

Brian and Justin



Fiction by Mimi



Journals West

This is an A.U. series taking Brian and Justin back in time to the old west.



Journals West - Part One

City Slicker

The finely dressed young man attempted to get his bearings as he struggled to retrieve his overstuffed leather bag from the stage coach which had carried him all the way from Denver. A sense of foreboding filled him as he stood in the muddy street wiping the dust of his long journey from his jacket. The disagreeable smell coming from the horses made his nose twitch. In an effort to remove himself from the offending animals, he started walking toward the telegraph office. He asked the man behind the window if there was a hotel in town. The man pointed up the street toward the dry goods store without looking up from his desk.

"Thank you." He said. The man waved him off. As he walked in the direction of the hotel he felt the stares of strangers on his back. This town would, thankfully, not be his final destination if all went as planned. He wondered if everyone who lived out west was as unfriendly as the residents of this town appeared to be. As he passed the livery stable, he noticed a man sitting in the loft above the stable. His gaze was piercing and it made the young man uncomfortable, yet curious. He nodded at the stranger who smiled back slyly before he disappeared into the loft.

Fear of the unknown and melancholy for the past gripped the young man's heart. At this point in time he was sure that coming west was a mistake. But in his heart, he knew he had no choice. His fate had been sealed on the day the telegram from his Aunt Lindsay arrived. He realized that there was no turning back now.

Justin Taylor was a young man of slight build and fair complexion. His mother had always doted on him when he was growing up in New York, as he was an only child. His Aunt Lindsay was a sweet natured woman who had been staying with her only sister since the onset of her illness. He received a telegram from his aunt a few weeks after classes had ended. He had taken a job as an apprentice to a lawyer in Boston for the summer. He did not plan on making the trip home until the holidays. But in the telegram his aunt implored him to come home immediately. She wrote that his mother, who had been ill, was dying.

The train ride from Boston to his family home in New York had been torturous. He and his mother had always been close, especially since his father's death two years ago. The thought that he might not get home in time to say goodbye, filled him with regret. When he arrived, his Aunt Lindsay greeted him at the door.

"She's very weak. I know she'll be happy that you are here dear."

Jennifer tried to sit up to greet her handsome son. "Hello sweetheart. I've missed you so much."

Justin was saddened by her appearance. She had lost weight and her color was very pale. "Mother." He kissed her cheek. "I've missed you too."

Before he had left for Boston to attend his father's alma mater, their relationship had been strained. There were certain areas of his life that he needed to keep private. His mother was constantly asking questions about the women

in his life. She thought it was time that he start looking for a wife from within their social circle in New York, so that when he graduated from law school he would return home, get married and raise a family in New York City.

Her biggest fear was that he would meet someone from Boston and want to remain up north. It was a constant battle for them. She would insist on introducing him to every eligible female in town. It was a great relief for him to escape to school. But, now that she was ill, their differences disappeared.

"Justin, I've been keeping something from you." Jennifer began anxiously. "My time is short. I want you to know that you have always been a dear son, and I have loved you above any one else in my life. I need for you to know the truth now." She paused to straighten herself in the bed. "Craig Taylor was not your father."

"What are you saying?" Justin jumped from the chair in which he was sitting.

"Please hear me out. I don't know how much longer I have." She pulled herself up on the pillow and continued. "As you know I grew up in New York, and was betrothed to Craig Taylor since I was young girl. When Craig was in school in Boston, I met a young medical student here in New York City. He was blond and handsome, just like you are dear. There was an instant attraction between us. I know it was wrong, but I had fallen in love and I began an affair with this man. We planned to marry when he graduated, but he was called to duty during the last year of the war. It was only one month later that I got a letter from his sister telling me that he had been killed during the siege of Petersburg.

"I wasn't aware at the time he left that I was carrying his child. Justin, I was so ashamed. When Craig came home from school, it took all the courage I could find to tell him what I had done. I never expected that he would honor his promise to marry me. At first he was angry, of course. But he was a good deal older than me and we had not spent much time together before getting engaged. After a while we talked and he said that he forgave me, and that if I was still willing to marry him, he would raise the child as his own.

"It was in his best interest to marry me, as he and his brother had an interest in joining my father's shipping business with their own. And so we were married. Craig was an attentive husband during my pregnancy. The day you were born he was so proud to hold you in his arms. It was the way that he looked at you that made me fall in love with him. I want you to know, that your father and I loved each other deeply, and you were a part that love. We were never blessed with another child. But he always said that as long as he had his son, he was happy."

Justin was speechless. His mother's proclamation had shaken him to his very soul. Craig Taylor had been a good father. He instilled in Justin a sense of honor, strong character and moral beliefs. It was difficult to imagine anyone else in the role of father.

His mother went on, "Recently, I received a letter from the man whom I believed to be dead. He wrote that he had been wounded in battle. He spent many months in hospitals, not knowing if he would walk again. He had his sister write the letter, so I could get on with my life. He read about my marriage in the newspaper, and later your birth announcement. He knew there was a possibility that you were his child, but he chose not to interfere in my life and cause me pain. He decided to start a new life for himself out west. When he saw the picture of you in the newspaper, he knew instantly that he had fathered my child."

The article was published several months ago when one of Justin's paintings was chosen for a traveling art show which featured student art work from all over the country. Justin could not believe that his mother would keep such a secret for all these years. "Craig Taylor was my father." He said defiantly. "This other man is a stranger to me."

"Craig Taylor was a good father to you. But he's dead and I am dying, my darling son. You will have no parents once I am gone. It would make me happy if you went to see this man. He denied himself the joy of seeing you grow up, because he felt it would have disturbed our lives. And he was right. There's no reason he can not be a father to you now. It would give me peace to know that you, at least, tried to find him. I don't want you to be alone in the world, my dear boy."

"I won't be alone, Mother. I have Aunt Lindsay, Uncle Morgan and my cousins."

"It's not the same, Justin. You've always been the center of a devoted, loving family. If you had picked out a young lady to marry, I would be at peace."

"Mother, please. I won't marry until I am ready. I don't need anyone to take care of me. I can take care of myself just fine."

"I don't want to argue now. Justin please promise me you will go to Colorado and meet him."

"I promise." Justin said softly. He saw the anguish in his mother's eyes.

When Jennifer drifted off to sleep, Justin went to find his Aunt Lindsay. She was in the kitchen preparing a tray for him. "Justin, I made you something to eat. You look worn out from your trip. Did you have a nice visit with your mother?"

Justin had always had a close relationship with his mother's younger sister. "Did you know?"

"About David Cameron? Yes, I did know. I was just a child, but I remember when he would come to the house to call on Jennifer. He was so dashing and handsome I could understand why your mother was attracted to him."

"So everyone knew that he was my father but me."

"Don't be bitter, dear. What purpose would it have served to tell you that the man you adored was not your father? They did what they thought was best for you at the time, and I believe Jennifer is doing what is best for you now."

"I don't want to go to Colorado." Justin protested. "What about my education and my job as a law clerk? Why would I interrupt my life to meet a man who would impregnate a woman who was engaged to another?"

"Justin, think of it as an adventure. You've never had an adventure of your own, have you?"

"When would I have had time for an adventure? I entered college at the age of 15 and I have worked for my father every summer for as long as I can remember. Next year I will start law school as my father always dreamed I would."

"Craig was a good father and it would do a man well to follow in his path. But you do have other dreams, don't you, Justin? You are a talented artist and writer. You have a creative mind which has been stifled. Out west you would be inspired to use those talents. When you come home you can make a decision about the rest of your life. Do you want to live in Craig Taylor's shadow, or do you want to be your own man?"

"I don't want to talk about it. Tomorrow I'll tell my mother that I have met a woman in Boston and we plan to marry. She can die in peace knowing that I will have a family of my own."

"But it would be a lie. You know what living a lie can do to a person, don't you Justin? You have no plans to marry because you are not attracted to women. It must be very difficult for you to hide that fact from your mother."

"Why would you say that?" Justin became flustered at his aunt's outspokenness. "I like women fine. I just don't have time to look for a wife."

"You may like women, but you could never love one. Your interest lies elsewhere, maybe in the masculine sex." Lindsay was not being judgmental, she was simply stating what was obvious to her.

"How did you know? Am I that obvious?"

"No, Justin, you're a perfectly normal young man, who is struggling to be something he is not. The stress has taken its toll on you. You've become distant and argumentative lately. One day soon, I hope you will consider me a confidant. I love you as I love my own children. And I would never betray your trust. I want to be there for you, if you need someone to talk to, when you are ready. You'll never have to hide anything from me."

Justin reached across the table and hugged her. "Thank you. I'm ready now, I think." Justin and Lindsay talked for hours. It was a relief for Justin to finally talk about the feelings that he had tried to deny for so long. They spoke of his fear of being exposed at school, and the consequences if he were ever caught with another man.

"Maybe one day you will find someone to share your life with. You will find a way to have what you want. I have faith in you, Justin. If you ever want my help, all you have to do is ask."

"If I ever find someone who shares my feelings, I will hold on to him for dear life. You're right, I would find a way to be with him no matter what."

A few days after her death bed confession Jennifer passed away in her sleep. As Justin stood next to her coffin which had been laid out in the parlor, the sadness that he felt at her passing was overwhelming. He looked into her still beautiful face and promised her that he would go west to meet David Cameron. And that when he returned he would find himself someone to share his life with. Tearfully he promised her that he would not go through life alone.

When he first set out, Justin had been excited about the prospect of seeing the country west of the Mississippi. Aside from Boston, he had never traveled further than his aunt's home in Roanoke. Justin, by nature, was an artist. His mother was quite proud of her son's abilities. But his father insisted that a man needed to make a living and painting pictures was a hobby, not a career. For as long as Justin could remember his father planned for his son to attend his alma mater in Boston. It was decided that he should study law and finance as it would be an asset to him when he took over the family's business.

Justin was a good student and a good son. He respected his father and he was grateful for the opportunity to learn all that he could in school. But art was in his soul. Every moment of the day, his eye would wander to an object or to a person's face and he would be compelled to draw what his eye had experienced. He was quite good at it. After his father passed away, he was free to study art as a minor subject at school. His days at school had been enjoyable. Now he felt disconnected, and fearful of the future.

His mother had given him the letter from David Cameron. Justin kept it in the pocket of his jacket. On his journey he took it out many times to read it over and over. The post mark was all he had to go on. It would be a challenge to find the man. He might not even be in the same town anymore.

Justin traveled west because his mother did not want him to be alone in the world. But when he arrived in the cold, unfriendly town of Buckskin Joe, Colorado he had never felt more alone in his life.

The arrival of the fancy pants city slicker had not gone unnoticed. From his perch in the loft of the livery stable in which he worked, Brian Kinney watched the movements of the young stranger with growing anticipation. As he watched the boy walk toward the hotel dragging his heavy leather bag, Brian felt his balls start to tingle.

Considered to be a rogue by most of the upstanding citizens of Buckskin Joe, Brian possessed a sensual charm that made his outlandish lifestyle acceptable. Many eligible females had tried to coax him into joining in the established social activities of the town. They swooned when he smiled, and thanked them for their kind invitations, but he was not inclined to be tied to one place and may not be in town to attend.

At thirty years of age most of the eligible men in town had married and fathered three or four children. The fact was, Mr. Kinney had never been attracted to the opposite sex. The thought of committing himself to a wife, and a brood of screaming brats, made Brian want to run for the hills. And in the back of his mind, that was his plan. To remove himself from this small town where everyone knew your business. His dream was to have enough money to leave this isolated place, and go to a big city where he could make his fortune gambling and pursuing what his heart always desired . . . to fuck as many men as he could lay his hands on.

The minute Brian saw that blond headed beauty alight from the stage, his mind was no longer on his work. There was a limited supply of young men in this backwater town who shared his sense of sexual freedom. The arrival of the stage this morning had his creative imagination working overtime. He wondered what it would be like to remove those fine clothes, one stitch at a time, with his bare teeth. Brian was imagining the look on the boy's face when he finally exposed his throbbing young cock and started licking his way to its moist tip.

His own cock was reacting to his lustful thoughts. As he dragged a heavy saddle down from a post, he was tempted to relieve his stress with his own hand. But, as he turned back toward the street, he came face to face with the object of his midday fantasy.

The boy had been watching Brian work his muscular body as he performed his chores in the stable. Knowing the shame it would cause his family, Justin had kept his attraction to other men's cocks a secret. In school he had experienced a few innocent encounters, but he had always refrained from letting things go too far.

Standing in the doorway of the stable Justin's eyes remained riveted on the older man as he went about his work. He sensed the physical magnetism of the handsome stranger the moment he walked into the stable. It was obvious that he was aroused, as the bulge in the front of his smooth cow skin pants was very apparent. The boy had no way of knowing that he had been the inspiration. He was having trouble controlling his own growing lust.

Brian sensed the young man's interest, a fact which put a cocky grin on his sensual lips. Removing the piece of straw he had clinched between his back teeth he asked, "What can I do for ya mister?"

The "mister" reference was for his own amusement, the boy was no more than 20, if that. The prospect of breaking in this fine piece of fancy city meat was the best thing that had happened to Brian in a long time.

"I want to rent a horse." Justin stammered. In an attempt to control his lust, he concentrated on his mission and how important it was to him. This stranger might be of use to him in more ways than one. "And some directions, if you don't mind."

"Where're you goin'?"

"No place special. I just want to get the lay of the land."

"I might be able to fix you up." Brian put the piece of straw back in his mouth and grinned. He boldly eyed the boy from head to toe. If he was any coarser, he would be licking his lips like a coyote anticipating a fresh kill.

Reacting to the man's stare Justin involuntarily smiled, revealing the sweet, innocent nature of a young boy. Brian Kinney felt like a bolt of lightening had struck him right through the center of his heart. This boy was young, too young to be out on his own. Strangely he felt he should be protecting this child, not only from the wilderness of Colorado, but from his own lustful intent.

"You can't be venturing out into these parts alone. Anything could happen out there, a wild animal could attack you. There are lots of poisonous snakes, and the terrain is rough. It's not like riding back east. You could fall into a ravine, and I'd be out one of my horses."

"Can you come with me? I would pay you for your expertise."

"What exactly are you looking for?"

Justin decided to tell him the truth. He didn't seem like a bad man, at least not in an evil way. "I'm looking for my father. I never knew him. My mother just told me that she'd heard from him. The letter was mailed from a town called Silverton."

"Yeah, I could take you there. It's quite a ways west of here. You'll have to pay me up front."

Justin smiled. The thought of spending time alone with this masculine creature had his head spinning. He offered him half the money up front, and half when they arrived safely in Silverton. There would be a bonus for Mr. Kinney if he was able to help Justin find his father.

'Half up front.' Brian laughed to himself. By the time they got five miles from town he would have it all. And his bonus would be the pleasure of fucking a fine piece of virgin boy ass.

"Meet me back here at dawn. Come prepared for a long hard ride."

Justin was ready to take that ride NOW. But, it would have to wait. He had to take control of the situation, at least until he could find his father. There was something about Brian Kinney that Justin found unsettling. He was sure that the only reason he had agreed to help him was for the money. But, there was something else to the man besides his good looks and charm. Justin was sure that the physical attraction had not been one sided. He had to stay on his guard with Mr. Kinney, or he was sure to lose his heart.

In the morning Brian was awakened by the voice that haunted his dreams that night. "Hey, let's get going! You said dawn, its way past that now."

Justin stood in the doorway of the stable outfitted for riding. He carried a bag full of food from the cafe down the street and a large leather bag. He tossed Brian a biscuit and started to mount a large white stallion near the door.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Brian jumped up as fast as his alcohol soaked brain would allow. "You can't ride Lightning," he gave his charge a sarcastic smile, "this horse is for grown-ups."

Brian forced his eyes open and scanned the stable for an appropriate mount. "Here try this one on for size." He indicated a small brown and white horse. "His name is Gus. He's small, but a little ornery. Can you handle it?"

"Sure. Ornerly is my middle name." Justin flung his bag across Gus's back, and the horse let out a snort. As Justin mounted the animal, it backed up against the wall in an attempt to scrap the offending rider off his back.

At first, Brian was tempted to come to the boy's aide. But, when he saw that Justin's willfulness was equal to that of the animal, he back away. Justin managed to get control of his mount, and ride out the stable door. Brian put his tongue against his cheek to keep from laughing as he mounted his one and only possession in the world, the beautiful white stallion, Lightning. It was going to be a long and interesting ride.

The weather in the mountains was unpredictable this time of year, to say the least. One moment you could be basking in the sunlight. The next moment you could be trying to outride a tornado. So far the weather had been calm, there was a storm brewing far in the distance, toward the north. No threat to them at the moment. They decided to stop to water the horses at a stream, and take a break for lunch.

Brian sat down near a tree stump and stretched out his long legs out on the grass in front of him. His hat hid his eyes so he knew it was safe to do what he had been dying to do all morning, study the look of his traveling companion.

Justin was not sleeping, but he did seem to be at rest. He worked his pencil across the paper that he had insisted on bringing with him. Brian had tried to discourage him from dragging along anything that might slow them down, but the boy said he needed the pad to record his journey. It didn't make any sense to Brian. Why would you need to write down where you went today? One minute you're here, the next minute you are somewhere further along the trail. On closer study it seemed that Justin was not writing, but drawing with the pencil. Curious, Brian quietly made his way over to where he could see the picture.

"It's not polite to stare." Justin said in his sultry voice. "Artists don't like to be watched while they create." He smiled shyly in Brian's direction.

"I was curious, is all."

Justin decided to made an exception in Brian's case. He slid over on the rock so that Brian could sit next to him. He was enjoying the fact that the man had taken an interest in his drawing. They hadn't had much conversation all morning. Justin assumed that it was because of the hang-over which Brian seemed to be suffering from. He could feel the sexual energy radiating from his body.

"It's pretty." Brian smiled. Justin had drawn a picture of the horses drinking from the stream with the rolling hills in the back ground. He moved in closer to the boy, attempting to touch him on the shoulder.

Justin backed away and stood up. "I think we should start riding. We still have a few more hours before the sun sets."

"Yes sir." Brian jumped to his feet.

Justin put his sketch pad and pencils away and mounted the horse that Brain had assigned to him that morning. Brian was impressed with the way his riding companion had taken full command of Gus after only a few hours. The horse was normally pretty ornery with strangers. "Did you do much riding back east?" Brian asked.

"When I was younger I took a few lessons but I didn't much care for it. I'm not the outdoor type."

"Well you have Gus fooled. I thought by now he would have scrapped you off on the nearest fence."

"I'm not about to let that happen. I think he knows who's boss." Justin said with confidence.

The self reliant young man had made an impression on Brian. He was compelled to find out more about him. "How old you are?"

Gus had been trotting ahead of Lightning as they rode down the path. Justin turned back and gave Brian a coy smile. "Old enough."

Brian was completely distracted by the flirty smile Justin had flashed at him. The physical attraction Brian experienced when he first laid eyes on the boy had increased significantly since they left the stable. But the smile had sparked a completely different feeling. One that Brian had never experienced before. He found it both disturbing and exhilarating.

Brian trotted along, slightly behind his young companion, as the view from that angle was very pleasurable. He tried to focus on his plan, to get the boy's money and take off into the sunset in search of brighter pastures. He had long since tired of mucking out stalls, and baling hay. Luck had guided the boy in his direction, and it was incumbent upon him to follow through. The plan had changed slightly since they'd left town. At first he planned to just hit him over the head, and take off with the horses. He planned to sell Gus somewhere along the road. But the boy's charm had an unusual affect on him, he felt protective of Justin. So he decided to leave Gus for the kid to ride back to town. Since they left that morning, they had been traveling in circles. They were only a few miles from town, and Gus knew the way home.

When they stopped in the late afternoon Brian decided it was time. It would be dark soon, and he wanted to get some distance from the area to avoid any trouble. Justin sat under a tree drawing. When Brian tried to sneak a look, Justin moved his arm to block his view. "You can see it when it's done." Brian plopped down across from Justin and stared at him.

"Why don't you eat another biscuit?" Justin suggested.

"No, you better keep them. You never know when you might get hungry."

"I'm always hungry. My mother said that I would be as heavy as my Uncle by the time I was 30."

"You're not fat. In fact you look just about perfect to me."

Justin smiled. "Thanks. I think I'm done with the drawing. You can see it, but first I want you to close your eyes."

Brian obeyed. When Justin said he could look, Brian opened his eyes. The vivid detail of the lifelike drawing astounded him. It was a portrait of Brian, without a shirt, standing by a stream. The picture was very flattering, and it was clear that Justin had been studying his anatomy for a long time. Brian couldn't resist bringing up the subject of sex.

"Have you ever laid down with a man?"

Justin blushed. "No. Have you?"

Brian laughed. "Hundreds of times."

"Really," Justin was clearly impressed. "What's it like?"

"It's very . . . satisfying."

"Is it different then being with a woman? Have you even been with one?"

"Of course I've been with women, hundreds of them too." Brian lied. "Have you?"

"No. I really don't have any interest in sex . . . with a woman that is. I find men more . . . interesting."

"Do you find me interesting?"

"Very. Can't you tell."

"Do you want to touch me?"

Justin stood up suddenly. "No! I mean I do, but not like this. I just met you."

"So what, it's just sex. It feels good. And way out here, who's gonna know?" Brian stood up and grabbed Justin roughly by the arm.

Justin pulled away with resolve. "I said NO! Now let's get going."

Brian didn't follow him.

Justin turned around and demanded "Are you coming?"

Brian stood motionless and stared after the young man. He made up his mind that it was time to get on with his plan to take the money and go. The boy was becoming tiresome, yet Brian hesitated.

Justin glared at him. Then, to Brian's surprise, Justin marched back to the spot where Brian stood, and planted a deep penetrating kiss on Brian's open mouth. Justin's tongue lingered briefly before he broke away and started walking toward the horses. Brian remained motionless, the kiss had penetrated him to his soul, and the feeling was unnatural and foreign to him. At that moment he wanted the boy more than he had ever wanted any other man. The feeling emanated from his chest, not his groin. It was not lust, but an overwhelming feeling of tenderness.

Brian panicked. He felt if he did not act now, his life was about to change forever. Justin was walking toward Gus, and Brian knew he had no choice. He picked up a rock that lay near the stream bed, and walked up behind Justin. He lifted the rock, and brought it down. Just before the rock connected with his skull, Justin turned around. Brian saw the confusion in his eyes turn to fear. Then it was over . . . the deed was done. Justin lay sprawled at Gus's feet, like a rag doll. Brian picked him up and carried him to a tree, where he placed him in an upright position. He couldn't bear to look at Justin's angelic face. He knew if he did, he would not be able to leave him.

Brian tied Gus to a branch near the stream. Justin would see him when he woke up, and Gus would take him back to town. The nasty bump on his head would heal, and the kid would most likely get on the first stage coach back east where he belonged. He had done the boy a favor. Brian took Justin's bag and riffled through it. He found a leather case filled with money, and stuffed it into his shirt. Before he left, he could not resist an impulse to gently kiss Justin on top of his head. "It was fun, sunshine. I'm sorry it had to end like this. But I am not the man you drew in this picture." Brian took the picture out of the book, and stuffed it into his shirt with the money. Without looking back, he mounted Lightning and took off toward the west.

Brian rode hard for several miles. He wanted to put a good deal of distance between himself and his charge before dark. He'd done a lot of very bad things in his 30 years on this earth, and he'd never felt a pang of guilt. Why should he feel guilty? There are those who have, and those who take away. He was one of the latter, and he was not ashamed. He tried to forget the sweet face and sunshine smile, but Justin preyed on his mind. "He'll be alright" He said out loud to Lightning. Lightning turned his head and seemed to glare at Brian. "Don't look at me like that. We've done worse, a lot worse, and you never judged me. I'm your master and don't you forget it." Brian felt a drop of rain hit his face. Minutes later he was drenched. The wind had picked up and the sky had turned black. A bolt of lightning hit the ground, and the horse jumped back. Brian got control, and led the horse forward a few yards. Seconds later another bolt of lightning hit near by. The storm was moving away, but it was moving east, right in the direction where he had left a sweet innocent young boy, who's only crime was administering one life altering kiss.

Brian pulled on Lightning's reins until the horse turned back toward the east. They rode as hard as they could behind the storm, which was wreaking havoc along its path. With each bolt of lightning, Brian searched the road ahead for a sign of the boy. The storm had grown more violent, and it had slowed its forward movement. He found himself riding just ahead of the worst of it. One more bolt of lightning hit, and Brian made out a form running down the road ahead of him. It was Justin. He rode up next to him and called his name. Justin saw him, and bolted to the right to get away. Brian called after him to stop, but Justin kept running until his path was blocked by a wall of boulders. Brian was close, he reached down, and tried to grab him. Justin surprised him by pulling himself up the rock wall.

"Stop running!" Brian yelled over the roar of the wind. Justin looked back at him with fear in his eyes. Brian followed him along the wall until he was able to reach his foot and pull. "Get on the horse!" Brian ordered.

Justin kicked him in the face, and continued to climb. Brian was momentarily stunned, but continued to follow Justin's path along the wall. He had gotten too high for Brian to reach him. Brian was about to get off the horse and climb up after Justin, when a deafening clap of thunder shook the sky. Justin fell from the rocks, right into Brian's arms. Brian held him tightly, and rode off to the east, with the storm racing at their heels.

Brian could feel Justin shivering uncontrollably next to his chest. He held the boy tightly as he guided his horse into a break in the rocks. There was shelter here from the storm. He slowly let Justin down and then jumped off of Lightning. Justin started toward the opening, but was halted in his tracks when another bolt of lightning touched the ground right in front of him. Brian pulled him into a cave near the back of the shelter. The horse was out of the rain, and would be safe where he was.

Justin struggled against Brian's strong grip on his arm. "Let go of me!" He yelled. His face was contorted with fear. Brian let go, and Justin backed away from him as far as he could get into the cave. He bent his knees, slumped to the ground, and began to sob. With each clap of thunder his body would jump, and he would tremble uncontrollably. Brian thought he looked like a caged animal. He tried to comfort him as best he could. He kneeled before him, and offered him a drink from his canteen. Justin grabbed it out of his hands and drank. His face was streaked with mud and tears. His hair was tangled and bloody. Brian reached out and tried to wipe the mud off his face. Justin pushed his hand away and stood up. "Get away from me!" Justin commanded.

"We're going to be here awhile, so why don't you calm down." Brian said softly. " When the storm is over, I'll take you back to town."

"Do you think I'm stupid? I wouldn't go anywhere with you! You tried to kill me!"

"If I wanted to kill you, you'd be dead. I did consider it, but you kinda grow on a person."

"What kind of a man are you? How could you be so cruel? I never did anything to you."

"What I did, had nothing to do with you. It was business. I needed money to get out of town, you had money. So I took it. Sorry, but that's the way things are out here in the Wild West. By tomorrow you'll be on a stage coach headed home, and all of this will be a learning experience."

"I don't forgive you. I'll never forgive you for leaving me out here to die."

"I left Gus. Why didn't you get on him, and ride back to town?"

"Gus running away is what woke me up. He was galloping down the rode past me." Justin explained. He threw up his hands. "Never mind. You got what you wanted from me, so why don't you just leave me alone. You stay on your side of the cave, and I'll stay on mine."

"Fine with me." Brian picked up the saddle bag he'd removed from his horse. He slowly pulled out a blanket and spread it out on the ground in one corner of the cave as Justin watched. Brian then sat down on the blanket, and pushed his hat over his eyes.

Justin retreated to the other corner of the cave, and glared at him. All of a sudden a clap of thunder reverberated throughout the cave. The lighting was almost simultaneously. Before Brian knew what was happening, Justin was in his arms. The overwhelming feeling of tenderness returned as he held the trembling boy. The violent storm continued outside, and with each clap of thunder Justin pulled himself closer to Brian. Slowly Justin looked up at him. Brian smoothed the hair from his sweet young face. Justin pulled himself up and kissed Brian passionately. Brian returned the kiss with equal enthusiasm.

Justin pulled his shirt over his head, and began to undo Brian's buttons. They barely stopped kissing to breath. Each article of their clothing was abandoned, and tossed to the side. They were on their knees facing each other. When a bolt of lightning lit up the cave, Brian looked down at Justin's naked form. He pulled him close and felt Justin's cock rub against his belly, as hot and hard as his own. Justin pulled away slightly and lowered his head. Brian's entire body stiffened when he felt Justin take his cock in his mouth. He'd had other men suck him off, but Justin's passionate manipulation of his throbbing cock in his mouth, was a beyond anything Brian had experienced before. He climaxed abruptly, and was grateful that Justin seemed to enjoy the taste of his juices. Brian cupped the boy's naked ass in his large hands, and Justin let out a moan. Brian laid him down gently on the ground and kissed his mouth. Turning him on his side, Brian grabbed Justin's hard cock, and pleased the boy until he shot his creamy juices all over Brian's stomach.

Justin rolled onto his back and covered himself with the blanket. He looked up at Brian and saw a tenderness in the man's eyes that he had not noticed before. Brian had a most unusual way of focusing his attention on a person. Justin was bewitched by Brian's smoldering hazel eyes. He lifted the blanket and Brian laid down next to him. They curled up in each others arms and fell asleep.

Brian awoke the next morning and found that he was alone in the cave. He stretched his long, lanky body and slowly pulled back the blanket. From where he sat in the cave he could see that the sky was bright and sunny. There was no hint of terrible storm from the night before. He got up and pulled on his trousers.

After taking care of his horse, Brian walked down to the stream. He saw Justin standing in the stream, dunking his head under water.

"AHHHH!" Justin screamed when he pulled his head out of the stream.

"What's the matter?" Brian asked.

Justin turned toward him. "For some reason, a lump the size of an egg has formed on the back of my head. Any idea how that happened?"

"It's just part of growing up." Brian replied. "Come over here, and I'll take a look."

"Turn around." Justin ordered.

"Why?"

"I'm naked." he said coyly.

Brian smiled at him sweetly. "All the more reason for you to come out of the water. I didn't really get a good look at you last night."

"Why don't you come in the water?" Justin suggested.

Brian stripped off his trousers and carefully placed them on a branch of a tree. He raced into the stream, and plunged under the water.

Justin waited for him to emerge. But after a minute or two Justin began to worry that Brian had hit his head on the bottom and drown. He was about to dive under when Brian came up behind him, and wrapped his arms around Justin's waist.

Justin giggled as struggled to be released. When Brian loosened his grip, Justin turned around and kissed him. They enjoyed bathing in the stream together until they heard a horse approaching. A man road by, unaware he had disturbed them. Justin got out of the water and wrapped his blanket around himself.

"That was close." Brian said, when he joined him on the shore. He grabbed the trousers that were now dry and put them on. Justin had hung his clothes out to dry earlier that morning. They were hanging on a bush near the cave. He grabbed them and went into the cave to get dressed.

Brian stared at him from the entrance. "You're beautiful." He uttered.

Justin grinned. "Men aren't beautiful. Women are beautiful. Men are handsome."

"I think you're beautiful." Brian said shyly. He entered the cave and reached for his shirt. "It's still damp. I'll put it out in the sun."

"Ouch!" Justin cried. He had pulled his shirt over his head and irritated his injury.

"Let me see that." Brian said. He went to Justin and gently rubbed the spot where he'd hit him. "There's a cut. I'll get something for it. Wait here."

Brian went out of the cave, and Justin went over to Lightning and fed him a biscuit. "Hey, boy. Thanks for rescuing me." The horse nodded his head gratefully, and Justin petted his neck. Brian came back from the woods carrying a plant.

"Come here." Brian instructed. He found the cut on Justin's head and rubbed the leaves of the plant on the spot.

"That hurts." Justin complained.

"It just stings a bit. This will help it heal." Brian finished tending to the cut, then went to retrieve his shirt from the bush.

Justin watched him put on his shirt. The two of them stood in the cave staring at each other. Justin broke the silence. "What next?"

"What do you think?"

"I think that yesterday went from being the worst day of my life, to the best. Thanks for coming back to save me."

"There wouldn't have been a need for me to save you if I hadn't . . ."

"Is that sort of an apology?" Justin asked.

"NO!" Brian shot back. "It's who I am. I'm not going to apologize for that, EVER. But I do regret that you happened into my path, and got hurt. You did nothing to deserve it, except to trust the wrong man. You should be more careful."

"So Brian Kinney is an evil devil, who will never change his ways, no matter what."

"No, I won't change. It's not that I can't change, but I don't want to."

"I see." Justin nodded his head. "But if one day you decided that you want to change your evil ways, it would be possible."

"Of course. I am my own man."

"I'm my own man, too." Justin's smile lit up his face and Brian became mesmerized.

"I'll take you back to town."

"What if I don't want to go back to town?"

"Where do you want to go?"

Justin took Lightning's reins, and pulled the horse toward the road. Over his shoulder he shot Brian a brilliant smile. "I'm going with you."

Journals West - Part Two

Lightning Strikes

Justin rode on the back of the horse with his arms firmly wrapped around Brian's waist. He did not know where they were going or why, but he was happy to have this time with Brian.

"Brian, can you stop here, please? I have to pee."

Brian complied with Justin's request and joined him in the bushes. His first instinct had been to dispose of his young companion at the nearest stage coach stop before things went too far. The kid would only hold him back, but since he was not really sure where he was going at the moment, he decided that for once he was going to enjoy the ride. When they had finished answering nature's call Brian decided that they should stop to eat.

"I'm almost out of biscuits," Justin informed him. "I have jerky and some carrots. Can I give a carrot to Lightning?"

"We can survive on what nature supplies us. If you look over in that direction, you'll see a bush with some red berries. We can eat them. Give the carrot to your friend, Lightning. I'm sure he'll appreciate it."

Justin fed the horse and then went in the direction that Brian had suggested. He came back with a hat full of berries. "Are you sure these are not going to kill us?"

"The last time I was on the road I practically lived on them. There are a lot of useful things out here in nature."

"Did you learn about them from your dad?"

"Nope, he died when I was a twelve. I was on my own after that. I learned how to survive."

"That's awfully young to be out on your own. Didn't you have anyone to take care of you?"

Brian got up suddenly and started to saddle the horse. "You ask a lot of questions."

"You're interesting. I want to know about you."

"What for, you writing a book?"

"As a matter of fact that's my dream. I plan to use my illustrations and put together a story of my journey west."

"Kid, you draw real pretty. But the wilderness is one great big dangerous place to be. You'll never survive where I'm going. It's time for you to get your pretty little ass back home."

"I'm never going home."

"Well you're not going with me."

"Fine!" Justin picked up his leather bag and stomped off in the direction of the road.

Brian mounted Lightning, and followed him. "You'll die out here alone. The nearest town is a days ride at least. Get up here."

"No, you go ahead. I don't want to hold you back."

Brian stopped his horse as Justin kept walking down the road. Brian leaned forward on his saddle, and shook his head at the boy's defiance. "I went to live with the minister from our town back in Topeka when my father died. The day he forced himself on me, I left. I've been on my own ever since."

Justin stopped walking, turned around and looked at Brian with compassion in his eyes. Brian put out his hand, and pulled Justin up onto the back of the horse. They rode along in silence, until Brian found them a safe place to camp for the night. Brian made a fire, while Justin dug in his bag for the last of the food.

When they lay down next to each other to sleep, Justin turned to Brian and spoke softly. "I can be a big pain sometimes. I didn't mean to pry, and I'm sorry. If you want to drop me off in the next town, I'll understand."

Brian pulled Justin close and put his arm around him. "It's not that I don't like having you around. You're funny and sweet. Tell me where it is you want to go, and I'll take you there. After that, we part company. I don't want you getting too attached."

"I thought you liked me."

"I like you fine. But, there's no point in hooking up together. I travel alone. I can't be taking care of kid."

"I'm not a kid. I'm 22, and I can take care of myself. I thought that we might take care of each other."

"Boy, there's no such thing as men hooking up and taking care of each other. It just doesn't happen. If people even suspected what we do to each other, we'd be hung. There's no question about it. We can't be getting attached."

"I'm already attached to you. If we really wanted to be together, I bet we could find a way. We could live out here in the wilderness."

Brian glared at him. "I'm not the settling down kind."

Justin pulled Brian's arm from his shoulder and turned his back to him. Brian pulled him back and kissed him. Justin didn't protest when Brian pulled his trousers off and lay on top of him. The sensation of Brian's lean, warm body pressed into his own tender white skin was all he could expect, and all that he would need for the moment.

When Justin woke up the next morning, he gathered berries and brought them back for Brian. "You are right about these berries. They're good, but not too filling. Is the next town really a days ride?"

Brian grabbed some berries and ate them. "No, I lied. I think we can be there before nightfall. There's an apple orchard up the road a piece. We'll be fine."

"What about money? We don't have any."

Brian pulled his bag out from under his head and threw it in Justin's direction. "Here, your money's in the pouch. There should be enough there to fill your belly for a while."

Justin smiled. "Not really. Half of it's fake."

"Fake? You tried to cheat me?"

"No, what I gave you when we left was real." Justin opened the pouch. "I made up some fake bills with ink before I left home, just in case I got robbed. I put real money in my sock. And I mixed some fake bills in with the rest. It figured if someone robbed me, they would think they got plenty, and wouldn't look further."

"Let me see." Brian demanded. Justin pulled out a fake bill.

Brian laughed out loud. "You have talent, kid. Come on, let's get movin'. If we don't stop to piss every five minutes, by this evening we can eat in a real café in town."

It was still light when they got to town. The café had tables outdoors. Brian and Justin tied Lightning to a nearby post, and ordered two steaks with mashed potatoes and gravy.

"I could eat two of these steaks myself. It feels so good to have food in my stomach."

"Eat up, Sunshine. After this town we'll be travelin' for a few days."

"Why did you call me that?" Justin asked.

"You don't know?" Brian looked around and lowered his voice so the cowboys at the table couldn't hear him. "When you smile, the sun shines, even when it's stormin' outside."

Justin rewarded Brian with a sunshine smile. "Thanks. You have a nice smile too, warm and gentle. But you don't smile very much, do you?"

"Only when I've got something to smile about."

"Tomorrow we should get some food we can eat on the road."

"How are you going to find your Pa once we get to Silverton?"

"I guess I'll just ask around."

"It's a pretty big town. What do you know about him?"

"Not much. My mother told me he was in medical school in New York when she met him. He must be a doctor. He was wounded in the leg at Petersburg. His name is David Cameron."

Brian's heart skipped a beat. He leaned forward in his chair and stared at the boy. "Did you say Cameron? How old would this Cameron guy be?"

"I don't know, maybe 40 something, I guess."

Brian remained silent for the rest of the meal. After they paid the check, they rode out of town a little way to set up camp. Brian lowered Justin from the horse and dismounted. Justin kissed him tenderly. Brian pushed away from him. "What's wrong?" Justin asked. "You were so quiet at dinner. Did I do something to make you mad?"

Brian ran his hand through Justin's soft blond hair. "No, you didn't."

"Let's get under the blanket." Justin said seductively.

"Wait, I have to ask you something. First, I need to know if you trust me."

Justin thought a minute before answering. "Yes. I trust you."

"Good, because I want you to give me half the money you have left. The real money, not the fake kind."

"Can I ask why?"

"No."

Justin dug in his bag, and pulled out the leather pouch. "Here," he handed Brian the pouch. "Take it all."

"I need to go back to town . . . alone."

"Brian, I don't want to be out here by myself in the dark. What if I get bit by a snake, or if someone comes along and kills me?"

"Here, take my gun. If a snake comes along shoot it, even if it's a human snake."

"I've never even held a gun in my hand."

"It's loaded. You just pull on this little piece here, and then fire. I might be gone most of the night. But I promise, I'll be back."

"You better come back. If you don't, I'll hunt you down and kill you with my gun."

"I'll look forward to it. Now set up your bedroll near that tree, and go to sleep. Before you know it, I'll be back." Brian kissed him hard on the lips and then mounted his horse and rode off.

Justin tossed and turned in his bedroll. Every noise made him jump. If Brian didn't come back, he would most likely die out here in the woods. His stomach felt a little sick. Eventually he drifted off to sleep. Around three o'clock, Brian came riding back to the camp with a brown and white horse in tow. "Wake up, Sunshine. We'll be sleeping in our very own feather bed tonight."

"Brian where did you get that horse?"

Brian handed him the reins. "I won him in a poker game. Along with enough cash to get us to Silverton in style. Now pack up your shit. I got us a room in the hotel."

Justin rolled up his bed, and grabbed his bag. Unlike Gus, this brown and white horse was very obliging. Justin mounted him with no trouble at all. They rode back to town, which now was dark and quiet. They tied up the horses, and Brian led Justin up a stair case in the back of the hotel.

Justin wasted no time stripping off his clothes, while Brian stared at him with lust in his eyes. As Brian slowly unbuttoned his shirt, Justin's growing interest made its presence known by lifting up the sheet . . . just a little. "Hurry up!" Justin urged his partner.

"Shhh, the walls have ears." Brian went to the door to check that it was locked. He got under the sheets with Justin and began massaging the boy's naked chest. "No noise, remember. We're taking a chance even being in this room together. Understood?"

Justin nodded. After kissing and stroking each other for what seemed like a long time to Justin, Brian whispered in his ear. "I want to be inside you."

Justin's body stiffened. "I can't."

"Why not?"

"I'm not ready. What if it hurts so bad I cry out and someone breaks down the door and finds us."

Brian reached over for his bag, which was lying on the floor next to the bed. "I borrowed this from the café." He showed Justin a tin box.

"What is that?"

"Lard."

"Lard? What for?"

Brian scooped out a generous portion and rubbed the lard all over his erect cock. "I won't hurt you."

Justin's fear of pain was vanquished by the carnal thought of having Brian's throbbing cock inside of him.

Brian had a cocky grin on his face when he paid the hotel clerk for the room. Justin grimaced as he sat in the horse hair chair in the lobby to wait for Brian. "What's the matter, Sunshine?" Brian asked as they walked toward the livery. "You look different today."

"I guess I've lost my virgin appeal." He looked around to make sure that no one was in ear shot. "My ass hurts. I feel like you're still inside of me." He whispered.

"That can be arranged, but you'll have to wait till we get out of town." Brian said as he mounted Lightning.

Justin addressed his horse as he tightened the saddle. "Be gentle with me." He grinned when the horse turned around to lick his face. "Hey, cut that out . . . hmmm. You don't have a name. Brian, did the guy you won him from tell you his name?"

"He's your horse. Call him what you want."

"He looks a lot like Gus. He's gentle, but not too fast. I could call him Gus 2."

"He better learn to keep up with Lightning. He's the slowest, laziest horse I ever did see."

"That's what I'll call him then. . . Slow Gus."

"It sure fits."

That night they slept out under the stars. When Brian awoke the next morning, Justin was still asleep. He decided to pick some berries for their breakfast. When he returned to the camp, he found Justin sitting under a tree drawing in his sketch book. "Why are you drawing a picture of that leaf?"

"I'm keeping a journal of plants. Isn't this the leaf you rubbed on the cut on my head where you bashed me with a rock?"

Brian took the leaf from him. "Not this. This one would have killed you."

"But it looks just like that leaf."

"It does, but the difference is this one is sticky. It has a poison."

"That's good to know." Justin wrote down what Brian had told him about the leaf. "What did you boil into tea when I had that belly ache?"

"Camomile. The plant has a white flower and it smells like apples."

"Where did you learn all this stuff Brian?"

"I pick things up here and there. Mostly from Indians that I've run into on my travels."

"Indians! Weren't you afraid they would scalp you?"

"Nah, they're not all savages like you read about in books. Unless you're throwing them off their land, or killing their food, they pretty much leave you alone."

"Can you teach me how to find this stuff? In case I need to cure you of something."

Brian laughed out loud. "If you get that desperate, just shoot me. I probably wouldn't survive your doctoring any how."

Justin pushed his shoulder and Brian leaned back against the tree. "Brian, maybe it's worth writing this stuff down. One day it may help someone. Maybe me, if I'm on my own in the wilderness."

"You have a point. Okay, I'll help you."

"I can draw an illustration of the plant and you can write down what it's used for."

"Nope, I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"I can't write. I can't read either." Brian admitted shyly.

"Really? Well now there's finally something that I can do for you. I'll teach you to read and write."

"Ain't no call for readin' and writin' out here."

"Maybe not. But what if you wanted to see more of the world than trees and streams? What if one day, you get it into your mind to visit a big city?"

"That ain't never gonna to happen."

"Why not? You're young and smart. There's no reason for you to limit your horizons. Didn't you ever dream about seeing a far away place?"

Brian thought for a moment. "There was a man I knew who came from San Francisco. He had the fanciest suit of clothes I ever did see. And he told me about the Pacific Ocean, and how in the evenings it seems like the sun disappears right down into the water. Before it goes completely out of sight, the sky turns all kinds of beautiful colors, and it reflects off the water. I might want to see that ocean some day before I die."

"I might want to see that too, one day." Justin said thoughtfully. "It's always been my dream to move out west where everything is new. Life in New York City is so structured. In California a person could make a difference in the world. Do you know what I mean?"

"I don't care about the world. It sure doesn't give a damn about me. My dream is to have a farm of my own far away from any town. I could grow what I need, and I wouldn't have to be with people who judge me."

"I bet people wouldn't judge you in San Francisco."

"People will judge 'US' everywhere we go, Justin."

"People judge you for all kinds of reasons, because it makes them feel smarter, and more important. Like if you can't read, they will assume it's because you are stupid."

"I ain't stupid!" Brian proclaimed.

"I know you aren't stupid. But people will make a judgment about how smart a person is by the way he signs his name. If you don't want them to have the upper hand, let me teach you how to write your name properly."

"I guess it couldn't hurt to know how to write my name."

Justin slowly wrote each letter and showed Brian exactly how to copy it. Then he gave the pad to Brian to practice while he took a nap under the tree. When he awoke, Brian was nowhere to be seen. Justin found a piece of paper stuffed in his pocket. Brian had copied his name over and over until it filled the page entirely. Justin turned the paper over to find that Brian had filled both sides. He got up and walked to the stream where he saw Brian sitting with a fishing pole in one hand, and a book in the other. Brian was intensely studying what was printed on the page.

"Where did you find that?" Justin asked.

"I found it in the collection of junk you've been carrying in that bag of yours."

"Have you taught yourself to read while I was napping?"

"I am looking to see if my name is in this book." Brian explained.

"Unless your name is Ishmael or Queequeg, I doubt it."

"Did you read all of these words?" Brian asked.

"I've read them over and over. And each time, I find a new meaning to the story. This book is my second most prized possession."

"And what's your other prize possession?" Brian asked.

Justin dug into his pocket. "My father's gold watch. There's a picture of my mother and me inside." Justin opened the watch so Brian could see the picture.

Brian smiled at him. "She's a handsome woman. You look just like her."

Justin looked at the picture wistfully before closing the watch, and putting it back in his pocket. "She was beautiful, kind and loving. We were close when I was younger. I regret that I never had the courage to tell her the truth about me."

"She would have tried to make you change."

"My aunt understood when I told her. Maybe my mother would have too. I never gave her a chance."

"She was your mother, she cared about your future. Being the way you are . . . the way we are . . . is not normal. People hate us and there's no hiding from that. You're better off not telling anyone. Especially someone who cares about you. It would only have burdened her last days with worry."

"Did you ever tell your parents?"

"Nope. My ma left us when I was a kid. I was just starting to feel 'different' about the time my pa died. Just as well, it would have probably killed him."

Justin couldn't resist the urge to put his arms around Brian, and hug him. To his surprise Brian allowed it, and hugged him back for a moment before gently pushing him away.

"What about the book?" Brian changed the subject. "Who are those two guys?"

"Ishmael is a sailor. He tells the story about Captain Ahab who is obsessed with defeating Moby Dick, the sperm whale who had taken his leg off."

"What about that other guy, Queeny?"

"Queequeg is a harpooner from New Zealand who meets up with Ishmael when they share a bed at the Spouter Inn in New Bedford."

"That's my kind of book. Where's the part where they fuck?" Brian flipped the pages of the book.

Justin took the book out of his hand. "They don't fuck. But they become friends. When you read a book, you can imagine anything you want."

"Hell, I can imagine anything I want without a book. I'm imagining something right now," Brian tugged at Justin's arm.

"Do you want me to read this to you?" Justin offered.

"No. I want to read it myself. How hard could it be to learn to read? It only took me an hour to learn to write."

"You have a few more letters to learn before you can read and write properly. There are twenty-six letters in the alphabet. Mostly reading is sounding out letters, and putting them together into words. I bet you'll be able to read this book, before I catch my first fish."

Brian laughed. "I'll take that bet. Now go get me some more paper. I'll provide the fish."

Brian was a quick and enthusiastic learner. Justin had written out the alphabet, and Brian copied the letters. Then Justin wrote a few words and showed Brian how to sound out the letters. When they arrived in the next town Brian began sounding out all of the words on the signs that he saw. Justin was amazed at his progress. "I always knew you were smart, but I am beginning to think you're a genius. I never saw anyone take to learning like you, Brian."

"I ain't no genius."

"I'm not a genius."

"I never said you were."

"No, I meant that's how you should say it . . . I am not a genius. That's the proper way. Ain't is slang."

"Are you going to correct me every time I say something? 'Cause if you are, you can just follow this road for another day and you'll be in Silverton. I'll ride in the other direction."

"I'm sorry, Brian. It was rude of me to correct you. It's just that I know you're smart, brilliant in fact. And I want everyone you meet to know it too."

"I don't know how smart I am. I got stuck riding with you." Brian teased.

"You love riding with me. Especially at night when we cuddle up under the blankets and . . ."

"You better stop right there young man." Brian reprimanded him. "I love fucking. You're a great fuck. That's all it is. When we find your daddy and you get settled, I'll be moving on."

Instead of pouting, as Brian expected, Justin grinned at him. "That's right, we can't be getting attached, now can we?" Justin sensed the bond that had grown between them, was stronger than Brian's urge to wander the country aimlessly. The feelings that he had for Brian were not unrequited. And he was confident that Brian would find a way to stick around in Silverton.

When they reached the next town they ate meatloaf and potatoes at the local saloon. Brian overheard the bartender mention that a card game would be starting up in a little while. "Here's my chance to pick up some traveling money. You go over to the hotel and get us a room." He handed Justin some cash. "Don't wait up."

"I don't want to be alone all night." Justin protested. "Maybe I'll play too."

Brian laughed. "You don't know how to play cards."

"I'm a quick learner, like you."

"A high stake poker game is no place to learn the art. I'll teach you how to play another time. Now get out of here."

Justin finished his meal without further comment. Brian ordered another whisky, and waited for the other gamblers to arrive.

Justin checked into the hotel, and found that the general store was still open. He went in and bought some paper and pencils, along with food supplies they would need for the ride. On his way out of the store he noticed that they had local newspapers from several surrounding towns on the counter. He purchased a few for Brian, so that he could practice reading.

When Brian stumbled into the room, it was almost dawn. Justin watched Brian's shadow unsuccessfully attempt to unbutton his shirt. Since they met, Brian had always been a man who was in control of himself and his surroundings. It amused Justin to see Brian in a state of complete inebriation.

"You want some help with that?" Justin got out of bed and unbuttoned Brian's shirt. As Justin worked at undressing him, Brian planted little kisses on Justin's neck and chest. "That tickles," he said pushing Brian away.

Brian pulled him back and held him tightly. "Don't you push me away!"

"Shhhh," Justin cautioned. "Remember the walls have ears. We have to be quiet." He led Brian to the bed and sat him down. Brian still clung to him. Justin gently massaged his head and his shoulders. Brian pulled Justin down on

top of him. The love making that followed was passionate and brief. When it was over, Justin thought that Brian had fallen asleep. He pushed himself up, but Brian pulled him back.

"I just want to get into the bed next to you." Justin slowly maneuvered his way around Brian, and climbed under the covers. He curled up in Brian's arms and closed his eyes.

"You awake?" Brian asked.

"Yes, are you?"

Brian had sobered up some, he still clung tightly to Justin. "We should be in Silverton in a day or two."

"That soon?"

"It's been a month."

"Has it? It doesn't seem that long."

"You know once you get settled, I'll be moving on."

"I know."

"I want to thank you for teaching me my letters. I'm gonna keep practicing, and one day I'm going to read Moby Dick. Maybe after I read it, I'll pass by Silverton and drop in to see you. We can spend some time catching up."

"I don't think that would be a good idea, Brian."

"Why not?"

"Being with you, I figured out something about myself. I want to share my life with one man. I'm hoping that one day I'll find someone who wants to be with me. I would never cheat on him, so hooking up with you would be out of the question."

"That ain't . . . I mean isn't going to happen. Men can't live together happily ever after. I've never even gotten to know the men I've had sex with. Most of the time, I don't even know their name. I just know it feels good. Then I move on to the next man."

"If I find a man who makes me feel the way that you make me feel, I will be devoted to him for all time."

"I'm the first man you've ever had. Don't you want to know what it feels like with another man? Wouldn't you find it exciting to fuck a stranger?"

"That would scare me to death. I want to meet a man and talk first. Maybe be friends before we fuck. I would want him to feel something special for me."

"Do you think we're friends?"

"I like to think we are."

"Then why can't I just drop by to say hello? We can talk about the book."

"Because I love you. I will always love you. And if you come back here, it will make me feel sad that you don't want to be with me."

Brian was silent. Justin rolled off his chest and turned on his side. "Good night, Brian."

"Good bye, Justin." Brian whispered.

When Justin awoke the next morning, Brian was snoring like a buzz saw. It was raining buckets outside, but Justin was starving so he got dressed and went to the café across the street from the hotel. The conversation the night before had been unsettling for Justin. He had hoped all along that Brian would change his mind about leaving. But now he realized there was no hope for a long term relationship with a man like Brian Kinney. He had told Brian how he felt about him. But it made no difference. Brian had been right, getting too attached to any man was a bad idea. It hurt so much to let go.

Justin finished his breakfast of bacon and eggs. When he left the café, he asked the woman who had served him if he could take some coffee and biscuits to his traveling companion. She obliged and wrapped up a meal for him to take to Brian.

Justin ran back as fast as he could without spilling the coffee. He hoped that Brian was not in such a hurry to leave that he would want to ride off in this storm. When he got to the room, he saw that Brian was sitting up in bed reading one of the newspapers he had bought the night before.

"Good morning. I brought you some coffee and biscuits."

Brian took the coffee from Justin without looking up from the newspaper.

Justin thought it odd that Brian hadn't said good morning "Are you mad at me?"

Brian looked up from the paper and sighed. "Why would I be mad at you?"

"No reason. What are you reading about?"

Brian studied the page in front of him. "It says here that the general store is having a sale on soap. And it also says here that Howard Jackson is selling his prize bull."

"It's raining really hard." Justin said as he looked out the window. "Can we wait a day to move on?"

"I don't suppose it matters much." Brian said listlessly.

Justin decided to press him. "What's wrong with you? And don't say 'nothing' because you're acting like I did something to upset you. I just said how I felt, that's all. I'm not ashamed that I have feelings for you."

"Are you saying that I should be ashamed for NOT having feelings?"

"Why are you taking what I said so personally? You made it perfectly clear from the beginning that you're not one for settling down. I always knew we would have to part ways at one point. It was my own stupid fault that I fell in love with you."

"You went and ruined it"

"Ruined what?"

"I thought we could be friends. After a while I would come back here and see you. But now you ruined it, and we can't be friends no more."

"Any more . . . " Justin saw the hurt look on Brian's face. "I'm sorry. That was rude."

"No, I appreciate it. You're trying to help me. I know that."

"Maybe we could still be friends." Justin sat down on the bed next to Brian and took his hand. "What I said was stupid. There's no way I'm ever going to find a man like you to settle down with. So if you still want to come and visit me someday, I'd like that."

"You'll find someone better than me. Someone who'll love you with his whole heart and soul."

"And then what? Tell my new father that I am leaving town to live in the wilderness with my male lover? Brian, what happened between us was special. It's never going to happen again in my life. I don't want to lose a good friend because of my stupid feelings. Say you'll come and see me."

"I suppose, if I ride through town and see that you're with another man, I could just move on again without stopping. That way you won't be tempted."

"No, I want you to stop. I never had a friend before."

"Liar, I bet you had lots of friends at your fancy schools back east."

"I never really fit in anywhere."

"Sometimes people who you think are your friends, turn out to be the opposite. The only person you can trust in this world is yourself. But if I had to pick a friend, I'd look for someone like you. "

"Thanks, Brian." Justin smiled sweetly. "I don't want there to be any bad feelings between us. So I think it's best we tell each other the truth, always."

"Agreed." Brian sat back down on the bed and picked up the newspaper he'd been reading.

Justin looked through the other papers and found a local paper from Silverton. "Hey, this one is from Silverton. I may as well catch up on the news from my new hometown." He sat next to Brian on the bed and opened the paper.

They lay on the bed side by side reading. All of a sudden Justin gasped. "Brian, look at this! I guess it won't be too difficult to find my father in Silverton. He's running for mayor. There's a picture of him."

"Let me see that." Brian pulled the paper out of his hand and stared at the picture. "What does it say?" He asked anxiously.

"Not much about him particularly. He's one of the candidates running for mayor." Justin took the paper back from Brian. "What do you think, Brian? Do I look like him?"

"No, you look like your mother. Are you sure it doesn't say anything else about him? What does he does for a living?"

"It just says he's a business man. I guess he gave up doctoring. He must own a store or something."

"Justin, don't get your hopes up about him. You might get disappointed."

"Brian, you're such a pessimist. If you always think that something bad will happen, it usually does. I'm not building him up in my mind. I had a good father. I'm only going to meet him because my mother wanted me to."

"Did it stop raining yet?"

"It let up some."

Brian got out of bed and put on his trousers and shirt. As he pulled on his boots he said to Justin, "I'm going to the outhouse. Give me that Silverton newspaper."

"Here, take it. I'm going to get some carrots and feed the horses."

Brian finished his business and returned to the room. The rain was coming down in torrents again, and Justin had not come back from the stable. Brian tried to concentrate on reading the newspapers that Justin had gotten, but after a while he became frustrated. Learning to read was not easy. But he had to admit that he was enjoying his new found ability. Could it be that people had been wrong about him all of his life?

Since he was a young boy, Brian had an interest in learning. His mother, Joan, was much younger than his father. Brian believed that it was a marriage of convenience for her. She was the youngest child of poor dirt farmers. When Jack Kinney came through town on his way west, he took an interest in the pretty young girl. He was in need of a wife, and since there were not too many respectable unmarried ladies where he was headed, he paid Joan's father for her hand in marriage. Before they arrived at their destination, Joan was with child.

Brian Kinney was born on the 10th day of July in the year 1856 in Wichita, Kansas. Joan was an attentive mother and Jack was very proud of his new family. As Brian grew he developed a close relationship with his mother. She sang to him, and made him laugh. Jack, an Irish immigrant, was a hard-working provider, yet his manner with his family was reserved.

As the years passed it became clear that Brian was destined to be an only child. The distance between their farm, and the next, did not allow for much of a social life for a young boy. He longed for the companionship of children his own age, and often asked his parents if he could go to school. But his mother had become withdrawn and distracted as Brian had grown up. She did not have time to take him back and forth to the school in town, but she promised she would teach him herself. Jack worked in the fields from morning till after dark most days. He thought that school was foolishness. Brian only needed to know how to work the land to make a living. And that he would learn by doing. It was a lonely life for Brian.

The only social time that the family shared was going to the church service in town on Sundays. It was a whole day affair. They would pack a lunch and leave at the crack of dawn to get there in time. The entire town would attend and after the service they would all gather in the picnic grounds that surrounded the church. Brian would join the boys who played kick ball in the field. It was the only normal family time he could remember.

When Brian was about eight, his father stopped going to church with them. He said that his time was better spent in the fields and that if God wanted to talk to him he would know where to find him. Brian was relieved that his mother insisted on going to church with her son every week. It was all that Brian had to look forward to. He noticed that his mother enjoyed the social outing as much as he did. In fact she had been spending a lot of time with one particular man who Brian would describe as shady. Brian was a particularly shy and quiet boy. It never occurred to him to mention the man to his father. But one day when Jack was out the fields, the man came to the house. Joan pulled Brian close to her and told him that she loved him very much. But she was unhappy and needed to be on her own for a while. She left with the man that day and Brian never saw her again.

After his mother left, his father changed. He still worked hard every day but at night when he came home he would drink. Brian was determined to take care of his father the best he could for an eight-year old boy. They became close and Jack started to open up to Brian about his feelings. He loved Joan very much and regretted that he had not been a better husband. As he watched his father's health deteriorate from the alcohol, Brian hated his mother more each day. Her selfish act had destroyed their family, and in the end was responsible for the death of his father.

One day when he was twelve years old he came in from feeding the chickens and found his father's body slumped over the kitchen table. From that day on Brian was completely alone in the world.

In the weeks they had been on the road, Brian and Justin had not been apart for more than the few hours that Brian had been in town playing cards. Alone in the hotel room, Brian began to wonder what it would be like for him when they parted company, and the thought saddened him.

He went to the window and watched as the sky darkened and lightning appeared in the distance. Justin had been gone quite a while. Brian considered going out to look for him, but then he spotted a lively young figure sprinting from the stable across the street to the hotel. Brian heard the boy run up the stairs and open the door. Justin bolted into his arms, and at once the room brightened as if a lamp had been lit. Justin had a way about him that warmed the coldest heart. Brian had a towel ready and was drying off Justin's hair, as the boy stripped out of his wet clothes.

"What happened to your hair?" Brian asked.

"I got a hair cut at the barber shop. How do I look?" Justin stood in the middle of the room stark naked, with a big grin on his beautiful young face.

Brian struggled to resist the urge to pick him up and throw him onto the bed. "You look presentable. But you looked fine before. Who are you trying to impress, anyway?" Brian wrapped the towel around him and Justin sat down on the bed.

"I'm not trying to impress anyone. When my hair gets too long, I look like a girl."

"What else did you do today?"

"I went to see the horses. I was trying to wait for the rain to stop before coming back, but I missed you."

"You missed me?" Brian asked as he slowly pulled the towel away from Justin's shoulders, kissing his soft fair skin. Justin returned the kisses and they spent the rest of the afternoon enjoying each other's company.

When they awoke from napping the rain had stopped. Brian pulled Justin to the window to show him the rainbow that had formed over the saloon. Justin grinned enthusiastically. "Colorado sure is pretty. I don't recall ever seeing a rainbow in New York." He turned to Brian and kissed him on the cheek. "Do you want to go to the saloon for dinner?"

"Yeah, in a little while. I have to tell you something. You better sit down over here by the window."

Justin sat on the window bench. Brian looked him in the eye and told him the story. "I'm acquainted with David Cameron, the man in the newspaper picture. When I was a kid he picked me up in a little town called Ponca City, Oklahoma. I traveled with his medicine show for more than a year."

"What are you talking about? David Cameron was a doctor. When my mother met him, he was in medical school in New York. You must be mistaken Brian."

"David Cameron was tossed out of medical school for cheating in his first semester. Which is probably why he left New York. He was a snake oil salesman, and a conniving son of a bitch. He taught me how to play poker. Only I never could master the art of cheating like him."

Justin grew silent. He stared out the window for a moment and then turned back to Brian. "I suppose it's possible that it's the same man. But maybe he's changed."

"I hope, for your sake, that he has. I don't tell you this to hurt you. You said we needed to tell each other the truth. I'm just warning you to be careful."

"I appreciate it."

"There's more, " Brian continued. "The man is dangerous."

"What do you mean?"

"It's pretty harsh."

"You can say anything to me, Brian."

"He likes to hurt people. I've seen him take a strap to both men and women. He beat me black and blue many a times. I had no place else to go, so I stuck it out. One night he got drunk, and he took his belt to my back and beat me bad, I still have scars. I snuck out of the tent that night and stole Lightning. I figured Cameron owed me."

Justin looked into Brian's eyes and saw the sadness and hurt of a much younger man. He cupped Brian's face in his hands and kissed his forehead. "You didn't deserve to be treated like that. I'm sorry that you were made to suffer. And I'm glad you got away."

"But you're still bound and determined to find him?"

"I've come this far. I need to see him, but I don't expect anything."

"I just wonder what it is he expects from you. The man I knew didn't do anything unless he saw a profit from it. He wrote your mother knowing that you would high tail it out here to meet your long lost Pa."

"I'll be careful, Brian. Now that I know the kind of man he is, I'll just meet him, and move on. It was my mother's dying wish."

"I'm sorry you came all the way out here for nothing."

"I'm not sorry. I met you."

"I'm nothing special."

"I wish that you would see yourself as I see you."

"Thanks to you, I know that I'm not too dumb to learn."

"That's a start. Let's go eat. I'm starving."

The saloon had a dinning room that was separated from the bar area. It was crowded but they managed to get a table in a quiet corner of the room. They ordered fried chicken, corn bread and two beers.

"Tell me more about your travels, Brian. Where else have you been? Where did you go after you left the medicine show?"

"I went south to Texas. Met up with a gang down there and traveled with them for a few years. Then I made my way up to Buckskin Joe, where I met you."

"That sounds exciting. What did you do with the gang?"

"Nothing I'm proud of."

"You're such an adventurer. I'd never be that brave. If I hadn't met you in Buckskin Joe, I never would have gotten this far."

"I'd say you're plenty brave. You've travel more miles than I have, coming all the way here from New York City. From what I've heard, you have to be pretty tough to live in that town."

"Some parts of New York are less than civilized. But I grew up in a nice area."

"I don't know why you'd ever leave a place like that. And what about your fancy school in Boston? Don't you want to finish school?"

"I will some day. But when I do, it will be on my own terms, doing what I want to do."

"If things don't work out for you in Silverton, will you go back home?"

"I haven't thought ahead that far. What about you, are you planning on going back to Buckskin Joe?"

"Hell no. There's nothing there for me. I was ready to move on when you provided me the opportunity."

"Don't take this the wrong way, but maybe we could travel together for a while. I know you're a loner, and you don't want to get too attached. But I do need your wilderness survival expertise to guide my journey. And in return I will share my academic expertise with you."

"Share your what?"

"I'll teach you the subjects I learned about in my fancy school. Reading, math, history and science."

"What do you know about science?"

"Just the basics. I never took a big interest in science."

"Sounds like a lot of work. I don't know if I can learn all that stuff."

"You don't have to decide now. We can talk about our plans some more once we see what happens in Silverton."

Justin woke up at the crack of dawn. They were about half a days ride from Silverton. By supper time he might just be in the company of a man who claimed to be his father. After what Brian had told him about David Cameron, Justin's enthusiasm had waned a bit. But he was still determined to follow through, and find Cameron no matter

what kind of a person he was in the past. He may have changed in light of the fact that he was running for public office.

The sun was just barely crawling up into the sky, and Brian still lay by the fire snoring away. Justin loved sleeping next to Brian. The first few nights they slept together Brian was aloof after sex. He would turn on his side facing away from Justin, and fall asleep almost immediately. Justin always found a way to nuzzle up next to him. Brian would pretend to push him away in the morning. As their journey progressed Brian became more open to affection. Justin was amused when he awoke this morning and found Brian's arm around his shoulder.

Justin gathered some fire wood so he could make coffee. He paced nervously as he waited for the water to boil. David Cameron's reaction to his new found family member might not be positive. Justin could be in for a big disappointment. But what was it that he expected to find when he set out on his journey? Love, acceptance . . . a sense of family?

He'd had all of those things back in New York. When his mother died, he felt an overwhelming sense of loss. He was truly alone in the world. David Cameron represented a possible connection to family that Justin so longed for.

Meeting Brian Kinney had changed Justin's view of the world. The man had been on his own since he was a boy. He was completely self-reliant, and yet he still had the soul of a young boy deep inside. Justin found himself hoping that David Cameron would reject him upon his arrival in town. By nightfall he could be back in Brian's arms.

The smell of coffee had awakened Brian, who went directly to the bushes to relieve himself. "Smells good, Sunshine. I'm gonna miss your cooking." Brian said groggily.

"You hate my cooking."

"That's true. Maybe it's the way you take care of the horses that I'll miss."

"You take care of the horses."

"Right. What was it about you I was going to miss?" Brian teased.

"My ass."

"That's it! The most beautiful ass west of the Mississippi. I will miss it, dearly."

"You may not have to miss it at all. He may hate me, and run me off his property. Or he may hit me over the head, and steal all my money and then run me off his property. You're not rid of me until I say so."

"You don't have any money, remember? And he's not going to hate you right off? You're not so bad when your mouth isn't running."

They rode along in silence that morning and into the afternoon. Justin ran the images of the meeting with his father over and over in his head until they became real to him. He was ready.

"Look," Brian pointed to a town in the valley. "All you have to do is follow the road along side the rail road tracks. It's not far. I'll make camp here for a few days. If you don't show up, I'll figure you hooked up with your new family and I'll be moving on. I'll see you in your dreams."

"If you're not here when I get back, you'll see me in your nightmares. I AM coming back. Maybe sooner than you think." Justin kissed Brian on the lips and began the journey into Silverton.

"Good luck, Sunshine," Brian called out, then under his breath he said. "You're gonna need it."

Journals West - Part Three

Silverton

It took Justin over an hour to ride down the steep hillside and find his way to the rail road tracks. It was almost supper time and Justin found himself wondering what Brian would have to eat that night. He had left all the provisions they bought in the saddle bags on Brian's horse. There was plenty of food for Brian to eat while he waited. Justin had also left Moby Dick in the saddle bag along with the food in case Brian wanted to practice.

Before he knew it, Justin was riding along the outskirts of town. It was bigger than most of the towns he had encountered after leaving Denver. But nowhere near the size of his hometown of New York City. Justin got to the rail road station just as the large mountain steam engine was arriving from Durango. In front of him loomed the mountain where Brian had set up camp. It was a comfort for Justin to know that Brian was nearby.

Justin dismounted and tied his horse to a post near the general store. The main street was crowded with pedestrians. Justin noticed flyers tacked onto posts along the street, encouraging people to attend a debate which was being given in the town square that very afternoon. He saw a crowd had gathered there and thought it would be a good place to start searching for his father.

The candidates arrived on horse back and greeted the crowd. He knew David Cameron right off. He was tall and handsome like the picture in the newspaper. When he spoke, his voice was commanding and sincere. Justin observed that David had a following among the town's people, especially the women. Justin stood near the livery stable and listened to the speeches.

When the debate was over, he stood back as the crowd disbursed, and wandered away from the main thoroughfare to collect his thoughts. Cameron's speech had been entertaining yet lacked any substantial information about the man himself or his views on the political issues. David Cameron was obviously intelligent and Justin had to admit, he was rather handsome for a man his age. It was easy to see why Brian had been attracted to him. And clearly it was easy to see why half the town had been carried away by his charming manner.

Justin watched as Cameron walk away after shaking some hands and making small talk with the town's people. David mounted his horse and road off toward the West. Justin followed him at a slow pace not wanting to draw any

attention to himself. Just outside of town Cameron stopped in front of a very large house which appeared to have seen better days. From what Justin could see, the porch needed repair and the house needed painting. But at one time it must have been quite grand.

Once Cameron let himself inside Justin knew it was time. He walked up to the porch and knocked on the door. David Cameron opened the door and stared at him for a moment. Before Justin could introduce himself, David took his hand and pulled him inside. "You're Justin Taylor. My God, boy, what are you doing here?" His welcoming smile and gentle manner put Justin at ease.

"I saw your speech and I followed you to your house. Is this a bad time? I could come back?"

David had already led him into the parlor and was pouring them both a drink. "There could never possibly be a bad time to meet one's only child." He handed the drink to Justin and held up his glass to toast. "Welcome, son."

Justin smiled and clinked their glasses. "Thank you."

"I never dreamed you'd make a trip all the way to Colorado. I thought your mother might be generous enough to send word of you in a letter. But she never wrote back and I had given up hope. It was presumptuous of me to write to her. She must hate me. We'll send word to her at once that you've arrived safely."

"Please sir, let me explain. My mother passed away four months ago. She gave me your letter on her death bed and told me the story. I only came because it was her wish that I meet you."

"Dear, Jennifer. How sad that you've lost your mother so young. You must be overwhelmed with grief."

"I was, but I've come to accept her death. The journey west helped to heal my pain. She must have known it would."

"Colorado has a way of lifting one's spirit." David sighed. "Tell me about your journey."

"I took a train to Denver and then a stage coach. The scenery was breath taking. I arrived in Buckskin Joe and have been traveling by horse since then."

"You should have wired me, I would have ridden there to meet you."

"I didn't want to trouble you. A month's ride is a long way."

"It's only a two-weeks ride. I would have been more than happy to meet you. I hate the thought that you made the trip alone."

Justin thought of Brian and the way they had met. It had taken them one month for a two-week ride. Brian had been delaying them on purpose. Justin could only guess the reason why.

"I hired a guide to take me here. He left me outside of town this morning."

"You need to be very cautious with men who call themselves guides of the wilderness. I've heard tales of people being robbed of all their money and left on the side of the road to die by the same men they paid to protect them."

"He didn't rob me."

"He did cheat you. A months pay for two weeks work! What was the man's name? I have acquaintances in that area. Perhaps they can catch up with him and get your money back."

"His name . . . " Justin thought quickly. "It was Gus."

"Gus? No last name?"

"He never said it. Please don't bother about him. I'm here in one piece, and that's what I paid him for. The time I spent on the road was put to good use. The inspiring sights along the way allowed me to capture Colorado in my sketch book."

"May I see your sketch book?"

Justin opened his bag and proudly produced the tattered book. He handed it to his father, but then realized in horror that Brian's likeness was all over the pictures in that book. Before he could think of an excuse to grab it away, Cameron was turning the pages.

"Your work is remarkable. Such detail."

"My artwork is my passion. But you don't need to wade through these rough drafts. They're all pretty much alike." Justin tried to take the book back but his David had a firm grasp.

"There are pages missing." David observed.

"Oh, yes. We needed paper to draw maps and such. Gus must have ripped the pages from my tablet." Justin gave a sigh of relief that Brian had thought to remove the drawings. Justin recalled that several of them were nudes.

"You have talent. I like this one particularly. Is that Pike's Peak?"

"Yes, I believe that's what Gus said. Would you like to have that one?"

"I didn't mean to be so bold, Justin. Your talent is remarkable. But you'll most likely not have the opportunity to visit this spot again. I wouldn't want you to remove it from your collection."

"No," Justin tore it carefully out of the book. "It would please me for you to have it."

"In that case I am honored. I've always had an appreciation for art. I used to dabble a bit with paints when I was younger."

"I'd love to see them."

"Perhaps later. I want to talk to you about your mother. I need to explain what happened. I tried for many years to get up the courage to contact her. When I saw your picture in the paper I could wait no longer." David paused and stared at Justin. "You favor your mother, don't you?"

"I think I do. But since I've met, you I see that perhaps I might have your eye color. My mother's eyes were brown and mine are blue, like yours."

"I do see myself in you. When I saw the picture in the newspaper, I knew right away you were my son from the shape of your eyes. And I figured you were born several months after I left. I want you to know that I was not aware of your mother's condition when I left New York. Had I known, I would have married her, of course. I did love your mother very much."

"She had feelings for you also."

"Her father disliked me. His mind was set that Craig Taylor was the man she would marry. There had been an understanding between the families since they were children. But we were in desperately in love. Jennifer fought with her father and he banned me from their home. She came to join me briefly in my apartment before I was called to duty. That's when she became pregnant. When the letter came assigning me to a field hospital in Virginia, her father took her back into their home and made her promise never to contact me again. I had every intention of coming back to marry her, but then I was wounded. I stayed in an army hospital for many months. I sent word to friends at school but they were graduated and gone. I didn't hear from her. One day I saw the announcement in the paper that she had married your father."

"She never knew you tried to contact her. When my father, Craig Taylor, came home from Boston, she told him what happened. He said he would marry her and raise me as his son. He was a good father. I loved them both very much. I had a good life with them."

"I'm glad. I never would have contacted her had I known she would burden you with finding me. I only wanted to hear about you. What you were like, what you studied in school. I don't mean to tarnish the memory of your parents."

"I'm glad to know the truth." Justin turned and saw a woman had entered the room. Her frame was small and fragile and she appeared to be older than his father.

"David, dinner will be ready shortly." She turned to Justin. "Is your young friend staying? I will set another place."

Justin felt uncomfortable. It was clear that his unexpected presence in the house had upset her. "No thank you. I must go into town to make arrangements for my lodging."

"Nonsense, " David exclaimed loudly, "you'll be staying with us. Justin, this is my wife Lillian. Lillian, may I introduce my son, Justin Taylor. "

The woman looked disturbed but not surprised. She took Justin's hand briefly and welcomed him. "David, you forget that the rooms upstairs are being renovated. There is only our room and Christopher's room."

"I'm sure Justin won't mind sharing a room with his step brother." Cameron smiled graciously at Justin. "I want you to feel welcome in my home. You're my only blood relative." He took Justin's bag and turned to his wife. "Please show Justin where he may wash up for dinner."

Dinner was served in the dinning room. Like the rest of the house, it was in need of a new coat of paint, but the furniture and fixtures reflected the grand room it had once been. David was friendly and talkative. Lillian somberly ate her meal. Justin felt that she resented his presence which was quite understandable. At one point David asked about his school. Lillian said that she grew up in Boston. Justin was glad to have a common ground to draw her into the conversation.

Before the meal ended, Christopher joined them at the table. He was boyishly handsome and well proportioned. He had light brown hair and large blue eyes that seemed innocent, yet dangerous at the same time. When they were introduced Chris gave Justin a hardy handshake, then took his place at the table next to his mother.

David, who sat at the head of the table, regarded his stepson with pride. "Justin, our Christopher has taken over my duties at the saloon since I started my campaign. He is thinking of expanding our empire and opening another gambling hall in a neighboring town. Christopher how was your trip to Creede?"

"Creede is not impressive. We should think bigger, I'm riding out to Alamosa in a day or two. There's a hotel for sale that would make a nice investment. We could turn it into a saloon with gaming rooms."

"Good work, son. Think big, I always say." David boomed.

Christopher beamed at his stepfather. "Thank you, father." Justin thought he sensed Lillian's discomfort at her son's referring to David as his father.

Lillian took a sip from her wine glass and turned to Chris. "Why not open a respectable hotel here in Silverton?"

"Mother, there's no money to be made being respectable. This town exists out of a need for hard-working miners and the like to let loose on a Saturday night. They're all about debauchery, gambling, drunken revelry and the immoderate indulgence of bodily appetites. They work hard for their money during the week and we provide them with a well-deserved opportunity to spend it on the weekend. That's the way life is out here and it's not likely to change. If you want 'respectable', go back to Boston."

Lillian began to cry. Christopher picked up his fork and went back to his meal without a second thought about how he had just treated his mother. Justin was tempted to speak out in her defense, but thought better of interfering in what was obviously a very volatile family disagreement. He glanced over at his father and thought he noticed him throw Lillian a warning look. Lillian excused herself from the table and left the room leaving Justin alone with David and Chris.

David picked up the conversation as if nothing had happened. "Justin, I will be out campaigning tomorrow and I was wondering if you'd like to join me."

"That's very kind of you. I'd be interested to hear your platform."

"I'd love it if you tagged along. I want my constituents to meet my long lost son." Justin briefly glanced at Chris to see if there was any reaction to David calling him son. Chris kept on eating his dinner without any indication that he was listening to their conversation. He gulped down the last of his meal and excused himself from the table. "I'll be off to the saloon for the evening. Justin, why don't you drop by. I'll introduce you to one of our working ladies." He shot his father a knowing glance.

"Thanks, but I am pretty tired this evening. I'd like to turn in early," Justin turned to David. "If that's okay."

"Suit yourself." Chris said as he swaggered out of the room. "Don't wait up."

Justin lay in bed staring up at the ceiling. David Cameron had been welcoming to him yet Justin was not comfortable with the family situation. He would have preferred to stay at the hotel. But he came to Silverton to get to know his father and the best way to do that would be to stay in his home. The incident with Chris and Lillian at the dinner table was unsettling. Justin would die before he would disrespect one of his parents. His behavior at the dinner table aside, Justin found his new step brother . . . interesting. He was attractive in a bad boy kind of way, dangerous, yet compelling. There was no chance that Chris would be attracted to a man romantically, but Justin thought that he might fit into the category that Brian had described, willing to fuck anything that moves.

It had been a long and emotionally draining day. Justin turned on his side and hugged the pillow pretending it was Brian. They had only been apart for a few hours but Justin already missed him. He nodded off to sleep with thoughts of Brian's sweet kisses in his head when he was awakened by a loud noise in the room.

In the shadow of the moon light that flooded the room Justin could make out the form of a man he assumed was Chris. Justin pretended to be asleep but could not resist opening his eyes to peek when Chris climbed into the bed totally naked. Justin felt his body tense up. He was wearing his drawers and undershirt and having this naked man sleeping next to him was extremely unsettling. It was almost dawn before Justin finally fell asleep.

When Justin went down stairs, the next morning he found David in the kitchen cooking.

"Good morning, son. How do you like your eggs?"

"Which ever way is easier. I didn't expect to find you down here cooking."

"Lillian is having one of her migraines. A man has to eat." David finished preparing the meal.

Justin sat at the kitchen table and picked up a newspaper. "Your opponent Mr. Webster is has taken a stand in favor of paving the main road into town. What's your opinion on that issue?"

"Mr. Webster is in favor of anything that will put money in his pocket. He plans to build a new saloon and gambling establishment on that main road."

"So you're against it because if he builds on the main road it will create competition for your saloon which is in town. It would appear that you're taking a stand against progress in light of how it will affect your business."

"Silverton is thriving. Progress like Webster proposes can ruin a town like ours."

"I didn't mean to criticize."

"You're a fine, educated young man from a very large progressive city. I appreciate your views such as they reflect your own experiences. Life west of the Mississippi is quite different, as it should be. The people who live here came west for a simpler life."

"I see what you mean. I do love it here in Colorado. It's so beautiful. Everywhere I look, I find inspiration for my art."

"Good, then you will enjoy my little surprise. After breakfast I want to show you something."

When the meal was finished David showed Justin a room at the back of the house. There was a southern exposure and the room was filled with light. Justin noticed that there was a table set up with paints, brushes and canvases. "I use this room to paint when I have the time."

Justin noticed the paintings on the wall. It was clear to him at that moment that his talent had come from his father. "They're wonderful. Do you have more?"

"No, just the ones on the walls here. Running the hotel and saloon has kept me very busy. I want you to use this room whenever you get inspired."

"I thought that today we would spend some time together. Didn't you mention that you planned to go out campaigning this morning?"

"I had forgotten that I had some business to attend to. If you'd like to work in here this morning, I'll return by the late afternoon. We can spend time together then."

Shortly after their talk David left to do his errands. Justin sat in the studio and picked up a brush. In school he had done some work with paint, but mostly he only had access to pencils and paper. Before long he had mastered the art of getting the right amount of paint on his brush. The rest came naturally as he painted the scene that he saw outside the window. Silverton lay at the foot of the Rocky Mountains. There was a breathtaking view and the colors of the late fall foliage inspired him to do three canvases before he broke for lunch.

David returned home in the late afternoon and was happy to see that Justin had made good use of the studio. "Justin, you have a very unique talent. Your work is wonderful. Do you mind if I take a few of these to show to my friend in Howardsville. He was an art professor and I would love to show off my son's talent to him."

"I'd be honored."

"Good, then it's all set. I will be leaving in a few days."

"You're going away? I thought we might get to spend some time together. I really hadn't planned on staying long."

"We'll do just that, right now. I want to take you around town and show you off. I was hoping that you would stay here with us until you have your plans for your education firmly set. Perhaps an art school in Denver. I'll make inquiries."

"I'm not sure yet what I want to do."

"Surely your family left you with funds to complete your education. As I recall, both of your parents came from money."

Justin never felt comfortable discussing his financial situation. David had been kind to him, but he was still a stranger. "I am not heir to a fortune. My father had many debts and my mother had been ill for quite some time."

"Really?" David regarded Justin curiously. He hesitated a moment and then his mood changed. "We'll have dinner at the hotel tonight. I'll ask Chris to join us."

"What about Lillian?" Justin asked.

"I'm afraid she is still confined to her bed. She suffers from migraine headaches often, the poor dear. We have a woman who comes in to care for the house and cook. Lillian will be fine."

David and Justin socialized with several of the town's people in the afternoon. Justin found that his father had a way about him that was compelling, especially to with ladies. He was equally liked and respected by the gentleman of the town. David introduced Justin to everyone they met on the street that day. His face was beaming with pride when he told them that Justin was a college graduate with a real artistic talent.

The former hotel, which was now a saloon, reminded Justin of the Cameron home, once grand and tastefully decorated, now fallen into disrepair. The state of the decor did not seem to bother the patrons. It was a weekend and the room was full of drunken miners and rail road workers all anxious to drink and gamble away their hard earned wages.

Justin's eyes began to itch when he and David entered the bar area to get a drink before dinner. The smoke and smell was enough to make Justin wretch. He was thankful when Chris appeared in the door way and they retired to the dining room which was far less noisy and chaotic.

The food was decent and the waitresses were friendly and efficient. David and Chris both ordered steaks. Justin ordered stew because he hoped that Brian had stew for dinner that night too. The discussion was mostly about politics and their plans to open saloons and gambling establishments in the surrounding towns. They were bent on building an empire. Justin's wondered if their ambitions were placed a bit high considering the lack of attention paid to the establishment they already owned.

Justin allowed David and Chris to dominate the conversation, only joining in when he was asked to render an opinion. He cautiously commented on the excellent location and the potential of the saloon as he observed the dynamics between his father and step brother. It was clear they were close. Was it a father/son or mentor/student relationship or something more? Justin felt uncomfortable in their presence. When the meal was over, David went to another table to say hello to some people, leaving Chris and Justin alone.

"Well, brother, what are your plans for the rest of the evening? My offer for a night on the town stands. We can have few beers and play a round or two of poker before helping ourselves to the female merchandise."

Justin had suspected that some of the bar maids and the waitresses were overly friendly. This was the second time that Chris was asking him to join him in an evening of debauchery and he suspected his new step brother was testing him.

"I don't think so. I have some work that I wanted to finish up tonight. David wants to take some of my paintings to a friend he is going to see."

"Hmm. Suit yourself, I guess." Chris shrugged his shoulders. "I figured you for being one of them cock sucking homosexuals anyway."

Justin panicked momentarily "I'm not . . . " he lowered his voice, "a homosexual. Why would you say such a thing?"

"Look, if I don't get laid at least once a day I would be crazed. You've been here three whole days and you haven't looked at a woman. The waitresses were flirtin' like crazy and all you did was flash that girly smile at them. Besides you kinda look like a girl with that mess of blond hair on your head."

"I can't help how I look. And the fact is that I have a girlfriend back home. We are to be engaged."

"What's that got to do with anything? Fucking is fucking. You do it because it feels good. You marry to have kids and a wife who hopefully has a dowry. But I guess you won't be needin' a dowry."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Big city boy like you from a fine family, fancy clothes, fancy education . . . you're loaded."

"I'm not loaded." Justin got up from the table. "And if you'll give my apologies to David, I must be getting back to my work."

Justin had been shaken by his encounter with Chris. He'd never been accused of being a homosexual. Hearing the words spoken out loud frightened him badly. If people got it into their heads that Chris's observations made a point, Justin may well be beaten or worse.

He spent the evening in the studio preparing some sketches and paintings for David to take to his friend. Justin had made up his mind that he would take a room at the hotel in the morning. Silverton just might be too small a town for Justin and his bizarre new family.

Justin got up at the crack of dawn on Sunday morning. David had been hinting that it would be a good idea for his family to go to church together but Justin had other ideas. It had been four whole days since he left Brian up on the mountain alone. He missed him terribly and this morning he decided to go to the hotel dining room and purchase a hearty breakfast for himself and Brian. He bought eggs, bacon, a loaf of home made bread, some fresh fruit. The waitress gave him a basket to carry it all.

The weather had been mild for November but the chilly winds reminded Justin that winter would soon be upon them. He had to make a decision soon, should he stay here and get to know his father, or should he ride off with Brian on another adventure? It was too soon to tell what his feelings were. But when he spotted Brian sitting under a tree reading a book, Justin's heart knew what his final decision would be.

Brian looked up when he heard Justin's horse approach. "Hey, stranger. I was just getting to the good part."

"I know," Justin said as he dismounted Slow Gus, "I saw your lips moving."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Brian asked.

"Nothing." Justin opened the basket and showed Brian what he'd brought. "Are you hungry?"

"I just might be able to force down a few bites. The berries up here are a little sour." Brian took a piece of bacon and wolfed it down. "It's good. But what I'm really hungry for is you." Brian grabbed Justin by the arm and shoved him up against a tree. Justin squirmed out of his trousers and let out a low moan when Brian entered him.

Hours later after they had satisfied their appetites, they lay on the ground staring up at the sky. Justin reached over and touched Brian's chin gently. "What are you thinking about?"

"My dick."

"Is that all you ever think about?"

"Sometimes I think about your dick."

"I'm sorry you have to stay up here all alone."

"I'm used to being alone."

"I'm not used to it. I miss you terribly."

"Are you ready to move on?"

"Not yet. The election is this week. I promised my father I'd stay and help him campaign."

"You two are getting along then?" Brian asked.

"He's been kind to me."

"He has his moments. That's how he sucks you in." Brian explained.

"He seems sincere. Maybe he's changed."

"For your sake I hope he has."

"He is very excited about my art work. When I showed him my sketches, he was truly impressed. It seems that he has a talent for painting. He set up a room in his house for me to do my sketching. He said I will be a famous artist one day."

"He has a house. I'm impressed. I never thought he'd have a pot to piss in. He liked living high on the hog on other people's money."

"He has a house and he owns a saloon with gambling rooms. The house belonged to his wife before they were married. Her late husband owned a hotel in town and when David married Lillian he turned it into a saloon."

"He's married?"

"Yes . . . to Lillian Hobbs. She has a son named Christopher. He and David are very close."

"How close?"

"Brian, he's not like that."

"If you say so Sunshine. Well, since you're all nestled in with your new family there's no need for me to stay. I need to be finding a place to spend the winter. I was thinking of going south, maybe to Mexico."

"Mexico? Is that far?"

"I don't know. I've never been there."

"What if I want to catch up with you. How will I find you?"

"Why would you want to be leaving your fine family?"

"Brian, cut it out. I don't know for sure they're all that fine. There's something about Chris Hobbs that makes my skin crawl. And his mother is not too friendly. I came here to get to know my father. I want to give it a few more days so I can help him win the election. Then I'll be moving on. Will you wait for me that long?"

"Can't say. It's getting mighty cold up here at night."

"Well I guess I better be getting back to town."

"I don't know if I'll be here when you get back. Here, take your book. I'm done with it."

Justin opened the book to where Brian stuck a leaf. "You're on page 10, Brian. You keep the book."

"It's your prize possession. What if we don't meet up again."

"Keep the book, Brian. If you're not here when I come back then I guess I'll have to find you again." Justin mounted Slow Gus and started to ride away.

"If you don't come back before I leave I'll put the book in this tree, right here." Brian indicated a cut out in the tree.

"Brian Kinney," Justin turned around and flashed him a sly look. "In case we don't meet up again . . . I love you." Justin grinned and turned back toward town.

Brian stood in the shadow of the large pine tree long after Justin was out of sight. His good sense told him to run for the hills away from this enchanting boy and his family drama. He kicked the ground and then sat back down under the tree and opened the book.

Justin got back to town early enough to eat dinner. Lillian had recovered from her migraine enough to join them. She still looked pale to Justin, although it seemed she had made an attempt to cover her sallowness with rouge.

"I'm glad you're feeling better." Justin said cheerfully.

Lillian nodded her head but did not speak. Justin suspected that she and David had been arguing before he came into the room. David's face was flushed and Justin realized that he had been drinking.

"I've prepared a few sketches and a painting for you to take with you to Howardsville. They're in the studio. I also want to let you know that I'll be checking into the hotel in the morning. I don't want to impose on your family for the remainder of my visit."

"Nonsense!" David blurted out abruptly. Justin jumped at the tone of his father's voice "You're a member of this family and you'll stay in this house during your visit. How would it look if my son decided that a hotel room was preferable to my home?"

"I just thought that Chris would be more comfortable having the privacy of his own room." Justin stammered.

"Chris has left on a business trip. And I'll be leaving in the morning. Lillian does not like to be alone in the house." David softened his tone. "Please reconsider."

"Of course." Justin agreed. He glanced at Lillian. She showed no reaction to David's outburst. They finished the meal in silence and Justin went directly to the studio to work.

The weather had turned cold and Justin shivered as he undressed for bed. Taking advantage of the fact that he would be sleeping alone that night, he had washed his underwear and hung them by the fire in the kitchen to dry earlier that evening. Naked he quickly crawled under the covers and as he lay on his back he could see the moon shining through the window. His thoughts turned to Brian who was camped out on the mountain. It would be much colder up there and Justin hoped that Brian was warm enough with the extra blanket he had brought him. He envisioned Brian laying on his back looking up at the same moon. Pretending to be at his side, Justin eventually drifted off to sleep.

During the night Justin was awakened when Chris climbed into the bed next to him. The stench of cigar smoke and liquor permeated the air. Justin turned on his side and move as far as he could toward the edge of the mattress to get

away from his bed mate. Mercifully, he fell back to sleep, only to be wakened again when he felt Chris's cold hand on his ass. He pushed him off roughly, which proved to be a mistake. His drunken step brother became enraged, and in a flash Justin found himself pinned down under the weight of the much larger man.

Helpless, Justin tried to struggle against Chris's attack. The more he squirmed and strained to get out from under him, the more aroused Chris became. Finally Justin felt Chris's hot juices explode on his naked back. Chris relaxed his grip and Justin was able to push him off. He jumped from the bed and began to beat at Chris's face with his fists. Chris grabbed Justin's hands to ward off the attack. He began to laugh. "What's the matter, little brother? It's all in the family. I didn't fuck you, I just accidently rubbed my cock on a naked piece of skin that happened to be in my bed. It felt good . . . it felt real good."

"You fucking beast!" Justin yelled. He remembered that Lillian was sleeping in the room beneath them. He lowered his voice, "And you accuse me of being a homosexual." He spat in Chris's face. Grabbing his clothes from the floor he bolted out of the room naked, ran down the stairs and locked himself in the studio. Once safely out of harm's way he put on his clothes and curled up in a chair to wait for morning.

Justin waited until the sun began to rise before he left the house. He rode into town and found a café that was opened early. Trying to put the events of the night before out of his mind, he bought a newspaper and read the articles that covered the election, which was only two days away. Justin had made up his mind that he would stay until then to support his father, but the next day he would rejoin Brian in the mountains. The thought of Brian waiting for him was comforting. After he finished his breakfast, Justin decided to go to the telegraph office and send word back to his aunt that he had made it to Silverton in one piece.

When he got to the telegraph office he went to the counter, wrote out his message and handed it to the clerk. "I'd like to send this telegram to New York City."

When the man looked at the paper, his face showed instant recognition. "You're Justin Taylor?"

"Yes." He replied, curious as to how the man was familiar with his name.

"I have several telegrams here for you. I was going to deliver them as soon as my helper got in today. Lucky for me you dropped by."

Justin waited anxiously as the clerk went to get the messages. He feared that someone from his family had taken sick, and in desperation his aunt had sent a telegram to Silverton. Justin felt guilty that he had not taken the time to contact her the minute he got to Colorado. When the clerk finally returned, Justin was shocked when he presented him with a handful of telegrams. After completing his transaction with the clerk Justin found a quiet place outside to read the telegrams. He was confused at first, as all of them were responses from financial institutions to inquiries about his accounts. Then it became clear to Justin. David had sent the inquiries. Brian had been right. David Cameron only acted in his own interest.

Justin's hands shook as he read the telegrams. There were responses from financial institutions in Boston as well as New York. David had even sent for information about him from his school. When he was finished reading, Justin

shoved the telegrams into his pocket and mounted Slow Gus. He was anxious to collect his belongings from Cameron's house and leave Silverton forever. As he rode up to the house, he saw Chris racing off in the opposite direction. Grateful that he would not have to deal with the man, Justin dismounted his horse and went into the house. He went directly to the studio where he had been keeping his belongings. As he started to pack his bag, he heard a low moan coming from Lillian's bedroom. Justin went into the hallway and gently knocked on her bedroom door. When there was no response he slowly opened the door and spotted Lillian sprawled on the floor. He rushed to her side and felt her neck for a pulse as Brian had shown him. She stirred when he touched her. "Lillian! Are you alright?" He could see her lip was swollen and bleeding. She sat up and pushed Justin's hand away from her face. "Lillian, what happened? Were you attacked?" He suspected right away that Chris had struck her. "Let me help you to the bed. I'll fetch a doctor."

"No!" Lillian exclaimed as she struggled to get to her feet.

"You're bleeding. Did Chris hit you?"

Lillian collapsed into a chair near the window. "I fell out of bed. Please leave me now, boy."

"I will be leaving . . . for good."

"Not before David returns?"

"I think it's best if I leave before he returns. However, I will remain in town to speak with him."

"You must be here when he returns tonight. You must!" She demanded excitedly. "He will be furious if you are not in this house when he comes home."

Justin understood her meaning. His anger would be great, and Lillian would be his only target. "I understand. If you need anything, I'll be in the studio."

Justin tried to paint but found that he was too distracted to concentrate. He had finished packing his bag and it was sitting near the door. At dinner time he checked in on Lillian. She was sleeping soundly and he decided to ride into town to get something to eat before facing his father. He lingered over his meal anticipating the inevitable confrontation. There could be no reasonable explanation for David's actions. David was after Justin's money. It was the only reason he contacted him. Justin was grateful for Brian's warning. He had been prepared for disappointment, but not this kind of personal betrayal.

Justin returned to the house just after dark. David's carriage was out front. The moment of truth was upon him. David was sitting in a chair in the parlor. He had been drinking heavily. Justin could smell it when he walked into the room. David stood up and faced him. "Where have you been? Lillian is a mess."

"Lillian was attacked by her son. She rejected my offer to fetch a doctor." Justin said flatly.

"How dare you!" David exclaimed.

Justin stood his ground. "How dare you!" He reached into his pocket and pulled out the telegrams. "You had no right to make inquiries into my finances."

"You lied to me!" David grabbed his arm roughly and pushed him up against a wall. "You have a substantial trust fund that you can have access to if you request it from your uncle. I need backing for the family's ventures. Like it or not, you're a member of this family by blood. I want you to wire your uncle and request access to a loan."

"I owe you nothing!" Justin pushed him away. "You're a selfish, mean, lying son of a bitch who will use ANYONE, even your own family. I regret that you're related to me. My mother made a mistake."

"If it had not been for me, your parents would have been childless. You owe me your life!"

"Fuck you, father! May you rot in hell!" Justin felt David's fist make contact with his face.

David punched him unmercifully until he fell to the ground. After kicking him in the ribs David grabbed his hair and pulled him up to face him. "I will get what I need from you! Consider what will happen when I announce to the town that my son is a homosexual who attacked his step mother and molested his step brother. You will give me access to your accounts, or you will be hung as a sodomist."

Justin watched David stagger out of the room before he passed out on the floor. When Justin came to, Cameron was gone. He got to his feet and looked in the mirror over the fireplace. His eye was swollen and blood was pouring from his nose. In the mirror he saw that Lillian was standing in the doorway of the parlor staring at him.

She brought his bag into the parlor and set it on the floor next to him. He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and managed to stop the bleeding from his nose.

"How can you live with a man who is pure evil?" Justin asked.

"When we married, David was charming and kind. I imagine that was the side of him that seduced your mother. Once we were legally married, he owned all of the assets that were left to me by my late husband. He turned our beautiful hotel into a seedy saloon. He gambled away what was left and even mortgaged the house. He turned my own son against me. If I ever left him, I would be penniless."

"Being penniless is better than being beaten."

"You better go quickly. He left here in a rage and he is likely to come back once he's had his fill of liquor. If you don't give him what he wants, he's likely to kill you next time."

Justin opened his bag. "Where are my drawings?"

"He's been selling them. You are quite good, you know. He got a pretty penny for them."

"He had NO right!"

"David cares nothing for the rights of others. He will take what he wants and it doesn't matter who gets hurt. Now, leave here boy, and don't look back."

Justin took his belongings and mounted his horse. When he got to the campsite, he was relieved to see Brian fishing at the stream. He tied Slow Gus next to Lightning and join Brian at the bank of the stream.

Brian turned and looked at him. "I see you met the real David Cameron." He tried to get a closer look at his face but Justin pulled away.

"You were right about him. Everything you said was true." Justin bent over the stream, threw water over his face and walked back toward the camp.

The next few days it rained heavily and they decided it was best to stay put and take advantage of the shelter the rocks and caves the mountain provided. Brian noticed a change in Justin's personality. He had become sullen and quiet after his encounter with David Cameron. At first Brian felt if he left him alone to work things out in his mind, he would come around. Days went by and nothing seemed to snap Justin out of his mood. Their funds were low and the weather would be turning cold soon. It was time to make a decision about the future.

"I suppose you'll be wanting to find your way back east before the winter sets in. They get some really bad snows up here in the mountains. There's no way to find food."

"I've already told you I'm not going home. There's nothing there for me." He said wistfully.

"Look, your Ma died, and that's an awful hardship to bear. But running away didn't help, did it? You did what she asked you to do. She thought it was for your own good. But finding Cameron only added to your pain. It's time for you to go home and get on with your life."

"I have NO life, Brian. I don't know what I would do if I went back. I don't know what to do now. Maybe I'll just sit out here on this rock and let the bleak Colorado weather take my life."

"Shit!" Brian threw the coffee out of his cup. "You let that asshole Cameron take away your spirit of adventure. I thought you were stronger than that. You disappoint me boy. Tomorrow I'm heading west. First town we come to, I'm dropping you off at the train station. You should go back home, marry the preacher's daughter and raise a passel of blond haired brats. You're not fit to ride with me."

"Fuck you, Brian!"

"Fuck me. That's right, it's all you're good for." Justin got up off the rock and lunged at Brian, pushing him to the ground. He raised his fist and was about to hit Brian in the face when he suddenly stopped himself and got up.

"I'm no better than my father. You're right. I'm not fit to ride with you. I'm not fit for anything." He slid off of Brian and sat under a tree.

"That ain't true." Brian stood in front of him. "I'm not really understanding the words in that book. I was thinking you could finish reading it out loud. And maybe I would have some time, now that the winter is setting in, to learn about those other things you mentioned, numbers and science and the like."

Justin regarded him silently. Brian shuffled his feet like a child which made Justin giggle.

"Now that's more like it." Brian put his arms out and Justin got up and embraced him. "I'm going to town and make us some traveling money. I need a stake for the game."

Justin dug into his pocket and counted five dollars. "Wait," he put his hand inside his jacket and pulled out his father's watch. "Take this too."

"Are you sure?"

"I trust you'll come back with it. You've always provided for us. I want to do my share."

Journals West - Part Four

Durango

It was almost dawn, and Brian had not returned to the camp. Justin decided that at first light he would mount his horse and go into town to find him. He had a bad feeling about Brian's plan to go into Silverton to gamble, and now he feared that something might have happened to the man.

When dawn broke, Justin traveled in the direction of town. He had the horse trot along slowly as he searched both sides of the road for any sign of Brian. Justin tried to keep his fear at bay as he searched. He was almost to town when he spotted Slow Gus grazing in a field. After grabbing hold of the horse's lead he tied both him and Lightning to a tree. The road paralleled a gully, at the bottom of which was a stream. He had only walked a little way when he spotted Brian lying face down near the water. As fast as he could, Justin ran down the steep incline. When he reached Brian's side, he felt his neck for a pulse. Brian was alive, but he was not moving. Justin turned his body over and saw that his face was cut and bruised. It might have happened during the fall, but somehow Justin didn't think that was the case. It looked to him as if Brian had been beaten and left for dead.

"Brian!" Justin whispered into his ear. Brian didn't respond. His right eye was swollen shut and his face was covered with blood. When Justin tried to lift him up, Brian moaned in pain. "Hold on to me Brian. I'll get us out of here."

It took Justin almost half an hour to drag Brian up the steep slope all the way to where the horses were tied. With all the strength he had left, he lifted Brian up onto Lightning. Brian's limp body slumped over the saddle like a rag doll. Justin decided it was the best he could do. He mounted Slow Gus and led Lightning along slowly, making sure that Brian did not slip off the saddle. Miraculously, they made it back to the campsite without any mishaps. Justin slid Brian down from the horse and dragged his body to the shelter of the rock caves.

Justin knew that he was Brian's only hope for survival. He made sure that Brian was warm and safe before he went to get what he needed. Using the sketch book of "good and bad" plants he searched the area for whatever he could find that would help Brian heal. On the way back he got some fresh water from the stream. He sorted out the plants he had collected and found a leaf that looked similar to the one that Brian had used when Justin had the lump on his head. Then Justin started a fire and boiled some water for an herbal tea. He pulled off Brian's shirt and gasped when he saw how bruised his body was. He used the water from the stream to clean all the cuts that he could find. Then he gathered Brian in his arms and held him close.

Hours later, Brian attempted to open his eyes, but was only half way successful. He looked over and saw the outline of Justin's form lying next to him. "Hey," Brian managed to pull himself up onto one elbow. "Justin, wake up!"

Justin's eyes flew open at the sound of Brian's voice. "You're alive!" He exclaimed proudly.

Brian felt the sting of the wounds that cover his body. He put his hand to his face and felt bandages. "What did you do to me?"

"When you didn't come back, I went to town to look for you. I found you in a gully, flat on your face in the mud. You were pretty messed up, Brian. I got you onto the horse and brought you back here. I fixed you up, like all the times you fixed me."

Brian pulled himself up into a sitting position. He started to remember the beating. "Shit, the fucker jumped me and took everything!"

"It's okay, Brian. As long as you're safe now, that's all that matters. How do you feel?"

"I feel like I fell off a cliff, and landed on my head. I have a fucking awful headache."

"I'll brew you some more tea."

"Let me see the leaves first. I don't need you poisoning me."

Justin got the cup of leaves and put it in Brian's hand. "Are they the right ones?"

Brian touched the leaves and held them in front of his face. "I can't see in the dark, but I guess they are right."

"What do you mean, dark? It's broad day light and the sun is shining on my face. Can you see it?"

Brian dropped the cup. "No, I can't see. It's dark. I can barely make out your face in front of me."

The relief that Justin felt when Brian awoke turned to fear. Brian couldn't see. Justin felt his heart racing, and he began to panic. But when he saw the look of pure terror on Brian's face, he knew he had to fight his own fears and tend to him first. He calmly picked up the cup and retrieved the leaves. "Brian don't worry. I'm sure it's temporary. You took a really bad fall and hit your head. You need to rest up and heal. I'll stay right here by your side."

Brian struggled to get to his feet. Justin helped him up. "Where are we?" Brian asked.

"We're back at camp. I dragged you into the rocks for shelter. The sun is shining through the trees."

"Get me outside." Brian insisted. "I want to feel the sun on my face." Justin obliged, assisting Brian to a stump near the stream. He sat him down and rubbed his shoulders. "Is that better?"

"No, I only see shadows."

"Is there anything you want me to do?"

"Yeah, I want you to dig a hole near a nice shade tree. Pull me over and lay me down in it. Then take my gun and shoot me in the head. 'Cause if I can't see, I'm already dead."

"You want me to kill you!!!" Justin exclaimed. "You're giving up without a fight!!!"

"What good am I without my sight? I won't survive. I can't hunt or fish to get food. Justin, I'm not getting out of this alive."

Brian's request had infuriated Justin. "You're not dead yet. But if you want me to put you in a hole and bury you now, then fine. I'll dig a hole under a tree, pull the trigger and put you out of your misery. Then I'll get in that hole on top of you and put a bullet in my own head. 'Cause without you, I may as well be dead too."

Brian stood up slowly and reached out his arms. Justin pulled him close and held him tightly. They clung together for a time then, without another word, Justin led Brian up the hill to the campsite. "You sit here, and I'll make the tea."

Brian rested his back against a tree and closed his eyes. Justin put a piece of bread in Brian's hand. "Eat this. I made some stew for you too."

Brian ate the bread and the stew. "Not bad, where'd you get it?"

"I stole the bread and vegetables from a farmhouse near town. I found some meat curing in a smoke house, so I took that too. I got a shirt and some pants off a clothes line for you to wear."

"You're stealing from folks now?"

"I don't care about folks anymore. I don't care about anyone, except you and me. If folks don't want us around because they hate us, then I'll take what I need to survive."

"You've lost your love for humanity. Is it because of Cameron?"

"He's a low down, lying, snake in the grass. He steals from people and ruins their lives, and they let him. And just because I don't look or act the way a 'real man' is supposed to, they would hang me without a second thought."

"What happened back there Justin? You didn't say much about it."

Justin hesitated and shuffled his feet in front of him. He hadn't planned to tell Brian the whole story for fear he would want to retaliate. "Can I ask you something first?"

"That depends, what is it you want to know?"

"What were your feelings for Cameron when you worked for him? Were you lovers? Is he . . . like us?"

Brian squirmed a bit at Justin's question. He was not one for talking about feelings. But in this particular circumstance he supposed that he owed it to Justin to tell him the truth.

"When I met Cameron, I'd been on my own for a while. Back then I hadn't learned to be content with my own company. I suppose I was lonely. He was kind to me when we met up, and I took it for something more. "

"You loved him?" Justin asked softly. "Did you have sex?"

"I was young. I didn't know what love was but, I guess at the time I thought I was in love. And yes, sex was a part of our relationship."

"So he is like us . . . he's a sodomist."

"Where did you hear that word?"

"From him, right before his fist sent me flying across the room."

"He's nothing like us, Justin. There are men who have sex with both men and women. Hell, some of 'em have sex with sheep and pigs. It doesn't matter who, or what, they rub up against, as long as it feels good to them. And there are men who don't feel like a real man unless they are hitting on someone smaller and weaker. It makes them hard. Cameron is that kind of a deviant in every sense of the word. I never should have left you alone with him."

"You couldn't have stopped me."

"I know. That's why I didn't try. You had to find out for yourself."

"Drink your tea Brian." Justin instructed him. When Brian finished the tea, Justin sat down next to him and pulled his head down onto his lap. Stroking Brian's hair with one hand he opened a book with the other and began to read.

"Call me Ishmael. Some years ago - never mind how long precisely - having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world."

"What are you doing?" Brian asked softly, the strain of his ordeal had taken its toll. His head was still throbbing. But the tea was starting to have a calming effect.

"I thought I would read a bit. It calms me to put my own troubles aside and read about other people's adventures. Do you mind if I read out loud?"

"No, it's okay. I can sleep with you talking. In fact, I'm getting kind of used to it."

Justin continued to read and as he did so, he massaged Brian's temples. Their roles had reversed for the time being. Justin felt protective of the man who had, so many times, calmed his fears and protected him from danger.

When Justin left home to travel west he wasn't sure why it was he needed to go. He loved the parents who'd raised him. David Cameron was a monster who had preyed on Brian as a young man. For that alone Justin would never forgive him. His mother had been young and foolish. She was as much a victim of Cameron as Brian was. She was lucky that she had Craig Taylor to save her from the shame of having a child out of wedlock. Justin finally knew why he had come all the way to Silverton. He needed to find out the truth: his parents DID love each other. Craig Taylor was his father in every way that was important. Justin had found peace with himself.

Justin barely slept that night. He was worried about Brian because he was restless and calling out in his sleep. Justin made sure to keep the blanket around him but he could feel Brian's body shivering next to him as they lay together. In the morning Brian was incoherent. Justin felt his head and knew that he had a fever. All that day and into the next Justin tried his best to get the fever down by bathing Brian with cold water from the stream and feeding him tea with a spoon. When he dragged Brian outside to have him pee, he saw blood pass. He knew that Brian needed more care than he could give him.

Justin found an abandoned cave entrance on the other side of the stream. He pulled Brian up and dragged him along as far as he could into the cave. After covering Brian with both of their blankets Justin got on his horse and rode off to find help.

It was almost dark when Justin returned. He got off the horse and ran to the cave. To Justin's surprise Brian was sitting up against the wall.

"You're awake!" Justin sat next to him and put his arm around Brian's neck. "How do you feel?"

"I've been feeling around on the ground for my gun. That's how I feel."

"Well it's a good thing I took it with me then." Justin got up and went outside to get the supplies he'd acquired.

"Where have you been?" Brian asked. "You've been gone for hours."

"There's a small town just east of here. I found a doctor there who gave me supplies and told me what to do for you."

"How did you pay him?"

"It was a lady doctor. I ran across her place by accident on my way into town. I saw a sign on the road it said: E. Parker, M.D. I didn't see anyone around and I was going to break in and steal anything I could find. But then a lady came to the door. I asked her if the doctor was in and she said that she was the doctor, Elizabeth Parker."

"She was pulling your leg. There's no such thing as a lady doctor."

"We'll there's at least one. And she was really nice. I told her that my friend was out hunting and fell off a cliff and now you couldn't see. She said it sounded like you had some swelling in your head that's causing you to be blind. It might go away on its own."

"And if it don't."

"She said that if it doesn't get better in another day or two, to bring you into town to see her."

"Did you tell her we have NO money."

"Yes, I told her that. I also told her about the bruises on your side and she gave me some bandages to wrap you up in. She said that something might be broken inside which is causing you to have blood in your pee."

"There's blood in my pee?" Brian uttered.

"Shit. I wasn't going to tell you that. She said that might go away too. Look, Brian she gave me all this stuff so I could fix you. So shut up and let me get to it."

"Why would she give you all this stuff when you had no money."

Justin grinned coyly. "I did something for her. She had a cocker spaniel who I could tell she particularly favored. I asked if I could draw a picture of the dog to pay her for help. I did a sketch of the dog looking out the window. She was real pleased with it."

Brian cried out in pain when Justin was wrapping his chest with the bandages. Justin worked on cleaning his wounds with the medicines the doctor had given him and then brewed Brian some more tea.

"You need to eat something. The doc said it was really important for you to keep up your strength."

"I'm not hungry."

"If you don't eat, you won't be able to fight. It seems to me that your body has a lot of work to do."

"I don't think I'm up to fightin'. Next time you go out, leave me the gun."

"Stop it!" Justin yelled. Frustration and fear overwhelmed him. "Stop acting like your life is worth nothing! If you don't get better in two days I'm taking you down the mountain to that doctor. If she can't fix you, I'll take you home to New York. Whatever it takes I'm willing to fight for you. So stop feeling sorry for yourself, and eat."

Brian reached out his hand. "Get me some water and whatever food you've got. I'll do what I have to do."

Brian ate what Justin prepared and took the medicine he brought. Justin got some water from the stream and cleaned him up. He put both blankets around him and held him for a while as Brian fell asleep. When he was sure that Brian was asleep, he went outside to look up at the sky and pray.

Almost two days had past and Brian was still in and out of consciousness. When there was enough light, Justin would read from the book. Brian seemed calmer when he did that. He wondered if he could hear. Justin was exhausted by the third day, but when he awoke from a short nap, he was elated to find Brian staring at him.

"Have I ever told you how beautiful you are?" Brian said, smiling at him.

"Yes, and I keep telling you that boys are not beautiful." Justin was overjoyed that Brian could see again.

"Well you are beautiful to me today. And so is Lightning over there by the tree, and Slow Gus is beautiful today too."

"You really are delirious. It's good to have you back. I'll get you something to eat."

He had recovered his sight, but Brian was still very weak. Justin proclaimed him not fit for travel and hovered over him like a mother hen. Brian didn't complain because he knew that Justin was right, he was not up to getting on a horse just yet.

"Here, Brian drink this." Justin handed Brian a cup of hot liquid.

Assuming it was herbal tea Brian took a sip. Something sharp jabbed his lip. "JUSTIN! What the fuck did you give me to drink?"

"You look pale, so I thought you could use some iron. I boiled some rusty nails I found. Did I do something wrong? I thought you told me that iron was good for your blood."

"You're supposed to take the nails out, before you give it to a person to drink." Brian pulled the offending nails out of the cup and drank the liquid.

"Sorry. I better write down that part in the book of cures."

To pass the time Justin continued to read from Moby Dick. Brian rested his head on Justin's leg and listened. "Those words sound pretty when you say them. When I'm reading they make no sense to me. But when you read the same words, I start to understand the story."

"That's because reading is new to you. Once you've master reading the words, then you can concentrate on what the author is trying to say. Moby Dick is a difficult book to start with. I wish I had another book that was easier. You'd love 'The Adventures of Tom Sawyer', or 'Treasure Island.' When we get to the next big town I'm going to buy us another book."

"With what? We have no money, remember."

"I have a little. I forgot about the money in my sock. I still have that. You can build us another stake at the next town."

"I won't be taking any more money from you. Truth is, in Silverado I lost the money you'd given me at the table. I even lost your prize possession."

"My watch?" Justin hesitated a moment, then said. "That's okay Brian. I don't need to know what time it is out here in the woods." Justin reassured him. "Brian, you never did tell me what happened to you. Was it Cameron who beat you up?"

"I didn't think he'd recognize me. I walked right into his gambling establishment. His step kid was playing at a table so I joined the game. After a while I recognized Cameron's moves, the boy was cheatin' and I called him on it. Cameron came over the table and told me to leave. He followed me outside, and he must have recognized your horse."

"Shit, I never thought he'd recognize Slow Gus. He's such an ordinary looking horse."

"It wasn't just the horse he recognized. He asked me if my name was Gus. I told him he knew God damn well what my name was, and he laughed. I spit in his face and took off. The next thing I know the kid was riding out after me with his gambling buddies. That's all I remember."

"We'll be more careful about who you're play cards with next time. I'll go with you."

"Justin, I'm really sorry about your watch. I know it was all you had left of your parents."

"It was just a watch with a picture, that's all. I know that my parents loved me. Now that I know the truth about my mother and Cameron, I know that Craig Taylor was a very special man. He was a good father and raised me to be like him. Even though I wasn't his flesh and blood."

"Any man would be proud to have a son like you."

"Thank you. It hurt to have Cameron turn on me like he did. He only wrote that letter because he thought I had money. When I told him to fuck off, the bastard showed his true colors. He told me that I was a perverted sodomist and he'd see me hang for it."

"Forget him. And good riddance. As soon as I'm up to it, we'll ride south. There are mining towns where we could get jobs and hold up for the winter."

"You want me to ride with you?"

"I guess you're a good man to have around, if I need some doctoring. But I want to set you straight about what you said when you left the camp last time."

"I told you how I feel."

"Men don't say things like that to each other . . . EVER! We ride together for the company and for sex."

"This man says what he feels. You don't have to say it back . . . EVER. I don't expect anything from you. But if I want to tell you how I feel, you can't stop me." Justin got up and stomped off in the direction of the stream. Brian watched him walk down the hill. He was aware that the dynamics between them had changed. Justin Taylor was not only beautiful, smart, and strong willed, he was stubborn as hell. Brian felt he had lost his edge. When Justin came running up the hill with a fish dangling from a string, Brian knew for sure he was no longer in control.

After they cooked the fish Justin cleaned up the camp and got the horses ready for the night. Something that he had not told Brian had been weighing on his mind. He wanted to be truthful with Brian now that they were going to be

riding together. Brian was stretched out in front of the fire and Justin went to join him. "Brian, I want you to know that if you hadn't gotten your sight back, I would have taken care of you. I would have wired my aunt to send me money. I would have taken you home with me to New York. I don't ever want you to get so desperate that you want to kill yourself. I'll take care you no matter what."

"I can just imagine what your aunt would say if you showed up at her door dragging in the likes of me, like a puppy dog on a chain. I appreciate the offer, but I know my place is here in the woods, not in some fancy woman's parlor."

"My aunt isn't fancy. She's kind and caring, and she would welcome you with open arms."

"You can't be sure of that." Brian yawned and rolled over on his side.

"Yes I can. She's never judged me." Justin hesitated a moment and then began his confession. "There's are things about me that you don't know, Brian. I've been holding back because I wanted you to get to know me for who I am and . . ." Justin heard Brian snoring. Maybe the timing wasn't right to tell him yet. Justin sensed that things between them had changed since Brian's accident. It was best for him not to muddy the waters just yet.

Brian recovered quickly after they left the mountain. They travel south to another mining town called Durango. Winter was upon them and travel was difficult. They decided that when they got to Durango they would get jobs and lay low for the winter.

Just before they got to town Justin turned to Brian and said, "Just so you know, I won't be calling myself Justin Taylor anymore."

"Why not?"

"This town is only a train ride away from Silverton. If Cameron gets it in his mind to look for me, I don't want to make it easy for him. So from now on call me James. I'll be James Thomas Armstrong from Atlanta, Georgia."

Brian shook his head silently.

"What?"

"I like your name. Justin Taylor has a nice strong feel to it. You look like a Justin Taylor from New York. How are you going turn yourself into a dumb old southern boy?"

"I'll pretend. I used to act in college. I was pretty good at it."

"I bet you were. But I'm not going to call you James."

"It's more common than Justin. I'll blend in better."

"I ain't arguing that. It's a good plan. But I am going to call you J.T."

Justin smiled. "That'll be fine."

"Where'd you come up with that name anyway."

"He was a classmate of mine. He disappeared from school last year. Some say that he died of influenza, others think that he may have married someone his parents disapproved of."

"You and he friends?"

"Not really. We shared a few classes."

"Well, I'm not changing my name for Cameron. I ain't (Brian stopped to correct himself) . . . I'm NOT afraid of him."

"You don't need to change your name. Brian's a more common name than Justin."

When they got within a half hours ride from town they sought out a secret hiding place where they could meet up. They found a cave that would suit their purposes.

"We should ride into town separately." Brian suggested. "I'll go first. If I see trouble brewing in this town I'll wait for you at the livery stable and we can go further south. You should give me a couple of hours to check things out. Then you ride in and go right to the livery stable. If I'm not there, you're on your own to find a job."

"If I see you on the street, can I talk to you?"

"Of course you can talk to me. Just be careful because you never know what people are going to pick up on. This is another mining town like Silverton. It's nasty, dirty and loaded with people. No one is going to notice a couple of strangers, unless we call attention to ourselves. Go in and look for work. Tonight we'll meet up at the livery stable."

When Justin got into town he went directly to the livery stable to see if Brian was waiting for him. Brian wasn't there which meant he had found work. It had started to snow and Justin pulled his coat up around his neck. He walked up and down the streets of the town looking for a respectable business that might be able to use a bookkeeper or a clerk.

It was snowing hard by the time he got back to the livery stable. Brian was waiting for him.

Did you have any luck?" Justin asked.

"I got a job with the rail road on the blasting crew. I'll be up on the mountain blasting rock out of the path of the tracks. I'll have to stay at the camp up in the hills during the week. But I'll be in town on the weekends."

"Blasting? Sounds dangerous."

"It can be. But I've done that kind of work before and I'm still here." Brian explained. "How about you? Did you find work?"

"I did get a job, but I don't want to talk about it." Justin looked at the ground.

"I thought we were past keeping secrets."

"Okay, I guess you'll find out eventually. I tried to find a job in a store or a bank, but they all thought I was just some kid. I can't tell them about my education because I'm not using my real name. The only job I could get was cleaning up at the Tattered Rose."

"You mean the whore house?"

"If you want to call it that. It's humiliating." Justin sulked. "I got a second job for the weekends, cleaning up at the saloon. The owner's letting me sleep in a storage room."

"It's work. We're only staying until spring, then we'll move on. Once we get far enough away, you can use your real name again."

"We'll get to see each other if you come in on Friday nights with the rest of the miners to gamble."

In the weeks that followed they saw very little of each other. Justin hated his demeaning jobs at both establishments. He imagined what his parents would have thought if they could see him polishing spittoons for a living. Durango was hell on earth for Justin, until Friday nights came along.

Justin always sensed it the minute that Brian walked into the saloon on Friday. He was almost always in the company of his fellow rail road workers. Brian had a way of charming people. Justin watched curiously when Brian arrived at the bar with three Chinese co-workers. Brian had taught them how to play poker. As they chattered away in their native language, Brian smiled and nodded as he took their money. He was so charming about it that they didn't seem to mind much. Justin ventured closer to the table as he swept up the floor. Brian had managed to learn a

few phrases of Chinese. In turn he had taught his three friends a few phrases in English. He called them One Lee, Two Lee and Three Lee.

Justin was glad that Brian had friends to keep him company. It was very lonely for him at in town. The girls at the whore house worked most of the nights and slept most of the days. The patrons of the saloon either ignored him or made fun of him. He rarely got to speak to anyone. Seeing Brian in the bar drinking and having fun with his friends made Justin jealous. He wanted Brian all to himself. After work he rode out to the cave to wait for him.

When Brian arrived at the cave he saw Justin huddled in the corner attempting to light a fire. Brian came up behind him. "That's no way to light a fire. Here, I brought this lantern with me."

Brian got the fire started and then rolled out a blanket on the ground. Justin shivered in his arms until their passion ignited a fire between them.

"I hate it that we only get to be together one night a week. It's torture to see you in town, and not be able to even touch you."

"Would you rather not see me at all?" Brian stroked Justin's hair lovingly.

"Of course not," Justin changed the subject. He pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and showed it to Brian. "Cameron won the election. He'll rob the town blind. And he'll keep progress at a stand if it threatens his own business. How can people be so blind, Brian?"

"Cameron's a convincing salesman. More than that, he's a showman. People can't resist a good show. Your mother, his wife and the two of us were his victims, too. We learned our lesson, and those people will too, in time."

"I hope they hang him. Along with that monster, Hobbs. He almost killed you, Brian."

"That's in the past. I can move on from it, and so should you."

"Are you going to have to go back out to the job site for the whole week?"

"That's right, just like every week. . . why?"

"Christmas is in a few days and I was wondering if the rail road was going to let you come back early."

"I'll be back on Friday night."

"That's Christmas day."

"So what? I don't care about holidays."

"Didn't your family celebrate when you were a kid?"

"When my Ma was still around, she would take me to church on Sunday."

"Then she must have liked holidays."

"She liked socializing. That's the only time that she got to meet people. It's where she met the guy she took off with."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"After she left, I never went back to church."

"But you must have done something with your Dad on Christmas."

"He'd cook a nice dinner, and give me something practical like boots."

"He wanted you to keep warm. He must have cared about you a lot."

"What's this about, Justin?"

"I want to know what it was like for you growing up. My parents always made big deal out of going to church on Christmas Eve. I used to hate getting dressed up and sitting there in a stiff collar for hours. All I could think about was the presents under the tree at home. Today I overheard the whore's talking about going to church on Christmas Eve. And I might want go too. I was thinking I might feel closer to my parents, spending Christmas Eve in church."

"If they let you in, I think you should go."

"They let the whores in last year. I'll just sneak in with them."

"Justin, don't think of yourself as one of them. This is only temporary. As soon as we get enough money together we'll head north. We can stake out a claim and find gold. We won't have to live like this forever."

"There's nothing wrong with those women, Brian. Most of them are nice ladies who fell on hard times like us."

"Well you go on then and enjoy your Christmas Eve. I'll be up in the hills blasting rocks."

"Every time I hear the explosions in town I jump."

"You're high-strung. You jump when the wind blows."

"I guess you're right. You are being careful, aren't you? After I went to all the trouble to save your life, I want to keep you around for a while."

"I'm careful."

"Good. I know it's not Christmas yet, but since you're not going to be around I have something for you."

Justin went to his saddle bag and pulled out a package and handed it to Brian. "Merry Christmas Brian."

"What'd you go and do that for? We're supposed to be saving up, not wasting money on presents."

"It's a practical gift Brian, it's not wasteful. Open it please."

Brian tore off the paper and held up a pair of black leather gloves. "You spent too much."

"I put in a few hours at the stable mucking out stalls so I could buy them. They're lined with rabbit fur. " Justin took Brian's hand in his. "You have such beautiful hands. I've always admired your hands, Brian. They're like a work of art. I want you to keep them warm so you'll be reminded how warm my body gets when you touch it." Justin pulled the glove onto Brian's hand and kissed him. They made love in the cave and fell asleep until morning. Brian rode off to town at first light. A little while later Justin rode back into town.

On Christmas Eve Justin rushed to finish his chores and then ran out of the saloon and across town toward the church. When he got there he quickly found a seat near the back of church. He thought back to the days when his mother would insist they go to church on Christmas Eve and he would protest loudly. Every minute of the service was spent thinking about the gifts that were waiting for him under the tree at home. As he sat in the church among strangers, he thought how wonderful it would be if he could have had one more Christmas with his beloved parents. This was the first Christmas he would be spending completely alone. Sadness crept up on him unexpectedly. Just before the service started he felt someone nudge him on the right side. Without looking up, he moved over in the pew to make room. He glanced over and a feeling of warmth filled his soul, Brian had come to church to be with him.

Christmas is more joyful when you shared it with someone you love. Justin dared not speak to Brian in public, but he could feel the warmth of Brian's body as he sat as close as he dared. After the service they walked out of the church together. The crowd dispersed as parents and children rushed home to wait for Santa.

"I didn't expect to see you tonight." Justin said.

"They gave us time off. I figured you'd be in there. Going inside was better than standing out here in the snow freezing."

They faced each other and Justin smiled warmly at Brian. "You made me really happy, Brian. I was getting kind of sad, being that it was my first Christmas without my mother."

Brian smiled back. "I have a surprise for you?"

"You already surprised me tonight. Are we going out to the cave? The snow is coming down pretty hard."

"I got us a room at a hotel near the train station. Tonight we get to sleep in a real bed."

"Don't you think that's dangerous?"

"Most folks are busy with their families. No one's going to be botherin' with us."

The hotel was on the outskirts of town. Brian was right about not being noticed. The people who were in the lobby were all busy with family and friends. Brian led the way upstairs and Justin followed discreetly. When they got to the room Brian had another surprise for Justin. He had dinner waiting for them complete with a bottle of wine.

"I can't believe you did all this. You really do like Christmas, don't you?"

"A man has to eat."

"You're full of surprises tonight."

"There's one more." Brian handed Justin a box with a string tied around it.

When Justin opened it he was speechless. Brian had given him a watch like the one that he'd lost in Silverton. "This must have cost you a week's pay."

"I didn't buy it. I won it in a poker game."

"Liar. It's brand new."

"I owed you a watch. I always pay my debts."

"You don't owe me anything." Justin insisted. He opened the watch and looked inside. Brian had drawn a crude stick figure of himself. Justin laughed out loud. "I love it. I love the picture of my new family inside."

"Now cut that out," Brian reprimanded him. "It was joke. We ain't related. . . I mean we aren't related. And we never will be. Now let's fuck."

"Merry Christmas, Brian." Justin threw his arms around Brian's neck and they both fell onto the bed.

After Christmas the weather got bitterly cold. It was too cold to sleep outside in the cave and when Brian came to town he'd play poker with his friends and then leave the saloon to sleep alone in a hotel room. The frustration was unbearable for both of them. The weeks dragged on endlessly while Justin mopped floors, scrubbed tables and polished spittoons. One night as Brian was leaving the saloon Justin put down his broom and followed him out the door. Brian was standing in the street talking to his coworkers. When he saw Justin he signaled him to go into the alley.

"I gotta take a piss." Brian announced loudly to his companions.

Justin was leaning up against the wall with his arms wrapped around his body to keep warm. Brian looked over his shoulder to check if anyone could see them. Convinced they were hidden in the shadows Brian put his arms firmly around his lover. "I miss you."

Justin gently pushed him away. "Me too. Brian, it's so hard being apart."

Brian tilted Justin's chin up and kissed him gently. "We're stuck here for the winter. But as soon as the spring comes we'll go back on the road."

Justin closed his eyes. "I can't wait."

Brian kissed him one more time and then left him alone in the ally. Justin remained with his back against the wall, his arms crossed and tears streaming down his face.

The following weekend the weather had warmed some but it was still too cold to sleep in the cave. Brian was exhausted from a long weeks work and was anxious to see Justin, even if only to watch him sweep the floor. He arrived at the saloon with his coworkers and sat down at their usual table. Justin was nowhere to be seen. An hour past and Brian began to get anxious. He excused himself from the table and wandered over to the bar.

He ordered a whisky and then asked the bar tender, "Where's that little blond kid? He hangs out around my table every week and I've been pretty lucky. Tonight he's not here and I'm losing big time."

"You mean James. He got the tar beat out of him earlier. The boss didn't want him bleeding all over the bar so he sent him to the whores across the street for patchin' up."

"I guess I'll throw in my cards for the night then. No use in throwing good money after bad."

Brian walked away from the bar and told his coworkers he was leaving for the night. He wasn't sure how to go about asking for Justin at the whore house but he had to try.

"Fellow across the street told me that little blond kid's here being patched up from a fight. I've done some doctoring during the war, if you need some help. They said he was pretty bad off."

The woman at the door was at least ten years older than Brian. She had a quick smile and easy way about her. Brian hoped she'd be understanding. He was getting very anxious about Justin.

"Poor James. That sweet boy should be home with his Mama, instead of sweeping up after drunks and perverts." The woman took a key off of a rack. "He's in the room at the end of the hall."

Brian went down the hallway and knocked on the door before using the key. When there was no answer, he opened the door and saw a figure lying underneath a blanket which was pulled up over his face. Brian rushed to the bed and pulled the blanket off of Justin's face. Justin grinned playfully and pulled up the covers to reveal his naked body.

Confused, Brian looked around the room. He went to the door and locked it. Stripping off his own clothes he quickly got into the bed next to Justin. Without asking questions he pulled Justin close to him and kissed him.

After they made love Brian lay back on the pillow and looked over at Justin. He had not noticed before but Justin's face was bruised and cut up pretty badly.

"What the fuck happened?"

"Some drunk in the bar decided to use my face to wipe his boots. He'd been giving me trouble all night, teasing me about being pretty enough to whore out. Then he kept asking me to suck his cock. It was so embarrassing. They had bets going at the bar whether I would do it or not. Finally he tried to drag me out to the ally. When I bit him on the arm he threw me on the ground and stomped on my face."

Brian hated what he was hearing. If he had that man in front of him now he would have killed him, no question. "You didn't deserve that."

"I sure didn't. But then I got this plan in my head about how to get you over here. The whores have noticed I've been down lately. Tess, the woman who gave you the key, asked me what was wrong. I told her I was lonely for someone in particular. She guessed right off it was a man. We got to talking and she said that there were other men in this town who prefer guys to gals. She lets them use this room in the back once in a while."

"I'm not surprised. But it's still dangerous. If we were to be seen together, she'd be hung right along with us."

"Not much chance of that. The other rooms are upstairs, and there's a door in the hallway that leads to the alley."

"How long have we got the room?"

"All night." Justin grinned. "She felt sorry for me." He put his head on Brian's chest and closed his eyes.

Before too long, Brian heard Justin's steady breathing and knew that he was asleep. Brian stroked the boy's head as he stared at the ceiling enjoying the moment. In the morning he had to break the bad news to Justin. The blasting crew was moving further south in the morning and he would no longer be able to get to town on the weekends. As he looked down at Justin's angelic face, a profound feeling of tenderness overwhelmed him. When they arrived in Silverton so many months ago he had been prepared to let Justin go to start a new life with his family. Men were not meant to fall in love with each other. The longer they stayed together, the more difficult it was to stand his ground. The prospect of a prolonged separation fill his heart with dread.

In the morning, after they made love again, Brian broke the news to Justin. "I've got something to tell you. After today you may not see me for a few weeks. The blasting crew is working further south and I won't be coming to town anymore."

Justin said nothing. He put his arms around Brian's neck and held him tightly.

Brian pulled him off gently. "I'll be back for you. With the money I'll be making, we'll have enough saved up to go where ever we want in the spring."

Justin nodded his head. Brian could see tears forming in the corner of his eyes. He knew that if he stayed any longer he would never be able to leave. He got dressed and kissed Justin on top of the head. "You take care of yourself."

"You too." Justin managed to mouth the words. After Brian walked out the door Justin broke down in tears.

The months that followed were torturous. After suffering another violent attack by a patron of the saloon, Justin was forced to quit. Tess let him stay in a shed in back of her place. He found another job at the livery stable. Each week he would ride out to the cave to hide his pay. It was too dangerous in town for him to keep his money with him. He and Brian had been saving up their money and hiding it in a deep crevice in the cave wall.

The weather was finally changing and Justin kept his spirits up by thinking about the moment that he and Brian would be reunited. When he arrived at the cave, he was surprised and excited to see Lightning outside tied to a tree. He quickly tied up his horse next to Lightning and ran into the cave. Brian was sitting on the ground with his back against the wall. He had a vacant look in his eyes, and he seemed not to notice Justin's presence.

"Brian?" Justin called out. Brian slowly raised his head and looked at him. Justin could tell there was something dreadfully wrong. Brian raised his arms and Justin went to him. "What are you doing here?" Justin asked. "Spring is a month away at least."

"Something bad happened." Brian said softly. He rested his head on Justin's shoulder.

"What happened, Brian?"

Brian focused his eyes on Justin's face. "We were on our way up to the highest point of the mountain in a wagon with the blasting supplies. It was rough going, and we had to be really careful not to go off the path. You always have to be gentle with that much powder on board. We all knew any sudden jarring of the wagon, and we'd all be gonners. One Lee, Two Lee, Three Lee and I were almost to the top. One Lee stopped the wagon so we could move a fallen tree limb off the path. I had to pee, so I went off into the woods a ways. When Two Lee and Three Lee got back on the wagon One Lee started to move ahead. I ran to catch up and I saw the wagon slide to the left and turn over. The explosion took the wagon, the men and a big chunk of the mountain. They were gone . . . just like that. It happened right in front of my eyes.

"Brian, that must have been so awful."

"I was left standing there alone. The only reason I got to live was because I was taking a piss. I started walking back to the camp. When I got there, the boss came up to me and said I could be in charge of the next blasting crew. They had another wagon all ready to go."

"That's really harsh."

"I walked right passed him and got on my horse."

Justin closed his eyes and tried to imagine in his head what Brian had just described. Knowing Brian, he was probably feeling guilty for not being on the wagon with them. "There was no way you could have known it was going to happen. I'm so glad you're alive and here with me. I feel sorry for those men and their families."

"Blasting is dangerous work. That's why they pay more money. They knew the risk, and so did I."

"Still, it must have been a shock to you."

"Sure as fuck was." Brian put his arms around Justin and hugged him tightly. Justin let out a gasp. "What?"

"It's nothing." Justin said. "A few weeks ago I got beat up again. The asshole kicked me in the side and it still hurts."

"Fucker! Justin I want you to quit that job at the saloon. I'll go back to the camp and take the blasting job. The pay will more than make up the difference."

"NO! Brian you can't go back there! Don't worry. I quit the job that night. I got another job at the livery stable. You can probably work there too."

"No, I won't. And neither will you. Let's go into town and get your stuff. We can be on the road in the morning. This town is nothing but trouble for us."

"But what about the weather? It's still too cold to sleep outside."

"Are you turning soft on me?" Brian smiled at him. "We've got enough money saved up to get a room in another town. If we only stay one night in a place no one will pay us any mind."

"I'm ready then. Let's go."

"What about your stuff?"

"Everything I own is in my saddle bag."

"It's settled then. We're free men, from here on out."

Journals West - Part Five

Outlaws

Spring came along earlier than usual. It was still rainy and chilly at night. They bought extra blankets and when they came upon a town they would check into a hotel at night. Brian would often engage in a game of poker to earn some extra cash. For Justin these months were fun and exciting. He was able to draw again for the first time since leaving his father's house. Surprisingly, he found that he could sell his art in the larger towns they came across. He was happy to finally be making money, doing something that he loved.

They had checked into a hotel one day because it was raining heavily. Justin had been teaching Brian math. It was a subject that did not interest Brian at all. Justin could see his frustration. "Hey, I have a better idea. Instead of me doing the teaching today, why don't you teach me how to play poker?"

"How am I going to teach you poker, when we have no cards?"

Justin got up from the bed and went to his bag. "I have cards." He announced as he pulled them out and threw them at Brian. "I stole them from the saloon in Durango."

"My own little robber bandit. What am I going to do with you young man?"

"Teach me to play cards I hope."

Justin was a quick learner. Brian was not surprised, but he was anxious that the boy would want to venture into a saloon to try his luck. Before the day was out, Justin proved him right.

"I think I can do this, Brian. We can go to a game and pretend not to know each other. I'm sure with your expertise we can run a scam to win more times than not."

"I won't cheat at poker. That's dishonorable."

"I used to think like that. But now that I've learned how harsh the world can be, I have no problem stealing, cheating or fighting. I don't care about anyone in the world except for you and me."

"What would your parents think of their educated, handsome young son talking like that?"

"If they really knew me as I am, they might not have accepted me anyway. They had no idea what life would be like for me. But I have no regrets at all. I like the man I am. And I like the company I keep. If I can't earn a decent living because how I look, or who I spend my time with, then I'll do what I have to do to survive."

"Sounds like you're ready to face the world. Let's go out and play some poker."

Justin did very well for a first time player. He made a little money and decided that it was enough for the night. He got up from the table and went to the bar. Another player took his place. Brian was having a good night, and Justin was content to watch him rake in his winnings.

All at once a commotion broke out at a table near the window. One man jumped up and drew his gun on another man, who he claimed was a cheat. The other man turned over the table and before Justin knew what was happening, every man in the bar was involved in the fight. He looked over at Brian, who was about to be hit over the head with a bottle. Justin ran over to Brian's attacker, and jumped on his back. Brian looked up and saw what was happening. He punched the man in the face and grabbed Justin by the arm. They ran out the back door of the saloon into the street.

"Are you okay?" Brian asked between gasping breaths.

Justin grinned playfully at him. "That was so much fun! A real bar room brawl!! Did you see that guy that I clobbered?"

"I saw him right before my fist hit his nose. Good work, partner!" They both laughed as they walked back to the hotel.

The months that followed were free and easy. They did what they wanted to do, when they wanted to do it. All that was important to them, was to have fun and enjoy life. By the end of summer they were running low on funds.

"I suppose we better think about finding a town to stay out the winter." Brian said one morning, as they lay on the bank of a stream eating berries.

"I hate the thought of being apart again." Justin said. "I want to find a place, where we can stay together."

"I've been thinking about that. What we need is a place away from people, like a ranch or farm. It'll take a lot of money to buy a place like that. We need to find a way to get a stake. I want to head north where there's still gold and silver being mined."

"You really think we can go up there and find gold, just like that?"

"Why not, how else do you think people get rich?"

"They work hard, and learn as much as they can."

"You mean school. Some people are just born lucky."

"And some people are just born naturally smart, like you. You've worked hard, and now you can read. So maybe we can put our brilliant minds together and think of a way to earn a good living."

"I'm 31 years old. If I want to make a good life for us, I'm going to have to get a stake somehow."

"Brian, I can get us a stake." Justin began to tell Brian about his holdings in New York, but before he got the chance three riders came along and stopped to water their horses.

One of the strangers came up to them and asked, "Hey, you catching any fish here?"

Brian looked up and grinned at the man. "Well if it ain't my old friend, Mikey." He stood up and put out his hand to shake.

The man he called Mikey threw his arms around Brian and hugged him. "Brian Kinney, I never thought I'd see your face again." Justin gasped when Mikey kissed Brian right on the lips. The other two men who were with him, didn't seem surprised.

"That's right, the last time we were together, you left me for dead." Brian said.

"I didn't leave you for dead. I told you to come with us to Santa Fe."

"No matter now. What have you boys been up to?"

One of the other men stepped forward to shake Brian's hand. "Same things we're always up to. I see you've got yourself a young playmate." The man tipped his hat to Justin.

Brian introduced Justin using his alias. This is James Thomas Armstrong, from Atlanta Georgia. We've been riding together. James, meet the gang. This is Mikey, Emmett and Theodore.

Justin came over to shake hands. "Pleased to meet you." He was curious about the man called Mikey and his relationship with Brian. It seemed to Justin like they were more than friends.

"My name is Michael, not Mikey." The man made sure that Justin understood.

"Would you like to have some coffee?" Justin offered. "Brian made some fresh this morning."

The men sat down around the fire that Brian had built and talked for awhile. Then Emmett and Theodore went to tend to the horses. "What happened in Santa Fe?" Brian asked Michael. "I thought that you'd end up settling down with that guy Ben."

"He died. He caught a fever when we were on the road. There was no doctor around. I buried him, and came back up north. I met up with Emmett and Ted a few months later. I was hoping we'd cross paths again."

"What are you doing here?"

"We've got our eyes on a bank in town. Looks like an easy mark."

"Is that so?"

"Those two clowns make such a spectacle of themselves in town, folks are already suspicious."

"Why do you send them to town?" Justin asked.

"To get the lay of the land. What's the point of hitting a bank that has no money? I want to know everything about a target before I hit it."

"Why don't you just go in and open an account?"

"With what money?" Brian asked.

"Hmmm. Let me think about this." Justin left the camp site and wandered off toward the stream.

"Great, now your wonder boy thinks he can plan a bank job. Brian, why are you dragging that kid around with you?"

"He's alright. And he's smart, too. He went to some fancy school back east."

"I say we hit him over the head with a rock. Who needs a kid hanging around?"

"Trust me, he's no kid. Who asked you anyway? In the morning we're heading up north to mine for gold."

"The gold mines are a long way off. You're gonna need a stake. Why don't you stick around and do a job or two with us? You can be our look out and tend the horses. Just like the good old days."

"I'm not about to get myself shot, cleaning up after your mess. And those days were not so good, as I recall. Most of the time we were starving and scared to death the law was going to catch up with us."

"The nights weren't so bad, now were they?" Michael grinned slyly.

"The nights were just as dismal as the days, as far as I'm concerned."

"Brian, we were close back then. We used to look up at the stars at night, and talk about our dreams. I recall, once in a while we would do more than talk." Michael took Brian's hand and looked into his eyes. "Are you telling that boy is more to your liking?"

Brian pulled Michael's hand off of his. "Mikey we were kids back then. Scared kids, as I recall. Whatever happened at night, was just something kids do to ease their fears. Nothing more."

"And what you have with that KID, is something more?"

"His name is James. What's between us, is none of your business."

Brian walked off in the direction of the stream. It was a beautiful spot high up on the mountain with waterfall that cascaded down the rocks. When he got close he heard Justin's voice. "Brian, help me!" Then there was a splash in the deep end near the waterfall. Brian pulled off his boots and ran into the water. He dove down in several places but couldn't find Justin. He called out his name on the verge of panic. "Justin!"

A response came from the direction of the water fall. "Over here, Brian. Help me!"

Brian swam close to the rocks and saw there was a ledge that led to the back of the waterfall. He climbed up and saw a stark naked Justin, smiling at him seductively. "I thought you'd never get here. I need your expertise." His erection was hard and firm. It was pointing in Brian's direction. Brian took a moment to look at Justin's perfect naked form standing before him. Most of the time when they had sex it was dark. They rarely took the chance to undress completely in the light of day, for fear of being seen. Justin's wet skin glowed in the sunlight that reflected through the water. Brian thought that he'd never seen such a beautiful man. He felt his own body react to his carnal thoughts.

"What are you waiting for?" Justin said anxiously.

"You made me jump in the water with all my clothes on. Why didn't you just call me over here?" He said as he pulled off his shirt and pants. Standing naked under the waterfall he pushed the hair back from his face. Justin spread his legs and leaned over the rocks. Brian grabbed Justin's pulsating cock and stroked it. He wet his fingers and put them inside of Justin's opening before guiding his cock inside of him. The water cascaded over their bodies as they pleasured each other. Brian pounded his cock hard into Justin, who gasped and clung to the rock. When they were finished, they kissed passionately. Brian felt Justin's hardness rekindle. Justin whispered in his ear. "I want to be inside you."

Justin usually was content for Brian to take the lead, but this day belonged to Justin. Brian obligingly leaned on the rock wall behind the waterfall and spread his legs.

Brian closed his eyes and let his mind wander. Sex had always been fast and easy for Brian. The men he seduced, and the ones who seduced him, had to be cautious. Sex was done in the woods, or in caves, and most likely was over quickly. Once satisfied, they would move on to their respective lives and never speak about it.

With Justin, sex was an event. Once he found a place where they could be completely alone, Justin was creative and insatiable. Brian found himself satisfied to be carried away to Justin's imaginary world, where there was nothing on their minds but their cocks. He was enjoying the sensation of Justin pumping himself toward completion, when he sensed something was amiss. They were not alone. He opened his eyes and saw Michael watching from behind a tree. "Michael is watching." He whispered to Justin.

"I know." Justin didn't slow his pace. "Let him. It's exciting." He panted as he pumped his juices for a second time that day. His excitement had been so great, that he felt lightheaded. He pulled out of Brian and put his head under the waterfall. When he'd recovered he went back to Brian who was glaring at the spot where Michael had hidden behind the tree. "He took off. When I catch up to him, I'll kill him."

"Why? He probably got off on watching us in action. Forget him, Brian. Come here and kiss me." Brian turned back to see Justin smiling at him with love in his eyes. Justin wasn't ready for their afternoon sexual adventure to be over just yet. Brian was pleasantly surprised when the boy got on his knees and took Brian's cock in his mouth.

Brian and Justin came back to the campsite laughing and grabbing at each other's clothes. The sight of them together annoyed Michael and he commented, "Don't you two ever get enough?"

Brian came forward and teased him. "There's no such thing as enough, Mikey. And what were you doing, spying on us?"

"I wasn't spying on you!" Michael insisted. "I was looking for a place to shit."

"Brian, leave him alone." Justin chimed in.

"I don't need you defending me, KID." Michael hissed.

"I'm not a kid." Justin insisted.

"You don't look a day over 12."

"I'm 19!" Justin spat out. Too late, he realized that Brian would know he'd lied to him about his age.

"You're how old?" Brian asked.

"What's the difference how many years I've been on the earth? Brian, you know that I'm not a kid?"

"No, you're not." Brian admitted.

"While Brian and I were . . . ah . . . swimming,. I had some ideas on how to find out what is happening at the bank."

"Really? You must be a freakin' genius kid." Ted quipped.

"That's right, I'm a freakin' genius, if you must know."

"What's your idea?" Brian asked.

"The way you've been going about, is not going to work. People are always suspicious of strangers. What we have to do is make a plan. Go into town and establish ourselves."

"How do you mean?" Emmett asked.

"First I would go in and get a job at the bank."

"And how are you going to do that?" Michael asked. He continued in a mocking voice. "I'm so cute and sweet you should give me a job at your pretty bank. Please, I'll suck your cock if you want."

Justin shot him a look of disgust. "I'd go to the bank, and show them what I can do for them. I doubt they have any one working there who graduated from Harvard with a degree in business."

"You have a degree from Harvard?" Brian asked in disbelief.

"I told you I went to school in Boston. I started when I was 15 and I just graduated this year. I was supposed to start law school, but then my mother died. Now, can I get on with my plan?"

"For God sake, get it over with." Michael scowled.

"Thank you. Once I get established at the bank, you all start showing up in town on a regular basis. You go to the same places, and do the same thing each time you're there. You go to the barber or the saloon, then to the post office, the grocery store, etc. You leave town at the same time each visit, making sure to nod to people on your way out so they notice you. I'll have the routine of the bank memorized in a few days."

"That just might work. " Brian said. "They won't be suspicious if they see us in town on a regular basis."

"Not you, Brian. You can't go into town right away. The others are ordinary looking. You'd stand out too much. We want people to recognize them, but not take too much notice. I have a plan for you, if this all works out."

"It'll take too long." Michael whined.

"It will take some time, but if things all work out we will have a big payoff, and no one will be chasing us."

"How do you figure that? Once the money is gone, we'll be wanted men."

"Not if it works the way I plan it."

"I'm willing to try, if everyone else is." Ted said.

"Me too." Emmett chimed in.

"I say no, it's a waste of time." Michael declared. "He's a fucking kid from Harvard, what does he know about bank robbing?"

"I say we give him a chance." Brian said. "What have we got to lose?"

The next morning Justin dressed in the suit he had worn on the train. While the others slept, he kissed Brian and rode off into town. Brian sat up and stoked the fire after Justin left. The night before they had talked about Justin's revelations to the gang. Brian could understand why he'd said he was 22, he never believed him anyway. But the fact that he misrepresented his background, was a bit unsettling. Justin had said he didn't want to put on airs about himself, by mentioning that he graduated from Harvard just months before arriving in Buckskin Joe. Still, they had been together for almost a year, and Brian was hurt that Justin had not been truthful.

Michael woke up and went into the woods to piss. When he returned, Brian offered him coffee.

"I fucking hate your coffee, Brian."

"I hate it too. That doesn't stop me from drinking it."

"What do you think the kid is up to?"

"Again, his name is James not 'the kid'. And I don't know what he's up to. But I trust him."

"Why."

"He saved my life a few months back. I got into a brawl after a card game and he dragged my ass to safety and took care of me. Did a good job of it, too. I was ready to call it quits and pull the trigger, but he wouldn't let me. He said my life is worth something."

"You LOVE him?"

"You know I don't believe in that kind of thing."

"You're sweet on him?"

"I would have to say that I am. Can you blame me?"

"From the looks of things, he keeps your cock satisfied, nicely."

Brian grinned to himself thinking about Justin sucking his cock. "What about you? Have you hooked up with anyone besides the Honeycutt/Schmidt Circus?"

"I've had a few men in my life. Nothing that lasted. There was always someone else in the back of my mind."

"We were friends, Michael. We can be friends again. But don't get it into your head I'm back in your life. The man you knew, no longer exists."

"You may try to act like you're better than me and the boys. But deep down you're the same old Brian Kinney . . . damaged goods. No one is ever going to change that, not even Harvard boy."

Brian went off to hunt for some food in the woods. By mid afternoon he had gathered enough rabbits to make a nice stew for the gang. He was missing Justin's company. Since Durango, they had spent much of their time together having sex. If Justin's plan worked and he got a job at the bank, Brian would have a difficult time getting through the days without him.

Justin came racing into the camp, as Brian was putting the stew on the fire to cook. "Hey, I'm a banker!" He announced loudly as he dismounted Slow Gus.

"Great, let's go celebrate." Brian grabbed his hand and tried to lead him into the woods.

"Wait a minute, Brian. I want to hear what happened." Michael insisted.

Brian wrapped his arms around Justin possessively, rubbing his already hard cock up against Justin's ass.

Justin was excited about his experience in town. "I went in this morning and introduced myself to the bank President, Mr. Clegg. I told him that my family moved here from back east and after graduating from Harvard University, I decided to make my home near them in Colorado. We talked for a while and he said that he was considering opening another bank in Alamosa, and was in need of someone with business experience to oversee the day to day operation in Cripple Creek while he made arrangements to set up the new bank. I was hired on the spot, as his assistant."

"Congratulations. How long before we can get our loot, and leave?"

"Be patient. There is security at the bank, but Mr. Clegg will be leaving in a few weeks and I will, most likely, be able to arrange for some time alone inside. By the time that happens, you boys will be recognized in town and our plan will be in place. I still have some details to work out."

Brian was getting impatient to be alone with Justin. He pressed his body up against Justin's ass, to remind him of the urgency of the moment. Finally Justin took the hint and allowed himself to be led off to the woods. Brian took off Justin's suit so that it would not get dirty. He hung it on a tree branch, along with the white silk shirt that Justin's mother had made for him. Justin kissed him long and hard, Brian sunk to his knees and took Justin's cock in his mouth.

Almost an hour later they lay naked in each others arms. Brian pulled himself up on his elbows, and looked over at Justin, whose eyes were closed. "We better get back to camp, before they finish off the stew." When Justin didn't move, Brian poked him. "Are you awake?"

"Yeah, my mind is still spinning though."

"What about?" Brian asked as he pulled on his trousers.

"Your part in the plan."

"Justin I'm not so sure about this hold up." Brian admitted. "Look, you got yourself a nice job in a bank. I could get a job in the livery stable or someplace near by and we can stay clean. There's no need for us to go putting our lives on the line for Mikey and his gang."

"Brian, we made a promise, and I plan to keep it. When this is over, we'll have our stake and we can head north like we planned."

"It's dangerous. What if you get caught? You could spend the rest of your life in jail."

"I won't get caught."

"How can you be sure?"

"Because when it's over, I'll be dead." Justin said.

"What!" Brian bellowed "You've lost your mind, boy!"

"It'll be okay, Brian. I'll explain it all tomorrow, when I get back to camp. You have to trust me."

Brian didn't sleep at all that night. He gazed up at the stars wishing he could remember how to pray. Justin seemed to be in control of everything. But just a few short months ago, the boy flew into a panic every time there was a thunderstorm. He'd give him one more day to explain. If he thought the plan was too dangerous, Brian was prepared to take Justin out of harms way, by force, if need be.

The next afternoon, Justin arrived back in camp with a small wagon. Brian noticed that Justin's seemed to be taking great pleasure at being the center of attention in the camp. He jumped down from the wagon, put his arms around Brian's neck and kissed him.

"What's for dinner?" Justin asked.

"Same as yesterday. . . rabbit stew." Brian said. "Are you going to explain this?" He pointed at the wagon.

"Yes, as soon as we eat. I'm starving." Once everyone was gathered around the campfire, Justin explained his plan in detail. "Tomorrow, you three," he said indicating Michael, Emmett and Theodore, "will come to town and mingle. You don't talk to each other. I think it's best if you have a story in your head as to who you are, where you came from, and what you're doing in Cripple Creek. If you make it up yourself, you're more likely to remember it.

"Since tomorrow is Sunday, I'll be staying here at the camp with Brian. That wagon over there is going to be your cover Brian. I have some paint in the back of the wagon, that we are going to use to decorate it. You're going to be Dr. B. Healed, a snake oil salesman from Kansas. Do you think you can handle it?"

"What the fuck . . . ?" Brian stumbled over his words. "Why?"

"Here's my plan. I figure once I'm a trusted assistant, I'll be given the combination to the safe, and I'll be informed when there's a big payroll expected. When the time comes, I'll make sure to be in the bank at closing time. Hopefully, by then I'll be the one closing up. All I have to do is open the safe, and hand you each a bag of money out the back door. You three will ride off, just like you've done every day about the same time.

"Brian, you'll come to town once or twice a week with the wagon. Talk to some people, charm the ladies and impress the hell out of the men. You can even play a game or two of poker. We want them to trust you. You and I will know each other because our parents go to the same church.

"The afternoon of the robbery you will be putting on your medicine show right across the street from the bank. Hopefully, you'll have a large audience. During the show, you'll hear a gun shot ring out. You'll run from your wagon, and find me in the alley with a bullet in my chest. The crowd will most likely have followed you to witness my demise. You'll announce that I'm dead, and since you know my parents, you'll take my body to them in your wagon.

"The money will be gone. They can't blame me, because I died defending the bank. They can't blame Brian, because he had a whole crowd of people around him when the shot rang out. They won't remember a couple of fella's who happened to ride out of town that day, because they leave town at the same time every day.

Justin picked up a bowl of stew and began to eat heartily. The others sat frozen, staring at him. Finally Brian broke the silence. "What if they send for a doctor and he sees you're not dead? You'd be hung the next morning."

"There is no doctor in town. I'll need some chicken blood or something to put on my shirt. And I'll take something that will slow my heartbeat in case someone gets suspicious. You'll have to be convincing, Brian. That'll be your job."

"You're not taking anything to slow your heart. What if you take too much, and it stops beating all together?"

"I guess they won't have a need to hang me."

Brian threw his bowl to the ground and stomped off into the woods. Justin continued to eat, ignoring Brian's outburst for the moment. The silence was broke by Michael.

"It just may work. But who's going to fire the gun, if we're already on our way out of town?"

"I'll set off a fire cracker. No one will know the difference."

"Well, I think it's brilliant." Emmett declared. "I never much liked being chased out of town at gun point."

"I agree. Justin, you're brilliant." Theodore added. "But, what about Brian?"

Justin looked in the direction that Brian stomped off into the woods. "I'll go talk to him."

It didn't take him long to find Brian, sitting with his back against a tree near the waterfall. Justin sat down next to him. "What's wrong with you?"

"Me? What's wrong with you? All of a sudden you've got a death wish."

"I think you don't trust me."

"I don't trust them." He pointed in the direction of the camp. "You're the one putting your life on the line. They might just take off with the money and shoot you for real."

"You think they would kill me?"

"Probably not. But you're really putting yourself in the line of fire, for what? I still don't get it."

"I'm tired of having everyone judge me because of my baby face. I'm not a baby."

"But taking a drug to slow your heart is dangerous. I won't have any part of it."

"So you won't help me prove my worth?"

"You don't need to prove anything to them. I'll go into town and pull the job with them."

"So, it's okay for you to put yourself in danger. You know if they go into town shooting, it's likely that someone is going to die. I don't like those odds, Brian. My way, we still get the money, but no one gets hurt."

Brian turned his head away from Justin and sulked. Justin nuzzled up to his neck and kissed him over and over while he whispered, "Hey, give me a shot at being a grown up."

Brian turned back to face him. "If anything happens to you . . . "

"You're going to be right there with me. I'm not going through with it, unless everything falls into place perfectly. I promise I won't take any chances."

The next day the gang rode off for town leaving Brian and Justin alone to paint the wagon. Justin enjoyed having Brian all to himself again. Michael's constant whining about his and Brian's relationship was getting on Justin's nerves. But since Brian seemed to have a past with the man, Justin knew better than to make trouble.

"You've been holding out on me, Brian. You have a real artistic touch."

"That must come from touching artists." Brian grinned at Justin playfully. "Want to take a break?"

"In a minute. I want to talk to you about your role. Here, I got you this coat wear for your act. Do you remember what David used to say when he was pushing his cures?"

Brian jumped up on the back of the wagon and put on the coat, then bowed comically. "Laaadieeeeees and gentlemen." He yelled at the top of his lungs. "Do you believe in miracles? Do you believe that only God can create a miracle? Here in my hand, I hold a bottle of miracles made by God Almighty. Nature's Elixir will cure what ails you, with only the most natural ingredients which come from God's green earth."

"You! The pretty, blond stud with the incredible smile." Brian grabbed Justin's hand and dragged him into the wagon. "I see, my pretty young friend, that you walk with a slight limp. What would you say if I told you that just one spoonful of Nature's Elixir applied lovingly onto your tight anus, would cure that limp in a flash?"

"I'd be obliged to give that elixir a try, but only if it's applied by a professional Nature's Elixir salesman." Justin smiled at Brian and handed him one of the small empty bottles he had purchased. "We have to figure out what to put in the elixir."

"That's easy. 99% tea and 1% whiskey."

"It's perfect." Justin beamed at him. "Thanks for getting into character for me, Brian. You're an amazing salesman."

"I learned from the master."

"You're nothing like him. You're charming, handsome and intelligent. I believe that you could make a miracle out of what nature provides."

"Well, thank you sir." Brian pulled Justin close and kissed him. "Now, how about that break?"

Justin grinned playfully. "Hmmm. I don't want to appear too easy. How about you dance with me first?"

"Dance?" Brian protested. "Why would you want to dance when we can just fuck?"

"I want to dance because you look so handsome and romantic in your Medicine Show coat."

"Well, maybe I'll just take off this coat, and my trousers too."

Justin laughed. "You're not very romantic, but you are consistent. So if you want to settle for just plain old sex, let's get at it." Justin pulled at Brian's clothes. They decided to go off a ways into the woods so that when the gang returned they could be alone. Brian built a fire and Justin made dinner from the cans of food he bought in town.

Brian rubbed Justin's back as he lay on his side staring at the fire. "That feels good." Justin mumbled.

"Having my cock in your mouth felt good too. Now let's get some sleep." Brian rolled over onto to his back.

"I can't sleep. My mind is awake. Talk to me."

"You want me to tell you a story?"

"I want you to tell me about Michael. You don't have to, if you don't want to. I'm just curious. He seems to be 'attached' to you."

"If he's attached, that's his problem. I don't get attached, you know that."

"He must have gotten it into his head, when you were younger. What happened between you? Why did you part company?"

"We spent a lot of time on the road together. We made use of it as we saw fit. There was nothing special about it for me. And that's all I'll say on the subject. We parted ways because Michael met up with a man who wanted to take him to Santa Fe to live with him on his ranch. I woke up one morning and he was gone. I rode up North till I ran out of money in Buckskin Joe."

"He left you? I guess I was wrong. He couldn't care much about you if he would just up and leave you."

"Everyone leaves, Justin. It's a part of life."

"Not everyone leaves, Brian." Justin whispered under his breath before he fell asleep.

It took a few weeks to set up every detail, but when the time was right, Justin's plan worked like a charm. They were able to hit the bank on a day that the payroll for the rail road was deposited. As nervous as Brian was, he carried off his part perfectly. When he heard the shot ring out, he ran to Justin in the alley and pretended to listen for a heartbeat. The shocked town's people had nothing but admiration for the unfortunate young man who had been killed defending the bank.

They met up with Michael and his gang at the camp site. Justin was a hero, but Brian was uncertain of his feelings. They had stolen enough money to get them both to the gold mines up north. That was all he needed. But the others were already anxiously plotting their next job.

Brian pulled Justin aside to talk to him. "What are you doing making plans with that crew. You got lucky today. We made enough to keep us on the road in style until we get up north."

"But we can make more money doing this, Brian. To tell you the truth, the danger is exciting for me. When I was lying on the street with my heart slowing down, I started to get hard just thinking about the danger. They want to do it again and I don't see any reason why it can't work. Think of it Brian, we can make enough money to buy a place without gambling on striking it rich in a gold mine."

"I don't like it. It's way too dangerous. What's the point of having all that money if one or both of us gets killed."

"No one is going to get killed. I promise." Justin put his hand on Brian's shoulder. "Aren't you a little bit proud of me?"

Brian could not help but smile at him. "I'm proud of you. But I was proud of you before you turned into an outlaw."

Over the next four months, Michael and his gang used Justin's brilliant mind to plan robbery after robbery. They hit banks, general stores, saloons, any place there was money. Justin seemed to take great pleasure in planning out the details. To Brian's relief, Justin rarely participated in the actual robberies. However they both took part in a few more bank robberies, using the original plan.

Justin made it clear that no one was to spend a large amount of money at any given time, as it might raise suspicion. On rare occasions when they came to a large town, they would split up and go on a shopping spree. Brian and Justin would shop separately, and then laugh out loud when they met up and realized they only bought gifts for each other. It was a very special time for them. Justin had earned the respect of the others, for the masterful way he planned their jobs. Sitting around the camp fire at night, Ted and Emmett would hang on his every word. Michael begrudgingly allowed him to take charge, and decide where and when they would hit. But Justin could feel the undercurrent of resentment that Michael felt for him. Often, Michael would wander away from the group during the campfire discussions. It unnerved Justin when he would see Michael gazing lustfully at Brian from the shadows of the trees.

Brian and Justin slept well apart from the others. Brian didn't mind sharing Justin's brilliant mind with the others, but their physical lust for each other was private. In the morning he would awake to find Justin wrapped around him like a blanket. He had never in his life allowed anyone to encroach upon his personal space like Justin did. But if Justin moved away from him in his sleep, Brian would gently guide him back to his side.

On this particular morning Brian carefully slid out from under the sleeping boy, and pulled on his pants and his boots. That day was important for all of them. They had been setting up a big bank job in town. Everything was in place for them to rob the bank that afternoon. Brian was to take the wagon into town and set up the medicine show. Justin would fake his death. They had played out this plan successfully in other towns, but each time Brian got a knot in his stomach thinking about the consequence if any thing went wrong. It was quite possible one, or both of them might die that day. He tried to put his negative feelings aside, for Justin's sake. Justin needed to have confidence in himself, to pull off the job without getting nervous. Brian had to hide his fears.

They had made a promise to each other the night before. This would be their last job. They'd saved up enough money to travel north and live comfortably for the winter while Brian tried his luck in the gold mines. After the robbery they would meet up with the gang and after they divided up the money, they would say their good byes.

One of the reasons that Brian had encouraged the end to their association with the gang, was because of Michael's behavior toward Justin. On many occasions Brian would see Michael watching from the woods, as he made love to Justin. Seeing the tortured look on Michael's face, made Brian thrust deeper and harder into Justin. Still, Michael relentlessly sought out Brian's attention. He took every opportunity to be alone with Brian, to remind him of what they had together years ago.

Brian had grown tired of Michael's whining about the past. Today would be his last opportunity to get Michael to let go of their past, and get on with his life. He approached Michael, who was wrapped in a blanket near the fire. Brian gently nudged him in the side. When Michael opened his eyes, Brian nodded in the direction of the woods. Michael got up and followed him. Before he could speak, Michael pressed his body against him, and kissed him on the lips.

Brian pushed him away. "You never give up, do you?"

"No. And I never will." Michael said defiantly. "I love you, Brian. You love me too. And when that spoiled brat outgrows you, I'll be right here waiting."

"You're pathetic, Michael." Brian uttered with contempt. "I don't love you. You need to get that thought out of your head, and move on with your life."

"That boy's sweet little ass has you by the balls. He'll leave you, Brian. The minute he figures out you're nothing but a poor, dumb farm boy with no future, he'll be gone."

Brian grabbed Michael by the shirt collar and pulled him close to his face. "He doesn't think I'm dumb. And he would never leave me alone in the desert to die. I'm telling you now Michael . . . leave US the fuck alone." Michael glared at him. Brian let go of his shirt and walked back to where he left Justin sleeping.

Justin was up and dressed when Brian got back. "Hey, I thought I was going to have to leave without a kiss good bye. Where did you go?"

"I was talking to Michael. I set him straight, once and for all."

"You didn't tell him we were leaving, did you?" Justin asked.

"No, of course not."

"We can't afford for him to think we're leaving. He might just decide to take off with all the money."

"Why don't you call it off. We can leave now. I don't trust that little fucker. And it's your life on the line."

"Brian, it's a big job. The money will keep us going all winter."

"I don't trust him."

"I'll be careful." Justin reassured him. "Now kiss me good bye, Dr. B. I'll see you in town this afternoon."

Brian spent the morning gathering their belongings and preparing the wagon for town. He and Justin had been keeping their money in a hiding spot in the woods. They decided it was best to keep the money stashed in a tree and

not carry it into town. That way if something happened to one of them, the other would have the money. Brian checked the tree before packing up the wagon for town. At the appointed time he dressed in the long black coat, and prepared for his last appearance as Dr. B. Healed.

Journals West - Part Six

The Promise

The gun shot rang out just as the crowd gathered to hear Dr. B. Healed's sales pitch. Brian jumped off the wagon, and ran over to where Justin lay on the ground. He turned him over and put his head to Justin's chest while the crowd looked on. The two of them had been through this performance a half a dozen times, and Justin always put the blood on his chest. This time the blood was on his lower back. Brian got a sinking feeling. He pulled open Justin's shirt and knew that Michael had betrayed them. Justin had been shot in the back.

Knowing it was important for the town folk to believe the boy had died, Brian made his usual proclamation. "He's dead." Brian looked around at the crowd and when he was sure they were convinced, then gathered Justin in his arms and put him in the back of the wagon. "His parents live in the next valley. They'll want to bury him proper, in the church yard."

Everything happened exactly as planned. Except this time Justin was in serious trouble. Brian drove the wagon as fast as he dared. He was concerned that the drug that Justin had taken might cause his heart to stop beating altogether, considering the trauma. As soon as he found a place to pull off the road under the cover of trees, he stopped the wagon and went to tend to Justin.

"Justin," Brian yelled as he tried to shake the boy back into consciousness. Justin opened his eyes and Brian could see his fear.

"I'm shot!" He said weakly. "Am I going to die?"

"Don't say that. I'm going to fix you up, good as new. But first I have to find a safe place. You have to hold on for a while." Brian found some cloth that would do for bandages. He tied them around Justin's abdomen.

"I'm scared, Brian." Justin's voice shook when he spoke.

"We'll get through this." Brian took Justin's hand and looked him in the eye. "I love you too much, to let you die on me."

Justin closed his eyes, and Brian covered him with a blanket. He then got back in the drivers seat. Brian had to take that bullet out, and stop the bleeding soon. The sky had gotten dark and Brian sensed a storm was on the way. He found a spot where he thought they would find cover, and he pulled the wagon as far as he could up the trail. After hiding the wagon with branches, Brian pulled Justin out of the wagon and carried him up the hill to a cave where they would have shelter. He built a fire and left the cave to collect the plants that he would need. Luckily they still had some of the drugs that Justin had gotten from the doctor when Brian was sick. Brian gathered some water at a nearby stream, and went back inside the cave. Justin's skin had turned very pale, but he was conscious.

"I'm going to take out the bullet out of you." Brian put his hand on Justin's forehead.

"It hurts so much." Justin's screamed. His breathing became labored.

Brian tried to calm him. "Justin, don't be afraid. I'm not going to let anything happen to you."

Brian petted Justin's head lovingly and then kissed him gently before he began the operation. He gave Justin a small dose of laudanum and waited until his breathing became steady. He rolled Justin over onto his side and felt around the area where the bullet had penetrated Justin's flesh. Luckily he could feel the bullet, and would not have to dig around searching for it. Brian took his knife and cut away flesh until he could reach the bullet. It came out easily, and Brian took what was left of Justin's shirt and tied it around the wound. He searched through their bags for something he could use for thread to stitch him up. Justin's silk shirt would have to do. Brian carefully pulled thread from the hem, making sure not to get blood on the material. Taking a reed that he'd gotten at the stream, he made a small hole in Justin's flesh and pulled the thread through. He followed around the wound making the stitches as small as he could.

Mercifully, Justin did not wake up during the operation. Brian covered the wound with Justin's shirt and wrapped him in a blanket. He sat up against the wall of the cave and watched over his patient. Hopefully the wound would heal and Justin will recover quickly. But Brian knew there was still a threat of infection. Justin had lost a lot of blood. Brian wasn't sure if he would have the strength to travel. They would need to move on as soon as possible as there would be lawmen out looking for the robbers. Strangers lurking around in the woods were bound to look suspicious. If anyone recognized Justin or himself, it would be over for them.

Justin woke up during the night and reached out to touch Brian's arm. He was too weak to talk, but when he saw the worried look on Brian's face he tried to smile. Brian lay down next to him and squeezed his hand. Justin slept on and off for two days. Brian tried to get him to eat, but nothing would stay down. The wound appeared to be healing but Justin felt feverish. If he didn't start gaining strength, an infection would kill him.

Brian finally got Justin to keep down some tea and berries. After he fell asleep, Brian went down the hill to the wagon. Using his knife, he scrapped off all he could of the paint. The only way he would be able to move Justin would be to use the wagon. It meant that he would have to stick to the road, which might be dangerous if the law was out looking for them. But Justin's predicament was grave.

Justin was asleep when he got back to their hide out. Brian lay down and got under the blanket with him.

Justin opened his eyes and smiled. "I heard you." Justin said. His voice was weak. He pulled one arm out from under the blanket and touched Brian's face.

"What did you hear?"

"You said you loved me."

"You heard right."

"I always thought you might. I hope I don't die, now that you love me."

"How do you feel?" Brian asked.

"Better. But my stomach is sick."

"You should go back to sleep."

"I'm tired, but I can't sleep." Justin closed his eyes and rolled onto his back, as he moved he winced in pain. "Brian, what do you suppose it feels like to die?"

"You're not going to die."

"I might one day. Tell me what you think it will be like."

"I guess it would be peaceful. No more pain or hunger."

"Do you think that you see the people who died before?"

"I think that when you're dead, it must feel like when you're sleeping. When my Pa died he looked like he went to sleep. When I found him, he was sitting in a chair and he didn't look sad anymore."

"He died alone? That's the saddest thing. I was at my mama's side when she passed. I held her hand and she knew I was there."

"I've been alone most of my life. It would be fitting if I died alone."

Justin slowly pushed himself up on one elbow and took Brian's face in his hands. "You won't be alone, Brian. I'll be there. Even If I die tonight, I will stay with you always. And when you walk through the pearly gates I'll be waiting for you."

"Stop talking about dying and listen to me. We're going to have to move on today. I scraped the paint off the wagon so you won't have to ride Slow Gus. Do you think you can manage it?"

"I'm not sure."

"You don't have a choice. We're too close to town where we are. We need to go north and just pray they aren't following us. When we get far enough away we'll find a doctor."

"I don't need a doctor. I have you."

"I'll be honest with you, Justin. The bullet is out, but if you start to get a fever it means you have an infection. I would have to clean out the wound again and burn it out of you. It's real important to keep the wound clean and we can't do that traveling. We need to find a doctor."

"I guess we better go then. I'll do whatever you say, Brian."

"There's one more thing I need to tell you. I went back to the tree when you were sleeping. The money is gone. Michael probably took it, the bastard."

"We'll be okay Brian, We have each other."

Brian gathered up Justin in his arms and cautiously carried him down the hill to the wagon. Justin cried out in pain several times. Finally he was settled in the wagon and ready for the trip. Brian kissed him on the head and got into the drivers seat. It had been a week since the robbery. Hopefully things had settled down and the lawmen were looking else where for the culprits.

They passed two towns, which Brian thought were too small. The next town they arrived at was called Gunnison. Brian slowed the wagon just outside of town and checked on Justin. "We're going to stop here. First I'll get us a room, then we'll find a doctor."

Justin stared up at him with a vacant look in his eyes which scared Brian. He put his hand on his forehead and as he feared, Justin was burning up. They had very little time to find help. Brian drove the wagon to the general store and went inside to inquire about a doctor. An elderly woman pointed town the street toward a church. Brian got into the wagon and rode quickly to the doctor's office.

He left Justin in the wagon and rang the bell. A man with an unruly shock of gray hair and light blue eyes answered the door. "What can I do for you, young man?"

"I need a doctor for my friend." Brian couldn't hide the fear in his voice. "I think he's got an infection. He's burning up with fever."

The doctor went to the wagon and looked at Justin. "He's pale as a ghost. What happened?"

"It's a long story, sir. Can I tell you, while you work on him?"

"Bring him inside. I'll see what I can do."

Brian lifted Justin out of the wagon and carried him inside. The doctor instructed him to take Justin into a room with a long examining table. "He's pretty weak, doc. He hasn't been able to keep anything down."

"What happened to him?"

Brian pulled off Justin's bandage and showed the doctor the wound. "He got shot. I took out the bullet and sewed him up. We were up in the hills when it happened."

"Did you shot him?" The doctor eyed Brian suspiciously.

"We were out hunting with a group of guys. One of 'em had too much to drink and started firing his gun into the woods. This unlucky kid was taking a piss and took a bullet in his back.. The rest of them ran off when they saw what happened." Brian shook his head back and forth trying to be convincing.

"I see." The doctor had accepted Brian's story. "How far in was the bullet?"

"I only had to cut a little to get to it."

Brian and the doctor turned Justin on his side. The doctor removed the bandage and Brian gasped. The wound was black and swollen. The doctor gently put his hand on Justin's head. "You rest up boy. We'll fix you up, good as new."

"What's your name son?" The doctor asked Brian.

"Brian." Brian thought it best not to elaborate by giving his full name. The doctor shook his hand. "I'm Seth Perry, call me Seth. I don't have to tell you that your young friend's condition is serious. I'll have to burn out the infection and since I'm alone here, I'm going to need your help."

"His name is James. And I'll do whatever it takes."

"Good, then let's get started."

Seth had Brian hold a cloth over Justin's nose and instructed him to drip chloroform on it every few minutes. Brian was glad to have something to keep his mind occupied while the doctor worked. He flinched when he saw the hot instruments burning Justin's pure white skin. Seth worked quickly. When he was finished, he bandaged Justin's wound and winked at Brian. "You did a fine job with the bullet. This wasn't your fault."

Brian was grateful for the doctor's words. "We were out in the woods, I did the best I could. Is he going to be okay?"

Seth took Brian's arm and led him out of the room. "It's too soon to tell. He's young and appears to be healthy. But he lost a lot of blood and he's very weak. He'll need all his strength to recover."

Brian nodded his head sadly. "Doc, how much do we owe you?"

Seth put his hand on Brian's. "Put your money away, son. We'll settle up tomorrow when you're thinking straight."

"Thanks doc. When will he wake up? I have to go and get us a place to stay."

"You shouldn't move him. You can stay here with him tonight. I was just going home for the evening. I'll be back in the morning to check on him. If you need me during the night come and get me. If you ride past the church about a half a mile, you'll see my house. My buggy will be out front."

Brian went back into the room where Justin lay on the table. He hoped he would wake up soon. Justin had shown so much strength over the past few months. He'd saved Brian's life, overcome the disappointment of meeting his father and found a way to run a gang of outlaws without anyone getting hurt . . . except for him. Brian looked at Justin's sweet face. What had he done to this brave young man? Secretly Brian longed for the days when Justin depended on him for everything. Justin had grown in so many ways, Brian felt threatened at times and resented Justin telling him what to do. At this moment he'd give anything if Justin would get up off the table and give him hell. He missed the sound of his voice. Brian longed to tell Justin so many things that had been left unsaid.

Brian slept on a chair next to Justin's bed. He hadn't realized how tired he was. He dozed off for a few hours and was awakened by a tug on his hand. Justin was awake. "Hey, Sunshine." Brian took his hand and kissed it.

"Where are we?" Justin said in a weak voice.

"We're safe. I found us a doctor who fixed you up. Does it hurt?"

Justin blinked his eyes and for a moment Brian thought he had fallen asleep again. He shook his wrist. "Are you okay."

Tears rolled down Justin's cheeks. "It hurts a lot."

"The doc had to open you up again and clean out the wound. He said you need to build up your strength to fight it. I'm going to get you some food."

"No, Brian. Don't leave me here alone!" Justin pleaded.

Brian smoothed his hair. "You close your eyes and go back to sleep. When the doctor comes back he'll give you something for the pain."

Justin was asleep when the doctor arrived in the morning. "How's our patient today?"

"He's in a lot of pain, doc. Can you give him something?"

"I'll check on him now. I'll give him some laudanum for the pain. In a day or two the pain should be tolerable."

"Doc, how much do we owe you? I have money, I can pay."

"How would you feel about running a few errands for me today instead of giving me cash? I have some patients who live a distance from town. It can take a week for me to check on them all. I need to deliver some medicine to them, and I haven't got the time to go."

"I don't want to leave him for too long doc. He's scared of dying."

"I've been caring for patients for a lot of years, son. I know how to reassure them they're not dying. Caring for the sick can put a strain on a person. Take a break, you'll do him more good if you're rested. Go get yourself something to eat, and bring back some food for James. I'll write up a list of things I need done. We'll call it even on my bill."

"That's real fair of you, sir. If he wakes up while I'm gone, don't pay his ramblings any mind. He's got an imagination that he loses control of at times."

Brian did as the doctor suggested. He brought breakfast for Justin and sat it next to the cot where Justin was still sleeping. He looked to see if anyone was around before kissing Justin on top of his head. The doctor had several patients waiting to see him. Before he started his visits, he called Brian over and gave him a list and the packages he wanted delivered.

The day passed quite pleasantly for Brian. The people he delivered the medicine to were grateful. Some of them wanted to talk and some just wanted to feed him. It was dark by the time he returned to the clinic. Justin was sitting at the table in the small waiting area eating a bowl of soup with the doctor.

Brian resisted the urge to kiss him. "Hey, you're feeling better?"

"Not really, the doc made me eat."

"You need to build up your strength, James." Seth turned his attention to Brian. "Brian, we saved you some soup. It's on the stove over there. Pull up a chair and join us. How did you make out today?"

"Just fine, sir. Mrs. Tully asked me to tell you that her gout is acting up again. I suggested she should lose some weight." Brian said straight faced. "It would put less pressure on her joints."

Seth laughed out loud and patted Brian on the back. "You'd make a fine doctor, son. I hope she listens to you."

Justin ate in silence, barely looking at either of his table companions. Once Brian had finished his soup, Justin asked if he could leave the table. "My side is really hurting. I'd like to lay down, if that's okay."

"Sure boy." Seth said.

Justin went into the other room to rest. Brian started to get up from the table but the doctor stopped him. "Sit and eat your meal."

"I got us a room at the boarding house. As soon as I'm finished we'll be taking our leave."

"There's no rush. I appreciate the company."

"Is he acting . . . normal, Doc?"

"The wound is healing as well as to be expected. The pain should be less tomorrow. You're a good friend to young James."

Brian wondered if his concern was causing the doctor to become suspicious of their relationship. "He saved my life a while back. I'm just returning the favor."

"How do you mean?"

"We were up in the mountains hunting. I took a nasty fall and hit my head. I was blinded for a few days. He took care of me until I recovered. A lot of men would have left a person for dead in a situation like that."

"I see, he must have a lot strength then. He should be good as new in a few days."

"I sure hope so. Normally he doesn't shut up. It spooks me to see him so quiet." Brian finished his meal and got up from the table. "I'll be taking him to the boarding house now."

"If you're still around tomorrow maybe you could drop by to help me out again. Since my wife died I haven't had a moment to collect my thoughts, much less keep up with my billing and my paperwork."

"Sure, Doc, I'll drop by."

In the days that followed Brian worked at the clinic for several hours a day. Justin's wounds appeared to be healing, yet he still complained of pain. His appetite hadn't returned and his weight loss worried Brian.

Brian brought up his concerns to Seth. "He's just not acting like himself. It's been weeks, and he still claims the pain is intolerable. When I tell him to just ride it out, he gets angry with me. I can hardly get him to eat anything. All he

does is sleep. But when he is awake he's meaner than a rattlesnake. Cursing and yelling at me and telling me it's all my fault. It's just not like him, Sir. He was always strong and healthy. Do you suppose there is something wrong with his brain?"

"Brian, I've seen this kind of behavior before. During the war a lot of soldiers killed the pain by taking laudanum or other such pain numbing drugs. The more they took, the more they needed it to kill the pain. After a while the drugs didn't work at all. And the men would act like you described what James is going through."

"What can I do for him?" Brian asked.

"Bring him in to see me tomorrow. I'll check the wound and see if it's healing properly. If it is, I don't think it's a good idea to give him any more drugs. Just make sure he eats to keep his strength up."

"Thanks." Brian said. "Doc, what happened to those soldiers?"

"Some died. Some were sent to asylums. But many of them were able to get past it and go back to their families."

Brian feared that what the doctor had told him was the truth. There would be no more drugs for Justin and he would see to it that the boy got a grip on himself and moved past it.

The next morning Brian brought Justin to the clinic. Justin protested when the doctor proclaimed that his wound was healing nicely. There was no infection. He told them they could travel now. Justin tried to get the doctor to give him one more dose in case he had pain on the road. But he was told he didn't need the drug.

Brian brought him back to the hotel and began to gather their belongings. Justin sat on the bed with a scowl on his face.

"Brian, you work there. You can get some of that laudanum for me." Justin pleaded.

"No, I won't. It wouldn't help the way you feel, anyway."

"What do you fucking know about how I feel?" Justin had grabbed Brian by the arms. His eyes were wild and his fingers dug into Brian's skin. Brian realized that Seth had been right, Justin had become addicted to the drug.

Brian gently pried Justin's hands off of his arms and sat him down in a chair. "Listen to me for a minute. Your infection is gone. There's no reason for you to be in pain anymore. I think that the laudanum is making you sick."

"But it hurts, Brian. I can feel the pain. Are you saying I'm lying?"

"I'm not saying that. I believe you have pain. But it's not from your injury. And taking laudanum is only making it worse."

Justin stared at him for a moment, then he put his hands over his face. "It's in my head, isn't it? I'm crazy."

Brian pulled Justin up into his arms and held him. "You've had a lot to deal with since we left Silverton. Maybe you were confused about all the bad things that have happened to you in the past year. Getting shot just brought it to a head. The doc said you may be traumatized."

"That means I'm crazy." Justin said sadly. "I'll have to go to an asylum. Brian, people never come out of those places."

"You're not going to any asylum. We're moving on tomorrow. Maybe once we're on the road, it'll cheer you up."

"What did the doctor say about me?"

"He said that during the war sometimes the wounded soldiers would take too much of that laudanum stuff and get sick like you."

"What happened to them?"

"Some went to asylums, like you said." Brian answered honestly. "Some got better on their own. You're young, and up until now, you were healthy. My bet is a couple of days of fresh air and sunshine will do the trick."

Justin smiled weakly. "I want to try to get better on my own. I would die if I had to live in an asylum."

"I would die before I'd let that happen. Now, get your stuff together. We'll leave first thing in the morning."

After saying their good byes to Dr. Seth Perry, Brian and Justin loaded up the wagon and headed north. Brian glanced over at Justin who was shivering in the cold morning air. He stopped the wagon to get a blanket.

"Here, wrap this around you. We'll take it easy on the road today."

"Don't treat me like a baby." Justin snapped.

Brian ignored his tone. "I'm not treating you any different."

"I'm sorry, Brian. It's just that my head hurts so much."

Brian reached back in the wagon and handed Justin an apple. "Eat this. You'll feel better."

Justin took the apple and ate it slowly. "Brian, I'm a burden on you, and I want you to know that I'm sorry for that. I never wanted to tie you down. If you want to drop me at the nearest asylum, I'll understand."

Brian stopped the wagon again and turned to Justin. "Do you remember what I said to you, right before I took the bullet out?"

Justin looked down at his feet and said sheepishly. "You said you loved me."

"That's right. I don't know how it happened, but somewhere along the road I fell in love with you. You always say that people who love each other need to stay together."

"I won't hold you to that, Brian. My mind is so confused now. I can't think about anything but the pain in my body. I don't see how I can ever get back to normal."

"What kind of man would dump the person that he loves on the doorstep of an asylum and leave him there? I'll stick by you no matter what. Your job is to do your best to get better. Now eat your apple."

"Brian, I want to make camp outside under the stars tonight."

"It's too cold. We'll stop at the next town and get a room."

"No, I'll be okay."

That night they camped out in the woods. Brian stayed awake holding Justin in his arms. Justin shivered and called out in his sleep all night. Brian knew that Justin was suffering. But the boy was fighting for his life, and that was what he needed to do. The next night Justin did not shiver or call out in his sleep. In fact he was so still that Brian nudged him a few times to see if he was still alive.

When they came upon a town, Brian was relieved that Justin did not ask to find a doctor to get more laudanum. In fact he had not complained about being in pain for several days. Brian was hopeful, yet Justin was still not himself.

"Hey, why don't you join me at the poker table tonight?" Brian suggested.

Justin shrugged his shoulders. "I don't think so. I'd like to stay in the room and sleep if you don't mind. We don't know when we'll be able to sleep in a bed again."

"Suit yourself. I want to show you something that'll maybe cheer you up." Brian pulled a newspaper from his jacket pocket. "Mikey and his gang are dead. They tried to rob a bank in Santa Fe and were shot to death. Look, there's a picture."

Brian tried to hand the newspaper to Justin, but Justin pushed it away. "No, Brian. I don't want to see it."

"They shot you, boy. Aren't you glad they got what they deserved?"

"What about us? We did the same thing. Don't we deserve to be lying there next to them?"

"We never hurt anyone. You saw to that."

"We hurt people, Brian. Being robbed hurts. Maybe now, being sick in my head, I am getting what I deserve."

It broke Brian's heart that each day Justin became more and more depressed. Brian tried to get him to draw, to take an interest in beauty of the countryside. But the light and passion had gone out of Justin's eyes. It was all he could to make it from one town to the next so he could crawl up into a ball and sleep.

The only time when Justin would show the slightest interest in life, was when Brian would lie down next to him. They would have sex, but Justin was not the playful passionate partner he had been in the past.

Brian was at his wits end. Winter was upon them and he knew they needed to find a place to settle down and work. But it was impossible to bring Justin to a town to find work. He was so thin his bones stuck out like a mangy street dog. His face was unrecognizable. The last town they came upon he found a cave in the woods for Justin to stay while he went to town to earn some money. At one point his attention was drawn to a crowd that had gathered in the street. Justin had somehow made his way into town. A group of boys were throwing stones at him. Brian ran to his rescue and hurried him out of town.

The next town they came upon Brian found an abandoned cabin in the woods just outside of town for them to sleep in. As gently as he could he confronted Justin about his behavior.

"I'm going into town to see about getting work for the winter."

"I'll go too."

"No. I'll take care of us. Don't you worry about that. I'll get two jobs if need be. But you have to stay here. You can't be wandering all over the place attracting attention to yourself, ' you hear. I'm taking the wagon with both horses. And just in case you get it into your head to follow me into town, I'm taking your boots too."

Justin obediently took off his boots and handed them to Brian. "Here, do you want my clothes too?"

"I don't like this any more than you do. But I can't work if I'm going to have to chase you all over creation."

Justin sat on the floor and curled up into a ball. Brian put a blanket over him and smoothed his hair. "There's food over there in the saddle bag. Your job it to eat and get your strength back. When you're ready, you can come to town with me and get a job." Brian kissed him on the head and left for town.

Brian got a day job at a mill. It was hard work, physical work. But it was the best way for him to keep his mind from worry. He worked the entire day and was paid in cash. The boss asked him to return the next morning. He took the money and went to the saloon to see if he could join in a poker game. It was odd to see that the saloon was almost empty at a time of day when men were getting out of work. He asked the bartender if it was always so slow this time of day.

"Nope, there's usually a card game at every table by this time. There's some excitement going on up at the ridge. They're hanging some throw back they caught walking around the woods barefoot."

After asking where this ridge was, Brian ran into the street and hopped on Lightning. Time seemed to stand still, as he pushed his horse to its limits. When he neared the ridge he saw the crowd disperse. Could it be he was too late?

He saw a noose hanging from a tree. No body, no lynch mob, nothing. Confused he quickly rode back to town. After asking around, he found out that the sheriff had put a stop to the hanging. Brian ran to the jail, and there he saw Justin sitting on a cot in a cell with his back to the door.

Brian had to think quickly to get Justin out of this mess. "Sheriff, I'm Dr. Brian Kinney. This boy was in my charge. I was taking him to an asylum in Denver when he got away from me. I appreciate your saving his life today."

"Don't thank me, doc. There's a law against lynch mobs here in this town. Even a throw back's entitled to a trial."

"Trial? Sir, he's not competent to stand trial. What's his crime?"

"Vagrancy, to start with. But if you'd be willing to take him, I'd be willing to drop the charge. Just make sure to get him out of town as fast as possible."

"That's kind of you, sir." Brian was greatly relieved. He took Justin by the arm and led him out to the wagon. They rode back to the cabin in silence. When he got Justin inside he pulled him into his arms and cried.

"I tried to stay here, " Justin explained, "but there were animals outside, and I got scared. You should have let them hang me, Brian. I'm a burden to you."

Brian shook him by the arms. "Don't you give up! You didn't give up on me, when I needed you."

"I want to get better, Brian. I really do. But my head won't let me."

"I know you want to get better. And I'd do anything to help you. Let's start by eating something. Your brain needs food to function."

"I know that. But my stomach just isn't hungry."

"Try." Brian smiled and lifted Justin's face up to meet his eyes. ". . . eat something for me."

Justin smiled, but there was no life in his eyes. "Okay."

The next day Brian and Justin were on the road again. Just outside of Denver, Brian made camp for the night. The next morning, he let Justin sleep while he went to town.

When he got back to camp Justin was awake and dressed. Brian pulled him into his arms and held him tightly. He hesitated a moment, as he choked back tears. "I want you to stay calm, because I have something to tell you. I sold Lightning, and bought you a ticket on a train back to New York."

Justin stood up straight, and started to cough. Brian held him close until the he stopped.

"You can't make me go." Justin said when he finally caught his breath. "I'll try harder, Brian. I'll eat whatever you want."

"You're too weak. I can't take care of you. I can't keep you safe." Brian rubbed Justin's back to calm him. "I want you to go home, and get well. When I get to San Francisco, I'll send for you."

"But we're going to make the trip together, Brian." Justin protested.

"It doesn't matter how we get there. I'm going north. They're still finding gold by the hand fulls up there. I'll make enough money for us to get a place to farm. I promise I'll send you a ticket for you to join me when I get to San Francisco."

"Who's going to take care of you?" Justin asked tearfully.

"Me. . . I've been doing it a lot of years." Brian put out his hand. "Come on, I want to show you something. I sold the wagon too, so we have to ride Slow Gus together." He put Justin up on the horse.

When the path up the mountain became too narrow Brian stopped and helped Justin dismount. They walked hand in hand until they came to a clearing near the top of the mountain. The view was breathtaking. Brian stood in back of Justin and entwined his arms tightly around him. "I want you to remember this sight, when you're home in New York. When I first came to this spot years ago, I couldn't believe a place so beautiful actually existed on this earth. I stayed up here and prayed for the first time since my Ma left, because I felt so close to God.

"When I first laid eyes on you, I got the same feeling. I couldn't believe that anyone so beautiful would be put on this earth to be with me. But somehow we were put together, maybe by God, or fate. Giving you up, even for a few months is going to be difficult. But for the first time in my life, I can see a future for myself. I have a goal in my head, and I'll move heaven and earth to make it happen. Now I need for you to have faith in me."

"Of course I have faith in you Brian. You can do anything. I want so badly to get better, so we could be like we were before. I feel like I'm letting you down."

"You haven't let me down. You've given me hope. I told you once that I didn't believe in love. I told you not to expect we would share our lives like married people. I believed it then. I've always thought that it was my nature to be a loner. I never wanted to be in a position to rely on anyone, or have anyone rely on me for anything. I was my own man, and I intended to spend my life alone. Then you came along and turned my whole world upside down. You made me WANT to be with you. I took joy in showing you things and taking care of you.

"I want you to know that I've changed my mind. Love does exist. And I love you, Justin Taylor, with a devotion as enduring as any man has for a wife."

"I'm not worthy of you, Brian. There's nothing wrong with me, but I can't get my head to believe it. If I end up in an asylum, I'll try to get word to you, so you don't waste your time waiting for me."

Brian turned Justin around to face him. "You don't get it, do you?" He went to the edge of the cliff and shouted, "I love this man!!" His voice echoed in valley. Brian got down on one knee in front of Justin. "Justin, will you marry me? Right here, right now, in the eyes of God and in the beauty of nature, will you?"

Justin looked down at his handsome partner. "You're a crazy man Brian Kinney. But if you want me, I'd be honored to marry you in the eyes of God, and in the beauty of nature."

Brian stood up and kissed Justin tenderly. They sat on a rock with their arms around each other until the sun disappeared. They made love for the last time before they parted.

"Brian, promise you won't forget me."

"How could I ever forget YOU?"

"Remember that I love you too."

Brian turned his head away. "I'll remember."

"I'll always be with you."

"We'll be together again soon."

They fell asleep in each other's arms. When they awoke Brian helped Justin get dressed in his silk shirt, brown trousers and jacket he had wore on the journey west. "You look nice, real pretty."

"Boys aren't pretty." Justin protested.

"That's right. You're beautiful." Brian kissed him on top of his blond head. "Take the ticket."

Justin looked at the ticket that Brian had handed him. "Brian this is for a sleeper, it must have cost you all the money you had."

"I have some money left, don't worry. The man at the livery stable was fair. I got a good price for the horse."

"I wrote out my aunt's address in New York. Don't you lose it now. I expect to hear from you in a month or two at the most."

"It may take a little longer than that. But don't you give up on me."

They held each other tightly. Brian pulled away first. He put Justin up on the horse and mounted behind him. They rode off to the train station in silence. When they got there Brian walked Justin to the platform.

"Brian, I don't want you to wait with me. I'll look like a fool if I start crying in public."

"I'll go then." They shook hands.

"Wait," Justin reached into his bag and pulled out a book. "I want you to take Moby Dick."

"No, Justin, that's your prized possession." Brian tried to shove it back into the bag.

Justin pulled his arm away. "Teaching you to read it is my most cherished memory. You take it, and keep practicing. When we get to San Francisco, we'll keep it on a shelf in our home. And don't drop it, because I wrote you a letter and stuck it in side. But don't read it, unless you hear that I didn't make it back to New York."

"You're gonna make it." Brian insisted.

"Brian, I want you to know what our time together meant to me, in case you don't ever see me again. That would only happen if I was dead. And I want you to know that you were the most important person in my life."

Brian took the letter out of the book, shoved it into his pocket and turned to leave. "Brian, one more thing. I want you to take one of my pencils. In case you get lonely and want to write to me." Brian took the pencil and looked around. There was no one else on the platform. He took a chance and gave Justin one last hug. As he did that he stuffed his bandana into Justin's pocket. Brian kissed him briefly on the cheek, got on his horse and rode away without looking back.

Justin focused his eyes on Brian's back for as long as he could still see him. He felt like his heart had been ripped out. Would he ever see him again?

Justin sat down on the bench and felt the lump in his pocket. He pulled out the bandana and unrolled it. Brian had given him \$20. Justin was sure that it was all that was left from selling Lightning.

They had been together for over a year. Justin remembered the day they met. Brian had nothing on his mind but sex. In the months that followed, Brian had given Justin so much more. He took care of him, and taught him how to survive. Justin realized that Brian was still taking care of him. Winter was quickly approaching. With no money, and no prospects for work, Brian may have sacrificed his life to keep Justin safe.

Justin got up from the bench, and walked into the station waiting area. Catching a glimpse of his reflection in a mirror, Justin gasped. He looked like a walking dead man. His cheek bones were protruding and there were dark circles around his eyes. Justin couldn't bear the sight of his face. He turned from the mirror, and looked at his hands. The skin that covered his bones was so pale they looked gray. Had his mind affected his physical appearance so gravely, in such a short period of time. No wonder Brian was frightened for him.

Justin heard the train whistle in a distance. In a few moments he would be on his way home to the safety of New York, and his family's bosom. His aunt would nurse him back to health, and he would join Brian in a few months.

Brian had been on his own since he was thirteen years old. Justin was almost 20, and he had never had to take care of himself. He went from the protection of his parent's home, to his school in Boston. When his mother died, he went in search of a father to take care of him. Instead he found Brian, who had become his father, brother, lover and best friend. Brian had enriched his life beyond his wildest dreams. And what had Justin given him in return? Today, Brian rode away with nothing.

Justin felt a surge of new strength in his weak malnourished body. It was time to grow up. As the train was approaching the station, Justin went up to the ticket window to cash in his ticket. It would be a test of his manhood that just might kill him. But Justin was bound and determined that he would pay Brian back for all he had given him.

He walked and walked until he found the livery stable where Brian had sold Lightning. Justin ran to the stall, put his face next to the horse's, and Lightning nuzzled him. "Don't worry, Lightning. I have a plan. We have a long road ahead of us but I promise that one day soon you and Brian and I will be a family again." For the first time in months, Justin realized he was hungry.

Journals West - Part Seven

Justin's Journal

It was nearly midnight when Brian arrived in San Francisco. The train had been delayed for hours, due to the fact that several trees had fallen across the tracks during a storm. He stretched his long legs, and picked up the bag which held all of his worldly possessions.

He thought back to the day he left Justin alone on the station platform in Denver. It was the hardest thing he'd ever had to do in his life. He could feel Justin's eyes on his back as he rode away. He knew that if he had turned around to look, he never would have been able to leave.

When Brian had reached his destination in the mountains, he sold Slow Gus and bought himself a stake to pan for gold. The days that followed were all the same. He worked tirelessly, and while he worked, his mind was filled with thoughts of Justin. How rich and full his life had been when they were together. He longed for him each night.

Since his ordeal up in the mountains, he had maintained his faith that he and Justin would be together one day. Now that he'd arrived in the noisy crowded streets of San Francisco, his faith began to waiver. It had been almost a year since he bade farewell to the towheaded young man who owned his heart. Over that time, thoughts of the year they had spent together and the closeness they had shared, strengthened his spirit, and motivated him to achieve his goal as quickly as possible. If all went as planned, Justin would be waiting for him in New York. All he needed to do was to send the telegram to the address that Justin had given him.

Brian could not get the last image he had of Justin out of his mind. He had sent the frail young man on a journey across the country all alone. Every minute, of every day since, Brian longed to hold Justin in his arms. As Brian wandered the city streets alone, a frightening thought struck him. What if he sent the telegram, and Justin never answered him? He would never know if he made it back to New York. Something could have happened to him along the way, and no one would have known to contact Brian. He paused on the sidewalk, and as he did, he felt a warm breeze caress his face briefly. Justin was with him, he need not fear the worst.

Brian smiled to himself in anticipation. He could still feel Justin within him. No matter how cold and hungry he had gotten in their time apart, Justin's spirit slapped him back in line. 'Trust me, Brian. I will see you again' Brian knew it would be soon. But he was not prepared for how soon.

He found a reasonably priced hotel downtown. It was very late and the desk clerk looked up from his newspaper when Brian came to the desk. "I want a room for a few days, possibly a week or so."

The clerk looked at him with a curious expression. "Just sign the register, mister." The man continued to stare at him while he reached for a room key from a peg on the wall behind him. When Brian finished signing, the clerk turned the book around and read his name out loud. "Brian Kinney." A smile of recognition came across the man's face. "It is you! I thought it might be. You look just like the pictures in your brother's story."

Confused, Brian was about to tell the clerk that he had no brother and the man must have mistaken him for someone else. The name plate on the man's coat read 'Horace.' Brian addressed him with curiosity. "What story, Horace?"

"Your brother, J.T. Kinney's 'Journeys West' series in the Examiner. There's a copy over there on the table. You can have it if you want."

Brian thanked Horace and reached for the key the man had placed on the desk. "Wait," the clerk pulled the key away. "You need to be on the fifth floor." He exchanged the key and Brian took the new one from him. The clerk seemed pleased to have met the brother of the author of the series. As Brian walked away, Horace called after him in a somber voice. "Mr. Kinney, my condolences." The desk clerk turned back to his reading without further explanation.

Brian got to his room and dropped his bag on the floor. He tore through the pages of the newspaper until he found the story. "The Pioneer." It was written and illustrated by one J.T. Kinney. The clerk had been right. The illustration of the author's ill fated brother Brian was indeed his likeness. There was no doubt in his mind that Justin Taylor Kinney was alive and well, and somehow living in San Francisco.

Brian read and reread every word of the story. After their abusive drunk of a father abandoned them at the tender ages of three and sixteen. Brian raised his little brother alone. Brian found work in the ship yards. He saved enough money to send his little brother to college so that he might have a better life. After J.T. left for school, Brian married a young seamstress named Alice. All of his life Brian had dreamed of owning his own land. After the birth of their son, Gus, Brian packed up his family and traveled west. The trip took its toll on Alice's health and mental state. But once they settled in Montana her health improved, and she conceived their second child.

If Brian hadn't known better he would have found this story to be totally credible. In fact it was really good. At the end of the installment, a pregnant Alice and her son Gus, are slaughtered by Indians. Poor Brian came back from hunting for food, only to find his family's lifeless bodies lying on the front porch. He buried them and made a vow to Alice never to marry again. Broken hearted Brian left Montana and traveled west to find his beloved younger brother J.T.

Brian put the paper down and laughed out loud. For the first time in a year he slept a deep peaceful sleep. Tomorrow he would set out to find his beloved brother . . . Justin.

The next morning Brian ate a light meal in the hotel dining room before venturing out into the busy city streets. He was overwhelmed by the size of the population of the city and had no idea where to start his search for Justin. The night desk clerk had been replaced by a rather cranky older man. The lobby was crowded and noisy and Brian needed to get out in the fresh air. He decided the best place to start his search would be at the newspaper that printed Justin's story. He bought a newspaper from a young boy who was peddling them on a corner and asked directions to the address that appeared on the front page.

It took the better part of the morning for him to find the building. To his disappointment the office was closed. He realized that it was a weekend and most likely he would not be able to talk to anyone there until Monday. He decided to visit a place that he had always wanted to see . . . the ocean.

The view of the Pacific Ocean was magnificent. He sat on the beach for hours staring into the horizon. He would make sure that when he found Justin he would insist on bringing him to this spot. Brian was exhausted from his travels and hungry as a bear. He found his way back to a main thoroughfare where he saw a tavern on a corner which served food. He ordered a steak and a beer. He asked the bar maid if she was familiar with the series in the Examiner. She did a double take and squealed. "You're Brian! The brother!"

"I guess that would be me. I just got to town. Do you have any idea where I might find my brother?"

"Well, let me think. There is that fancy men's club where all the artsy types hang out on the weekend."

"Can you tell me where that is?"

"Near the train station at Union Square."

Brian had a feeling that Justin would feel right at home in a men's social club. He paid for his meal and hurried back toward Union Square. He found the club easily. Ironically it was very near his hotel. He entered the building and was stopped at the door by a guard. When he was informed that this was a private club for members only, Brian explained that he was here at the invitation of his brother J.T. Kinney.

The guard recognized him from Justin's stories and immediately and brought him to a large meeting room set up with several gaming tables. Brian felt his heart leap when he saw his beautiful blond partner playing cards at one of the tables. When he had left the boy on the station platform Justin was so small and fragile. All Brian wanted to do was to protect him and keep him safe. Brian winced as he recalled the pain in his heart at the thought of sending the ailing young man off on his own to be cured by his family. If he could have given his life to save the boy, he would have done it gladly. His love was that deep. He had endured these many months of separation with one image in his mind . . . Justin's smile. This was the moment he had longed for.

As if he felt Brian's gaze upon him Justin glanced up from the cards in his hand and their eyes met. Justin's smile was reserved, yet it was enough to light up the room. He excused himself from the table and ran to greet his 'brother.' Justin hugged Brian in a brotherly manner and whispered in his ear. "Trust me."

Brian did as he was told. He followed him around the room greeting the members of Justin's private club. As quickly as he could Justin maneuvered Brian toward the door and out of the club.

"You look well." Justin said in a detached manner.

Brian tried to read his thoughts but realized that they were on a public street in a large city. Justin was being cautious. As they walked side by side in silence Brian tried to rub the back of his hand against Justin's. All he wanted was to do was touch him. The walk to the hotel seemed endless. It was mid afternoon and the lobby was empty except for the desk clerk who had dozed off at his post. Justin walked slightly ahead of Brian up the staircase.

“My room is on the fifth floor.” Brian said.

“So is mine.” Justin turned toward him and smiled brightly. “This side of the hotel is often empty because most of the guests want a view of the bay. The day I arrived here I asked for a room that faced the east. When I first arrived in San Francisco I stayed in 510. Every night I would look out this window and talk to you. Now when I come to town, the clerk makes sure I get the same room.”

“Horace. . . we met last night. He knew right off who I was looking for. I guess he figured to put me in a room close to you. Tomorrow I’ll have to thank him for his kindness.”

“We’ll take good care of Horace. He’s a friend, and a fan of my journal.”

When they arrived at room 510, Justin took the key out of his pocket and opened the door. It was a large suite with floor to ceiling windows. Justin drew the curtains across the windows and turned on the lamp. “I guess tonight I won’t have to use the window to talk to you.”

Brian slowly walked across the room and took Justin’s hand in his. “It’s like a dream for me to hold your hand. There were times when I thought I’d never see you again.” A single tear rolled down Brian’s cheek.

Justin put his hand to Brian’s face to wipe it away.” We’re together now, and that’s all that matters.” He then put his arms around Brian’s neck and held him close. The warmth of their bodies ignited a flame that had been dormant since they last were together. Brian put his large hands on Justin’s face and kissed him.

Justin pulled off Brian’s coat and started to unbutton his shirt. Brian took hold of his hands and stopped him. “Wait . . .”

“I’m sorry, Brian. You must have so many questions. I’m being presumptuous assuming you share my need for physical contact without an explanation.”

“I share your need . . . more than you can imagine. In time we’ll catch up, and you can tell me all about your elaborate ruse. But there is something I need to say, before one more minute passes.”

“We can talk later?” Justin reached for Brian’s belt buckle. Brian once again, pulled away.

“This can’t wait. I’ve been planning for this moment for a year. I thought I’d have more time to put the words together, so they would come out right. But here you are now standing in front of me. So let me say this.

“I’ve been alone most of my life. I never wanted to get attached to people, because I figured eventually they’d leave. In my mind, that was the way of things. So you can’t blame me when I tell you this. When I left you in Denver, a part of me still feared you’d never come back. I figured you’d forget me eventually, and in time I’d come to accept my fate and I’d go back to my solitary life in peace.

"But you weren't gone five minutes, when I knew that my life had changed forever. I was not cut out to be alone. It was all I could do to keep from turning around, and running back to get you. But I knew it was best for you to go home. In these months apart I've done a lot of thinking, a lot of praying and a LOT of needing for physical contact.

"I was scared when I got off the train in San Francisco today. But then I felt you near me. I knew it was going to be okay. And here you are, waiting for me all this time. You are one fucking amazing man, Justin Taylor. I want to thank you, for believing in me."

Justin was overwhelmed. He clung to Brian for a long time before they kissed passionately. Justin undressed Brian as Brian pulled at Justin's clothes. When they were naked Brian picked Justin up and carried him to the bed. The months of separation melted away as they resumed the familiar lovemaking rhythm.

"Are you hungry?" Justin asked when Brian finally opened his eyes.

"For you." Brian reached for Justin's hand.

"I mean food. We could go out, but we need to talk first. There's a lot you don't know, that you will have to learn. I've spent a year building our story, and we can't afford to be sloppy."

"I don't want to talk. I don't want to eat. I want to be right here, in bed with you."

"I'm going to go to the café across the street, to buy us some wine and sandwiches. You should go to your room, and freshen up. Mess up the bed while you're in there, so the maid will think that you slept in it."

"I'll go downstairs with you." Brian got out of bed and pulled on his trousers. "I've got to use the outhouse. Or do you suppose I can piss out the window?"

"Brian!" Justin grabbed his arm. "You can't piss out the window five stories up in the middle of a city."

"Then hand me the piss pot."

"We civilized citizens now have indoor privies. There's a water closet down the hall. All you need to do is pull on the chain when you're finished."

"They let you shit right inside the building?"

"Come on." Justin giggled. "I'll show you how to use it."

Brian was sitting on the bed when Justin returned with the food. "I got us some sea food chowder and sandwiches. San Francisco has some mighty good food."

"It smells good." Brian watched as Justin set the table. "You look different."

"Older and wiser I suppose." Justin smiled at him. "Here, you open the wine."

Brian opened the bottle and poured two glasses. "To us!" he said as he handed Justin his glass. They clinked glasses and drank, Brian kissed Justin on top of the head.

They ate heartily, and finished the bottle of wine. "When are you going to tell me all of your secrets?" Brian asked.

Justin leaned forward and whispered. "We must be very careful, Brian. I've spent a year gaining the trust and respect of the people here. One mistake and they'll ride us out of town on a rail . . . or worse. The walls have ears. We shouldn't talk until we get home tomorrow. Until then, you'll just have to follow my lead, and not speak very much."

"We have a home?"

"I want to surprise you." Justin smiled mischievously, "Brother."

"I don't know how many more of your surprises I can take."

"They're all good surprises, I promise."

"Tomorrow, then."

"All will be revealed." Justin joked.

"I guess I should be getting back to my room. I'll go to sleep alone and . . ." Brian pretended to head for the door.

"I don't think I could sleep without you one more night. Justin pulled him back into the room. "But we . . . "

" . . . we have to be careful. I get it."

"Did you mess up the bed in your room?"

"I did."

"Give me your boots."

“Why do you want my boots?”

“I’m going to put them outside the door of your room. The valet will polish them and return them in the morning.”

"Indoor privies, valets . . . civilization could grow on a person."

They took a coach out of the city the next day. When they arrived in a small town just outside of the city, Justin took Brian to a livery stable. "Are you ready for your next surprise?" Justin grinned widely as he opened the door to a stall. "Say hi to brother Brian, Lightning."

The horse recognized his former owner instantly, and came out of the stall to greet him. Brian grabbed the horse's neck and hugged him. Justin gave him a warning glance, nodding in the direction of the stable hand. Together they prepared Lightning for the long ride ahead. Brian mounted the horse and pulled Justin up into the saddle behind him. It felt like old times. And it was so good.

Justin directed Brian to ride south. It took them until dinner time to reach a quiet little town called Plum Creek . Justin told Brian to stop. "We'll eat dinner here before making the rest of the trip. Our home is not very far from here, but there's nothing there to eat."

Brian was famished. They ate at an outdoor café that reminded him of one they had visited when they were on the run. It was a relief to know that not every town had grown to the size of San Francisco. Everyone at the café knew Justin by name. Brian was introduced as his brother. The waitress and Justin seem to have a friendship. Her name was Daphne. "Justin, when do you think your wife will be arriving? I am dying to meet her. We're having our annual Sweetheart's Dance at the end of the month." Brian, who had been drinking from his beer mug, gagged.

Justin opened his eyes wide and kicked Brian under the table as he responded to Daphne's question. "She won't be able to travel until the spring. I don't think that the sweetheart's dance would be appropriate for the two of us right now. He nodded toward Brian."

"Oh, my! Brian, I am sorry about your family. Please forgive me for being so thoughtless." Brian raised one eyebrow. Justin kicked him again, and gave him a warning glance

Brian quietly said, "Thank you," before tearing off a piece of bread and shoving it in his mouth. Daphne retreated to the kitchen.

Justin whispered to him. "I'll explain when we get home." Brian glared at him and tore off another piece of bread.

They ate in silence. Brian wasn't sure what topics were safe, and what weren't. Justin had become an active member of the town's society. Brian had never fit in anywhere. He was always considered an outsider, no matter how long he

stayed in one place. The number of people who greeted Justin made Brian nervous. "Was there a place for him in Justin's new life?" He wondered.

It was dark by the time they left the restaurant. Justin and Brian went for Lightning's reins at the same time. Justin pulled them out of Brian's hand. "I'll take us home. The road's a little tricky at night."

Brian begrudgingly got on the horse in back of Justin. The night air felt damp, and the wind was picking up. Brian felt that a storm was almost upon them. Justin sensed his concern. "Don't worry, it's just a few miles up the road." He patted Brian's hand which rested on his hip.

They rounded a curve in the road, and Brian could see the outline of what appeared to be a very large ranch house. Justin rode Lightning into the open barn. They prepared the horse for the night, and then went into the house together.

Once they were inside, Justin pulled Brian into his arms kissed him. "Welcome home, Brian."

The room they stood in was enormous. Justin started stacking wood into a very large fireplace. Brian loved the feel of the room. It reminded him of the outdoors. "This house is yours?"

"This house, the land, the barn . . . ALL OURS! I put your name down as half owner when I signed the deed." Justin poured them each a glass of brandy, and led Brian over to a large leather chair near the fire place. "Sit down and I will tell you what I've been up the past few months. Where do you want me to start?"

Brian sipped the brandy and sat back in the chair. "Start with your wife," he said sarcastically.

Justin rolled his eyes. "Molly, that's her name. She's back east in New York. I came out here to make my fortune. Molly was with child at the time. She is a very frail girl, and her family insisted that she have the baby at home. It was a tearful good bye, and I would never see my unborn child, as it was still born. Molly suffered a breakdown, and has not been up to travel. But our love is enduring, and we will be together very soon. She writes to me every week."

Brian ginned at him. "Very dramatic. But why did you make up a wife?"

"I didn't make her up. I dated a girl named Molly, before I came west. My aunt told me that she is married with two children, and already as fat as a house. Let me start at the beginning, and you will see a method to my madness."

Brian nodded his head and refilled his glass as Justin continued his story.

"The day you left me standing on the station platform in Denver, I grew up and took charge of my life. Ever since I was a child, people always had a plan for my life. My father was obsessed with me following in his footsteps. I was expected to go to his alma mater, and become a successful business man. My mother's plan was for me to get married, and father a dozen or more babies for her to dote on. When I was left alone after she died, I came out west to find my real father because, I guess, I didn't think I was capable of making my own decisions.

“Then I met you. You guided me through the wilderness and into a life of crime. You taught me about sex, and freethinking. I was happy to follow you anywhere. You made the decisions, and you protected me. You even saved my life. I knew you cared about me, and all I wanted was to be with you.

“When you sold Lightning to buy me a ticket home so I would be safe, I knew then that you really did love me. As I waited for the train, I began to think about what being with me had cost you. When we met you had a job, a home and a life that was unencumbered by responsibility. The day you left me in Denver, you walked away with nothing except your need to provide a future for us.

“I took control of my life that day. I knew what I wanted, and it wasn’t the safety of my family’s bosom in New York. I wanted to make a home for us. I was determined to give to you back all that I had cost you, and more. I cashed in the ticket, and bought back Lightning.”

Brian listened in disbelief. “You never went home? Where did you go?”

“I got a job that day. I went to the newspaper office, and applied for a job as a reporter and illustrator. After a while, I submitted some articles about local news. I advanced quickly. One day the editor came up with an idea for a story about how construction of the Transcontinental Railroad had changed the lives of the people who lived in small towns along its route. I interviewed people who lived in the towns, and would send my articles, along with the illustrations, back to the newspaper. Once I left Colorado, I started writing the articles as public relations for the Railroad. That’s what got me to San Francisco. End of the line for me. It took almost a year to accomplish my goal.”

“That’s an amazing story. You make me proud.”

“The next part might not make you so proud. Brian, I’ve been lying to you. Not lying really, but I never told you the truth about my situation. I started to tell you when you lost your sight, but you fell asleep on me. I tried again, but the timing was never right. My family was quite well off. My father was a full partner with his brother in the shipping company. When he died, his shares passed to me. My mother came from money also. She and her sister shared a sizable fortune, along with several properties in New York. I am an only child, and all of my mother’s estate passed to me upon her death.

“When I got to California I knew I could never go back to New York, or the shipping company. I arranged to sell my shares of the company to my uncle. I sent my aunt word to transfer all of my funds to the bank here. I invested in the railroad and in several other businesses. I bought this place for us. As soon as you’re ready, we can purchase what you’ll need make it into a self-sustaining farm, just like you always dreamed.

“I knew we were destined to be together. I never gave a thought that you might not show up in San Francisco. I dreamed about you every night. If I concentrated hard enough, I could hear the sound of your steady breathing as I lay in the bed longing for the touch of your hand, the sound of your voice. I know it sounds crazy. But you’ve been at my side through all of my journey.”

Brian put down his glass and stared at Justin for a long time before speaking. “It all makes sense now. I’ve felt you too. You’ve guided me through some tough times. Tougher than you will ever know. I am overwhelmed by your devotion to a poor, wayward loner.”

“Are you mad at me for lying to you?” Justin asked sheepishly.

Brian put out his arm and gestured for Justin to sit on his lap. Justin was only too happy to snuggle himself up to Brian's chest. "How could I be mad at you? I have some secrets of my own."

"We're not keeping secrets from each other any more."

"You had plenty. This is my first, let me savor it a while. Tell me more."

"There's not that much more to tell. Since I got here I've been preparing a home for us. I made friends in Plum Creek, which is the closest town, and connections in San Francisco. I wrote the series for the Examiner to set us up with a cover story. Even in this day and age, if we were exposed, there are those who would hang us from the nearest tree just for loving each other. I decided that I needed a wife back east so that the women in town would not make romantic overtures. If I rejected them too often they would look for a reason. I won't have their suspicions cloud our future. Having a wife to whom I am devoted makes me sympathetic. Next year she will make the trip to San Francisco. When she meets her demise, I haven't decided how yet, I will be a grieving widower racked with guilt. No one will think less of me for honoring the memory of my dead wife by declaring my intention never to marry again.

"Your tragedy was greater due to the fact you lost a child and your unborn baby along with your wife. You're completely devastated by your loss, and it will be understandable why we spend our lives alone together in this house, sharing our grief. Behind closed doors, in the protection of our isolated home, we will bask in the glory of our love together.

"People feel they know us from my stories. They like what they've read, and will accept two brothers living out their lives together in seclusion. All you have to do, is read the series and you will know all about our story."

"The true story is a lot more interesting, if you ask me."

"The truth will get us killed, and I am not about to lose you now. Promise me you'll keep to the plan."

"You're brilliant. Your plan just may work. At least for now. But you are right about what would happen if they find out the truth. They'd hate us even more for deceiving them. We need to make an alternate plan in case we have to leave this place on short notice."

"I don't want to leave. No one is going to find out the truth."

"You should know by now that anything can happen. What if someone comes to town who knows you as Justin Taylor."

"No one, except my family, knows me as Justin Taylor. When we rode together I never told anyone my real name. Except for that bastard Cameron. And there's not much chance that he would show up here. If he does we'll take care of him for good."

“What about the bank? Didn’t they have to put the account in your real name?”

“Justin Taylor Kinney is my real name. I’ve had it legally changed. I told my family that my real father died in the Indian wars and I wanted to bear his name. Do you mind that I took yours?”

“Mind? No, we’re family, aren’t we?”

"That's right. In the eyes of God, and in the beauty of nature, you are my husband." Justin said shyly. "Can I call you husband?"

"If it's good enough for God, and the beauty of nature, then it's what I want. I am your husband, and you are mine."

“We are family.” Justin said with confidence. “Now it’s your turn, Brian. Tell me your secret.”

“It’s not quite as elaborate, or interesting as your story. Some of it is disturbing. Are you sure you want to hear it all?”

“Every word. I want to share every moment of your journey.”

“First I want to tell you that what you said about me being with you is true. It’s the same for me. If I ever lost faith, you were right there slapping me back in line.”

“I do my best.”

“I started out with all good intentions. My plan was to make my fortune panning for gold. I spent day after day crowded together with the smelliest, nastiest group of men on the face of the earth. They watched every move I made. If I found a few scrapes of gold, the whole bunch would crowd my stake. I finally had enough of them. I took off up the mountain alone. That was a big mistake.

“I had some food and ammunition for my rifle. At first it was okay. I liked the solitude. I thought about you constantly, and those thoughts kept me going. The further away from the camp, I got the more nuggets I collected. It wasn’t a lot, but it was enough to get me to the next town or the next mining camp. Then I got greedy. I went too far up into the mountains. The snow came and I was trapped. You don’t want to hear the rest.”

Justin looked up at him, “I need to hear it. All of it, Brian.”

“Justin, you never would have survived it. I trudged through the snow for days and days. I thought it would never stop snowing. My feet and fingers were numb. It’s a miracle I didn’t lose them. I had finished what little food I was able to find, and all I had to drink was snow. I didn’t think I would make it. And my only thought was that I’d let you down.

"Finally, I fell face first in the snow, ready to breath my last breath, with only the memory of you in my head. That was the first time it happened. I felt warmth on my face like I had been touched by an angel. I heard your voice. 'Don't you give up on us, Brian Kinney. You keep your promise to me.'

"I got up and looked around. Right there, a few feet ahead, was a shack. I dragged my body through the snow and pulled the door open. It was rickety and it smelled like death, but it was shelter from the storm, so I went inside. I realized right away that I was not alone. The former resident was still there, lying in a puddle of muck that used to be his innards. Varmints were eating his rotting flesh. I picked up my rifle and fired into the dark. They scattered in all directions. But, I'd hit a few. I don't even know what they were. I ate them . . raw."

Justin scrunched up his face. "You're right. I never would have survived it."

"Are you sure you want to hear the rest?"

Justin took his hand and kissed it gently. "Yes, I want to know everything that happened to you. And I will spend the rest of our days making sure you never suffer again."

"I passed out after that. I don't know how long I slept but when I woke up I could see through the cracks in the walls that the snow had stopped. I tried to open the door, but the snow had me trapped. I stayed in there for days trying to force it open. Finally I managed to push through the wall on the other side. But when I got out, I started to slip into the snow. It almost covered my head, but gathering all my strength, I was able to pull my self up. And that was it. I went back inside the shack, and found some jerky in the man's stash. I even found some gold nuggets. After a while he stopped smelling bad. Either that or my nose was too numb to notice the smell. I sat him up, and started talking to him. And that was the extent of my social life. It took a long time for the snow to melt enough for me to escape the shack.

"When I got out, I started walking. I don't know how far I got or how long I had been walking. The sun was bright and I guess it was the start of spring. But it didn't matter, my mind was gone. You'd disappeared from my thoughts, and I knew I was doomed. I came upon the river then. It wasn't frozen, and I needed to drink. When I put my hand in the cold water I felt you touch me. I thought I was hallucinating, and it shook me up. I had promised you a life, and all these months later I still had nothing to offer you. If I lived another day in this agony, I thought that I would rather be dead. Then I felt the warm breeze on my face. I looked in the cold water and saw your face smiling up at me.

"I reached for you, and your face started to glow. If it was my last moment on earth, I was ready. You were in my heart and in my head. I could rest in peace now. I put my hand in the water to touch you. But you were out of my reach. I went deeper in the water, with my head and my face. I was ready to die. Then the thought struck me . . . what would happen to you if I died? I knew that I would surely not survive if something happened to you, and I knew if I died you would be devastated. One without the other, would not survive. I pulled myself out of the water and stood up straight. I had survived for you. And I was rewarded for my renewed faith."

"How were you rewarded?"

"Patience, my dear brother. I'm going to show you."

"Brian, my story pales in comparison to yours. You're so brave."

"You're the brave one. Look at all you've accomplished. You've made us a life here in San Francisco, all on your own."

"But I always knew I had a choice. I could have claimed my inheritance at any time. I'm glad that I chose not to. Starting out from scratch when you left gave me the confidence to find out what I was made of. I never had to make my own decisions before. I am proud of what I've accomplished, and happy now to share it with you. But you had only your courage, and wits to guide. It's you who are brave."

"But I failed you."

"You didn't fail! You're here now. That's all that matters. If I hadn't gotten here first you would have sent for me. I would be on a train right now and you'd be the one preparing for us to be together."

Brian stood up. "Well I lied, I didn't fail in my quest." Brian reached into his bag and pulled out a yellow rock the size of an ostrich egg. "I pulled this out of the river when I saw your face in the water. I stood up, and there it was in my hand. I imagined that you put it there."

"My God, Brian! That's the largest piece of gold I have ever seen. It must be worth a million dollars."

Brian laughed. "Not quite that much. But it will make us a nice nest egg, should we ever have to be on the run again. I tested it myself, to make sure it was real. We have to keep this a secret. If anyone finds out about it, we will surely be in danger from thieves like us."

"Thieves like we were. That's over now."

"We'll keep it in a safe place. If anything ever happens that would put our life together in jeopardy, we will have a stake to keep us going for a good long time."

"I hope we never have to use it. For the first time in our lives, we fit in somewhere."

"Anywhere I can hold you in my arms is home to me."

"In our home, we will live the life we've always deserved to live. Outside of this place, in the eyes of all others, we will be family."

"Family . . . I haven't had a real family in a very long time. I like the idea."

"You better like it. You've got a lot of family history to catch up on, starting tomorrow."

"We better get some sleep then."

Justin took Brian's hand and led them to the bedroom, before he opened the door Brian pulled him into his arms and kissed him, then he lifted him up and carried him into the room. Justin laughed at Brian's reaction when he saw their bed. Brian dropped Justin onto the huge feather bed, and fell on top of him.

Brian awoke in the middle of the night. He gently moved Justin's hand from his chest, and got out of bed. Walking in the dark, he stubbed his toe on the dresser. He grabbed his foot and hopped out of the room, closing the door behind him. When he recovered from his injury, he carefully made his way into the living room where he sat down in a leather chair by the fireplace. He stoked up what remained of the fire and put another log on top.

Two days before, he had arrived in San Francisco with nothing but faith in love. His commitment to that faith had been rewarded. Justin had taken the lead and provided them both with the perfect life. So why did he find the situation unsettling?

Justin had changed. He had matured into a brilliant, successful young man, capable of amassing a fortune in less than a year. The fact that he inherited money was not as impressive as the fact that Justin had made it to San Francisco by using his talent and his wit. It had only taken him a few months. While Brian was wasting away in a shack in the mountains, Justin had built himself a reputation in one of the largest cities in the country.

He was proud of his beautiful young partner, but unsure of his own role in their relationship. When they were together before, Justin had depended on him for survival. The day that Brian arrived in San Francisco he had a mission. He had been prepared to start from scratch, and build them a new life. Now, as he sat alone in the dark, he wondered what purpose he served. It struck him that one day Justin might come to realize that he had outgrown his need for Brian.

Brian was comforted by the sound of the rain pelting the windows. For the first time in a long time he had a roof over his head. The warmth from the fire soothed his soul. He drifted off to sleep in the large leather chair.

It wasn't long before he was jarred awake by a loud clap of thunder. The room lit up seconds later when lightning touched down near by. Brian was ready to join Justin in the bed. Before he could get out of the chair he heard a sharp piercing cry coming from the bed room. Brian rushed to the bed where Justin was sitting up gasping for breath. Brian put his arms around Justin and rocked him. As Justin clung to Brian the room began to shake. Pictures fell from the walls and the brandy glass that was on the night stand fell to the floor and shattered.

Justin continued to shiver in Brian's arms. Brian covered him with the blanket, and laid down next to him on the bed. The rain continued to fall, but the lightening and thunder seemed to have moved off to the east.

'It's okay, the storm's going to pass.' Brian said, gently.

Justin had calmed down slightly. "Sorry, I still can't stand the thunder and lightning. Here in California I have to deal with the earth shaking. It frightened me so badly the first time it happened, I wet my pants. You must think I'm such a child."

“You don’t have to be so strong all the time. I was missing the boy you used to be. Holding you in my arms with the lightning flashing reminds me of the first time . . . in the cave.”

“I remember. I was scared to death.”

“Of me?”

“You’d just hit me over the head and stolen all my money. Then you left me for dead, and took off with the horses. The next thing I knew the sky turned black and I was in the middle of the most horrendous lightning storm in the history of the world. Why would I be afraid of you?”

“You scared the shit out of me too.”

“Me, how did I do that?”

“You kissed me.”

“That’s not scary.”

“Your kiss was scary. I thought I was having a heart attack.”

“You’re so strong, Brian. You never got scared. No matter what happened, you always found a way for us. I’m all grown up, but a change in the weather turns me right back into that scared little kid.”

“You’re the bravest man I know. Look at all you’ve accomplished in one year on your own. I was beginning to wonder what I was going to do with myself now that you’ve got our entire lives under control.”

“Brian, no!! All I’ve done is create a facade for us to hide behind. I was desperate for you to come and find me. I bought this land and don’t have a clue how to grow things. I’ve been using the money I make at the paper to buy supplies from town. When they run out, I go into the woods with the book we made of what’s safe to eat and what isn’t. So far you’ve only seen J.T. Kinney, the man who parties in town for four days out of the month. But the real Justin, who lives here day to day, is starving. Not only for food, but for love and affection. Now that you’re here, I know everything will work out. You’re my hero, Brian. You always will be.”

“You haven’t managed the farm? What about live stock?”

"Chickens . . . I hate them. Every time I reach for an egg, they peck at me. They're always breaking out of the pen. Then I have to run around chasing them. I haven't been able to eat any of them. When I go out there with a hatchet, they look at me funny. I'm afraid they'll haunt my sleep. I'm pathetic."

"Don't worry sweetheart." Brian teased him. " Tomorrow I'll put little blindfolds on them so you won't have to look at them when you chop off their heads."

"You see, I do need you." Justin grinned at him. "I love this. . . just lying here talking about our future."

"Back on that mountain, I was sure I was going to die. I reflected on my life and what had been most important to me. In my first 30 years I wandered from town to town looking for acceptance, and finding nothing but trouble. When you came into my life you gave me a purpose. I had someone to care for. The way you look up to me, and your incredibly infectious smile brought joy to my life. That's the image that kept me alive throughout my ordeal."

"Get used to seeing my smile, because you will wake up to it every morning from now on."

The next day Brian did wake up to Justin's smile. They made love before getting out of bed to fix something for breakfast. Brian went out to the chicken coup and gathered eggs for their breakfast.

"A real breakfast. Did the chicken's put up much of a fight?" Justin asked.

"I sweet talked 'em. I told them that I needed a few of their precious eggs to feed my younger brother who was about to starve to death. They handed me a whole passel of eggs."

"Good for you. Fetching the eggs will be your job from now on." Justin was anxious to show Brian all modern features of their home. "Brian, look at this. We have water that runs right into the house through pipes. It comes out right here, in the kitchen. I can make coffee without making a trip to the stream."

Brian nodded his head approvingly. After breakfast Justin continued his tour of the house. "I bought this house from a retired judge. He was up to date on all the fancy gadgets. We have our very own water closet, complete with a cast iron tub."

"There's one thing that your fancy mansion doesn't have."

"What's that?"

Brian went into the bedroom and came back with a book. "A shelf for Moby Dick."

"You finished it?"

"I finished it three times. There wasn't much else to do in that shack. I read it out loud to my room mate. I believe he enjoyed it as much as I did."

"I'm so pleased it gave you comfort." Justin said. "And I want you to know that we do have a shelf. I haven't finished our tour yet. I was saving this room for last." Justin opened the door to a room off of the large living room. Each of the four walls were covered with hundred of books."It's a library. The judge loved to read. He was moving back east to live with his daughter and didn't have room to take them. There are so many classics here, it will take us years to read them all."

As Brian walked into the room his eyes opened wide with wonder. "I'll be damned. You can keep your water closet and your fancy plumbing. This room is where you'll find me."

Brian walked over to the book case and made room for Moby Dick on a shelf. "Now we really are home."

Journals West - Part Eight

The Family Man

Almost a year had passed since Brian arrived in San Francisco. In that time Brian had cultivated an exceptional garden. He found that the weather conditions in the area were perfect for growing fruit and grapes, along with the vegetables they enjoyed. The ranch was self sustaining. Aside from a few brief trips to town, Brian and Justin had managed to survive nicely on their own. Justin's plan was working. They lived as lovers inside of their isolated home, but when they were in the company of others they became the Kinney brothers.

To Justin's surprise, Brian agreed to accompany him to San Francisco on his twice monthly visits. When they were out in public, Justin had strict rules. He insisted that Brian wear black to perpetuate the image of the grieving widower. Brian was only too glad to oblige, as he liked how he looked in black. Justin had made a point of observing the way that men who were brothers interacted. He studied their mannerisms, what they talked about, how they looked at each other, etc. He had copious notes on the subject and read them to Brian each time they left the house.

"I'm not an idiot." Brian protested. "I know how to act in public."

"Brothers are different. They are closer then friends or acquaintances and, at times, they are slightly competitive. We need to work on that. I've learned how to play poker and I think, you and I should engage in a game in public when we go to town. I'll let you win, and then I'll pretend to become exasperated that my older brother has outdone me."

"You'll LET me win?"

"I've gotten pretty good at it. You'd be proud of me."

"I'm always proud of you, little brother." Brian stroked Justin's hair lovingly. "But there is one thing about our elaborate saga that has me perplexed."

"It's important that you memorized and understand every detail." Justin retrieved the newspaper articles that he kept in a desk drawer. "What is it you want to know?"

Brian took the papers from Justin. "Why is it, dear brother, that my wife is portly, short and appears to be snarling in all of these drawings; while your wife is willowy, fair and quite lovely?"

Justin grinned. "Only a man who is desperately in love with a woman would overlook her short comings. You love Alice for the woman she is inside. A man who marries a beautiful woman would appear shallow. A man who selects a wife for her beauty, would most likely find another beautiful woman to fill her shoes, should she die. Obviously, your marriage to Alice was based on a deep binding connection that can never be duplicated. That explains your deep commitment to her memory. It makes you appear less odd, and more sympathetic."

"What about you? Your wife is beautiful. Couldn't she be replaced by another pretty face?"

"Of course not. Molly is my first love. We were both innocent when we married. She was my very first and, I was hers. Our love was pure."

"So it's not going to appear odd that you don't seek another wife?"

"It may. But over the months that I've been here, I have cultivated friends and associates. People have gotten a chance to know me. They can see my love for my wife in my eyes every time I pick up one of her letters at the post office. Everyone who knows me, also knows Molly."

"But other men have lost their first wives, and have remarried."

"Only because they need a woman to run the house. We'll be together in our solitude. I'll be inconsolable at first, you'll need to keep me from taking my own life. Then I'll become spiritual, euphoric that Molly has spoken to me from the next life. I'll go through stages before I resign myself to the fact that I will live out my life in this world alone, until death reunites our spirits."

Brian rolled his eyes, "I don't know how you sleep at night. Your mind must be working all the time to keep up with your vivid imagination." He studied the illustration Justin had made of Alice. "This woman is a beast. I think you made her ugly because you're jealous that I married her."

"How can I be jealous of someone I made up in my head? I don't know what you're complaining about, you have a child. Your son's angelic face and sweet smile should make up for your wife's short comings."

Brian studied the picture of his son. "Hair the color of wheat, skin the color of milk, eyes the color of the sky . . . my son is YOU!" He observed.

Justin laughed out loud. "I was wondering when you would catch on to my little joke. Now take a closer look at the love of my life. Molly is statuesque, with dark brown hair that lightens when the sun shines on it. Her warm hazel eyes can see inside your soul."

“Me?”

“Who else could I claim as the love of my life?”

“I don’t like her.” Brian confessed.

“Then she must die.” Justin proclaimed.

“So soon?”

“It’s time.” Justin became serious. “ We need to get on with our lives.”

“How will you do it?”

“First I’ll contact my Aunt Lindsay, and tell her to send a letter from Molly telling me that she is ready to join me. I’ll make preparations for her arrival. Everyone will see how excited I am at the prospect of having my true love here with me. Then the telegram will come from New York. Molly and her entire family have been wiped out by an influenza outbreak.

“You and I will leave on the next train to travel to New York. We will be gone for two months, at least. When we return, I’ll be wearing black, same as you. I’ll have suffered a break down, I have some experience in that regard. You’ll hover protectively over me. Over time I will recover, but I’ll vow to never marry again.”

“It sounds good. But where will we actually be, when we are supposed to be in New York?”

“We’ll be in New York. We’ll stay with my Aunt and see all the sights. We’ll make it a working vacation, so to speak.”

“I’ve never been that far east.”

“How far east have you been?”

“Kansas City.”

“You’ll love New York. It’s the most exciting place in the world.”

“I’m not cut out for big cities. I won’t fit in.”

"Brian Kinney, have you looked in the mirror lately? You are no longer the rough around the edges outlaw in the making. You're handsome, intelligent and refined. You can read and write as well as I, better at times. I can't wait for my family to meet you."

"What have you told them?"

"My Aunt Lindsay knows everything, obviously. I had a long talk with her before I left to come west. I told her that it is not in my mind to marry. When I wrote to her about you, she knew that my feelings toward you were not brotherly. She asks me about you when she writes. My father's brother Morgan, I've long suspected, shares our interest in male companionship. He was married, and fathered two children, his wife passed away the year after I left. Uncle Morgan and Aunt Lindsay, she being widowed many years, seem to have an understanding. She's mentioned to me, on more than one occasion, that he prefers the company of men. But they do spend quiet a bit of time together socially."

"I don't have anything to wear."

"We'll go shopping when we get there. You'll fit in beautifully. And I'll always be at your side."

Justin executed his plan with precision and dramatic flare. His reaction to Molly's death was the talk of the town for days. Brian followed his lead, and stoically took charge of the travel arrangements. He took Lightning into town to board at the livery stable in Plum Creek. Then he hired a coach to take them to San Francisco where they could catch the train east.

It rained the day they left, which made it easier to slip out of town without fan fare. Once they were settled in their private room on the sleeper car, Justin stripped off his black coat and gave out a sigh. "I thought I would die in this coat. It's so hot in here." He looked over at Brian mischievously. "Does that door have a lock?"

"I believe it does?"

"I've never done it on a train before." Justin grinned playfully.

"I thought the walls had ears."

"It would be hard to hear anything over the noise from the rails. I don't think anyone would hear us kiss. I could sure use a kiss right now."

Brian leaned over and kissed him lightly on the cheek. Justin pulled his face around and kissed him on the mouth, running his tongue playfully over Brian's teeth.

Brian pulled away. "Thanks a lot. Now look what you've done." He pointed to the lump in the front of his trousers. "What I am supposed to do with this until we get to New York."

"Am I responsible for that?" Justin whispered seductively. "I guess then that I'll have to take care of it for you." Justin got on his knees and undid the buttons on Brian's pants.

"What have you told your family about me?" Brian asked. The train was about to pull into the station, and the unfamiliar surroundings had him on edge.

"My Aunt Lindsay will know right off that you're more than just a friend. She hasn't discussed my 'sexual orientation' with my cousins, or with my Uncle Morgan. I want to take her into our confidence, as she has been a great help to me. I'll ask her advice as to what we will tell the others in the family."

Brian gave him a nervous smile and turned back toward the window. Justin put his hand on Brian's knee. "Don't be nervous. They're going to like you."

"I'm not comfortable in family situations. I may have to find another place to stay." Brian answered honestly.

"If you are uncomfortable in my family home, WE will find another place. Keep in mind that I do still own the house. It belonged to my parents, and I lease it to my aunt."

"Your name being Taylor."

"My lawful name being Justin Taylor Kinney. If you like, I'll add your name to the deed. Or I'll sell the house to my aunt."

"It's where you grew up. You can't just sell it."

"I have no intentions of ever living there again. The only reason I didn't sell it before, is that my aunt needed a place to stay in New York. She sold her home in Virginia and plans to move here permanently. I think that she is hoping to marry my Uncle Morgan. If that's the case, the house will suit their needs perfectly. Their children are all married now, and have their own homes in the area."

The train pulled into Grand Central Station at 5:00 pm, which was the height of the evening rush hour in New York City. Brian was overwhelmed by the crowds and the noise. Justin hailed a carriage which took them to his family home. Brian stood on the front walk staring at the building, while Justin paid the driver.

"What do you think?" Justin asked.

Brian was about to respond when the front door opened and a blond woman in her mid forties came running toward them. "Justin, darling! Your train must have arrived early. I was on my way to meet you." She and Justin embraced, and Brian instantly knew where it was that Justin got his brilliant, infectious smile. He stood by, silently watching the joyful reunion of Aunt and nephew, when all of a sudden he was swept up into it.

"You're Brian!" She put her arm around his waist and pulled him into her embrace with Justin.

Justin pulled away and introduced him properly. "Aunt Lindsay this is Brian Kinney. The man who saved my life and accompanied me on my travels in Colorado."

Aunt Lindsay grasped Brian's hand and firmly placed her other hand on top. "Welcome to the family Brian." She turned back toward the house where a man stood in the doorway. "Victor, will you please see to their luggage." The tall gangly servant obliged, and Aunt Lindsay led the way into the parlor. She ordered the maid to bring tea and cakes for them to eat while they talked. Once they were served, Lindsay dismissed the servant and closed the parlor doors.

"Justin you've grown into a very handsome young man. I am so proud of all that you've accomplished. I want you to tell me your story from the beginning. And don't leave out one word."

Justin and Brian sat next to each other on the sofa. "I will tell you everything, Aunt. Most of it you already know from my letters, but there is one thing that's most important to me."

"I can see what, or shall I say who, is most important to you, Justin." Lindsay turned to Brian. "Brian I want to thank you for taking such good care of my nephew, and keeping him safe from harm. You mean the world to him, and I consider you a member of our family. From this moment on, you must call me Aunt Lindsay."

"You don't seem old enough for me to be calling you 'Aunt'. But if that's your preference, then 'Aunt' is what I'll call you."

"Aren't you charming. It's no wonder Justin fell head over heels in love with you, from the moment you met."

"Aunt Lindsay!" Justin protested. "It took a few days for me to call it love."

"What does it matter how long it took? Anyone can see that you've made a perfect match Justin. I am so happy for you."

"If anyone can see it, then we must tone it down for our own safety."

"Justin, I hope that one day you and Brian can share your love openly with the rest of the world. But for now, you must keep your relationship private. So what do you want me to tell the family about Brian?"

"I was going to ask your advice. It's my instinct to stick close to the story that we are half brothers. Since my cousins are aware I only recently found out that Craig Taylor was not my natural father, it may seem plausible that Brian could be a half brother who I met on my travels. What do you think?"

"It would not only be plausible, but highly likely that your natural father might have other children. I have told them that David Cameron had misrepresented himself in the letter and that your real father was a man named Kinney. Since Morgan never met the man I can tell the family that Brian's father was a bit older than my sister and had been married before. It is a bit confusing but they will accept Brian, once they meet him tomorrow tonight."

"Tomorrow night?"

"I planned a party. All of your cousins will be here."

"You didn't have to plan a party for me."

"I can't think of a better reason to have a party. And I have some news for you. Your Uncle Morgan and I have become engaged."

"I am so pleased. You and Uncle Morgan are also a perfect match."

"We love each other in our own fashion. If you are in agreement, we'd like to purchase this house and make New York our home."

"I'll arrange for it as soon as we get settled. For now I would appreciate it if you would show us to the rooms you want us to use during our stay. I think we could use a nap before dinner."

"You'll use your old room for your stay, of course."

"And for Brian?" Justin asked.

"Do you object to sharing a room?" Lindsay teased.

"Is that wise, with the others coming tomorrow?"

"My sons shared a room up to the day they moved from our home. Your father shared a room, in this very house, with his brother until the day he went off to college. There is nothing unusual about brothers sharing sleeping quarters. Unless you would prefer separate rooms."

"No, my room will be fine."

They carried their bags from the hall up the stairs to Justin's old bedroom. Brian dropped his bag on the floor and threw himself onto the large feather bed. "You left all this to sleep on the cold ground in Colorado?"

"It wasn't so cold with you right there next to me." Justin put their bags in the corner and joined Brian on the bed.

"Your aunt is very understanding." Brian put his arm up and Justin snuggled next to him.

"She was much younger than my mother. We've always been close. She likes you, I can tell."

"I like her too. But calling her Aunt Lindsay, that's going to take some getting used to. I was never cut out to be anyone's family."

"Brian, you're wrong. You're a wonderful partner to me. You were a good son to your pa until he died. I don't want you to think of yourself as an outsider anymore."

Justin rolled over and got on top of Brian to kiss him. Brian pushed him off reluctantly. "We can't do that in your aunt's house."

"We are going to be here a few weeks. Her room is on the other side of the house and the servants only come up here when they are called. I want to make love to you on my former bed, in my former room, where I spent my former life. That way you'll be a part of my memories of this house."

The party the next evening was a grand affair. Family and friends arrived all day long and Lindsay had hired musicians to entertain after dinner. Justin could remember the parties his parents had thrown when he was a child and it was fun to be a part of it once again.

His cousin Tara, Uncle Morgan's oldest daughter, had grabbed his hand and held it tightly. "Justin, you look so grown up. Do you remember the last party that was held in this house?"

"It was the Christmas before my father died. As I recall we danced with each other all evening."

"My Robert is a dear husband, but he is not a dancer."

"Do you think he would mind if I asked you?"

"He is over there talking to your brother, I doubt that he would notice."

Justin smiled brightly and took her hand. He loved to dance, and his cousin Tara was one of his favorite partners.

"Justin you must write to me when you get back to San Francisco." Tara begged. "Aunt Lindsay said one day when my children are a little older we might all go out and visit you."

"You would love California." Justin said enthusiastically. "You're welcome anytime."

"Your new brother is so handsome. I hope that Robert is not boring him to death. He can go on and on about his medical practice."

"Brian is very interested in medicine. He learned a lot of cures from the Indians. On more than one occasion he used plants to cure ailments we got during our travels." When the song ended, Justin excused himself and went to Brian's side.

Robert greeted him. "Your brother has been telling me about the cures he's learned from the Indians. I'd be interested in reading the research you've done, Brian."

"I'm not a doctor. I don't have anything written down."

"You should consider going to medical school."

"Brian, we have our book." Justin reminded him. He turned to Robert and explained. "When we were traveling in the frontier, Brian would show me the plants and explain what they were used for. I would draw a picture and write it all down. That way when Brian got sick, I could use the plants without killing him."

"I'd like to see that book some day." Robert said enthusiastically, "My colleagues might find them primitive, but I would be interested in learning more about the Indian methods. After all, they have been studying cures for longer than we have."

"You and Tara must come to San Francisco and visit us. She is already making plans with Aunt Lindsay, I think."

"I look forward to it." Robert turned to Brian. "It was nice chatting with you. Brian."

"Same here." Brian shook his hand before Robert reclaimed his wife on the dance floor.

"You should do what he said, Brian. You should go to medical school."

"I never went to first grade. How in the world would you expect me to get into medical school?"

"We should look into it. We could tell them you were privately tutored, which you were, by me. I bet you would just have to take a test, and they would let you in. You would be a wonderful doctor."

"I thank you for the compliment, but I would only be a wonderful doctor until someone caught me kissing you. Then they would hang me anyway, even if I just saved their worthless life."

"You don't have to deal with people. You could study science or medical research."

"How much of that punch have you had to drink tonight?"

"Okay, I'll drop the subject. . . for now." Justin smiled at him coyly. "You haven't danced."

"I don't know how to dance."

"My cousins are very good. They could teach you in no time."

"I don't want to dance with your cousins."

"It does seem rather ironic, doesn't it. They throw a party for us, but we can't even dance with each other."

"I don't care about dancing. Maybe we should just go to bed."

"I have an idea." Justin led him up the stairs. Brian headed toward their room but Justin pulled him past the door to a hall way. They climbed a small staircase which led to the attic. In the attic there was a third staircase which led to the roof.

"Nice view," Brian said. "Almost as pretty as the one from Pike's Peak."

"I didn't come up here for the view. I came up here to dance. We can still hear the music. They're playing a waltz. Now put your left arm around my waist and take my hand."

"This is stupid. What if someone sees us?"

"Unless they happen to be bird, no one can see us up here." Justin moved closer to Brian and smile up at him. "Do you know what day this is?"

Brian looked down at Justin's sweet face. "I suppose you're going to tell me." He began to follow Justin's lead, swaying gently to the music.

"I found my train ticket in my luggage when I was packing. Three years ago on this date I arrived in Buckskin Joe, Colorado."

"And the next day I hit you on the head with a rock, and ran off with your money."

"It didn't hurt."

"Like hell it didn't." Brian rubbed the spot on Justin's head.

"You came back to save me."

"That was Lightning's idea. I learned never to argue when he takes a stand on something."

"I love our life together, Brian. I wouldn't trade you for anyone else in the world" Justin moved them around the roof in a dance pattern. Brian stumbled along with him, but picked up the steps quickly.

"Are you sure? You had a lot going for you in this big city."

"I have never been more sure of anything in my life. If I stayed here, I would most likely have married some pathetic little church mouse, and fathered a brood of ungrateful little blond brats. I never would have had the courage to seek out a man to share my life with."

"As the man who was sought out, I am grateful. If I hadn't met you I'd most likely be dead."

"You wouldn't be dead."

"Maybe not. But I prefer not to think about my life before you."

"Do you ever miss the freedom?"

"In my first 30 years on this earth I had nothing but freedom. It ain't all it's cracked up to be. If I had it to do all over again, I wouldn't change a thing. We have an amazing life, and I owe it all to you."

Justin stopped dancing and kissed Brian gently. "We should go downstairs and say good night. I'd like to go to bed now."

"We better wait a few minutes before we do. You've done it to me again, with your overly exciting kisses."

Justin rubbed his body against Brian's and laughed. "I suppose I am at fault once again. I better take care of that right now." He pushed Brian up against the wall of the staircase and pulled his trousers down.

Brian and Justin stayed in New York for Lindsay and Morgan's wedding. During their stay, Robert invited Brian to visit with him at the hospital where he worked. They had become good friends and Brian promised to write to Robert about his experiences with the cures he had used in the frontier of Colorado. Justin spent his days packing up what remained of his parent's belongings. Most of the furniture he gave to charity. Some pieces he packed up and shipped off to their home in California. They had been gone for two months. After the wedding, Lindsay and Morgan left for a voyage to Europe. Brian and Justin bade them farewell at the ship, and then went to the train station to make arrangements for their journey home.

The trip home was long and arduous due to inclement weather conditions. The trains were delayed and once, they missed their connecting train causing them to have a lay over for two days in St. Louis. Justin became anxious as

they got closer to San Francisco. He had gone over the details of the journey that had supposedly been taken for the purpose of seeing to Molly's family's affairs. Brian listened, as Justin fabricated another elaborate tale of a funeral, etc. Each day the story became more and more gruesome. Finally Brian started to tune Justin out.

"Are you listening?" Justin pulled on Brian's arm when he caught him staring out the window. "This is important Brian. We have to keep our stories straight. What happened when you woke up one rainy morning to find my bed empty?"

"I hastily got dressed and went out into the storm to find you huddled in a ball on your wife's grave."

" . . . a fetal ball. Brian, you left that out. I have to appear to have had a total break down."

"If you don't stop adding descriptive adjectives to your macabre tale, it's me who will be curling up into a fetal ball. This is depressing as hell."

"It's I who will be curling up into a fetal ball." Justin corrected him. "But that was very good. Your vocabulary has increased significantly since you read one book a day from our library."

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" Brian pouted.

"Enjoying what?"

"All of this . . . drama." Brian said. "Ever since we left New York all you've done is plot the next installment of your saga. I can see physical changes in your appearance the closer we get to home. Your face looks gaunt, your skin is pale, your eyes are puffy, you've even lost weight. It's like you're preparing to appear on stage in some tragic play. To tell the truth, it's a bit unnerving."

"It's the details that are important, Brian. I just buried my wife. We must get them to believe that it's changed my life so dramatically I will never marry. Once this stage of the saga, as you call it, is complete, we can live out our lives together in peace."

"I don't know if I can pull this off. You're making it too complicated. Why do I have to pry your hands off her tombstone?"

Justin started writing again. "It's the details that make an impression. Brian, it's likely that we will never have to tell them all these details. But if people start asking you questions I want to make sure we have the same story."

"You ARE enjoying this."

A sly smile came to Justin's lips as he continued to write. "A little."

"Little drama queen." Brian mumbled under his breath.

As instructed, Brian hovered over Justin protectively when they arrived home on the train. He behaved in a manner to be expected of an older brother. Justin dressed in black, and also wore a black hat which all but covered his face. The town's people came to the farm to offer condolences, bringing food with them. Justin remained stoically silent, while Brian thanked them for their kind words. With nothing more to say, the townspeople would leave the farm with a feeling of profound sadness for the plight of the two widowed brothers.

In time Justin recovered sufficiently to travel into the city. The members of his club politely expressed their sympathy for his loss, and suggested that a game of poker might divert his mind from his sorrows. Slowly, Justin adjusted to his loss, and life went on.

Several months passed uneventfully. One day Brian looked up to see a carriage pull up in front of the house. He watched as Justin came out of the house to greet his friend Daphne. They went into the house together. Curious as to the nature of her visit, Brian picked up a hoe and began to rake the ground underneath the living room window.

"I've never been inside your place. It's so large." Daphne tried to peek around Justin toward the rest of the house.

Justin took the hint. "Would you like to see the rest of the house? We're not the best housekeepers. This is my bedroom." Justin opened the door to the bedroom revealing a collection of illustrations of Justin's recently deceased wife decorated the walls. Daphne walked into the room and studied pictures. "She was beautiful. You must miss her very much."

"She's always here with me, she always will be." Justin said thoughtfully.

Daphne walked out of the room and down the hall. Justin followed closely behind her. "Brian's room is a bit sparse." Justin opened the door to a small bedroom which contained a bed and two dressers. On top of one of the dressers was an illustration of his wife and child. "There's another room upstairs, but we never bothered to furnish it. It was supposed to be for the children we expected to have. Now it will remain as storage."

"You might need to use it one day." Daphne said.

Justin smiled placidly and walked back toward the kitchen. "This is the kitchen. We have some modern amenities, but my brother and I don't require much to get by"

"Your brother does the gardening? What is this on the table?" Daphne picked up an unusually shaped gourd. "This would look lovely in my table decorations at the cafe."

Justin grabbed it out of her hand. "That one is rotten. I'll have Brian gather you another from the garden. Justin went to the window and looked out in the distance for Brian. He almost laughed out loud when he saw that Brian had been right outside the window listening. Justin yelled out in the distance. "Brian, please pick another gourd and

gather some ripe vegetables for Daphne to take with her." He smiled down at Brian before turning back to Daphne. "Can I offer you some tea or coffee?"

"No, thank you. Justin, I am going to get right to the point. " Daphne sat down on a chair near the open window where Brian was pretending to work. "You've been a widower now for almost a year. I know how deeply in love you were with your wife, and I understand your need to isolate yourself. I've missed your presence at the cafe. Over the past few months, I see that you have gone through the grieving process and appear to have accepted Molly's death as God's will. As you know I've grown quite fond of you since you moved here. I want to know if there is any chance that some day you may want to seek out a new wife. And if you should, would I have any chance of . . . "

Justin stopped her by taking her hand and looking into her eyes. "Daphne, if the day ever came that I should be in search of a wife, you would be my only choice. However, I must be honest, and tell you that it won't ever happen. I'll never again marry."

"Justin I know you want to honor Molly with your commitment to your eternal bond. But you are so young, and one day you may regret not having a companion in this life. Many men marry more than once in their life time. It doesn't mean they loved their first wife any less. One day you might change your mind."

"I won't." Justin paced the floor in front of the fire place while he considered his words.

Brian stood very still outside the window. He was concerned that Daphne's reaction might be extreme if Justin was too harsh. She might become suspicious of a man in his 20's who resigns himself to a life of solitude in hopes of reward in the afterlife. If she gets angry, it may cause them problems. Brian turned his eyes toward the barn where they had stashed their "nest egg." It might have to come into play sooner then they thought.

Justin sat down in a chair opposite Daphne. He leaned forward and took her hand again. "I feel I need to explain."

Daphne looked at him sadly. "You don't need to explain, Justin. I didn't come here to push you into a courtship. I came because Mr. Foster has asked me to marry him. He's a good provider, and he will make a good husband and father. But I have feelings for you, that I don't have for him. I believe I could truly love you, as you had loved your wife. I had to know if there was any chance of having you as my husband one day in the future, before I gave Mr. Foster my answer."

"If you should decide to marry him, I wish you all the best. Mr. Foster is a very lucky man. I would like for you to understand my resolve never to marry again. You see, Daphne, I haven't been completely truthful in my journal stories. As I said in my disclaimer in the beginning of each episode, it is based on the truth, but names and places were changed, as were some of the facts.

"In my story I wrote that my mother died when I was born. That's not true. I was three years old when she died. I barely remember her, or the circumstances of her death. But my brother told me the story. Brian and I are half brothers, we have the same father, Jack Kinney, but different mothers. Brian's mother and our father married very young. Joan was Brian's mother. According to Brian, the sun rose and set on her in Jack's eyes. Brian was 9 years old when she died of cholera. Our father was inconsolable, as I was, when I heard the news of Molly. But Jack had a young son who needed a mother.

"After the appropriate mourning period he took a second wife, my mother Jennifer. She truly loved Jack and adored Brian. Brian said that Jack soon regretted his decision to marry and had dreams about Joan and their life together. He began to drink heavily. Jennifer was desperate to save her marriage so she became pregnant hoping to remind Jack that life does move forward. He had a family here on earth who loved him. Brian told me that after I was born, Jack tried to be a good father, but by that time the whisky was the only thing that could dull the pain he felt. My mother could not bear living in the shadow of a dead woman. Just after my third birthday, she went down to the river and threw herself in. They found her body a few days later.

"Brian was 13 years old at the time. Our father never did recover from the pain of losing two wives. A few days after my mother's funeral, my father shot himself to death. After that dreadful day, Brian was all I had in the world. He got a job at the shipyards during the day. He farmed me out from neighbor to neighbor when he was working. But every night he would pick me up and take me home with him. I remember the small house that my father had left us. It wasn't much, but all I ever needed in the world was my big brother. He raised me since that day. I'd be lost without him now.

"We Kinney men fall in love only once in a life time. I think you can see now why I would never subject another woman to the kind of pain that caused my mother to take her life."

"Oh, Justin, that's the saddest story. You and your brother must find great comfort in each other's company."

"He is my brother, my father and my best friend. We'll take care of each other from now on."

"I am grateful that you told me the truth about your family. As much as I think we could have made a life together, I would not want to put that kind of pressure on you. You and your brother are blessed to have each other."

When Justin and Daphne appeared on the front porch, Brian backed away from the window and picked some vegetables and gourds for their guest. When Daphne rode past him in her carriage, he handed her the basket and nodded his head. She thanked him, and went on her way.

Justin returned to the house and went directly to the cupboard to get a loaf of bread. He closed the door and was startled to see Brian standing directly in front of him. "How do you do it?" Brian asked. "How do you lie so easily to someone who has just asked if you would marry them?"

Justin smiled brightly, "I lie to protect us. Daphne is nice to me because she thinks I would make a good husband. But if she ever saw what we do in our bed at night she'd be repulsed. She would run to town to sound the alarm. They'd put together a posse to ride out here to hang us from the nearest tree. These people are NOT our friends Brian. They don't even know who we are."

Brian regarded him sadly. "There was a time when you thought it might be possible to change their minds."

"I was young and idealistic. I'm grateful for your guidance in that respect. What's most important to me is not the acceptance of society, but our survival in it."

"I think we're doing a pretty good job. And I'm grateful to you for that." Brian picked up the gourd from the table. "If she only knew the pleasure this gourd had given you when I stuck it up your ass, I think she might not have been inclined to decorate her table with it."

Justin grabbed the gourd and threw it out the window. "That's what you get for leaving your toys out where people can find them." When Justin playfully put his arms around Brian's neck, an envelope fell out of Brian's shirt pocket.

"It's from the school!" Justin declared. "Brian, is it your test results?"

Brian tried to take the envelope but Justin pushed him away. "I didn't have a chance to open it."

"How long have you had this letter?" Justin held the envelope out in front of his face. Then he handed it back to Brian and went back to making his sandwich. "If you don't care, then neither do I."

"I care." Brian regarded the envelope as he turned it over and over again. "I picked it up at the post office this morning."

"Why didn't you open it?"

Brian handed the envelope back to Justin. "I wanted you to open it. You bring me luck."

"You don't need luck to pass a test Brian. You're brilliant. I don't have to open it to know you passed."

"Just open the fucking envelope." Brian insisted. "Please, Justin."

Justin opened the envelope and read the letter without expression. "Well," he began slowly. "You PASSED!!!" He jumped up and down holding the letter up over his head. "I knew you could do it. Brian, I'm so proud."

Brian took the letter back. "It says I need to sign up for classes that start in August. That's just a few weeks from now. I can't go off and leave the crops to rot. We won't have anything to eat this winter."

"I can take care of the crops. We won't starve. Come on Brian, smile! You're an amazing man. This is your chance to do something you have always dreamed of doing."

"I don't know if I'm ready. There are a lot of people at that college. They may get suspicious of us, little brother. It's tempting fate to get involved with so many strangers. We could lose it all, this ranch, our perfect life. We'd have to leave it all behind."

"Why would you think that? No one is going to ever see us together. You'll be going to classes during the week, and I'll be . . . here . . . alone." Justin had not thought about the sacrifice they would both have to make in order for Brian to get his education.

"You see. It's not going to work. I'll write to Robert and thank him for his help getting his colleagues to advise me. Just knowing I could get into that school is enough for me."

"You're not giving up that easily. I won't let you. What's the big deal anyway? I'm sure you'll only have classes a few days a week. The rest of the time you can study at home."

"Justin, it would take years."

"We've been apart before and survived. You'd be doing something positive for yourself."

"What are you saying? I know that since I've been here, I haven't done much of anything but play my part in your little saga." Brian shot back at him. He regretted the words the minute they left his lips. But he said nothing.

Justin looked hurt . . . and then angry. "We agreed it would be best."

"Every minute of my life is planned out for me. Say this, Brian. Don't say that. Don't get too close to me walking on the sidewalk. Never touch me in public Brian, we're supposed to be brothers. Sometimes I feel like I can't breathe."

"You never said anything."

"You won't let me! You make all the decisions. Making a commitment to go to school should be MY decision, not yours."

"You're not happy here." Justin said sadly. "I never knew. I only wanted to protect you. To protect US from the rest of the world. Forget this place. We can go somewhere else, and start over again." Justin threw up his hands. "I'm done."

"You're leaving me?" Brian hadn't intended for things to go this far.

"Leaving you? Brian, you don't know me at all, do you?" He grabbed his jacket from the hook by the door. "I'm going to get some air. I'm not abandoning you like every other person in your life." Justin left the house, slamming the door behind him.

It was well after dark when Brian heard the sound of a rider outside. Justin had been gone for hours. When he came into the house, Brian grabbed him and held him close. "I'm sorry." He whispered in Justin's ear.

"Me too." Justin's response was short. He hung his jacket and headed toward the bedroom.

"I made some soup." Brian gestured toward the table. "You've been gone all afternoon. You didn't eat your sandwich. I figured you'd be hungry." He couldn't read Justin's face but he was sure that he was not out of the dog house yet.

Justin washed his hands at the sink. They sat down at the table and ate their soup in silence. After dinner, Brian cleared the table and went outside to do some chores. When he got back, he found Justin sitting in a chair by the fire. "What are you thinking?" Brian asked.

"Do you really want to know?" Justin turned his face up toward Brian.

Brian sat down on the floor in front of Justin and took his hands. "Yes, I do want to know. I care what you think."

Brian had a way of looking at a person that could melt your heart. Justin smiled slightly and moved over so Brian could share the chair with him.

"I am controlling," Justin began. "I know that. It's because I'm afraid all the time. I have to be in charge of every situation, because if things get out of control, we would both be in danger."

"I'm not complaining. I admire your creative mind. And you're right, most of the time."

"Why didn't you tell me what you were feeling? I don't like that you can't talk to me if something is bothering you."

"Let me talk then. I will tell you exactly what is on my mind."

"I'm listening."

"First off, I want to say that I'm grateful to you for making me want more out of life. Because of you I've come to know another side of myself that I never knew existed. But that's not to say that the ornery, thieving, deviant is gone."

"I fell in love with the ornery, thieving deviant."

"Then you know what drives me."

"Sex." Justin said, without hesitation.

"Good boy. You get an 'A' plus in the study of Brian Kinney."

"I think I am starting to understand. You're afraid if you are away from me, that you'll need to still have sex."

"Oh, I know, I'm going to need sex. I wake up in the morning, needing sex. I go to bed at night, needing sex. And in the daytime when I see you bend over the sink, I need sex."

"I need sex too, just as much as you do. There's nothing wrong with it, it's natural for men to need sex."

"But you'll be out here alone. You can hump the sheets, use your hand. Heck, you can even fuck the sheep if you want."

"We don't have any sheep."

"I'm making a point. I'm going to be living at a place where young men probably take showers together after playing sports. The slap each other on the butts with their towels. My dick would give me away."

"So don't play sports."

"That was just an example. Something will happen during the day, and my needs will over power my common senses. I'm scared to death of losing control with people who are probably suspicious of me anyway."

"We can get an apartment near the school. I'll move into the city with you."

"And just how would that look? People don't go off to college dragging their baby brothers along with them. It would look suspicious."

"I see the problem. Maybe you can go somewhere at night. I've heard there are places where men gather to . . . "

"You mean the baths."

"You know that place then?"

"Do you?"

"I believe there are many men who are like us. And there are those who wish to experiment. All men have urges. That's why they have brothels for those who have normal needs. Why not a place for men who are not so normal?"

"You've been there?"

"NO!" Justin exclaimed. "I was here for a year before you arrived. I have to admit, I did think about it. But I knew that I had to stay focused on my plan. I wasn't about to risk our future for a few moment's of pleasure."

"Justin, there is a difference between satisfying one's lust, and being in love with someone. I'd be perfectly happy to spend my entire life, fucking only you."

"I feel the same. But sex is still something we need. You can go to the baths, Brian. I don't object."

"I can't take that chance. Not with the number of people who know my face from your journal. Our lives are set in print for everyone to see. I would always be at risk for exposure, or a target for blackmail."

"It's my fault then. If you'd come to San Francisco first, we would have had a little house in the woods somewhere. No one would have known we existed."

"We would be hidden away like animals. I don't think you would want that for yourself. What you did was nothing short of miraculous. We live together as brothers to the world. But in our home we are lovers who exist only for each other. We have the best of both worlds thanks to you."

"I am brilliant."

"You are, my dear. Now let's go to bed."

"I still think you should go to school. We could find a way, I'm sure of it."

"I don't want to talk about this anymore. I'm sorry about what I said before. I just wanted you to stop trying to run my life. But I don't want you to think that I'm not happy."

"No, we can NOT stop talking. You're free to say and do anything that you want to me. And I'm not just talking about school. It hurts me that you would think I would leave you just for making your feelings known."

"You were right. All the people I've loved in my life have left me. Or disappointed me somehow. It's always in the back of my mind that you're a strong willed man, who just may take it in his head to move on one day."

"There is nothing that could push me away from you."

"Well that's good, because I've got that same problem again tonight."

"The sex thing?" Justin teased.

"Un-huh." Brian nuzzled his face in Justin's neck. "I got it real bad."

"I have it really bad." Justin got up and pulled Brian off the chair.

"You too?" Brian smiled as he put his arm around Justin and led him to the bedroom.

The next morning Brian awoke to find the bed next to him empty. It was unusual for Justin to wake up before him. He got out of bed and went into the kitchen where Justin was sitting at the table writing in a tablet as he hummed to himself.

Justin jumped when Brian put his arms around him from behind. "You're up!" Justin quickly closed the tablet he was writing in and got up from the chair. "I'll fix you breakfast."

"What are you writing?" Brian asked as he sat at the table. He had lived with Justin long enough to know that the wheels were turning in his pretty blond head. Brian considered pressing the issue, but did not want to cause a scene like they had last night. When Justin was ready, he would tell Brian what was on his mind.

"I want to go into the city tomorrow. I have an article to drop off at the newspaper. I want you to come with me. We can spend the weekend."

"At separate hotels again?" Brian asked. Justin had decided that it would be wise if, when they went into the city, they stayed at separate hotels. He told Brian that he should mingle with people in town who have similar interests to his own. Brian had found a place near the hospital where the doctors and interns stayed. They had a parlor where the guests could gather to talk or play cards. Brian enjoyed the conversations and the opportunity to keep up his card playing skills. But at night he would often break the rules and travel across town to sneak into Justin's bed.

"I want you to do something for me." Justin said. "Tomorrow, while I'm at the publishers, I want you to go to the college and gather information about the schedule of classes for the fall."

"I thought we decided not to discuss this anymore."

"All I'm asking you to do is get the class schedule. If you don't want to do it, then you can stay at home and I'll go to the school and inquire about the schedule. I don't know what it will do for your reputation to have your little brother handling your affairs."

"Alright, I'll go. I'll get the information for you." Brian gave in. "Then what? Do you plan to tie me up and drag me off on the first day of classes?"

"After tomorrow I won't bring the subject up again . . . ever." Justin kissed Brian on the head as he handed him a plate of eggs from the stove.

In the morning they set out on their journey to the city. They checked into their respective hotels, and Brian went about getting information at the college. The school schedule would require him to remain in town four days out of the week for three months a semester. With the time it would take to ride back and forth, he and Justin would only have one day a week for their own. After leaving the school, he went directly to Justin's hotel. Justin was not in his room, nor had he left word for Brian where he would be. Brian tried the Bohemian club and was told that Justin had not been there that day. He returned to his own hotel across town, and attended his usual card game that night.

The next morning Brian walked out the front door of his hotel to find Justin waiting for him in a coach. "Hey, brother," Justin called out with a big smile on his face. "Care to go for a buggy ride with me?"

Brian regarded him curiously. "Where were you yesterday?"

"I had an errand. I'm starving. Let's go eat breakfast."

They ate at the restaurant where Brian had eaten the first day he came to San Francisco.

"It's nice to have such a hardy breakfast." Justin said between bites. "Remember those days on the road when all we had to eat were berries?"

"Life was a lot less complicated."

"Do you miss those days?"

"Sometimes. Do you?"

"In some ways, I do. We were free and bold. No fear. It scares me to death to think of what we had to endure back then."

"I got the class schedule." Brian informed him. "As I imagined, it's not going to work out. I would have to be in classes four days out of the week. We'd never get to see each other."

Justin kept eating without a pause.

"We won't speak of it again, that's the end of it." Brian said.

Justin didn't respond.

"Are you mad at me?" Brian finally asked.

"Just hurry up and eat. I have something to show you."

They finished their meal and got into Justin's coach. They traveled south on a road that paralleled the ocean. Justin noticed that Brian's eyes were focused on the water for most of the trip. "You really love the ocean, don't you Brian?"

"I have to admit that I do. It gives me a feeling of peace. We are very small and insignificant in the scheme of things. The ocean is so vast and superior to man."

"All that surrounds us in nature is that way."

Brian smiled at him and put his hand on Justin's knee. Justin pulled the coach over to the side of the road. "Look over there, do you see those houses near the cliff?"

"Yes, it must be a town."

"Do you see that house on the far end all by itself?"

"It looks like it's on the edge of the cliff. Who would want to live hanging over the edge of a cliff like that?"

"I was hoping that you would."

"What do you mean?"

"That house is for sale. I inquired about it yesterday. It will suit our needs while you are at school. If we like it here, we can keep it as a summer house. What do you think?"

"You want to live here?"

"We can have both the ranch, and this summer house. The weather out here is mild in both the winter and the summer. We can come out here when ever we feel the need to get away. It has one large bedroom that appears to hang over the cliff. It really doesn't, there is a ledge underneath. But no one could venture out there without going through the house. We could sleep together with the window wide open to the sky."

"You'd be willing to leave the ranch?"

"To be with you, I would live in that shack on the mountain that you talked of . . . cold dead corpse, carnivorous varmints, man eating snow drifts and all. I'd do anything to be with you."

Brian was too touched to speak. He looked at Justin and hoped that his eyes conveyed all the love he felt in his heart.

"Brian, I'm not going to force you to go to school. But deep down I think it's what you really want to do. Now, do you want to look at the house, or not?"

"Sure, we'll look." Brian said softly. His mind was racing. Justin had found a way, once again, to make his dream come true.

"I can write my articles anywhere. This place is closer to the city, but you would have to ride for an hour or so to get to school every day."

Justin had taken the key from the owner's attorney the day before. The house was small, but perfect for their needs. Brian stood at the picture window that overlooked the ocean. He stared out at the view for so long, that Justin had to shake his arm to get his attention.

"There's a general store down the road, and a few scattered bungalows here and there. But there are no houses that are too close. Since we're at the end of the road, there are not likely to be any built. It's very secluded. Perfect for studying. Brian it's up to you. We can go to the attorney and tell him we're buying it, or we can go back to the city. Either way, I promise I'll never bring up the subject again."

"I think we better get back to the city." Justin turned his head so that Brian would not see the disappointment on his face. Brian turned his attention back toward the ocean. "I want to go to the school, and sign up for those classes."

Justin's face lit up with joy. "You mean it? You really want to this?"

"It may be hard to leave this house every day. Between the perfect view of the ocean, and your perfect body lying next to me, I just may be tardy for class on a regular basis."

"Since today is Sunday, you're not going to be able to sign up for those classes just yet. Why don't we take a walk on the beach and talk."

They walked along the beach and watched the sunset. "Brian it's just like your friend described. It looks like the sun disappears into the water. It's so beautiful. I can't wait to paint it."

"You are going to be out here alone, a lot. Medical College isn't going to be easy. I've never had formal schooling."

"You are going to love learning."

"I loved learning from you. I don't know how I'm going to compete with all those 'fancy school' graduates."

"As one of those 'fancy school' graduates, and your former teacher, I can tell you that they are the ones who should be nervous. You have a natural ability to figure things out, without the benefit of instruction." Justin stopped walking and took Brian's hand in his. "I will make you a bet, right here and now. When you graduate, it will be with honors. Most likely you will be at the top of your class. You will go on to do great things in the field that you choose."

“You’re giving me honors already? I haven’t even filled out the application yet.”

“On Monday we’ll fill it out together.”

“You are a part of this, you know. If it weren’t for you, I’d still be signing my name with an ‘X’. We’re both going to be making sacrifices. Are you sure this is what you want?”

“I want us both to be happy. It’s not going to be easy, sharing you with the rest of the society. But I will keep the home fires burning. I love you, Brian. And I will be there for you, when ever you need me.”

They sat on the beach until the sun set. The next morning they began a new chapter of their lives together.

Journals West - Part Nine

Love Everlasting

Brian's 50th birthday was approaching, and Justin had made arrangements for the two of them to travel to New York to visit with Aunt Lindsay. They had been together for 20 years and his love for Brian had grown deeper with each passing day. After all the trials and tribulations they went through to find their place in society, life had been very good to them. Justin had made a fortune from his early investment in railroad stocks. He was also a published author and a noted artist. Brian had earned a doctorate in medicine, and enjoyed a rewarding career as a medical researcher at the hospital.

They planned to spend the summer at their cottage on the ocean when they returned from their New York trip. It had been a solace for them since they purchased the house when Brian started medical college. Brian loved to wake up in the morning and look out across the ocean. He had been content to make his home in San Francisco with the man he loved, but Justin knew in his heart Brian had always had a curiosity about places unknown.

Brian was still lean and handsome, although Justin had to pretend not to notice the patches of gray on his temples. Justin told him he thought it made Brian look distinguished and even more desirable. Brian declared they made him look old, a fact that he was not ready to accept just yet. In a few weeks he would be 50, and he simply refused to talk about it. He told Justin that he did not want to celebrate the fact that he had been on this earth for half a century.

Justin laughed, but agreed not to press the issue. He had felt the same trepidation, when Brian mentioned that in two years he would be 40. Justin's boyish face and small frame, had always given him a youthful appearance. At 38, he had hardly aged at all. After twenty years together, they were still a very handsome couple.

Every other year, they traveled to New York to visit with Aunt Lindsay and Uncle Morgan. On the alternate years Lindsay would come to California, most often bringing one of her grandchildren for a traveling companion. Normally their journey would coincide with the Christmas Holidays. But it was Aunt Lindsay's suggestion that

Justin arrange to bring Brian to New York for his birthday. She was planning a family party for him. Brian had become a part of the family. Lindsay insisted from the beginning that he call her Aunt. He said that he would, if only to validate Justin's elaborately established life story. But secretly, he was pleased and honored to be considered a part of a close, and loving extended family. If her children suspected the nature of his relationship with Justin, they never let on. Both Brian and Justin looked forward to the annual visits.

It was mid April, and Brian had been working on an important research project for months. Brian had become a dedicated doctor, and was well respected at the hospital. Justin was extremely proud of Brian's accomplishments, yet selfishly, he wished that Brian was not so dedicated to his work. The research project that Brian was working on presently, had consumed him. Over the past few months, Brian remained in the city near the hospital during the week, only coming home briefly on the weekend.

When Justin first got to San Francisco, he made sure to get a hotel room that faced east so that he could watch for Brian's arrival. He was young and foolish, but the vigil helped him feel connected to Brian. After 20 years together, Justin still found himself looking in the direction of the city where Brian spent his nights working. Justin longed to hear the sound of Brian's footsteps on the front porch, and the sound of his voice as he greeted him after a long day. Mostly he longed for his touch.

Justin read somewhere, that touch is the beginning of possession. Since their first encounter, Brian always had the need to touch Justin in some form or another, even after they'd had sex. It was his way of telling Justin that he longed to possess him. Justin loved the feeling of Brian's warm skin on his. He was possessed by Brian Kinney, he always had been. One of the reasons that Justin insisted on planning a New York trip, was because he missed being close to Brian every day.

While Brian was in the city working, Justin stayed behind to prepare the house for the renovations which were to be done while they traveled to New York. They had decided it was time to expand the attic and make a bedroom suite for the two of them. This would allow for more space on the main floor for their collection of books and Justin's art work. Justin made plans to go into the city on Monday to consult with the architect. He would meet up with Brian on Tuesday, and they would leave on the train for New York that evening.

Early Monday morning Justin hitched up the horses to his newly purchased fancy surrey. Justin thought it would be more practical than riding a horse into the city and stabling it out of town. Brian hated the thing. He said it made Justin look like a sissy because it had an elaborate fringe. Brian still insisted on riding his horse everywhere. Lightning's son, Moby, had been born one stormy night on the ranch. Brian named him Moby, after the whale in his favorite book. The stallion had the same brilliant white coat and graceful speed as his father, and became Brian's most prized possession after Lightning passed away.

After making sure that the house was ready for the workmen, Justin left for town. He made his rounds of the city as he usually did on his frequent visits. He stopped at the bank to withdraw the cash needed for their trip, then he spent the afternoon with the architect finalizing the plans. After eating dinner at the hotel, he went to the club to enjoy an evening of poker. Justin had become a fairly good player and tonight he was on a winning streak. He played long into the night, and by the time he got back to the hotel it was almost 3:00am.

Justin had stayed at the same hotel for all the years he had lived in San Francisco. When he made a reservation, he always requested the same room, 510. It was the room where he and Brian had made love for the first time after they were reunited. Since he already had the key in his pocket, he waved to Horace as he went past the desk. Horace

called him over to the desk to tell him that a gentleman had been asking about him and that he was waiting for him in the lobby.

Justin could not imagine who was looking for him at this time of night. When he looked into the lobby, he saw a man slumped in a chair by the fireplace. Justin approached the man cautiously. "I'm J.T. Kinney. They told me at the desk you were looking for me."

The man stood up and faced him. At first Justin didn't recognize him. But when the man's lip turned up into a sarcastic snarl, he realized that it was Chris Hobbs. "Hello, brother." Hobbs said.

Justin felt his stomach turn with revulsion. "You are NOT my brother. What are you doing here? Why would you ask for me?" If Justin had been forewarned about Chris's arrival, he would have armed himself. It was Chris who had beaten Brian senseless and left him in a ditch to die. It would give Justin great pleasure to do the same to this repulsive figure before him. Justin had not given him a thought since he had read that his father, David Cameron, had been shot to death in his own gambling establishment, by a man who accused him of cheating.

Chris Hobbs was only a few years older than Justin, but he had aged dreadfully. He was grotesquely overweight. His eyes were blood shot and several of his teeth were missing. The man's breath reeked of alcohol and tobacco, and it was all Justin could do to keep his dinner down.

"We need to go somewhere to talk." Chris demanded.

"I don't want to talk to you. If you continue to harass me, I'll call the constable and have you removed from the premises."

Chris got up close to Justin and pulled him by the collar. "I'll kill you first." Chris stuck a gun into Justin's ribs. "Then I'll tell the good people of San Francisco the truth about their famous writer man, and his fake brother. I'm sure the part about them humping each other in this very hotel would make 'em real angry. They'd be givin' me a medal for killing you, and saving them the trouble."

"What do you want?" Justin asked. He was trembling so badly that his voice shook.

"Money! What else would you be good for? I hear tell you have plenty, and I'll be taking my share. In fact, I may decide to take it all. Now, where is that pansy ass man you call brother? I feel the need to wipe my boot on his face again."

"Brian's gone. I can give you money. Let's go up to my room. I'll give it to you there."

"Lead the way, pervert."

Justin managed to slip past the desk while the clerk was in the privy. Once they got to the room, Justin opened the door. When Hobbs pushed him into the room, Justin fell to the floor. "You can take all the money I have in my wallet." Justin pulled out all of the money he had won at the poker table.

Chris collected the money with his fat stubby hands and shoved it into his vest. "This will do for tonight. By morning, I want to be a rich man. So you better have a stash somewhere." When Chris pulled his hand out of his jacket something fell to the floor. He picked it up and dangled it in front of Justin's face. "Remember this? It's your slut ma, and her bastard baby boy, smiling for the pretty picture inside of Daddy's fancy watch."

When Justin reached for the watch, Chris slapped him across the face so hard he slammed his head into the wall. Justin got to his knees and pulled himself up by a chair near the window. It was almost dawn and Brian could walk into the room any moment. He had to think of a way to save them both.

Justin recovered from Chris's abuse and collected his thoughts quickly. "I have gold. I have gold nugget the size of your fist. You'd never have to worry about money again if you cash it in. I'm sure it's worth a million dollars."

"You're lying."

"I'm not lying. I have it hidden at my house, about an hours ride from here."

"You ain't going no where." Chris held the gun to Justin's head.

"If you put a bullet in my head, you'll leave here with only what you have in your pocket. I'm not going to run off. Where would I go?"

"How do I know you won't run off with the gold."

"Come with me then."

"No, it's a trap. You've got your boyfriend waiting somewhere out in the woods."

"I told you, Brian is gone. You can stay here in the room. When I get back, I'll give you the nugget."

"Go, go and get your nugget. And you better hurry! The first man to open that door who ain't got a nugget in his hand, is going to get a bullet in his head."

"Don't be an idiot. The maid would be the only one to come in here. Would you kill her?"

Chris grabbed Justin by his collar and pushed him up against the wall. "I'd fuck her first, then I'd kill her and leave you to take the blame."

The horror of what happened next, sent Justin running from the hotel in fear. He hailed a cab to take him to where he had left the surrey, then he wrote a note for Brian and handed it to the driver. "Please, this is a matter of life or death. Go back to the hotel and give this note to the desk clerk. Tell him that the minute Brian Kinney arrives, he must give him this note. " Justin took off his shoe, where he always kept a stash of money, and gave the driver a generous tip.

The surrey was light, and Justin whipped the horses unmercifully for speed. He was not one for high speed travel, but tonight he was in a race for his life. He had to get the nugget, and get back to the hotel before Brian arrived. Tears ran down his face as he thought about the years they had lived so happily as lovers. It could all end tragically this night.

Justin didn't know if it was the speed of the surrey, or his own imagination, but it felt to him like the ground had begun to shake. There was no time for him to stop, so he drove the horses on faster and faster until, before his eyes, the road ahead of them split in two.

Brian had spent the weekend at the beach house reviewing his notes and preparing instructions for his staff to follow while he was away. Monday had been spent making a few repairs to the roof to be sure the house would be ready for them when they returned from their trip. This past year at work had been both exciting and difficult. Brian had been so engrossed with his experiments, that it became impossible to make the journey to the ranch, or even to the beach house with any kind of regularity. Most nights he would spend sleeping on a cot at the hospital. Justin came to town to visit on occasion, and Brian did make an attempt to travel home on the weekends. But the past few months had been exhausting. Brian felt guilty leaving Justin at the isolated ranch house, while he stayed in the city. He knew it was hard for him to be alone so much, but Justin never complained once. He encouraged Brian in his work, as he had encouraged him during his years at medical college.

They had been together for 20 years. Brian still could not believe how lucky he had been to find such a compatible partner in life. As much as he enjoyed his work, he realized lately that he had become anxious during the day, and restless at night. It was because he missed being with Justin. Having a successful career, only to go home to an empty room at night was pointless. Brian often thought about the days when he would spend the night gambling, and then return Justin in woods or some cave. Justin would always greet him with that endearing smile, and love in his eyes. The more time he spent with Justin, the more he appreciated the joy he brought to his life.

Brian was excited about the upcoming trip. Not so much the trip to New York, but the gift he had planned for Justin. Brian had been plotting with Lindsay to surprise Justin with a special anniversary trip. They had concocted a plan to get Justin to New York, using Brian's birthday as an excuse. He had made plans for them to travel by ship from New York to Europe.

Today, Brian planned on riding back to San Francisco early, and surprising Justin at his hotel. Hopefully, he would still be asleep in the room that was so special to them. When they were done making love, they would begin a new adventure in their lives.

When Brian reached the top of the hill that overlooked the city he stopped, as he always did, to take in the view. Through the usual haze that blanketed the city, he gazed out upon a scene that shocked and bewildered him. This

was a road he had taken hundreds of times, and yet he felt like he was lost. Smoke permeated the air making it difficult to see in the distance, but it appeared that buildings all over the city were in flames. It was an eerie and frightening sight. The realization struck him that there had been a natural disaster the likes of which he had never seen. And the man he loved more than his own life was, most likely, right in the middle of it.

Brian rode as fast as he could into the chaos. That which had once been so familiar, was unrecognizable. People wandered the roads aimlessly with a far away, vacant expressions on their faces. Brian only thought now was to find his beloved Justin.

It was difficult to maneuver around the streets that were strewn with debris from the buildings that had collapsed. Police had set up road blocks, in an attempt to keep order. Brian showed his hospital identification, and was allowed to pass. When he approached the street where the hotel was located, the extent of the devastation sickened him.

Bodies lined the road, as the rescue workers continued their efforts to free people who had been trapped. Brian joined Horace in his efforts to free a man from the rubble. The man was bleeding from the head but did not appear to be too badly injured. Brian escorted him to where the medical personnel were working, then went back to talk to Horace.

"Horace, have you seen Justin?" Brian asked, with trepidation.

Horace looked at Brian with fear in his eyes. "Your brother was here last night. I saw him come in late. A man was waiting to see him. I am pretty sure they went up to Justin's room."

Brian nodded his head and returned to his search efforts. Horace worked by his side. The next victim they pulled out of the pile of rubble was dead. Horace recognized him as the man Justin was with the night before. Brian searched the body and was shocked when he found something that identified the man as Chris Hobbs. He continued to search near the where the body was found, but there was no sign of Justin. Brian had almost given up hope, when a familiar feeling overtook him. At once, Brian knew that Justin was alive. He felt his presence, and sensed that he was in danger. The feeling was so strong, that Brian mounted his horse and left the city in haste.

Searching for Justin in the city was like looking for a needle in a haystack. If Justin had dealings with Hobbs the night before, and somehow escaped, it was likely that he would be at the ranch waiting for Brian. As Brian maneuvered his way through the crowded streets, the enormity of the tragic events became more and more apparent. Fires were breaking out everywhere, people were trapped under rubble, and many would most likely perish. A parade of refugees leaving the city passed him on the road, carrying their worldly possessions. Luckily, the trains and the ferry boats were still up and running. People rushed to get their families and their possessions to safety.

Brian was several miles from home when he saw the sissified fringe of Justin's surrey as the vehicle lay upside down in a ditch. He got off his horse and ran down the side of the road to where the surrey rested against a tree. Justin was nowhere in sight, but there was blood on the seat. Brian ran back to the road, and saw Justin's horses grazing in a field ahead, apparently unharmed. He grabbed their reins and led them along with him toward home.

When he got to the hill that overlooked their property, he was relieved to see that the house itself was still standing. But the roof of the barn had collapsed. Brian called out Justin's name. The house was locked up tight, and Brian knew that the only place that Justin could be was under the roof of the barn. Piece by piece he pulled the heavy

lumber off, and put it to one side, until he finally saw Justin's blond hair, which streaked with blood. With one mighty shove, Brian removed the last piece of lumber which had entrapped Justin.

Brian felt a strong pulse in Justin's neck. He checked for broken bones, finding none, he turned Justin over. The gold nugget that had been their hidden treasure fell out of Justin's hand. Brian put the nugget on Justin's chest, and carried him into the house.

It was a miracle that Justin had only suffered cuts and bruises to his body. When the barn collapsed, Justin had been digging a hole where the nugget had been hidden. The falling timber trapped him in the hole, but did not crush his body. Brian cleaned and dressed the wounds. After wrapping Justin in a blanket; he laid him on the sofa near the fireplace, and sat in a nearby chair to keep watch.

Several hours later, Justin began to move. Brian checked his pulse, and found that Justin's heart was beating rapidly. Thinking it was a sign that Justin was having a nightmare, Brian tried unsuccessfully to wake him. Justin began to whimper and thrash about, while Brian stood by helplessly.

Justin dreamed that he was still running in fear. He hadn't been so scared since the day Brian hit him on the head, and left him to die in the wilderness. When the surrey turned over, Justin had lost consciousness. When he awoke, he realized that it was almost dawn, and Brian was in danger. He relived the terror of the road splitting in front of his eyes, and the surrey going out of control. He struggled to his feet, and after making his way back up to what was left of the road, he ran as fast as he could toward home. If he wasn't back at the hotel before Brian arrived, Chris was bound to kill him. When he got to the barn he took a shovel from the shed and started to dig up the nugget. That was the last thing that he remembered, before the barn fell in on him.

Brian was becoming concerned that Justin's head injury was more serious than it had appeared. As he anxiously paced the room, trying to figure out what to do next, lightning struck the house with such force the windows shook. Justin screamed and reached up his arms. Brian grabbed his hands, and pulled him close. "It's okay. You're safe, we're both safe."

Justin opened his eyes and looked up at Brian. "You're NOT dead!" He clung to him tightly until Brian pried his hands loose and looked into his face.

"I'm not dead, neither are you. I'd say we're both very lucky."

Once Justin fully regained his wits, he began to panic again. He had to tell Brian what happened. "Brian, we have to get the nugget and leave San Francisco right away! I think I may have killed Chris Hobbs. He was waiting at the hotel when I came in last night. He read my journal stories, and came to San Francisco to blackmail us. He said if I didn't give him enough money to make him rich, that he'd expose me for a sodomist. I told him that I had gold, and that he should wait there for me to get it. He said he would kill whoever walked through the door. I was so scared that you'd get to the hotel before I got back, and be shot to death.

"Then we fought, and Chris pushed me up against the wall. He made more threats, and then he kissed me. I spat in his face, and then he hit me hard. I fell to the floor, but before he could get to me, I crawled toward the door. He grabbed my hair, and I the only thing within reach to defend myself with, was a brass lamp. I hit him across the bridge of the nose and he doubled over. I got up, and hit him once again, on the back of the head. There was so

much blood on the floor, but I don't know if he was still moving or not. All I could think to do was get the nugget, and find you.

"Whether I'd killed the man, or not, I knew our lives would change forever. If he was alive, there was a chance he would kill you when you got to the hotel. If I'd killed him, I would be charged with murder. Our whole sordid story would come to light, and I'd be hung, and most likely you along with me.

"We have to use the nugget, and start a new life somewhere else, Brian. We better hurry because something very, very bad is happening. God is angry at me. The earth opened up. I almost fell into hell."

Brian gently stroked Justin's soft, blond hair. "I told you that we're safe, and I meant it." "There was an earthquake in San Francisco. The whole city is almost destroyed. What didn't get damaged in the quake, is now on fire. I was so scared that I'd lost you."

"The whole city is gone? Brian, that can't be. Cities don't just disappear."

"It didn't just disappear. The earth moved, and the buildings collapsed. The hospital, the newspaper office, and the hotel are gone. The streets are lined with corpses. Horace told me that you were in your room when the earthquake hit.

"Hobbs is dead, Justin, but you didn't kill him. At least, it doesn't matter if you killed him or not. They were still pulling people out of the rubble when I got to the hotel, some dead, some alive. I was scared to death you'd be among them. I helped pull out bodies while searching for you. Horace was next to me, helping. When we pulled Hobbs out of the rubble, Horace said he'd seen you with him earlier. There was something about the man that was familiar. When I reached into his jacket and pulled out your father's watch, I knew right away that it was Hobbs. " Brian put the watch in Justin's hand. "Justin, if he hadn't made you come here to get this gold nugget, it would have been your body I pulled out of the rubble today."

"I guess this time the bad guy didn't win." Justin said.

"No, he didn't."

Justin sighed and pulled Brian's arms tightly about him. "My stomach hurts."

"I'll make you some tea. Then we should get some rest." As soon as the words were out of his mouth the earth began to shake again. It only lasted a few minutes but it was enough to awaken new fears."

"Brian is it safe to stay here? Maybe we should go."

"Go where? The roads are overrun with refugees, who just might be desperate enough to cause us harm. For now, we'll stay here. In the morning we'll ride to Plum Creek and see what the situation is there. Aftershocks are to be expected, Justin. Don't let them upset you." Brian went to the kitchen to make some tea for Justin and some coffee for himself. He returned with the two cups and put them on the table next to the chair and sat down next to Justin.

"What about Aunt Lindsay? When she hears about the disaster she'll be out of her mind with worry. We must get word to her that our trip will be postponed."

"We'll go to New York." Brian said calmly.

"How can we go on a vacation, and leave our neighbors and friends destitute. Brian, we must do something to help them."

"What they'll need most is money. We'll donate the nugget. It'll feed and house a lot of people."

"No, Brian. . . we need this nugget to secure our future together. We almost needed to use it to get Chris out of our lives. I won't have you give it away. When I think of what could have happened to us today I feel sick."

Brian took Justin's hands in his. "I don't need a gold nugget to make me feel secure. I used to think that if I had enough money to buy whatever I wanted, I'd be happy. Living here has been like a dream. But what happened today showed me that it isn't the house, or my job, or having money to spend, that's made me happy all these years. It's the sight of you smiling at me when I walk in the door at night. Whether we continue to live out our lives here in San Francisco, or start over somewhere else, as long as I have you to come home to, I have everything I need."

"But your research is important, Brian. You'd regret having to give it up to start over."

"My only regret is that I spent too much time at the hospital, and not enough time here with you. I've missed you so much while I was staying in town."

"It was lonely here, too. But I know that you love your work, and it makes me happy that you've been able to make advances that will change the world. That's far more important than keeping me company out here."

"Justin, I've been feeling at odds for a long time. I enjoy my work, there's no question. When I arrived in San Francisco, and saw all that you'd accomplished, I'll admit that I was envious. I wanted to be the one to build us a life. I wanted to take care of you. It was apparent, as much as you loved me, you didn't need me as much as you once had. So going to school, and making myself useful to society, was my way of becoming worthy of you."

"Why didn't you ever tell me this?"

"I didn't know myself, until I starting sleeping at the hospital for days on end. I've become competitive with the other scientists. I want to be the one who discovers the break through vaccine so it will bear my name. My work has taken over my life. I feel like I am two people. Brian the brother who has devoted himself to his work, and Brian the man who is so deeply in love with you, that sleeping on a cot at the hospital has driven him completely insane."

"This morning when I felt the earthquake hit, my only thought was I couldn't remember the last time I told you I loved you. Riding into the city I was so scared that I'd never see you again. All I could think of was that I might never see your smile, or hear your voice, or touch your sweet, soft skin. I rode right past the hospital and saw it was on fire. I never once thought to go in and try to save the research it took me a year to compile. I imagined what were

you thinking when this terrible earthquake hit the hotel. Were you scared and calling out for me? Had I let you down again?

"It's been on my mind for months. I wanted to tell you, but I didn't know how. I want have adventures like we used to have together. You opened my mind to books years ago. Having the ability to read has enriched my life beyond my dreams. I've had much pleasure reading about distant places and the adventures of others. In returned I want to show you a world you've never seen. I've been keeping a secret from you. I've made arrangements for us to travel by ship from New York to Europe."

"What! When were you planning on telling me this?"

"It was my plan to tell you at my surprise party."

"You knew about your surprise party?"

"Knew about it! . . . It was my idea. What better way to get you to travel to New York, than to have you think you were putting one over on me? Aunt Lindsay helped, of course."

Justin was silent for a moment. "You're right, Brian. I've really missed you, too. I planned the trip to New York to get you away from your work, so we could be alone together. After what happened, it really makes me want to visit with our family and do all the things we've dreamed about doing in our old age."

"One or both of us could have died last night." Brian said. "Which is why I want to go ahead with our plans to travel. I want to spend time with you, enjoying everything that life has to offer. Since I'm already old, and you're never going to be, we should do what makes us happy. What purpose would it serve for us to stay here now? We'll make a donation to help rebuild the city. Whether the Kinney brothers return to their lives here or not, it doesn't matter. As long as Brian and Justin are together, I'll be happy. "

"It just seems so unreal. Our city, the newspaper, the hospital, the hotel, it's all gone in just the blink of an eye."

"On my way out of the city I saw destruction, fear, suffering and death. And it made think about what you said one day. These people don't really know who we are, and you were right. Day to day life as we know it, is all very fragile and insignificant. It made me realize how lucky we are to have something so special and private that the only two people on earth we are 'real' to, is each other.

"When I was younger I used to think that God was a force that was working against me. But then I met you, and it all turned around for me. We've endured hunger, the natural elements, blindness, bullets, explosions, separation, the pain of betrayal of others and the hatred of society in general. Last night one of the worst natural disasters in history saved us from exposure by Chris Hobbs, and the likelihood of you being charged with murder. As awful and frightening as the earthquake was for the good people of San Francisco, for us it was a miracle."

"God is looking out for us after all." Justin exclaimed.

"He cares for us, more than he cared for your step brother, that's for sure. Maybe we should start going to church." Brian said as he handed Justin his tea.

"It might be a good idea to keep the lines of communication open between us and God." Justin took the cup from Brian and sat it down on the table. He handed him the watch. "I want you to have this, Brian."

"But it's your father's watch . . . your prized possession."

"It was my father's watch, then it was mine. Now I want you to have it. I much prefer the one you gave me. The only prize that I possess, is you." He picked up his tea and held it up to Brian's cup. "Here's to God's good favor. With him on our side we're invincible."

"To the real 'us' . . . Brian and Justin, and love everlasting."

Journals West - Part Ten

From The Ashes

It had been six months since the earthquake had devastated the city they had called home. Brian and Justin made their trip to New York for Brian's birthday celebration as they had planned. The family greeted them warmly and Aunt Lindsay offered them a permanent home with her and Uncle Morgan should they not wish to return to California. They thanked her for the offer but told her they were not yet sure of their plans.

Time seemed to stand still and the angst of the ordeal they had suffered slowly slipped away once they were on board the ship that would take them to Europe. Each day of their journey the horrors they left in San Francisco faded a little. And each night their bond with each other grew.

Justin was in awe of how much Brian knew about the different places they were traveling to. "Brian, traveling with you is like having my own private guide." He commented as they left their hotel to have dinner at an Irish pub.

"I read a book on each country so I could impress you." Brian said as they walked side by side.

"Now why would you need to impress me?"

"This trip is like a new beginning for us. More so, now that the future of our home is uncertain. I feel the more I know about the world, the more logically I can make a decision as to what our next move should be."

"Then you're not sure about returning to California. Where, then? New York, Chicago, Denver . . . or are you suggesting we settle here in Ireland? Funny, how I look around and see your countrymen. You fit in here Brian, it seems everyone has a similar look."

"I don't really see us setting up house in this country. These people seem far too concerned with their neighbor's business. We need to be in a place where we can be off on our own, yet still a part of the community."

"I agree. Tomorrow we will be on our way to England and then home to New York. Have you given any thought to what we will do then?"

"What would you like to do?"

"I'll be happy anywhere that you're happy. I can write and paint any place. You would have to be near a hospital or clinic."

"No . . . I don't want to continue being a doctor. It's far too consuming and it was coming between us. I'll find other work. Maybe teaching or farming. My main goal in life is to spend as much time as I can with you."

"That's very sweet. This time I'll let you set us up in a new location. I think I over did it a bit in San Francisco with my journal. I really didn't give you a chance to have a say in how we lived."

"Your journal was brilliant. Without your intricate planning we might not have been successful in staying together for so long. I want to know how you feel. What do you want to do when we get back to New York?"

"Honestly, I don't want this to end. I feel like I did when we were first together. If I could, I would travel with you to the ends of the earth and back."

"That's what we'll do then."

When they arrived in New York City, there was a telegram for Justin from the architect he had paid to add the addition to their house. He had workers and material ready and he wanted to know if he should proceed with renovations. Justin wrote back that he should go forward with the work and wired him the remainder of the payment. He figured if they did not want to return to the house they could easily sell it for much more money than he'd paid. The architect also asked for permission to move into their barn with his workers, as finding accommodations in San Francisco was difficult. Justin had agreed to the arrangement.

After spending Christmas with the family in New York, they decided to tour the country by train and by road. They traveled south first. Justin didn't care for the southern states. He was told that the heat was oppressive in the summer months. The people seemed odd to him and he sensed their distrust. He had the feeling that they sensed the true nature of his relationship with Brian. Brian told him that he was imagining things. But when they got to Atlanta, Brian declared that the south was not a fitting place to settle.

Next they traveled to Wichita, Kansas. Justin wanted to see the place where Brian was born. Brian found the farm where he had grown up. It seemed to be occupied by quite a large family. The house was gone with a new larger one taking its place. It made Brian feel a little sad that the house his father had built no longer existed. But in his memory it was clear. Brian took Justin to the church yard where his father had been buried. He found the stone for Jack Kinney and took off his hat to pray. Justin did the same.

When Brian had finished, he turned to Justin and asked. "Where to now?"

They boarded a train that took them to Denver. There they rented horses and rode to the place on the mountain top where they had made promises to each other in the eyes of God and the beauty of nature.

"Brian, this place is just as beautiful as I remember it."

"It's a national park now." Brian told him. "That means it will be preserved forever. Progress can't touch it."

"There's something to be said for progress," said Justin.

"There's something to be said for the beauty of nature too." Brian replied. "You remember our vow?" Brian asked thoughtfully. "The day you married me in this place was the happiest day of my life. . . and the saddest."

"Mine too." Justin took his hand. "But look at all we accomplished with our lives since that day."

"We have, haven't we." Brian smiled down at Justin proudly. "Now, my dear, where do you want to go next?"

"You decide, Brian."

Brian sat down on the ground and looked out over the valley below. "These past few months of traveling have been rejuvenating. I feel like a young man ready to start life a new. There's only one place I can think of that I belong."

"Where is that Brian?" Justin asked.

Turning to Justin he said softly, "Home. I want to go home to San Francisco."

Justin smiled broadly. "You do? I am so happy because that's what I want also."

"It might not be as we remember it, Justin. People we were acquainted with might have moved on. The city may not ever be the same. We might not recognize the place."

"So what. We have each other. San Francisco is where we belong. We will help to rebuild the city, bigger and better than before."

"There is one place I would like to take you before we head home. That is, if I can find it."

“Where’s that, Brian?”

“I’d like to find that old shack near where I found our nugget. I want to drop in on my old buddy there and introduce you. That is if he hasn’t rotted into the ground by now.”

Justin laughed. “Lead the way, my husband.”

They enjoyed the summer days riding up to the mountains where Brian had almost lost his life. It was the last leg of their long journey home and they made the best of every moment. When they reached their destination, Brian found the place in the river where he had found the nugget.

“You were so close to me on that day. I felt you guiding me to find my way.”

“I’m sure that at that very moment my thoughts were of you and how much I needed to have you close to me. I must have willed it.”

“The shack shouldn’t be too far up ahead. Do you mind if I try to find it?”

“I want to meet your friend, Brian. I feel like I was a part of your adventure here.”

Brian found the spot where he figured the shack to be. All that was left were a few pieces of rotted wood.

“Brian, are you sure this is the place?”

“Yes. You see that tree over there? I scratched my name on it with my knife. Just in case I didn’t make it and you came looking for me. You would know that I had died here.”

Brian looked around and found a decent sized piece of stone. He dug a hole and planted the stone firmly in it. “What do you think I should scratch on his tombstone. I didn’t know his name.”

“What did you call him?”

“I called him stinky. Believe me, at the time it was fitting.”

Justin laughed. “I didn’t come all the way up here with you so you could leave a tombstone for a man named ‘Stinky’.”

“I called him Slim when he stopped smelling so bad. And I’ll put the year to mark his passing.”

“I guess it’s better than Stinky.” Justin rubbed Brian’s shoulder. “You’re a good and loyal friend, Brian.”

“In a way Mr. Slim here saved my life. So he should be remembered.”

When they arrived in San Francisco, it in the summer of 1907. They were surprised at how much progress had been made rebuilding the city. It did not take them long to find accommodations at a new hotel called the Fairmont. It was quite grand and Justin slept very late. When he woke up he realized that Brian was not in the room. Several hours later Justin was in the restaurant when Brian came in and sat across from him.

The silly grin on Brian’s face made Justin curious. “What mischief have you been up to , Brother?”

“What makes you think I’ve been up to mischief? I will have you know, Brother, that I am a well respected doctor and a valued member of this community. I don’t get into mischief, at least not any more. I went out with a purpose this morning. When you finish your breakfast I’ll show you my new purchase.”

Justin chuckled. “I don’t recall when I have seen you so excited over spending money. It must be something you really wanted.”

“It’s a practical purchase. You’ll see. Our lives will be made a lot easier.”

“You got us a cook?”

“Don’t be silly.” Brian said grabbing a piece of bacon from Justin’s plate. “Hurry up and finish.”

To tease Brian, Justin ordered a refill of coffee. Brian tapped the table nervously while Justin sipped it leisurely. When they had finished, they walked through the lobby to the street. Justin looked around. The only unusual object he saw was an automobile of some kind parked in front of the hotel.

“What’s the surprise, Brian?”

Brian produced a key from his pocket. “This is the surprise. I’ve purchased us a Rambler 27 Renabout. What do you think?”

“I think you beat my fancy surrey. It’s amazing, Brian. Do you know how to operate it?”

Brian hesitated a moment. “The salesman showed me. It’s pretty easy, like driving a buggy. You point it in the right direction and go.”

“Go where?”

“Anywhere we want.” Brian ran around to the driver’s side of the automobile and climbed into the seat. “Come on, get in.”

“I don’t know, Brian. I’ve heard these things are dangerous.”

“Justin, the lives we’ve led we are lucky to be alive. Let’s enjoy every experience with a positive attitude. Please, I promise not to go too fast.”

Justin reluctantly climbed up into the seat beside Brian. After a few minutes he began to relax and enjoy the ride. “This is fun, Brian. Can I drive it some time?”

“I’ll tell you what, as soon as we get outside of town I’ll give you a lesson.”

“You’re pretty good at this.”

“I feel like I was born to drive.” Brian laughed.

As he promised once they had reached the outskirts of town, Brian hopped out of the driver’s seat and let Justin have a turn. Justin was anxious at first but quickly got the hang of it. They took turns driving until it was almost time for dinner. When it began to get dark they returned to the hotel to park the car. Then they took a cab to Justin’s private club to have dinner. It was a pleasant surprise to Justin that most of the members he was friendly with were there that night. They decided to play cards for a few hours before returning to the hotel. The next morning Brian refueled his new automobile and they drove to their home. Justin was pleased that it only took half the time it would have taken by buggy. As they approached the house Justin let out a gasp.

“Look, Brian. The second story is completely finished, as the builder had promised. Doesn’t it look magnificent?”

“It looks fine. But I still don’t know why we need to have all that space. All we need really is one big feather bed for the two of us.”

“You love having a roof over your head and all the amenities.”

“I do enjoy a nice soaking bath indoors. But I could sleep on the ground under the stars, as long as you were there with me I’d be happy.”

“Me too. But this will be so much more convenient. We will have our suites upstairs and no one will ever have to go up there but us. When we have company they can sleep on the first floor. It will give us privacy.”

“I will enjoy having privacy. When your family visits it makes me uncomfortable. I always think that they are standing outside our bedroom door listening to us fornicate.”

“Now you see the method to my madness. And beside that we can expand the library. And maybe you can do some of your research here instead of being away at the hospital so much.”

“I told you I don’t want to pursue my career at the hospital.”

“I thought you’d reconsider, now that we are back home. This community needs you, Brian.”

“I don’t know about the community.” Brian said as he parked the car in front of the house. “What I need is to carry you up our new staircase and throw you down on our feather bed. What do you say to that, Brother?”

Justin laughed as Brian grabbed him around the waist and lifted him out of the automobile. “When we’re here on our own property you must call me husband . . . husband.”

Brian carried Justin into the house. Once they were inside he kissed him gently on the lips and put him down. “Good Lord, is this the same house?” The area that had once been a hallway was now an expansive staircase. They both climbed the staircase slowly, taking in each detail of the new addition.

There were two bedrooms upstairs. Justin intended to set one room up as a study as they would share the main bedroom which had its own bathroom attached. The rooms were unfurnished and Justin imagined where they would place their bed. “Look at the view from this window, Brian. We’ll wake up and see the stream and the woods.”

Brian looked out of the window. “Much nicer than the view in the other room. Do you realize that our neighbor’s sold their farm and there are two houses on the property now?”

“No, that’s not good. Are they close to us?”

“Far enough away that they won’t be peering in our windows at night. But it does bring home the point that the neighborhood is changing. Tomorrow I’ll go into town and arrange the purchase as much of the surrounding property as is available. We can not afford to have people getting too close.”

“You’re right. We don’t want to feel unsafe in our own home.”

The next day they went to the clerk of the county in which they lived and found all the land around them that was available for purchase.

“Brian, what are we going to do with all this land?”

“I have an idea to grow grapes and start a winery.”

“That’s a very ambitious undertaking. It would be a lot of fun to have a wine label with your name on it.”

Brian laughed out loud.

“What’s so funny?”

“I was thinking about the last time I put up a bottle with my name on it.”

“Dr. B. Healed and his all powerful Nature’s Elixir!” Justin sang out.

“99% tea and 1% alcohol.”

They both doubled over in laughter. “That was a fun time, wasn’t it?” Justin said when he’d recovered.

“What happened after was not so much fun.”

“I remember the worst of times too. But we got through them together.”

Brian was in good spirits in the days that followed. He busied himself with the new property and his plans for a vineyard. One day he was out in front of the house measuring for a fence when a motor car pulled up to him. “Dr. Brian Kinney, as I live and breathe. I thought for sure you’d have put out your shingle on Park Avenue in New York City by now.

“City life is not for me, Dr. Beaumont. What in the world are you doing out in this neck of the woods?”

“I came out here to see you, Brian. Do you have a few minutes to talk?”

Curious, Brian asked his friend to come into the house for coffee. “How are things at the hospital?”

“Slowly getting back to normal. For the moment I am only working there part time. I have other business to tend to right now. I’d heard you’d quit. Do you really plan on giving up the practice of medicine?”

“Research is not exactly practicing medicine. I had spent way too many hours cooped up in a lab and not enough out in the fresh air. That’s my plan now. I’ve bought up all the surrounding acres and my brother and I are planning to start a vineyard.”

“Property is always a wise investment. I wish you luck in your venture.”

“Thank you. But I’m sure that’s not why you drove all the way out here. What did you want to talk to me about.”

“Is your brother at home?”

“He’s in the City today. But we have no secrets.”

“I understand.” Dr. Beaumont shifted uneasily in his chair. “What I want to discuss is delicate. After the fires there’s been much unrest in City. For many years those in power ran the city like a private club. Only those rich enough to pay their extortion could advance. We’ve started a committee and I came out here to ask you to come to one of our meetings.”

“What can I do to help? I don’t really live in the City.”

“You’re well respected in the community, Brian. People like you. We need to convince others that it’s time for change.”

“I don’t know how much spare time I’ll have with all the work I have to do here.”

“Come to a meeting and hear us out. That’s all I’m asking of you, Brian.”

“Just tell me when and where and if I can get away I’ll stop by.”

As Brian said good bye to his friend, Justin came bursting through the front door carrying several packages. He dropped them on the table and shook hands with Brian’s company.

Justin tried to contain his excitement while Brian introduced him to his guest. He extended his hand and greeted him warmly. “It’s so nice to meet one of Brian’s colleagues. Will you stay for dinner?”

“Unfortunately I’m on a tight schedule today. Maybe another time.”

Brian walked him to the door. “Hope you will be joining us soon, Brian.”

“We’ll see. Thanks for coming out.”

“What was that about,” Justin asked as he unpacked the groceries.

“Nothing important,” Brian answered. “What have you got there?”

“A surprise. I have lots of surprises.”

Brian put his arms around Justin’s waist. “I love surprises. Let’s go upstairs and you can surprise me all you want.”

“Please be patient. Now close your eyes and take my hand.

Brian did as he was told. Justin led him out to the front porch. “Now you can open them.” Justin instructed.

“You bought an automobile. Do you think we need two?”

“We do now that I have a new job in the City.”

“You got a job?” Brian asked unenthusiastically.

“Come inside and I’ll tell you about my day.”

Justin quickly prepared sandwiches from items he had brought home from the market. While he and Brian ate, he described the events of the day.

“I decided that driving a motor car into the city was far more practical than using a wagon. I went to the car dealer and bought the largest one I could find. I think that it will be safer than your open vehicle.”

“It’s a sight better than that stupid surrey you used to drive. What did you do with the wagon?”

“I’m getting to that. You see I decided that I would like to donate it to someone less fortunate. So I drove it over to the mission near the park. I was so taken by Sister Abby, the woman who runs the mission, that I ended up spending the day.”

“She really made an impression on you.”

“I think she is the most interesting person I’ve ever met, aside from you, of course.”

“Of course.”

“She’s not a real nun. They call her sister Abby at the mission. She told me that it amuses her, considering she has a rather tainted past.”

“Interesting that she would say something like that to a total stranger.”

“I didn’t feel like a stranger. By the time I left, it felt like I’d know her all my life. She’s a very interesting person. She’s traveled extensively.”

“We’ve traveled too.”

“She’s been to so many exotic places: India, the Middle East, China. And she also learned the language.”

Brian changed the subject. “Tell me about the job.”

“I’m going to teach at the mission. Sister Abby said they are desperate for teachers. It doesn’t pay much but I’ll be getting out of the house.”

“Why do you feel the need to work? We don’t need the money. It’s a long commute into the city every day, even with a motor car.”

“I won’t be going in every day. Just three or four days a week. And I really love the idea of meeting new people. There’s a man who works there named Anthony. He teaches English to the Asian children and adults in the evening. He’s from Boston where I went to school. And he hasn’t said anything, of course, but I think he’s like us.”

“What do you mean like us?”

“You know, he likes men. It’s just the impression I got.”

“Be careful Justin. We’ve worked very hard to keep our lives private. The last thing we need is an old deviant from back east sniffing around your ass.”

“Don’t be gross, Brian.”

“You didn’t tell him that you were . . .”

“Of course not. And he’s not old if you must know. He’s my age.”

“That’s even worse. What if he gets it into his head that you’d be agreeable to his advances.”

“I never would be and you know that. And, if I may remind you, I was the one who came up with our story. I would never divulge the details of our secret to anyone, much less a stranger.”

“This is an interesting twist. I’ll be spending more time at home and you won’t be here.”

“I’m sorry you don’t support me in this.”

Brian hesitated before answering. “It makes me nervous. That’s all I’m saying.”

“Do you trust me.”

“I do. It’s the rest of the world I don’t trust.”

“I promise you come first, always.”

Over the next few weeks Brian concentrated all of his efforts into the plans for his winery. But twice a week he traveled into the City to attend his political meetings. He was appalled by all he had learned about the local government and he was determined that he would do everything in his power to help the cause.

Justin was thrilled to be working at the mission. Every night he would chatter on endlessly about the students, his new friends, and particularly about Sister Abby. Brian began to resent Justin’s new life. His preoccupation with the political issues he was struggling with kept him silent. Justin was happy, and that was all that mattered.

At breakfast one morning Brian noticed something different. “These pancakes don’t taste like the ones you usually make.”

“It’s a new recipe I got from Sister Abby. Do you like them?”

“They’re alright.” In fact, Brian thought they were very good, but he found something about the flavor oddly disturbing. “What’s in them?”

“Chocolate. She said she used to make them for her kids.”

“I taste it now.”

“You love chocolate.”

“Not for breakfast.” Brian put down his fork and poured himself a cup of coffee.

“Sorry. Do you want some eggs?” Justin asked as he cleared the table.

Brian put down his cup and grabbed Justin’s shoulders from behind and hugged him. “I guess I’m just not hungry right now. They were very good. Thanks.”

Justin had noticed that Brian had been preoccupied lately. Over the years he had come to accept that his partner was moody and unpredictable. He took things to heart and brooded. Sometimes Justin felt ignored. But these moods usually didn’t last very long and Brian was always extra sweet to him after they passed.

It was early fall and Justin had been working at the mission for a month. If he had to chose a time in his life when he was the happiest, he would put his life now second only to his time on the road with Brian so many years ago. Brian had been working hard on the winery project. Justin had become uneasy about Brian's secret evening activities. Not because he didn't trust him, but because Brian behaved differently the morning after returning from one of his long evenings in the City.

It was Friday evening and Justin was in a particularly good mood. He had made a rabbit stew and the aroma from the kitchen was reminding him of the days when he and Brian cooked anything they could find. They would eat together huddled around a campfire and after cleaning up they would make love under the stars. It was a magical time for them both.

Justin heard Brian's motor car as he drove up to the house. The brakes screeched as

Brian parked out front. He had taken to driving at speeds that frightened Justin. Brian came in the door and threw his coat on the banister. Justin could tell he was in a foul mood.

"Hi," Justin said sweetly. Brian came up behind him and kissed him on the neck. Justin put his hand on Brian's face. "How was your day?"

Brian didn't answer. He went into the bathroom leaving Justin alone to set out the food. Justin could hear the water running into the tub. Brian had decided that bathing was more important than the meal Justin had spent hours preparing.

Justin decided to take the time to look at some of the children's papers that he had brought home to mark for corrections. Brian was normally a very even tempered man. On occasion he could become silent and moody. Justin knew enough to stay out of his way on those occasions. They usually passed quickly and at times Justin was able to talk him out of his dark mood.

Brian had experienced an unusually stressful day. As he soaked in the tub he thought about the day's events. He had long felt that the government of San Francisco was made up of a bunch of self serving, thugs. It was not in his nature to become involved in politics. But some of the things he had heard lately from his friends who lived in the city set his blood boiling. It seems that the residents of Chinatown had been treated very poorly after the disaster. They were forced to move from Van Ness Street to another part of town not considered to be such prime property. There was also a plan to establish separate schools for the Asian students. Mayor Schmitz had been convicted of extortion after the fires. But Brian did not have much faith that things would change much under the current regime.

At the meeting he attended today he learned of all the many unfair and prejudicial actions that had taken place in their absence. Not being an actual resident of San Francisco he was not eligible to run for office. But he did have friends in the City who thought as he did. That it was time for a change. They had convinced him to use his influence and financial resources to raise funds for a campaign. Now that he was alone with his thoughts he

regretted committing to the cause. Knowing that the political bosses of San Francisco would use any means necessary to maintain control of the City, he feared that he could be putting Justin and himself in jeopardy.

Justin was sitting by the fire reading when Brian finally came to the table. "I've put your stew in the oven. I've eaten already because I was hungry and I wasn't sure if you were coming in to dinner."

"Sorry." Brian said softly as he retrieved his supper from the oven.

Justin came to the table to talk to him. He knew it wasn't the best time to ask Brian this question but it was something that had been on his mind for a while.

"Brian, I was thinking about asking Sister Abby and some of my co-workers to dinner one night. What would you say to that?"

"I'd say no fucking way. Why in the world would you want to bring prying eyes to the place where we live."

"You're saying I can't have any friends."

"You never needed friends before. All you need is me."

"You're a snob."

"I'm just trying to protect what's mine."

"Me?"

"My privacy. the last thing I want is a bunch of do gooders sitting at my table checking out your ass when you're not looking."

"What are you talking about."

"Your friend Anthony."

"Anthony is not my friend. In fact . . ."

"Have you fucked him yet?"

"What is wrong with you tonight?"

“Nothing is wrong with me. I just asked a simple question. You need to feel needed. Fuck that Justin. You want to bring new people into our lives because you want to know what it’s like to fuck another man.”

“I’m not going to listen to this.” Justin got up to leave the room.

“Don’t worry, you won’t have to listen to me any more. I’m leaving.” Brian angrily grabbed his coat from the closet and stomped out the door into the night.

Justin stood on the staircase dumbfounded. He had no idea what had just happened or why. He thought about calling after Brian, but changed his mind and went upstairs to bed.

Brian had been gone for three days and Justin was out of his mind with worry. He never enjoyed tending to the animals. That had always been Brian’s job. He had put off mucking out the stalls as long as he could. It would be dark soon and it looked like there might be a storm brewing. Justin put on his jacket and went to do his chores. The horses were restless and he wondered if they were missing Brian as much as he did. The thought went through his mind again . . . “what if Brian never comes home.”

The wind had picked up and the sky had gotten dark. Before he left the barn he nuzzled Moby’s neck. Don’t worry Moby, Brian still loves us.

The days had gotten shorter and it was so dark Justin could barely see the house from the barn. As he got into the front yard he noticed a figure standing by a tree. He was startled at first, but then he realized that it was Brian. They both stood very still, silently gazing at each other. It was Justin who made the first move. He put his arms out and Brian ran into them. Brian hugged him so tightly that Justin had to gasp for breath.

Brian clung to Justin silently for the longest time. It was Justin who broke their embrace. He pushed Brian away roughly and pounded his fists on Brian’s chest. “What were you thinking? Do you know how worried I was? I thought you’d driven that stupid automobile into a ditch and been killed! How could you run off like that? I’ve given you no cause to be angry with me. I did nothing wrong.”

Brian grinned slightly and simply said. “You’re right.”

“What am I right about?”

“Everything. You did nothing wrong. You’ve never given me any cause to be angry with you. I had no business running off the way I did. And I did drive my automobile into a ditch. Only I wasn’t killed, as you can see.”

“Are you okay? Where have you been, Brian? It’s been three days. I was afraid to leave the house for fear you’d return and find me gone.”

“Well, after I drove into the ditch it seemed that my eyesight was a little blurry. A policeman took me to a hospital.”

“Why didn’t you get word to me?”

“I didn’t want to worry you. In case I didn’t recover.”

“Oh, right. It would be much better if I never knew what happened to the man I have shared my life with for over 20 years, than to have to care for an invalid. Brian, how would you feel if I disappeared and you never knew what happened to me?”

“It would tear out my heart.”

“Anything, even bad news, is better than not knowing. We’re together for better or worse, Brian. Remember that. We have to trust each other completely. Don’t you ever shut me out again.”

Brian pulled him close and kissed him passionately. It was a very tender moment. Until Brian felt a chill run down his spine. Someone was watching them. They were still standing in the yard, out in the open. Brian pushed Justin away and turned his attention to the figure standing on the porch.

“Who are you? What do you want with us?” Brian demanded.

The figure alighted the porch and stood in the yard facing him. “I’m Sister Abby from the mission. I’ve come to see Justin. No one answered the door so I sat on the porch to wait. It’s a long journey back to town and I need to see him.”

Brian shook with rage at the intrusion of this strange woman. He had wild thoughts of strangling her and burying her body in the woods. They had been found out. This woman could get them run out of town or worse. Luckily Justin pushed passed him and took charge of the situation.

“I wasn’t expecting you. Please, come inside.” Justin took her arm and led her up the steps. Brian begrudgingly followed. As soon as the door was closed it began to rain heavily.

“Please sit down.” Justin said. “Would you like coffee or tea, or perhaps I could offer you a glass of wine. My brother makes his own from the grapes he grows here.”

Brian, who had been staring at Sister Abby from across the room could not believe what was happening. He and Justin had been seen sharing a very un-brotherly kiss in full view of this stranger and Justin was pretending it hadn’t happened. He burst forth almost knocking Justin over. “She knows you’re not my brother! What is going on here? Exactly who are you and who sent you here to spy on us?” He demanded.

"I'm not here to spy or to pass judgment." Sister Abby said calmly.

"Not good enough. A person doesn't happen upon two men kissing without getting some thought in their head. I want to know what you plan on doing with this information. If it's blackmail, just name your price. I'll pay it and you can leave."

Justin gently pushed past Brian and held his arm. "Brian, please . . ."

"No, Justin. There is something suspicious about her unannounced arrival here. I have made some enemies recently who would take great pleasure in exposing our little rouse to society." He turned his fury on Abby. "You are lucky for now that Justin is so naive. My first thought was to strangle you to death in our front yard and bury you in the woods. If that is the only way to keep our secret I may just . . ."

Sister Abby calmly stood face to face with Brian. "There is no need for you to commit murder, Brian. You have nothing to fear from me."

"Why should I believe you? What's to stop you from running to the nearest church and revealing what you've seen here?"

"What have I seen, Brian? A kiss between two men who obviously care a great deal for each other. I'm the last person to judge you. I've committed far greater sins."

"What would that be Sister?" Brian asked angrily.

"Abandoning my eight year old son and my husband to satisfy my own lustful curiosity."

Her statement hung like a cloud in the room. Brian stared at her for a long time before he recognized her face.

Justin still clung to his arm. "Brian, what is she saying?"

Sister Abby started to answer, but Brian spoke first. "This woman used to be my mother. And she's the last person in the world I would trust with the most important secret we share."

Brian turned to Justin. "I'm exhausted. I can't deal with this now." Without another word he left the room.

Justin watched as Brian slowly climbed the staircase. He could only imagine what was going through the man's mind. All Justin wanted to do was comfort him. The rain had abated momentarily but a loud clap of thunder signaled the approach of another squall. "It looks like the storm will linger. You must stay the night here. I'll put your horse and carriage in the barn where they will be safe."

When he finished his chore, Justin returned to the kitchen where Sister Abby was sitting quietly with a far away look in her eyes. "Is it true, Sister? Are you Brian's mother?"

“Yes, it’s true. Justin, I didn’t come here to spy on you. I only came out here tonight because you’d told me that Brian was out of town. I needed to tell you what happened at the mission today. I had a telephone call from Anthony’s sister. He’s disappeared and his family is very concerned. She told me that Anthony is ill. He had been in a sanatorium back east but he left one day without telling them. They are worried that he may cause harm to himself. I know that the two of you had become friends and I wondered if he might have said something to you about leaving.”

“Honestly, we were not friends anymore. In fact, he had become bothersome lately and a few days ago I asked him not to speak to me anymore. I feel so badly about it now. Had I know he was sick, I would have told you he’d been behaving strangely.”

“The poor soul. I can not imagine the pain he must be in for his family to shut him away in a sanatorium.”

“I went through a bad time like that long ago. I almost had to be shut away. It was very frightening. If it weren’t for Brian I would have gone mad.”

“Justin do you think Brian will ever allow me to speak to him?”

“I don’t know the answer to that. Brian is very stubborn once he has taken a stand. But in the past he has softened on certain issues over time.” Justin explained. “How long have you known that Brian was here in San Francisco living with me?”

Sister Abby sat back in her chair and sighed. “It’s confession time, Justin. I came to San Francisco to seek out my long lost son. After the earthquake I came to California to visit my sister who lives in Berkeley. She had a copy of the San Francisco newspaper that carried your Journal articles. I saw the pictures that you had drawn and I knew that your Brian was my son. He looks so much like his father. Logic told me that he would not accept me now. But my heart won out. I wanted to see him in person. I needed to make sure that he was alright. I had no real ties where I had been living. So I moved here and got a job at the mission. Once I was here I enquired about the two famous brothers in your articles. I was told that you were traveling, and it was not sure if you would return to the area. Imagine my surprise when you walked into the mission to ask for a job.”

“Why didn’t you ask me about Brian? I thought we were friends.”

“You saw how he reacted tonight. Can you imagine how he would feel if I had discussed the matter with you beforehand? There was no need for you to be involved. You stated in your disclaimers that your journal was a work of fiction and based only loosely on your real life story. I just assumed that Jack remarried and you were Brian’s younger brother. After I got to know you, I’d decided that Brian was not alone in the world. He had a younger brother who was devoted to him. That’s why I didn’t pursue seeking him out. He didn’t need a family, he had his own. If I had known how much trouble I was going to cause tonight I never would have come. I am so sorry.”

“You had no way of knowing Brian would be here. I can understand your concern for Anthony.” Justin got up from the table and rinsed the cups in the sink. “I’ll show you our guest room.”

"I can't stay here tonight, Justin. I don't think that Brian would appreciate it. Perhaps I could sleep in the barn and be on my way early in the morning."

"Brian would not send an animal out into this weather. You must sleep here tonight and perhaps in the morning he will have a change of heart."

"Do you think there is any chance of that?"

"Well he didn't bury you in the woods tonight so there is still a chance." Justin said, trying to cheer her up. "But he's had a hard life and all his troubles started when you left. I would suggest you give him some time to work things out in his head. He is a brilliant man and one day he may come to realize that there is no point to be holding grudges."

Justin showed Abby to her room and went upstairs. Brian was sitting on the edge of the bed with his head in his hands. Justin gently rubbed his back. "What did the doctors say about your injuries?"

"I have a concussion and bruised ribs. They kept me in the hospital because my blood pressure was elevated and also because my vision was slightly blurred."

"How did you get home?"

"A doctor friend was kind enough to drive me."

"Is there anything you need?"

"Did she leave?"

"You don't think I would send her out into a storm in a wagon, do you? She's downstairs in your old room."

"I don't want to see her."

"I think she got the message. She'll be gone first thing in the morning. Do you want to talk about it?"

"No. I have something more pressing I have to tell you. I should have told you this right off the other night. I probably could have avoided all this. I've been involved in a political campaign. A few weeks ago I found out that after the fire the Chinese were treated like dirt. They were forced to move from place to place because the City planners did not want them to rebuild Chinatown on prime property. It infuriated me and I allowed myself to be talking into joining in the campaign against the current council members. It got really ugly. In fact the police believe that my car was actually forced off the road to stop me from giving money to the cause."

Justin hugged him as tightly as he dared. "That's so scary."

"I'm not scared for me. But they threatened my family too. I won't risk your safety now that I know what they are capable of. I am done with my campaign activity."

"So the bad guys win."

"What would you have me do?"

"I expect you to do what's right. I'm not going to tell you what that is. But if you do decide to continue with the cause, please be careful."

Brian tried to ignore the pain he felt in his right side from the accident. It had awakened him several times during the night. Each time he was reminded of the events of the evening before and the reappearance of his long lost mother. His mind would not allow him to rest. It was early morning and Brian noticed that the sun was rising. With some effort he pulled himself up out of bed and went downstairs. He intended to tell Sister Abby that she was not welcome in their home and that if she should tell anyone what she had learned about his and Justin's true relationship, he would expose her as a charlatan who had left her husband and child to be with another man. But when he went into the kitchen he saw that the bedroom door was open, the bed was made and there was a note on the table thanking them for their hospitality. She had apparently left earlier that morning.

Brian made a pot of coffee, poured himself a cup and went to sit in his favorite chair by the fire. Justin came down to find Brian sound asleep in the chair an hour later. He covered him with a blanket. After reading Sister Abby's note he poured a cup of coffee and sat down opposite Brian in front of the fire. Brian was curled up in a ball with one arm hanging over the arm of the chair. Justin stared at his beautiful face and was reminded of the time they spent on the road together 20 years ago. Brian usually was awake long before Justin, but on the rare occasion Justin awoke first, he would take the opportunity to study Brian's features.

At 52 Brian was in amazingly good shape. His body was slim and firm. Justin always admired Brian's appearance. He relied on his strength, knowledge and wisdom all throughout most of his 40 years. Now seeing him curled up in the chair like a young boy, all Justin wanted to do was to protect him from the world. Most of the time Brian put on a strong demeanor which some people interpreted as cavalier and uncaring. But Justin knew that whatever Brian felt deep down would be reflected in his soulful hazel eyes. Last night Justin saw in his partner's eyes the hurt and anger of an eight year old boy. It frightened him to see Brian in that light.

Justin pondered the events of the night before. He wondered if he had been insensitive to Brian's feelings to allow Sister Abby to spend the night. The last thing that Justin wanted was for Brian to feel as if he was taking sides against him. He wondered if Brian's personality would change with his mother's return. Would he eventually warm to her, would he shut her out forever, or would he strangle her and bury her body in the woods? Justin supposed any one of those scenarios was possible.

Over the past few weeks Justin had become genuinely fond of Sister Abby. There was no evidence that he observed that would cause him to think she meant Brian harm. She was kind, intelligent and companionate. Much like Brian, he thought. But if Brian was offended by her presence in their lives, Justin would volunteer to quit his job at the mission.

When Justin started to fry his eggs for breakfast he heard Brian stir in the other room. "Brian, do you want some eggs?"

"Sure," Brian said as he struggled to get up from the chair. The pain had subsided a little and he hoped he was on the mend.

Justin had just put the plates on the table when he felt Brian's arms embrace him from behind. "I love it when you do that."

"I know." Brian spun him around and kissed him tenderly. "Let's eat."

"Sister Abby left a note." Justin said. He wanted to give Brian the opportunity to talk about his feelings.

"I read it."

"Do you want to talk about it, Brian? Remember what happens when we try to keep our feelings from each other."

"There's no need to talk about it. As long as she keeps her mouth shut we should be okay."

"Is that all you have to say? Your mother just reappeared in your life, Brian."

"It's not like she came back from the dead. I always knew she was alive somewhere. Now she shows up in San Francisco. I have to say that's more than a coincidence."

"She read my journal in the paper and figured it out. She thought we were really half brothers."

"I have to wonder why after all these years she'd seek me out."

"The only one who can answer that is her. Why don't you talk to her?"

"I have no need to talk to her."

"She's your mother, Brian."

"She ceased to be a mother to me when she lay with another man and chose him over my father and me."

"You'll never know why she did what she did."

"I know all I have to know. She left my father and me for selfish reasons. A person who does something like that might have an ulterior motive for finding her long lost son. Maybe she wants money, or something else. I say we give her whatever it takes to keep us safe."

"She may have a reason for leaving that you aren't aware of. And I can't believe that she is completely evil. I've worked with her closely now for several weeks."

"She was my parent for 8 years. Then one day she decided she didn't want to be my parent any longer. There's a lot at stake for us here. I have good reason not to trust her."

Justin sighed deeply. "You're right. I am quitting my job at the mission. I'll go there today and give her notice."

"You don't have to do that."

"If you can't trust her, then neither can I. We'll break all association with her and I'll stay here and help with the winery."

"It doesn't matter to me if you want to continue teaching at the mission. It might be a good idea to keep an eye on her and make sure she doesn't start talking. If she is planning something else you might be able to get wind of it if you stay close to her."

"You mean spy on her?"

"Why not? Isn't that's what she's doing to us?"

Justin thought for a moment before he answered. "Alright, I'll do it."

Justin expected his first day back at the mission to be awkward. But Sister Abby greeted him in her usual friendly manner and began discussing the days lessons. They never discussed what had happened the night before.

As the days passed, Justin adjusted to his awkward position. Brian questioned him about Abby and her plans. Justin saw no evidence that Abby was planning anything. But Brian was still apprehensive. There was nothing to do but wait it out.

Sister Abby had found a replacement for Anthony. Tess Malone was a very attractive young woman from the Chicago area. Justin guessed that she was a few years younger than himself. She was a very competent teacher and the children loved her. Justin discovered that she had a ten year old daughter. Her husband had left her for another woman and Tess came to San Francisco to start a new life.

At first Justin thought that she was very friendly and a fine addition to the school. But as the weeks went by he noticed that she was making every excuse to drop by his classroom or run into him on his lunch hour. It was becoming clear that she was flirting with him. This development made Justin wonder if Brian wasn't right about mingling in society. It seemed that since he started working he had attracted not one, but two unwelcome admirers.

Justin walked a fine line between professional courtesy and protecting his private life. Tess was very forward about her intentions. She even asked Justin to come to dinner to meet her daughter. Justin politely told her he had business affairs to take care of at home. She pressed the issue and wanted to know when they could get together. Justin gave a lame story about not wanting to drive at night and she offered to put him up for the night at her house.

Tess was becoming a serious worry for him. In fact he considered giving up teaching at the mission until Sister Abby came to his rescue by informing Ms. Malone that it was against school policy for the staff to date. This was the perfect solution for Justin. He would not have to explain about his dead wife. Which all these years later did seem a little far fetched. After Sister Abby's announcement he made it a point to be polite, but always professional with Tess.

One evening he was leaving the school he saw that Sister Abby was alone in her office and he stopped in to say good night. "I want to thank you for talking to Tess. The situation was getting very uncomfortable for me. Brian warned me what would happen if I ventured out into society. I guess he was right. Everyone I meet wants to marry me."

Sister Abby laughed. "Justin, you're a very attractive man and I am sure with your education and financial situation you are considered a very good catch. You have to see yourself the way a young, working woman sees you. Especially one with a child she is supporting."

"So it's nothing in particular that I am doing to encourage them?"

"I wouldn't think so, dear."

"Good, in the future I'll avoid talking to anyone who is not already attached."

"Justin, has Brian asked about me at all?"

"No, he hasn't mentioned you. He has told me that he doesn't trust you not to cause us trouble."

"And do you trust me?"

"You've show me nothing but kindness. I do trust you. But my first allegiance has to be to Brian."

"He must be very bitter."

"Frankly, I don't think he has given it much thought lately. He's been involved in the political election which takes place next month. And he's also been working hard on putting together the winery. In fact he left yesterday to visit some vineyards in Napa Valley. He was planning on purchasing new equipment and get ideas about planting. He's been very busy."

"It's good that he is doing things that he loves to do."

"He loved medicine too. But it kept us apart too much." Justin said. "He'll be gone a week or so. When he gets back I'll bring up the subject of a meeting between you. That is if he is in the right mood. He can be very intense at times. The election has made him that way lately. I'll be glad when that's over and we can concentrate on making wine and celebrating the holidays."

Brian arrived home late Wednesday afternoon. It had been a very successful trip and he was in a hurry to unload the used machinery that he had purchase. He was not surprised that Justin wasn't home. He usually worked late at the mission on Thursday. Since Brian was not due back until the weekend Justin most likely ate dinner there and would return home at night.

The election was only one month away and things had gotten very heated at the last meeting he'd attended. One of the committee members quit because his house had been set on fire. There was no proof that the opposition had committed the crime but he was concerned for the safety of his family. Brian was anxious to get into the City to attend this evening's meeting. He quickly unloaded the machinery into the barn and took off for the City.

When he arrived Brian noticed that a few of the younger members were absent but that in their place were several upstanding citizens who Brian recognized. It appeared that some of the people of this City were sick of the anarchy that had ruled for too long. It was time for change, even if there was a price to pay. Brian was speaking to the assembly about the campaign plans for the coming week when there was a loud crash in the room. Someone had thrown a brick through the window. Several more bricks came flying through the air as the members scrambled to take cover. There were a few minutes of silence and they heard the police sirens. The people in the room were outraged at the blatant attack. It reinforced their resolve to clean up the corruption in this City.

The meeting ran until well after midnight. Had it not for the fact that he was anxious to see Justin he would have stayed the night at a hotel. The trip home was treacherous. It had rained earlier in the evening and now there was a fog that covered the road. Brian could barely see a few feet ahead. It was almost 2:00 a.m. when he finally pulled up next to the house. He was alarmed to notice that Justin's car was nowhere to be found.

The house was dark. Brian turned on a lamp and searched the kitchen table for a note. There was none. It was late and the roads were too dangerous to go out looking for Justin. He reasoned that Justin might have attempted to drive home and turned back because of the fog. Tomorrow Brian planned to go to the mission to make sure that Justin was there.

Justin usually had the day off on Thursday and Brian thought he may be on his way home. Brian waited till noon to drive to the mission. When he got there he saw a young woman eating her lunch on the porch. He assumed that she was the new teacher.

"Good afternoon, Miss." He tipped his hat and gave her a shy smile. "I'm Justin Taylor's brother. I was wondering if he was about?"

"You're Brian, how do you do. I'm Tess." She smiled at him. "I haven't seen Justin today. In fact I had to cover his class yesterday afternoon and I wondered if he was ill."

"Is Sister Abby around?"

"No, she's on an errand. I am sure she'll be back shortly. I have an extra sandwich here if you'd like to join me."

"No, thank you. I've eaten." Brian said. "When was the last time you saw Justin?"

"I believe it was yesterday morning. Or maybe the morning before that. I think he's been avoiding me if you want to know the truth."

"I'm sure that's not the case. When Sister Abby returns tell her I'll be back to talk to her."

Brian had become concerned. There would be no reason for Justin to miss class. Unless something had happened to him. He drove past the mission building and happened to glance to the right. Justin's car was parked behind the building. Now it was time for Brian to panic.

Brian paced nervously as the police questioned Sister Abby in her office. He was sure they were wasting their time here. Justin had been missing for almost two days and Brian was convinced that his enemies at the counsel were responsible. They'd run Brian's car into a ditch, there was no telling what they would do to Justin to send Brian a message.

The office door opened and the policeman approached him, "Mr. Kinney, the Sister said that she has not seen Justin since she left on some errands Tuesday afternoon. He was alone at the school grading papers when she last saw him."

"That is my brother's auto parked in back of the building. Someone must have abducted him from here."

"Mr. Kinney, there is no evidence of foul play that I can see. He may have gone off with a friend and left his auto here. Maybe there's a woman?"

Brian realized that the police did not share his desperation. "He wouldn't do that without sending me word."

"I am going to his club to interview some of the members." the officer said. "Maybe they can shed some light on his whereabouts. I suggest you go home. He may be there now or left word."

"He would not be there without his auto. But I see your point. I'll wait there until I have word from you. Thank you for your help."

Brian sat down at one of the children's school desks. As his long legs sprawled out under the desk he felt great despair. He was on his own in his search for Justin. It was clear that the police did not believe that Justin was in danger. Brian was out of ideas where to look. Lost in thought, he had not heard Sister Abby enter the room.

"Brian, I'm glad you stayed behind. I want to tell you something."

He stood up abruptly knocking over the chair. "I have no time for you now. I have to find him."

"It's about Justin. I didn't tell this to the police but I suspect I might have an idea what happened to him."

Brian grabbed her arm. "If you know something you should have told the police. They don't believe me. I'll get them back here, and you tell them everything."

"Brian, hear me out. I didn't say anything to the police because I believe that Anthony might be involved. I recently found out that he was obsessed with Justin. The other day Anthony showed up at the school while I was out on an errand. I heard them arguing in the office. Anthony wanted Justin to run away with him. Justin was very angry. Anthony left here very distraught that day and has not been back."

"And you think he might have done something drastic? Justin could be in more danger than I imagined. We must tell this to the police."

"And what do you think they would say if I told them that Anthony was romantically obsessed with your brother? Brian, it would cast him in a light of suspicion, and neither one of you can afford that to happen."

"What do you suggest we do? Go door to door looking for them?"

"Of course not. Earlier in the week his sister showed up at the school and told me that Anthony had been obsessing about a man he met at the mission. He did not come home the night before and she was worried. His family had been very concerned about him. A week ago his sister arrived with the intention of taking Anthony back to Boston where he had been living in a sanatorium."

"A sanatorium? What's wrong with him?"

"He has a mental disease. His family believed that it was controlled by medication. Then one day he disappeared from the hospital. The family is very wealthy and Anthony has a trust fund. They tracked him down to San Francisco and his sister came here to talk to him. She said he was very distraught and anxious. He was in love with a man who was trapped by his family. He told her that he would return to Boston with her, but he would have to talk to his lover. She reluctantly let him go."

Brian's eyes grew wide. "Justin is in great danger. We must go to the police. Even if it means we have to leave San Francisco. I can't take any chances with Justin's life"

"I've been thinking about places Anthony might have taken him. I recalled that when Justin first started working here he and Anthony were very chatty. Since they were both from New England they discussed places they were both familiar with. I overheard one conversation where Justin told Anthony that you and he owned a bungalow on the ocean and that it was one of his favorite places on earth. He especially enjoyed going there in the fall after the crowds had left. He described it as isolated."

Brian grabbed his hat from the desk. "If I don't return in a few hours, you must tell the police about Anthony."

"I'm going with you." Abby said as she grabbed her shawl.

"No, you're not!" Brian declared.

"I will follow you out there in my wagon if you don't let me come with you."

"I don't need any help! Not from you!"

"Don't be ridiculous, Brian. We don't want anyone to get hurt. I can talk to Anthony and perhaps he'll let Justin go voluntarily. He can then go back home to Boston and Justin will be safe. If you go there half cocked and confront him with anger, you might put Justin's life endanger."

"Alright, you can go. But you'll come with me, and do what I tell you to do. If Justin is hurt, you can be sure that Anthony will pay. You won't be able to stop me."

"Fair enough."

They rode out the ocean in silence. As soon as the house became visible Abby called out that she saw a truck parked on the side of the house. "They're here! That's Anthony's truck."

Brian sped down the road toward the house.

"Brian, slow down. We must proceed with caution. If Anthony is agitated he may become violent.

"We don't know that he hasn't become violent already. I'm sure Justin is not taking his abduction with great humor."

Brian was right. Justin had been tied up and stuffed into a closet. He had no idea that he was waking up in his own bungalow at the ocean. Anthony had drugged him. Justin remembered being struck on the head when he left the mission. Anthony had taken him somewhere and locked him in a room. He had been tied to a bed with a rag stuffed

in his mouth. Frustration turned to fear when Anthony became agitated. It was clear to Justin that there was someone with them in the house. He could hear footsteps over his head. He tried to make noise by screaming with the rag in his mouth and hitting his head on the headboard. Anthony yanked him off the bed and threw him into a wall, cutting his forehead. Moments later Justin heard an engine start outside. The person upstairs must have left the house. Anthony took the opportunity to move Justin to a more isolated spot.

It was dark in the room and when Anthony touched Justin on the leg, he jumped. "What are you doing?" Anthony had taken the rag from Justin's mouth but his eyes were still blindfolded.

"Touching you. Don't worry, it's safe now. No one can hear us."

"Safe! Once I get out of these ropes you won't be safe! I'm going to kill you?"

"Be calm my love. We are free to be together here. Once we make love you will want to leave with me. You'll see how beautiful sex can be when you love someone."

Justin could feel Anthony lie down on the bed next to him. The man was naked. Justin jumped when Anthony ran his hand over his crotch.

"You need to relax." Anthony said softly. "I will have you Justin. Right now."

Justin became enraged. He bite down hard on Anthony's ear. They struggled and Justin was able to knee him in the balls. Anthony screamed out in pain and jumped off the bed. Once again Anthony grabbed Justin and threw him into the wall, this time knocking him out. Justin woke up in a closet with his hands tied and the rag in his mouth. His despair turned to hope when he heard Anthony talking to someone. With all his might Justin banged his feet into the closet door over and over again. He was rewarded for his efforts. All at once the door opened and he was in Brian's arms.

Brian carried Justin out to the car where he untied him and examined his injuries. Justin struggled against Brian's efforts to keep him still. "Let me at him! Brian, let me go!"

Brian gently held him back. "Sister Abby is talking to him."

"Brian, he kidnaped me. He tried to force himself on me!"

"But he didn't, did he?"

"No! Of course not. I would die before I would allow another man to touch me."

Brian held him tightly. He told Justin how Abby had figured out where they were. "Abby told me that Anthony has a mental disease. He was in a sanatorium back east. She thinks she can talk him into going back there."

Justin calmed down a bit. "She can make him listen. She's very good getting people to do the right thing. I guess I am lucky that she figured it out. I owe her my life."

"I wouldn't go that far, Justin. But we were lucky that she was around."

Brian tried to get Justin to sit in the car and wait. But Justin was too nervous to sit still. He paced back and forth trying to get a peek in a window. "What's happening in there, Brian? Do you think she's okay? Anthony could hurt her."

"She tied him up. He's not going anywhere."

"She did?" Justin smiled for the first time since this ordeal began. "Your mother is quite a remarkable woman, isn't she Brian?"

"That woman is NOT my mother. But she is one ornery, feisty female. If you ask me, Anthony doesn't stand a chance."

With that, the door opened and Abby emerged with a rather sullen Anthony following sheepishly behind her. "We're ready. Anthony will be returning to Boston with his sister on the next train." She announced. "I'll drive his truck back and the two of you can go home."

"You'll ride back with us." Brian said firmly. "I'm not taking any chances of him getting away from you. He won't be needing that truck where he's going. We'll take it back next time we get out here. Now let's go."

No one spoke a word on the trip home. Brian stopped in front of Anthony's home and he and Justin waited outside while Abby talked to his sister. When she came out she was surprised they were still waiting. "You needn't have waited. I could have taken a street car home."

"We wanted to thank you, didn't we Brian." Justin said.

Brian shrugged and responded, "We'll take you home now."

Their ordeal was over. Thankfully no one was seriously injured. When they arrived home Brian held Justin in his arms for a very long time. "I love you," was all he could think of to say.

"I know you do. I love you too. Now, let's go to bed."

By Monday morning Justin was anxious to return to work. Brian had told him that he was going into town also and not to expect him back before evening. Justin hoped that there would be no awkwardness with Sister Abby. He enjoyed working at the mission and hoped that she had not been offended by the way that Brian had been behaving toward her. Justin understood Brian's deep rooted resentment of his mother. But surely he could at least be cordial to this woman who had become a friend.

Sister Abby was sitting on the porch when Justin arrived. "Good morning." He said, and took a chair next to her.

"Good morning, Justin. I trust you've recovered from your ordeal."

"I'm fine, thanks to you."

"I feel responsible in a way. I didn't know anything about Anthony when I hired him. I should have checked into his past. He was working closely with the children."

"You couldn't have known. I am sure the children didn't suffer."

"His sister called before they got on the train to thank me. He is the youngest in the family and they'd been very distraught over his disappearance. It was the right thing to do, letting him go without getting the police involved. Thank you for that Justin."

"It was in our best interest too. Brian told them I'd been visiting a friend and became ill. It was a flimsy story but they didn't seem to care."

"Brian can be very convincing."

Justin smiled. "He has that gift. He should have been an actor." He became serious. "I hope that Brian's behavior did not offend you. He's grateful to you for your concern for my safety. It was rude of him not to thank you for that."

"Brian is a bitter man. And he has good cause to be. He'll never forgive me Justin. I accept that."

Justin gently touched her hand. "Don't give up hope."

Abby sighed deeply. "By the way Justin. Anthony's family has donated his truck for the use of the mission. Perhaps you'd have time to drive me out there after classes to retrieve it."

They made it back from the trip to the beach house in the late afternoon. Justin stayed at the mission into the dinner hour. Since Brian had told him not to expect him home for dinner, Justin stayed to help Sister Abby serve the meal and joined her to eat in the kitchen afterward. It was already dark when he started for home. Sister Abby stood on the porch and waved to him. As was her habit she made a pot of coffee and went to sit out on the porch to relax.

Brian had been waiting in the dark across from the mission until he watched Justin drive away. When he saw Abby come back to the porch and sit down, he took the opportunity he had been waiting for.

"I see you still like your evening coffee. Do you have an extra cup?" Brian asked.

Abby was surprised to see him. "I'm afraid you missed Justin. He left a few minutes ago."

"I came to talk to you."

Abby went inside and poured coffee for Brian. He was sitting in a chair when she came out. "It's getting rather chilly out here. Would you like to go inside?" Abby suggested.

"As I recall you like the chilly evening air. I recall you sitting on our porch at home many a fall evening like this one."

"Brian, may I ask why you're here?"

"I owe you. You wanted me to talk to you. So I'm here to talk. Don't mistake my coming here as some kind of forgiveness, because it's not. I don't forgive you for leaving your little boy. I am not a little boy anymore, but I still have memories of his pain. My life is a happy one now and I am very content. If you want to talk to me, I'm ready to listen."

"I'd like to hear about your life."

"Like what?"

"I don't know if I am ready to hear the bad things that happened. Tell me something good first. Like when you met Justin."

Brian chuckled. "You'll get a different story from him if you ask. But this is the truth. I was working in a stable in Buck Skin Joe, Colorado when he arrived on the stage coach. He stuck out like a sore thumb in his big city suit and his bulging leather bag. The minute I saw him bells went off in my head."

"It was love at first sight."

"Hell, no. It was lust. I lusted after his money. And maybe I was a little attracted to him. He looks much the same now. His hair was so blond he shone in the sun. His skin was soft as a baby. It was the first time in my life I felt that kind of attraction toward anyone. I wanted to protect him from the world. Mostly from me."

"What did he have to fear from you?"

"I wasn't always the upstanding citizen you see before you today. My past is as shady and scandalous as your own. My father died when I was 12. I was taken in by a minister who beat and raped me. I ran away from him only to take up with a traveling medicine show. Dr. Dave showed me how to cheat and steal. But my heart wasn't in it. So he beat and raped me. I ran away from him and joined up with a band of bank robbers. I road with them for a few years and then they left me high and dry in the desert one day. I rode north and ended up in Buck Skin Joe. One day this blond city boy arrived in town and changed my life forever."

"That's not the life I'd envisioned you have. I thought you would take over the farm from you father and maybe marry and have a few children."

"Sorry to disappoint you."

"I'm not disappointed. You're still farming of a sort, just in a different place. And you have a loving family of a different kind."

"My father loved you. He changed when you left. I don't think it ever occurred to him that you might abandon us."

"That surprises me. He never said he loved me. I didn't feel loved. He was a good man, Brian. I thought he was a good father and would take care of you."

"He drank heavily. When he was sick he would talk about you. He missed you terribly."

"I always intended to send for you."

"Why didn't you?"

"Circumstances. . . I became pregnant. George, the man I ran away with, abandoned me. I did what I had to do to survive. I found my way to my sister's home in St. Louise. She took me in and I gave birth to my twins. A boy, Connor, and a girl, Claire. My sister helped me to get a respectable job cleaning the homes of her rich friends. A few years later I met a man who I fell in love with and we married.

"I went to school and got my teaching certificate. A short time after that I became pregnant again. I had a son named Charles, after his father. He reminded me so much of you as a baby, Brian. It was at that time I wrote to you. I can see now that you never answered because your father had died and you were off on your own. You don't know how much it pained me that you didn't write me back."

"Sounds like you had a nice family."

"It was nice. In fact, aside from the guilt I felt about leaving you I was very happy. Then my husband died suddenly. With three children to raise things became difficult. I had little time to spend with my baby as I had a teaching job in the day time and I cleaned houses at night. My sister cared for the baby and the older children. I lived to spend time with my children. Little Charles was so bright. He could read before he started school. One night I was working late

for a party. When I arrived home the fire trucks were outside my house. My twins were in the street crying hysterically. The fireman told me that my sister and my youngest child had perished in the fire. He was eight years old."

"I am sorry." Brian said sincerely. "Life can be unpredictable."

"I had bad dreams after that night. Charles was angry with me for leaving him alone. Then the vision of Charles would turn into your face, Brian. After that I became obsessed with finding you."

"As you can see, I'm doing fine. I don't need you anymore."

"I am glad you came."

Brian rose from his chair and started to leave. "My memories of you are not all bad. I found comfort thinking about those nights on our porch if that makes any difference to you."

"Yes, it does, Brian thanks again for coming."

Brian hesitated then turned back, "I just want to warn you that Justin might invite you to join us for Thanksgiving. I don't put much store in holidays, but Justin's a family man. His family is in New York and won't be coming west until Christmas time. So if he does ask you to Thanksgiving dinner, I want you to know it's okay with me if you say yes."

"I look forward to Justin's invitation."

"It doesn't mean you're family or anything. Just that it pleases him to have someone to fuss over on the holidays."

They said good night and Brian headed for home.

Journals West - Part Eleven

Life's Adventures

Justin was not in the kitchen when Brian arrived home. Before he called out his name Brian heard snoring coming from the living room. Justin had fallen asleep on the sofa while reading. The book lay open flat on his chest. Brian thought about waking him, but a feeling of tenderness overwhelmed him for a moment as he stared at his sleeping partner. Justin had changed very little over the years. His skin was as smooth and fair as the day they met. His hair had darkened to a deep honey blonde which Brian loved. Justin had worked hard to maintain his small but firm body. Brian wondered if he'd ever told Justin how much he admired his appearance.

Justin opened his eyes and Brian pretended to avert his eyes to the book on Justin's chest. "What are you reading that has put you to sleep?"

"Walt Whitman." Justin kissed Brian on the cheek. "What time is it?"

"A little past 8:00 pm."

"How was your day?" Justin asked with a smile.

"You mean where the hell have you been all day? Say what you mean, boy."

Justin laughed. "You know I worry."

"You didn't look worried lying on the sofa. In fact you looked very peaceful. . . and beautiful." Brian added.

"Thanks. But men are not . . ."

"You are." Brian interrupted. "You are the most beautiful man I've ever seen. I don't tell you that enough."

"Maybe not in words, but I know how you feel."

"Are you okay? Did suffer any setbacks at work? You did experience a dreadful ordeal. We haven't talked about it."

"I'm fine." Justin said firmly. He started to go to the kitchen to make a pot of coffee.

"I'm not." Brian said softly.

Justin stopped in his tracks. "What do you mean, Brian? We've been through a lot worse than me being abducted. I wasn't hurt. Just humiliated. It was not the most tragic event of my life."

"Sit down, please." Brian coaxed gently. Justin sat on the sofa next to him. "I want to talk about what happened."

"I'm listening."

"I want to apologize for not trusting you. When you first told me about Anthony I got jealous and you got defensive. Had I acted like a partner instead of an ass you could have told me about your concerns. Things might not have gotten out of hand."

“I should have made you listen.” Justin said as he sat on the sofa next to Brian. “Brian, do you resent the fact that I took the job at the mission? I’ve been able to make a good living by writing and drawing here at the house. I rarely went into town. The only time I socialized was at my club once a month or so. Working at the mission is fun for me. I get to meet new people and talk to them about their lives. I don’t feel so isolated.”

“I didn’t know you felt isolated.”

“It’s not so bad when you’re here. But when you were at the hospital all the time I got lonely a lot.”

“That’s over with. I’ll be home a lot more now.”

“You’re not asking me to quit the mission are you?”

“You do see the danger in bringing new people into your life, don’t you? Everyone we meet has the potential of turning on us. I only want to protect what we have from public attention.”

“I feel like you don’t trust my judgment.”

“You were just violently abducted by someone you judged to be worth befriending.”

“We were never friends. He was interesting to talk to, that’s all. When things got weird, I cut him off.”

“A little too late.”

“Alright, I shouldn’t have trusted Anthony. But some people are worth getting to know.”

“You mean Abby.”

“Yes, and some of the other people I’ve met at the mission. I want to keep working there.”

“You’ll be more careful in the future?”

“I’ve learned my lesson. Don’t trust anyone.”

“Good, then you should keep working there.”

“Brian, I want to ask you a favor.”

“What is it?”

“You know that Abby’s family is pretty far away. Her children live in St. Louis.”

“She has her sister in Berkley.”

“Yes, but her sister is going to her children’s home in Sacramento for Thanksgiving dinner.”

“And . . . “

“Would you mind very much if I invited Sister Abby to join us. My Aunt Lindsay and Uncle Morgan can’t come here until Christmas. Please, Brian. I promise not to talk too much.”

“You can’t promise that. It’s your nature to talk too much. And if it will keep you from making a mess of our turkey dinner, then go ahead and invite her. But understand that she’ll be here as your friend with no place else to go, nothing else.”

Justin reached over and hugged Brian around the neck. “You are the sweetest, kindest most understanding man in the world.”

Justin stood in the hallway and knocked on the bathroom door. “Brian, get out of that tub this instant! She’ll be here in an hour and I have to bathe and get dressed.”

“Why don’t you come in here and join me?” Brian said seductively.

“I have too much to do this morning for your foolishness. You can be the most exasperating man on the planet. Now hurry and get out of that tub.” Justin knocked on the door loudly. He gasped when the bathroom door opened and Brian stood in front of him stark naked. “Brian!”

“What?” Brian shrugged. “You said to get out of the tub. Did you think I was sitting in there in my suit.”

“You’re impossible.”

“What happened to sweetest, kindest . . . “

“Dear,” Justin smiled sweetly, “please get dressed. She’ll be here soon.”

"I don't know why your making such a big deal. It's not like she hasn't seen me naked."

"Please behave yourself today, Brian. This is my first big holiday dinner without my Aunt Lindsay to help."

"I won't come to the table naked if that will make you happy. But you will be paying for this later when we are in bed."

"That's a deal. Now will you please get dressed and select the wine you'll be serving for dinner."

Justin busied himself in the kitchen while Brian went to the wine cellar. An hour later dinner was ready, but their guest had not arrived. Justin paced the floor nervously, check out the window every 5 minutes. Brian settled himself into his favorite easy chair by the fire and read a book. "Brain, this is not like her. Sister Abby is very punctual."

"That's not the experience I had with her. I recall many a holiday that I spent waiting for her to show up. If dinner is ready? We should eat. Would you like red wine or white?"

"There could be something wrong. It looks to me like there is a storm brewing."

"Maybe she got stuck in the rain and decided not to turn around and go back." Brian said.

Justin grabbed his coat from the closet and started for the door. "I'm going to look for her."

Brian got up and looked out the window. "That storm is about to hit us pretty hard. I'm sure she's found shelter or gone back home. It's just a meal, Justin. Not worth getting worked up over."

"I know there's something wrong. She's just getting used to driving that truck. I'm going to look for her. Put the turkey in the ice box."

"Wait," Brian said. "I'm not about to let you go wandering around in a storm by yourself. You put the food away and I'll get my coat."

As Brian predicted, the violent storm struck when they had driven about a mile from home. Justin craned his neck at each curve in the road checking for Sister Abby's truck. He had a gut feeling that something had happened to her. It wasn't long before his worst fears were realized. He spotted a vehicle that had gone off the road. It was halfway down a steep incline. The truck apparently had turned over.

"Brian, look!. That's her truck!" Brian stopped the car and looked in the direction Justin was pointing.

"Stay here!" Brian commanded. He got out of the car and started down the slope. Justin was sliding down right behind him. At that moment a bolt of lightning shot out of the sky and hit a nearby tree causing Justin to lose his footing and slide halfway down the hill past the wreck.

“Justin!” Brian called out. He started after him, but Justin called back to Brian “I’m okay. Go see to your mother. I’ll be right there.”

Brian approached the truck cautiously. It was precariously perched upside down in between a downed tree and a large boulder. He carefully crawled along the driver’s side and peered in the window. Abby was unconscious from what he could tell. He reached in and felt the pulse in her neck. She was alive. His touch startled her awake.

“Brian, what happened?”

“You’ve been in an accident. I’ll stay here with you while I send Justin for help.”

Justin came running up to the wreck. “Brian, we have to try to get her out. That boulder might not hold for long.”

“My leg is crushed by the dash board.” Abby told them.

“I’ll climb in and free her.” Justin said. “I can see that her foot is caught. I’ll pull up the seat and get her out.”

“It’s too dangerous.” Brian warned. “You take the car and get help. I’ll stay here with her.”

With that, the truck started to shift and came close to sliding past the boulder that held it in place next to tree. Abby grabbed Brian’s hand and said as calmly as she could. “Let me go, Brian. It’s alright. I am ready to die.”

Justin leaned into the truck from the other side and said firmly. “We’re not giving up on you! Now hold on while we secure the truck.” Justin pulled on Brian’s arm and took charge of the situation. “There’s a rope in the trunk of my car. We’re going to have to tie one end of the rope to the car and the other to the truck. If you could just move the truck a little bit to the left I am sure I could move the seat and get her out.”

“I’ll stay with her.” Brian said. “You go up to the car.”

“Brian, I’m smaller than you. I can slide into the window if you can pull the truck over to the left.”

“What if it moves too much and goes crashing down the hill with you both inside.”

“It won’t, if you tie it to the car.” Justin insisted. “Now stop arguing with me. There’s a break in the rain now and we have to get her out as quickly as possible. I think that she is bleeding profusely.”

Brian ran up the hill and was relieved to see that several cars had stopped to investigate the crash. He told them the plan and two men who he recognized as neighbors volunteered to secure the rope and pull the truck into position. Brian ran down the hill and tied the rope to the axle of truck. When Justin was in position he signaled the men that

they were ready. When the truck moved just enough to get Justin inside, he signaled them to stop and hold that position.

Sister Abby had passed out again. Justin pulled gently on her leg but it would not budge. He asked Brian to get him a tire iron so that he could use it to pry the seat back. Brian ran back up the hill and returned with it as fast as he could.

“Brian, you go on the other side and hold her while I pull the seat back.” With all the strength he could muster he yanked on the seat. Finally it gave in and Justin was able to reach Abby. “I’ll need a rag or something to tie on her leg. I am afraid she is bleeding very badly.”

Once again Brian ran up the hill and got his medical bag from the back seat. He could hear Abby moaning when he got to the truck. “Justin, tie this tightly around her leg just above the cut. That should slow the bleeding.” Justin did as Brian had instructed and when it was done he gently put his arms around Abby and slowly pulled her out the side window. Brian was ready to carry her up the hill. He quickly examined her injuries and was dismayed by the amount of blood that was leaking through the bandage. He wrapped it as best he could and put her into the back seat of their car.

Justin thanked the neighbors who had come to help. As he got into the front seat of the car he heard a loud crash. He did not need to look back to know that Sister Abby’s truck was now at the bottom of the hill.

Thankfully they were not far from the hospital where Brian had worked as a researcher. Abby had slipped in and out of consciousness on the trip. Brian was concerned about the loss of blood. He recognized one of the nurses at the desk. “Please help, we have an injured woman in the car. Her truck went off the road and turned over. She has a gash in her leg and I’m afraid she has lost a lot of blood.”

Abby was whisked into the emergency room. Brian and Justin paced the floor waiting for word. A doctor who was a friend of Brian’s with came out to talk to them. “Brian, Abby was very lucky that you came by when you did. She’s in grave condition. Her leg is broken and will have to be set, but she lost so much blood that she’s very weak. We almost lost her a few times.”

“What about a blood transfusion?” Brian asked.

“That’s what we plan to do. But it is a risky procedure. Does she have any family that you know of? It’s best if the blood comes from a family member.”

“She’s my . . . “

“Aunt.” Justin interrupted him. “Sister Abby is Brian’s aunt on his mother’s side.”

“You’ll be her best hope then. Come inside and we’ll prepare you.”

Justin paced the floor alone for what seemed like hours. Finally a nurse came to him and took him to where Brian was resting after the procedure.

Brian opened his eyes and saw that Justin had fallen asleep in a chair next to his bed. "Wake up, Brother."

Justin opened his eyes and smiled. "I'm just resting my eyes."

"How is she?"

"Resting comfortably is all they'll tell me."

"I guess we can go home then."

"We can't leave her here alone."

"Why not? We've done all we can for her."

Justin came close and whispered to him. "She's your mother and she's frightened."

"I thought she was my aunt." Brian said sarcastically.

"You know why I said that. It would shed suspicion on us."

"I know . . . your journal bible. The history of the Kinney Brothers. You think that people would have figured out by now it was a pack of lies."

"Maybe they might think that, but they have no solid proof. This situation might give people something to think about. Her being your aunt will not affect us in any way. Will it, Brian?"

"I suppose not. Have they gotten word to her kids yet?"

"I don't know. Remember it's a holiday and travel may be difficult. I want to wait until we can talk to her and make sure she's okay."

Brian sighed. "It's days like these I long for a time when life was not so complicated. I recall one Thanksgiving day I bashed a rabbit over the head and made myself the most satisfying rabbit stew. I sat under a tree and ate the whole pot. I feel asleep under the stars without a thought in my head for anyone."

"You long for those days?"

“At times like this I do.”

“You’d be miserable and you know it. A life you described may suit a young man, but at your age you’d most likely die of loneliness, or you’d freeze to death.”

“I guess you’re right. You always are.”

The nurse came back a few minutes later and announced that Sister Abby was awake. Justin approached her bed and took her hand. Brian stood near the door and nervously toyed with his hat.

Abby looked tired, but alert. Her manner was strong and feisty as Justin always knew her to be. She took his hand. “Justin, you saved my life.”

“And you saved mine. Now we’re even.”

“It’s hardly the same thing. You foolishly risked your life to save a cantankerous old woman like me.”

“I don’t see it that way. And I had help.”

Abby waved to Brian who still had not entered the room. “Brian, stop standing in the doorway fidgeting.”

“Yes, Auntie.” He said, smiling smugly.

“What are you talking about?” Sister Abby questioned him.

Justin answered her question. “You needed a transfusion and we told the doctor that you are Brian’s aunt on his mother’s side.”

“Oh, what a tangled web we weave.”

“Tangled web? Our lives are more like a hornets nest.” Brian said, settling himself into a chair next to the bed.

“I am grateful to you both. But I think you should go home and enjoy what’s left of your holiday.”

“We’ll stay until your family comes.” Justin announced.

“My family?”

“They called your son and daughter.” Brian explained.

“What?” She said in dismay. “I wish they hadn’t. Please have them call back and tell them I’m fine. This will cause such a commotion for them.”

“I bet they’re already on their way.” Justin said. “They’ll want to be here for you.” Sister Abby chuckled. “You’ve never met them. All they will do is whine and complain about how I’ve inconvenienced them. They will insist on putting me in a home or some such thing.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” said Justin. “There’s nothing to be done now. I bet they will be here as soon as they can.”

“Justin, I would like to rest now. Brian, thank you for all you’ve done for me. Now the two of you be off and enjoy your Thanksgiving meal.”

Justin had gone to the mission early Friday morning to let them know what had happened to Abby. Brian drove into the city late that afternoon to meet with him at the hospital. Justin greeted him in the hall outside of Abby’s room.

“Is anything wrong?” Brian asked when he saw Justin standing outside of Abby’s room.

“I wanted to warn you.” Justin said.

“Warn me about what?” Brian asked. His question was answered when a heavy set middle aged woman emerged from Abby’s room in tears. Her sobs could be heard down the hall. Justin looked at Brian and shook his head. “Justin, what’s going on?” Brian asked.

A moment later a short man with thinning hair came out of the room. He grabbed the sobbing woman by the arm and led her back inside.

“Brian, meet your siblings. The woman is Claire and the man is Connor. They’ve been here for half an hour and they are driving every one crazy . . . including me.”

“That’s our cue to leave.”

“We can’t do that.” Justin protested. Claire has done nothing but cry, and Connor . . . he’s just creepy.”

“It’s not our business.”

“Abby was close to tears a minute ago. Come inside and reason with them, Brian. You’re so good at that.”

“Let’s get it over with.” Brian said when he saw that Justin was resolved to stay. “Then you are taking me out for a big juicy steak.”

“It’s a deal.”

Abby looked small and fragile sitting up in the big white hospital bed. Brian was amused when Justin brushed past her children and sat on the bed putting a protective arm around Abby.

“Brian, thank you for coming.” Abby said in a weak voice. “These are my children, Claire and Connor.”

“And who is Brian, mother?” Connor asked snidely. “Why is he here? Is he another one of your disciple’s, like the blonde man?”

“Don’t be rude Connor.” Abby snapped. “I introduced you to Justin when you came in. For your information, Brian is my nephew. Justin is his half brother.”

“I’ve never heard you speak of a nephew named Brian, mother.” Claire said between sniffles. “Are you sure he’s related to us?”

“Of course I’m sure. He’s the son of my sister Maura.”

“The one who died in the cholera epidemic?” Claire recalled hearing the story.

“Yes. I lost track of my sister’s family after her death. I read about Brian in the newspaper and decided to look him up, being that he was living near to San Francisco. We’ve become reacquainted over the last few months. In fact I was on my way to their estate in the valley for dinner when my truck went off the road. Brian and Justin rescued me. They used Brian’s blood for a transfusion. If it weren’t for them you’d be here to arrange my funeral.”

Connor stepped forward and extended his hand to Brian. His demeanor had change and he seemed almost friendly. “We’re grateful to you, cousin, aren’t we sister?”

Claire was sitting in a chair in the corner of the room. The mention of her mother’s funeral had brought on another bout of wailing sobs.

Abby sat up straight in the bed. “Claire, control yourself.”

“Yes, Claire you need to get a hold of yourself.” Connor said. “We have to make arrangements to have mother moved to a facility in St. Louis as soon as possible.”

Justin, who had been sitting on the bed next to Abby jumped to his feet. “A facility!”

Brian hushed him. “Justin, stay out of it.” Justin put his arm around Abby and let Brian talk.

“Her injuries are not life threatening. After a few weeks rest she should be as good as new. It would not be advisable to move her at this point in time.”

“And how would you know that?” Connor asked.

“I’m a doctor.” Brian explained. “I retired recently, but I know everyone on the staff here. She’ll get the best treatment available. After that she’ll need to stay off her feet for a few weeks. There’s no need for you to go to the expense of finding a suitable facility. And the good ones are quite expensive.”

“Claire, you’ll have to take her in.” Connor ordered.

“I can’t do that.” Claire cried. “My house is small enough with six children. You have no dependents. You should take her.”

Abby put up her hand and commanded. “Stop! I am not an invalid ! I still have my wits about me. I’ll make my own arrangements.”

“But mother . . .,” Claire began to sob again.

“Connor, please find suitable hotel rooms for your sister and yourself. I’ll pay for your travel expenses. Now if you don’t mind I would like to get some rest.”

Connor put his hand on Brian’s shoulder and said. “Maybe our cousin wouldn’t mind putting us up on his fancy estate for the night.”

Justin almost fell off the bed. Brian turned and addressed his brother with a sarcastic smile. “Our farm is quite a distance away. It’s not very convenient to the hospital. There is a decent hotel across the street.”

“I’ll go make our arrangements then. Come along, Claire. Mother is tired.” Connor shook Brian’s hand. “Since we are kin we should catch up. Sister and I won’t be leaving until tomorrow evening. Maybe we can have dinner tonight.”

“Sorry but have plans.. A business dinner.”

“Business? I thought you were retired.”

“I retired from medicine.”

“Brian is starting a winery.” Justin announced proudly. Brian turned and glared at Justin.

“A winery?” Connor said with a sneer. “I’d be very interested to hear about that. I am always looking for investments. What do you say we meet for lunch tomorrow at the hotel?”

Brian realized it was best to humor the man. Abby was visibly upset and he did not want to insult him in front of her. “We’ll meet you at the hotel at noon.”

After they left Brian closed the door. “Well, your children are . . . charming.” He said sarcastically.

“I love them dearly but there’s a reason I live 2,000 miles from them.”

“I’d say you threw away the best of the litter.”

Justin hit his arm, “Brian, that’s not nice.”

“It’s true.” Abby said under her breath. She tried to hide a smile. “I won’t take sides against my children. You’ll have to find a way to get along.” It was apparent that she was becoming sleepy. “Justin, could you do me a favor and contact the mission office tomorrow and tell them I’ll need some assistance when I go home from the hospital. Perhaps they would have some volunteers that would help.”

“Nonsense. The living quarters are on the second floor. There are too many stairs. You can’t stay there alone with strangers.”

“The alternative would be to go to live with Claire or Connor.”

“Brian . . .” Justin looked over at him pleadingly.

“You’re not going anywhere for a few more days.” Brian avoided Justin’s stare. “Things like this always have a way of working out. Why don’t you get some rest and we’ll see you tomorrow.”

Once they were out in the streets Justin told Brian to pick a restaurant. They thought it was better not to dine near the hospital for fear of running into Brian’s new found dysfunctional family. They selected a restaurant on that overlooked the water. After they ordered their meals Justin decided to bring up the subject of Abby. “Brian, we can’t allow those two to bully Abby into leaving her home.”

“It’s not our place.”

“It is your place.” Justin argued defiantly. “She’s your mother. You’re her oldest son.”

“She took away that title when she abandoned me. I owe her nothing.”

“I do. I owe her my life.”

“What do you expect me to do, announce that I’m the long lost brother she gave up so she could run away with their low life father?”

“I am sure that if you offered her a place in our home they would be more than happy to go back to their lives.”

“Justin, I am not prepared to give up our home. It’s the only place we can be together without worrying about being judged.”

“She hasn’t judged us.”

“Having a meal with us is one thing. Living under the same roof is quite another. It could become very uncomfortable for us and for her. You know what happens when your Aunt Lindsay comes to visit for a week. We can’t be ourselves. It’s a bad idea Justin.”

“Can you think of a better one?”

“I’ll pay someone to take care of her at the mission.”

Justin sighed. “I guess that’s best. But I don’t see how she can manage the stairs in her condition.”

“I’m glad we’re in agreement.”

“I’ll go there and visit with her.”

“Good, I’m sure she’ll appreciate it.”

Justin was not surprised Brian had awakened early the next morning and gone off somewhere. He'd often spend the mornings riding his horse around the property before joining Justin for breakfast. Justin dressed and went downstairs to make pancakes. Brian never did come home. Justin looked out the window and noticed that Brian’s car was gone. He must have had a meeting that morning and forgot to tell Justin about it.

Justin decided to go to the hospital. It well may his last opportunity to see Abby. When he arrived she was sitting in a chair near the window. Her color had returned and she looked rested.

“Good morning, Justin.” Abby said when she saw him.

Justin bent to kiss her cheek. “You look lovely sitting here in the sunshine.”

“I am feeling better.”

“Have you heard from Connor or Claire this morning?”

“Yes. They’ve arranged for a convalescent home. They’re coming this afternoon to pick me up and take me with them.”

“If that’s not what you want, then tell them no.”

“I’ve thought about it a great deal. I realize my leg will be immobilized for weeks. I won’t be able to handle the stairs at the mission. And I will need a lot of help for quite a while. It’s too much of a burden to put on the volunteers at the mission.”

“If you want to stay there, Brian and I will pay someone to help you.”

“I couldn’t ask you to do that Justin. You’ve both been far to kind.”

“You’re Brian’s mother. We are as much your family as Connor and Claire.”

“There would be too many questions, Justin. It would look odd for you to help me. People would wonder about our relationships. I don’t want to cause you and Brian any more problems. I’ll do what Connor and Claire want me to do.”

Justin decided to change the subject. “I brought a book for you to read on the train.”

“Thank you dear.”

“I also brought you a picture of Brian and me. It was taken when we first came to San Francisco.

“Oh, Justin you are both so young and handsome. Not that either of you has changed much. You’re still both young and handsome.”

“Thanks. You’re not so bad yourself.”

“I’ll miss you both very much.”

“We’ll miss you too.”

“We can write.”

Silence hung in the air between them. Finally Justin stood up and spoke what was on his mind. “I don’t like your children and I don’t trust they’ll do what’s in your best interest. They seem far too selfish. I know it’s not my place. But I don’t want you to go with them.”

Abby took his hand and squeezed it. She was about to speak but was interrupted when Brian burst into the room. “What are you two conspiring about?”

Justin answered him. “Connor and Claire are coming this afternoon to take Abby to St. Louis. They’re putting her in a home, Brian!”

“No they aren’t.”

“How do you know that, Brian?”

“I went into the city this morning to make some inquiries about my baby brother. It seems that he’s rather unscrupulous. He has a long history with the authorities in St. Louis. In fact, they were very interested in his whereabouts. It seems he’s been involved in a scam or two and they want to talk to him. Between Claire and Connor they don’t have a penny between them. I had lunch with Connor just now and he asked me all kinds of questions about the vineyard and the property that we own. He insinuated that unless I made him a partner in the family business he would have his mother committed to an institution. I told him if he and his pathetic twin sister didn’t pack up and hit the road immediately, I would have him arrested and sent back to St. Louis in chains.”

Justin grinned at him. “Why am I not surprised?”

“Honestly, I can’t say I am surprised either. He is my son. But he’s always been a handful. He takes after his father. You certainly sized him up quickly, Brian.”

“It takes a con man to know a con man. I spent the first thirty years of my life charming money out of people. If charm didn’t work I used violence.”

“That was a long time ago, Brian.” Justin said. “And you were just trying to survive.”

“Because you had no one to take care of you.” Abby said sadly.

“I realize that if you had taken me with you, I'd have been playing nursemaid to the Boobsey Twins all those years. I would have run away at the earliest opportunity anyway. I guess you did me a favor.” Brian said. “Justin, help Abby pack her bag.”

“Where is she going?” Justin asked.

“I’m sitting right here.” Abby said. “I can speak for myself. Brian, where am I going?”

“Home . . . with me and Justin, of course. Now get a move on.”

Justin had already begun to gather the items in Abby’s room. When Abby was ready, Justin helped her into the wheelchair which a nurse had brought into the room. Brian got behind the chair and began to briskly push Abby down the hall.

“Brian, wait up.” Justin said as he struggled to keep up. “Maybe I should push the chair and you could carry the bag to the car.”

“Justin, I know how to push a wheelchair. I am a doctor.”

“Why are you in such a hurry?”

“I parked the car in the ambulance spot.”

“All the more reason you should go and move the car. Here, take the bag. Abby and I will follow.”

Abby seemed amused by the exchange between the two men. When they got outside, Brian opened the car door and Justin helped her get inside. Justin realized his car was parked near the door. “Brian, do you think the hospital will let us borrow the wheelchair for Abby? It would be helpful for her to use to get around.”

“I’ll go in and ask. I am sure it would be alright. Why don’t you drive home in my car and I’ll load the chair into your car.”

Justin was not surprised when he parked his car near the front steps that Brian was right in back of them. Brian carried Abby into the house while Justin got the chair and set it down in the living room. Brian had also thought to get a pair of crutches. Justin showed Abby to the room on the first floor next to the bathroom. With a little effort Abby was able to navigate on the crutches into the bathroom.

The afternoon passed quickly. Justin prepared chicken and salad for dinner. After the meal Abby announced that she was tired and would like to go to bed. Brian cleaned up the kitchen while Justin assisted Abby to her room.

Justin sat next to the bed when Abby was settled. "I brought this cowbell in here for you to call us in case you need help in the night. I'll leave the light on in the hallway in case you want to get up during the night."

"I am so tired I think I'll sleep straight through to morning. Thank you, dear."

Brian was sitting up in bed reading when Justin came into their bedroom. Brian smiled at him sweetly and lifted up the covers for him. "Come to bed."

Justin took off his clothes and slipped into the bed next to Brian. He rested his head on Brian's chest for a moment then began kissing him gently. They made love slowly and passionately. When they were finished Justin got out of bed and put on his underwear before returning to bed.

"Why are you wearing your drawers? You never wear clothes to bed?"

"I want to be ready in case Abby calls for me."

Brian made a face, but said nothing.

"Brian, I'd like to know what really happened this morning. What made you decide to bring Abby home with us?"

"I got to thinking about what you said. I do listen to you when you talk, even if it doesn't seem like I am at the time. I respect your feelings."

"Thank you. But that's not the real reason you practically dragged Abby out of that hospital."

"I didn't tell the whole story about Connor. He's pretty slick. He'd almost figured out that Abby was not my aunt and he was asking a lot of questions about you. It got violent and I had him arrested for assault. He was madder than a wet hen. When the police took him away he was making threats to take his mother somewhere I'd never see her again and getting to the bottom of my lies. I told the police that he was a wanted man in St. Louis."

"Do you think he'll talk his way out of it? You don't think he would come here to take Abby, do you?"

"No, I spoke to the police afterward. I told them if they would ship him back to St. Louis I would drop the assault charges here. They were only too happy to get him off their hands. They said they'd arrange it. I wanted to get Abby out of town quicky before she got wind of what happened."

"What happened to Claire?"

Brian laughed. "She hightailed it out of town on the next train. I think she was glad not to have the responsibility of her mother and her loser brother."

"You don't think that Connor will make trouble for us, do you?"

"I think he is in a mess of trouble where he's going. Hopefully they'll lock him up and throw away the key."

"Are you going to tell Abby what happened?"

"Of course I will. Once she's rested I'll tell her the whole story."

The next morning Brian awoke early. When he came downstairs he was surprised to see Abby sitting in her wheel chair in the kitchen drinking coffee. "Good morning, Brian. Can I get you some coffee."

"I'll get it. How did you manage to get up by yourself. You really shouldn't be putting a strain on that leg, you know."

"I needed to get up and start finding my way. This morning I was able to roll into the bathroom and bathe myself. One small accomplishment at a time. Once I pulled my self into the chair I felt quite capable of doing a few small things on my own."

"Like making coffee."

"I need my coffee in the morning. If I don't have a cup by dawn's light I'm out of sorts all day."

"Me too."

They sat in awkward silence for several minutes. Brian spoke first. "I was thinking about hiring a woman from the neighborhood to come in for a few hours a day to help you."

"Thanks, but I am a very independent soul. I don't like to be molly coddled."

"Suit yourself. But Justin isn't going to be here all day to see to you. Let us know if you change your mind."

"I want to thank you again for your hospitality, Brian. Your house is lovely and the layout will make it possible for me to get around while I recover. I was dreading being confined to one room at the mission."

“Since you seem to be on the mend I wanted to talk to you about your son.”

“What has Connor done now?” She asked without expression.

Brian explained what had happened the previous day. Abby showed no emotion. When Brian finished she simply said he’d done the right thing and asked him to pour her a second cup of coffee.

“I feel somewhat responsible for the situation. If you want I could make some calls. I could hire him a good attorney.”

“Brian, Connor is his father’s son. He’s always been devious and calculating. He’s a grown man now and he must answer for his crimes.”

“He must have been a headache for you growing up.”

“Yes, his behavior was cause for concern. But that’s not to say that I don’t love him.”

“I don’t see how that’s possible.”

“He’s my son. I love him unconditionally.”

As the weeks went past Abby continued to improve. The week before Christmas she was able to put pressure on her injured leg and walk with a cane. Both Brian and Justin were impressed at her fortitude. She took great pleasure with each small accomplishment. It was quite clear that she intended to make a full recovery as quickly as possible so that she could return to the mission.

Justin was pleased to see that Brian made a point to spend time with Abby. Justin laughed out loud when Brian offered to teach Abby to play poker and in turn she beat the pants off of him. He hoped that Brian and Abby would find a way to put the past behind them.

Christmas was only three days away. Justin was in the library putting the finishing touches on the painting that he had done for Brian’s Christmas gift when Abby knocked on the door. “May I come in?” She asked.

“Yes, of course. I was just finishing this up. What do you think?”

“Oh, Justin. . . I am speechless. It’s beautiful. I’m sure that Brian will love it. You are quite a talented artist.”

“Thanks.”

“Justin, I wanted to let you know that after the holidays I plan to return to the mission.”

“I figured you would. I know you must be anxious to open the school again. But I have to say I’ve enjoyed your visit with us.”

“I’m very grateful to you and Brian. I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t taken me in.”

“My family will be here tomorrow. I’m afraid it’s going to get a bit hectic.”

“Having a big family must be nice. Do they visit often?”

“I see them twice a year or so. I do enjoy their visits but I’m afraid that Brian usually gets uncomfortable after a few days. He’s always said he wasn’t cut out to be a family man.”

“I think he is very devoted to his family. . . you.”

“That’s true. But honestly, I am glad that Brian has blood kin. I never thought I’d get to have a mother in law like you.”

“And I never thought I would have a son in law like you.”

Justin grinned and turned his attention back to his work. Abby started to leave the room but stopped in her tracks and turned. “Oh, Justin. I didn’t mean . . . I never thought . . . “

Justin finished her sentence. “You never expected Brian to be with another man and not a woman.”

“Justin, if you were my son’s wife I would not love you more.”

“I know that. No one expects their child to grow up to be a homosexual.”

“I’d be lying if I said I was not surprised. But staying here with the two of you I never once felt awkward or uncomfortable. The way you are together is the most natural thing in the world. It’s a joy to be around you. I do love you both very much.” She kissed Justin on the cheek and left the room.

Brian had just finished putting new sheets on the bed in the guest room when Justin returned from the market. Justin went into the bedroom where Brian was working and closed the door. He put his arms around Brian and kissed him on the neck.

Brian turned and kissed him back. "Hey, stranger." Brian said. "We won't be able to kiss in any room but our bedroom for a long time."

"It's only twice a year we have company."

"It seems like a life time to me."

"Christmas is going to be very special this year."

"Where are we going to put all these people, Justin?"

"Tara and Robert will have this room; Uncle Morgan and Aunt Lindsay can sleep in the spare room upstairs; and I've put cots in the library for Chad and Simon."

"Good thing the entire clan isn't coming. We'd be sleeping in the barn."

"Stop complaining. You know you always enjoy the food. We're having fish for Christmas Eve."

"Chardonnay." Brian said thoughtfully.

"For Christmas dinner we are having roast beef."

"Merlot." Brian exclaimed. "You're not cooking the roast are you? I hate over cooked beef."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence." Justin said with a grin. "Not to worry, Aunt Lindsay is a master in the kitchen. Tara is an expert at making bread. And at this very moment Abby is in the kitchen preparing ginger bread cookies."

Justin watched the expression on Brian's face change. He planted a kiss between Brian's eyes.

"What was that for?" Brian asked.

"That was for the sad little boy who missed his mother's cooking at Christmas time."

"What are you talking about?" Brian pushed him away.

“Your face is an open book Brian. Every emotion you have is reflected in your eyes. After all these years I know exactly what you’re thinking.”

“Well you tell me then.”

“When I mentioned the cookies your eyes got sad. You were thinking about all the Christmases after your mother left.”

“I don’t even remember that time of my life anymore.”

“Deep down you do. But to tell the truth, I have seen less and less of that sad little boy of late.”

“I can’t forgive her for what she did, Justin.”

“Brian, that’s not what I see in your eyes when you’re sitting on the porch together talking about politics or travel, or when you’re playing cards with her. Your mother came back for you, Brian. After all these years she came for you. And I think that you love her for that. You won’t ever forget what she did, but maybe you could try to understand and forgive her. People do make mistakes when they are very young and foolish.

“In a week she’ll be leaving us and returning to the mission. You should think long and hard about where the two of you go from here.”

After dinner Justin disappeared to work on a secret project. Brian guessed it might be his Christmas present. Brian poured two glasses of wine. He went to join Abby who was sitting on the porch.

"It's getting chilly out here." Brian said as he handed her the wine.

"This should help warm us up."

"Tell me something, If you hadn't injured your leg, would you have gone back to St. Louis to be with your family for the holiday?"

“I haven’t lived in St. Louis for over 20 years. Once my children were on their own, I wanted to experience life and the beauty of nature in my own manner.”

Brian smiled at the term “beauty of nature” as it was what he had said to Justin when he “married” him.

“Don’t laugh at me.” She scolded.

“I wasn’t laughing at you. It’s just the term ‘beauty of nature’ has special meaning for me.” Brian wanted her to continue with her story.

“We used to take long walks when you were very young to study the beauty of nature. It was actually your science lesson.”

Brian now recalled her using the term when they were together. “Where did you go when you left St. Louis?”

“I was working for a wealthy family who traveled extensively. They hired me to tutor their children while they traveled to Paris, China, India and many other places. I learned as much about culture and religion as the children did. It was an illuminating experience. I was grateful for the opportunity. When their children were no longer in need of a tutor I traveled on my own for a while. I guess I was searching for something.”

“Searching for what?”

“When my young son died I had a crisis of faith. I stopped going to church. I even stopped believing in God. But as I grew older I felt empty inside. What I was looking for was a kind of spiritual fulfillment.”

“Where does one find such a thing as that?”

“I found a Society that believes in a combination of nature and the soul. The mix of science and religion made me think deeply about my purpose here on earth. I believe that your actions determine your destiny.”

“It makes sense to me. I’ve read of the Theosophist Society. Their headquarters is in Pasadena.”

“That’s where I lived before coming to San Francisco. I was teaching and studying other religions of the world. I found it quite interesting.”

“And have you found your spiritual fulfillment?”

“I have come to believe that God lives in all people. It is your actions on earth that determine if you have fulfilled your purpose.”

“Why did you leave Pasadena?”

"I couldn't get past my guilt over leaving my son. I believed it was fate that led me to read Justin's journal stories and ultimately allowed me to find you."

"You needed to find me so that you can get into heaven."

"I needed to find a way to right a wrong I had done, so I could let go of my guilt."

"That stuff about actions and destiny makes me wonder. I did a lot of rather questionable acts myself when I was younger. Do you think there's any hope for me?"

"The only person who guides your destiny is you. If you can forgive yourself for your sins and right the wrongs you've done, you will be rewarded. Judging by the life you live here with Justin, you have reached spiritual fulfillment here on earth."

"The life we live here is Justin's doing. I came along for the ride."

"Give yourself some credit, Brian. Justin's told me all the things you've taught him. He's enjoyed his adventures with you."

"Did he tell you about our first adventure?"

"You took him to Silverton to find his father. That was noble of you."

"Did he tell you I hit him on the head with a rock, took his money and left him for dead?"

"No, he didn't tell me that."

"My plan was to rob him. That's the kind of man I was then."

"You must have had a change of heart."

"He kissed me." Brian recalled the turning point in his life like it was yesterday. "I felt that kiss down to the bottom of my toes. Looking at that sweet face scared me to death. I just knew he'd be the death of me. But as it turned out he's my whole life. There was a violent thunderstorm and I went back to find him. Truth be told, I was looking for an excuse to go back. I'd already fallen in love."

"You're a very lucky man to have found such profound love."

"Did you love my father?"

"I was so young when I met Jack Kinney. The marriage was arranged by my father. But that's not to say that I did not feel love for the man. If he had only given me more of himself I might have stayed. True love might have grown over the years. But never doubt that I loved you from the moment I felt you growing in me. Your father was so excited. After you were born he was driven to make a success of the farm so that he could provide for his family. He was a good man, Brian."

"Yes, he was a good man."

"How different our lives would be if I had stayed."

"You would have been miserable."

"You would be a farmer with a wife and children. Justin would be living in New York. Can you imagine your life if you hadn't met him?"

"I don't want to imagine that. I am not a family man. I would sooner live in the forest alone for the rest of my life than to be trapped in a loveless marriage." Brian stopped and considered what he had just said. "That must be how you felt. You didn't feel loved. You didn't love him. Yet you were trapped . . . by me."

"You were the light of my life back on that little farm. But I did feel trapped. I wanted to learn to read and improve myself so that I might be a better mother to you. That's how I first met George. He was teaching me how to read. I don't know how I allowed it to happen but I was drawn to him. I always intended to return for you."

"When I was younger I thought you might have died. It was more of a comfort for me to think of you as dead, than not knowing where you were or if I would ever see you again."

"Brian, I may regret asking this, but I need to know if anything has changed between us. Have you forgiven me?"

Brian took a deep breath before looking her straight in the eye and answering simply, "Yes."

Abby breathed a sigh of relief. "Are you sure?"

"You were very young woman with no say over your own life. You saw a chance to change your circumstances and you took it. If I were in your shoes I can't say I wouldn't have done the same. You haven't judged me. I'm through judging you. I'm ready to let it go."

"You're an amazing man, Brian Kinney." Abby said, trying to hide the tears forming in her eyes.

"Justin's always saying that."

"Then it must be true."

“What can I say? I come from amazing stock.”

“I’ll be going back to the mission next week. I do hope that we can continue our poker lessons.”

“I don’t know if I can afford to play poker with you. But I wouldn’t mind coming by for a meal once in a while. I love Justin dearly but he’s never quite gotten a hang of serving a proper meal.”

“You and Justin are welcome anytime.”

“You don’t have to leave, you know. We can find a place for you here.”

“That’s kind of you. Thank Justin for me. Maybe one day when I’m old and gray I’ll take you up on that offer. But I need to get back to the mission and make myself useful.”

It was Christmas Eve and all the family had gathered around the large table in the dining room. Brian raised his glass and made the toast. “I’ll make this short and sweet.” He raised his glass. “To family. The greatest gift a man can have.”

Everyone joined in the toast and when it was finished Justin started passing the platters around the table.

“Abby, how is it you came to find Brian?” Tara asked.

“It read Justin’s Journal in the newspaper.”

“How wonderful you were able to reunite with your nephew after all these years.”

Abby smiled at Brian. “I don’t know what I would have done if Brian and Justin had not taken me in after my accident. It is wonderful to have family close.”

Lindsay smiled knowingly at Justin. He had explained to her who Abby really was. She decided it best to change the subject. “Abby, Justin’s told us that you’ve traveled extensively. Morgan and I are planning a trip to China in the spring. Perhaps you can recommend some interesting sites to see.”

The rest of the meal passed pleasantly. When coffee and desert were served, Tara said that she had an announcement to make. “Chad has been accepted to the University at Berkeley. He will be started classes there in January.”

Chad was Tara and Robert's eldest son. He had always had an interest in studying medicine. At every family gathering he has sought out Brian's advice. The two had developed a bond over the years. Brian stood up and said. "This news deserves another toast."

Everyone laughed. No more wine for me, Brian. Justin protested. I've had more than enough. "Well, with coffee then . . ." he raised his glass. "To the future doctor in the family."

"We wanted to ask a favor of you both. Since Chad won't be started class until February we wondered if he could stay here with you until then. I would have written but he only just made up his mind he was going to stay in California before starting school."

Justin looked over at Brian who's face was unreadable. "Of course he can stay here. He's family after all. Brian can help him study."

Justin left his Aunt and cousin's in the kitchen to finish cleaning up. It was almost dark and he had not seen Brian for a while. Knowing his partner would need a break from "family" after a long day, he decided that Brian was most likely out in the barn.

"Hey," Justin said when he found Brian grooming Moby. "What are you doing out here?"

"I could ask you the same thing."

"I was looking for you. I wanted to give you your Christmas present tonight." Justin smiled and produced a package that he held behind his back.

Brian laughed. "Is that a fishing pole?"

"Open it and see."

"In a minute." Brian said. "I want you to open your present first."

Justin grinned broadly and looked around the barn. "Where is it?"

"Don't be impatient. First I want you to taste this batch of wine I made." Brian poured Justin a glass of red wine and Justin drank a sip.

"It's wonderfully romantic." Justin exclaimed. "You're a genius, Brian." Brian smiled and poured himself a glass of the wine.

"Now, where is my present?" Justin asked.

"Right over here" Brian pointed to the stall next to Moby's.

Justin hadn't seen the horse when he came in. Now he looked into the stall in amazement. "Brian, he looks just like Slow Gus." He opened the stall door and put his hand out to pet the horse's nose.

"It took me quite a few trips to breeders to find just the right one. I thought he'd remind you of the good old days."

"I love him, Brian. Thank you."

"I figured you're going to need a horse so that we can ride through the vineyard together."

"You really are excited about your new business, aren't you."

"Our new business. And yes I am. I guess at heart I am a farmer of a sort after all."

"And that brings us to your present." Justin smiled slyly. "Merry Christmas, Brian."

Brian opened the package and saw what Justin had done. It was plans for the vineyard and an oil painting of the main building with the sign Kinney Brother's Winery. He had also designed several possible labels for their new wines.

"I had it designed by an architect." Justin explained. "If you like the plan, they can start building right after the holidays."

"It's perfect." Brian said as he studied the plans.

"Over here they are going to construct a brand new stable and barn area for the horses and equipment you'll need in the field. Moby and New Gus will have a brand new fancy home."

"You'll have to make one change for the labels. I don't think that Kinney Brother's is a fit name for a beautiful, romantic wine."

"I can make new ones. What do you plan to call it?"

“I’ve decided that our line of wines will be called Nature’s Beauty.”

“That’s a perfect name, Brian.”

“And you’ve given me a perfect gift.” Brian looked at the drawings again. “What’s this building here?” he asked.

“That is the best part. It’s a guest house completely separated from our house. Now when we have company they won’t be underfoot in the house. We’ll always have our privacy.”

“I treasure our privacy.”

“So do I, Brian.” Justin said seductively. “In fact I think I could use a little privacy right about now.”

Brian kissed Justin slowly, relishing the taste of his partner’s lips.

“Maybe we should just fix us a bed in the hay and avoid having to say good night to every family member in the house.”

“Are you sure you’re okay with my cousin’s boy staying with us?”

“It’s a big house. He’ll just have to get used to the walls shaking while we’re having sex. Maybe we can tell him it’s an earthquake.”

“That hay bed is not sounding like a bad idea. ”

“I never asked you this, but does anyone in your family, aside from your Aunt Lindsay, know we’re not really brothers?”

“My Uncle Morgan knows. He figured it out on his own because he’s always had similar feelings. I never discussed it with anyone else in the family so I guess they just accept our story at the truth, or they just don’t care.”

“Have you ever talked about it with him?”

“One time . . . he brought it up. He said he thinks that I inherited it from him. What do you think about that Brian? Did we inherit our preference for men, or is it something we brought on ourselves?”

“I suppose it is possible that we were born with it. Maybe one day science will be able to tell us the truth.”

“If they ever could prove we were born homosexual . . . like we were born with blonde hair or fair skin . . . I wonder if people would still hate us for it.”

“People hate anyone who is different from them. Whether it’s the color of the skin, the country they come from or that fact that they sleep with men, people can’t accept those that are different from them.”

“I like being different. I wouldn’t have changed a minute of my life. Being different is what makes life interesting.”

“Sometimes a little too interesting for my taste. But you’re right. I wouldn’t want to go through life without adventure.”

“For us, every day is a new adventure.”

Brian lifted his glass and toasted with Justin. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

END

Season One

Aftermath

The Wait

Emmett's reactions to Justin being attacked

Emmett sat in the hallway waiting for Michael to return. He had promised Michael that he would stay with Brian while he went to check on Justin. Deb had arrived with Jennifer Taylor, they were both crying so Michael took charge.

Emmett forced himself to look at the man facing him. It was a sobering sight. His face was caked with dried blood and streaked with tears. His eyes were swollen and he had not made eye contact with anyone since Emmett had arrived. He clung to that "red badge of courage" he had around his neck. He must have felt if he let go of the scarf Justin would surely die. Brian Kinney had never been one of Emmett's favorite people, but tonight he felt compassion the boy.

It would never do for Jennifer and Deb to see him like this, much less Justin, when he wakes up. Emmett got up and walked toward the men's room. On his way he procured a wash cloth and a towel from the linen cart. He also grabbed a clean bed pan from the examining room next door. He filled the pan with warm water and walked over to where Brian sat. Not asking permission, he knelt in front of him and started to clean his face. Brian winced but did not object, so Emmett continued. He worked slowly, and gently, trying not to upset him. He watched Brian's face as he worked, every once in a while he grimaced, like he was remembering something, then he would close his eyes and sigh.

What had it been like for him? This man who was always in control, watching helplessly as sweet little Justin got his head smashed with a bat. Emmett felt his pain and realized that tears were rolling down his own face.

When Emmett decided that Brian's face was as presentable as it was going to get tonight, he looked down at his hands. Brian had big hands, for a man his size. As he worked, Emmett pictured Brian's hands cupping Justin's face on the dance floor at Babylon. The looks that passed between those two would melt stone. Not that he was jealous, he liked to watch the two of them dancing and kissing. It was romantic. Emmett had never experienced that kind of chemistry with anyone, he wondered if he ever would. Well, he couldn't paint either, but he enjoyed a beautiful work of art.

He thought about the night of the King of Babylon contest. It occurred to him that he'd been the cause of Brian's rebellion against couplehood. He was teasing Brian, but there was no denying that Brian and Justin had been acting like a couple for months. Emmett enjoyed teasing Brian about Justin. He would put his arms around Justin, then as if taking possession, Brian would pull the boy back by his shirt. It was kind of sweet, really.

It took a long time but he had removed most of the blood. Working around the scarf was a problem so Emmett tried to pry it from his hands. It was the first time all night he had seen any sign of life in the man. Brian pulled at the scarf and glared at Emmett. But, there was no going back now, buddy.

Emmett spoke gently, but firmly "Brian, you can't wear this in front of Jennifer, it's her son's blood on this scarf. And what about when Justin wakes up and wants to see you, it would really freak him out." Brian backed down a little and Emmett went on. "I know it means a lot to you to hold it. Does it make you feel closer to him? Look, I'll take it and fold it neatly and put it in your coat pocket, next to your heart." Brian let him take the scarf.

There wasn't much more Emmett could do so he took out his comb and fixed Brian's hair, the best he could, with no Moose. Well at least he wouldn't be sitting here scaring people. Then Emmett did something he had never done before and probably would never do again. He kissed Brian on top of his head, then sat down next to him to wait.

Emmett wondered how Justin could survive, there was so much blood on Brian. He reflected on the events of the evening and, for the first time that night, Emmett allowed himself to think about Justin.

The boy was so beautiful and full of life. At first the gang thought he was just a tag along pest. They wondered why such a smart kid would spend so much energy pursuing a man who didn't appreciate him. The night that Justin entered the dance floor at Babylon and took away those studs that Brian had spent all night stalking Emmett started to admire the kid.

Justin would hang out at Babylon hoping that Brian would notice him. Emmett saw his face fall when Brian would drag his prey from the dance floor down the stairs to the backroom. Justin would try to hide his frustration and Emmett felt sorry for him. He enjoyed his company and he was a great dancer, the two formed a bond. There was something special about Justin. Even though Emmett knew how futile his quest for Brian's attention was, he found himself rooting for Justin to win.

Emmett watched as Justin chip away at the facade that separated Brian Kinney from the rest of the world. There were times when he thought the boy would just give up. But he never did, no matter what Brian did push him away, Justin stood his ground. The night he won the King of Babylon contest just to get Brian's attention Emmett couldn't imagine how anyone could not love this boy to pieces. Watching Brian's face as Justin recanted his sexual conquest the next day was priceless.

That's why Emmett was so shocked a few days later when Brian announced he was moving to New York. Justin looked as if someone had hit him, but he once again recovered his cool. Was it possible for a human being to be so heartless? This boy loved him so completely and Brian had just tossed him aside like he meant nothing. Emmett had tried to console Justin, telling him he could have any man at Babylon. But, it was clear that Justin did not want just any man, he wanted Brian. He was willing to hold on even if it meant having his heart broken over and over again. As far as Emmett was concerned, Brian Kinney was beyond redemption.

It was so like Justin to do something outrageous like asking Brian to go to the prom. He really wanted to go, and it was important to him to be with someone he cared about. The look on his face when Brian turned him down broke Emmett's heart. Poor baby. He was so hurt. Not that it was a good idea to bring your 30-year-old lover to the prom, but Brian could have handled it better. There were a lot of things Brian could have handled better.

Justin bounced back from the disappointment, as he so often had to do, and asked his friend Daphne. He had been so excited about getting dressed in the tux Emmett picked out for him. Helping him to get ready was a joy, they had

become close over the past few months, Emmett adored him. When Justin walked down the stairs at Deb's and made his entrance, Emmett almost burst with pride, the boy was a vision. No one ever expected the evening to end with Justin lying in a pool of his own blood, and Brian clinging to a blood soaked rag crying his heart out.

The waiting was more than Emmett could take, he walked up the hall where he could see the room where they had taken Justin. As he walked, he felt a presence behind him, he turned and saw that Brian was following. When they got to the end of the hall, they froze. The doctor was talking to Justin's mom and she was crying. Emmett held his breath straining to hear what was being said. Jennifer looked up and saw them just as Brian bolted for the front door.

Emmett was not about to let Brian abandon Justin now. He took off out the door after him and stopped. A crowd had collected outside the hospital. Many of them were in prom attire, student's, teachers and parents. There was a group that Emmett recognized from the Gay and Lesbian Center. There were people from the diner and Woody's and even some from Babylon. But, for the most part they were strangers who had heard about what happened to Justin and came to the hospital to show their support.

Both Brian and Emmett stood there in disbelief. Neither of them had realized how many people had compassion for a victim of gay bashing. Some of Justin's classmates had made signs that said "We love you, Justin" some even said "We love you, Justin and Brian."

It's a shame they didn't listen when Justin wanted to form a Gay/Straight Alliance to put an end to the violent attacks by bullies like Chris Hobbs. Maybe Justin would have had a happy memory of the best day of his life. Brian turned and then walked back inside to face whatever the news was that had made Jennifer cry. All these strangers came here to show their love for Justin. Brian would do the same. Emmett had hope, once again, that Justin would finally get what he wanted most in the world.

Jennifer - The Wait Part 2

Jennifer took a deep breath as the doctor who had been attending to Justin approached her. She felt her heart sink as he spoke solemnly. "Mrs. Taylor, we'll be taking Justin upstairs in a few minutes for more tests. They will help us to determine the next step. If the swelling hasn't gone down we may have to consider the possibility of surgery to relieve the pressure."

A nurse came up behind Jennifer and took her arm. "Maybe you should get some coffee. The tests shouldn't take too long. You can come back and sit with him when they bring him back into his room."

Debbie Novotny stood up when she saw her friend. Jennifer had been at Debbie's house waiting for Justin to return from the prom when they got a call from Daphne telling them what had happened. They had been at the hospital since 2:00 a.m. waiting for Justin to regain consciousness.

"They need to do more tests," Jennifer reported. "He seems so restless. Like he is trying to wake up. I wonder if he's in pain." She took a deep breath and sat down. I'm not going to cry. She told herself. Justin needs me to be strong.

Jennifer and Debbie had stayed up to wait for Justin. It had seemed like such a long time since she and Justin had enjoyed a normal mother and son heart to heart. She missed him terribly. But, she knew that he was safe and reasonably happy at the Novotny's.

"Jennifer, the doctors are doing everything they can." Debbie put her hand on Jennifer's arm. "Justin is one tough cookie, hon. You know he will fight this with everything he's got."

Any minute now he is going to open those gorgeous blue eyes and ask us why are we making such a big deal."

"Where's Brian?" Jennifer asked suddenly.

When they arrived at the hospital that evening Jennifer had seen Brian sitting in chair down the hall. He had not moved or spoken to anyone since they had arrived. It appeared that he may have been crying. Jennifer had no idea what she was going to say to him, but she knew her son. If anyone was going to get through to Justin, coma no coma, it was Brian Kinney.

"I don't know." Deb responded. "Maybe he went outside for a cigarette. Do you want me to go look for him?"

"No. I'll go." Jennifer decided. "Why don't you go down and get that coffee for us."

She walked down the hallway and out the emergency room doors. An ambulance was parked outside and it gave her chills to think of how her son must have felt when he arrived here. She found Brian sitting on the steps near the laundry entrance. Jennifer walked over and sat down next to him.

"They're doing more tests. They may have to operate to relieve the pressure." she said flatly.

Brian focused his stare at Jennifer. "What happened was my fault." Brian said quietly.

He put his head down so she couldn't see his face.

Jennifer was not about to let him tune her out. She put her hand on his arm and turned him toward her. "I'd like to be able to blame you for what happened tonight. In fact, I'd like to be able to blame you for my son leaving home, for my marriage breaking up and while I'm at it I might as well blame you for Justin being gay." She studied Brian's face and thought how young and vulnerable he appeared at that moment.

She continued. "I'm sure that Justin doesn't blame you. As long as we are passing out blame I may be just as responsible. I practically forced him to go to the prom. His right of passage, as Debbie called it." At that moment Jennifer reached for Brian's cigarette and took a drag. "Truthfully, a part of me wanted him to go for appearance. How would it look if your son doesn't go to the prom? What's wrong with him? Why doesn't he fit in?"

"When I heard he'd asked you to go with him I was horrified." Jennifer admitted. "For Justin it was the most natural thing in the world. He wanted to share a special night with someone he cares about. I was relieved that you had better sense. Justin should go to the prom with a girl . . . like a normal kid." Jennifer choked back tears.

Brian turned away from her again. But, She was determined to get through to this man for her son's sake. "Do you love my son?" she asked

"I never told him. . . " Brian stammered.

"I know you never encouraged him, not with words. Justin trusts himself to judge people based what he senses about them He's always been like that. It's a gift that he has, an intuition.. That's what makes him so brutally honest".

"I don't know you Brian. I only know what other have told me about you. Justin has told me you're an honest man and he trusts you. So many people in his life have let him down. He trusted his father and me when we told him we would always love him, no matter what. When we found out he was gay we cut him out of our lives."

"His father hasn't even called to see if he is dead or alive. I let him live with a stranger, simply because it makes it easier for me to accept him. I don't know what happened between Justin and Daphne, but he said her feelings had changed towards him for some reason. All the people in his life that mattered to him have let him down. He trusted us to love him because we told him that we would."

"You're here now." Brian said in her defense. Her words made sense.

"Maybe you've never said it in words, but Justin is convinced that you love him."

"I've let him down . . . more then you know." Brian said.

"You may THINK that you've let him down. I watched you stand up to Craig when he tried to make Justin conform to his rules by denying his own nature. You went to New York to bring him back when he ran away. You're the one that found him an appropriate place to live and you've kept him close. In your own way you've always protected him. You may be the only person that HASN'T let him down. You can sit there and tell me that Justin is wrong about you. It's all in his head. That you have no feeling for him. If that's true Brian, tell me one thing." Jennifer looked him in the eye. "What made you go to the prom tonight?"

Brian did not react, until Jennifer spoke again.

"He awoke briefly, a little while ago. I sat there holding his hand and he opened his eyes for a brief moment and looked at me." She had Brian's attention and looked straight into

Brian's eyes. "Do you want to know what he said? . . . 'Where's Brian?' You're the only thing on his mind. So, where were you?" Jennifer challenged him.

"They won't let me in there. It's against their rules. I'm not family." Brian responded defensively.

"Since when did rules ever stop Brian Kinney from doing what he wanted to do?" Jennifer asked.

Brian opened his mouth to speak, but at that moment Vic came out to tell Jennifer that the doctors were finished and she could go back inside.

"She's right, you know." Vic had waited till Jennifer had gone to speak. "I can tell you one thing. If it was you lying in that hospital bed Justin wouldn't be sitting here feeling sorry for himself, now would he? He'd move heaven and earth to help you. You're always preaching to Michael about him being honest with himself. Maybe it's time you start doing the same."

Vic was carrying a white M.D. coat. He tossed it at Brian and went back into the hospital. It was time for Brian to transform himself into the invincible Brian Kinney, for Justin's sake. He donned the coat and marched back through the emergency room doors. To his left he spotted a patient chart on a clip board. As he passed the Gurney he picked up the chart figuring the corpse under the sheet wouldn't be needing it anymore.

As he continued down the hall to his destination two nurses jumped from behind their perches to block the door. "Can we help you, doctor?" said the suspicious nurse. "Can't you read? I'm Dr. Mohammed Persaud. Justin's Gynecologist," he said with a smirk. "I am here for his annual exam."

The shocked nurse went running for security as Brian stepped inside the room. The lights were dim and for a moment his facade faded. He walked over to the bed and looked at Justin for the first time since that horrible ambulance ride. He closed his eyes for a moment took a deep breath and then he sat down on the bed next to Justin.

Jennifer watched from where she stood at the window. There was total silence in the room as Brian sat staring at Justin. He moved in very close and whispered. "Justin?"

Jennifer held her breath, but there was still no response from Justin. Brian was not discouraged. He moved even closer and said "Justin, you can't leave me. You promised you never would."

They waited in silence and finally a single tear rolled down Justin's cheek. Brian put his hand up to Justin's face as he opened his eyes. Justin looked at Brian and another tear started to fall. He opened his mouth to say something, but Brian put his finger up to Justin's lips and said. "I know, it's your allergies again."

Brian bent down and kissed Justin gently on lips and then they locked eyes. For the first time Jennifer saw what Justin saw. There was an unmistakable bond between them. She had no doubt in her mind that they loved each other deeply. Justin had been right all along.

Tears streamed down Brian's face now also. For a moment Jennifer thought he might be breaking down again and she would have to ask him to leave. But it wasn't necessary because at that moment Justin put his hand on Brian's face to wipe the tears. The scene gripped her heart.

"Leave it to you to have allergies that are contagious." Brian said, no longer in control of his emotions. Justin put his hand on the back of Brian's head and pulled him down to his chest. Brian was openly sobbing and Justin was stroked his hair. Somehow, comforting Brian had made Justin calmer.

Jennifer went out into the hall as the nurse returned with the guard. "Mrs. Taylor ,what is going on in there?"

"It's okay, really. Justin is awake." Jennifer told them.

"I'll get the doctor." the nurse replied.

Jennifer smiled over at Deb and Vic. She hadn't realized before how much she had come to depend on them, especially Debbie. She stepped back into the room. Justin smiled up at her weakly. She put her hand on Brian's arm and gently pulled him away from Justin. "The doctor's need to examine him now."

"I won't leave him again." Brian was determined.

"Don't worry, I'll tell them you're family and you can stay here with him." Jennifer said.

He stood up and removed the white coat. "What do you say Justin? Can we trust her?"

"Yeah. If you think I'm pushy. . ." he said though his sleepy haze.

Brian and Jennifer stepped into the hallway while the doctors' examined Justin once again. Brian went to the men's room and Jennifer sat with Deb and Vic. Michael and Emmett had returned from retrieving Brian's Jeep from the parking garage. They had stopped at Brian's to bring him a fresh shirt.

Brian looking refreshed and much more like himself. The doctors finally had good news. It appears that Justin's made progress and they expected a full recovery. He would have to stay in the hospital a few days for observation. Except for headaches and a few scars he would be back to normal in no time.

"One of you can stay with him in this room tonight," the doctor offered. "In the morning we'll move him upstairs."

It hadn't occurred to Jennifer that only one of them could stay. She thought about what

Justin would want. "Brian, would you stay with him tonight? Michael said he would take me home and I can get some rest and come back in the morning. I'll give you my cell phone number. If there is any change you can call me and I'll come right back."

Brian looked surprised. "Are you sure you want me to stay?"

"Now, who do you think Justin would want to wake up to?" Jennifer responded.

Brian took out a piece of paper and a pen and wrote down her number. When he finished he looked at her and asked "What do you want me to call you?"

"Anything but Mom." was her response.

For the first time that night Brian smiled at her. On the paper under her number he wrote down the word Mom and underlined it. Jennifer fell asleep from exhaustion as soon as her head hit the pillow. Her first thoughts when she woke were about Justin. She phoned the hospital and was told he continued to improve and at the moment he was sleeping peacefully. Debbie phoned her at 7:00 a.m. and she relayed what the nurse had told her.

"Thank God. What a relief to hear good new for a change." Debbie said. "Why don't you stop by for breakfast on your way to the hospital. You can pick up some of Justin's things to take to him."

As Jennifer got dressed she thought about how many times Debbie Novotny had been there for her over the past few months. She was not very close with her own family. Since Craig and she split, there had been some very lonely days. It terrified her that she might spend the rest of her life alone. She looked forward to the time that she spent with Debbie.

"Well, you look refreshed." Deb said when she answered the door in her housecoat. "I'm glad that you decided to go home for a while. It won't do Justin any good if you wear yourself out."

"I must admit that I felt a little guilty leaving him there alone." Jennifer confessed.

"He wasn't alone. And besides, I think Brian needed to stay." Debbie led Jennifer into the kitchen, where she had prepared eggs and sausage. "Did you see the paper? Our Sunshine is a hero. There's a story about him. They even put in a picture from the yearbook. He looks so adorable."

Jennifer read the article in the newspaper Deb had handed her. "It say's here that there's been a wide spread outpouring of support from the community. It's nice to see that a reporter had taken a positive view point. "The article even mentioned how Brian apprehended the assailant Chris Hobbs, thereby, saving Justin from further harm."

"Can you believe it? Someone told me that there's a web site where people from all over the country are discussing the issue of Gay Bashing. Maybe the legislators will start taking notice and do something about it. I heard there are Justin and Brian fan clubs popping up all over the Internet". Deb said enthusiastically.

"I only wish that Justin wasn't the martyr to the cause. I would rather have seen an article about his artwork being recognized." Jennifer didn't want to seem ungrateful. She smiled Deb and handed the newspaper back. She hadn't realized how hungry she was until Deb put a place of eggs and sausage in front of her. Jennifer admired her friend in so many ways. A year ago she never would've believed that she'd be sitting in this kitchen with a woman whose only common bond with her was the fact they both sons who were gay.

Before Justin's coming out and her subsequent divorce from Craig , Jennifer had considered the members of the Country Club to be her close. They came from the same social background, wore the same designer labels, and vacationed in the same exclusive resorts. It never occurred to her how shallow those relationships had been. Not one of the women she considered to be her closest friends had called to ask how Justin was.

"Vic is still asleep. The whole ordeal really knock him out. He loves Justin like a son he'll never have. "Debbie announced." Have you heard from Justin's dad?"

"Not a word since last night. All he said was that he would keep Molly with him until things calmed down." Repeating what he said stirred up feelings of anger in Jennifer. "He wasn't always like this Deb. Or maybe he was, and I just never noticed. Our marriage had been on thin ice for quite a while. The family crisis over Justin just brought things to a head."

It was the first time Jennifer ever expressed her feelings about the marriage break up. She felt comfortable enough with Debbie to go on. "In a way I was to blame. He was always so driven by his career, working late hours, traveling. At times I felt like excess baggage, someone that made a home for him and took care of his children."

"I nagged him every time he walked in the door to spend more time with me and the kids, especially with his son. I suspected that there were affairs. But I was terrified of leaving him. I'd never been on my own before. My insecurities drove him right into the arms of another woman."

"I'm sure that's not true. You're a beautiful, intelligent woman. Any man would be lucky to have you." Deb continued. "Good riddance to bad rubbish, I always say. It's just not worth eating your heart out over a man."

"I second that." Vic appeared in his bathrobe. "Any word on our boy?"

"Justin's gonna be fine." Deb informed him. "In fact, I brought down his sketch pad and pencils and some of his books for Jennifer to take to him at the hospital. When he comes home we'll have a big party. What do you think, Jennifer ? We can invite the gang for dinner."

Home? Where was Justin's home? Jennifer felt a pang of guilt. Justin was her child, she should be the one taking care of him. It was wrong of her to allow Debbie or Brian to take over her responsibility.

Debbie sensed her hesitation. "Me and my big mouth. I'm sorry hon, he isn't even awake yet and here I have him back here partying."

Jennifer decided not to discuss Justin's homecoming until she had worked things out in her head. These people were kind and generous. She didn't want to insult them. On the other hand she felt like she was losing Justin to his new life.

"I better be on my way." She said as she rose from the table. "Can we talk about it later?"

"Sure, honey." Deb and Vic followed Jennifer to the door. She turned and hugged them both.

"I want you both to know how much I appreciate everything you've done for Justin . . . and for me too."

Debbie hugged the woman, who at that moment seemed very fragile. "We're family kiddo." Deb declared. "Whether you like it or not, you're stuck with us."

Vic joined in the group hug. It made Jennifer laugh to realize she was as much a part of this family as Justin was. What remarkable people they were. Suddenly she didn't feel so alone anymore.

"I'll relieve you at the hospital at 3:00 p.m." Deb called after her. "Tell sunshine we love him. And tell Brian he better behave himself, or he'll have two mothers to answer to." As she closed the door Debbie wiped away a tear.

Jennifer didn't know what to expect at the hospital. The nurse at the desk said that Justin was awake and his uncle had stayed with him all night. She opened the door slowly.

"I'm not eating it, Brian, It taste like shit." Justin was sitting up, pushing at the tray in front of him.

Brian pushed it back stubbornly. "You'll eat every fucking thing on this tray or I'll bash you myself"

Justin noticed Jennifer at the door and used the distraction to try to dump the tray into the garbage. "Hi Mom. I'm glad you're here to save me from Uncle Brian."

Disgusted Brian gave up. He rose from the bed and went over to get his jacket. "Next time you need someone to wake you from a coma call Moby."

Jennifer didn't know what to say, they were so gentle and loving with one another when she'd left the night before room last night. She half expected Brian to be cuddled up next to Justin on the bed. But, here they were bickering like ten-year-olds.

"How are you today sweetheart?" She smiled at her handsome son. The bandage on his head and the black eye were reminder's of how serious his injuries were. He was lucky to be alive.

"Much better now that you're here, Mom." he was smiling.

"If you ask me he was faking a coma just to get his picture in the paper." Brian declared.

Jennifer thought Brian looked much better then when she left last night. He was wearing the red shirt that Michael had brought him. Despite what he'd been through the night before, he looked quite attractive this morning.

As Jennifer talked to her son, Brian stood silently next to the bed never taking his eyes from Justin. When he was ready to leave he moved in close and kissed him, pausing to look into Justin's eyes. Seeing what he was looking for there, he knew it was okay to go.

Brian put his arm around Jennifer and said, "I guess I'll leave this obnoxious brat to you. If he gives you any trouble call me. I'll make sure he doesn't sit down for a week." Brian then kissed Jennifer on the cheek.. "Good bye Mom."

The look on her face cause Justin to burst into laughter, which in turn caused a pain that shot through his temple. "It only hurts when I laugh." he said when recovered.

"I love you Uncle Brian." Justin shouted, loud enough for the entire floor to hear.

"Yeah, yeah." Brian's grunted as he walked out into the hall.

Out of the corner of her eye Jennifer saw Brian turn and blow Justin a kiss. He mouthed the word. "Later."

Justin whispered back. "Later."

"Mom?" Justin notice that his mother was standing there with her mouth opened. "Are you okay?"

Jennifer was flustered that Justin caught her staring after Brian. "It's okay, you can look all you want." Justin was on to her. "Just remember he's taken."

"He's right, you know." Jennifer said after she had composed herself. "You can be an obnoxious brat."

They talked for a little while, then Justin fell asleep. Jennifer tried to read, but she found herself reflecting on the events of the past year. So many things in her life had changed. There were many decisions yet to be made, and she would be the one making them. It was terrifying, yet exciting to finally be in charge of her own life. She would take a lesson from her son and learn to trust herself.

The Homecoming

Michael and Emmett stopped by at the hospital on the way to work. Every day they brought him something to add to the growing collection of gifts he had accumulated since being admitted. Most of them were from strangers all wishing him a speedy recovery. Justin had never been what you would call shy, but all this attention was starting to embarrass him. He realized the press coverage about the attack had started a dialogue in the community about gay bashing and he was okay with that. But, he was hoping that the doctor would send him home soon so life could go back to normal.

"So, where will you be going when you get released, honey?" Em asked. "I'm sure Deb and Vic miss you like crazy, but maybe your mother wants to baby you for a while. Of course you could always stay with us so I could baby you."

"I'm not a baby." Justin threw one of the many stuffed animals at Emmett's head. "I haven't decided yet."

"You know my Mom loves having you. As long as you're around she won't have as much time to bug me about David," Michael said. In his heart he knew Justin was waiting for Brian to ask him to come home to the loft. Things had changed so dramatically since that night Michael almost believed it might happen.

"Well, we better get going. Don't want to be late for work." Emmett gave Justin a kiss on the forehead and glared at Michael until he did the same. "See you later baby."

They started for the door, but were stopped in their tracks. "Time for your bath Mr. Taylor." The hottest male nurse in the hospital was standing in the doorway with the necessary equipment. No wonder Justin was in no hurry to leave the hospital.

He smiled at them and started into the room. From behind him a familiar voice said. "I'll take that." Brian brushed past the nurse and gave him a knowing smile as he took the job off his hands.

Out in the hallway Michael and Emmett snickered. "It's baby's bath time." Emmett giggled, "I'd like to be the soap"

Michael blushed and started to push Emmett down the hallway. "We're going to be late for work."

When they got to the parking lot a man in a silver BMW pulled up next to Michael's car and almost knocked them down as he stormed his way into the hospital. It took a minute for the identity of the man to register. It was Craig Taylor.

"Oh, my God!" Emmett exclaimed. "Michael, we have to do something."

"Emmett, you distract him and I'll go warn them." Michael started running back to the door.

Emmett grabbed his arm and said. "Wait, Michael. We'll never get passed him. I have an idea. Just follow my lead. As soon as I hit the ground you run inside the hospital."

They ran back through the parking lot until they were along side of Craig. Emmett turned to Michael briefly and then collapsed to the ground at Craig's feet.

"Oh, my God. Help!" Michael cried.

Craig stopped in his tracks. "I'll run inside and get someone."

"NO! I'll go. We just came from the ER. I'll get the doctor who treated him for his aneurism. Please, just stay with him. I don't want him to die alone."

Before Craig could stammer an answer, Michael was gone. He kneeled down next to Emmett, not knowing what to do.

Drama Queen that he was, Emmett couldn't resist the temptation to ham it up. "Mommy? Is that you?" Emmett uttered.

"Your friend went to get help. Just . . . stay quiet." Craig said, looking for any chance to get away.

With that Emmett reached up and grabbed his shirt. "Mommy, I'm sorry about your dresses. I know it was wrong of me. I promise I'll never wear them again, without asking."

Much to Craig's relief he spied two EMT's just getting into their vehicle. He summoned them over, then made his break into the hospital.

Satisfied that Michael had enough time to get upstairs, Emmett got up and brushed himself off. "I'm fine." He held up his hands to the EMTs. "New shoes." He smiled and pointed to his feet.

They looked at each other and laughed as they returned to their vehicle.

He made his way back into the hospital to retrieve Michael. To his surprise he found him standing in the hallway talking to a group of ladies.

"Michael!" Emmett exclaimed.

"I'm sorry. They know me from work. They were asking about Justin. I couldn't get away." Michael tried to explain as Emmett dragged him to the stairs.

"He had to wait for the elevator. We just may be able to beat him there by using the stairs."

They ran up the six flights and emerged into the hallway. The door to Justin's room was still shut. "I think we may have pulled this off," Emmett said.

Winded, the two rushed through the door, only to be greeted by a confused Craig Taylor. Justin, who had been sitting on the bed reading, looked up. Brian was no where to be seen.

"What the . . .!?" Craig exclaimed.

"He got better. Just wanted to thank you." Michael and Emmett backed out of the room into the hallway.

"DAD!" Justin was more surprised by Craig's presence then by Michael and Emmett's antics.

Not wanting to appear too hopeful he asked, "What are you doing here? I'm not dead, if that's what you were hoping for."

"Justin, don't say that. I never wanted you to die. I never wanted you to be hurt like this either." Craig was at a loss for words. Seeing Justin in this condition he couldn't help but feel guilty for not being with him last night. The past few months had been difficult for him. He loved Justin, but, he was repulsed by what he had become.

After what happened, he was hoping that Justin would be open to the suggestion of intense therapy. He had heard of groups that specialize in reforming homosexuals to a point where they marry and have families and forget all about

their former gay tendencies. Craig intended to pursue this, but he knew he had to gain Justin's trust first so he intended to move slowly.

"What did the doctor's say about your injuries?" Craig asked. "Will you fully recover?"

Before Justin could answer the door opened again and Jennifer walked into the room, followed by Brian.

"He'll be fine, no thanks to you." Jennifer said coldly.

Craig resolved to stick with his plan. He knew he would have to deal with these two eventually so he tried to remain calm.

"Jennifer I told you I drove up to be with Molly at camp. She'd heard about Justin on the news and was very upset. I had to explain things to her." Craig defended himself.

Jennifer ignored Craig's response and addressed her son.

"I just spoke to the doctor Justin. He said you can leave today, but you must rest. No strenuous activity, what-so-ever." She glanced over at Brian. When she walked in the room unannounced, a little earlier she witnessed an activity involving Brian and Justin that she would have preferred never to have seen.

No decision had been made about where Justin was going once he left the hospital. Officially he lived at Debbie's. Jennifer had settled into her new apartment and had made room for Justin to come and stay for a while. Of course, it was all up to Justin.

"Have you made your decision yet Justin? You know that Molly would be thrilled to have her big brother around again." Jennifer was hopeful.

Craig interrupted. "Do you think it would be wise to expose Molly to all this? Her friends are already asking questions about Justin and this man." Craig turned to glare at Brian who had busied himself packing Justin's things.

"Justin needs care Craig. I'm his mother. It's my place to take care of him." She was trying to control the rage in her voice.

"You're Molly's mother too. Don't you see what will happen if you allow Justin to move in with the two of you? You're already glorifying what happened. I don't want my daughter to have any further exposure to him and his depraved sexual behavior." He pointed to Brian. "Who knows what will happen next. Maybe Molly herself could become a victim of violence. You've already lost us one child, Jennifer. I won't allow you to mess up Molly's life too. If you insist on bringing Justin to your home, I'll sue for full custody of Molly at once."

Justin was not going to allow Molly to be sacrificed. "I'm going home to Debbie's. At least she still wants me, if no one else does."

"NO, you're not." Brian spoke for the first time since Craig entered the room. "Justin's coming home with me." He looked Craig right in the eye then brushed past him to put both arms around Justin. "I want you." Brian was sincere.

At first Justin blushed at Brian's obvious display of affection in front of his parents. He had almost given up hope of Brian asking him back to the loft. Whatever prompted Brian to ask at that moment Justin was ready to accept.

He turned to his father who was pacing the floor near the window. "I'm going with him." Without another word Craig made his exit.

Justin looked over at his mother. He was not surprised that she was crying. Gently breaking away from Brian's embrace, he got out of bed and hugged her. "Mom, it's okay. I know you love me. I can't let him take Molly away because of me."

"I think I may need some help taking care of this brat. Maybe you could come over in the morning when I go to work to make sure he doesn't get into any more trouble. What do you say, Mom?" Brian gave her his sweetest smile.

The events of the past few moments had left Jennifer in shock. Craig blamed her for everything and now he was going to try to keep her daughter from her. Justin was probably better off staying with Brian. At least he would not be exposed to any more of Craig's vicious attacks.

"Yes, I think that's best for now. Thank you, Brian. What time would you need me to come over tomorrow?"

Jennifer left the hospital feeling defeated. She had lived with Craig Taylor since college. Had she been blind to his true personality all these years? When had Craig become such a hateful, controlling monster? Was he right about her? Had she been too permissive with Justin? She was beginning to doubt herself again.

Debbie cleaned the counter as slowly Jennifer sipped hot tea. "That's great news honey," Debbie exclaimed. Are you going to be taking him home today?"

"No, Deb, I won't be taking Justin home." She began to cry.

Deb took off her apron and sat Jennifer down in a booth. "What happened? Did Brian put pressure on Justin to go home with him? I'll go talk to him."

"No, Deb, it wasn't Brian this time." She sighed. "It was Craig. He showed up at the hospital this morning. Justin was ready to go home with me, I think. But, when Craig found out our plans he hit the roof. He accused me of putting Molly in danger by having Justin in my home. It was horrible. I've never seen him like that before. It scares me to think he has the power to take my daughter away simply because I want my family together. Debbie, he's serious. He is planning on suing for full custody of Molly," Jennifer said.

"Well, that just isn't going to happen. We'll talk to Melanie. She'll take care of Mr. Taylor." Debbie tried to comfort her. "Poor Justin. He had to hear all this bull from his father in his hospital room."

Jennifer was glad to have Deb on her side. "Brian stood right up to Craig and protected Justin. I'm grateful for that. I'm going there tomorrow to stay with Justin while Brian goes to work." Jennifer said.

"I'll come over and keep you company in the afternoon. We can call Mel and fill her in on what's happening." Debbie took Jennifer's hand. "It's gonna be okay."

Once again Jennifer was grateful to Debbie. "I hope so. I'll call you tomorrow."

Jennifer had never been to Brian's apartment. He said he would leave the door opened in case he was getting ready for work when she arrived. She was a little nervous about just letting herself in after what she'd walked in on at the hospital. Cautiously she opened the door. Justin was on the couch watching cartoons. Brian was on the phone at the desk. He looked very different dressed up for work. Craig never had that kind of style. Leave it to Justin to fall for a man who wears Prada suits. She waved a hello to Brian and went over to sit next to Justin.

"Hi Mom. So what do you think?" He said, sensing her obvious fascination with Brian's apartment. "Isn't it cool?"

"Oh, yes, it's very . . ." Jennifer searched for the right word, "masculine. It's lovely, honey."

"Are you sleeping on the couch?" She regretting asking, the moment, the words left her mouth.

"Of course I'm not sleeping on the couch." Justin said defensively. "Brian slept on the couch last night. I think he was afraid I would break or something. Besides, he has trouble sleeping sometimes and he didn't want to wake me."

She sensed that Justin wanted to talk about something, but Brian had hung up the phone and came over to say good bye.

"Be a good boy for your Mom." He stroked Justin's face with the back of his hand, then he bent down to kiss him on the lips.

Jennifer was still attempting to get used to these displays. Brian was obviously a very affectionate man. Her family had never been that way, and she was sorry to say that she had not really been very demonstrative with her own children. Justin was loving this physical contact with Brian. One more thing Brian provided that she never could. She stopped short of feeling resentment toward the man. It wasn't his fault that she was feeling insecure again.

They spent the morning talking about school. She was so glad that he was excited about his decision to go to art school. Art had always been her passion, although she was never as talented as her son. It was wonderful spending this time with Justin. Their relationship had been strained for so many months. She had missed just having an opportunity just to talk to him without arguing.

"Mom, have you talked to Dad about Molly?" Justin asked.

"Justin, you really shouldn't be concerning yourself with that now. Molly's fine. She called last night from camp. She's having a wonderful time. If you like we can call her after lunch and you can talk to her yourself."

"I'm sorry that the kids make fun of her because of me. Do you think she hates me?" Justin asked. "I wish this whole bashing thing had never been in the papers. I feel awful about how it's affected my family."

"We ARE still your family, you know. Just because you're living here or with Debbie, doesn't mean that we've abandoned you." Jennifer tried to comfort him.

"What about Dad? Does he really think that I would hurt Molly? He hates me Mom. What if he decides not to pay for me to go to college?" Justin was becoming agitated.

"Justin, that's one thing you won't have to worry about. Your father would kill me if he knew I was telling you this. The money in your college fund was provided by my father. It's in the form of a trust which would have passed to you on your 21st birthday. Since I'm the trustee, it's my decision whether or not you can use the money for college."

"Thanks for telling me Mom. I was worried about how I would pay for school if Dad disowned me." He was relieved.

A few minutes later Brian called to say he would be a little late. Since Justin didn't have much of an appetite, he said he would pick up some take out on the way home. He wanted to make sure Jennifer would be able to stay. When she returned to the couch, Justin was sound asleep. He looked just like he did when he was five years old. She was glad that she had been able to relieve him of one burden.

Over the next few days Justin continued to recover, although, he was still plagued by headaches. Brian was very affectionate, but, when Justin would push for a more intimate contact he would back off. Justin was becoming frustrated with the whole situation and knew that he had to make a decision.

Brian had been brooding all day. Everyone at work had been tip toeing around him, afraid to mention Justin or the attack. Since he didn't want to bring his personal life to the job he decided to leave the office for a while and take care of something that had been preying on his mind.

Craig Taylor was in a similar mood. At work he conducted himself as he had done before, with complete professional detachment. His personal business was not up for discussion, not even the condition of his son. Alone in his office he attempted to concentrate on the reports he needed to finish, but his mind kept going back to that day at the hospital. He had not meant for it to turn into a battle with Jennifer.

He was beginning to realize that he had lost control. He could accept the fact that his marriage was over. It had been a long time coming, for the most part it was his fault. The affair with her best friend was the final blow for Jennifer. Her only request was that the children shouldn't suffer for his actions. This all took place several months before Justin decided to tell them that he was gay. It was easier for him to blame Justin for all that had gone wrong in his life.

All he ever wanted, was to be a good father, and protect his children from harm. He made sure that Justin had the best education. At first he tried to encourage his son to play sports like all fathers do. When it became apparent that Justin wasn't interested in following in his father's footsteps, he accepted it without too much fuss. In fact Justin was not a bad ballplayer, but, he would rather draw pictures than play. Jennifer had greater influence over Justin because she spent more time with him. If he hadn't been so busy building his career maybe, his son would have turned out differently.

He wouldn't blame Justin if he never spoke to him again. It was cruel to make those threats in front of him. How could he lose control and say those things? What kind of monster had he become? The fact was, he loved his son, and he wanted to help him.

He heard a commotion in the outer office and started to get up from his desk to investigate. Before he could move away from his desk Brian Kinney burst through the door followed by Craig's frantic secretary.

"Mr. Taylor? Should I call security?" the secretary asked in desperation.

"No, Mary, it's okay. I can take care of Mr. Kinney." Craig shot back.

"Get out of my office. I have nothing to say to you." Craig returned to his desk and sat down. He wasn't sure he could handle the situation seeing the crazed look in Brian's eyes. The fact that he was carrying a baseball bat also concerned Craig.

"The feeling is mutual Mr. Taylor. I'm not here to socialize. I need to explain something to you." Brian sat opposite Craig.

"Say what you came here to say, and get out." Craig said with apprehension.

"First, I want to compliment you on your performance at the hospital. It must have made you feel like a real man to threaten your wife in public like that. Not to mention the added thrill of intimidating your son, who had been in a coma the day before. Nice work, Dad." Brian said sarcastically.

"What happens between me and my family is none of your business." Craig responded.

"Justin IS my business. Justin's mother is my business." Brian stood and started walking around the office. He studied the trophies and sports awards Craig displayed in a case on the wall. "These are nice. They must be very important to you."

"I didn't come here to accuse you of being a bad father. In fact, just the opposite." He came around to Craig's side of the desk. He sat crossed legged on the desk balancing the bat on his knees. As he spoke, he stared out the window.

"My father was an abusive, alcoholic, son of a bitch. He died a few weeks ago. I hated the man my whole life. I felt nothing when he died. Justin gets mad at me when I say that. He says he could never feel that way about his father. You must have done something right to gain his undying devotion."

"I don't give a fuck about you, Mr. Taylor. In fact, I think you're a homophobic asshole. You're no better than that punk Hobbs. But, Justin still loves you. It hurt him that you weren't at the hospital that night. He thinks that you don't care about him, and that you want him to die."

Brian moved around the room again talking more to himself than to Craig.

"I was there when that bat came down on his head.. I was watching him in my mirror. He was so happy right before it happened." Brian took a deep breath.

"I saw that asshole Hobbs in the mirror, sneaking up on Justin. I yelled to Justin. He turned around, but he didn't see it coming. He was still smiling at me when the bat hit him."

Brian studied the bat in his hand.

"Did you ever think about how much damage a bat like this could do to the human head? I heard the sound when it hit . . . his skull cracked, like an egg." Brian's eyes were wild as he relived that moment in his mind. Suddenly he lifted the bat and smashed the trophy case. The glass shattered in all directions. Craig jumped, but made no attempt stop him.

Brian turned to Craig and continued. "At first I thought I could wake him up. That he would be okay. When I looked at his face, I saw the blood gushing out of his skull. It dripped out all over his face and started a stream on the floor. There was so much blood. How can one little person lose so much blood and still live? I couldn't do anything to stop it. I just watched the stream get bigger and bigger until it started to go down the drain in the middle of the floor. His life was just slipping away and there was nothing I could do. I was sure he was dead."

"There were so many things I didn't tell him. I thought about my father and how I went to his grave to tell him all the things I never told him when he was alive. How could I have been so stupid . . . so selfish?" Brian was lost in his own thoughts.

Craig Taylor was visibly shaken. Brian regained control of himself and turned to leave.

"Sorry about the trophies." Brian said. "If you have anything you want to tell Justin, come and tell him now. You never know how much time you'll get."

Brian reached his car and started the engine. He had left the bat embedded in the trophy case for a reason. Craig Taylor should value Justin's life as much he did his trophies. Relaying the details of the attack out loud to Craig had somehow made Brian feel better. He hoped that soon he would be able to finally tell Justin what he was feeling.

"Hello Michael." Jennifer opened the door. She had been very impressed with Brian's friends and their devotion to Justin. They all made appearances on a regular basis. Michael was carrying bags from the supermarket.

"I got everything on the list Mrs. Taylor I also got Justin some lemon cakes from the diner." Michael pointed at the small bag in his hand. "They're his favorite."

"Please call me Jennifer, Michael." Jennifer said. "I'm glad you're here I wanted to get dinner started for them before I leave to meet your mother. Justin's in the bathroom. He's been in there for quite a while. I was getting worried. Would you go and check on him?"

"Sure, Mrs Taylor." Michael left the bags on the counter and went up to knock on the bathroom door.

"Justin? Are you okay?"

"Come on in Michael." Justin called out.

Michael opened the door and saw Justin sitting on the floor smoking a joint.

"What the fuck are you doing with this?" Michael took the offending joint out of Justin's hand and automatically took a drag.

"Justin, you just got out of the hospital, you shouldn't be smoking dope. What if your mother came in here?"

"Michael, I don't care. I am going fucking nuts in this place. My mother is here every day asking me questions, cooking and cleaning. When my mother isn't here, your mother is here fusing over me. And Brian treats me like I am made of glass. He won't even let me out of the apartment." Justin was showing his frustration.

"We haven't had sex since before the prom. I think maybe it bothers him to look at my face. I'm not perfect anymore and I'm gross him out." Justin was desperate. "What do you think Michael? Am I really ugly now?" he turned his face toward Michael to show him the scar on his head and the black eye.

"I'm sure that's not it Justin." He said looking at the boy. Even with his injuries Justin was still beautiful. Michael had never told him that.

"Michael, I didn't think it would be like this. I need to leave here before I go out of my mind." Justin was resigned.

Michael put his arm around Justin. "In the first place you're not ugly. You're just as beautiful today as you were that first night we met you. You know I wouldn't be saying that if it wasn't true, right?"

Justin looked at Michael and saw that he was being sincere. "Yeah, I guess so."

"You have to remember something about Brian. He feels things more deeply than most people. I think he hides his feelings from us because it makes him feel weak and vulnerable." Michael went on. "What happened that night happened to both of you. When I got to the hospital, Brian was inconsolable, almost catatonic. He just sat there with tears rolling down his face. Nothing that anyone said or did had an effect on him.. I'd never seen him like that Justin. It was really scary. If you hadn't recovered, I don't know what he would have done."

"He needs to feel like he is taking care of you. Give him some time. Stay here and let him work it out, okay?"

Justin understood. He nodded.

"I can't believe you're sitting in here smoking a joint with your mother in the kitchen." Michael started to laugh.

"You think that's bad. When I come in here to jerk off, she's constantly knocking on the door to see if I'm okay. I feel like I never left home." Justin started to laugh too.

"What about the smell? What if she comes in here?" Michael asked.

"That's easy. I just spill some of that funky new cologne of Brian's. That odor will mask anything." He took the bottle and spilled some on Michael.

They flushed the remainder of the joint down the toilet. Michael put out his hand to help Justin up and then opened the door. They came face to face Brian. The two of them started giggling again.

"What the fuck are you two doing in here?" He asked.

"Nothing, Dad." Michael said, between giggles.

Brian went into the bathroom and pick up the near empty bottle, still clueless as to what caused the laughing fit. He reminded himself to buy more cologne.

"Thanks for doing the grocery shopping for me, Michael." Said Jennifer as he was leaving.

"Anytime Mrs. Taylor." Michael responded. "Justin, don't forget what I said. Hang in there a little while longer."

"I guess." Justin shrugged. He put his arms around Michael neck as Brian entered the room "Thanks."

Michael hugged him back and left. Brian was not sure how he felt about this mysterious new kinship between Michael and Justin. It must have something to do with the coma thing. He dismissed it.

Brian appeared to be in a good mood tonight. Justin noticed that he had put on the stereo when he walked in the door and was dancing around the room. Maybe Michael was right, he just needed some time for things to return to normal.

The phone rang and Justin answered. "Brian, it's Lindsay. She wants to know if we can come over for dinner tomorrow night." Justin was hopeful Brian would agree.

"Only if Mom can come too." Brian shouted loud enough for Lindsay to hear. He had danced over the kitchen where Jennifer was preparing their dinner.

Justin smiled at his mother's reaction to Brian's antics. "Great, we'll be there at 7:00. Thanks Lindsay."

"How do you know I don't have a date tomorrow night?" Jennifer teased.

Brian Waltzed her around the room as Justin shook his head in disbelief. He had never considered the possibility that his mother would start dating now that his father was out of her life. He wasn't sure how he felt about that. She looked very young and attractive dancing with Brian. It was good to see her smiling again. It was good to see Brian smiling too.

There was a knock at the door and Justin got up to answer it. Craig Taylor stood in the doorway. He looked apprehensive and self-conscious, not at all like the man who had stormed out of Justin's hospital room a few days earlier.

"Craig. What are you doing here?" Jennifer moved forward to protect her son from another cruel attack. "I think you should leave."

"

I need to talk to Justin." Craig spoke softly. "Please."

"It's okay." Said Brian, brushing past Jennifer. "Come in."

Justin didn't know what to think. It was almost like Brian expected to see him. "I have nothing to say to him." He put a protective arm around his mother.

"

Jennifer I have no plans to take Molly away from you. You're a good mother. I apologize for losing my temper the other day." Craig was sincere.

The room was silent. Brian took control of the situation. "Justin. You don't have to listen if you don't want to, but, I think your father has something to say. I'll finish making dinner while you talk."

Jennifer took the hint and left to meet Debbie.

"I'm not sure I did the right thing leaving him there to face his father." Jennifer and Debbie were busy making decorations for the party. Lindsay and Melanie thought having it at their house would make it more of a surprise for Justin.

"Brian would have thrown the man out on his ear if he thought he came to hurt Justin." Debbie reassured her. "Who knows, maybe, he had some kind of eye-opening nightmare that scared the shit out of him. Justin loves him, he never blamed him for anything that happened. If there is any way they can heal the rift between them, now's the time, before it's too late."

Debbie didn't mean to remind Jennifer that Justin almost died a few days ago. But, the past week she had thought of nothing else. She felt guilty about insisting he go to his prom. Having him living at the house had been a joy. She had grown to love him like a son. Seeing him lying in that bed all cut and bruised had given her nightmares every night since.

"I don't know if I trust Craig but, to tell you the truth he seemed more like himself tonight. I hope he was sincere, for Justin's sake."

Jennifer changed the subject. "I'm glad we're having this party for Justin. It's time got out for a while and had some fun. Brian's been wonderful, but I think Justin is anxious for his life to get back on track. The last few days he's seemed so restless."

"Sure he is. He's 18. No one stays home at night when they're 18. Not even when they live with Brian Kinney. Justin will be happy to see his friends from school." Debbie smiled.

"Daphne only invited a few of the kids who she felt were really supportive of Justin. He'll be so surprised." Jennifer was looking forward to the party.

Craig and Justin talked for a while. His father still disagreed with his lifestyle, but, he was not going to make an issue of it anymore. If you want to live your life in this fashion, I suppose it's your choice. He wanted to make it clear that he still loved him and wanted the best for him. They talked about school and the living arrangements. Justin told him that he would prefer to go on living at Debbie's, at least for the first semester. He sensed that his father was relieved he wasn't planning on remaining with Brian.

It was comforting to Justin that they were able to have a civil conversation for the first time in over a year. When Craig left, he told Justin he would call him at least once a week to check on him. Justin could call him anytime, for any reason.

Brian remained in the kitchen while they talked. When Justin came to the table, they didn't discuss what was said. It was apparent that Brian had something on his mind. Justin guessed that he was trying to figure out how to ask him to leave. At this point he was ready to go back to Deb's and get on with his life.

It was an exhausting day for Justin both mentally and physically. The headache he had tonight was worse than usual and he decided to go to bed early. He didn't wake when Brian slid under the covers beside him later that night, but after a few hours the pain in his head and his growing frustration at Brian's lack of interest in sex forced him out of bed.

While he was at the computer desk looking for a pen, he came across the paper bag that Brian had been carrying around all week. When Justin opened the bag and found the white scarf the memories of the night of the prom exploded in his head. At the same time Brian woke up screaming his name.

Justin ran to Brian's side to comfort him. The two of them talked openly and honestly for a long time. Brian admitted that he had been having nightmares about Justin and about his father's death. Justin confessed his fears that the scars from the beating would cause Brian to not want him physically anymore.

"Now, that's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard." Brian exclaimed. "Do you really think I'm that shallow?"

"I'm not perfect anymore. I'm damaged goods." Justin put his head down. "I bet if you saw me on the street tonight for the first time you would walk right past me."

"Do you really want to know what I think?" Brian smiled.

"Yes." Justin responded cautiously.

"When I saw you in that street light I thought I had died and gone to heaven. You were perfect. You kinda glowed like an angel or something. I couldn't wait to get you back here just to touch you all over. You were so beautiful I

was almost afraid to talk to you. I thought you might not want to be with some old guy." He looked at Justin for his reaction. Seeing his delight Brian went on.

"Of course, once you opened your mouth and started challenging me, that was when I really got interested. That's why I keep you around. Nobody excites me like you do Justin." Brian put his hand up to Justin's forehead and pushed his hair back to examine the scar left by the bat.

"I don't know what your talking about Justin. I don't see anything about you that isn't perfect." He gently kissed the scar and then moved down to kiss Justin's discolored swollen eye.

Justin was aware that this time was different. They were making love to each other for the first time. Their emotional wounds were healing and their relationship had taken a giant step forward.

"SURPRISE!" They all cried. And Justin was surprised all right. He was so glad to be going anywhere tonight. He never expected a party.

"Welcome home Sunshine!" Debbie gave him one of her bear hugs that almost took his breath away.

Michael pried his mother's arms from Justin. "Mom, you're gonna put him back in the hospital with broken ribs."

Lindsay and Melanie both kissed him as they dragged him into the den to show him a surprise. "Hey Gus! You're walking!" Justin cried out.

Gus made a bee line to his favorite babysitter. Justin picked him up and hugged him. Jennifer watched as Justin and Brian sat on the floor and passed the happy baby back and forth. There was something different between those two tonight. A cloud seemed to have lifted. They must have found a way to put the nightmare behind them.

The doorbell rang and Lindsay told Justin to answer it. He was surprised for the second time that evening when he saw Daphne and several kids he knew from school. They talked about graduation and college and all kinds of normal kid things. Justin put on some CD's and they began to dance.

Jennifer was growing concerned that Justin might be overdoing it for his first time out of the house. She was about to suggest some slower music, but, it wasn't necessary. Brian had gone over to the stereo and changed the CD. She recognized sound of the Drifters, an oldie that was a particular favorite of hers. Brian took Justin in his arms and they danced around the room smiling at each other. The other kids paired off and followed Brian and Justin's lead.

A week ago her biggest fear was losing Justin. She realized that she hadn't lost a son, she had gained a Brian Kinney and everything that came with him. It was going to be an interesting new life.

Pressure

Brian deals with his demons when he takes Justin home from the hospital

Brian, was dressed all in black. He paced back and forth as he pitching his latest marketing idea to a tough sell client. When he was finished, he left the room quietly and did not seem to notice the seductive look that the client threw his way. Back at his desk he opened a draw and removed a worn paper bag which he then put into his jacket pocket. He took a moment to glance once more at the photo on his desk of himself with Justin. He had his arms around Justin and was playfully biting his ear as the boy smiled, that incredible, innocent, beautiful smile.

Brian got into his jeep, but he had a few stops to make before heading back to the loft. As he passed the hospital, he looked in that direction, but kept driving. It was getting dark as he pulled up to the cemetery and got out of the jeep. He walked over to a grave and put a bunch of flowers there to replace the ones that were getting wilted. The recent events in his life had made him think about what was important and what wasn't.

As he exited the elevator and opened the door to his apartment he retrieved the paper bag from his pocket and put it in a draw in his computer desk. Removing his jacket and tie he walked over to the window and stared out at the rain for a moment before dropping to his knees in front of the couch where he buried his head in the cushions.

After a moment a hand fell lightly on head. He looked up and smiled at the beautiful face he loves so much. A little worse for wear Justin's head was still bandaged and he had a black eye, but his smile was the same beautiful, innocent smile in the photo. Brian moved up and took Justin in his arms and kissed him gently over and over again. Justin turned and cuddled up next to him resting his head on his chest. Brian picked up the remote and pushed play and the TV screen lite up with cartoon images from "Yellow Submarine"

Justin had spent two days in the hospital, during the first day he was told he had been in and out of consciousness. He had no recollection of the events that lead to the attack but from what the others had told him Chris Hobbs had tried to kill him and Brian saved his life. Daphne filled him in on all the details of what happened at the prom. Justin still could not believe that Brian showed up and danced with him in front of everyone. He wished he could remember the looks on their faces, he wished he could remember the look on Brian's face.

The one face he never wanted to see again was Chris Hobbs. Brian had broken his knee cap and Daphne had told him it looked unlikely that Chris would ever play football again. So much for the football scholarship he was counting on, not like he didn't deserve it, the creep. Still Justin almost felt sorry for him, he was in a lot of trouble now and his future looked hopeless.

As for Justin his head still pounded constantly and if he attempted to get up from the couch he would wobble like one of Gus's bathtub dolls. All he wanted to do was forget the nightmare that was St. James Academy and Chris Hobbs and revel in the attention that Brian was showering him with.

When he was discharged from the hospital Brian, insisted on taking him back to the loft to recover. Everything seemed different. Brian was different. When he questioned him about, what happened that night in the garage Brian called him a drama princess and said he should forget what happened and just be glad that he was alive.

He had been at Brian's for almost a week and was wondering how long this special treatment would last. Brian would leave for work in the morning making sure that someone came by to check on him every few hours. His two mothers Jen and Deb dropped by several times a day bringing him food and stuff. Vic came by with his video games and books. Emmett sat with him and watched old movies and cried, Justin knew that he was not crying about the movie. Sometimes Em would bring Ted with him but since Blake left Ted was not much fun to be with. Not that Ted was ever fun, but Justin was used to him being around.

Lindsay and Mel brought Justin his sketch pad, but he did not feel much like drawing just yet, he was afraid of what might materialize on the paper. He was happy that they had brought Gus with them, he had a very special bond with that little guy and it made him feel good to see him.

Brian got up and made them both a salad after the movie had ended. He said he was not very hungry but he was tired and wanted to go to bed early. He was acting so weird but that was Brian, he would never discuss what was bothering him. It hurt Justin that Brian had not made love to him since the accident. He had not even tried. He would lay the bed next to him but if Justin began to make moves Brian would back off and move to the couch. Was Brian backing off because they were getting too close again? Last time he felt trapped Brian made plans to move to New York.

Justin was getting scared, that's probably what woke him up in the middle of the night, he couldn't get back to sleep, so he decided to get up and turn on the computer for some late night chat room companionship.

He was careful not to wake Brian, who had not been sleeping much at all in the past few months. Justin noticed that when he stayed over Brian would be awake many times during the night. He would find him sitting on the couch

staring into space. Justin worried that he was drinking too much and doing drugs. He really ought to start taking care of himself at his advanced age.

Trying to ignore the pounding in his head Justin booted up the computer and did a search for articles on sleep deprivation. He wanted to copy down some of the sites to access later so he started going through the draws of the desk looking for a pen. What he found was the crumpled up paper bag which Brian had been carrying around with him. Justin was curious about the contents. Everyone had noticed Brian's attachment to the bag, but no one had the balls to ask him what was in it. Michael thought it was Brian's disco drug d'jour and Emmett figured it was some kinky new sex toy.

Curiosity won out and Justin opened the bag. A stab of pain went through his entire body, the memories of the night of the prom flooded back into his head like a dam burst: the euphoria he felt when Brian walked into the room, the faces of the other student, the kiss on the dance floor, Brian holding his hand, the walk to the garage. The kiss, oh, my God, he does love me. He was telling with his eyes that night. And then he heard him screaming J-U-S-T-I-N! A blood curdling scream, but it was not a memory, it was Brian, screaming out his name in his sleep.

The boy rushed back to the bed just as Brian's sat up, the look on his face was one of terror. Justin held Brian's shaking body in his arms, he could feel his heart racing, it frightened him more then Chris Hobbs had frightened him. After what seemed like an eternity Brian calmed a little and looked at what Justin had in his hand. It was the white scarf that he had retrieved from the crumpled paper bag. It was time to talk.

Brian admitted that he had been having a recurring nightmare, which was probably the cause of his sleeplessness. What surprised Justin was the fact that the dream had started months ago, before the attack by Chris Hobbs, it had started right after Jack's funeral.

It had always bothered Justin that Brian did not express any grief about his father's death. He never talked about the wake or the funeral and Justin was afraid to ask. It scared Justin to think that Brian had no capacity to feel an emotional tie to his father, even if he was a crappy father. That would be fucked up, it could mean that he had no capacity love anyone, not even him.

Brian held Justin tightly, almost crushing him for a moment, then he lightened his grip and started to talk. He said he needed to tell Justin about the funeral first so he would understand about the dream.

"I remember standing at the grave site, feeling bored, thinking 'when was this fucking thing going to end'. I wanted to get a drink at Woody's and then get my cock sucked by some anonymous trick at Babylon. I remember thinking 'Why are we standing around in this dismal place praising the son of a bitch in the ground?'" Brian paused, "It was the dirt part that got to me. When everyone started tossing the dirt on the coffin. I couldn't do it. I couldn't cover him with dirt. He was my father."

I didn't want them to think I was some little faggot who couldn't bear the thought of burying his father so I backed away from the grave and lit up a joint, right there in the cemetery.

Justin felt his eyes burning, he did not want to cry in front of Brian so he bit his lip and let him finish.

"A few days after the funeral I had the dream for the first time. I was at the cemetery looking for his grave. I needed to find him to tell him that he was a selfish prick who never should have had kids." Justin saw that Brian was getting anxious.

"In the dream, I'm at the cemetery. I look for hours and I can't find his grave. It gets dark, and then it starts to rain and I start running because I'm almost out of time."

Brian had started to sweat and Justin could feel his body tense up, maybe he ought to stop him. He didn't know what he would do if Brian had a fucking heart attack or something. Shit, this was not going to be good.

Brian started to rock Justin and tighten his grip as he continued "I finally see the stone. It says Jack Kinney loving father - what a fucking lie. I need to dig him up to see his face when I tell him what I thought of him. He can't hurt me now. Not with words and not with those big hands of his. I get to the coffin and I pull it open, but I can't see his face because it's covered with this white silk. I rip it off but it's not Jack . . . Justin, it's you. You're in the coffin"

Justin pulled back to look at Brian's face. His eyes were wide like saucers, and he looked like a little boy. A scared, hurt little boy.

Brian looked at the white scarf as tears started streaming down his face. He remembered the fear he felt at the thought of losing the only person who saw him as he really was and loved him anyway. Justin held him close and said, "I'm not dead Brian, I'm not going to leave you. I told you months ago you can't push me away."

"You almost died that night and it was my fault" Brian whispered.

"Nothing was your fault. I wanted you there. Even if I had died, it still would have been the best night of my life." Justin tried to smile, but tears came instead.

Brian kissed him tenderly and he remembered the kiss in the parking garage. Justin knew he was expressing love with his kisses instead of pain. Both Brian and Justin were consumed by this new found intimacy. That night they made love, it was the first time for both of them.



The Fountain

Justin gets involved with a community art project and meets Brian's mother.

Brian got out of bed and headed for the shower making sure not to wake Justin. The late night activity in their bed had exhausted them both and he decided the boy needed his rest. They had entered into a pact which, much to Brian's surprise, was working out for both of them. It had been Brian's idea for Justin to work off his debt from his New York adventure. In addition to his job at the diner, Justin was expected to help Brian out with errands, household chores, cooking, and babysitting for Gus. Brian would help Justin out financially at times. Justin very rarely asked for money, except to buy beer at Woody's and Babylon.

They had placed a big jar on the kitchen counter. It was filled with colored voucher slips for debits and credits. A night out alone at the baths or a visit to the back room at Babylon would cost either man a debt. There was no guilt involved, just payback. Since they were exploring the possibility of a relationship (Brian still hated that word) the stakes had become little higher and the payback had become a little more creative.

Justin was in need of a 'big time' favor from Brian. Last night he had offered to pay up in advance. Brian had no idea what he would be expected of him, yet he agreed to the deal. Curiosity had gotten the better of him. Justin had become a master at the art of creating playfully interesting methods of foreplay. Last night Brian had been the recipient of a combination striptease/lap dance that had involved leather, rope, massage oils and ice cream. The memory of the event brought a smile to Brian's face as he wrote 'one big time favor - paid in full' on a piece of paper and placed it in the jar. Brian wondered if Justin realized that his credit vouchers outnumbered his debits two to one. It surprised Brian that his own credit slips outnumbered the debits. In fact there were very few debits in the jar that were his. Brian thought about adding a few just to keep Justin from getting too cocky about the 'relationship thing' working out, but he decided against it. What was the point of having the jar, if they weren't going to be honest? In fact, Brian was pleased that he had been able to alter his lifestyle slightly to allow Justin into his life officially.

The living arrangements were working out nicely. Justin spent most week nights at Deb's studying or working on projects. Two nights a week he and Brian would have dinner together. On the weekends Justin got to spend the night at the loft. Art school was challenging and hard work, but he was really enjoying his classes. It was so much better than being imprisoned at the St. James Academy. His classmates were all talented artists like himself. He enjoyed having coffee with them and just talking about art. Justin was sure that many of them were gay, although the subject of sexual orientation had not been brought up yet. They were all just getting to know each other and he was not comfortable enough with any of them yet to discuss his personal life.

Today Justin planned to attend a meeting with a community group that was interested in sponsoring a project. They wanted students from the art institute to come up with a design for a sculpture which was going to be the focal point of a new playground in the park across from the school. Although sculpting was not really Justin's forte he liked children and had a few ideas which he wanted to bring to the project. He was excited at the prospect of his designs being included. He had put a lot of thought into what would inspire young children to love art as much as he did. He was already influencing Gus, by encouraging him to draw and helping him express himself with crayons.

The big time favor that Justin had 'purchased' from Brian last night had to do with the committee's request that everyone approach business leaders in the area to participate in the project. He was sure that Brian would be an great asset to the committee. He was such a good salesman, and in order to convince people to donate money to the

project, they would need his expertise. Justin planned to use the fact that he was the father of an adorable little boy who would benefit from the outcome to convince Brian to help out. There was one fly in the ointment. One of the committee members was none other than Mrs. Jack Kinney, Brian's mother.

As far as Justin was aware, Brian had not had any contact with his mother since his father's funeral. It was only by accident that Justin had become involved with the group and had come in contact with the woman. Justin wasn't actively trying to re-unite Brian with his mother. He knew that Brian would not like anyone interfering in Kinney family matters. Justin debated about telling Brian the truth. But he was sure it would totally destroy any chance of Brian helping him out by participating in the project. Justin planned to invite him to the meeting just to listen to the details of the project. That was all he would ask of him. If Brian didn't want to get involved, Justin would understand. That would be the end of it.

Justin was making coffee in the kitchen when Brian emerged from the bathroom.

"When are you going to clue me in to your evil plans for me? I'm not going to any Parent-Teacher conferences for you or anything like that. Unless the teacher is hot. Maybe I could work out a deal to improve your grade."

"Don't flatter yourself." Justin smiled. "It does have to do with the art school." Justin explained about the project and told Brian about the meeting he wanted him to attend. After a mild protest Justin was surprised that Brian agreed to attend.

Brian pulled up at the campus of the prestigious art institute around four o'clock. He was immediately impressed by the way that the landscape reflected the artistic influence of the students attending the college. Brian had not been to the school since Justin began classes. Jennifer had given Justin her car for graduation. Brian missed driving him to school in the morning. It had always made him feel more connected to Justin's world.

When Justin had asked him to come to the school for the meeting Brian protested at first - because he was Brian Kinney, and he felt he had to. Truthfully, he was grateful for the opportunity to see where Justin spent his day. After the attack in the parking garage it was difficult for Brian to let Justin out of his sight. At first Justin liked the attention. But when classes started at the college Justin let Brian know that Brian was not to hover over him. Justin wanted to take control of his own love. He was not going to let Chris Hobbs turn him into some little chicken faggot who needed his protector around all the time. Brian admired Justin's bravery. Still, it didn't keep him from worrying about the kid. Not knowing where Justin was at any given moment made Brian nervous. There was also the fact that Justin would meet new people with like interests. He would be hanging out with a new group of friends whom Brian didn't know anything about. The meeting that Justin had arranged for him to attend was his opportunity to "spy" on the kid, and at the same time earn credit for participating in the project.

Justin nervously paced the hallway waiting for Brian. He planned to tell him about his mother's presence before he entered the room. Justin had seen Mrs. Kinney come in with her fellow committee members and he flashed her one of his famous 'Sunshine' smiles.

"What a nice looking boy," Joan Kinney commented to her friend. "Isn't he handsome, Theresa? And, he is so talented. He would be a perfect match for your daughter, Samantha."

The two women smiled at each other at the prospect of matchmaking. "Yes they would be adorable together. And Samantha does admire the artistic type. I will bring her to the unveiling and introduce them."

They took their seat in the meeting room. A few minutes later Theresa said, "Joan, isn't that your son?"

Joan Kinney had not seen Brian since he embarrassed the family at his father's wake. She was devastated by his comments about his father. 'Where did they go wrong with this boy?' He was so sweet when he was a baby. He hardly ever cried. His older sister, Clare had cried since the day she was born, and hasn't stopped yet. She had always needed much of Joan's attention.

Brian looked so much like his father had at his age, tall and handsome. But Brian had something that Jack never possessed. Brian had an elegance about him. He was a very sharp dresser. She wondered how he had come to be at this meeting. Could he be seeking her out to apologize? She was about to find out, Brian was walking over to where they were seated. Brian smiled and kissed his mother on the cheek. He then nodded to the other ladies as he took a seat next to his mother. The meeting was about to come to order and Joan had not been able to ask him what he was doing there. Brian acted like nothing had happened. She would have to set him straight after the meeting. He should go to confession and repent for his despicable behavior. She would speak to him about that. But not here, not in front of her friends.

Justin got up to address the room and present his ideas for the sculpture. He had worked very hard yet he found that he was apprehensive about showing his design for the first time. His fears were unfounded, everyone was blown away by the drawings they saw before them. He had designed a fountain featuring sculptures of children playing in the water. They were laughing and holding hands as they waded in the water. One of the little boys looked a lot like Gus and he was holding the hand of an older girl who looked somewhat like Justin's little sister, Molly. There were several other children all sizes splashing and playing in the water. The facial expressions and realistic poses gave the piece a feeling of children having fun. At least that was what Justin was trying to express when he made his drawing.

Justin held his breath for a moment while the committee members took in the meaning of the piece. When they started to applaud it was apparent that this would be the winning design. Justin was so proud he was beaming.

Everyone was excited about the project now and as the fever died down Brian overheard the woman sitting next to his mother say "Joan, you were so right about that boy, he would be perfect for my daughter. I will make it a point to bring her to the meeting next week and introduce them."

Brian excused himself before he totally lost it in front of his mother and her friends. The irony was killing him. His mother was match-making again. This time Brian wasn't the 'victim', she was trying to impose on some unsuspecting girl, it was his very own teen-age lover, Justin.

Justin found Brian standing in the hallway doubled over with laughter. "You didn't like it, did you? You're laughing at my design."

"No, I'm not laughing at you. Don't be a 'drama princess'. It was something I overheard one of my mother's cronies saying. Your design was not bad. You draw almost as good as you fuck." Justin smiled and moved closer for a kiss, but Brian pushed him away. "You should have warned me this morning about my mother being here."

"Would you have come?" Justin asked in response. "Besides, I wasn't sure if she was your mother or not. I'd never met her." Brian grunted and then Justin asked. "Are you still going to help with the project?"

Brian let him squirm a little and then said "Sure, I think Gus would like to see himself memorialized in bronze." He kissed Justin on top of the head and went back inside to face his mother.

Brian was officially introduced to his mother's friends. He managed to politely excuse himself before his mother had the chance to take him aside for a talk. He promised he would call her and left the room. Joan was satisfied, despite Brian's hasty departure because her friends had assumed that he was there at her request. They were impressed with her dutiful, handsome son. "Is he married?"

Justin was pleased about the outcome of the meeting. Not only because of the positive reaction to his design, but because he was able to put Brian together with his mother. Hopefully working together on the committee would break the ice between the two. Justin thought about the close relationship he and his father had shared before he came out. He still missed his father. When Justin found out that when he was lying in a coma in the hospital his dad never came to see him or even called to find out if he was dead or alive, Justin decided to write him off. It was hard for him to admit to himself that his father hated him. But, at least he still had his mother. They had always been close when he was growing up. She had been wonderfully supportive since he'd come out. When he was in the hospital she had been the one to allow Brian to visit him. Justin knew that his mother had misgivings about the Brian. But she also knew that Justin needed him. She had accepted the fact that Brian Kinney was a permanent part of her son's life. She did her best to treat Brian fairly. Justin wondered what kind of person Brian would have been if he had the support of his family, or at least one of his parents. After meeting Mrs. Kinney Justin decided that maybe Brian was better off not telling her he was gay. She would never accept it and she would never stop trying to "save" him.

Secretly, Justin had hoped that Brian and his mother would find a way to mend the rift between them. Joan Kinney was nice to Justin, she praised him for his talent whenever they met at school. It seemed to Justin that every time he saw her, she had someone else she wanted to introduce him to. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out she was matchmaking. He was gay. That was a statement of fact. But he did not have the overwhelming need to declare it to every person he came into contact with like he had in high school. It was apparent that Mrs. Kinney was a bigot. Justin now understood what Brian had said when he asked about his coming out to his parents. They did not deserve to know, they were not a part of his life. At the time Justin was naive enough to think that a parent would accept a child no matter what. But after his experience with his father, he totally understood one thing. . . you can not expect

to change people, especially bigots. It didn't keep Justin from feeling just a little bit sorry for her. She was missing out on being a part of her beautiful son's life. Not to mention the fact that she wasn't even aware of the fact that she had a grandson. Justin wondered if she ever noticed the resemblance the little boy in the fountain had to her own son.

By the end of the semester Justin had made some good friends at school. He found himself spending many hours working on the project at school, and less time hanging out in the bars on Liberty Avenue drinking and picking up guys.

At first he was afraid that Brian would feel neglected and want to go to the clubs more. But the voucher jar did not reflect any increased activity. He was pretty sure that Brian was being honest about the vouchers. Justin was always counting them up and comparing. Making sure to stay ahead of Brian on credits, of course. The energy which fired Justin's artistic creativity, had also made him horny as hell. When Justin came home, Brian would be the recipient of many late night visits from the "foreplay fairy". Justin would never neglect Brian. They were as close as ever, both in and out of bed. Now that the fountain project was almost completed he would reward Brian's patience with a new act from Justin Taylor's "foreplay repertoire." The unveiling was planned for Tuesday afternoon and Justin was very happy with the results of everyone's efforts. He was so proud, not only of himself, but of the project leader's commitment to involve the whole community in the project. A special effort was made to include all races and religious groups. Justin recognized some people he had met at the gay and lesbian center.

Brian normally hated crowds and would do anything to avoid them, but today he made an exception. He had stopped to pick up Lindsay and Gus for the unveiling. Lindsay was particularly proud of Justin's accomplishment as she had been one of the first to encourage him to pursue his art. She took Gus out of the car seat and handed him to Brian just as Mrs. Kinney approached. Brian and his mother had managed to remain civil to each other while working on the committee together.

"What a beautiful baby, Lindsay. I didn't know you were married."

Lindsay smiled "Yes, I married few years ago?"

Brian had to cover his mouth to keep his mother from seeing his reaction to Lindsay's announcement. He could almost see the wheels turning in his mother's head. "That should be your baby, Brian." If she ever knew that Lindsay was referring to the fact that she was married to another woman and that the child had been the result of his jerking off into a cup. . . well, Brian couldn't even imagine how his mother would react to that news.

Brian saw Justin approaching them at that moment. At first Brian had thought it was funny that his mother had taken it into her head to match Justin up with every pubescent female she could find. But, she had exhausted her supply of young girls for Justin and recently started to trot out the eligible 30 year old potential daughters-in-law. Brian was tired of the game. He was proud of Justin's accomplishments and he was also proud that Justin was a part of his life.

After today the game would be over. He wouldn't have to see his mother again, except for maybe special occasions, like a death in the family.

Joan Kinney had decided that today was the day she would lay down the law to Brian. She only wanted what was best for her son. He should be married and settled down by now. Jack had always discouraged her from getting involved in Brian's personal life. 'Marriage isn't for everyone' Jack would always tell her. She felt sometimes that he was talking about himself. Jack Kinney was not easy to live with. She had sinned by having relations with him before marriage. Living with that man had been her punishment.

Justin could not believe the size of the crowd that had gathered. He felt like he was about to give birth. He guessed that this statue unveiling would be the closest he would ever come to that. Everyone was there at the park. He saw Lindsay with Brian and Gus, Mel had taken off early from work and arrived with Ted and Emmett. Michael, Deb and Vic were there also. Justin saw his mother and Molly standing with them. He went over and kissed his Mom and Molly. He told Molly that she was going to see something very special in a few minutes. He directed her to stand in a spot where he knew she would see her likeness in the fountain. His mother was now talking to some people she knew from her country club. Mrs. Kinney was standing with them. Justin had a bad feeling about his Mom meeting Brian's mother without a warning. But there was nothing he could do at this point. It was almost time for the ceremony to start.

Jennifer had known some of the women present from various clubs she had belonged to over the years. One woman congratulated her on her son's accomplishments.

"Have you met Joan and Theresa?" Jennifer's friend asked. "They're on the committee." Jennifer was introduced as the artist's mother. She liked the sound of that. Joan asked, "Where is Justin's father?"

"He is out of town," Jennifer lied. She did not want to get into her personal life with strangers.

Theresa commented. "Justin is a very talented and equally handsome young man. Does he have a girlfriend?"

Jennifer heard herself say out loud, "My son is gay".

Joan could not believe her ears. This woman had just announced to a crowd that her son was gay and she was not in the least bit embarrassed. It was appalling that she would bring her small daughter to this event and announce out loud that her son was a sinner. Joan felt that the boy had set out to deceive the community. It was her duty make sure everyone knew they had been taken in by this vile young man. Any conversation about the matter would have to be put off until after the ceremony to avoid a scandal. But she would be sure to make her protests about the deception.

The crowd had assembled next to the big white tent which would soon be lifted to reveal Justin's masterpiece. Brian wished that he could be closer to Justin right now. He was so proud of his golden boy. After the obligatory speeches were given the work of art was revealed. It was so beautiful the people in the crowd gasped. The children in the fountain seemed real and one child in particular stood out.

For a moment Joan Kinney could not believe her eyes. There before her in the fountain was a likeness of her little boy, Brian. There was no mistaking the resemblance. All of a sudden it became clear to Joan that Lindsay's child was her grandson. Brian and Lindsay must be married and for some reason have kept it a secret from her.

Brian got up and moved away from Lindsay. He was so overwhelmed by the beauty of the fountain that he had tears in his eyes. Before he realized it, he stood face to face with his mother. She was speaking to him. "Why didn't you tell me about Lindsay and your son?"

Brian was stunned but not overly surprised that some one had mentioned to her that Gus was his son. Or maybe she had just guessed, when she saw the statue. He'd thought about telling her. But he had decided that she would never understand about Lindsay and Mel.

"Why did you keep your marriage to Lindsay a secret from your mother?"

Brian laughed out loud. He was tired of the game. It was time for the whole truth. "Gus is my son, but Lindsay and I are not married, and we are never going to get married." It was like he had struck her, she took a step back then went off on a tirade about sex without the benefits of marriage, and on and on. He tried to tune her out, but she was on a rant that wouldn't end. One thing that she said caught his attention.

"That young man, that Justin. . . his mother just announced shamelessly that her son is gay. What has this world come to? Sinners should be ashamed of their actions. They need to repent or they will rot in hell."

Brian was not going to listen to any more. The game would end, right now. Brian approached a security guard and asked to borrow his megaphone. Brian stood jumped up onto the platform next to the next to the fountain and started to speak. "My name is Brian Kinney. I am a member of the committee and I have a very important announcement to make. I am proud to say that the statue of the young boy in the fountain is a likeness of my son Gus. Gus's mother Lindsay and her life partner Mel are raising him in a loving two parent home. I'm grateful to them for allowing me to be a part of his life."

"The work of art you are all admiring is the creation of the young man who owns my heart, my boyfriend, Justin Taylor. I want to thank him for giving me the courage to be proud of my son and his mother and my friends and of course, Justin whom I love very deeply. They are the people I have chosen to be my family."

Brian had ruffled a lot of feathers with his little speech. His mother and here cronies had left the park in a hurry. Lindsay and Mel came over and kissed him as did Michael and Deb. He searched the crowd for the one person who meant everything to him. He found him next to the fountain stilling with Gus and Molly. Molly was holding Gus's hand as he splashed Justin with water. Brian thought it was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

Justin looked up at him and smiled "You're full of surprises Brian Kinney. Do you realize that you just outed yourself, me and everyone you know in front of the entire city?"

"What are you talking about ?" Brian asked. Justin pointed in the direction of the media trucks parked at the curb. Brian began to laugh, so did Justin and Gus and Molly.

When they got back to the loft Justin took the voucher jar and emptied it out on the table. He took all of Brian's debits and put them into the ashtray. Dressed in his timeless bed sheet toga he ceremoniously lite a match and threw it into the middle of the pile of papers. "Great, now I am a virgin, and I have to start all over again." Brian pouted.

"You can if you want" said Justin, as he caressed Brian's ear with his tongue "but remember payback can be very exhausting. Your boyfriend is so demanding. In fact, he is planing on fucking you all night, every night for the rest of your life."



It's a Mystery

Brian is held captive by someone from the past. As he struggles for his freedom, Justin faces his biggest fear - living his life without Brian.

It's a Mystery - Part One

After putting in an hour on the treadmill Brian struggled out of his sweat soaked T-shirt. Justin had called to say he was leaving the diner almost an hour ago and he still had not arrived at the loft with their dinner. He picked up the phone to dial the kid's cell number when the phone in his hand rang.

"Yeah." Brian said impatiently. There was no one on the other end of the line.

"Shit." That was the forth call today. It was happening on a daily basis lately. Over the years he had picked up his share of weirdos so this kind of crank call was not unusual. It did concern him a little tonight because Justin had mentioned that he thought some guy might be following him. For that reason Brian had given Justin the keys to the Jeep with strict instruction to come straight home after work.

It had started to rain a few minutes before and was now coming down heavy. Brian was not too sure about Justin's driving the Jeep to begin with, this weather was not helping his vivid imagination.

BOOM! A giant clap of thunder signaled the start of a torrential downpour. The thunder was loud, but Brian thought he'd heard screeching brakes also so he started to the window to check it out when the phone sounded again!

"What the FUCK do you want?" Brian's nerves were on edge.

"Nice way to talk to your best friend." Michael responded.

"Oh, sorry. Some asshole is getting his rocks off by dialing my number every fucking 5 minutes and I'm getting sick of it." Brian picked up a towel and was drying his chest. "What's up?"

"Actually, I was calling the boy wonder. Tell him he left half your order back here at the diner."
Michael waited for Brian's response. "Brian?"

"What time did he leave there?" Brian was getting concerned.

"You mean he isn't home yet? He left about 45 minutes . . ."

Before Michael could finish the sentence Brian felt an impending sense of dread. He ran to the window and looked out. As the lightening exploded overhead he saw his Jeep parked across the street. For a brief moment he felt relief that Justin had made it home, but as the second bolt of lightening hit, saw a figure lying in the street and his heart sank.

Barefoot and half dressed Brian ran down the stairs and out into the street. The form lying next to the Jeep was Justin. Seconds later Brian was at his side reliving that horrible night of the prom.

"Shit, that asshole! He made me drop our dinner all over the pavement. You fucking idiot!" Justin screamed out to no one in particular as he struggled to stand.

"Are you okay?" Brian shouted over the rain.

"I think so. I landed on your salad." Justin was too mad to think about how much worse it could have been.

"Your knee is bleeding." Brian said as he inspected the boy for injuries. Brian picked him up and put him in the Jeep.

"We're going to the hospital." Brian insisted. "Just let me go up and get my shoes and a shirt. DON'T get out of the car."

Since the beating, Brian had appointed himself protector. Justin knew there was no point in arguing, not that he would anyway. Being beaten into a coma makes you realize that no one is immortal and, it's better to be safe than sorry.

Luckily the doctor who had treated Justin before was on duty in the emergency room. As he carefully checked for injuries to the boy's head he asked him what happened

"I was getting out of the Jeep on the driver side and this car came out of nowhere and almost knocked me down. It was like he was aiming for me. I slipped on the food I dropped and landed on my knee. The car didn't hit me, really, but it was very close." Justin was still fuming.

"Had you seen the car before Justin?" Brian asked.

"It looked familiar. Maybe he was at the diner?" Justin was trying to remember.

"Do you think it might have been that guy you said was following you?" Brian asked.

"It was dark. I don't remember seeing him tonight, but, I was really in a hurry to get home and maybe I wasn't paying attention." Justin was becoming frustrated.

"You should report this to the police." the doctor suggested. "After what happened to you in June you can't be too careful."

After receiving six stitches in his knee Justin was released, not much the worse for wear. They decided to go back to the diner. Michael had been joined by Emmett and Ted and Deb was behind the counter.

"What happened Sunshine? We were so worried." Deb said with concern.

As Justin recounted the story, Brian sat silently studying the other patrons of the diner. Most of the people there were regulars, people he had seen before at Woody's or Babylon. He wondered if one of them had taken an interest in Justin and was silently stalking him.

"We're not taking any chances with your safety Sunshine. I'm going to call Sal at the precinct and you're gonna report this." Debbie went to the phone and dialed the number before Justin could protest.

Sal was the desk Sergeant at the local police station. He and Deb met when Vic had been arrested last May. Deb had decided that he was not such a bad guy after he'd given Vic the medication he needed. Once things were squared away for Vic, Deb decided to take the officer some lemon bars from the diner as a thank you. They talked for a while when he went on break and found they had a lot in common. A few days later he called and invited her to a ball game. It was nice to have someone from her own generation to talk to that she wasn't related to. They were becoming good friends.

She got on the phone and told him what had happened to Justin. He said for Justin to come down to station in the morning and file a report. Since he didn't have the license number or a decent description of the car it would be hard to follow up on, but, it would be good to have it documented in case someone was really harassing him.

"I don't think the police will do anything, but, I'll go down there in the morning and talk to Sal." Justin knew that there was no point in arguing with Deb once she had her mind set about something.

"Can we go now?" Justin closed his eyes and put his head on Brian's shoulder.

"We should talk about changing your hours here. I don't think it's a good idea for you to work at night unless I can pick you up." Brian put his hand on Justin's face.

Justin's head sprung up from his shoulder. "Are you kidding? I get my best tips at night."

"We'll talk about it tomorrow honey. You look tired, you should go home and rest." Deb turned to Brian. "And I MEAN rest."

Brian rolled his eyes at her as he paid the check. "Let's go baby."

Just as they entered the loft the phone rang. Brian picked it up and once again there was no one on the other end. "That does it, tomorrow I get a new phone number. This is the last thing I need tonight."

"Brian, do you think that maybe those calls are for me? Maybe it's the guy that's been following me. I bet he was driving that car too." Justin was getting anxious.

Since the beating Justin had become a little paranoid. He was suspicious of anyone who even looked at him. That's why Brian had not been too concerned when Justin mentioned that he thought someone had been following him. But, the phone calls and the brush with that car were real. If someone was stalking Justin then Brian would have to take action.

"I hate to bring this up, but, what did your shrink say when you told him you thought someone was following you?" Brian asked.

Justin's parents had insisted that he go to a therapist to help him to deal with what had happened. He went along with it just to keep them off his back about Brian.

"You think I'm making it up?" Justin backed away from him.

"No. I don't think you're making it up Justin." He spoke gently and pulled on the boy's T-shirt till he was close enough to put his arms around him. "I'll find out who is doing this and I'll put an end to it one way or another." He held Justin's face in his hand and locked eyes with him.

"I'm sorry I'm causing you so much trouble. I want to make your life easier, not harder. I love you Brian." Justin buried his head in Brian's chest.

"Sorry is bullshit." Brian said. "I love you too."

If Brian knew where he was going he would stop him dead in his tracks and probably ground him for life. He knew if he was ever going to overcome his fear he would have to face it alone. Brian had been wonderful since that night, but, Justin was starting to feel like a child. It wasn't like him to let other fight his battles, not even Brian. He was a man and it was time for him to start acting like one.

Earlier in the day Justin had taken the bus to his father's office. Craig had promised him a car when he graduated from high school and Justin was going to ask him if the offer still stood. They were on speaking terms, but, barely. It seemed no matter what the topic Craig had an opinion that was opposite of Justin's way of thinking. They were never going to have a normal father/son relationship, but, at least they were both trying to have establish some kind of communication.

"Alright Justin. You did very well with your SAT scores, and I'm proud of you for that." Craig said "When the lease is up on my Volvo I'll get a new one and you can have my old car."

"Dad, I was wondering if I could maybe borrow it, just for today. I need to go somewhere and there's no bus service." Justin hoped Craig would not press him about his destination.

Craig chuckled. "You're out of luck today. I dropped the car off for service this morning and they gave me a real clunker for a loaner. If you want it, your welcome to it."

"Sure, I don't care what it looks like. As long as it gets me where I need to go." Justin was happy his father was going to help him.

"Here are the keys. Just be careful and put it back in the garage downstairs when you're finished." Craig hesitated.

"Wait one minute Justin, I want to give you something." He opened a closet door and produced a baseball bat. "This belongs to your friend Brian. Tell him I don't need it anymore."

"Sure. Thanks Dad. I'll bring the car back this afternoon." Justin cradled the bat in his arms. He had no clue as to what that was all about, but, he was in too much of a hurry to leave to worry about it.

Chris Hobbs had been assigned to do his community service at St. Margaret's Hospital. The judge had been lenient with Hobbs because it was his first offense. Justin figured the judge was a homophobic asshole. Chris also had to go to a psychiatrist to learn how to manage his anger.

He had not thought about how he would get inside. They don't allow just anyone to wander around without a reason, especially carrying a weapon. He stood outside a rear door entrance trying to think of a plan when the door opened and out walked Chris Hobbs.

Justin wondered how he would feel if he ever did run into Hobbs face to face. Now here they were just staring at each other in the parking lot. Chris looked much older than his eighteen years. He had gained weight since Justin had last seen him in the courtroom. Pale and haggard, he was not the same Chris Hobbs who ruled football field at St. James. Justin noticed that he still walked with a pronounced limp from the injury to his right knee.

Justin tried to speak, but, all he could manage was "Hey."

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Chris shot back. He was not as vicious and sure of himself as he was when he strutting around the halls at St. James.

"I need to talk to you." Justin tried to keep his voice from shaking. He had forgotten all about the bat that he carried in his hand.

"Are you going to hit me with that or did you want to shove it up my ass." Chris remarked sarcastically.

Justin let out an involuntary chuckle and leaned the bat up against the fence.

"You got any cigarettes?" Chris asked.

"Sure." Justin pulled out the pack and let Chris take one. He took one for himself and light them both.

"Thanks." Chris sat down on the steps.

"Why?" was all Justin could think of to say.

Chris started to get up, but, changed his mind. He took a deep breathe and then answered Justin.

"A lot of reasons. I was drunk. And it pissed me off, watching you dance with that guy at my prom. It pissed me off that you let him put his dick in your ass. Just the thought of it makes me sick." He puffed out circles of smoke and watched them disappear.

"Why do you give a fuck what I put up my ass? It's my ass, not yours." Justin was about to suggest that maybe that was the problem, but, stopped himself. He was getting no where with this line of questioning, so, he decided to use another tactic.

"You look like shit. What do they have you doing here? Hard work I hope?" Justin looked around the grounds. He saw that there were several groups of kids in the yard.

"They're brain damaged kids. I help clean up the shit and sometimes I get to drag them around in wheelchairs and stuff. Come on, you should meet them. You were almost one of them." He opened the gate and led Justin into the yard.

It was not Justin's plan to spend the day following Chris around a mental hospital, but, he needed his questions answered and this would be his only opportunity.

They walked past a group of younger kids who were sitting at a table near the wall. The members of the staff were attempting to feed them, but, most of the food was landing on the ground under the table. The kids didn't seem aware of their environment. Most of them were in wheel chairs and the ones that weren't confined were wearing helmets with chin straps. He guessed that the helmets kept them from hitting their heads when they tried to walk around. It struck him that if Brian had thought of it he would probably make him wear a helmet like that every time he left the apartment.

They walked past this group and through another gate to a bigger section of the yard. There were about a dozen older kids who appeared to have a higher level of capabilities then the others. Chris told his supervisor that Justin was a classmate of his who was thinking about volunteering.

Justin was glad that Chris had called him a classmate and not a friend. He didn't want to be his friend. It was creeping him out being with him at all, but, he needed to know.

A girl who looked to be about Molly's age was pulling him by the hand. "Sit." she commanded. She dragged him over to a picnic table where a few kids were working on crafts.

"That's Vicki." Chris said. "Bossy little chick." He sat down opposite them. When she was seven years old her maniac father tossed her out of a third story window. She's been here for four years and hasn't made much progress. Doesn't get any visitor's either so she kinda latches on to anyone who walks in the door. "Why don't you entertain her for a minute while I empty the trash."

Justin picked up a pencil from the table and began to do a sketch of Vicki. She moved around a lot and made funny noises, but, he managed to get a pretty good likeness of her. He turned it toward her when he was finished and watch her eyes light up with glee. It made him feel good. His sister Molly never took much interest in his drawings, even the ones he did of her.

"Me, Me!" A boy who looked a little older than Vicki jumped up and down begging Justin to draw him too. Before he knew it he had done a sketch of every kid at the table. While he was working it gave him an opportunity to study their faces. He wondered about the pain that each one of them had suffered in their young lives. Most of them had vacant expressions and facial paralysis, not a pretty sight. He concentrated on their eyes and sometimes got a glimpse of what the kid might have been like before their injuries. The staff member who was supervising the children thanked Justin as he left the table.

It was disturbing to think of how close he'd come to spending the rest of his life in a place like this, sitting in his own shit while strangers stuffed food in his face. He wished that Chris would come back so he could leave.

A few minutes later Chris returned pushing a wheelchair occupied by a very pretty young woman. He parked the chair next to the table where Justin had been sitting. All at once she was bombarded with the kids showing her his sketches. She made a big deal about each one and then turned and waved at Justin.

Before he could say anything Chris spoke up. "Her name is Marie Stewart. She was a pre-med student in her senior at Northwestern University when she had her accident. She was waiting for a bus with a bunch of her friends when this old lady in a big ass Towncar jumps the curb and runs them down. Three of them were hurt, just broken bones and stuff. Marie was hurt the worst, the car landed right on her head. She was in a coma for months. Everyone thought that she was going to die, but, she didn't. The woman that hit her claims she swerved because a dog ran out in front of her car, but, they proved she was on a cell phone at the time. You never know when some asshole is going to up and do something stupid and fuck up your life forever."

"Why did you come here today?" Chris finally asked.

Justin had been thinking about Marie and her accident. He wondered if in his own way Chris was apologizing for being an asshole. It didn't matter, he'd seen and heard enough for one day.

"What kind of car do you drive?" Justin finally asked.

"That's what you came out here to ask me?" Chris snorted. "You must be fucking brain damaged."

"I need to know, that's all. Just tell me so I can get out of here."

"I can't drive a car Justin. My knee is too fucked up thanks to your boyfriend." Chris responded.

"So you haven't been stalking me." Justin was relieved in a way.

"Don't flatter yourself. My life is just as much of a fucking mess as yours is. I lost out on the football scholarship, I can't even think about college until I serve my sentence, my parents have to pay your fucking hospital bills and the

bills for my knee surgeries. If I never see your little faggot ass again it would suit me just fine. Does that answer your question?" With that Chris turned went back to work.

Justin found his way out of the yard, retrieving his bat from where he had left it. He did not want to think about all the things he saw and heard at that place today. He opened the door to the 1985 Cadillac his father loaned him and turned up the radio. He imagined he was dancing with Brian at Babylon.

Things calmed down after the phone number was changed. Justin went back to working the evening shift at the diner when school started. After his visit with Chris Hobbs he thought a great deal about the kids at the hospital, especially Marie. One minute she's a carefree student hanging out talking to her friends and in seconds her life was changed forever. There was no point in being afraid of anything. She never even had time to feel fear. What good would it have done her anyway. What good would it do him to live his life afraid to walk the streets.

He was glad that he went to see Chris at the hospital. It made him feel fortunate to be alive and well. He wasn't going to continue to being a victim. It was finally over for him.

Brian had noticed a change in Justin. He started going out alone at night again. There weren't any more frantic phone calls to come and pick him up because he thought someone had been following him. The therapist his parents have him seeing must be good.

The power had gone down in the gym earlier because of a storm in the area. Brian decided to come home and change and then surprise Justin by picking him up from his late shift at the diner and taking him to Woody's.

Not wanting to get involved in conversation in the diner Brian waited out in the Jeep for Justin to appear. He glanced in his rear view mirror and had a flashback to prom night. Instead of dwelling on the bad things that happened that night Brian thought about how cute Justin looked in his tux and white scarf. Nothing could take away the warm feeling he had as he watched Justin in the mirror that night. He wasn't going to let Chris Hobbs or anyone else fuck up his memory of that moment for him.

Lost in his thoughts, Brian jump when he saw something moving in the bushes. He crouched down in the Jeep and checked the mirror again. A figure dressed in black ran across the street and dashed into the ally.

Justin had not imagined that someone was following him. This guy was for real and Brian was ready for action. He silently got out of the jeep and walked toward the ally where the figure had disappeared. At that moment Justin pushed opened the door of the diner and the figure in black emerged from his hiding place.

Brian pounced on him from behind knocking him into the van that was parked at the curb. Pulling him by his jacket Brian turned him around and removed the wool hat he had pulled down over his face.

Justin was at his side by this time and he let out a gasp. "Sean, what the fuck are you doing here?"

Brian recognized the boy as the twink that Justin had topped the night of the "King of Babylon Contest" The teenager looked so scared Brian thought he might wet his pants so he let go of him and allowed Justin to do the honors.

"Have you been following me?" Justin demanded in anger.

"Yes. I called your apartment too. I needed to see you Justin." His voice was barely audible.

"Why didn't you just come into the diner and talk to me?" Justin's voice softened.

"I wanted to see you in private. You're always surrounded by people, especially HIM." Sean pointed at Brian, who was now leaning up against the van lighting a cigarette and trying not to laugh.

"So, you're seeing me now." Justin glanced over at Brian. "In private."

Brian got the hint and crossed over to wait in the Jeep while Justin straightened out his stalker. The irony was not lost on Brian. Justin was getting a bit of his own medicine. Brian knew that Justin would handle the matter much better than he had.

He watched them as they talked. It looked like the kid was crying. Instead of letting him walk away Justin pulled him back and hugged him. After a few minutes Justin walked Sean to his car and waved to him as he pulled away. He was smiling coyly when he got into the Jeep.

"Don't even start with me." Justin warned Brian. "If you hadn't been such a prick that night I never would have had this problem.

Brian laughed out loud. "I'm proud of you, Junior."

All the pieces of the puzzle had fit. The mystery had been solved. Sean had been calling the loft and hanging up when he got Brian. It was Sean that Justin had been seeing following him at night. Life was now totally back to normal, or was it?

Fuck this rain. Justin had been driving the 1985 Caddy his father bought. It was the same one he had borrowed the day he went out to St. Margaret's to confront Chris. A few days later his Dad called and told Justin he had bought the Caddy as a second car for himself. He intended to restore it as a collectable and then sell it. He offered it to Justin for him to drive until he could give him the Volvo.

At first Justin was thrilled to have his own wheels, but, realized too soon that driving an old clunker had it's disadvantages. His father enjoyed working on old cars, but, Justin had no interest in car repair. As a result he had absolutely no idea what to do when the stupid thing died on him in the worst possible part of town. He knew it was only about ten blocks to the diner, but, if he cut through the park it would shave off a few blocks. The path through the park was not the smartest choice, but, it was really starting to pour and Justin decided to go for it.

As he entered the park he sensed someone come up behind him. Fear gripped him and he started to run, but, the man was right on him. Within seconds the assailant grabbed the boy by the back of the neck and threw him to the ground. Justin thought he was finished when he saw the gun in his hand. He closed his eyes and thought of Brian as he waited to die.

As quickly as he had approached the man with the gun let out a hiss and released his grip. He got up and ran before Justin could see his face. The boy sat there shaking in disbelief that he was still among the living. He grabbed his cell phone and dialed Brian.

After going to the police station to fill out a report they made their way over to Debbie's to let her see that Justin was okay. She was beside herself when Brian picked up Justin at the diner after the attack. She insisted they go to the police and immediately called Sal to tell him what happened. Sensing how upset she was Sal volunteered to pick her up from work and drive her home. He stayed with her to wait for Justin and Brian to come back.

"What are the police going to do about this?" Brian asked.

"We don't have much to go on. Justin didn't see anything except the gun." Sal turned to Justin "Can you describe the gun at all?"

"It was black, it looked like your gun, only bigger." Justin was trying to remember.

Something occurred to Brian. "Justin, what were you wearing?"

"Your leather jacket." Justin put his head down. "I'm sorry, I know I'm not supposed to wear it in the rain."

"It's okay. What else were you wearing? Did you have a hat on?" Brian asked.

"Yeah, I had on your wool hat. You know, the one with the snake on it. He pulled it off my head when I fell." Justin was picking up on what Brian was thinking.

"Were you wearing my jacket the night that car almost hit you?"

"Yes. And the hat too." Justin looked up at Brian. "Do you think this guy was really after you?"

"Maybe. It would explain why that guy took off when he saw the color of your hair." Brian said.

"You may be on to something. Can you think of anyone who might hold a grudge against you?" Sal asked.

"Well that would be half the population of Pittsburgh." Deb answered.

"Try to narrow it down Brian. Is there someone that you've had a run in with lately?"

"Not that I can remember." Brian responded. He didn't want to get into his personal lifestyle with "Officer Sal" so he told Justin to get ready to leave.

Neither one of them spoke on the ride home. Justin hated when Brian got quite on him. Most of the time he could coax him into a better mood by flirting with him until he penetrated the wall. But, he knew tonight was different, no amount of enticement would do him any good. He got under the covers next to Brian and tried to sleep.

When he did finally sleep his dreams were so vivid they woke him. He turned on his side and looked over at Brian. The first time they had sex Brian turned over and faced the wall to sleep. Justin wished that he could cuddle up next to him and hold his body close all night long. It took a long time for Brian to get used to that kind of intimate contact. Tonight he was facing the wall again and Justin felt shut out. He felt tears well up in his eyes and Brian's back was really starting to piss him off. He put his hand out and touched his lovers arm.

"Brian." Justin whispered. There was no response from the other side of the bed, but, Justin knew that he was awake. He put his hand on Brian's back and started rubbing. Still, no response. Justin felt a tear roll down his face.

"I won't let you shut me out Brian. Not tonight. I need . . . WE need each other. Talk to me." Justin said.

Finally Brian turned toward him and brushed his hand across his face. Justin knew he hated it when anyone saw him cry.

"Don't even think about blaming yourself for what happened tonight. What if it had been you instead? He would have killed you and where would that leave me? I'd rather be the victim then the one who's left alone. I couldn't image my life without you." Justin let his hand slide around Brian's neck as he pulled him closer.

Brian let him kiss his tears, his eyes and finally he let him licking the line of his nose to his mouth. Sinking his tongue deep into Brian's mouth Justin was determined not to allow Brian to suffer in silence tonight. Propping his head up with his hand Justin looked down at his lover.

"What are you thinking?" Justin asked.

"I'm thinking that you're a cock teaser." Brian quipped back.

"I'm not a tease. You'll get what you want, but, first we need to talk." Justin sat up and faced Brian. "Are you mad at me?"

"No." Brian protested. "Sometimes I just need to work things out for myself."

"But you aren't working them out are you? Maybe I can help. You know I'm probably a genius." Justin bragged. "Brian, are you scared?"

Brian tried to turn back on his side, but, Justin held him down. "Fuck you." He spat up at the boy.

Justin remained in charge. "I was scared to death tonight. It doesn't make me any less of a man. You know that I was afraid all the time after Chris clobbered me with that bat. I hated feeling scared, always depending on you to protect me from my own shadow. So I did something about it."

Brian looked up at him suspiciously. "What did you do."

"Promise you'll hear the whole story before you start yelling at me." Justin felt like he was jumping off a cliff. There was no predicting how Brian would react to this news.

"I went to St. Margaret's Hospital to see Chris Hobbs." Justin braced himself for Brian's response.

"You did WHAT?" Brian had put his hands on Justin's arms and pulled himself up until he was even with Justin's face. "That was a fucking stupid thing to do Justin. What if it was him that was trying to hurt you. You could have been walking right into a trap"

"It was a public hospital Brian. I knew he couldn't do anything right out in the open. Besides, I had a weapon."

"You had a what?" Brian asked.

"I had a weapon. I stopped at my father's office to borrow his car and he gave me a baseball bat. He said it was yours and that he didn't need it anymore." Justin scrunched up his face. "Brian, when did you loan my father a baseball bat?"

For the first time that evening Brian managed a smile. "It's a long story. I'd rather hear you finish yours first." He remembered the look on Craig's face when he smashed his trophy case with the bat.

"Okay. So, I went to the hospital because I thought that he might have been driving the car that almost hit me." Justin hesitated for a moment and then continued. "I thought maybe if I could find out why he attacked me in the first place, I could let go of my fear."

He went on to describe how he found Chris and how much different he looked. "I used to have nightmares about him and most of the time he was this giant monster. After I saw what he looks like now I realized he's just another stupid kid with problems."

He told Brian about drawing the brain damaged kids and how sad it was to see them stuck in that place. Then he described what happened to Marie and why, after that, he stopped dwelling on his fears.

"Maybe if you had been afraid you wouldn't have attempted to cut through the park." Brian responded. "That guy had a GUN, Justin. He could have killed you."

"So, I made a mistake. I won't do it again. Chris could have killed me with the bat, or whoever almost hit me could have killed me with a car. As long as I let fear control me I might as well be dead."

"Tomorrow I'm buying a gun." Brian announced.

"NO. You're not. What if you kill someone. Even if you were defending yourself you would probably be executed because your gay." Justin was adamant.

"What good am I if I can't defend myself or my family?"

"There's got to be a better way." Justin responded.

"So, Mr. Genius, what do you suggest I . . . I mean, WE do." Brian asked.

"Tomorrow we'll get the guys together and try to make a list of suspects. It's possible that what happened tonight was just a random act of violence. If it's someone we know then maybe we can ferret him out and confront him. Just remember you're not alone. Everything you do affects me and the guys and your son." Justin put his arms around Brian and pushed him back down onto the mattress.

"Do you feel better now that we talked it out." Justin asked.

"Yeah, thanks." Brian answered. "Just remember that sometimes I need to brood. Don't take it personally. It's just the way I am."

"Why is it that all this shit happens to us? I bet Ted never even gets a crank phone call. What makes us targets for every homophobic asshole on the planet." Justin rolled over on his back.

"It's because we don't give a fuck what people think and it pisses them off." Brian explained.

"Ted is afraid of his own shadow. Michael doesn't even tell the people he works with that he's gay."

Justin started to tickle Brian's balls. "Michael and Ted will never have what we have."

Brian responded to Justin's petting by pulling him over on top of him and fingering his nipple ring. "What is it that we have?"

"Each other." Justin smiled down at him.

"We'll need a lot of paper for this list." Mel announced.

Brian responded by rolling his eyes at her. "Okay Lindsey, write down the first suspect is Mel."

"This is serious Brian." Justin took charge. "Let's start with the obvious. How about Kip. He probably hates us both."

Lindsay started writing. "What about Gilliume. He certainly has good cause to hate Brian."

It took an hour for them to complete the tentative list of suspects. Some were business associates of Brian's, some where people that Michael knew and most of the others were tricks that were disappointed when Brian wouldn't give them a second look. They decided to make some discreet phone calls to check on the where about of the people they knew.

"You left off one person." Justin chimed in.

"Who's that, honey." Lindsay asked.

"My Dad." Justin responded.

"Justin, do you really think your Dad would be capable of killing Brian?" Lindsay was shocked.

"He already tried once, remember?" Justin said.

Brian took the pad from Lindsay. "Justin, I've already settled things with your father. Don't put his name on the list. He's your family."

"Don't blame me if you see a Volvo racing toward you one night and you're not prepared."

Justin got up to help Lindsay put Gus in the baby seat.

"Justin, don't you have to get ready for work? If you're late again we'll have to add Debbie to the list." Brian said after everyone had left.

He was busy studying the list as Justin crawled on to his lap. "Get off." He nudged the boy. "You have to go to work and I have to figure out who's trying to kill me."

Justin took the list out of his hand. "Stop thinking about it." He insisted. "You just have to be careful, that's all. It'll help to have the list so you can remember who to watch out for. If you're going to sit here and dwell on all the terrible things that could happen you'll go nuts."

Brian thought about it. "I guess you're right. There's nothing I can do until he tries again."

"If he tries again." Justin chimed in.

"So how do you stop thinking about your problems?" Brian asked.

"That's easy. I turn up the radio really loud and I pretend that I'm at Babylon dancing with you."

Justin dragged Brian off the couch and turned up the stereo. The two of them danced around the apartment until it was time for Justin to go to work.

Several weeks had past since the night Justin was attacked in the park. Brian made a point of being aware of the people around him and looking around before he got into his car at night. Everything had been calm, but, he was careful not to let his guard down as far as Justin was concerned. If Justin worked at night Brian would go to the diner and pick him up. Sometimes Michael would go with him. Until the kid got rid of that piece of crap he called a car he would not trust him out at night alone.

It was Friday morning and he was looking forward to going away with Justin. It was a three day weekend and they planned to drive to New York City tonight. He had made a reservation at the hotel that Justin stayed at when he ran away. The thought of that incident made Brian smile. It had been a hellish week at work and he still had a lot to do before he could leave so he drove to the office early to get a head start.

Pulling into his usual parking spot near the elevator he retrieved his brief case from the back seat. As he turned to walk to the elevator he heard footsteps. Something made him turn back and as he did he saw a fist coming straight at his face. Seeing stars, he dropped to his knees. The blood was shooting out of his nose and down the front of his blue Ralph Lauren shirt. He looked up right before he blacked out and managed two words. "It's YOU."

"You're damn straight it's me. Did you think I was going to let you get away with ruining my life, you little prick." David took the handcuffs out of his pocket and secured them on Brian's wrists. He dragged the younger man back to his rented car and threw his limp body into the trunk.

It's A Mystery - Part Two

Michael was surprised to see Justin's big ass Cadillac screech to a halt outside the Q-Mart. He was even more surprised to see that he was carrying Brian's briefcase.

"Michael I gotta talk to you." Said Justin struggling for breath as he ran into the store.

Michael dragged him back to his office and sat him down. "What happened to Brian?"

"He's missing Michael." Justin was close to hysteria.

"Slow down and tell me what happened." Michael put his hand on Justin's arm.

"We were supposed to go to New York tonight. He said he had a lot of work to do before he could leave the office today so he went in early, about 7:30." The boy took a deep breath. "He'd left the report he was working on in the printer, so, on my way to school I stopped at his office to bring it to him. It was 9:30 and no one had seen him.

"I went down to the parking garage and saw that his Jeep was in his reserved spot. I found this next to the car Michael." He showed Michael the briefcase, it was covered with blood.

Justin's eyes were wide. He was on the border of panic. Michael could only think of one thing to do. "I'm calling the police Justin. You stay here, okay." He placed his hand on the boy on his head. "We'll find him. He's gonna be okay."

Michael was not at all sure that what he told Justin was true. This was the most serious trouble Brian Kinney had ever gotten himself into. Or, maybe he hadn't gotten himself into it at all. Maybe someone else was responsible for poor Brian's fate. He tried to stay in control as he dialed 911.

Thirty minutes later Michael and Justin sat in the police station surrounded by Sal and two detectives. Justin was still clinging to the bloody briefcase.

Sal spoke to him gently. "It'll help Brian if they could look at it Justin." Indicating the briefcase.

The boy released his grip and let Sal take the case. He in turn handed it to the young detective who opened the clasps and began to examine the inside. "Sal, if they're reporting him as a missing person we can't do anything for 24 hours." He said as he shuffled through Brian's papers.

"This isn't your run of the mill missing person Andy. Brian was abducted. Look, there's blood on the briefcase. And, there's a documented history of harassment."

"Are you a relative kid?" Another detective opened his pad and began to take notes..

"Justin is Brian's boyfriend." Sal shot a look at the burly dark haired detective. "They pay taxes too Joe."

Justin looked over at Michael. "I told you they wouldn't do anything." He started to get up to leave.

Sal stopped him. "Justin sit down. We're going to help him. The more information you can give us the better his chances are. Now, start at the beginning son."

Justin recounted the whole story for the detectives. They listened and they wrote down pertinent information as Justin talked. Once in a while they would interrupt to ask questions. When he was finished the detective named Joe came over to where he was sitting.

"How was your relationship going? I heard you guys cheat on each other a lot. Did Brian cheat on you, boy?"

"Don't answer him Justin." Mel stood in the doorway.

"I would ask any partner of a missing person the same question Miss." Said Joe defensively.

"Are you finished with Justin, Sal?" Melanie asked.

"Justin, I promise I'll do everything I can to find Brian." Sal said.

Michael took hold of Justin's arm and turning to Mel said. "I'll take him to my Mom's. Call the guys and meet us there."

Brian's mouth felt like he had been sucking on cotton balls soaked in blood. The pain eld between his eyes had subsided, but, he suspected his nose had been broken. The blindfold was tight, and the metalhandcuffs were digging into his skin. His body was stiff from the long ride in the trunk of the car. He wondered how long he had been out.

"I'm sorry, I'm being a poor host?" David must have been inches from his face. He jumped at the sound of his voice. "Lucky for you this is a holiday weekend. I don't have to be back in Portland until Tuesday. Do you know what that means? You get to live an extra day."

"You seem to be having some trouble standing maybe I can fix that, I AM a Doctor" David stood behind him and lifted him under the arms. As Brian screamed out in pain the cloth that had been stuffed into his mouth dropped to the floor. David ignored his protest and slammed him down in a chair which was next to a small table. Using the handcuffs he secured his victim to a chain that was wrapped around a pole a few feet from the staircase.

Removing the blindfold he said. "No need for this now."

David sat down across from Brian. "It's just like old times. Maybe we should call Mikey and ask him to join us."

David had put some bread and cheese on a plate in front of them and started to pick at the food. "I guess you thought you were rid of me. You thought wrong. I'm not a very good loser Brian. I told you that when I first started dating Michael. I thought you understood."

"What the fuck is this all about, David?" Brian found his voice. It was painful for him to move his mouth but, he had to do something to stall this madman. "We had no problem between us."

David responded viciously, gritting his teeth as he spoke "YOU had no problem. I had a problem PAL."

It was clear that David had been drinking, but, there was more to his transformation then a simple problem with alcohol. His face was distorted, there was a semblance of evil in his eyes that made Brian shutter.

"He hasn't said a word since Michael brought him home." Debbie whispered over the telephone to Jennifer. She had been out of town visiting her Aunt in Oregon.

"Debbie I'm counting on you. It will take me all day to get home even if I can get a reservation, but, I'll try. Please, take care of Justin for me." Jennifer pleaded over the phone

"You know I will honey. Don't worry about Justin. You just get home safely." Debbie made her way back to the living room where everyone had gathered.

"Justin, your Mom's on her way home." Debbie said.

Justin didn't respond. He sat on the couch between Michael and Emmett hugging the pillow and staring into space. She had tried to get him to go upstairs and lie down, but, he wouldn't budge. It was like watching Brian waiting at the hospital when Justin was hurt.

Debbie couldn't take it any more. She turned and went back into the kitchen where, for the first time since Justin's accident, she gave way to tears.

Michael came up behind her and put his arms around her. "Mom, Justin will be fine, as soon as we find Brian."

"Oh, I know he will. I'm not crying for Justin. I am crying for Brian. I called his mother. Do you know what she said? She blamed his Godless existence and his friends for allowing something like this to happen. She said she would go to church and pray for his soul."

"The poor boy never had a chance in this world, not with parents like that. I should have been nicer to him Michael. I always blamed him when things went wrong for you or Justin. I hope he knows that I love him too."

"Mom he knows you love him. Believe me, he appreciates everything you've done for him and Justin." Michael held her closer. "I'll call Sal and see if there's any word. Do you want to speak to him?"

"Yeah, sure. Thanks honey." she wiped her eyes on her apron.

David got up and started pacing the room. "It's always about sex with you, it's it Brian? You and Michael try to hide it, but, when I asked him to go to Portland I knew you'd try to convince him to stay. You never really let go of him, not since high school. Poor Michael never had a chance for a normal relationship."

"I told you, it's not like that. We're friends, and that's all." Not sure what degree of violence the deranged man before him was capable of Brian tried to remain calm. He decided that the best course of action would be to keep him talking until he could find a way out of his predicament.

"Look, what do you want? I'm not a threat to you. If you kill me Michael will hate you forever."

Brian's statement sent a wave of fury across David's face. "Michael will never know." David said through clenched teeth. "No one will ever know what happened to the great Brian Kinney. He just took off one day looking for a better fuck, looking for Mr. Goodfuck."

"Justin will know" Brian muttered, more to himself than to David.

For the briefest second the old David was visible in this monster's eyes. "I didn't mean to harm Justin. He's just a kid, not much older than my son Hank. I was sitting in my car near the entrance to the park waiting for you to drive by on your way to the diner. I thought I just got lucky when I saw him. He was wearing your coat and that hat Michael gave you for Christmas. When I saw it was Justin and not you I left him alone."

The words caught Brian's attention. It's exactly what Justin said that night when they were in bed He was afraid of being the one left alone. He said he would rather be the victim because he didn't want to live without me. Brian was more determined than ever to free himself from this madman's clutches.

"Justin you look like hell. Let me take you upstairs and fix you up, baby. What would Brian say if he saw you all red eyed and puffy." Emmett pried Justin from the couch and led him upstairs.

Looking in the mirror Justin started to come out of his stupor. When he thought about the conversation he'd had with Brian about being the one left alone he began to cry. "Emmett, what if I never see him again. What if he's alone and scared."

"Justin. When you were the coma did you feel like you were alone" Emmett tried to calm him.

"No. I was in a coma I didn't feel anything." Justin responded.

"Well let me tell you, honey, Brian felt the same way then as you do now. He would have done anything if he could have traded places with you. More than anything he wanted to be with you, and I think in his mind, he was. You were never alone Justin. Brian isn't alone now."

Justin slumped down and sat on the toilet seat. He thought about what Emmett said. It made sense to him and he needed something to hang onto now. Maybe if he concentrated he could make Brian feel his thoughts.

"I think I want to lie down now." Justin got up. "Call me downstairs if anything happens."

"Sure sweetie. Good night." Emmett left him to his thoughts.

"Justin is another one of your victims, Brian Just like Michael. You'll string him along for the rest of his life. That's why I have to stop you. You prey on innocent kids like my son Hank." David sat down on the chair again and poured himself another drink.

Brian was starting to understand. This mania had something to do with David's son. "What happened out in Portland David?" Brian asked.

A look of rage emerged from the depths of the man's soul. David stood up quickly knocking over the table. His face was unrecognizable as he reached for Brian who had jumped back against the wall. David grabbed him by the neck and began to choke the breath from him. Brian struggled but, David was heavier and used his weight to pin him against the wall. As the younger man slumped to the floor he felt a sharp pain in his side as David's heel connected with his ribs.

"It's been two days Sal, and no word." Debbie was losing patience. "What the fuck are those dicks doing?"

"They're checking out the suspects on Brian's list. So far everyone has checked out. They're still looking for that French guy."

Michael, Ted and Emmett were sitting at the kitchen table. Justin was sitting on the floor in the living room tuning out the world with his headphones. The doorbell rang and Debbie went to answer it.

"Justin, honey. Your Mom's here." Debbie tried to get his attention as her friend kissed her cheek and came inside.

Jennifer bent down over Justin and removed the headphones, as she had done so many times in the past. "Sweetheart. I'm so sorry about Brian. How are you holding up?"

"I'm okay Mom. Everything's going to be okay, he's not alone." Justin was strangely calm.

Jennifer looked over at Deb.

"Good Baby. You're praying for him then." Debbie shrugged and returned Jennifer's look of concern.

"No, I'm talking to him. He knows I'm there." Justin replaced the headphones.

"Debbie, what is going on?" Jennifer pulled her aside.

"Damned if I know." Debbie said. "I'm just as confused as you are. Yesterday he was inconsolable."

"Oh, God Debbie. He's had so much trauma in his young life. My poor son. I hope he isn't having some kind of mental breakdown. I'm going to call his doctor." Jennifer was in a panic.

"Calm down Jennifer. It's a holiday weekend. How much luck do you think you'd have getting him tonight. You look exhausted honey. Why don't you go upstairs to Justin's room and lie down."

When Brian finally woke he vomited. He felt like he had been hit by a truck. When he tried to stand every part of his body screamed out in pain. His left eye was almost swollen shut as a result of the beating he'd suffered at David's hand. He turned his head to survey the room with his right eye. His captor was no where to be seen, which was a relief, because he didn't know how much more abuse his aching body could take.

In his state of unconsciousness he dreamt of Justin. In his mind he had a vivid image of the boys sweet face. He could almost feel his touch when he closed his eyes and concentrated. When Justin was in the coma he had tried to communicate with him with his thoughts. He wanted to believe that Justin was here with him. "Justin, you won't be left alone, not if I can help it."

He gathered every ounce of strength he had left and dragged his body along the wall. As his eyes adjusted to the meager light in the room he started to check around for anything he could use to help himself. He felt the floor under the staircase and his hand brushed something plastic that was lying under the stairs. It was David's cell phone. He heard the door open and with his last ounce of strength he dial memory #1 and tossed the phone back under the steps.

David came charging down the stairs without warning. "Where's my cell phone you little shit?" He stumbled into the room.

"I don't know what your talking about David." Brian hoped he was talking loud enough, this was his last hope.

"My phone Brian. It's gone." David was tearing the room apart.

"David, you asshole." Brian screamed "You must have dropped it when you were beating the shit out of me. You're gonna fucking killing me down here in this basement Give me a break. Let me come upstairs and get some help."

Michael jumped out of his skin when his cell phone rang. Almost everyone he knew was right here at the table in front of him, except of course for Brian.

"Hello! Who is this? BRIAN?" Michael froze.

Justin grabbed the phone from Michael's hand. Putting his ear to receiver he could hear Brian's voice shouting about going upstairs and getting help. Then the line went dead.

"We need to call the police Justin." Michael took the phone back from him.

"NO. Michael wait." Justin grabbed the phone back and dialed *69. When the number flashed in the LED screen Justin showed it to Michael.

"Who's number is it Michael?" Justin demanded.

"It's David's cell number." Michael put his head down.

Justin pressed further. "David! Where is he? Where would he take Brian? Think Michael, Brian's in trouble."

"We should call the police and tell them about the call." Michael insisted.

Justin was getting frustrated. Then he remember something. "Doesn't David own a cabin somewhere? You went there with him. It's on that lake where my parents used to rent a summer home."

"He sold it when he moved to Portland." Michael stood up and grabbed the teenagers arm. There's nothing we can do for Brian. We have to call the police.

Justin pulled away from him and grabbed his jacket. "I'm going to the lake. Maybe he didn't sell that cabin. He might have been lying to you Michael. He lied to you about everything else. "

Justin took off out the door. Ted got on the phone and reported the call to the police. When he hung up he turned to Michael and told him that the police said they would look into the possibility that David has Brian.

Michael ran out the front door after Justin. "I'm going with you."

"Me too." Emmett was already in the back seat.

Ted followed Michael our and got in the back seat next to Emmett. Justin started the engine and slammed his foot down on the accelerator.

"What's all that noise?" Emmett asked.

"Just a bunch of stuff in the trunk. It used to belong to a contractor and I never bothered to clean out the trunk." Justin explained. "I bet there are lots of tools and things we can use to rescue Brian."

Brian knew he had to keep stalling for time. And, he had to be careful not to mention the kid or Michael. He prayed that he reached someone with the phone call. It was a long shot that by dialing the #1 memory on David's cell he would reach Michael, but he had to try something. In his drunken state the maniac had not even noticed the phone had been connected, he just turned it off and retreated up the stairs. He returned hours later with another bottle in one hand and a gun in the other.

"What's the gun for?" Brian tried to keep the desperation he felt out of his voice "You said I had three days. It's only been two days David."

"So you're counting the days." David gave Brian an icy smile. " I don't intend to kill you today, but, if I have to I will."

Not wanting to risk setting David off again he tried to control the anger in that was boiling up inside him. Take a different tactic Justin would say. Brian thought about that late night conversation in the loft. Justin telling him to "kill them with kindness." A vision of the kid wrapped in a blue sheet, stroking his hair while he brooded, materialized in his head. Kill him with kindness, I'll fucking kill him with my bare hands.

Brian spoke softly through his swollen lips. "I want to write a letter to Justin. Please, he needs to know that I didn't want to leave him alone. And I want to ask him to take care of Gus. He'll tell Gus that I loved him when he is old enough to understand. It's important that my son knows I loved him."

David didn't answer right away. He seemed to be considering Brian's request. Taking another swig from the bottle he got up from the table and staggered up the stairs. He returned a few minutes later with a pen and pad.

"Write." He threw the pad at Brian.

"A kid should know his father loves him. Even if the man's a selfish, egotistical prick." David plopped into the chair and watched Brian write his letter."

It was easy for Brian to write to Justin. He could write a book. The longer he was able to stall, the more chance he had that David would drink himself into a stupor and pass out.

"I hope this isn't a wild goose chase. They could be anywhere." Michael was still doubtful.

"Why don't we call the police up there and ask them to go out and check on the house." Ted suggested.

"Good idea. At least if they believe us they can stop David from hurting Brian." Michael said.

He dialed information and got the number. After explaining the situation to the Sheriff the man agreed to go out and check on the cabin. They drove on in silence waiting for the phone to ring.

"Kids think all kinds of things about their parents." David was talking more to the bottle in his hand than he was to Brian. "You can't let other people bring up your kid. They tell fucking lies and turn them against you." David paused and closed his eyes. "I wanted him to know that never meant to kill them."

Brian froze. He wondered what David was talking about. Who did he kill? So, I'm not his first victim. He went back to writing and David continued to talk.

"That son of a bitch ruined my son. He told him I was sick and evil. All those lies had Hank convinced that if he spent too much time with me I would destroy him.. For years I never knew the lies he told my son. The man turned him against me. He TOOK my son from me, like Tom TOOK Glen from me, like you TOOK Michael from me."

Who the fuck were Tom and Glen, Brian wondered. Michael never mentioned them. He never said much about David's past, just that his former lover was dead. Shit, was Glen his former lover?

"How did he die?" Brian couldn't stay silent any longer.

David looked startled, then realizing he wasn't alone in the room he spoke. "It was an accident. The police said I was in the clear. They went off the road one night after we argued in a bar. If he'd stayed with me . . ."

The man fell silent. Brian thought he was asleep but, after a few minutes David rose abruptly and staggered over to undo the handcuffs from the chain using them to secure Brian's hands together in front of him. Grabbing his soiled designer shirt David pulled him up from the chair until his face was right up against his own.

"He had NO right to drive my son away. Greg had NO right to tell him I killed his brother. Glen had a choice, ME or TOM, he choose wrong. " David had snapped. Brian could feel his hot breath in his face and he struggled to get free of his grip.

"Michael choose YOU, didn't he Brian." David covered Brian's mouth with his own in a kiss of death. Brian felt the weight of the powerful man's body pressing on him as he pushed him up against the wall. With his free hand David undid the button and zipper on his victim's trousers allowing them to drop to the floor.

"Michael choose WRONG. I'll show you why Michael should want me and not you."

Brian felt his blood run cold. The thought of David carrying out his threat caused his stomach to contract until he almost puked.

A sudden flash of light flooded the room which Brian now realized was in the basement of David's cabin. The sound of a car door slamming sent David into a panic. Putting the gun to Brian's head he forced him to the floor and held him down, keeping one hand tightly over his mouth to stop him from screaming out.

Ted answered on the first ring. "Bad news. He said the cabin is locked up tight. No sign of anyone around. He even tried all the doors and windows."

Justin was crushed. "I guess we better turn around."

"NO." Michael said. "Keep going Justin. David's cabin didn't have any locks."

Justin turned the car off onto the dirt road in the direction Michael indicated. They had switched off the lights and were coasting down the road near the driveway.

"Stop here." Michael told him.

For the ten minutes Brian listened as the doors and windows on the main floor rattled. Someone was trying to get in, or, maybe just checking to see if David was here.

The weight of David's body on top of him made it difficult to breathe, much less scream out. He felt as helpless as he did the night that bully clobbered Justin.

Something had triggered the chain of events that brought the calvary out here to check on the house. Even if they left disappointed at least he knew that someone suspected David was his captor. If that someone was Justin, there was hope that his sorry ass would be rescued. He prayed it would happen before David got a chance to finish what he had started earlier.

They could see the outline of the cabin in the moonlight. It appeared to be empty, but, then they heard David yelling.

"He is here. Let's hope we're not too late." Michael said.

"What's the plan? How are we going to get Brian out of there?" Emmett asked.

"How well do you know this place Michael. Do you think you could find your way around in the moonlight?" Justin asked.

"I was here a few times. I'm not sure. To the left is the lake. Over there, down that hill, is a ravine. It's pretty steep and it's about an 85 foot drop to the bottom. I wouldn't want to go wandering around there in the dark"

"I have an idea." Justin slipped quietly out of the car and ran around to the truck. He opened it with the key and removed the baseball bat, a can of gasoline, a length of rope, two sets of jumper cables, a small hatchet and some rags. Leaving the trunk ajar he returned to the car and started putting his plan in action.

"We have to lure David out of the house before we can get to Brian." Justin was ripping the rags into shreds with the hatchet and tying them to a large rock he had found. We'll throw this rock with the rags through the front window. That should get David's attention.. That's where you come in Michael. You'll hide in the woods over there. When you see David you start calling him. Once he's out the front door, run toward the ravine and zig zag back and forth to confuse him. You'll have to keep talking to him, only don't let him see you."

"Emmett and Ted you run into the cabin and go down to the basement." Justin directed.

"Michael, where are the stairs to the basement?" Justin demanded.

"I think the door is in the kitchen, over on that side of the house." Michael pointed to the left.

Emmett raised his hand. "I have a question. What makes you think that David will be afraid of a rock, when he has a gun?"

Justin scrunched up his face and said. " 'Cause it'll be on fire . . . DUH."

The boy continued talking as he dipped the rags in the gas can. "Drag Brian out any way you can. He must be hurt or tied up so be careful and bring something sharp with you in case you have to cut a rope or something, I think there's a knife in the tool box in the trunk.

Emmett waived his hand again. "About the fire . . . "

"The basement stairs are on the opposite side of the house. Even if it does catch fire if you work fast enough it shouldn't be a problem."

"Here Ted. Take the rock with the gasoline rags. Give me about 10 minutes, then light the rags and throw the rock through the front window."

Ted looked at Justin in disbelief. "Oh, no pressure. I never even played in Little League."

"You can do it." Justin said forcefully. "You have to, Brian need us. He'd do it for you Ted."

"Michael, you come with me so you know where to lead David." Justin ran down the hill out of sight.

The three men looked after the boy as he disappeared into the darkness. They hoped he wasn't acting out the plot of some action movie he'd seen. There was no choice but to follow his plan. Emmett and Ted got into position and waited to carry out their orders. Michael glanced toward the house, before following Justin down the hill.

The boy was careful not to step too close to the edge. He had to set his trap close enough for David to lose his balance and fall into the ravine. After tying the jumper cables together he searched around for some sturdy bushes to secure them to. Using the hatchet he cut some small branches and laid them across the jumper cables so they would not be visible. Once his trap was set Justin looked at his watch, it was almost time to set the plan in action. He hoped he could remember how to climb a tree.

Emmett was keeping time and when 10 minutes were up he signaled Ted to light the rags.

Ted took a deep breath and summoned every ounce of courage he had. He lite the rags as he stood up and with all his might pitched the burning rock. It crashed right threw the middle of the front window.

"YES!" Ted jumped up and down like he had just accomplished a home run.

Emmett grabbed his arm and pulled him back into the trees to wait.

"It won't be long now. Soon Michael will come here looking for his lover." David was ranting loudly as he paced. "You thought you two would be together . . . don't worry LOVER BOY you'll be together. Together in HELL."

Brian never heard him. He lay unconscious on the basement floor unaware that the calvary had arrived, and was about to set fire to the house.

The sound of glass breaking shattered the silent cabin startling the monster who was once Michael's partner in life. No longer thinking rationally he ran to the door calling for Michael. David had lost all reason.

Minutes later the front door burst opened and David appeared, gun in hand.

It was all up to Michael now. "David. Come out here. I need to talk to you."

"Michael? Michael, don't leave, wait, I'm coming." David took off in the direction of Michael's voice.

Adrenalin took over and Michael shoot back and forth across the path just ahead of David.

"Why Michael?. Why did you leave ME for HIM." David was very obviously drunk.

"I never left you for Brian, David. You left me, remember?" They were almost at the edge now.

"Michael, come back to Portland with me. Brian doesn't love you. I love you." David followed Michael's voice, moving his head from side to side trying to lock in on his location.

Justin watched from his perch in the tree hoping Michael would guide David to the trap fast so he could get up the momentum to push him over the edge. As he heard them approach Justin braced himself.

Michael saw David's feet become entangled in the cables causing him to lose his balance. With all his might Justin swung the bat, hitting him on top of his head. Still standing, but dazed, he staggered slightly just inches from the edge. Before he could recover Justin came at him full force kicking him in the back. David plummeted over the edge, along with Justin.

"Fuck you David." Michael screamed out. He got down on his stomach and crawled to the edge of the cliff. Taking a deep breath he ventured closer and slowly put his arm down into the darkness. Justin grabbed his hand and using the rope he had tied to his waist proceeded to pull himself back up to safety.

No words were spoken between them as they ran back to the house.

Emmett and Ted were sitting on the ground supporting the limp form of their friend.

Justin fell to his knees at Brian's side.

"He's alive Justin." said Emmett.

"I know he's alive. I always knew." He took Brian's hand.

"Michael, you and Ted go back to the cliff before the police get here. Pick up everything and put it back in my trunk" Justin directed. "The story is we don't know what happened to David. We just threw the rock to get his attention and he took off when the fire started."

As they loaded Brian into the ambulance Justin looked over at Michael. "You go Justin, he needs you" Justin threw him his car keys and got into the ambulance.

Brian opened his eyes for a moment as they rode to the hospital.

"We have to stop meeting like this." Justin was smiling down at him.

When he woke, he almost cried out in fear, until he saw that he was no longer in the dark basement but, in a sun filled hospital room. His eyes were swollen and his nose was bandaged. The ribs on his left were broken for sure, they were all taped up. He tried to move, but, nothing happened.

A wave of terror struck him. "I'm paralyzed. I can't move my legs." He forced open one eye and looked down toward the foot of the bed. He spotted the reason for his paralysis. Justin was curled up at his feet like a faithful guard dog. His head was resting on one leg and his arms were wrapped around the other leg.

He tried to talk, but, his lips were painfully sore and swollen. He freed his right leg from the boy's grasp and used his foot to kick Justin in the head.

"Hey." The Justin awoke and smiled up at Brian. "Stop kicking me."

He worked his way up to Brian's face to find a spot that wasn't bruised or bandaged. Finding several, he showered his lover with gentle sweet Sunshine kisses.

"You shouldn't talk. They gave you something to make you sleep." Justin sat on the bed and held his hand. Silent communication was never a problem for them.

Debbie and Jennifer were sitting in the hallway with Michael when Justin emerged from Brian's room. "He's awake. I'm going to get something to eat, if you guys want to go in and stay with him."

"Sure honey. I have a few things I need to say to Brian. Come on Jennifer, it's just Mom talk, you come too." Debbie took her hand and they went into the room.

"Michael, don't you want to see him?" Justin sat down next to him. The events of the evening had taken its toll on Michael. Justin realized that he felt responsible for what happened.

"I'll let our Mom's talk to him first." Michael held his cell phone in his hand. "I called David's ex-wife, Laurie. It seems that there were problems between David and his son once he moved to Portland. Her second husband, Greg, had been interfering. You know how controlling David can be, it was a bad situation. So bad, that Hank took off. He's been missing for over a month. The police in Portland think that he might have left the country with his step dad.

"Wow, that explains a lot." Justin said.

"Justin, what if he's not dead?" Michael looked up at him with sad eyes. "I never heard the body hit the ground. The police never said anything about finding him. What if he survived the fall and comes back?"

"Michael, he's dead. There's no way he could have survived that fall. He's not Captain 'Fucking' Astro, you know." Justin tried to sound convincing. The truth was he had thought of the possibility David was alive. "It wasn't your fault. You had no way of knowing the man was a nut case. He was really nice when you were living with him." Justin was sincere.

Michael changed the subject. "You were amazing out there Justin. Where did you learn how to do all those things?"

"I don't know, watching cartoons I guess." Justin smiled.

"Let's get something to eat before Brian regains his strength and starts tearing this place apart demanding to go home." Michael said.

They stood up to go and Michael stopped and hugged Justin. "You're a good man to know, Boy Wonder. My friend Brian's a pretty lucky guy."

Halloween

After his release from the hospital Brian concentrates on getting his career back on track. Taking Justin with him to New York City for a business trip he begins to wonder if can have both a career and a boyfriend.

"Man, this car rides smooth. I could get used to this." Michael stretched out in the front seat of the 1985 Cadillac.

"I never thought I'd like driving a car the size of the Queen Mary. I think I'm gonna miss it when I get the Volvo in a couple of weeks. The trunk is so full of surprises." Justin gave Michael a knowing smile. They were on their way to the hospital to pick up Brian and take him home to Pittsburgh. Justin had stayed at the hospital during the day and at night when they threw him out he slept in his car. After two days he was anxious to get home, but the prospect of driving an hour and a half with the recovering Brian had him a little nervous. Michael had gone home with Jennifer and his mother on Sunday because he had to work. Not wanting to make the drive back alone with a sick man Justin had asked Michael if he would take the train to the nearby train station, which is where he picked him up this morning, to take the ride back with them.

"Was he any better last night?" Michael asked.

"Not really. He hasn't talked much. I think he's brooding, whatever that means." Justin said as he turned into the parking lot.

Justin waved to the nurse at the desk. "Good bye, thanks for everything." She had been kind enough to let him stay after hours with Brian that first night. He was pushing the wheelchair out into the parking lot when the passenger got out and deposited himself in the backseat of the car with out a word.

"Justin, I'll drive if you want.?" Michael suggested, motioning to the backseat. Justin got in the back and pulled Brian's head over into his lap. The man fell asleep about ten minutes after they entered the highway. Justin asked Michael to turn on the radio.

It had been a turbulent holiday weekend. The aftermath of Brian's kidnaping and subsequent rescue had made the news in the small PA town. The police had no leads as to the whereabouts of Dr. David Cameron. Thankfully, they did not have too much to say about his victim, just that he was a 35 year old advertising executive from Pittsburgh. The 35 year old part made Justin laugh, earning him a admonishing glare from Brian.

The trip back to Pittsburgh had been uneventful. Michael and Justin helped Brian into the elevator. He still had not uttered a word. A few minutes after they arrived at the loft Lindsay and Mel arrived with Gus. Brian held the baby for a while rocking him back and forth in his arms. Emmett and Ted arrived with Chinese food. The gang was enjoying an impromptu party, momentarily forgetting their host when the inevitable happened.

"GET OUT" Brian shouted with a supercilious sneer.

"He's baaaack!" Ted quoted from the movie "Poltergeist."

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As his friends reluctantly exited the loft single file, Brian showed no emotion. Justin started to leave with the crowd until he felt a tug on the hood of his sweatshirt.

"NOT YOU!" Brian pulled him back into the room.

Justin looked up at him unsure of what his next move would be. He didn't have long to wait. Brian kissed him passionately as he pulled at the boy's clothes. Dragging Justin by his hood of his sweatshirt, Brian made his way up the steps to the bedroom. He threw the startled teen onto the bed and yanked off his sneakers and socks. Brian stripped off his worn jeans as Justin struggled out of his sweatshirt. Quickly grabbing the condom from the night stand, Brian rolled it down his shaft as he lubed the boy without comment. The bandages around his torso didn't deter his efforts to ravish the now naked teen. Moments later he entered the boy with the force of a wild animal. Justin moaned, first in pain, then in pleasure.

They had never experimented with rough sex, but tonight's session certainly qualified. Not that Justin minded, he would do anything for Brian. He knew what it was like to be a victim. It must have been doubly hard for a man with Brian's controlling nature. If it would help him to regain his confidence, Justin was willing to be his pawn.

"Come here." Brian summoned the boy to his side of the bed after the rush of energy had subsided.

Justin was more than willing to comply. "Ready for round two."

"No." Brian said softly. "You shouldn't have let me do that to you." He pulled Justin over to his chest and let him drape his arm around his neck.

"I'd do anything for you Brian." Justin said as he gently played with Brian's hair.

"I know you would. But I don't want to hurt you. You shouldn't let me."

"It didn't hurt," the boy said, adamantly.

Justin decided to let it rest for a while and changed the subject. "When are you going back to work?"

"Tomorrow. I'll be working weekends for a month to catch up."

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"It's no big deal. I've been beaten up many times. I should be used to it by now." Brian checked the clock by the side of the bed. "I better get to sleep."

Michael had not realized how his everyday habits had changed when he was living with David. The single life was a totally different existence. He knew that even though things did not work out with David, he preferred having a partner. Next time he would be more careful about who he picked. Not that there was anyway of him knowing David's potential for violent behavior, he was always a perfect gentleman when they were together.

It was the first time in months that Michael, Ted and Emmett had found time to meet for breakfast. With the exception of Emmett, their lives had changed dramatically in the past few weeks. Ted had had no news of Blake. If only Blake had let Ted help him overcome his addiction, they could have had a something special. Ted had never had a real boyfriend and he missed being part of a couple.

Michael's dilemma was more complicated. His whole life had been turned upside down. A year ago he was happy just to sit here with his friends and live life vicariously through Brian. He secretly wished that things had never changed. Reviewing the events of the past year it was clear to Michael when it all began. It was the moment Justin Taylor appeared through the mist on Liberty Avenue that Brian Kinney was lost forever.

Not that Michael blamed Justin for everything that happened, but from that moment on there was no going back. Michael had made some discoveries about himself once he stepped out from behind Brian's shadow. There was more to life than Woody's and Babylon. Unfortunately for him, he stepped right into David's shadow without any time for him to enjoy the sunshine.

Emmett and Michael had walked to the diner. They met up with Ted outside and entered the diner together. No one expected to see Brian Kinney sitting in the booth dressed for work, reading the morning paper.

"What?" He responded to their stares. "Haven't you ever seen a man eating breakfast in dark glasses?" Brian's attention went back to his paper.

Under normal circumstances the phrases, "How are you?" or "Do you really think you should be going back to work so soon?" might have been appropriate. But this was Brian Kinney, such pleasantries would be unnecessary and unwelcome.

"Are you gonna eat that?" Emmett asked pointing to the piece of jellied toast on his plate.

Brian responded by shoving the plate in Emmett's direction. The group ordered their breakfasts and discussed going to Babylon. Nothing was said about the events of the past few days.

When the check arrived Michael signaled Ted and Emmett that he wanted to speak to Brian alone. They grabbed their jackets and went to the counter to pay the check.

"Brian . . ." Michael started to speak.

"Mikey. Don't even say it. I DON'T blame you for what HE did." Brian said firmly.

"That's not what I was going to say." Michael leaned forward. "You can't keep it all inside. At some point you're going to need to talk about what happened."

"It's over and done with. I don't see any reason to burden you with the details of my weekend get away, or should I say drag away."

"I wasn't talking about me. I meant you should talk to Justin. I mean REALLY talk to him. He's not just some kid, not anymore. He's the one that saved your life."

Brian got up from the booth without saying a word. He stood next to Michael for a brief moment and put his hand on his shoulder. They exchanged a knowing look that only best friends share. Brian left the diner and went off to work.

After that first night Brian was very gentle with Justin in bed. So much so, that the boy was sure his lover was picking up tricks to satisfy his lustful appetite. Classes at the Art Institute were going well and Justin was enjoying the whole experience. One draw back was the fact that he had tons of homework every night in addition to the special project assignments. Between working at the diner, going to school and doing his assignments he did not have too much time to socialize. He was starting to worry that Brian would forget about him.

Brian was slowly recovering from his physical injuries. His face was still discolored, but the pain in his rib cage had subsided to the point where he could manage a few sit ups in the morning. At the moment Brian was pacing the living room with his cell phone in his hand talking to his secretary. She had phoned to tell him he had to go to a meeting in New York in two days. "I hate fucking out of town meetings to begin with. Having to go to New York with my face looking like this is sucks. I won't even be able to go out without dark glasses. My client's will think, I'm blind or something."

Justin overheard the conversation and was formulating a plan in his mind. "You know, I don't have any classes on Thursday and this week my professor canceled my one Friday class. If I work fast and finish up my project by tomorrow I could go to New York with you."

Brian had hung up the phone and was lying on his back on the floor contemplating his first sit up. "I'll have meetings all day. What would you do?"

"In New York, are you serious?" Justin had emerged from the bathroom, toothbrush in hand. He was wearing a white button down shirt and underwear. "We never got there on the holiday weekend, remember. Maybe we can get tickets for a Broadway play."

Justin sat down on Brian's feet so he could do his sit up. Brian looked up at him. "Great, we should go to a Broadway play with my face like this. What will we see . . . Phantom of the Opera? Maybe he would lend me his mask."

"Maybe we should see something that would match your mood lately . . . like 'Jekyll and Hyde'." Justin shot back.

The analogy made Brian laugh out loud. Justin collapsed on top of him and the two of them rolled on the floor together in uncontrollable fits of laughter. Laughter turned into passion, and they made love for the second time that morning.

"How do you always manage to do that to me?" Brian was still smiling when he sat down at the counter to wait for his coffee.

"It's just one of my many talents." Justin smiled back. Justin decided to take advantage of the upbeat mood and bring up a sensitive subject

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"So, was he hot?"

"Was who hot?" Brian responded as he lifted the cup.

"The guy you fucked yesterday. Was he hotter than me?" Not wanting to start a fight he flashed Brian one of his sweet smiles.

"Nobody is hotter than you Justin." Brian smiled back.

"Then why don't you want me like that?" Justin asked putting his head down shyly.

"What's this about?" Brian put the cup down and putting his hand under Justin's chin he pulled his face up until they were eye to eye.

"Don't get mad. I just want you to know you don't have to treat me like I'm made of glass. I want it all Brian, the GOOD and the BAD."

"And the UGLY?" Brian said, referring to his black eyes.

"You're not ugly." Justin giggled.

Brian was glad to be able to laugh at himself. He continued,. "It takes me twice as long to pick up a trick now that I'm deformed."

"I can save you the trouble. I'm right here any time you want me." Justin said sincerely.

Brian's face was unreadable for a moment. Justin held his breath, hoping he hadn't blown everything .

After a long pause Brian spoke. "What are you doing wasting time sitting there? Go make the some reservations for New York."

Justin got up and kissed him. After making the reservations on line he went to the bathroom to finished getting dressed. "Maybe we could drive my car to New York. That way we could go the night before and have the whole day."

"I'm not going to New York in the Batmobile."

Justin came out of the bathroom wearing a shirt and tie. Brian looked at him curiously.

"Where are you going in that get up?"

"I'm meeting my father for lunch. We're going to switch cars today. The next time you see me I will be the proud owner of a 1999 light grey Volvo. We could take my new car to New York and break it in."

"I think I already did, remember." He was referring to the night Justin's father ran into him with his car.

"Oh yeah, I forgot. You don't mind me driving it do you?"

"As long as you don't decide to run me down we can take your car to New York."

They arrived in New York City at around midnight. It was warm in the city and as they drove to their hotel they were amazed at the number of people walking the streets so late at night. In Pittsburgh everything, except the bars, closed up by 10 pm. Here it seemed like there was something going on everywhere they looked. The lobby of the hotel was very quiet. Justin put himself in charge of checking in. Brian sat nearby with the luggage, which in his opinion, was a bit excessive for four days. He listened as Justin answered the desk clerk's questions and handed him his business credit card for the bill.

"Would you like two double beds or a king?"

Justin didn't have to think about the answer. "King." He said loudly. "We're gonna need lots of room." He turned and smiled at Brian.

Brian shook his head from side to side. When Justin's back was turned, the desk clerk glanced over at Brian and smiled. At least he didn't offer to show them the door. The bell hop loaded the bags onto the cart and headed toward the elevator. Justin grabbed the garment bag away from Brian.

"What's in there?" Brian asked as they got to the room. "Your trousseau?"

"It's a surprise." Justin said. "You'll see it Friday night."

"What's Friday night?" Brian yawned.

"It's Halloween. These are our costumes." Justin announced.

"Oh, no." Brian moaned, as he tried to imagine what Justin's idea of a perfect costume for him would be. "Are you gonna turn me into a vampire . . . 'cause I'm so good at sucking?" He playfully took the boy's ear into his mouth and demonstrated his sucking ability.

"It would serve you right. Don't worry it's something that suits your personality."

"Then it MUST be Vlad the Impaler. I've been know to impale one or two sweet young things."

"I should have made you Peter Pan, because you're never going to grow up. Just think of all the fun you'd have on the Island of the Lost Boys."

"If I'm Peter Pan then that would make you Tinkerbell . . . Peter's stalker."

Feigning indignity Justin pushed him down on the bed. Brian couldn't stop laughing at the thought of Justin dressed up in pink tights and wings. "I do believe in fairies." Brian managed to get the words out right before the pillow hit him in the head.

"This is war." They tore into the bedding extricating every pillow they could find , beating each other into submission. Justin declared himself the victor, as Brian was laughing so hard it started coughing fit. Justin straddled him on the bed with a pillow raised over his head ready to strike. Seeing that Brian was under stress he dropped the pillow and released him. Brian seized the opportunity to pull Justin toward him. Rolling over, he pinned the struggling teen underneath his hard body and held him there.

"Peace." Justin whispered, barely able to breath.

Brian rolled onto his back pulling Justin over on top of him. "Peace." He whispered gazing into the young man's eyes.

Taking their time they touched each other gently before their lips met. Wanting this moment to last forever, they slowly kissed, savoring the warm sensation as their tongues intertwined. Straddling his lover's legs Justin pulled back and began to take off his shirt. Brian rose up on his elbows and put his hand over the boy's. He took over the task of unbuttoning each button and then slowly sliding the shirt down over Justin's shoulders. Burying his head in the boy's chest, Brian was content to inhale his sweet scent before sliding his tongue down his chest and circling each nipple. Justin bent backwards to give Brian access to his belly. His lover's tongue traveled downward following the line of pale blond hair to his waist. With nimble fingers Brian undid the snap on Justin's pants and slowly slid the

zipper down . Reaching around he cupped the boys ass with his hands, and slid his pants down pulling them over his feet and tossing them onto the floor. Justin lay back on the bed allowing the older man to relieve him of his underwear, leaving his rock hard erection exposed.

Brian explored Justin's naked body with a penetrating stare. He had been with this boy a hundred times or more, but he always found the sight of his naked body intoxicating. Justin could feel Brian's stare cutting into his flesh like hot steel. He longed for his touch on his throbbing cock. Finally he could feel Brian's familiar fingers encircled his balls. As he stroked the boy's cock Brian stripped off his own shirt and threw it on the floor. Justin reached up and undid Brian's pants. They both started tugging at the garment until it too had been flung onto the floor along with his underwear.

It was Justin's turn to stare. Brian straddled him like he did on the night they met. Looking up at his lover he was struck by the difference in his face from that first encounter. There was something in his eyes now that told Justin he was important to Brian. No matter how many times they made love, for Justin, it would always be as exciting as that first night.

Slowly Brian let his hands explore the full length of Justin's naked body. He wanted to commit every inch of his flesh to memory so he could play this moment over and over in his mind. As Brian's hands caressed him Justin began to writhe in anticipation. Almost as if reading his mind Brian moved in close for a deep sensual kiss. Reaching down into his overnight bag, Justin found what they would need. He had put it right on top, knowing it would be the first thing they'd unpack.

After several attempts to extricated his tongue from Justin's warm mouth, Brian managed to slid down into position. As he did so Justin readied the condom and handed his lover the K Y. Brian lubed Justin as the boy unrolled the condom over his lovers dick. Brian lowered his body over Justin's small frame. They locked eyes as he entered the boy. Positioning his legs over the man's shoulders, Justin, felt the length of Brian's stiff cock fill him inside. Pulling him down close to his body Justin could feel his own cock pulsating against Brian's stomach. Once again sensing Justin's need, Brian reach down between their undulating bodies and began stroking his dick.

Watching Brian's face as he thrust his hips harder and harder into his body, Justin was overwhelmed with emotion. Reaching up with both hands he pulled Brian's face down to his own for a deep penetrating kiss. The feel of Justin luscious lips sucking his tongue intensified Brian's desire, forcing him to push even harder and deeper into the boy as he stroking his dick with equal fury.

As they clung together, the rhythm of their love making increased. Brian moaned loudly as he released his load into the boy's throbbing hole. His lover's outcry triggered Justin's climax as he shot his hot cum between their now sweat soaked bodies.

Brian heard the wake up call at 7:00 am. At first didn't know where he was. This was the first time since his weekend imprisonment that he had not slept in his own bed. He looked down and saw blond hair sticking out from under the blanket. A wave of relief slipped over him. He had not wanted to admit it to himself but his encounter with David Cameron had left him edgy.

Realizing his priority today was to sell the campaign to his client he slowly slipped out from under the sleeping boy and headed for the shower. When he came out of the bathroom he saw that Justin had already ordered breakfast and was sitting at the desk writing out a list of all the places he wanted to see in the city.

"Do you think your meetings will last all day? Will you be free for lunch?"

"Doubtful. I wouldn't count on me for dinner tonight either. If it's going well I may have to take them out and wine and dine them before I can get them on board. I told you this was a working trip, not a vacation."

Justin nodded. "I guess I'll survive in the big city all alone."

"Call me on my cell phone every hour so I know your okay. I'll have it on vibrate if I'm in a meeting and I'll call you back as soon as I can get away. And, write down where you're planning on going in case I can get away early and meet you."

Brian was almost ready to leave, he had begun to get into ad exec mode once he put on his tie. Looking over at Justin he melted a little and went over and hugged him. "You were wonderful last night. Don't worry we'll have the weekend I promise. I'll finish by Friday and we can have all day Saturday."

"Don't forget the parade." Justin called after him.

"I never forget anything."

"Yeah, you do. You forgot . . ."

"I won't forget." Brian said, stopping him short. He reached the lobby and asked the doorman to hail him a cab. As he rode across town he was going over the presentation in his mind, preparing for the meeting. His thoughts kept straying back to Justin. Had he forgotten something? NO, I'm not going to do this. Bringing him with me on a business trip was a mistake. Then he remembered last night and the incredible sex they'd had. Oh, shit. I forgot to tell him I loved him. That's what he meant. Brian started dialing his cell phone as the cab pulled up to the Park Avenue address.

After three rings he got the leave a message announcement. "Listen you little shit, why do you think I gave you this fucking cell phone? If you're going to play games I just won't tell you I love you this morning, so fuck you." He forced a smile in the direction of three women standing in front of the elevator doors. They had begun to stare at him.

As he waited for the elevator his phone rang. "Yeah."

"Fuck you too." Justin laughed into the phone.

Brian felt his ad exec exterior melt as he whispered into the phone. "I love you, baby."

"Me too." Justin whispered back. "Good luck today."

As Brian got onto the elevator he heard the stifled giggles of the three ladies who had been watching him. 'Great way to start the day.'" he thought. He prayed they weren't getting off on his floor.

Justin finished getting dressed as he planned his day of solitary sight seeing. He made a list of things he wanted to see and a separate list of things he wanted to see with Brian. Starting at the South Street Seaport he organized his journey so he would be back in midtown around noon. The last time he had been to New York he had been terrified to leave the hotel room. Today he was looking forward to actually seeing some of the sights he had only heard about. In a way, he was glad to have some time alone. He planned to do some drawing and he knew if Brian was with him he would never have the patience to just sit and watch. Picking up his sketch pad and supplies he left the hotel to explore the city.

Brian's early morning meeting had gone well. The group he'd met with appeared to be excited about the presentation and he was now ready to move up the chain of command to the decision making level. He had to wait for the some vice president to finish up with a meeting before it was his turn to make his pitch so he decided to call Justin.

"Hi" Brian said into the phone

"Hey, how's it going." Justin responded.

"I'm only half way up the chain of command. I won't be meeting you for lunch."

"What about dinner?"

"I don't know yet. Where are you?" Brian asked.

"I'm in a sex toy shop on Christopher Street"

Brian smiled. "Don't max out my credit card."

Just as he hung up, the receptionist came to escort Brian to the VP's office. With any luck he was a closet queen in his 60's with the hots for younger men. Brian would wine and dine him for lunch, but the old guy would have to get home for dinner with the wife and kiddies.

Drew Martin greeted Brian with an outstretched hand. This would be more difficult than he had planned . . . Drew Martin was a woman. He judged her to be in her early forties but, she was well preserved. She wore a dark green silk suit which complimented her trim figure perfectly. Her make up and hair cut were flawless, obviously designed by some outrageously expensive Fifth Avenue Salon. The fact that she wore her shoulder length dark auburn hair loose disturbed him a little as most of the woman he had dealt with in a professional capacity wore their hair short or pinned up. He examined her left hand and was disappointed not to find some kind of ring, hoping that she would be married or at least engaged.

It wasn't the first time Brian had to pitch a campaign to a woman, but it had always been on his home turf where he could wine and dine them and pass them off to someone else if a more personal service was required. He was on his own and this meeting could make or break the sale.

"Good morning Mr. Kinney. My assistant tells me you have some very exciting ideas," Drew Martin said as she motioned him to sit down. "So, sell it to me."

Ms. Martin had a pleasant smile and a no nonsense approach to business. Brian liked her style but, not enough to provide any special services. It would be difficult for him to handle the situation, if she did hit on him. He had always managed to keep his personal life separate from his professional life. He preferred to keep it that way. As the day progressed, he could see that she was impressed with his ideas. She did have several suggestions and he made some changes to accommodate her needs.

They had a late lunch at a small Italian restaurant nearby. After several glasses of wine he found himself relaxing a little as they discussed the pros and cons of living in New York City. After lunch they continued to work at her office. By 5:00 pm the contract was signed and Brian had added a new client to a growing list.

Brian asked Drew if she would like to go to dinner and see a show that evening. When she said that she had plans he was relieved. He could spend the evening with Justin without feeling guilty about neglecting his client. Then she dropped a bombshell. "There's a party tomorrow night, Brian. There will be several important people that you should meet in attendance. The campaign you're creating for us is brilliant. I'm sure I can convince some of my associates to give your firm an opportunity to show them what you can do."

If Brian had been alone in New York he would have been very excited at the prospect of networking on this level. He had promised Justin that they would go to the parade together, but there was no way he could pass up this chance to advance his career. "I'd love to. Thank you for asking," Brian heard himself say.

"Great. I'll meet you there about 10:00." She started writing down the address. "Oh, by the way, you'll need a costume. It's a Halloween party. The restaurant has a great view of the parade route." She handed him a slip of paper. "And bring your boyfriend."

Brian was speechless. "My what?"

"Brian, the restaurant where we had lunch is famous for its glamorous model clientele. They were craning their necks to get a look at you. But, you never look up once, that is, until the waiter came to take our order. As for your boyfriend being in town with you . . . your pants have been vibrating every hour on the hour. Unless you had your dick motorized it would suggest someone was checking in." She smiled at his bewilderment.

"So, is he as cute as you?" She asked as she walked him to the door.

"Cuter. But, don't tell him I said that." Brian answered, he still wondering what had just happened. At that moment Brian's cell phone started to vibrate. Both he and Drew laughed.

"Where are you?" Brian asked.

"At the Virgin Record store in Times Square."

"Get tickets for something. I'm finished here and heading back to the hotel."

As soon as Brian gave him the okay Justin on line to get tickets for Jekyll and Hyde. When he got to the back to the room he called out to Brian.

"What are you doing?" Justin asked when he found the man soaking in the oversized bathtub.

"Celebrating." He answered as he sipped champagne from a glass.

Justin stripped off his clothes and joined Brian in the tub. "You got the account!"

"Of course." Brian poured Justin a glass of champagne.

Justin positioned himself with his back to Brian, and rested his head on the mans chest. Brian listened as the boy enthusiastically described every little detail of his day. When the room got strangely quiet Brian looked down and saw that Justin had fallen asleep. The warm water mixed with the champagne had relaxed him completely and within moments Brian was also sound asleep.

Brian awakened 45 minutes later frozen to the bone. Justin was standing next to the tub dressed in a white hotel robe. "It's after 6:00. I'm starving, should I order room service?"

Brian managed to struggle out of the tub as Justin grabbed the second robe and held it up for him. It reminded him of the time Justin had run away and he found him in that hotel room in wearing a white robe. The cold water had a chilling effect on him, but the sight of Justin in that robe was warming a certain part of his anatomy.

"Hold off on the room service." Brian said as he grabbed the tie on Justin's robe and yanked.

The theater was across the street from the hotel. They managed to eat and get dressed in plenty of time. The music was great and they both really enjoyed the play. Sebastian Bach was surprisingly good for a rock star. At the end he tore the house down with his on stage antics during his curtain call. They gave him a standing ovation.

"Let's take a walk." Justin suggested. They headed east toward Grand Central Station. Brian had passed it many times during the day, but he had never seen it at night. It was an incredibly awesome sight, so brightly lite it appeared to be glowing. The surrounding skyscrapers hovered over the building like soldiers guarding a fortress. Continuing on toward the East River they turned north on 1st Ave and passed the United Nations Building. Turning left at 50th Street they walked back toward the hotel, passing St. Patrick's Cathedral and Radio City Music Hall.

"I'd love to be here at Christmas when the tree is up and all the decorations are lit, it must be beautiful" Justin mentioned as they approached Rockefeller Center.

"It must be crowded, and expensive," Brian muttered. Christmas was not his favorite holiday.

The next morning, Brian awoke before Justin. He took the opportunity to read the morning paper before being dragged off to any number of museums and tourist attractions that Justin had on his ever growing list. The kid had been a good sport about being left alone yesterday. Brian was glad that he was able to amuse himself without getting into trouble.

Brian sat down on the couch and picked up the sketch pad that Justin had used on his sojourn. Every scene that Justin had described to him the day before had been memorialized in the book: the Seaport with the tall ships surrounded by skyscrapers, the Statue of Liberty, various office buildings, churches and street scenes from all over lower Manhattan. What struck Brian about Justin's drawing was his ability to capture facial expressions. He had done a sketch of a group of old people sitting on a park bench feeding the pigeons. One drawing was of a group of students walking to class through Washington Square Park. There were several very detailed sketches of young men he had drawn for obvious reasons. He must have come across them on Christopher Street when he was checking out the sex shops.

"Did you order breakfast yet?" Justin yawned as he emerged from the bathroom.

"These are really good. I almost feel like I was with you yesterday." Brian said.

"You were." Justin smiled up at him. "You're always with me."

"Does that mean I can stay in the room and sleep today, while you go off and sketch hot guys." Brian said as he pulled Justin close.

"No way! I have the whole day planned. We'll go to the Guggenheim Museum, and then the Metropolitan Museum of Art . We can walk around Central Park and have lunch at Tavern on the Green. Then, if we have time, we could go down to the Museum of Modern Art . . ."

Brian lost count at three museums as Justin prattled on and on about their itinerary. His mind was on the party and how he was going to broach the subject. The more he thought about it, the more concerned he became about the prudence of bringing Justin to the party. People may accept him as a gay man in his professional capacity, but how will they react when they see him with an 18 year old boy. Especially, a boy who looked as young as Justin. It would not do his reputation any good to be considered a pedophile. He'd have to deal with the problem later. Today was Justin's day.

The City had starting to show it's fall colors. They took at cab to the Guggenheim to start, then ventured down to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. For hours they walked from exhibit room to exhibit room admiring the diversity of each culture and the many treasures housed at the museum. Justin did a sketch of Brian posing next to the statue of Apollo. They argued over which one was hotter the statue or the real thing.

They started walking back downtown through Central Park to their lunch destination. There were so many heavily wooded areas of the park, it was easy to imagine you were out in the middle of a forest.

"I never realized Central Park was so big," Justin said as they walked hand in hand. "I feel like we're walking in the woods, it's so weird to look up and see tall buildings all around."

They walked past Belvedere Castle, and Strawberry Fields to Tavern on the Green, their destination for lunch. It was just past 1:00 and they had to wait for a table. They ordered drinks at the bar and wandered outside to the patio to wait. It was a pleasant fall day and the park was busy. They watched the people on the different paths walking dogs, skating, biking and just strolling hand in hand. Since today was Halloween there were children and adults dressed in costumes ready for an afternoon of Trick or Treat.

"It's like watching TV," Justin observed.

"What are you talking about?"

"The people in the park. There's a little drama going on everywhere you look."

Brian looked around and noticed a couple fighting loudly, a few seconds later they were hugging and laughing. In the other direction there was a drunk trying to beg some change from another drunk. They talked for while and then they walking down the path together. Justin started making up dialogue for each scene they observed and Brian joined in the game. They were so engrossed in their cast of characters they hardly notice the announcement that their table was ready. Walking inside they took a moment to admire the chandelier in the hall as they entered the room, which was beautifully decorated with similar smaller chandeliers.

They were seated at a table that overlooked the patio so they could continue to people watch as they ate. Justin ordered Maryland King Crab Cakes and Brian had a turkey club sandwich.

"I didn't realize how hungry I was," Justin said when the food came.

"We must have walked 10 miles already today. Lets take it easy for a while. I don't want to be exhausted for tonight."

"You mean the parade?"

Brian realized that he almost spoiled the day. "Yeah, the parade. I'm going to need a nap before slithering into my Batman suit."

"Wrong. You're not even close. And, I'm not telling you what your costume is. You're going to be surprised."

Justin was the one in for a surprise. Brian still had not thought of a way to break the news to the boy. "What's the next stop on the Justin Taylor Torture Tour?"

"Two more stops and then we can go back to the hotel and take a nap before the parade. First I want to go to F.A.O Schwartz and buy something for Gus, and the Museum of Modern Art is on 53rd Street, which is on the way back."

They arrived at the hotel room at 4:30 totally exhausted. Dropping the packages on the chair they stripped off their clothes and plopped down on the bed. By 4:45 they were both sound asleep. Several hours later Brian felt the pressure of moist lips traveling down his torso. His body was still aching from the museum marathon Justin had put him through. But, he was making up for it now. Brian felt his cock harden as the boy sucked on his balls. Putting his hand under the blankets he pushed down on Justin's blond head, as the boy's mouth encircled his now pulsating shaft.

"Justin you're soooo good." Brian moaned. "Too good, baby."

He pulled lightly on Justin's hair. "Let's finish this in the shower."

Halloween used to be Michael's favorite holiday. His mother always made a big deal and force everyone put on a costume while they handed out treats to the neighborhood kids. Last year he and David dressed as super heroes. It all seemed so surreal now. His relationship with David was never what it had appeared to be. He wondered if there was anyway he could have known. That thought turned over and over in his mind since that day, the day that he found out the man he had been in love with was a homicidal maniac.

"Are you coming to Babylon with me and Teddy tonight?" Emmett snuggled up next to him on the couch. "I can put together a fabulous costume for you."

"You just made me an offer I CAN refuse. I remember the last time you dressed me for Halloween. It took me a week to remove the rogue from my face."

"I thought you made an adorable Pipi Longstocking. You have to admit it won you a prize as most original costume."

"Emmett I'm not in the mood tonight, really. You and Ted go, when you come home you can tell me all about the Tricks and the Treats."

"Don't sit here and sulk all night. You've been doing too much of that lately." Emmett got up and kissed him on the head. Tossing a violet boa over his shoulder he made a dramatic exit.

Michael switched on the television and started flipping stations. "Over two hundred stations and nothing to watch."

When the bell rang he got up and automatically went to the candy bowl before answering the door. The one thing he still enjoyed about Halloween was watching the kids parade around in costumes. He opened the door expecting a hoard of kids yelling Trick or Treat, instead he came face to face with Hank Cameron.

"Hi Michael. Trick or Treat?" Hank made a half hearted attempt at a smile.

Michael reached out and hugged the boy, pulling him into the apartment. Hank sat down on the couch and dropped his backpack on the floor. He seemed to have aged years in the short time since Michael had seen him.

"Are you okay? Do you want something to eat?" He'd forgotten the candy bars he had picked up before opening the door, all ten of which were now in Hank's hand.

"You mean besides candy." Hank took a candy bar and unwrapped it slowly.

"Hank your Mom is so worried. She's desperate to hear from you. You have to call her right now."

"I wanted to talk to you first. Because you were close to him Michael. I need to know what happened."

Michael could see tears forming in Hank's eyes. He braced himself for the damn burst. Michael held the boy while they both cried for the David they had once loved.

There was no way Brian could put it off any longer. He had to tell Justin that he would not be able to go to the parade with him. He planned to tell Justin that he had to attend a boring business gathering that would be very important for his career.

"Who's Drew?" Justin asked when Brian came out of the bathroom.

"Where'd you hear that name?" Brian dreaded the answer.

"She called when you were in the bathroom." Justin said. "She wanted to make sure that you had a costume for the party. I told her not to worry because you had a great costume. Are we going to a party, Brian?"

"I was invited to a party by my client. She wants to introduce me to her associates. It could mean more business for me. I was going to tell you, but I knew you had your heart set on going to the parade. Maybe you could go to the parade and I could meet you after." Brian suggested out of desperation.

"Are you kidding? A real New York City party. They'll probably have a DJ and maybe even some celebrities." He pulled Brian up from the couch and started dancing.

Brian pushed him away. "I can't take you Justin."

"But she said . . ." Justin stammered.

"I can't show up at a party for perspective client's with my baby faced 18 year old boyfriend."

Justin was crushed. "You're ashamed to be seen with me?"

Brian stood his ground. He had to be practical, this party could mean a great deal to him financially. "They would think that I'm some kind of pervert. I could lose the account I signed yesterday."

Justin disappeared into the bathroom. Brian collapsed onto the couch. He felt like the lowest scum on the face of the earth. This is exactly the reason he never "did" boyfriends. When Justin came out of the bathroom Brian got up and turned to face him. His jaw dropped. Justin was dressed in a white cowboy suit with gold trim. The low cut pants were made of soft satin material and the trim was a delicate gold braid, they fit him like a glove. He wore a belt with a gun holster. The gun was a gold metallic toy pistol. On top he wore a short white vest the same material as the pants with the same gold trim. The fringe on the vest did little to conceal Justin's bare torso. He had on a white hat also trimmed with the gold braid. It tipped down over face so his eyes had to peek out from underneath.

"Here." Was all Justin said as he handed Brian his costume. It was a black cowboy suit matching the one Justin was wearing, only instead of the vest there was a black silk shirt with silver metal trim at the points of the collar. "It's supposed to be the good and the bad. They didn't have an UGLY." Justin scrunched up his face and then turned to leave.

"Where are you going?" Brian managed to speak.

"I'm going to the parade." Justin announced and stared to leave the room.

As Justin closed the door the phone rang. It was Michael. "Brian. I'm glad you're there. I need to talk to you "

Brian never heard a word Michael said. The thought of Justin roaming the streets of New York City wearing that white "wet dream" cowboy outfit drove him absolutely insane. Brian tossed the phone aside and ran down the hall barefoot and shirtless. He caught up to Justin at the elevator.

"Come back" Brian ordered as he pulled on Justin's arm.

"NO!" Justin shot back, shrugging him off.

"You can come to the party."

"I don't want to go to your stupid party."

"Please!" Brian put on his puppy dog look that he knew Justin could never resist. This time, it didn't work.

Justin pushed the elevator button several times as Brian stood there pouting. "You look ridiculous," Justin said briefly glancing in Brian's direction.

Brian saw a slight smile emerge on the boys lips, but, he realized more drastic measures were needed to stop him from getting on the elevator. Brian got down on his knees and put his arms around Justin's legs looking up at him. "Please." he repeated.

Justin started to smile. The elevator door opened at that moment exposing the scene between them to a group of kids with their parents returning from Trick or Treating.

"NO!" Justin scolded. "No more candy for you, you've had enough."

Everyone on the elevator laughed. The people exited the elevator and walked down the hallway. "You deserved that." Justin said as he pulled Brian to his feet.

"I'm not ashamed to be seen with you Justin. It's just that you look so young. People who don't know us might not understand."

"I may look young, but, I'm not stupid. I'll make them understand."

Brian put on his costume and stood in front of the mirror as Justin pulled and tugged at the tight fitting black silk shirt till it was just right, then he put the hat on Brian's head and he was ready. Justin stood in front of him and looked at their reflections in the mirror. "Look in the mirror, Brian. Do you think anyone could look at us and not understand how perfect we are together?"

Brian studied their reflections and had to agree. They were a complete contrast of each other. Justin's fair hair, blue eyes, slight stature and sunny disposition complimented Brian's dark hair, hazel eyes, lanky build and brooding nature. Total opposites, black and white. The costumes were perfect.

They arrived at the party at 10:30. Brian searched the room for Drew and spotted her near the bar. Drew saw them and waved. Taking a deep breath he guided Justin through the crowd.

"Hello Brian." she put out her hand. "I'd like you to meet my boyfriend Daniel Harney. Dan this is Brian Kinney, Pittsburgh's answer to Madison Avenue." Dan shook hands with Brian. For a moment Brian froze. Remembering what was at stake he put his arm around Justin and introduced him.

"Drew and Dan I'd like you to meet Justin Taylor."

Justin smiled and shook their hands. "I'm pleased to meet you."

"So, Justin what have you been doing with your time in New York?" Drew asked.

"Just sight seeing mostly. I've been sketching my way through Manhattan. I've got almost a whole book of drawings already."

"Justin is a student at Pittsburgh's Institute of Fine Arts."

"Dan went to school there." Drew said. "He's an art dealer."

The ice was broken and Brian started to relax. Justin and Dan got into a conversation about the school and art in general. Drew had studied art in college before becoming a business major. She and Dan met a few years ago at an art auction at Sotheby's. Brian was impressed that Justin was able to converse so comfortably with these well educated adults. Another one of his many talents. They talked for a while and then when the music started. Drew wanted to dance so she and Dan made their way to the dance floor.

"How am I doing?" Justin asked, smiling smugly.

"Shut up." Brian took his hand and dragged him out to the dance floor.

Before the first number was over the black and white cowboys had made an impression on the crowd with their well rehearsed dance moves. There were some disapproving stares, but, there were also several other same sex couples and in general it was a festive and friendly atmosphere. Justin was tireless when it came to dancing. They had been on the floor since the music started and Brian was winding down. Pulling Justin by the hand he tried to drag him off the dance floor for a little while.

"No, this is my favorite song. Please!!!" It wouldn't have mattered what they were playing it would have been is favorite. Justin was in his glory and Brian wasn't about to deny him his fun.

Drew came to his rescue. "Brian, why don't you take a break and come meet some friends of mine. Justin will be fine on his own."

Brian turned to look. Sure enough Justin was already surrounded by three young women who were copying his dance steps.

"Stay where I can see you. DON'T disappear into the backroom!" Brian ordered.

Justin smile and yelled back. "I will if I want to."

Brian walked away smiling to himself at Justin's proclamation. Drew took his hand and brought him around to several tables to introduce him. She was very enthusiastic about his work and let her friends know that it would be to their advantage to give his firm a call should they need an innovative ad campaign.

"I want to thank you for inviting me tonight. And, for being so understanding." He looked over toward Justin who was now dancing with a young man dressed like Rocky Horror.

"He's a very special young man. You're a lucky guy." She kissed him on the cheek and went back to join Dan at their table.

Brian stood at the bar and ordered a beer. Before it was delivered he felt someone tap him on the shoulder. He turned and saw the Adam Lyons from the Kennedy and Collins Agency.

"How's it going?" Brian greeted him.

"You should have called, we could have gotten together."

"I'm with someone." Brian pointed to Justin out on the dance floor.

Looking over in Justin's direction Adam replied. "'Lucky you. He's beautiful".

Brian just smiled. "He's an art student."

"Have you given any more thought about moving to New York? Things are opening up at Kennedy & Collins. You should submit another resume. We have new management and they're not very happy with the insider that was hired in your place." Adam said. "They have great art schools in New York you know."

Brian nodded. He had looked into the art schools when he was thinking about moving to New York in May. If Justin ever found out he'd never live it down. A hot looking blond with green eyes came over and stood next to Adam. He wore a red devil costume and carried a pitch fork. If Brian had to guess he would say that the kid wasn't much older than Justin. Adam put his arm around the man and introduced him.

"This is my partner Steve. He just graduated from N.Y.U. Steve, this is Brian, the guy from Pittsburgh that I told you about."

Brian greeted the young man marveling at the fact that Adam had introduced him as his partner. Things must be different in New York City.

Adam promised to email him some information and then pulled his partner on to the dance floor. Brian stood at the bar watching Justin dance. Not only had the business part of the trip been successful, but he found he was totally enjoying Justin's company. There was something about the boy that had made his life brighter. He thought about how things were for him and Michael at 18. They'd had good times and they had each other, but, he had spent most of his teen years developing his brooding, bitter nature. He never really spent much time just enjoying his youth.

Justin had a zest for life. He was gay and out and proud of himself. It was a joy just to be with him. Maybe Lindsay was right, Justin was exactly what he needed to finally make sense of his acrimonious existence.

Brian's thoughts were interrupted for a brief second when a reflection of an image in the mirror over the bar startled him. Since they had been in New York, Brian had almost been able to put the thoughts of his close encounter with death out of his mind. Maybe it was just the spirit of the Halloween festivities but he was getting an odd chill up his spine. Checking the mirror again he saw nothing.

'I must be hallucinating, without the benefit of drugs.' Brian said to himself.

Looking back at the dance floor he searched for Justin. The boy had wandered over to the window that overlooked Broadway and was enjoying the show in the street. Brian came up behind him encircling him in his arms. Earlier there had been a mix of adults and children lining the street. Now there were mostly adults sporting all kinds of outrageous costumes. There was no real organization or specific music or theme to the parade. It was a display of New Yorkers having some fun and showing off their outrageous creative abilities.

Justin turned to face him. "What's wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost. I mean a real ghost."

Brian had to admit that the vision he imagined in the mirror had shaken him a bit. "Nothing. Just a costume, it was kinda creepy. This guy was dressed as the grim reaper, the mask was just a bit much. I guess I'm still a little jumpy."

"I remember feeling like that after Hobbs attacked me. I was constantly seeing things that scared me."

"But, they were real. Remember what happened with your stalker kid. Not to mention that incident with Dr. Death."

Justin did not want to think about the possibility they were being stalked again. He wanted to believe that his plan worked, that David was dead. Brian did not know the truth about what happened that night. They all thought it was best to wait. It was best not wanting to involve Brian in the deception. Justin wished now that he had told him the truth from the beginning.

"He's dead." Justin said with conviction.

Brian put his hand over Justin's mouth. "You don't know that." Not wanting to spoil their evening with his paranoia he kissed Justin gently.

"Let's go back to the hotel. I'm going to fuck you all night."

"No argument here."

They said their good byes to Drew and Dan. Dan gave Justin a card and told him to stop by his studio in the Village before they left town. "I'd like to see your sketches. Who knows, maybe I can cash in on a rising star before he gets too famous."

Justin liked the idea of a real New York City art dealer looking at his work. "We still have one more day." He said to Brian as they got on the elevator.

Brian groaned and leaned heavily on the boys back. "Nooooo." He protested. "My feet are still killing me from this morning.

"We could take it easy. I want to go to the Village and shop. Maybe we could go to Dan's studio, and show him my sketches. I love that part of the City. I feel like I fit in. Do you know what I'm talking about?"

Brian kissed him. "Yeah, okay. But no more museums this trip."

Having a Ball at Babylon

This story concludes the Mystery. The holidays are upon them and Brian and Justin are feeling the pressures of family, complicated by the disturbing news of another murder which appears to involve David.

Justin was unlacing his ice skates when he saw Daphne pull up. "It's about time you showed up," he admonished her. "I'm freezing out here. Today of all days my car decides to get recalled."

"Come on, Justin, give her a break, it's not that cold." Hank Cameron had managed to remove his skates and pack up the hockey gear in the time it took Justin to unlace one boot.

"Well, at least someone's glad to see me." Daphne said, smiling in Hank's direction.

"I don't know what you're trying to prove out here Taylor, you're never going to be a jock, no matter how much time you spend on the ice."

"He's okay." Hank said in Justin's defense. "It helps me to have someone to practice with and he is getting more coordinated. At least he isn't falling down every five minutes, like he did a month ago"

Hank was starting to adjust to his new life. His mother had been cool about him staying in Pittsburgh. It had been a rough year for him, first his step father leaving his mother and then his father's death. He felt closer to the real David Cameron here with Michael and his family and things were working out fine. Living at Debbie's was interesting to say the least, but, he liked her and Vic very much. Michael came by just about every day and they got to spend a lot of time together.

His mother had sent money to enroll him in Justin and Daphne's alma mater The St. James Academy. Despite its ominous reputation and Justin and Daphne's warnings he was enjoying his classes there. He had decided that the only way to survive socially at St. James was to become a jock, so he was working out and skating regularly. Hockey had always been his passion and he was glad that Justin was able to come to the rink with him after school to practice.

"I'm starving" Daphne said. "I had to skip lunch because I was running late today. What do you guys feel like eating?"

"I can't Daph, I have to go to Babylon to work on the mural." The club managers had decided to hire the reigning "King" to paint a mural on the wall and while they were at it remodel the drab disco. Justin had been working there in the afternoons for two weeks.

"Oh, I forgot about the Justin Taylor dream job, painting naked men on the walls of his favorite dance club." Daphne teased him.

"Can you drop me off there and then take Hank back to Deb's? It's on the way." Justin flashed Daphne his famous Justin Taylor smile.

"Sure, I guess it's left-over chicken casserole for me tonight." Daphne was disappointed.

"We can still go eat, I'm starving too." Hank said.

Daphne took Hank's hand and the two walked off laughing, leaving Justin struggling to balance his skates, books and hockey stick.

"This place looks so weird in the daytime." Michael said to no one in particular. "No wonder they don't open until after dark."

Justin came out from behind the bar after covering his masterpiece with a tarp. "Hey, Michael. Yeah, it sure does stink in here. I never notice that before."

"That's because your senses are dulled by alcohol and lust."

"What's this about lust?" Brian came up behind Michael.

Justin smiled. "Hi. What are you doing here? I thought you were working late."

"I got bored. Besides, I got a call at work that your car was ready so I asked Michael to drop me off to pick it up." Brian walked over to the wall covered by the tarp.

"So how's the masterpiece going, Picasso?" he asked as he tried to sneak a peek at the art work.

Justin grabbed his hand and held it. "NO peeking." He said, then pulled Brian into his arms for a kiss.

"That's all we needed in here." Michael said. "An entire wall dedicated to the image of Brian Kinney."

"And what's wrong with that?" Brian was still staring into Justin's eyes.

"It's not Brian, not all of it anyway." Justin tore himself away from Brian and headed downstairs to clean up. Turning back he said. "Michael, don't let him look."

Predictably the two men did their best to look under the tarp. "It's too dark in here to see anything." Michael gave up and sat at the bar.

"So how's your pet kid doing at St. James Hall of Horrors?" Brian asked.

"Pretty good, he's very smart. Justin's been helping him out with his school work."

"Yeah, he told me. You're sure he's straight, right? I wouldn't want him to fall hopelessly in love with his best friend." Brian teased.

Michael was not amused. "I gotta go."

"Where? I thought we'd get something to eat." Brian put his arm around Michael's shoulder, his way of apologizing for teasing him.

He didn't know if it was his imagination or not, but it seemed like Michael recoiled at his touch. He had been acting strangely lately. Brian could not put his finger on it, but something was different about Michael. Maybe he was still jealous of Justin. Well he would just have to get used to it, the boy was here to stay.

Justin came back up the stairs and Brian forgot all about Michael and his insecurities.

He had something else on his mind.

Putting his arms around Justin he said. "You know we haven't properly broken in your Volvo."

"Yes we did, on the way back from New York, remember?"

"Oh, yeah. But, that was the front seat, we have to do something about the back seat."

Brian gave Justin his infamous come hither look and the two of them were off to the parking lot.

Michael stood in the empty disco watching his best friend and the boy wonder dancing their way out the door. He wasn't sure what he was feeling, he only knew that the Brian Kinney he thought he was in love with all these years was gone. The fact was he never really existed.

"So you were right there when it happened. It must have been awful." Hank spoke between bites of his turkey sandwich.

"I didn't really see it happen; but, I did see Justin lying on the floor with his head all bloody. It was so scary. And Brian, he was really freaked out. They were so beautiful together on the dance floor. That damn bully Chris Hobbs should rot in hell."

"Justin's such a nice guy. Why would anyone want to do that to him? I just don't understand the big deal about being gay." Hank said. "What happened to that guy? Did he go to jail."

"No, he got off easy, community service. Justin said that he doesn't even care anymore, as long as doesn't have to see him again. He's not going to change his life for some stupid bigoted asshole. He said that he's proud to be who he is and to be with Brian. He's pretty brave about it."

"Justin's brave, that's for sure. And smart. He figured out where my dad took Brian."

"I'm glad Justin finally got what he wanted." Daphne said. "Those two are quite a pair, like Romeo & Juliet."

"More like Batman and Robin." The two new friends laughed together.

Brian reached over Justin's sleeping body to grab the phone before it woke him.

"Hello."

"Brian, it's Mother. What are you doing?"

In his mind he blurted out 'I just finished fucking my 18 year old boyfriend within an inch of his life; in fact, I think I may have killed him.' Justin began to moan. Brian covered the boy's mouth with his hand and answered his mother for real. "I am working on a project for my new clients. Why?"

"Your Aunt Mary has dropped by unexpectedly, she would love to see you, Brian, can you come right over?"

"Now?"

"Yes, Brian, she is going to take the train back to Philadelphia tonight, she has to get home to her cats. Clare and the boys are already here. I'll hold off on dinner till you get here."

Before Brian could think of a logical protest she hung up. "Shit!" he exclaimed loudly.

"Wha . . ." Justin came to life beside him.

Brian had already begun to put on his clothes. "I've got to go to my mother's house. My aunt is in from Philadelphia. I'm sure I would never hear the end of it if I didn't make an attempt at socializing with "all that's left" of my family. My mother is such a drama queen. She's ten times worse since my father died. I suppose she'll be making plans for Thanksgiving.

"Oh, yeah, that's next week. My mother is going to visit her parents in Florida with my sister."

"You're going to Florida?" Brian asked.

"No one invited me. I don't think they're ready for a gay grandson, I'm not sure they ever will be. When I was in the hospital my mother told them I got hit by a car. No, I won't go into the closet for their sake, or anyone else's. If they can't accept me the way I am, fuck 'em. My mother is just getting used to having a queer son. I'll let her have some time with her parents this year."

"Then what are you doing on Thanksgiving?"

"I don't know. Lindsay and Mel are going to Mel's cousin's. I guess there's always Deb and Vic, but Michael has been acting kinda strange lately. I guess I'll just work at the diner. I bet there'll be big tips on a holiday."

Brian sat down on the bed to put on his socks. "I hate holidays, especially Thanksgiving at my house. We had to go to church in the morning and then my mother would cook all day. Clare would fight with her boyfriend and then run up to her room and cry, and my father would turn on the television and watch football. I don't know which was worse, having to watch the game with my father or sit in my room and listen to my sister sobbing through the wall."

"That sounds pretty depressing. In a perfect world we could be together for the holidays. But, no one is ever going to allow us to do that."

Brian ruffled Justin's hair and kissed him on the head. "I'll be back as soon as I can. Why don't you go back to sleep and rest up for later? I think I'm going to need to relieve some tension when I get home."

Dinner at the Kinney house was never a pleasant affair. The first order of business when was to pay off his insufferable nephews. He must say that they had kept their end of the bargain and not mentioned what they had seen at the loft. But, then at the dinner table it happened.

"Uncle Brian," Mark asked. "How come you didn't bring Randy with you?"

The little boy's face paled when his brother kicked him under the table and gave him the evil eye. Seeing an end to the cash flow, Matthew took steps to remedy the situation.

"Grandma, Randy is an artist. He draws really great pictures. Uncle Brian hired him to take us skating when we stayed at his house."

"Good save." Brian mouthed to his nephew.

"Bonus?" Matthew mouthed back.

Brian nodded.

"How nice that you were able to hire someone to take them out. I do hope you know him well. You shouldn't leave our precious boys with just anyone."

"He's not just anyone. I know him very well."

He shot his nephews a warning glance, thus stifling their giggles.

"We must discuss Thanksgiving." Aunt Mary said. "I won't be able to travel because my friend who takes care of my cats will be in Florida. Why don't you all come to my house for dinner?"

Brian got a vision of driving his sister's mini-van across the state of Pennsylvania with his mother, sister and nephews fighting, moaning and complaining the entire trip.

"I have plans." he snapped.

His mother glared at him. "Brian, how could you possibly have plans? Thanksgiving is a holiday which should be spent with family. We're your only family, so where else would you be going on a holiday? Last year you made

plans with your friend Michael and it turned out to be your father's last Thanksgiving. You never know how much time the Good Lord will give you to be together with your family."

"I'm having dinner with someone who has no family," he lied. "I promised him Thanksgiving dinner at my place."

"It's settled then. We'll have Thanksgiving at your apartment. Mary, we'll come to your house for Christmas."

"I'll be out of town for Christmas," Brian said, trying to figure out what just happened.

"We'll see, Brian."

Brian's mother dismissed his protests and left the table with the other ladies to prepare dessert.

He thought he saw his sister pass him a sympathetic glance.

Mark sat down next to him and put his hand on his arm. "I'm sorry, Uncle Brian. I didn't mean to talk about Randy. I really had fun with him and I wanted to see him again. You can have your money back." The little boy produced the \$20 bill his uncle had given him earlier.

"Keep it," Brian shoved it back in his nephew's pocket. "I know you didn't mean it."

"Is Randy going to have Thanksgiving with us at your house?"

"Justin, his name is Justin. And no, he can't have dinner with us," Brian answered him.

"Because of Grandma?"

Brian thought about what Justin said when they discussed it last time. When you tell your mother you'll be out to everyone. Then you won't have anything to hide. He really hated the thought of Justin being alone on Thanksgiving.

"NO. He'll be there," Brian had made a decision.

Brian sat in the booth waiting impatiently for Michael to show. He hadn't spent much time with his best friend since the unfortunate incident with Dr. Demented. It was partially because of his busy work schedule, and also because of his growing need to be with Justin. But, Brian couldn't help noticing that when they were together things were different between them. Michael was quite to the point of being mysterious. It wasn't like him not to voice every little thought that came into his head. Another thing that bothered Brian was the feeling he got whenever he touched Michael. It seemed like he would stiffen up and move away slightly. Something was definitely wrong and Brian was going to find out what it was.

"Are you pissed at me for something?" Brian came to the point the minute Michael sat in the booth.

"No. Why would you ask me that?" Michael responded coolly.

"You've been avoiding me. What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Is it Justin?"

Michael's demeanor soften a little. "No, Justin's an okay kid. I like him."

"If it's not Justin then it must be me. So what is it Michael? What did I do?"

"You didn't DO anything. The world does not revolve around Brian Kinney. Not everything is about you."

Brian was shocked. Michael had never spoken to him like this. Before Brian could think of a response the door opened. Emmett and Ted walked into the diner and started over to the table. A quick look at Brian's face told them to sit at the counter. The door opened again and two conservatively dressed men walked in and did a visual scrutiny of all the patrons of the diner. Their eyes stopped at Brian and Michael's table. Before approaching them the pair consulted with each other briefly.

They both stood as if at attention and produced their badges to the men seated in the booth.

FBI." The older man said. "Are you Michael Novotny and Brian Kinney?"

"Yes." Michael's face paled.

"We need to speak with you concerning a Dr. David Cameron." The men sat along side them in the booth.

"Have you heard from or seen David Cameron since his disappearance?"

"Of course he hasn't. And he didn't disappear, he took off after almost killing me. You make it sound like he was the victim."

"Mr. Kinney, we understand that he had you detained in the basement of his house for several days."

"Detained, tied up and held at gun point, beaten within an inch of my life. Yeah, I seem to remember that."

Michael answered the agent's question. "No, I haven't seen or heard from David since that night. Why, have you heard anything?"

The agents looked at each other and the older one began explain. "There was a murder in New York City in late October. We have reason to believe that Dr. Cameron may have been involved."

"That's impossible. David isn't a serial killer. He had good reason to hate Brian. He wanted to get even with him for ruining our lives."

"The victim was killed in a gym facility which offered massage therapy. We believe that Dr. Cameron was working there as a therapist. It was a very brutal murder. The marks on the victim's neck indicated that the murderer used a great deal of force. It was later determined that there might have been a mechanical devise used. It turns out that Dr. Cameron might have had surgery on his hand due to an injury he suffered. He had a device implanted that would be capable inflicting such injuries."

"Even if that's true, I don't believe he could murder anyone in cold blood for no reason."

"The name of the victim was Greg Satterfield, his ex-wife's second husband and the brother of his former lover."

Michael was silent for a moment. "I haven't seen him or heard from him since the night we reported him missing. I'm sorry, I can't help you."

The agents thanked him for his time and got up from the booth. "Mr. Novotny ,I don't have to remind you that this is a very dangerous man we are dealing with. Both you and Mr. Kinney should be very careful. We understand that his son is staying in town with you."

"Actually he's staying at my mother's house. I'm sure that he hasn't had any contact with his father."

"Still, Mr. Novotny, we'll need to speak with him."

"I better go there with you. He'll be upset when he hears the news about his stepfather."

Brian sat and stared after Michael and the agents as they left the diner. It wasn't fear for himself that gripped him. There was something very wrong with Michael and he suspected that David had something to do with the change in his friend.

Emmett and Ted sat down at the booth and Brian filled them in.

"Poor Michael, he must be heartsick. And that poor kid, losing his father and gaining a maniacal killer."

"What about poor Brian? Nobody gives a shit that he almost killed me first. I'm the guy he hates more than anyone."

"I just got my life together and now I have to worry about Robo Doc." Brian got up and paid the check.

"You two better keep an eye out for Michael. I don't think he'll be calling me if something happens." He left the diner to find the one person in the world who really cared what happened to him.

"What are you doing here?" Justin was surprised to see Brian in the middle of a work day. "Is something wrong?" He could tell by his face that something had happened. Wiping his brush with a rag he descended the ladder and went to Brian.

They sat at the empty bar and Brian started to explain. "David is alive. In fact, he's more than alive, he's bionic."

"What the fuck are you saying?"

"The FBI just questioned me and Michael at the diner. It seems that his wife's second husband was murdered in New York, around the time that we were there in fact". Brian remembered the image that he thought he had seen at the party and a chill ran up his spine.

"David murdered Hank's stepfather? That poor kid, he really loved his father and he loved his stepfather too."

"So everyone has sympathy for David's kid, but nobody cares that he'll probably come after me next."

Justin put his arms around Brian. "If he comes after you he'll have to take me, too. I'm not leaving you alone. I don't think I could live through that again."

Brian looked back at him with his puppy dog look that melted Justin's heart. He wanted to hold him in his arms forever and keep the rest of the world at bay. There was a vulnerability about Brian that Justin found very endearing. Of course, the man would only allow this aspect of his personality to emerge briefly and only in front of the one person he trusted most.

Snapping back to into his no nonsense business man's approach to the world he removed Justin's arms from his neck. "That wouldn't be very practical, now would it. How am I going to explain the presence of my sweet faced teen-aged boyfriend at my sales meetings? No, you'll go to class and I'll go to my job and we will BOTH be very careful. I'll call you when I get to work and I'll pick you up and bring you here so you can finish painting my picture on the wall."

"It's not your picture I'm painting, Brian."

"Sure, you're painting all the other hot guys you've fucked. Speaking of fucking hot guys, let's get out of here and find some hot guys."

"You won't have to look very far." Justin groped at Brian's crotch with his paint free hand.

In the middle of a long passionate kiss Justin's cell phone rang.

Hank was on the phone arguing with his mother. She wanted him to come back to Oregon, but he refused. "I'm not leaving here, Mom. I just got settled in school. If you make me go back I'll just run away again."

Michael took the phone from the boy who was obviously very upset. He took the news about his stepfather's murder hard. If his father was involved, he had to know. Laurie and Michael decided that she should make the trip to Pittsburgh and talk to Hank in person.

As soon as he hung up with Laurie, Michael dialed another number.

"Hi, Justin. Look, Hank is pretty upset. Do you think you could come over and talk to him? He looks up to you, maybe you could calm him down."

"Sure, Michael. Brian is here with me. We'll be right there."

When Justin and Brian arrived at Deb's Michael was nowhere to be found. He said that he had some errands and he had to leave. Justin went up to talk to Hank. Brian took the opportunity to question Debbie about her son.

"Have you noticed a change in Michael recently?"

"Of course I have. What would you expect? He's been through hell in the past few months. First David and him breaking up and then you getting kidnapped. He's been fucking traumatized. And now he has to deal with another murder and David's son."

"I know. Deb, it's been rough on all of us. But, I was talking about him and me. Has he said anything to you about us?"

"Well, I have noticed that he doesn't mention your name every 5 minutes like he usually does. But, it could be because you have been spending so much time with Justin he feels left out."

"It's more than that, Deb. I get the feeling that he's kinda hostile toward me."

"Michael doesn't have a hostile bone in his body. It must be your imagination, Brian."

It was dark and cold in the apartment and Michael shivered as he opened the door. He felt a warm hand caress his neck and he took a deep breath. "Hi," he whispered sweetly.

"Hi yourself. I've missed you." David removed Michael's coat.

"I did everything you said. We're all set, passports, tickets, everything."

David was busy nibbling on Michael's neck.

"Did you hear me?"

"Yes. We may have to wait a week or two 'til things settle down with the police. I can't wait to finally have you all to myself. No more Brian Kinney. He will be gone from our lives."

"You mean we'll be gone from his life."

"Michael, it has to be final, so final that no one could ever undo it. No, baby, we'll have to put an end to Brian Kinney. That's the only way he won't be able to interfere."

"Do you understand?" Standing with his back to the wall Michael was completely at David's mercy. He felt his cock harden at the thought of David actually killing Brian because he wanted him so much.

"Yes, David, I understand. I'll do anything you say."

"How much do you know about cooking a turkey?"

"The only kind of turkey I've made into a meal involved two pieces of bread. Why?"

"Well, we're going to have to figure it out by the day after tomorrow. That reminds me we're going to have to go shopping."

They had been spending most of their free time together for a number of reasons. The first being the fact that David had not been apprehended yet, the second reason being that Michael had pretty much dropped out of Brian's everyday life. He was cordial enough when Brian called, but, the relationship was almost a dead issue. The third reason they were spending time together was the fact that they just couldn't get enough of each other.

The evening had started out with a marathon fuckfest, leaving them both depleted for the moment. Brian had neglected to tell Justin about Thanksgiving. He figured it was now or never. "My mother and sister have invited themselves here for Thanksgiving. I thought we would serve turkey. What do you think?"

Justin turned to Brian with his mouth opened. "WE . . . what do you mean we? How could I possibly show up for Thanksgiving dinner with your mother?. I'm not good at hiding things, Brian. No way. You can cook yourself a turkey and let me know when it's over so I can clean up the mess."

"No, you have to be here. My mother's always tells me that holidays are for family." He pulled Justin into his arms. "I'm going to tell her the truth. I've decided, you were right. There's no reason for me to be hiding you from anyone. If God wants to take out his wrath on me through my mother, that's her problem. I'm proud of you, Justin, and I want the whole world to know that you belong to me."

Justin basked in the glow of the moment as Brian held him close. "Yams. We'll need some yams so I can make sweet potato pie. My grandmother used to make it for Thanksgiving, it's a Taylor family tradition. I was going to miss it this year, so, I'll make it myself."

Everything was perfect. Brian never had a doubt that Justin could pull off a dinner party in two days. The table was set for six with the new china that they had picked out together just for the occasion of their first (and maybe last) family gathering.

Now all that was left was for Brian to find the right words to say to his mother. "Fuck. I'm a dead man." he thought. There are no words in the English language, or any language for that matter, that would soften the blow for Joan Kinney. When they arrived he was just going to introduce Justin and tell her the truth. If she chose to leave and never speak to him again, he could live with that. What he was concerned about was how her reaction would affect Justin.

It had been a joy watching the kid teach himself the basics of cooking a turkey with all the trimmings. The aroma coming from the kitchen was incredible, nothing like the sterile atmosphere that was his mother's domain.

Brian sat at the computer waiting for Justin to finish his shower. They were both anxious to deal with the fallout and get it over with. He had discussed the possible scenarios with Justin. His mother would, for sure, be very upset. Even though they had never discussed it, Brian was sure his sister was well aware of the fact he was gay. She may side with his mother and all four of them might storm out of the loft, leaving them with all this food and a bad taste for entertaining family for the holidays. Justin swore it wouldn't matter as long as they were together. Brian felt exactly the same way.

He had almost gotten through his email when he heard Justin scream. He was halfway across the loft when he saw Justin standing in a towel with soap all over his hair and body.

"There's no hot water."

Brian started to laugh.

"What are you laughing at? They'll be here soon and I can't even rinse the soap out of my eyes."

Brian grabbed the towel the teenager had wrapped around his waist and started to dab the soap out of his eyes.

"Calm down. I'll call the super and tell him. It's happened before, he'll get it fixed right away." He made the call while Justin stood in front of him naked, dripping soap all over the living room floor. The sight of Justin's naked soapy body was giving him a hard-on. It reminded him of studs and suds night at Babylon. His very own stud looked great in suds.

He deposited the wet towel on the kitchen counter and wrapped his arms around the naked boy. Justin giggled as Brian smothered his wet, slippery flesh with kisses. Brian was about to pick Justin up to carry him to the bed, when he got the feeling someone was watching. He looked up and saw his mother and sister standing in the doorway with their mouths opened. Mark and Matthew were hidden behind their Grandmother's coat.

"You're early," he managed to say as he shielded Justin behind his back. He retrieved the towel from the counter and handed it to the mortified teen, who immediately made a dash for the bathroom.

"Are you coming in or not?" He would not have chosen to have it happen like this, but it saved him from having to say the words to his mother.

Clare nudged her mother forward and the boys, unperturbed, took off for the treadmill.

"What is going on here?" Joan demanded.

"Thanksgiving dinner, Kinney family style." Brian offered.

"No, I won't accept this. You've sinned in the eyes of God, Brian. You'll have to attend counseling with the priest, of course. Kissing that little boy, what were you thinking?"

"Mother, you don't really want to know what I was thinking."

"Brian, you've disgraced the family. Clare, we should leave. What do you think?"

His sister had not uttered a word. She stood silently next to her mother looking at the fine furnishings in her brother's apartment. "Did you just ask me what I think? Mother, that's the first time you have ever asked me that. Since you did ask, I'll tell you. First of all I think you ought to apologize to Brian for not knocking before entering his apartment. Second of all you should apologize to his friend because frankly, mother, he may be young, but from what I can see, he's not so little."

For the first time since his birth Brian felt the urge to kiss his sister. He took the casserole dish from her hand and did just that. "Little brother, you have good taste."

"Thanks. I mean it, really. Thank you." Brian took their coats and hung them in the closet, all the while watching his mother's reaction. She did not answer Clare, nor did she make a move to leave. Clare was admiring the Italian furniture, ignoring her mother completely.

"I better see if he's okay." He left the two women alone in the living room.

Justin had finished showering and was sitting on the edge of the sink. "Is it safe? Are they gone yet?" Justin was trying to be nonchalant about what happened, but, Brian could see the tears welling up in the corners of his eyes.

"I'm sorry that happened. But, it's okay. My sister Clare has been replaced by an alien from another planet and she has quieted the beast formerly known as my mother. Get dressed and come downstairs, please, I want to introduce you before my real family arrives."

Before leaving the bathroom he turned back to Justin and said, "Maybe now you'll remember to lock the front door when you come in."

"Brian, I was here all night. You were supposed to lock the door."

"Oh, right. Sorry." He smiled sheepishly and returned to the living room.

He offered his guests a glass of wine. His sister accepted and sat down near her sons on the sofa. His mother had retired to the chair in the corner and was not speaking. He brought her a glass of wine anyway, which she swallowed in record time. He refilled her glass and left the bottle on the table next to her.

Justin entered the room and Brian put his arm around him.

"You must be Justin, the artist," Clare said, taking his outstretched hand. She praised his work and went on to thank him for the sketches he had given the boys the last time they were there.

Matthew and Mark grabbed Justin's hands and dragged him over to the Sony Playstation, where the three remained until it was time for to put dinner on the table.

From the kitchen Justin could see that Brian was enjoying talking to his sister. He wondered if she has always been nice and Brian was so busy being Brian, that he never noticed. There was clearly a problem with his mother. She hadn't said a word and she'd been there over an hour. He hoped she wasn't saving up a tirade for the dinner table. What ever happened Justin would understand. After all, his family had caused Brian all kinds of grief. Justin had a more immediate problem. The timer on the turkey had not popped out and everything else was ready. Dare he stick a fork inside to check? He wouldn't really know what he was checking for anyway. He thought about calling Deb, but he remembered that they had gone to the airport to pick up Hank's mother.

He was about to give up and cheat by prying the little plastic piece out when he received advice from an unexpected source.

"Those things don't always work. Let me look at it." Joan Kinney had taken charge of the turkey. Justin relinquished the fork to her and stepped back.

"Yes, it's ready." She turned off the oven and as she did so the timer popped out.

"Thanks." Justin flashed her one of his irresistible smiles. "This is my first turkey."

"You can't always depend on gadgets. You must use your own instincts in the kitchen. Are you making gravy? I'll need flour."

Justin reached up over the stove and retrieved the bag of flour. He stepped back against the counter and hid the can of turkey gravy he had bought under the sink.

A timer went off and Justin remembered his sweet potato pie was still in the oven. Joan stepped to the side as he removed it from the oven.

"My mother used to make sweet potato pie." She looked surprised. "No one in my family likes it so I haven't had it in years."

Justin thought he detected the start of a slight smile in the corners of her mouth, just briefly and then it was gone. He decided that maybe Brian had misunderstood his mother, maybe she just felt unappreciated by her husband and by the rest of her family and that's why she became so bitter.

"I love it. My grandmother lives in Florida so I don't get to have it anymore either. I figured if I learn how to make it would be more like a real Thanksgiving."

"Where are your parents?" Joan asked flatly.

"They're divorced. My mother took my little sister to Florida with her."

"What about your father?"

"We don't talk much. He went to the Bahamas with his new girlfriend." Justin felt sad for a moment, then he remembered that he was where he had always wanted to be.

Joan Kinney was looking over at her son. Then she turned and looked back at Justin. "I think that everything is ready. Why don't you call everyone to the table."

Brian smiled at Justin from his seat at the head of the table. Justin was at the opposite end deep in conversation with, of all people, his mother. They were busy comparing recipes for some kind of special dessert they were about to concoct. The boy was full of surprises, that's for sure. He seemed to be able to hold his own in conversation with most adults. His "country club" upbringing had served him well, especially with Brian's pretentious mother.

Brian was sure that his mother was not finished admonishing him for his unholy behavior earlier, but she had not made any attempt to do so today, for that he was grateful. There was sure to be some kind of lecture on the scriptures. Whatever. He would deal with it when the time came. It appeared that she had accepted Justin as his "friend." Maybe that would be enough. It was certainly better than pretending he didn't exist.

This was the first Thanksgiving that he actually felt that he had something to be thankful for.

Justin stood on his toes to put the platter back in the cabinet. "Did you like the ambrosia? It's my favorite dessert. I would never have been able to make it myself in a million years. I got your mother's recipe and I'm going to start practicing."

Brian took the dish out of his hand and put it on the self. "I better enroll you in my gym. I'm certainly going to be spending a lot of time there with you in charge of the food preparation."

"You did a nice job with your first holiday dinner, baby, everything was great."

Justin smiled shyly. "Did you talk to your mother at all?"

"Not really. She did say she would call during the week. I was thinking of changing the number soon anyway."

"At least now she knows. I'm proud of you Brian. Now all you have to do is tell her about Gus and you'll have nothing to hide from anyone."

"I was going to save that one for Christmas dinner." Brian put his arms around Justin's waist and pulled him away from the sink. "Those soap suds are giving me ideas."

Monday morning after a holiday weekend was always a bummer. Justin had a full day of classes after which he promised his mother he would come over for dinner. Brian didn't have to go into the office this morning because he had a meeting at 10:30 at a client's office. As he showered and dressed Justin tried to be quiet so not to wake him, knowing that when he did wake up he wouldn't be in the best of moods. With Babylon closed for remodeling they had decided to take a road trip to Philadelphia. Emmett, Ted and, to everyone's surprise, Michael took the ride. It was nice to have the gang together, but for the most part Michael kept his distance from Brian. This caused the man to get even by drinking too much, and making a total ass of himself on the ride home.

Justin tiptoed up to the edge of the bed and planted a soft kiss on top of Brian's head. "Later," he whispered. After checking to make sure that the alarm was set Justin grabbed his book bag and left the apartment.

Michael slipped into the loft quietly, making sure not to disturb its occupant. He had waited for Justin to leave, knowing that Brian would still be sleeping. He had been very drunk the night before and he usually stayed in bed as long as he could after a night like that. Standing next to the bed Michael took this last opportunity to look at his once beloved friend while he slept. He really did look like a little boy all warm and curled up in the blankets. Michael felt himself getting aroused.

All he had ever dreamed of his whole life was to lie naked in Brian's arms basking in the glow of the most incredible sexual experience ever. As he lay there sleeping, Michael could tell that Brian was dreaming about having sex. Stripping off all his clothes, he gave in to his urge and cuddled up next Brian's naked body.

Just the thought of finally having his wish had given Michael a hard-on. He closed his eyes and began to rub himself against Brian's warm flesh. Brian turned in his sleep and reached out with his arm pulling his bed partner closer.

Michael was in heaven, his mission forgotten for the moment, as he rubbed his cock against Brian's rock hard member. Slowly Brian arched his back and stretched his arm over his head. He was almost awake now and so glad that his partner had returned to their bed.

"I love you, sweet baby. Rub me harder, you can do better than that. I love you so much, Justin.

Before he was fully awake Brian felt a cloth being pressed hard against his face. What was Justin up to, he could barely breathe. Struggling with the hand that was now fully clasped onto his face, Brian opened his eyes. He tried to speak before he passed out but all he could manage say was "Michael?"

"I've got to re-think this late night party life on school nights." Justin remarked to his new friend Billy. His head had been throbbing all day.

"I don't know what you mean. What's the point of going to college if you're not going to party?"

"Ahhh . . . to learn something?" Justin joked as he dialed his cell phone.

"I guess he's still in a meeting. I was hoping to get him before my next class."

"Keeping tabs on your boyfriend? Not cool, Justin."

"It's not like that. Someone is stalking us and we're just trying to keep track of each other."

"I'm sure he's fine, Justin." said Billy sympathetically. " Let's get a move on, we don't want to be late for Professor Paul's lecture."

Brian got a feeling of deja vu when, for a second time in his life, he opened his eyes to find that he had been bound, gagged and blindfolded. He tried to remember what had happened. Michael . . . it was Michael that had done this to him. His suspicions about his friend had be correct. Somehow Michael and David had managed to hook up and now they were going to kill him. The only thought that came into his head was that Justin was going to somehow blame himself.

"Did you have a pleasant nap?" Someone was poking him in the ribs with a hard metal object that he assumed was a knife. The next thing he knew the ropes and the blindfold were being cut off and he was face to face with Dr. David Cameron. The tape was ripped from his face and he struggled to spit out the rag that had been lodged in his mouth.

"I guess I won this round, Brian. Michael is here with me. We're going to have a little party."

Brian managed to stand, only to realize that David had trapped him in a cage which was being hoisted high over the stage at Babylon. The lights were being turned on one by one as the music loudly pulsated in his ears. David was busy adjusting some kind of gadget he was rigging up. Brian noticed the odd way he was holding his hand. The F.B.I had been correct about the murder in New York.

The remodeling was almost finished and Justin's mural was clearly visible from where he was imprisoned. It was incredibly realistic. He had painted the likenesses of all the regulars of the dance club. Ted and Emmett were dancing with each other. There was also a likeness of Michael and David dancing, looking like the loving couple they once were. The image of a sea of men dancing was brought to life by hundreds of flashing lights reflecting off the highly polished brand new disco ball which adorned the ceiling.

Featured in the center of the mural were the images of Justin and himself. It looked like the boy had recreated that moment in time when he had reclaimed him from the two tricks all those disco nights ago. He was holding Justin over his head like a trophy and smiling up at his prized golden boy. Justin was gazing down at him in adoration.

If it wasn't for the awkwardness of the moment Brian would have applauded the unveiling. It was truly the most ambitious work Justin had ever done. Brian was extremely proud of him. He prayed that he would get the chance to tell him.

Justin was busy pacing in front his mother's condo building. He shook the cell phone and almost threw it to the ground when Brian's "leave a message" announcement came on. He had been trying to reach him all day. In between classes he had gone back to the loft, but there was no sign of him. Next to the bed there was a strange pair of underwear with super heros on them. Justin imagined the comic book guy getting an early morning call to come over before work. Brian was missing again. Justin would have preferred it if he was with the comic book guy. At least he would know he was alive.

He stood there weighing his options when the phone rang. To his disappointment it was Daphne. "What's up?"

"I can't find Brian. Daphne, I know somethings wrong. What am I going to do?"

"I'd come over, Justin, but Hank is with me. He came over to study. I can't just dump him at Michael's house. What should I tell him?"

"Bring him with you. If David's involved maybe Hank can help."

The three friends sat in Daphne's car trying to figure out the next move. "Did you call the police?" Daphne asked.

"Of course I did. Sal said that since the F.B.I. was looking for David they would take Brian's disappearance seriously. But, they still have no idea where he is."

"Did you ask Michael when you saw him before?" Hank asked.

"What are you talking about? I didn't see Michael."

"I saw his car outside of Babylon on the way over." Hank said. "I thought he was there with you."

"I finished the mural last week. Babylon is still closed, they were putting in a brand new giant disco ball and fancy new lighting. The grand reopening isn't until Friday. Why would Michael be there today?"

The three friends looked at each other and Daphne started the engine. They were off to Babylon to investigate.

As Brian stared down at the artwork he noticed Michael looking up at him from where he stood in front of the image of Justin and himself. "It's over, Brian. David and I are leaving together. I'm sorry it had to come to this, but, there's no way we could ever have peace if you were still alive. David has convinced me you would always be a part of our lives as long as there was still breath in your body."

David had lowered the cage which held his enemy. He had failed last time and he was determined that finally he would have his revenge. No one made a fool of David Cameron and got away with it. He came up behind Michael and put his arms around him. "Why don't you go over and say good-bye, Michael. After all he was the love of your life for so many years."

Michael was confused. David was pushing him toward the cage, closer to Brian. He didn't want to look into his boyhood friend's face. He wasn't sure anymore if he could go through with any of David's plan. Brian was looking at him with those incredibly expressive hazel eyes. "No, David. I can say good-bye from here."

Before he realized what was happening, Michael felt himself being shoved through the door of the cage. David slammed it shut and locked it. "One last dance, boys."

The cage began its ascent toward the ceiling. The former friends looked at each other with sadness and fear.

"David, don't do this." Michael pleaded. "You can still get away. The police don't know anything."

"It's not about survival, Michael. It's about revenge. All of you, every man in my life has disappointed me. You're all liars, you all must die."

"Have I disappointed you?" Hank stood near the doorway.

Justin and Daphne had heard the music blasting from inside the bar. "No way, Daph, it has to be them. The workers wouldn't be there this late and there are no cars around except for Michael's. I know Brian's in there. I just know it. You stay here. "

Daphne had turned to Hank in the backseat. She felt sorry for the boy having to be a part of his father's capture, but, they had no other choice. "Hank, you call the police. Tell them that your father is holding Brian Kinney hostage at Babylon. And stay in the car. Wait here for them." Daphne tossed Hank her cell phone and stepping out of the car, she took off in the direction in which Justin had disappeared.

The cage that imprisoned Brian and Michael had reached the very top of the building in record time. David set the control panel up earlier so that he could maneuver the cage with his victims and watch them plummet to their deaths. He had not counted on his son being present to witness his murderous wrath.

"Hank." The visibly shaken David called out his son's name. "Get out of here. Wait outside. Go, you don't need to see this."

The boy did not move and David approached him. "We're leaving the country. You and I are. Michael arranged everything. You'll see, no one can come between us again."

A terrified Michael called out. "Run Hank, he's not the man we thought he was. He hurts people, Hank. RUN!!!!"

The boy stood his ground. His father gently reached out his hand and the boy took it.

David was calm, but still intent on carrying out his revenge on Michael and Brian. Michael was attempting to take his son away. It should be apparent by now, anyone who tried to come between him and his son met with a terrible fate.

Justin and Daphne made their way up the back stairs to the control room. David had rigged up a remote control for the cage, overriding the control panel in the booth. A fall from that height would surely kill them both. Justin was determined to figure out a way to save them.

With Daphne at his side they began to push and pull at the various slides and buttons on the board. The music and the lights were all affected, creating a dizzying effect in the room, but nothing they tried affected the position of the cage. Daphne found a dial and pulled on it. The disco ball increased in revolutions until it appeared to be perilously out of control.

Michael called out to Hank again. "Run, Hank, please, save yourself."

David and Hank stood in the center of the room. David released Hank's hand for a moment as he struggled with the controls he had rigged for the cage. Hank took the opportunity to run behind the bar and hide.

David turned and shot a penetrating gaze at his former lover. Michael realized that there was nothing there but hatred and insanity. As he prepared to die, he took his best friend's hand and whispered. "I'm sorry, Brian."

The cage began to fall as Justin and Daphne watched in horror from the control booth. Out of frustration and fear Justin banged his head on the control board. Something on the board lit up and the cage slowed to a halt inches before it hit the floor, throwing Brian and Michael up against the bars.

In a rage David reached into the cage with his bionic arm and pulled Brian's head toward him. Holding the knife to the man's throat, he shot a maniacal gaze up at the control booth.

Justin put his hand over Daphne's and pulled the dial out all the way. The disco ball over head lurched forward and broke free from the ceiling. David backed away from the cage to look up as the ball careened toward him. With a tremendous crash the disco ball hit the floor and broke into thousands of shards of glass. The largest piece penetrated the neck of Dr. David Cameron.

Justin unlocked the cage and released Brian and Michael. He grabbed Brian and held him close. Michael ran to the bar and retrieved the sobbing Hank, shielding him from the sight of his father's partially decapitated body.

The police had arrived as David was reaching into the cage after Brian. They saw the ball break loose from the ceiling and declared David Cameron's death an accident.

Brian stared at the lifeless body of Dr. Death lying on the floor under the disco ball. It reminded him of the scene in the "Wizard of Oz" when the house fell on the wicked witch . . . Ding Dong the Doc is dead. Good riddance. Justin still clung to his side. He looked down at the boy and whispered. "How did you manage it this time?"

"I used my head." Justin looked up at him and smiled.

Justin had been praying for snow since they arrived in New York. He'd heard from everyone how beautiful it was at Christmas when there was snow on the ground. They had arrived three days before and had been touring the city at a leisurely pace this time. After eating dinner at the Marriot Hotel they decided to take a walk up to Rockefeller Center to see the tree.

It had been almost a month since David's death. Hank was treated in the hospital for shock and released to his mother. Michael did not leave his side at the hospital. No one but Brian was aware of the extent of Michael's involvement in his kidnapping and attempted murder. David had brainwashed Michael using drugs and other mind-controlling techniques. Michael agreed to see a psychiatrist to get de-programed and work out his feelings about David and about Brian. They would always be friends, but some things would have to change in their lives.

Hank agreed to return to Oregon with his mother with the condition that he would be allowed to visit Michael and his new friends Daphne and Justin in the spring. He had accepted the fact that his father was mentally ill. It would be a fact that he would have to deal with. He was glad that he was able to help distract him and buy Justin some time to save Brian and Michael.

It was colder than normal in New York on Christmas Eve. Brian held Justin close as they walked. They stopped to admire the Christmas tree in Rockefeller Center.

"I can't believe your mother invited me to your Aunt Mary's for dinner tomorrow."

"We didn't give her much choice. I told her you'd be with me and I didn't think I should leave you sitting out in the car for 5 or 6 hours on Christmas Day, while I had dinner with the family. She did tell me that I should go to church tonight and pray for forgiveness for my sins."

"St. Patrick's Cathedral is only a few blocks away. I bet it's nice on Christmas Eve."

"Justin, if I walked into St. Patrick's Cathedral on Christmas Eve the statues of the Saints would turn and glare at me, the walls would start to shake and tears would fall from the Virgin Mother's eyes. At least that's what my mother has led me to believe."

Justin laughed out loud at Brian's description of the chaos that would ensue if he attempted to attend mass. They continued to walk up 5th Avenue with their arms around each other.

"Are you going to tell her about Gus?"

"No way. It's one thing for her to think she can fuck up my life, I'm not about to let her loose on my kid."

"You said you weren't going to keep secrets anymore. You're going to have to tell her someday. I say, get it over with before he understands what she is talking about."

"Well, then, maybe you should tell her. You seem to have a way with her."

"She tolerates my existence because I like her cooking. If I have to tell her you jerked off in a cup so two lesbians could raise her grandson, she'll probalby poison the ambrosia."

"Exactly my point."

"I'm a little nervous about meeting your Aunt Mary," Justin admitted.

"Is it because she'll be the only one at the dinner table who hasn't seen you naked?" Brian joked.

"No. Your nephews told me all kinds of horror stories about Aunt Mary and her 11 cats."

Brian got a mischievous look on his face. "Did you know that the last time I was there for Christmas she had 12 cats?"

Justin started to smile. "What happened?"

"How was I supposed to know the stupid thing liked to chew on wire. I mean, what's the use of having lights on a tree if you don't plug them into the socket?"

Brian tightened his grip around Justin's shoulder pulling him in closer. As they passed Saint Patrick's Cathedral it started to snow.

Stand Alone Stories

The Lesson Plan

A Brian and Justin After School Special

Justin rushed into the loft, tossing his jacket on the chair. With Brian due home today he needed to straighten up and make something special for dinner. He had gotten himself into a situation and his mind was racing a mile a minute because he was not quite sure how to handle it.

There was a new teacher at the art school - Monsieur Henri Paul - a very famous professor from Paris. While Justin was learning a lot from Professor Paul's amazing technique, he never quite connected with the man himself. It bothered Justin that the famous teacher took no notice of him or his talent. The professor would walk right past his sketches with no comment, while stopping at the other students' work to make suggestions or remarks.

This afternoon Justin decided to ask Lindsay's advice. By happy coincidence, after having taught art for a number of years at the University of Pittsburgh, she had applied for and been hired as an instructor at PIFA just before Justin began his freshman year. Lindsay's office was down the hall from Professor Paul's classroom.

"Can I come in, Lindsay or is this a bad time?"

The woman smiled widely when she saw her favorite blond boy standing in the doorway. "Of course, sweetie, I'm never too busy for Gus's favorite babysitter."

Lindsay had truly come to love him almost as much as her own child. But then, what was there about him not to love? He had talent, warmth, charm, and sincerity - besides being one of the most beautiful young men she had ever seen. In fact, both Lindsay and Melanie often commented to each other that they hoped Gus would grow up to be just as handsome.

"So is this an official visit or merely a social call?"

"I was just in the neighborhood and thought I'd stop by."

"Well, I'm glad you did."

The boy fidgeted some more, then nervously cleared his throat.

"So, um, . . . uh,"

Lindsay tried not to show her amusement. One of the many things people found so endearing about the golden boy was his naive sweetness.

Thank God he had not entirely lost his childlike innocence, she thought, despite the bashing and being in Brian Kinney's turbulent orbit for the past year.

"Yes, Justin?"

"I was wondering . . . how well do you know Professor Paul?" Justin asked

"Not very well. I've chatted with him at various faculty functions but that's about all. I know he's an excellent teacher and has a fine, artistic background. Why? Are you having trouble with his class?"

"He hasn't taken any interest in my work. Do you have any ideas how I can get his attention. If he never critiques my work I won't be getting much out of his class."

Lindsay stood up and walked over to where Justin was perched on the other side of her desk.

"Well that's his job, sweetie. That's one reason why you're here - to have your work critiqued so you can learn from it and improve yourself as an artist." Lindsay gently squeezed Justin's shoulder as she spoke. "Why don't you do a portrait? You are so good at capturing facial expressions."

"Good idea, I'll check out my portfolio and bring in something new tomorrow. Well, thanks Linds. I'll see you later. Give Gus a kiss for me when you get home."

"I will sweetie and don't forget. You're babysitting tomorrow night."

Justin smiled back at her warmly.

"I'll be there. Bye!"

Back at the loft, Justin tore through his collection of sketches. Most of the portraits were of Brian. But, there was one nude self portrait that Justin was particularly proud of. It was really good, at least he thought so, and he could not wait to bring it to class today for Monsieur Paul's assessment.

He was not surprised, however, when the Professor said "your work it's good, but, it lacks discipline. Come to my office after class. Perhaps, I can help you with some instruction."

What happened after class was so predictable, Justin felt stupid not to see it coming. It was almost like a plot from one of Emmett's silly porn tapes.

I must have been taken in by his professional reputation, Justin thought. Actually, what we did really wasn't unpleasant. I kinda enjoyed it a little too much. Of course, now I have a problem -- how do I account for my actions in the voucher jar? It's not like I had SEX with the guy, not really! Of course, if he had asked, maybe I would have consented. But he didn't, I didn't and it never happened. But wow.....why have Brian and I never done anything like THIS before? I guess I know why. Brian would NEVER be able to do it.

It was getting late and Justin decided that since he did not have sexual contact with another person it was not sex. On the other hand he did have an orgasm involving another person and he felt he had to be honest about that. He took his yellow debit vouchers, ripping it in half and putting it into the jar. It looked pathetic lying on top so he shook the jar, sliding the paper to the bottom.

Maybe Brian would not notice it, at least not tonight. For sure, Justin thought, I'll have to explain it in the morning. Tidying up the loft and starting dinner took the rest of the afternoon. He had been up early and decided he could get in a nap before Brian got home.

Just a few minutes, Justin thought as he threw himself down on top of the comforter. But he was more tired than he realized, and that is where Brian found him.

"Justin!" Brian was yelling through Justin's sleep fogged mind. "What the fuck is this?"

Justin rolled over, looked up and as his eyes focused, he saw Brian holding the yellow half-voucher Justin had put into the jar.

"Are we fucking in fractions now?"

In response, Justin, stretched out seductively on the bed.

"Is that how you greet me after being gone almost a whole a week?"

Still affecting a pout, Brian sat on the bed next to Justin.

"Okay, I guess it can wait."

"Did you miss me?" Justin asked in his sexy, flirty whisper.

"No, there were lots of hot guys out in L.A." Brian snapped back, still dwelling on the yellow piece of paper he still had in his hand.

"So, HOW many?" Justin asked, with an impish grin.

As was often the case, Justin had taken charge of the conversation.

Brian softened, but decided to play dumb.

"How many what?"

But Justin was still in control.

"HOT GUYS! Did you add them up and put the slips in the jar yet?"

Brian looked sheepish.

"I caught the fucking flu from some asshole on the flight out. I was sick the whole time. I barely got my meetings in. No vouchers."

Justin felt bad about Brian being sick and alone, but before he could say anything Brian calmly pressed his original question.

"Justin, what IS this?"

"I really WAS going to tell you. It was something that happened today at school. Remember that art teacher I was telling you about, the one from Paris?"

"Yeah, I remember. He doesn't like your work. Another fucking Frenchman. Well, Fuck him." Brian paused and thought a minute. "DID you fuck him?"

"I went to his office after class. I brought in a special portrait to see if I could grab his attention."

"And what exactly WAS this special portrait?" Brian asked.

"The one I did for you. The nude self-portrait." Justin said innocently.

Brian leaned closer to the boy, until they were face to face.

"Ah, I see. And DID it grab his attention?"

"Yeah, but he said my work was undisciplined and he was going to give me some 'special' instruction."

Brian was having a hard time containing his laughter and he smiled at hearing the word 'special'. This encouraged Justin to continue.

"He had me stand next to his chair and asked to see the drawing again. I held it up and he stared at it for a long time, so long my arms got tired. I started to put the picture down and the next thing I knew he was pulling at my zipper and dropping my pants. He never touched my cock or anything, he just pulled down my underwear, put me over his knee and spanked me.....hard."

Brian was laughing out loud at this point.

"Hey, your boyfriend's been violated. Aren't you going to do something?" Justin said, starting to get pissed off.

Brian attempted to control himself.

"Sorry. So, what happened, did he jerk off or something."

"I don't know. I just got up and left when I could get out of his clutches. He was really strong and a lot bigger than you."

"Really, like 10 or 11 inches?"

He was making fun of the kid now and Justin started to smile.

"It kinda turned me on and I went to the nearest men's room and jerked off. That's why I put the half-voucher in the jar. I wanted to be honest.""

He got up on his knees behind Brian, who was still sitting on the bed, and put his arms around his neck .

"Actually, I'm glad that I've told you ' cos the truth is, even though it hurt, it got me really hot, too." He continued shyly. "I could get into spanking. Can we try it?"

Brian changed the subject.

"What's for dinner?"

He got up and retrieved his suitcase from the other room and began to unpack.

Justin decided not to press the issue now, but he wasn't going to give up either.

Getting up from the bed he went to the kitchen to finish preparing dinner. The thought of Brian being in L.A. and not scoring was starting to amuse him. It was not the first trip the older man had taken since they had been together, but it had been the longest separation.

Did Brian miss me as much as I did him, he wondered as he checked the stove and set the table. I feel bad that I wasn't there to take care of him what with the flu and all. The man is a big baby when it comes to being sick. Besides, I enjoy having him depend on me to make him feel better.

As he unpacked Brian mulled over in his mind how much he missed Justin the past week.

When I woke up with the flu the first thing I did was call out for him, Brian thought, shaking his head in amazement. I'm just so used to all the times Justin takes care of me when I'm hung over or sick. Whenever I wake up with a cold and just need to complain to someone about how shitty I feel, Justin is always there bringing me juice and rubbing my neck. Hmmm! This relationship stuff isn't half-bad if you do it right.

He felt kind of stupid now making such a big deal about that voucher. He never realized it before, but that jar was first thing he looked at when he walked in the door. Maybe they should get rid of the jar and just not mention the extra curricular activities. Brian realized that would be a mistake. He needed the visual confirmation of trust as much as Justin did. It was better that they keep everything out in the open.

He did find Justin's story amusing. It even turned him on a little. Now that he was thinking about it, everything about Justin turned him onhis eyes, his voice, his sweet little ass.....mmmm.

"Justin! What's payback for half a fuck?"

Dinner was delayed a few hours.

Later, as they laid entwined on the bed, they revisited their earlier conversation.

"So, what do you think? Are you into it?" Justin was serious. He wanted Brian to spank him.

"Justin, I can't hit you. I'm sorry. I thought about it, but, I just can't do it."

Brian got up on his knees and rubbed his eyes

"He really must have hit you hard, you have welts on your ass"

Justin was remembering the stinging feeling and started to get hard again. "Yeah, like I said, he was a big guy. He has big hands too."

Brian got serious.

"Maybe I should go talk with him."

Justin was serious too.

"Yeah, maybe you should, maybe we should BOTH go."

Brian called the school from his office and made an appointment for the next day. He would meet Justin at lunchtime and they would talk to the guy together.

This professor was probably just some old perv getting his rocks off, Brian thought. But after what happened at the prom, he did not want to take any chances. He could not bear the thought of anyone hitting Justin for any reason.

Thinking about the meeting made Justin anxious. He could hardly concentrate on any of his classes that morning.

It was different than the sort of anxiety he used to feel when his parents would have a conference with his teachers or principal at St. James Academy.

It was always his fault then, something HE did. They never saw the other side of what went on at that school. It was difficult to tell them how he was teased constantly. Often, the teachers were as bad as the students. His father would just get angry and yell at him and his mother would drag him to doctors trying to fix what was wrong with him.

Justin knew there was nothing wrong with him. He was smart and talented and loving. Oh yeah, he was also gay.

It was no longer an issue for Justin. His homophobic father was out of his life. His mother, thanks to Deb, had learned to accept him as he was. He no longer feared the constant disapproval of teachers or anyone else because Brian would always be there to protect him.

I wonder what Brian is going to say when he meets Professor Paul, Justin thought. His moods are so hard to read sometimes. I liked having Brian as my "protector", but I don't want my lover antagonizing one of my teachers. It might come back to bite me in the ass later.

When time came for Professor Paul's class, Justin felt a knot the size of a boulder form in his stomach. How would the teacher behave toward him in class knowing of the upcoming conference? He had not seen Monsieur Paul since the previous afternoon when he had been over the professor's lap being spanked.

Justin arrived at the classroom before Professor Paul and took a seat near the back of the room. When the bell rang and the professor entered, the boy sank low in his chair. He was all too thankful that there was no assignment due for him to present that day. It was just a boring lecture through which he could easily daydream.

After dismissal Justin made a hasty retreat toward the classroom door, hoping to escape to the hall before Paul had a chance to say anything to him. He was almost to the doorway when he felt something tugging on his shirt.

"We seem to be in quite a her-ray don't we Justeen."

Justin hated the way the Frenchman pronounced his name. Now even some of his classmates were doing it although Justin suspected they did it more to mock Paul's heavy accent than to tease him. Still, he wished Paul would learn to pronounce it correctly.

"Um, I'm meeting a friend for lunch and I don't want to keep him waiting." The boy turned and attempted another hasty retreat but was stopped dead in his tracks when Paul closed the door.

"I'm sure your friend won't mind if you're a few minutes late. I wish a word with you first."

Justin could not make out whether the older man was angry, worried or just curious. Maybe he was trying to torment him before the conference. If that was Paul's goal, he was succeeding.

"I understand we're to have a little chat later this afternoon with a Mr. Keenay".

God, Justin thought, does he have to pronounce EVERYTHING like that?

"Uh, yes sir" he gulped awkwardly.

"And just exactly who is this Mr. Keenay? Is he your guardian?"

The young blond tried to think quickly how to answer that question. It wasn't easy considering he had never known himself just exactly what Brian was to him other than being the person he loved most in the world.

"Not exactly, Professor."

Paul eyed the boy curiously.

"Well then Justeen, what exactly is he?"

"He's a very special friend who's interested in my academic career," responded Justin feeling fairly pleased with himself for thinking of such a polite but a vague answer.

Before his teacher could continue his interrogation the classroom door opened and a couple of students sauntered in for Paul's next class.

Saved by the bell, Justin thought to himself.

Once he was safely in the hallway, he let out a sigh of relief. God, he would be glad when this day was over.

One thing was certain, Monsieur Paul would surely know who Brian Kinney was AFTER the conference. Brian always leaves a memorable impression on everyone he meets. thought Justin, grinning despite his nervousness.

Brian sat at his desk fidgeting with some contraption for which he was supposed to be developing an ad campaign, but he could not concentrate. His mind was on Justin and his latest adventure into erotica in the classroom.

Who would believe that Brian Kinney would be sitting here thinking about how he would handle some teenager's academic issues. But then, Justin was not just any teenager. It still took Brian by surprise to find himself smiling about some little thing that Justin did or said, or better yet, one of his Justin looks that could knock Mr. Kinney for a loop. So, this is love, he mused. It doesn't suck as much as I thought it would.

He wished that it not taken a bat to Justin's head for him to realize that he loved the boy. But realize that, he did, and more. He now knew he was capable of love, that he was worthy of being loved and most importantly that Justin really loved HIM.

And now Justin was definitely serious about wanting to explore a new side of their physical relationship with the spanking thing. It certainly was not totally foreign to Brian.

He giggled to himself thinking about how he used to spank the CEO who wore the diaper. But that was different. He was just another of Brian Kinney's many casual fucks. It was NOT Justin - his precious, golden wonder boy.

Brian might have considered engaging in this type of sex play with Justin before the incident in the parking garage. Certainly there had been times when the boy pissed Brian off enough that he really wanted to discipline him. But, after seeing him lying so lifeless and bloody on that ambulance stretcher, Brian wasn't sure he could bring himself to hit the boy even for pleasure.

However, if Justin wanted this so badly, then Brian would try to overcome his post-bashing hang-ups. He wanted to make Justin happy. He wanted their physical relationship to continue to grow -- and yes it WAS a relationship .

One thing was certain. No one was going to spank Justin but him. Brian would make sure he saw to that. And he intended to make that crystal clear to this Professor Paul - one way or the other!

Painfully aware that his youthful looks might prevent people from taking his art work seriously Justin had begun dressing like a model in a Land's End catalog -- white or powder blue button down shirts, cardigans, khakis and loafers.

His new more mature style was a constant target of Brian's caustic wit, so he wore it only at school. However, with Brian joining him to meet Monsieur Paul, the sartorial taunts were unavoidable.

"You look like you're on the way to ivy league glee club practice." Brian sneered. "No wonder you turned the old guy on, probably reminded him of his misplaced youth."

Brian, of course, looked hot in anything he wore. But today he sported his sexy red shirt, driving Justin to distraction.

"Brian? What are you doing here?"

Lindsay could not believe her eyes. Brian Kinney in a classroom? It was a sight she had not seen since college. She smiled, but then her suspicions took over. She knew Brian only too well. Something was going on here..... a postgraduate erotica study group with Justin and Professor Paul? She shuddered and put the thought out of her mind.

"I came to see where Justin spends his day. Something wrong with that?" Brian's response was the familiar blend of casual nonchalance and condescending arrogance.

Now Lindsay was truly suspicious.

"No, I was just surprised to see you here, that's all. Well, I have to go..... I have some papers to mark. Good-bye Brian..... Justin." As she turned to go she could have sworn that the boy was blushing.

"Hmmm. She knows something's up. Now we'll have the whole gang teasing us about staying after school for 'punishment'." Brian smiled leeringly down at Justin. He would never admit how sexy he found the kid's junior

yuppie outfit It took great restraint to keep from kissing him right there in the middle of the campus. Instead, he wrapped his arm around Justin's shoulder and propelled him toward the classroom building.

Justin always loved it when Brian would "claim" him like that, but he wished he had waited until they got inside. Not that he was ashamed of being with him, but, Justin, thinking of what they were about to do, thought it best if they did not make a scene.

Lindsay was still deep in thought over what brought Brian to the campus. He could be very predictable at one moment and aggravatingly inscrutable the next. Add Justin to the mix and he was almost impossible to decipher. But a clue arrived unexpectedly as she collided with someone.

"Professor Paul, I didn't see you."

Ever the suave, unperturbed, Gallic gentleman, Paul casually bent down to pick up the book he dropped.

"Lindsay, how are you today? Please call me Henri"

"I'm fine Professor. I was looking for you earlier. I wanted to talk to you about something, someone actually. Justin Taylor, he's a friend of mine."

"Oh, yes, little Justeen, he is a very talented boy."

"Ah, so, you HAVE noticed his talent. He was concerned that you appeared not to like his work." Lindsay's relief was obvious in her voice.

"No, nooo, Lindsay, in fact I am considering giving Justeen private lessons. I am on my way to meet with him and his ah friend Mr. Keenay. Do you know heem Lindsay?"

"Oh, yes I know Brian very well. He's a very interesting man. I'm sure you'll enjoy meeting heem, ah.. him How wonderful that you have taken notice of Justin's talents. He's such a wonderful boy. I am sure he will benefit greatly from your personal instruction."

As she walked away, she had a hard time keeping a straight face. There was more to this than academic counseling. But she Lindsay wasted no time worrying about Justin. It was Professor Paul who should worry. He would not be able to put anything over on Brian, that was for sure.

When he walked into the classroom and saw Brian, Paul knew that he had been correct in his assumption that they were not here to discuss art. The man was beautiful, but in a different way than the boy. Justin had the look of a Renaissance angel, while his friend had the sleek manliness of a Greek statue. Paul envied the teacher who had the privilege to instruct HIM in the art of love making. But was HE the boy's teacher? The image caused stirring in the professor's loins.

From Brian's viewpoint he was confident that he would be able to size up the professor quickly and have control of the meeting. While his first priority was protecting Justin, he had to admit his curiosity was peaked by Justin's account of the incident that took place right in this very room.

He decided that it was imperative that he sit as near to Justin as possible. They had pushed two desks together and sat down, Brian putting one hand on the back of Justin's chair and turning his body toward him. As the door opened Brian took Justin's hand in his and made sure that the first impression the good Professor was presented with was "Don't touch. He's mine."

Brian had to admit that the demeanor of the Frenchman was nothing like he expected. Most of the professors he had in college wore jeans and sweater vests, giving the impression that they should renegotiate their contracts for more money. This man was dressed stylishly. His clothes were expensive, but not flashy. He was a big man, about 6'4", and in good physical shape for his age which Brian guessed to be about 55. His dark hair, greying at the temples

gave him a distinguished look. Brian's gaze moved to the man's face, and noted expressive brown eyes, high cheek bones and full almost pouty -- but very kissable - lips.

Brian thought he must have been hot when he was younger. "I'd do him." was his evaluation.

"Allo, Justeen. And you must be Mr. Keenay."

Brian couldn't help but inwardly chuckle. Justeen, he thought to himself. Can't wait to use THAT on the little blond imp."

Snapping his mind back to the professor he thought about the man's voice, VERY deep and low, almost hypnotic.

The men shook hands. Professor Paul's hands were large. Larger than his own. His fingers were round and thick. Brian thought about the marks these hands left on his lover's ass. He put his protective feelings aside for a moment remembering that he was here to please Justin, and wondering if Justin was correct about the size of other parts of Paul's anatomy.

Observing the meeting of the two older men Justin tried to analyze the situation. it seemed to be going well. Brian appeared to be impressed with Monsieur Paul. They were talking about his work and it made him feel important that Brian had taken the time to come here and meet with the professor. It touched Justin to hear Brian say how talented he was and how proud he was of him, things he would never say to him when they were alone.

As happy as he was with the praise, he was very anxious to get to the real reason for the conference. Ever since Paul had given him the unexpected spanking, the young man could think of very little else except how to get himself over Brian's lap.

Since first meeting him under the street lamp on Liberty Avenue, Justin had learned everything he knew about sex and making love from Brian. He had been an excellent teacher. Ted and Emmett often remarked that Justin had "learned from the master." The required curriculum Brian had imposed included fucking in every conceivable position, oral sex, rimming, and even electives in sex toys the basics of bondage.

Now Justin was ready to for a new course of study. He loved Brian and trusted him implicitly but had become a little frustrated at his lover's overprotective manner since he had been bashed by Chris Hobbs. As grateful as he was to see Brian finally express true love and concern for him, he did not want the sexual aspects of their relationship to be held back because of it. In Professor Paul, the boy saw a possible key to unlock the door to this new world of sexual fantasy.

Justin began to squirm in anticipation and Professor Paul noticed his fidgeting.

"Ah, Justeen, you seem to be a bit restless. Perhaps there is something you would like to get off your chest, no?"

While Justin was more tactful and better schooled in social graces than most 18 year olds, he was at a loss to find a way to start the conversation. Fortunately Brian beat him to the punch.

"Well Monsieur le pro-feh-SORE, Justin tells me you two had quite an interesting chat after class yesterday about his work needing more "discipline". That WAS the word you said the Professor used, wasn't it Justin? "Discipline?"

Paul cut his eyes back and forth between the two men with both amusement and impatience to see what was coming next.

Justin's fidgeting was approaching overdrive, but he managed to answer.

"Yes, that's what he said my work was lacking.""

"I see."" Brian began to glide around the room picking up small objects here and there, studying them and putting them back in place.

Unnerved, the taller man, was forced to turn to watch him. When he was sure he had Paul's attention Brian then made direct eye contact with the Frenchman.

"And you, Professor, seem to think you can supply this 'discipline'?"

"Oh yes, Monsieur Keenay. I've had MUCH experience in these matters." Paul replied, regaining his confidence and self composure.

Justin decided that watching these two joust was going to be almost as much fun as his plan for the main event. Brian circled the room again and returned to the desk where Justin sat. Surveying his surroundings one more time, he looked down at the desktop and ran his fingers across it, pretending indifference.

"Well that's good to know, Professor. Because Justin tells me he's very eager to, how shall I put it, acquire this new method of discipline."

The Frenchman looked over at Justin and smiled broadly.

"Well, my young friend, I am glad our after school chat made such a positeev impression on you. I'm always daylighteed to find a pupil who is eager to learn and bay-nay-feet from my vast experience."

The young blond couldn't help but blush as he remembered how aroused he had become while receiving his ass smacks from the professor the day before. In fact, he could feel his cock growing hard again just thinking about it. Only now he wanted his round young ass cheeks to receive the print of Brian's hand.

"Yes Professor, you are so right. My, uh, work does need more discipline. I thought perhaps you might show , Brian, aaa.....Mr. Kinney how he could, um, supply me with more discipline. That way, he could, well help me with my homework assignments."

The boy looked over at Brian to see if he could detect any reaction but, in true Kinney fashion, the older man's face was unreadable. He just sat there silently, scornful left eyebrow arched-up in a typical Brian scowl as his dark green eyes moved from the Frenchman to Justin and back again. Paul, on the other hand, was growing more amused, and aroused, by the minute.

"Nothing would pleeeze me more, Justeen! As zee sayeeng goez, practees makes purrfeect!"

Brian watched The Professor with keen interest as the Frenchman made his little sly innuendos, made more obscene by the heavy accent.

"Purrhaps zee school ez not zee best place for deescuzing art. Beesides, I have a rather nice collection at my private studio." Paul grinned mischievously at the two younger men.

Justin perked up.

"You have a private studio, Professor?"

"Oh, yes!" Paul replied enthusiastically.

"Now why does that not surprise me, Professor." Brian shot back, tongue firmly planted in cheek. Justin gave his lover a look of combined annoyance and amusement.

"It's small but quite comfortable. Plenty of room for a three-way, uhm, discussion," the Frenchman quickly replied.

"I'll bet!" cracked Brian rolling his eyes sarcastically.

Justin turned to Brian, smiling directly into his face in his most seductive little boy manner. Justin had mastered this technique and knew Brian could not resist it. It was like a pampered child pleading for a toy and when he did it, his slight tendency toward sibilant "essses" turned into the sound of air leaking from a tire. It was something Brian secretly found endearing .

"Brian, pleasssse! If Professor Paul is kind enough to offer us the hospitality of hissssstudio and share his private art collection with ussss the least we can do is accept."

For the first time Brian began to fully understand just how important this new sexual exploration was to his young lover, and after what seemed an eternity to Justin, Brian finally gave in.

"If it means that much to you, I suppose we could go over for a little while. Besides, we wouldn't want the professor to think we had bad manners now, would we?" His note of sarcasm was not lost on the Professor.

Justin's blue eyes lit up like electric lights, and Paul grinned like the cat who was about to lick the cream.

Paul's studio was just off main living quarters. Like the rest of the apartment, it was a little small but very tastefully decorated. Large windows and a skylight allowed the sunlight to pour in. As it was now late afternoon, the setting sun flooded the room with rich, vibrant colors.

Throughout the studio were various canvases, paint materials, and some tables for sculpting and modeling clay. Professor Paul was apparently an artist of many interests - and talents.

"Professor, I didn't know you were a sculptor. I thought you only painted." Justin remarked, obviously impressed with what he saw.

Paul smiled at the boy and replied "I believe if a person is truly serious about art he must not confine himself to one art form. A well rounded arteestt is a happy one I always say."

Brian, looking cockier than ever, retorted sarcastically, "Is that what you always say, Professor."

Feeling slightly uncomfortable at Brian's mocking arrogance, Paul decided to move the proceedings along.

"I'll get everyone a glass of wine while you two gentlemen make yourselves more, uhm, shall we say comfortable."

"You do that, and we always do." Brian quipped, grasping Justin by the front of his sweater and pulling the boy toward him.

After Paul had headed off toward the kitchen, Justin took the opportunity to chastise Brian.

"Please don't spoil this for me. I really want, I mean I need to do this with you. It means a lot to me."

Brian still had reservations, but, Justin's blue eyes pleaded with him to give in.

"I promise to be good, Justin. I realize now this is really important to you. But I call the shots. Got it? And if I think this is getting out of control, we stop. Understand?"

Brian leaned in until he was touching Justin's forehead with his own.

"I understand, Brian. You're in charge. Besides," the boy grinned mischievously, "I wouldn't have it any other way."

When Professor Paul returned, the boys were surprised to see that he had removed his clothing and was wearing nothing but a dark-blue silk robe. He carried a tray with three full wine goblets and over one arm were draped two robes identical to his.

"Since Justeen seems to be so interested in my art, uhem, equipment, I thought you two might like to see first hand how I use live modellz for my, uhem, inspiration" Paul said as he served the wine.

Brian and Justin exchanged looks. This thing was moving much faster than they had expected. While Brian was not completely comfortable with this development, Justin was already stripping off his clothing.

"Justin, what do you think you're doing?" Brian exclaimed.

"I want to model for Professor Paul". He answered, trying to appear innocent but instead looked like a bad boy about to raid the cookie jar.

A wide grin appeared across Paul's face.

"Ah, Monsieur Justeen is a very eager pupil. Perhaps you would like some assistance in removing your clothes, yes?"

"He would like some assistance with his clothes, no!" Brian loudly retorted, glaring at the professor.

He was surprised at his own outburst and continued in a controlled voice

"No. Before we continue, I want to make one thing abundantly clear, you're not to touch Justin. Not now. Not ever again. He is a student here and you are a teacher. I am here because he wants to learn from you and I don't object, as long as I am the one providing the hands on instruction."

Justin looked a little startled at Brian's outburst but he liked it. It pleased him to find Brian was actually capable of jealousy. And he LOVED the idea of being Brian's personal possession. Especially since Brian had made that fact clear to a third party in front of him. Without further ado Brian reached over and began pulling and tugging at his young lover's clothing. Paul licked his lips hungrily as the young blond's shirt, pants, shoes, socks and briefs went flying into a pile on the floor. Brian snatched one of the silk robes out of Paul's hand and draped it over the boy, tying the garment's belt and then tugging on it to pull the boy close to him. Brian couldn't help but notice that his golden lover was already sporting an erection.

"O.K., Brian. Your turn. I want you to play model with me." Justin chirped eagerly.

"Yes, Monsieur Keenay I want to see how your beautiful young bodies look together. I think you would make excellent subjects for a sculpture. I will call it 'Man and Boy'."

Brian shot Paul one of his famous Kinney smirks.

"Now, THAT'S original, Professor. I wish I had thought of something as clever as that."

Justin rolled his crystal blue eyes.

"Brian! You promised!"

"You're right, Justin. I did."

With that, Brian let out a clearly audible sigh and began removing his black Armani suit, red dress shirt and tie. Justin picked up the clothing that Brian had thrown on the floor in a heap. He quickly folded what he could and draped the jacket over the back of a chair.

Brian seemed to be distrustful of the professor and did not take his eyes off him. Since Justin wanted this be a pleasant experience for Brian, he moved closer to remove the remainder of Brian's clothing.

Brian felt the professor's large hands touch his shoulders as he slid the silk robe over his near-naked body. He was not surprised that the professor took the opportunity to press his hard silk-covered cock against his own robe draped

buttocks. He let him linger there as Justin knelt and slid his snug-fitting briefs down to his ankles and removed them. The boy tied the belt of the robe around Brian's waist as his lover had done for him.

Now they were ready.

Giddy with excitement Justin swallowed his glass of wine in one big gulp - an action that Paul found highly amusing - especially when the young man let out a rather loud belch. Brian just rolled his eyes. Once again he marveled that this horny 18 year-old had such power over him that he could be talked into this situation.

The dashing Frenchman prowled around the two handsome men eyeing them like a hungry cat in a fish market. As he undressed them with his eyes and savagely molested them both in his mind he was snapped back to reality by Brian's voice.

"Well leave SOMETHING on us, Professor We might catch cold!"

Justin let out a snort at his lover's wisecrack.

"All right, gentlemen." Paul began enthusiastically, "I would like for you to step up on that pedestal and slowly drop your robes to zee floor."

Brian shot a cold look in the Professor's direction.

"And I would like for you to drop dea..."

"BRIAN!" Justin frantically pleaded.

Undaunted by Brian's outburst, Paul calmly responded "Monsieur Keenay why don't you take a lesson from your young friend? Drink your wine. It will help relax you, and besides, it is an excellent vintage."

One look at Justin's sweet pleading face and Brian knew he was defeated.

Without further comment, he took a deep breath and a large gulp of wine.

He began untying the belt of Justin's robe as Justin followed suit with his.

The Frenchman reached inside his own robe and slowly stroked his already erect cock. As an artist he was struck by the unique expressions on the faces of the handsome duo, as they smiled playfully at one another. They were completely consumed with each other. Watching this exquisite couple interact was, for the professor, equal to enjoying a fine work of art.

"Excellent gentlemen. Excellent!"" He paused, and sighed. "I must say. You are a strikingly beautiful couple."

Justin grinned proudly as he gazed up at his handsome lover. "Well, if you must, say it Professor, we won't stop you."

Brian was finally loosening up. He had been forced to skip lunch because one of his team had screwed up on a project, and he had yet to have dinner because he had gone straight to the institute and then to Paul's studio.

What with the wine hitting his empty stomach and seeing the needful look on his young lover's face, the Great Kinney decided to make the most of this rather unusual situation and enjoy it as best he could.

Professor Paul approached the two men while continuing to stroke his growing erection. Brian and Justin stood very close to each other, neither of them sure of what the Frenchman was planning to do next. They did not have long to wait.

"Now gentlemen, I think it is time to baygeen Justeen's first lesson in artistic deesceepleen. Monsieur Keenay, please sit down." He spoke in a low hypnotic voice as he pointed to a stool perched on the back of the platform on which the two younger men were posing.

Justin was so excited he was about to burst. The eager young blond was practically draped over his lover's lap before Brian could sit down.

"That's it, gentlemen." Paul now had the front of his robe wide open, revealing his impressive cock. Even Brian, the possessor of one of the most sought after dicks in Pittsburgh who was not easily impressed by the size of other men's endowments, raised an eyebrow at its length.

"Justeen," Paul continued, moving to stand next to Brian. "I usually tutor my pewpelles in the art of discipline personally. But since Monsieur Keenay is so insestant in no one but him having, uhm, physical contact with you, I will make an exception in your case. I shall, however, uhem, supervise Monsieur Keenay while he 'instructs' you."

The pungent aroma of sexual tension permeated the room.

Brian's initial reluctance to indulge in Justin's fantasy was erased by, the sight of the beautiful boy's luscious round ass staring up at him. Justin wiggled, rubbing his erect cock against Brian's now rock-hard dick. All the while, Paul stroked himself faster and faster as he watched the scene before him.

Despite his newly found enthusiasm, Brian wanted to make sure Justin was okay.

"Justin, this is your last chance to back out" he spoke with a note of calm concern in his voice. "Are you absolutely sure you want me to do this to you?"

The boy turned his head and looked up sweetly at his lover.

"Brian pleasse, I trust you. I want you to do it." He said softly.

Justin's voice betrayed an equal mix of love and lust with a just a hint of desperation. It was more than Brian could stand. All reservations gone now, he was ready to give his young lover what he so obviously desired. He looked at Paul for instructions.

"Now Monsieur Keenay, rub your hand across Justeen's ass cheeks." the Frenchman commanded. "Ah, oui. Yes, that is right. Now raise it back and give him a firm swat with your open palm."

Brian, now fully aroused, gladly and enthusiastically obeyed.

Sssmmmmaaaacccckkkk!

The palm of Brian's large hand landed on Justin's right ass cheek causing the young man to jump as he let out a loud yelp.

"Veree good, Monsieur Keenay. Encore, s'il vous plait. Again pleeze.

Brian's hand made contact with Justin's bubble butt once again, this time on his left cheek.

"AHHHHH!" Justin yelled.

Judging from the way he was grinning and the fact that he was stroking himself faster by the minute, Paul was obviously pleased with Brian's spanking talents.

Brian began smacking Justin's ass with a steady rhythm, alternating from left to right cheek with a few swats aimed at the middle of his lover's creamy white butt. Justin, obviously turned on by the feel of his lover's stinging blows, ground his erection into Brian's with each new slap.

Brian was surprised at how erotic this was. As Justin's bottom grew redder and redder from the abusing blows, Brian became more caught-up in what he was doing. He could tell that, despite the fact that a steady stream of tears were now rolling down Justin's face, the boy was close to orgasm.

Professor Paul had been silent after the first two strikes. Finally the loud smacking sound of Brian's hand on Justin's ass and Justin's moans of pleasure-pain drove the Frenchman over the edge. Both Brian and Justin were startled when a wave of unidentifiable French words came pouring out of Paul's mouth as he shot his load.

Seconds later, Justin brought himself to climax with one hard push against Brian's pulsating cock. Sliding off his lover's lap he grabbed Brian's dick, pumping him to a creamy completion. "Oh, God, Brian!" The panting boy exclaimed. "That was so fucking incredible!"

Brian, seeing the tears on his young lover's cheeks, quickly pulled the boy into his arms and held him tightly. Sobs of love, gratitude and fulfillment poured out of Justin as he wrapped his arms around the older man's neck and laid his head on his shoulder.

Brian looked down at the young man's blistered bottom, startled at the deep hand prints HIS hand prints. "Are you okay, baby? Did I hurt you too much? I got so caught up in it." Brian whispered so that Paul could not hear the worry in his voice.

"Yeah, I'm okay, Brian. It hurt but it was soooo hot."

Justin's voice was calmer now, the sobs subsiding to a faint whimper. The boy raised his head off Brian's shoulder and looked him lovingly in the eye.

"It was hot because it was YOU doing it, Brian. I needed this to make me feel like I really belonged to you. And I needed you to know that you can do anything you want to me because I trust you completely with my body."

Brian was speechless at Justin's heartfelt declaration. He pulled his beautiful boy tightly against him and gently rocked him in his arms. The two lovers were so caught up in this tender moment that they completely forgot they were not alone until the professor's deep, heavily accented voice resounded through the studio.

"Bravo, gentlemen!" Paul exclaimed. "That was a verree stimulating sight. Monsieur Keenay, I must compliment you on your technique. I could have not done a better job myself."

"Merci, Professor. I'm SURE you couldn't." Brian responded sarcastically.

Justin, both physically and emotionally exhausted from what he had just experienced, was unusually quiet.

Brian released him from his arms and retrieved their clothing from the chair. He handed Justin his underwear and slacks first, then began his own dressing.

Pulling on his shorts, Justin was surprised at how tender his bottom was from the spanking. But it was a good kind of soreness because it reminded him that he and Brian were a part of each other - a new part the two men had discovered together.

Dressed in his red shirt and his Armani suit Brian Kinney was in total control once again. As he handed Paul the silk robes, he leaned in on him and spoke slowly and firmly.

"Just remember, Professor. No one touches Justin, but me!"

He looked the professor squarely in the eyes to make sure he made his point.

Paul nodded. Even during the heat of the moment the Frenchman couldn't help but be a bit moved by the love, tenderness and understanding the two younger men showed for one another. It was obvious that their relationship was something very special.

"Now gentlemen," Paul began, "this is only Justeen's first semester. I think he will need further instruction throughout the school year. I trust, Monsieur Keenay that as Justeen's teacher, I can depend on you to, how shall I pooot eet, help him with heez homework, No?"

Brian and Justin looked at each other and grinned coyly.

"Oh, have no fear on that account, Professor. "Brian quipped. "You may depend on it."

Justin smiled sheepishly and added, "Just try not to make my homework assignments this heavy every night, Professor".

The boy rubbed his still-stinging rump while Brian let out a Kinney snort.

Paul smiled and said, "I'm quite serious about using you two beautiful young men as modelz for a sculpture. It would make for a verreee interesting piece of artwork."

Before either of them could respond, Brian's cell phone chirped.

"What!" Brian snapped into the mouthpiece. "All right, all right. I'll be there shortly."

He abruptly hung up.

"Who was that?" Justin inquired.

"It was Mikey. He wants me to stop by his place on the way home."

Justin rolled his eyes. "What for, does he need you to change his diapers for him again?"

Brian tried to look serious but couldn't help but smirk at Justin's wisecrack.

"Obviously one session over my lap wasn't enough" Brian said, tongue in cheek. "I think you and I will have to continue this conversation back at the loft."

"Well it will have to be later." The boy replied.

Brian looked at him with a puzzled look on his face as Justin continued.

"I'm babysitting Gus tonight, remember?"

"Oh Fuck! I forgot." Brian snapped.

Not one to give up another opportunity for for a wisecrack about Michael, the teen slyly nodded at Brian's cell phone.

"It's just as well, Brian because it looks like you've been roped into babysitting too!"

Before Brian could respond to this latest crack, Justin grabbed Brian by the back of the neck and pulled the older man's lips to his, smothering them both in a long, hard kiss.

Professor Paul graciously escorted them to the front door and bid them a good evening.

Parking his car, Justin ran across the street to Brian's building. As much as he did love baby sitting, he was anxious to get home. Gus was getting to be a handful now that he was walking, but Justin adored watching him. He liked to picture Brian at that age, without all his hang-ups and bitterness toward the rest of the world.

He was not sure what Brian would have to say about this afternoon, if anything. They had not discussed what happened at the meeting with the professor. Instead, Brian went off to tend to Michael and Justin drove to Lindsay's and Mel's to spend the evening with Gus.

It was not without some trepidation that Justin opened the door to the loft. He was amazed at what greeted him. The loft was dark, soft music was coming from the stereo and a trail of candles on the floor lit a path to the bedroom.

"I guess Brian isn't mad at me." Justin thought to himself. He smiled, as he slowly followed the flickering illumination up the stairs.

Brian was stretched out on the bed facing Justin, his head supported by his left hand. He was dressed in a black silk robe similar to the one that he had worn earlier today.

An identical garment was draped on the bed next to him. Without a word Brian picked it up, handed it to Justin and motioned toward the bathroom.

Justin took the robe and went into the bathroom, all the while wondering what Brian was thinking. He showered, expecting Brian to join him, and was surprised when he did not. Upon finishing, Justin put on the robe and reentered the bedroom. Brian stood in the center of the living room. The furniture had been pushed back creating a dance floor. There was a song playing on the stereo -- the music they had danced to at the prom. Justin was startled at first. He had not heard it since that night and for a split second there was a twinge of bad memories. But as he moved into Brian's arms he only felt "The Drifters" romantic rhythm that the two had shared that evening and suddenly nothing else mattered. He was safe in his lover's arms.

Brian led his partner back up the stairs to the bedroom, where he had poured two glasses of wine and placed them on the bed on a silver tray. He handed one to Justin and they continued to sway to the music as they finished the wine. When the song ended, Brian took their glasses, returned them to the tray, then put the tray on the bedside table. Placing their arms around each other again, they fell onto the bed in a kissing embrace.

"This is the way it was supposed to happen that night." Brian spoke for the first time.

"Ridiculously romantic?" Justin smiled at him.

"You deserve romantic, once in a while." Brian was serious now. "There has been too much.....what? Too much angst lately. You do so much for me and I know I don't always thank you. In fact, I CAN be a real prick sometimes. But you never give up on me."

Smiling at the boy, he went on.

"I wanted to thank you for today. It was an incredibly sensual experience. How do you always manage to get me to do things I don't want to do? Never mind, don't answer that. I don't think I want to know."

Justin was glad Brian understood.

"I don't want you to get bored with me, Brian. There is so much I want to experience, maybe there are one or two things you haven't done yet either. I want to try new things, and, I want to do them with you."

Brian laughed.

"Justin, I could never get bored with you. When you see the professor again, tell him we appreciated him sharing his expertise. Who knows, maybe the old guy has some other tricks up his silk sleeve."

Justin stroked his cock through smooth material of the robe.

"Mmmm, this feels good. Thanks for the gift Brian. Silk is a real turn-on. And yeah, I did have a few questions to ask the professor. He seems to have a lot of experience. So you don't mind if I see him?"

"You can see him. Just remember, no touching."

Brian paused then asked sheepishly, "Does it still sting?"

"A little, I can still feel it." said Justin, rolling over on his stomach.

Brian began to rub Justin where he had spanked him. He could tell Justin was ready for more, but Brian had something on his mind.

Justin unexpectedly rolled onto his back trapping Brian's hand momentarily and making him wince.

"What's wrong with your hand, did you hurt yourself smacking my butt?" Justin, said suppressing a laugh.

"No." Brian backed off quickly covering his wrist with the sleeve of the robe.

"Brian, what's going on? What did you do with Michael? You didn't spank him too, did you?"

The thought of Brian using the technique on Michael that he had learned during their private lesson upset Justin.

"Of course not, and, don't be a drama princess."

Justin calmed himself and sat up cross-legged.

"Do you have something to tell me?" he asked, looking down at his reclining bed-mate.

Wanting to talk, Brian sat up behind Justin, and put his arms around him.

"It was what you said about needing to feel like you belong to me. That somehow, me hitting you made you feel like I needed you. Justin, you know it's hard for me to say certain things. I always thought that you just understood"

Justin leaned his head back onto Brian's shoulder nuzzling his face as he did so.

"Brian, I know what your trying to say. And I do understand. I'm not some insecure little faggot. I know you love me. I don't need to HEAR you say it all the time."

Brian held him closer, whispering into the boy's ear.

"No, I need YOU to FEEL it all the time"

"Justin, when you said what you did, it made me think how I used to feel when my father would hit me. It was really the only time he ever paid any attention to me. Maybe I felt like you did. The pain was better then being ignored.

"All these years I've been having sex without any emotion or commitment. It meant nothing to me. It was just sex. You are the only one who made love to me. You devoted yourself to me completely without any encouragement from me or from anyone else. It used to scare me to death that you had this power over me. I realize now, that until I gave in to you, I had nothing."

Brian, released Justin from his embrace, rose from the bed and looked down at him.

"Today you said you needed me to hit you, to physically give you pain, so you would know that I loved you. In truth, I needed to feel pain today to feel like I was worthy of your love."

He put his silk-covered hand up to Justin's face and pulled the sleeve back to reveal what he had done. Justin was speechless. The beaded bracelet that Brian always wore was gone. In its place was a freshly inked tattoo. It was a heart, and, across the heart it said "Justin."

Brian sat back on the bed next to Justin who was motionless staring at the tattoo. Tears welled up in the young man's bright blue eyes. He tried to speak but words failed him. Brian gently placed his other hand on the back of Justin's neck and pulled the boy's face to his shoulder.

The two lovers sat like this for what seemed to be an eternity. They had always been able to communicate privately without saying a word. It was no different now as they sobbed gently.

Finally Justin raised his head from Brian's shoulder and gazed lovingly into the man's deep green eyes. Joyful tears flooded down his face as if they came from his very soul.

There was no more the boy could say other than "you do love me."

Brian faced him eye to eye and began kissing his lips, his cheeks, eyes, nose. When every last tear drop was gone, Brian ran his hand over Justin's face, first one cheek, then the other.

"I always have, Justin. It scares me to death sometimes. I don't know how to accept it, how to take care of it. I only know I need you and I want to try."

"That's all I've ever wanted, Brian....." The boy began, stroking Brian's face and moving his hand gently down his chest. "For you to try. We'll be okay, even if we have to build our relationship one day at a time."

Once more it was Brian's turn to marvel.

"Well," he said, his face betraying an ironic smile. "You've done it again sonny boy, I thought I was going to be the one reassuring you and you've turned the tables on me."

Justin detected the joking sarcasm in Brian's voice.

"Turning the tables on older men is one of my talentssss" the golden boy whispered seductively.

"Impish brat!" Brian exclaimed as he gave him a playful swat on his butt. "Right now it's one of your other talents that I'm most interested in."

Justin flinched slightly, his bottom still a bit tender from the spanking Brian had given him earlier that afternoon. Nonetheless he smiled coyly as he responded.

"Really, and what talent would that be?"

Brian reached over and embraced the smiling boy and they lay entwined in one another's arms for a brief moment. Then almost instinctively they began untying the belts on each other's robes and slowly, and in perfect unison, slid them off of each other's shoulders.

As they undressed Brian noticed the marks his hand had left on Justin's sensitive bottom. He hopped out of bed and headed for the bathroom, returning with a bottle of expensive lotion.

Justin sat up and scooted over just enough to let the man back in the bed and once again laid his head in the crook of Brian's shoulder, one leg draped over Brian's. Brian poured a generous amount of creamy liquid in the palm of one hand and, reaching around the boy's torso, began gently massaging the soothing balm into his ass cheeks. With his other hand Brian lightly caressed the back of Justin's neck and kissed him sweetly on the top of his silky blond head.

Normally the blue neon lights on the wall behind Brian's bed gave a cold, garish quality to the room. But tonight they gave off a warm, soft glow as they shined on the skin of the two lovers.

They sat closely, gazing at one another's bodies. No matter how many times Justin had seen Brian naked, he never ceased to be in awe of the man's sensual beauty. But tonight he looked even more beautiful because tonight there was an aura coming from him that Justin had never before seen.

Brian too was totally captivated. The young man was truly an incredible sight to behold with his bright blue eyes, golden hair, porcelain skin, and that incredible smile that Brian secretly found so beguiling.

"Justin, you're so fucking beautiful" Brian spoke softly. "The first time I saw you in the lamp light on Liberty Avenue I thought you looked like an angel, my very own angel."

The younger man smiled sheepishly, blushing at such a loving compliment.

"But you're an angel too - my guardian angel." He said, a Justinesque grin sneaking across his face. "Now let's make some heavenly music, together."

Brian returned the grin.

"Hmmp. Yeah we're both angels all right..... fallen angels!"

The two men laughed together as they wrapped their arms around each other. Soon their hands were exploring each other's bodies. They seemed to be everywhere at once. Deep, passionate kisses accompanied the caresses. Justin worked his tongue down Brian's muscular torso using the tip to draw circles round Brian's nipples. He slowly and seductively alternated from the left one to the right - nipping slightly at them with his pearl-white teeth.

"Ahhhhhhhh" Brian moaned softly.

Justin then moved his tongue down to Brian's naval before trailing it along the thin line of hair that led to the man's dark brown bush.

"You're such a little tease." Brian whispered between moans. "Actions like that will get you thoroughly fucked."

The boy raised his head slightly, pausing from his trip down Brian's treasure trail. His eyes were devilish in their sparkle.

"Well THAT"sss what I had in mind."

With a wink and a smile, Justin plunged his mouth down on his lover's hard, anxious cock, engulfing its entire length in one hungry movement. Then he tightened his lips at the base and drew them slowly back up to the top. Twirling his tongue along the head he blew soft breaths on the wet, glistening shaft.

Soon Justin was pumping up and down on Brian's dick in swift greedy movements.

Justin paused and slid his tongue between his bottom lip and Brian's shaft so that the head of Brian's cock was resting against the back of Justin's throat. He then used the tip to lick Brian's balls, which were already close to explosion.

Finally, Brian could no longer stand it. He grabbed Justin by the head with both hands and pulled the boy off of his throbbing shaft.

"God, Justin". Brian exclaimed. "You almost sent me over the edge. I love the way you suck cock."

Justin pulled himself up close to Brian's face, resting his chin on the man's chest, and focusing his blue eyes into Brian's.

"I learned from the master."" He whispered.

With that Brian wrapped both arms around his golden boy and squeezed him tightly as they both giggled. "Now I think we'll see what else you learned from the master" Brian said with a playful tone in his voice.

Justin's head popped up causing the two men's eyes to meet in a mutually mischievous gaze.

"Anything you say, master. I'm all yours" Justin exclaimed eagerly.

Brian moved both hands down Justin's back and squeezed the boy's round ass cheeks.

"You bet your sweet little ass you are!"

Justin closed his eyes, took a deep breath and smiled sweetly. God, how he had wanted, needed to belong to Brian. And now, at last, he really did.

Still holding Justin in his arms, Brian rolled them both over on their sides facing each other. He gazed deeply into his young lover's eyes capturing him in an almost hypnotic stare.

Justin was always consumed by Brian Kinney's penetrating looks. But tonight there was something different in those irresistible brown eyes. Brian was communicating not just lust for Justin's body, but also the passion and love he felt for his partner. There were no words that could express what they meant to each other at that moment.

"I want to fuck you, Justin. I want make love to you all night long."

There was a sound of desperate longing in Brian's voice.

"I want to feel every part of you . . . possess you ... all of you!"

Justin rolled over on his back, spreading his legs as he offered himself to his lover, his eyes still locked in Brian's intense gaze.

Brian, now up on his knees, stared down at his beautiful blond boy wonder and spoke softly but firmly.

"I want you, baby. I want you so much."

Justin's handsome young face glowed as if lit from within.

"And I'll always be here for you. Always, no matter what."

Brian gently lifted Justin's legs onto his shoulders.

As always, lube and condoms were within easy reach. Brian slowly worked a generous amount of lube into Justin's tight hole with his fingers, first one, then two, stretching the boy's rectum in preparation for his long, hard cock. Justin sighed and moaned softly as Brian's fingers grazed prostate making him uncontrollably impatient for Brian's dick in his ass.

"Fuck me now, Brian" he begged. "PLEASE! I want you inside me. Take me."

Brian was overcome by the urgency in the boy's voice.

"I need you too, Justin."

Brian unrolled a condom onto his rock-hard shaft and positioned the head at Justin's entrance, looking down lovingly at the beautiful young man lying beneath him. He then pushed into Justin firmly but gently, reveling in the tightness of the boy's anal muscles.

A moan of pleasure-pain poured from the young man's lips.

"Uh uhh ahhhh!"

"Relax, baby. Let me in. I'm going to go deep inside you. Deeper than I've ever gone".

Brian began a slow but steady series of thrusts into his young lover's ass, each a little deeper than the previous one.

Soon Justin's ass muscles had adjusted to the intrusion of Brian's enormous cock. As Brian began increasing the pace, Justin wrapped his slender arms around the older man's neck and pulled his lips to his. The two lovers began devouring each other's mouths, their tongues entwined as if tied together in a knot.

Justin squeezed Brian tightly, trying to pull the man deeper into him, as if that were physically possible. By now Brian was pounding into Justin with the force of a jackhammer. It would be a miracle if the boy would be able to walk the next day.

Sweat poured from their writhing bodies.

Finally, Brian released his lips from his lover's mouth and pounded as hard as he could into Justin's butt, almost knocking the boy's head into the wall behind the bed.

Justin, though moaning more than audibly, seemed to be trying to suppress the cries as if he were afraid he'd awaken the neighbors. Brian detected this as he continued to thrust into the boy.

"It's okay, Justin. Yell . . . scream as loud as you want. Let me hear you surrender to me."

With that, the young man seemed to lose all his inhibitions and cried loud moans of pleasure, submission and fulfillment.

Brian was nearing completion. He reached down to grab Justin's cock and began pumping it in rhythm to the powerful thrusts he inflicted into the boy's ass. The abuse to his prostate coupled with the rapid strokes on his cock brought Justin toward orgasm. His eyes suddenly opened wide, his jaw dropped just as widely.

"Come for me, Justin. Shoot your hot load while I fuck your sweet, beautiful ass."

Justin couldn't stand it any longer. Suddenly, he raised his head off the pillow, clutched Brian around the shoulders in a stranglehold as if he were trying to keep from drowning in his own sweat, and let out a scream that would wake the dead.

"That's it, Justin. Do it! Do IT!" Brian yelled. A flood of hot creamy cum shot from Justin's cock as if a dam had burst.

"Ahh ahhh ahhh AHHHHHH!"

He screamed louder and louder, holding on to Brian for dear life.

"I got you, baby. I got you." Brian exclaimed reassuringly.

As Justin's ejaculation began to subside, Brian thrust into the boy a few more times before shooting his own load. The uncontrollable convulsing of Justin's anal muscles around Brian's pounding erection during his uncontrollable orgasm combined with the boy's wild, passionate cries were all it took to bring Brian to climax.

He shot his wad with full force, filling the condom, then he collapsed on top of Justin who slowly removed his legs from the man's shoulders and let them drop onto the bed. The two lovers lay very still while their breathing slowly returned to normal. Justin caressed Brian's sweat-drenched back with his soft, pale fingers.

Brian mustered up enough energy to roll himself off of the boy, yank the condom off, and sink onto the dark blue sheets beneath him. The two lay beside each other in silence while their hands found one other. They squeezed each other's hands tightly.

Finally, Brian spoke.

"That was so amazing, Justin."

YOU were so amazing!"

"WE were so amazing."

Justin looked up at the ceiling hardly able to move.

His mind went back to the first time he came back to the loft with Brian. What a long amazing trip between then and now! Justin always trusted his instincts about people and he knew he had been right about Brian. He thought about all the times Brian tried to ditch him, all the mean things he said and did, trying to get Justin to back off. Enduring all the hurt feelings and loneliness made Justin appreciate each milestone in their relationship. What happened between them tonight was one of those special moments, and Justin would cherish the memory forever. HE always knew that they belonged together. He just had to convince BRIAN to give him a chance.

Brian felt the pressure as Justin tightened his grip on his fingers. Clingy is that was Justin called it? He never thought of himself as the clingy type. After sex all he wanted to do was sleep, preferably alone. That is until the first time Justin put his arms around his neck and fell sleep on his chest. All he wanted to do was touch him, stroke his blond hair while he slept. Oh, yeah, he was hooked. Now he was the clingy one.

Brian's mind wandered back to the night Justin confronted him for the first time.

I tried to tell him, it would never work, Brian thought. I was too old for him, he was too young for me. Every word I said, everything I believed in, he convinced me I was wrong. When did it all turn around and bite me in the ass? How could he have known more about me in one night than I ever knew about myself? The kid is still a mystery to me but I'm determined to figure him out, even if it takes me the rest of my life.

Justin reached over and put his hand on Brian's right arm and pulled the man's wrist to his lips, gently kissing the tattoo that bore the red heart with his name. He understood the significance of what Brian had done for him. From that moment on, no matter who Brian was ever with, Justin knew he would always be there. He put his arms around Brian's neck and nuzzled his head into his chest. As Brian stroked his soft blond hair, they both fell into a deep, sweet sleep.

Brian's Dirty Secret

Justin was late again. What else is new? I don't get it. He's always claiming he loves me and wants to be with me and where the hell is he? . . . he's with my best friend Mikey. So where does that leave me? Home alone jerking off with cyber sex. I may just have to make a few more rules to keep this relationship worth my while.

The door opened and Justin flew in throwing hat, books, coat and art work in every direction. "Brian, what are you doing?" Justin was surprised to see him.

"I'm taking care of my needs. What does it look like I'm doing?" Brian didn't take his eyes off the computer screen. "If I waited around for you to make an appearance, my dick would fall off"

Justin stuck his head in front of the computer screen and smiled sweetly at his boyfriend. "Are you feeling neglected? I really can't help it, you know. I have classes all day and I have to make money in order to stay in school. Michael and I are doing great with the comic book gig. In fact, we're working on a new character. That's why I'm late. Do you want to hear about it?"

"No." Brian started to get up, but Justin straddled his legs rendering him helpless. He took his tongue and starting at Brian's Adam's apple he made a straight line up to his mouth. He paused briefly and looked into his lover's eyes before he kissed him passionately.

"Do you want me to take that off your hands?" Justin asked looking down at Brian's already erect cock.

Brian gave in. He never could resist Justin's seductive methods of persuasion. Justin stripped, leaving a trail of clothes behind as he ran to the bedroom to retrieve what they needed. He returned to where Brian was sitting and straddled him again. In minutes they let themselves be carried away to a place where only the two of them existed.

When they were finished Justin lifted his head from Brian's chest and looked into his penetrating hazel eyes. He couldn't help but remember that look from the first time they had sex. All the words that Brian had blurted out during the heat of passion may have been just that, empty words. But Justin never forgot the look in his eyes after. It had been Justin's first time with a man. But, he knew even then what happened between them was special.

If it's true that the eyes were the windows to the soul Justin knew that night he had touched Brian's soul and he would never be the same. As their relationship grew that look reflected the words that Brian just couldn't bring himself to say. Justin trusted it and depended on it. That look from those eyes had gotten him through some really difficult times.

Tonight, as he felt the love that emanated from Brian's eyes, Justin was torn. Just how was he going to tell Brian that he was out the door again for a meeting at school.

"Go. I'm sure I'll find someone to amuse me for the evening. I'm going to Babylon." He stomped off to the bathroom.

As he retrieved his clothing from where he had flung it, Justin thought about ditching the meeting. But, it was important meeting for him. It could mean extra credit and possibly connections to the art world. He would think that an advertising executive would understand. After all, Brian puts in extra hours at work when he has to. That man can be such a baby sometimes. "I love you Brian" Justin shouted in the direction of the bathroom.

"Yeah, yeah . . . me too." Was the barely audible response.

Brian knew he was being unreasonable. It never bothered him to be alone before. He should be glad to have an evening free to spend with his friends at Babylon. But, it didn't seem fair for Justin to move in and make himself

irreplaceable, then leave for some stupid meeting whenever he felt like it. Brian had completely changed his life to be with Justin only to find himself alone at night.

After a few minutes of trying to rationalize his thinking, Brian realized that he was acting like an asshole again. It wasn't Justin's fault his life was so chaotic right now. He had a lot to deal with and he was doing the best he could to keep things going, including their relationship. Brian opened the bathroom door and went to the window to see if Justin had left yet. His car was gone. Brian would talk to him later. They would work it out together.

I have the whole evening to myself. He smiled as he lifted the phone to call Michael. He changed his mind about calling and deciding it would be better to surprise him. Maybe they would ask Emmett and Ted to join them for a night at Babylon.

He knocked on the door and Emmett answered. "Brian! What are you doing here? Justin went home hours ago. We figured you would be IN for the night . . . literally."

"Very funny." Brian pushed past him. "Where's Mikey?"

"Not here. He went to pick up Mark. They going out to celebrate," Emmett said.

."Celebrate what? Did Michael finally pop his boy's cherry?" Sneered Brian.

"Nooo, that happened a long time ago. If you ever talked to your better half, and I mean that literally also, you would know. Michael and Justin have sold another character to the publisher. It means a lot more work for both of them. But, it also could mean a lot more money if it takes off like the last one. You should really take more interest in Justin's other talents. One day he will be a very successful artist. And you, Brian. Well you will always be bad boy Brian Kinney."

"Yeah, so, what are you doing tonight?" Brian ignored Emmett's comments.

"Thanks for asking, Brian, but I have a date." With that the door bell rang and Emmett pushed past Brian to open the door.

"Hi baby" Emmett kissed the imposing figure standing in the doorway.

Brian was impressed. This guy looked pretty hot. It's about time Emmett got some.

"Who's this?" the man inquired about Brian.

"Some friend of Michael's. He was just leaving." Emmett gave Brian an imploring look.

"Yeah, I'm on my way to Babylon." Brian gave the guy a seductive smile as he brushed past him. "In case you get bored."

He sat in his jeep trying to decide what to do. Spending the night alone at Babylon didn't seem as appealing as it used to. He must be getting old, all he really wanted to do was go home and spend the night sleeping next to one hot 18 year old blond.

It was almost eleven and Justin still wasn't home. Emmett's words echoed in Brian's head. Justin was busy working hard building a career. With all that he had going for him he was bound to be a success. Brian was proud of Justin, maybe it was Brian Kinney that needed some work. His friends were finding mates, and he was genuinely happy for them. Going out to the clubs together did not have the same attraction that it used to. He realized that without the sexual escapades Brian Kinney was a pretty boring guy.

He never cared for sports, or mechanical things like fixing cars. Michael had his comic book collecting to occupy his time. Brian had outgrown comic books about the time he was old enough to get into bars. What did other people do when their partner's were otherwise occupied? He'd have to give it some thought.

Justin found Brian on the couch sleeping when he got home. The television was on, of all things, the Home and Garden channel. He must have hit the remote accidentally in his sleep. It had been an exhausting day and Justin really wanted to go to bed, but, looking at Brian still pouting in his sleep all he wanted to do was make him happy again.

"Hi baby." Justin had removed his clothes and was crawling on top of Brian.

"Have we met? Oh, yeah, you're that pain in the ass little stalker that used to hang around." Brian smiled up at him.

"God, I miss this." Justin was undressing him. "Just us, alone together. No classes, no professors, no meetings."

"No Michael." Brian chimed in.

Justin was already hard just from his naked body rubbing up against the still-half-dressed Brian. The boy worked quickly to remedy that situation. Soon Brian's clothing was flying in all directions. The two men devoured one another with deep, hungry kisses while their hands explored each other's bodies. Justin playfully nibbled at his lover's inviting neck sending shivers down Brian's spine. The handsome man reached around to cup Justin's smooth ass globes, gently but firmly giving them a squeeze. Suddenly, there was a loud smacking noise. Justin felt a sharp sting overtake his young butt.

"OUCHHHHHHHH!" The boy yelped. "What the fuck did you do that for, Brian?"

Brian looked at Justin right in his sparkling blue eyes and said "Payback, for being an inattentive pupil."

Justin, was intrigued "Brian. I don't know what you are talking about?"

"I'm taking about neglecting your studies" the man replied. Brian grinned devilishly.

He gently scooted out from under Justin and grabbing the boy by the shoulders. Pulling him to his feet, he held him against his torso. Their lips were just barely an inch apart as Brian softly, but, firmly spoke, "You're behind on your studies with Professor Brian. So we're going to have an all-night study session."

"Oh, I'm all in favor of that!" Justin eagerly replied.

With that, Brian took his golden boy by the hand and led him to the bedroom. As usual, the blue lighting was casting a soft, sensual glow on the steel grey silk sheets of their bed. The two men stopped and faced each other at the foot of the bed. Justin began slowly licking the hollow of Brian's neck. Brian threw his head back to give Justin better access, his soft, chestnut hair flopping back making him look even sexier, if that was possible.

With his tongue Justin slowly circled Brian's right nipple, before gently nibbling at the tip. Small moans of pleasure escaped Brian's mouth. As Justin moved to perform the same duties on Brian's left nipple, Brian began rubbing his large hands over Justin's ass. Brian never got tired of this boy's delectable butt. He truly believed Justin had the most beautiful bottom of anyone he'd ever seen.

Justin slowly dropped to his knees and began glorious tongue play on Brian's stiff, aching cock. First twirling his tongue over the head then licking the shaft. Up and down. back and forth.

"AAHHH, Yeah. Suck my cock, Justin." Justin hungrily began engulfing his lover's entire cock into his mouth. He could feel the tip against the back of his throat. Brian's fingers twisted into Justin's soft, blond hair as the young man's mouth pumped faster and faster on his cock.

"OHHHHHHHHH God, Justin! You're soooooooooooooo fucking gooooooooood at that." Brian moaned. But, he wasn't ready to cum yet. Pushing Justin off his dick, Brian lifted the boy to his feet. Then, he grabbed a condom and slicked himself with lube.

Brian lifted Justin into his arms and said "Now. It's time for your new lesson." Justin clung tightly to his lover's neck looking inquisitively. "Wrap your legs around my waist" Brian continued his instruction. Justin eagerly did as he was told.

Brian was holding Justin with his arms under Justin's butt. He began guiding his erect cock to Justin's ass crack. He slowly rubbed the erection up and down Justin's crack, teasing and tormenting him.

"Put it in me, Brian. I want you inside me." Brian positioned the head of his cock right at Justin's hungry hole.

"Slid yourself down on my cock, Justin." The man ordered.

Justin eased down on his lover's body just enough to allow penetration into his rectum. Brian simultaneously lifted his pelvis, pushing his shaft deeper into the boy's ass. "AAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH. Oh, yeah Brian. Feels good. Fells soooooooo good."

Brian rocked slowly but steadily in and out of the boy's ass, bouncing him in his arms up and down on his dick. "It's going to be even more incredible." Brian replied smiling. With that, Brian ceased pumping but continued to hold Justin with his cock still engulfed in his ass.

"We are going to play a game called "dead fall over?" Brian said.

Justin's excitement was growing. He knew this was quickly leading to some intense sexual activity.

"It's like when you're kids and you fall forward like you're dead weight." Brian explained. "And that's what I'm going to teach you tonight, Justin. I hold you in my arms with my dick up your ass like I'm doing now. Then I fall forward. You land on the bed on your back and me on top of you, causing my cock to thrust really hard into you. All the way inside you."

Brian spoke softly and very seductively. Justin's blue eyes widened but he didn't speak. He knew Brian would never hurt him. He trusted the man to take him places sexually, both physically and emotionally, that he could never go with any other man.

"Remember, Justin. Stay relaxed. Don't tense up until after you hit the mattress." Brian said. "Let me feel you relax now. Relax your ass muscles, Justin." Brian could feel the grip on his cock loosen slightly. "That's good, baby. Just like that. Nice and relaxed."

With that Brian placed his shins against the foot of the bedframe and, gripping Justin tightly, locked his eyes on the boy's and whispered "Hold onto me tight, baby. I'm going to take you. I'm going to take all of you. Make you mine again." Brian leaned forward, his legs straight, and toppled onto the bed, taking Justin with him. Justin's back hit the mattress with a thud just as Brian's cock slammed into him. The young man's eyes widened and his mouth dropped open just as a loud "AAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" emerged from his throat.

Brian had pushed so deeply into Justin that his balls slapped against the boy's ass cheeks. The two lovers lay motionless for several seconds until Brian slowly eased his cock out of Justin's ass until just the head was still in. "Justin, you're so fucking incredible. Now take your legs from around my waist and put them on my shoulders."

Justin obeyed just as Brian quickly slammed back into the boy's ass, causing him to moan loudly. He had never taken Justin like this before. So forcefully and so completely. And the sensation of totally possessing his golden boy wonder drove Brian into a frenzy.

Justin gazed into his lover's hazel eyes with a look of total submission combined with, love and hunger. "Oh Brian, yeah! Please. Fuck me hard! I need you so much, Brian."

With that, Brian began pounding mercilessly into Justin's abused hole. Yet the harder he pumped him the more Justin wanted. "I'm going to fuck you hard, baby." Brian growled in a low, sensuous voice. "Going to fuck you harder than I've ever fucked you before."

Brian leaned in to capture a long, deep kiss from his lover then continued assaulting his ass with punishing thrusts. Justin moaned and screamed in ecstasy. Brian was almost over the edge. The constant pounding to his prostate had Justin on the brink of climaxing without touching his cock. Suddenly he felt an uncontrollable heat building up in his balls. Two more powerthrusts from Brian's dick sent Justin into an orgasmic frenzy. "AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHH. AAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHUUUUHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!! A lava-flow of hot, creamy cum sprayed from Justin's throbbing cock, covering Brian's stomach and chest.

Justin's pulsating ass muscles plus the feel of his lover's hot load when it hit his skin was all it took to send Brian Kinney into the most incredible orgasm of his life. He shot his load filling the condom and collapsed into a sweaty heap on top of his young lover.

After their breathing had begun to slow down, Brian gradually removed Justin's legs from atop his shoulders, rolled off of him and collapsed again beside him. Justin was totally exhausted. Brian had almost literally pounded him into the mattress and he knew he would be sore for the entire weekend. 'Oh, Brrrrrrrrriiiiiiaaaaaaaaannnnnnnnnnn.' The young blond purred softly. Brian turned his head toward his lover, reached over to cup his chin in his hand and pulled the boy's lips to his. It was a long, deep, tender kiss. The two men had just reached such a high plateau the no words were necessary. They simply continued exploring each other's lips and tongues while gazing into each other's eyes.

The next morning Justin was sore from the vigorous sexual escapade the night before. He got out of bed and started for the shower. Brian grabbed his hand and pulling him back to the bed. "It's Saturday. Get back here."

The phone rang and Brian got a sinking feeling. "Don't tell me. Michael."

Justin picked up the phone. "Forget it Michael. I can't make it this morning." He was not about to abandon Brian again.

As Justin and Michael made plans for later Brian headed for the shower. Justin joined him a few minutes later. "Let's talk." Justin picked up the soap and washed Brian's back.

"What about?" Brian responded.

"My schedule. This is only temporary, Brian. Once I get the character started Michael and Mark can write the dialogue, then I just have to fill stuff in later. It could mean some good money for me, and, more than that, connections for my future in the art world."

"I thought I was your future?" Brian pouted.

"You are everything to me. You know that. Please, be patient. You didn't get where you are overnight did you?" Justin asked.

"Okay, I understand Justin. I really do." Brian was enjoying the feeling of Justin's wet hands on his butt. "I was just instilling some guilt so I can be bad at a future date and use the credit." He smiled and turned around to look at Justin. "It's just that I miss being your whole world."

""You are still my whole world. You always will be. But, think about it, in ten years or so when you are too old to work I will be the one supporting the family." Justin joked.

"Don't be a smart ass. I may have to use some discipline on you!" Brian swatted Justin's butt playfully

"Promise?" the boy smiled seductively.

Justin made a special breakfast for his man. Home made blueberry pancakes and sausage. Okay, they were frozen sausages, but he did make the pancakes from scratch.

Brian sat on the couch sipping his coffee while Justin cooked. He picked up the remote and turned on the T.V. Justin brought his breakfast over and the two of them ate while they watched the workers on the screen pour the cement for the driveway.

"I heard he's gay." Justin mumbled as he ate.

"Who's gay?" Brian asked

"The guy with the beard, Bob Wheeler." Justin responded.

"No, way!" Brian said in disbelief.

"I read it somewhere. Don't worry, Brian, I think your title as The World's Hottest Gay Older Guy is safe." Justin teased.

"Very funny, Picasso. You better watch out or we will have to revisit Professor Paul some more lessons." Brian threw a pillow at him.

They spent the morning together watching cartoons and old movies on TNT. It was time for Justin to leave again and Brian decided to give him a break. "I think I'll go to the gym, then I have some errands to run. You can stay at Michael's and get your work done so you won't be so stressed out during the week when you have class." He played with Justin's foot which was embedded in his lap.

"Why don't we meet up for dinner and then go to Babylon together? I bet Michael and the rest of the guys would want to go too, just like old times." Justin said.

"Okay, but you may not want to wait for me to eat. I may be a while." Said Brian mysteriously

"Really, where are you going?" Justin pressed.

"None of your business." He said. "Don't you trust me?"

Justin could not help but glance toward the voucher jar. It didn't look like there had been any recent activity. He thought about how well the voucher jar had worked for them. Justin believed that they were both being honest and they very rarely even mentioned it anymore. It just made them both feel more secure to have it there.

"Yes I do." Justin kissed Brian and then got ready to go to Michael's place.

"I love you." Brian called after him.

"Me too." Justin came back to the couch and gave him a hug. "Later."

An hour later Brian still sat on the couch staring at the T.V. screen. He never realized how much time he spent just trying to get laid. Email, phone calls, bar hopping, the big build up, the act, the kiss off. It was time consuming. Here he was now, having his every carnal thought acted out to perfection by the hottest piece of ass around, and all he had to do was watch T.V. What's wrong with this picture?

He tried to remember the last time he took an interest in any activity other than hunting for his next prey. Hunting? Too messy. Besides, he thought. It's probably technically a sport.

The guy with the beard was back from the commercial break. He was talking to another guy with a beard about bathroom tiles. He knew he was supposed to get up and go somewhere, but in a few minutes they were going to show the finished product and Brian figured he had invested too much time now to just turn it off.

The whole thing looked pretty good when they put it together, but there were a few things that Brian would have done differently. As he sat there contemplating the view from the garden, something occurred to him.

"That's it!" Brian had a revelation. "Why haven't I thought about this before?" He grabbed his jacket and his car keys and took off out the door.

"Maybe he's going through a mid life crisis." Michael smiled.

Since Justin had moved in with Brian, Michael did not discuss one with the other, for fear of saying something wrong and pissing them both off. Brian was his best friend in the world and Michael loved him dearly. Justin had grown on him. Since they were working together, he had come to think of him as a little brother.

"He's only 30. That's not even close to mid life." Justin was concerned. "No, it's the fact that I am not around as much as I used to be and he just can't accept it. I feel awful every time I walk out the door and leave him sitting there with the remote in his hand. I just don't want him to think he has to go back to picking up a different guy every night because I am not there to take care of him."

"Justin, you have your whole life ahead of you. Brian loves you enough to put up with some sacrifice in order for you to make your way in the world." Michael said.

"I know that Michael. But, I still feel bad about it. You don't see his face when I come home and tell him I have to go out again. It's like telling Gus he can't have any more cookies." Justin said.

Michael laughed at the comparison. But, Justin was right, it was exactly that same Kinney pout. "I'll call Ted. I'm sure he's ready for a night out. Mark is eating at his mother's tonight so I'm free and I'm sure we can count on Emmett."

"Count on Emmett for what?" Emmett came in the door and overheard his name.

"Babylon. Tonight. Be there." Michael did his best Brian Kinney imitation failing miserably.

Justin burst out laughing. "That was so funny, Michael, he would kill you if he ever heard it."

"I think a night at Babylon is just what we all need." Justin said "I'll call and tell him."

Justin dialed Brian's cell number. "This number is not accepting messages at this time." A recording said.

"That is strange, he never turns off the cell phone. Maybe he's in the gym." They got back to work enthusiastically and were finished by dinner time. Justin kept calling Brian's cell phone with no response. He decided to go home and see what was wrong.

Brian wasn't home. There wasn't a note or anything. Just the T.V. still on the HGTV network. Justin shut the television off and went to the kitchen to start dinner. It was well after 8:00 p.m. when Brian finally came home.

"Hi. I tried to call you before, but your cell phone's not working." Justin waited for an explanation, but, none was coming. "So, you went shopping."

"Hi." Brian came over and kissed Justin briefly, then went to the bed room and stuffed the bags he was carrying into his closet. For a change he was in a good mood and Justin decided not to press him with a bunch of questions. The salad was done, but, before Justin could put it out on the table Brian grabbed the bowl and threw himself down on the couch. He switched on the T.V., then looked at Justin, beckoning him over to the couch with his sweet puppy dog eyes.

Justin wasn't happy that the dinner he slaved over, was being consumed like so much fast food in front of the television, but he humored Brian. It was good to see him smiling for a change. Justin joined him on the couch and snuggled up next to him as he ate. He noticed a band-aid on his left hand, and two more on his right hand.

"What happened to your hands? Did you get into a fight or something?" Justin wondered what Brian could have been up to that would cause him to cut himself.

"No. I did that in the gym on one of the stupid machines. It's fine, just some scrapes." He smiled at his lover's concern for him. After the incident with Chris Hobbs, Brian had gotten into numerous altercations. It didn't take much to set him off. If anyone even looked at Justin sideways, Brian was all over them.

The clarinet theme came on the television signaling the start of what had become Brian's favorite show. Justin wondered if it was a mistake to tell him about the guy being gay. Maybe he was out all day looking for him. He smiled to himself at the thought of Brian lusting after Bob Wheeler.

Justin got up and went into the kitchen to put the Penne Ala Vodka on their plates. Seeing no possible way of prying Brian from the television he brought the food over to the couch and sat next to him to eat.

They had become very close since they began living together. It was unusual for Justin not to know what was going on in his lover's head. He decided that anything was better than the pouting Brian had been doing since Justin started school. If he had found himself something to do with his time, Justin was happy. When Brian was ready, he would tell him about it and not before. In a way it was exciting to Justin that Brian had a little mystery about himself again. One of the things that had attracted Justin to him was the challenge of uncovering the mystery that was Brian Kinney.

They had a great time at Babylon with the gang that night. Brian loved dancing with Justin, he was probably the best dancer at Babylon. The way that boy moved on the dance floor thrilled him. Brian remembered that first night he showed up at Babylon. Every guy in the place was watching him, even the two guys he had hand picked for his own evening's entertainment. Babylon was never the same once Justin arrived on the scene.

The next morning Justin woke up early and was surprised to see Brian's side of the bed empty. He called out and Brian responded from the livingroom. "I'm going out."

"What? It's 8:00 a.m. on a Sunday morning. Where are you going? . . . to church? Don't tell me you've found religion." Justin was so tired he could barely move. The weeks' activities combined with the strenuous payback sessions with Brian were catching up with him. All he wanted to do today was snuggle up next to Brian and sleep. "Come back to bed? Please." He gave his sweetest seductive smile at Brian who had just reentered the bedroom.

"You need your rest. We both know if I get back into that bed no one will be getting any sleep. Since you have to work at the diner this afternoon, I thought I would go out. Don't worry about dinner. I'll pick up some take out on the way back."

"I love you." He gathered the sleepy boy in his arms and hugged him. "I'll see you later."

"Okay, I get it, this is payback for me deserting you all week. Go ahead and act mysterious, maybe I should get some rest, because, when you do get home I will be expecting my payback. And it better be good." Justin rolled over and hugged the pillow that still smelled like Brian.

"Count on it!" Brian said as he picked up the bag from his closet.

Later, when Justin finally got dressed to go to the diner, he thought about Brian's behavior this morning. He seemed different. Was he wearing flannel? No, that couldn't be. And what was in that bag? Justin smiled to himself, this mystery was going to be a challenge, all right.

"Maybe he's having an affair with a lumberjack." Emmett joked.

"It has nothing to do with sex Em. If he was fucking other guys, I would know." The other guys didn't know anything about the voucher jar. He didn't want them teasing Brian about it, besides, that part of their relationship was private.

Justin was at Michael's apartment putting the finishing touches on their latest edition. They were really proud of how things were going. It had taken months of hard work, but, it was finally paying off. Justin was looking forward to spending more time with Brian.

He didn't like to admit it, but, Justin was getting concerned about Brian's recent clandestine activities. They had decided that one day of the weekend they would spend together and the other day they could pursue their separate interests. It was almost Spring and the school year would be over soon. Justin wondered if Brian would want to continue the arraignment.

Brian seemed happy to be doing whatever it was he was doing. Emmett and Michael had teased Justin about it, saying that Brian was keeping a mistress somewhere that was into flannel. Justin always told them he trusted Brian and he meant it. Only lately he had noticed a few things that were making him think.

Brian had been coming home late on Sunday's, always exhausted. Last weekend when he took off his shirt Justin noticed his back was sunburned. Of course his first thought was to remove Brian's pants and see if any other part of his anatomy had been exposed. But, he put the thought right out of his mind. He wanted to trust Brian. But, Last week Justin happened to see Brian's credit card bill. There was a charge on it for a motel reservation. Still, Justin was determined to trust that if Brian was tricking around with anyone he would account for it in the jar.

A terrifying thought struck Justin. What if it was more serious than a one night stand. If Brian had met some other guy and fallen in love. He wouldn't consider him a trick, would he? Justin had made himself sick thinking about all the possible explanations for Brian's behavior. He thought about how he'd felt all the times Brian would pick up other men right in front of him. If he lost the love of his life because he took on too much extra work Justin would never forgive himself.

He knew that if he just came out and asked Brian what he was doing on Sunday afternoons, Brian would tell him the truth. But, Justin was afraid to ask for fear of what that answer might be.

Justin had a plan. The following weekend he left the loft at the usual time and let Brian assume he was going to Michael's apartment. He knew that Michael and Mark had made plans for a romantic weekend. The details of such an event would not interest Brian, so, Justin knew that Michael wouldn't bother telling him about it.

He wanted so badly to just come out and ask Brian what he was doing, but he was afraid the answer would destroy his world. After kissing Brian goodbye, Justin got into his car and drove around the block. Parked in an ally down the street, he watched Brian leave the loft with more packages. Brian got into the jeep and drove off. Justin waited a few minutes and then followed him at a close distance. He felt like a spy, but his sanity was at stake.

They both entered the highway and after about 30 minutes Justin watched as Brian exited onto a local rural road. Another 20 minutes later Brian's jeep had disappeared. Justin was in a panic now. He drove up and down the two lane road until he spied Brian's jeep parked near some trees on a dirt path. Justin pulled his car off the road a little further down and walked back to where Brian had parked the jeep.

He walked up the dirt road, then, he saw him. The sun was warm and he was shirtless. This was not the Brian Kinney that he knew. He was sweaty and covered with mud. He had a shovel and a pick axe appeared to be digging a hole. Justin just stood there and watched in amazement. He couldn't think of any reason for Brian to be out here in the middle of no where digging a hole. Unless, maybe, he had just murdered someone and needed to hide the body.

Brian had put the shovel down and picked up a bottle of water that was on the ground. After taking a drink he dumped the rest of the contents over his head. Justin could not help but be reminded of that first night in the loft. He was so in love with this gorgeous hunk of a man the memory brought tears to his eyes.

Whatever the consequences for his actions Justin had to know now what was going on. He moved forward. Brian still had his back to him, but, before Justin could say anything Brian spoke.

"So, are you coming, or are you going?"

"I'm coming and staying." Justin smiled as he responded.

"What took you so long?" Brian turned around.

The man was a sight. His hair was wet and muddy, his hands and nails were caked with dirt. There were numerous Band-Aids on his fingers and bug bites all over his sunburned back. The smile on his face was the most beautiful smile Justin had ever seen.

Justin took a deep breath and said. "Brian Kinney, I love you. What the fuck are you doing out here?"

Brian put out his hand and said "Why don't you come over here and I'll show you."

Justin complied and Brian led him up a hill to what looked like some kind of clearing. Around the clearing there was a crudely constructed fence made of wood.

Brian beamed proudly. "I built that fence."

Justin gulped back his laughter. The picture of Brian out here week after week constructing this pathetic excuse for a fence almost made Justin lose it. But, he saw that Brian was serious, so he fought to hold back his reaction.

"You drove 60 miles from home to build a fence? I have driven you over the edge, haven't I." Justin joked.

"No, In fact you are my inspiration. When you started leaving me alone at night, I thought about what I could be doing to amuse myself without getting into trouble. Then I remembered that I had bought this piece of property a few years ago as an investment. I came out here and got an idea. I thought about how great it would be to have a place away from Pittsburgh, my job, your school, your projects, the guys. A place where we could be alone together."

"So, we're going to come out here and stand in a ditch?" Justin asked.

"Don't be fresh. I'm building us a house." Said Brian. His excitement about the project was building and Justin being here was perfect, he was ready to share his plan.

"Over here, is where we're going to lay front of the fireplace and fuck. Over there, is where we'll sleep and fuck. Then, there is this room, where you'll make the meals and I will throw you across the table and fuck you. Do you want to hear about the bathroom? 'Cause the bathroom will be special. We're going to have our very own hot tube. This is where we'll spend most of our time. Because, after all the fucking we'll be doing in every other room we'll need a place to clean up so we can fuck some more. Of course, the thought of holding your hot, wet, bubbling little body while we're lying in our hot tube might make me want to fuck you in there too."

Brian had once again rendered Justin speechless with his actions. The thoughts that had filled his head about Brian cheating on him were totally bogus and Justin felt terrible. "I followed you here because I thought you were cheating on me." Justin confessed.

Brian looked at Justin in disbelief. "You don't ever have to put yourself through that, baby, all you have to do is ask me. I don't lie to you. You don't lie to me. That's why this relationship thing is working. Don't you know that by now?"

"I just let myself get scared. It won't happen again. We've been totally honest with each other." Watching Brian surveying his imaginary masterpiece Justin fell in love all over again. He thought about the possibility of this house ever becoming a reality "Brian, about that fence."

"All right, let's not carry that honesty thing too far." Brian held up his hand.

Justin laughed. "So, when do we move in?"

"In about 150 years, if the contractor keeps his word." Brian answered.

"Contractor? I thought you were building our house."

"Well, I thought about it, but I decided I would farm out the grunt work, like all that messy construction stuff. I will be overseeing the project and making all the decisions. I did enjoy digging the hole. Maybe I'll make a garden with a patio, like on that show we saw. Then we should invite that Bob Wheeler guy out here to do a show about me."

You're serious about this, aren't you?" Justin was amazed. "So, what do I get to do?"

"You're going to decorate the walls with your artwork. No comic book characters please. Maybe just some nice nude self portraits. Why don't you convince Professor Paul to do a life size sculpture of the two of us fucking."

"Brian, if you are planning to put the house up here, why were you digging in that muddy hole down the hill?" Justin asked.

Brian smiled and took Justin's hand. He dragged him back down the hill. When they got to the mud drenched hole Brian picked him up and threw him into the mud. He jumped in after the surprised teen and picked him up in his arms.

"This . . . is our mud wrestling pit." Justin couldn't believe what Brian had just done to him. He was about to protest loudly, but the feel of the warm mud on his skin as Brian tugged at his shirt was giving him a hard on.

Justin laughed uncontrollably, "I can't believe we're out here fucking in the mud." He pulled Brian's face up so he could look into his eyes. "I can't even find your eyes. Are you sure you're Brian Kinney?"

"Wait a minute." Brian had managed to free his cock from his jeans and began to rub it against Justin's bare, mud-covered stomach,

"Oh, yeah. You're Brian Kinney." In a moment Justin had freed his own pulsating member and the two of them rolled together in the mud stroking each other to completion. It was like fucking inside a giant tub of lube. The sensation was incredible.

Who would ever believe it? Justin Taylor was lying in the mud. No shampoo, no moose, no hot shower, no clean clothes, and he was loving it. Brian's enthusiasm was contagious and Justin started making plans for decorating the house. Living at Brian's loft was great, but everything in it belonged to Brian. He wondered what it would be like to make a home for the two of them.

"Did you say 150 years? I don't suppose there's any way you could make a phone call and at least get the hot tube delivered today?" Justin joked.

Brian went to the jeep and brought back his gym bag and a blanket. He wrapped the blanket around Justin and then rummaged through the gym bag and found a towel and some extra gym clothes. He dried off the best he could, then dressed in his gym clothes, saving some shorts for Justin to wear.

But, Justin was busy walking around the property making plans. "We'll have to take out some of these trees for the patio. I think we should have a big picture window right here," indicating the area Brian had designated the bedroom "and maybe a sky light so I can look up at the stars while you're fucking me." He smiled at Brian.

"Hold on, who's making the decisions in this family?" Secretly pleased that Justin getting into the house plan.

Justin had wrapped the blanket around himself like a toga. It reminded Brian of the way Justin would sleep, all wrapped up in the sheets like a cocoon. Watching him step from room to imaginary room planning their home, filled Brian with a warmth he had never had in his life. Justin had become his family.

"We make the decisions in this family together." Justin was standing in front of him with that challenging look Brian had come to know so well.

"Whatever you say dear." Brian teased.

"Are we driving back home like this?" Justin was getting cold. Brian put his arm around him and started walking back to the road.

"I have reservations for the motel a few miles down the main road. They have a hot tub." Brian smiled.

"How did you know I would follow you out here today? Are you psychic or something?" Justin was bewildered.

"I know what you're thinking at every given moment." Teased Brian.

"If you did, you wouldn't be grinning like an idiot." Justin shot back.

"Okay. I made reservations every weekend. I know how much it kills you, not knowing all the details of my life. I knew eventually you'd show up." Brian confessed.

"Did you really plan that mud pit?" Justin was curious.

"Not really." He admitted. "I started to make a driveway, like on that show we saw. I hit a rock or something with the shovel so I picked up the axe and the next thing I knew, there was water gushing in every direction. I don't know where it came from, but, my neighbors' cows are starting to look awfully thirsty."

Justin roared with laughter. Life with Brian Kinney was never going to be boring.

The Comic Book Adventure

Michael and Justin form a connection

Justin was alone in the loft reading the Art history book his mother had given him when he was recuperating. His eyes were burning and his head ached a little but he was getting used to that. It only happened when he was tired anyway. He got up and headed toward the bedroom to wait for Brian to come home. There was a knock on the door which startled him a little. He was jumpy since the attack and he wasn't expecting anyone.

"Brian, are you in there?" it was Michael. Justin should have known, he had been there almost every night this week. Justin suspected that was the reason Brian went out earlier to "who knows where," so he would not have to deal with Michael again tonight. He dragged himself to the door,

"Hi Michael, Brian's not here." He leaned heavily on the door frame hoping that Michael would notice how tired he was and let him go to bed. No such luck, he was already inside and talking non stop about some stupid comic book character. Justin didn't dislike Michael, in fact, lately he felt sorry for him. When David left for Portland it was inevitable that Michael would turn to Brian with every thought that came into his head. The fact that Justin was now living there made no difference, he was just an appendage of Brian now. It made him fair game for Michael's evening therapy sessions. Justin always thought that the two of them had nothing in common except for loving Brian and sleeping in the same bed- -Mike's old bed at Deb's, that is.

Justin resigned himself to the fact that Michael was not going to leave so to make small talk he asked to see the comic book that he'd brought. It was a little different then Michael's usual hero Captain Astro. The art work in this particular comic was rather interesting. Justin always liked to draw cartoons, in fact, he had considered going into animation when he was younger. He may just have struck on a topic of conversation that they could both relate to. Justin knew that Michael would rather be talking to Brian, but Brian never got into the topic of comic books as an art form. They had an actual conversation for the first time since they discussed the move to New York that never happened.

Justin picked up a pencil and started to sketch a figure with pecs and abs and of course a solid package up front. His first thought was to give the figure Brian's face, but realized what the consequence would be if he ever saw it. Instead he drew a face that mostly resembled Michael with a few elements of Emmet and Ted and just a touch of Brian's sensual lips for fun. The look of the character made them both laugh out loud. They started to think up stories about what special powers he might have. He looks so gay so he must have the power to get a hard on with lightning speed, able to lick tall dicks with a single stroke of his magical tongue. For the first time Michael and Justin connected.

It was only 1:00 a.m. and Brian was ready to call it a night, he must be getting old. Instead of getting depressed about his age Brian grinned. He was thinking about the scene that would greet him at the loft. Justin would be all warm and comfy under the covers, he would undress quietly and sneak in beside him. Brian loved to warm his cold hands on Justin's cute little bubble butt. The boy would moan in protest, but only for a few seconds. The thought of Justin moaning was giving Brian a hard on. He couldn't wait to get home.

Brian had considered the fact that Justin might be a little pissed about being abandoned tonight. He had not gone out because of Justin, it was the thought of another evening of consoling Michael that drove him out of the loft. It wasn't that Brian did not want to be there for him, but he was out of idea's and out of patience. He thought about asking Justin and Michael to come out with him tonight but Justin looked tired and he still had those headaches. The headaches worried Brian a little. It had been weeks since the attack and he knew that Justin was still in pain at times.

People that knew Brian would never believe it but one of the reasons he left the apartment was to let Justin get some rest. When they were alone together, it seemed they spent most of the time in bed doing everything but sleeping.

Shit, that was Michael's car. It never occurred to Brian that Michael would drop by and wait for him. Poor Justin, he was sure to be plenty pissed if he had to be alone with Michael all this time. Brian had to get control of the situation with Michael right now. He had geared up for a battle when he opened the door to the loft but the sight before him was anything but what he expected.

Justin and Michael were at the computer laughing and talking up a storm. They were so involved in whatever the hell they were doing they didn't even notice him standing there. "What the fuck is going on?"

"Hi Brian" said Michael. "Come over here and look at this. The boy genius and I have come up with a gay super hero." They had scanned the drawing that Justin had done into the computer. They decided to tone down his flamboyant appearance a little and change his super hero name. The image was up on the computer screen and they were busy writing a story for him. Brian leaned over Justin's head to see what they were talking about

"What the fuck?" The drawing was pretty funny. It looked like Michael on steroids. He could see that the art work was Justin's but the whole theme definitely had Michael's touch. Cartoons were not his thing but he could see where the concept might be considered funny.

Frankly, he found the buddy scene between Michael and Justin disturbing, he preferred their normal back and forth insult hurling behavior. So, they entertained each other with super heros while he was out partying, but he was back and it was over now. He waited for Michael to leave so he could ravage Justin, but it wasn't happening.

"Michael, Justin's been having headaches, maybe you ought to let him get to bed."

"No, it's better now." Justin responded. " In fact I had forgotten all about it, besides, we were just getting to the exciting conclusion. I'm going to stay up a little while and finish it because Michael wanted to show it to his friends at the comic book store."

Michael just looked up at him with excited puppy dog eyes and Brian knew he would be going to bed alone. He had not expected this, not in a million years. Michael had something that Brian wanted. He would let Michael have him for a little while, but he would be waiting up for Justin with the thought of getting his boy genius moaning till morning.

Brian woke up and rolled over to Justin's side of the bed. For a moment fear gripped him when he did not make contact with his sleeping beauty until he realized that the light was on in the kitchen and he heard Michael's voice. It was 3:00 a.m. and he'd had enough of this game. He got out of bed and stormed into the living room. Michael was on the couch still talking and Justin was at the computer desk half asleep still holding a pencil in his hand.

He picked Justin up and threw him over his shoulder. Justin didn't protest, he slumped over Brian's shoulder limply and let himself be carried off.

"Good night Mikey" Brian said as he threw a blanket in Michael's direction. He gave him one of his famous Brian Kinney sneers and Michael got the message.

"Thank you Justin." Michael said. Justin waved at him with the pencil and gave him a sleepy smile as Brian carried his prey to bed.

The next morning Brian woke up and checked to make sure that Justin was still there. His blonde hair peaked out from under the comforter and Brian pulled the cover down gently to look at him. He could never stay mad looking at that sweet face. He got out of bed and went into the bathroom to get dress making sure not to wake Justin. He had forgotten that Michael was still there till he went into the kitchen and saw that breakfast was on the table.

"Sorry about last night" Michael said. He wasn't that sorry, hanging out with Justin had been fun, Brian was going to have to share his toy for once. It was the last thing that Michael expected to happen, Justin and him enjoying each other company.

He thought about how Justin had come into their lives. The sight of him was enough to make Michael cringe for months. He was everything that Michael wasn't. Come to think of it, he was a lot of things that Brian wasn't. He had gotten so used to the antagonistic relationship they had fallen into, he hardly noticed the gradual kinship that had developed between them. He regretted some of the things he said to Justin out of jealousy, fear and frustration. It was difficult to admit, but he had started to admire the kid in the last few months.

The night he got the call from Brian that Justin had been seriously injured had been the worst night of his life. The breakup with David had devastated him. He would be sad for a very long time, but he would survive and maybe find another love someday. He also knew he would be out there trying because he learned something about himself, he liked belonging to someone special.

Sitting in that hospital hallway all he could think of was how much Justin meant to Brian. What a revelation that was for him. For 16 years he had tried to penetrate the walls that protected Brian Kinney's heart, this boy managed to tear down the walls in a few short months. It was then that Michael realized his true feelings for Brian. The yearning he felt for him all those years was replaced with compassion for this fragile human being. He loved him as a brother and the thought of Brian losing Justin forever broke Michael's heart. Brian would never survive without Justin. Michael was sure of it.

Justin tumbled into the kitchen rubbing his eyes. He put his arms around Brian who was sitting at the table eating the oatmeal that Michael had prepared. "Sorry about last night."

Brian pulled him down to eye level with his T-shirt and said "Payback. Tonight. Be there." He kissed him gently and got up to leave for work. Justin sat in his chair and started eating what was left of the oatmeal.

When he got to the door Justin called out "I love you, Brian." Michael grinned, knowing how much Brian hated public displays.

"Yeah, yeah." He feigned disinterest as he exited the loft, but Michael saw the sweet grin that penetrated his ad exec. reserve. Justin didn't have to look, he already knew it was there.

"So, what are you doing today Michael?" Justin asked, "maybe we can put the rest of the comic together and take it over to the store." He was glad to have something creative to do because last night he realized that the headaches went away when he started to draw. "I hope we weren't too optimistic last night, sometimes things that look good at night look really bad in the morning."

"Yeah, I've had a few tricks like that too." Michael said "I'm doing inventory tonight so I suppose I can go in a little late. "Yeah, let's do it."

Justin laughed. He was surprised at how funny Michael was. He had always seemed so serious to Justin. Maybe this was his true personality. He had grown up in Brian's shadow and went right to David's shadow, so this was the real Michael, a closet comedian. Last night Michael dictated the storyline while Justin typed it into the computer. He enjoyed making his drawing come to life and this morning it still looked good to him.

The character had taken on a more practical design. He was still gay but his powers were equal to the other super heroes and his specialty was protecting kids, not just gay kids, but all kids who were tormented by bullies. He had a sense of humor about himself which Michael and Justin had fashioned after Emmet and his compassion for the underdog was inspired by Ted. The super hero stuff was all Brian. They hoped he wouldn't recognize himself, if he did it would be the end of this adventure.

They had given him a secret identity, Les Sussman, computer repair geek. He worked mostly in schools fixing computers by day and clobbering bullies after 3:00pm. They had also given him a fitting super hero name. He would be known as Captain Advocate.

Michael was on a roll. The one liners he had given Les Sussman had Justin in stitches. It felt good to laugh. Justin's life had been a series of extreme highs and extreme lows since he had come out. Today, hanging out with Michael, made Justin feel like the carefree teen he lost months ago.

They printed out a draft of the comic and together they went to see Michael's friend. Their creation got rave reviews from everyone at the store. The unlikely duo decided to write some more comics and see if they could market them on the Internet. Over the summer the two became a working partnership. They were both enjoying themselves and to their surprise their venture was becoming profitable. Although the character would never have a wide appeal Michael's talent for comedy lightened the subject matter and the character had developed a cult following.

Brian's reaction was predictable. He was not the center of attention for once and he resented it. He also resented the amount of time Justin had been spending with Michael. It wasn't that he didn't trust Justin, it had nothing to do with sex for once, he felt left out when he caught the two of them giggling over some stupid joke that Michael came up with. Justin had tapped into an aspect of Michael's personality that Brian never knew existed. He was used to Michael being the needy one, always hanging on Brian's every word. With his newfound confidence Michael was becoming his own person, and Brian found that he was no longer in control.

The summer was coming to an end and Justin would be starting college soon. Brian wanted to spend some time alone with his golden boy to reassure himself that Justin wouldn't forget his promise not to leave him, not ever. He knew he was being selfish but he had given up so much of his control freak personality in the past few months it was only fair that he be allowed take control now and straighten out this situation.

Justin had been hinting that he would like to use his King of Babylon prize to take Brian to the Bahamas for a vacation. Brian had been putting him off fearing he was being manipulated. But, it was time for action, the trip would fit right into his plan. He told Justin to go ahead and use the travel vouchers for next week.

"No promises, if I see a hot guy down there I am going for it and so should you." Brian warned.

Justin agreed enthusiastically, smiling to himself at the thought of Brian finding hot guys in their hotel room. He made a mental note not to order any room service.

Brian called Michael and told him to meet him at Babylon. He knew that Michael had not been out much since David left and it was time the boy got back into the pool. The gang all met up outside the bar and predictably Michael and Justin started discussing their joint venture. Michael had Justin, Emmet and even Ted in stitches with his new found personality. Brian wandered away from them as the music started. Michael grabbed Justin to dance. Neither of them noticed that Brian had disappeared into the crowd.

Brian stood on his old perch above the dance floor and with his well-trained eye he scoped out the dancers. He was looking for something particular tonight and after a short time he found it, the answer to all his problems. Down below him at the bar was a beautiful blonde head. He swiftly made his decent to the bar and grabbed the object of his attention. As he turned him around Brian was impressed with the resemblance, the boy was beautiful. He guessed that he was about 20 but he looked younger.

"Hi, I'm Brian, want to dance?" Without waiting for an answer he took the young mans hand and dragged him out to the dance floor. Seductively, he looked into the boy's eyes and saw the familiar combination of fear and determination. His body was young and hard and his smile was dazzling. Brian guided him expertly across the dance floor to his destination.

Michael and Justin were standing with their backs to the bar. Justin saw him first and Brian had a twinge of regret as he saw the familiar reaction to his bold antics. A wave of pain shot across Justin face, but he recovered quickly, putting the "I don't give a fuck" look in its place. It would be the last time Brian would be reminded of what his heartless treatment had done to Justin, he vowed to never see that look again.

When he reached the bar with his new friend in tow he quickly eased Justin's fears by putting his arm around him and releasing his "catch."

He turned to Michael and said "Michael, this is, " he turned to the boy and asked "What was your name again?"

Justin laughed, he'd figured out Brian's plan.

"Mark, my name is Mark." Said the confused boy.

"Oh, yeah, Mark, right." Brian was enjoying this "Michael, this is Mark. Mark, this is Michael."

Michael was dumbstruck. The boy was an angel come to earth. He had curly blonde hair, soulful hazel eyes and one of the cutest butts Michael had ever seen. He was slightly taller then Justin, and thin but not too thin. He was perfect, especially when he saw Michael and his eyes light up when he said. "Hey, you look just like Captain Advocate."

Brian Kinney returned to his original standing as Michael's hero. Tonight Michael would have the opportunity to "mentor" his very own "golden boy" The two did not even notice when Brian and Justin started to leave. They were deep into conversation about super heros. Justin heard Michael ask him if he knew how to draw.

"I guess I am being replaced" Justin pouted.

Brian smiled and pulled Justin forward by his shirt collar. "Don't you know by now, nobody could ever replace you."

Body and Soul

Justin wonders if his feelings for Brian will last. He wakes to find a stranger in his bed and spends the day in search of Brian.

Justin awoke in a panic, he thought he was late for school, until he realized it was Saturday. He was relieved he did not have to get out of bed today because he was unusually tired. He must have been having a dream, he thought he heard voices and that's what woke him, but he couldn't remember what he had been dreaming about. As he fell back down on the pillow, he watched the pile of sheets and comforter next to him on the bed sigh up and down with the heavy breathing of his lover.

He thought back to a time when he could only imagine what it would be like to wake up next Brian every day. Now here they were in a relationship that was not only sexually charged, but intimate and close. It was his impossible dream come true.

Brian had been down lately, about turning 30, but Justin thought he looked as hot as any guy at Babylon. He must admit he had given some thought to the fact that when he turned 30 Brian would be 42. Would Justin still love Brian then? He wanted to believe it didn't make difference, it was Brian's soul that he loved, and his soul was ageless. But, 42. His father was only 40.

The heap of bedding on his right began to move and Justin thought about the consequences of waking Brian up early on a Saturday. A smile came to his lips as he awaited his punishment eagerly.

He felt warm hands caress his skin and he moaned in pleasure at the thought of unbridled passion that awaited him. The hand moved upward with a circular motion and Justin began to feel uneasy. He moved forward on the bed and lifted the covers. "Shit!" Justin cried "What the fuck are you doing?"

"What are you yelling about? I fucking live here and this is my bed." The head that emerged from under the covers was talking but Justin could not believe what he was hearing or seeing.

The figure rose from the bed and stood over him in an obvious state of arousal. What shocked Justin beyond belief was the fact that it should be Brian. He talks like Brian. He moves like Brian. But, the figure looming over him with that silly grin on his face was none other than Michael Novotny.

"Where's Brian, Michael? Is this some kind of sick joke?" Cried Justin.

"Look, Justin, I don't know what kind of drug you have been taking, it's me, Brian Kinney, the guy you have been fucking for months."

The figure lunged for him as Justin bolted from the bed. He grabbing his clothes from the floor, ran to the bathroom and closed the door. His heart was racing and he considered what had just happened. Maybe he was hung over, or suffering from some kind of hallucination. Could it be that someone slipped him some kind of drug last night? Try

as he might he couldn't even remember last night. He was getting scared. There must be a logical explanation for this, maybe it was something I ate or an allergy I didn't know I had. He didn't know what to do next.

One thing he was not even considering was getting back into bed and fucking Michael. He quickly got dressed, opened the door slowly and peeked out. The Michael/Brian person, still naked, was up and at the computer checking his email.

"Hot stud, ready to suck cock anytime day or night." He read from the screen. "Hey, you can be replaced, sweet cheeks." He teased Justin.

Justin said. "Sorry Brian (the name caught in his throat as he said it to Michael) I completely forgot that I have to go to the diner today. I promised your mm..... Deb I would take a Saturday shift and I am really late."

"No big deal, you will pay me back later for neglecting your boyfriendly duties." The figure went back to typing and Justin dashed out the door.

He couldn't think clearly, and his head was pounding. He decided that since Michael was pretending to be Brian, maybe Brian would be at Michael's apartment. They must have concocted this scheme as some kind of test for Justin. Brian probably wanted to see if he could trick him into being unfaithful.

Justin thought about that night he won the King of Babylon contest, how jealous Brian had been, even the next day he was still pissed. But he deserved it, he was treating me like shit. I won't let him make a fool out of me. Justin was going to get Brian back for playing this joke on him. It wasn't funny. He was forced to look at Michael's naked body. He was fucking traumatized.

Nothing he witnessed this morning prepared him for the shock he got to Michael's place. "Hi baby. Aren't you the early bird." The mannerisms and clothes were Emmett's, but, the body belonged to Lindsay. "Holy shit. I have lost my fucking mind."

"What's the matter sweetie, you look upset? Come sit here and tell Auntie Em all about it." Lindsay/Emmett patted the sofa.

In order to keep from panicking Justin diverted his eyes and pretended to be talking to Emmett. "Have you seen Brian or Michael this morning?" He asked.

Lindsay/Emmett replied. "Don't be a silly boy, of course I've seen Michael, he lives here, remember. He left for work at Q-Mart about an hour ago."

"Really, was he himself today? I mean, did he seem different to you?" Justin asked.

"Of course he's different, honey, he hasn't been the same since David left, the poor darling." Em replied. "Have you eaten, baby, you look hungry? Can I fix you some pancakes or something?"

"No, thanks, I'm not hungry. I have to find Brian, I mean Michael. I don't know what I mean." Justin was very confused. He said goodbye to Lindsay/Emmett and walked to the bus stop. One thing he was sure of, Lindsay looked really hot in pink Spandex.

His head started pounding again and he felt a chill, like when someone touches your grave, he'd heard. Great, now he was getting sick. That's all he needed. He remembered Emmett's nurse imitation the night his father smashed into Brian's car. He made a mental note not to drop in at Lindsay and Mel's house today for fear of finding Emmett breast-feeding Gus.

He rode the bus to Q-Mart hoping that when he got there he would find Brian. Justin thought about this morning, he always loved waking up to Brian rubbing his stomach, or his butt. He loved Brian's hands, they made him feel safe and protected. Shit, he missed his touch, what was he going to do if this situation was permanent. Sex may just be sex, but, there was no way in hell Justin was going to spend eternity sucking Michael Novotny's dick.

Before he knew it, he was standing in front of Q-Mart. He braced himself and went inside. The girl from Michael's birthday party was at the register. "Hi, Stacy. Is Michael here?"

"He's in the refrigerated section taking inventory. Be careful. He's in a bear of a mood today." Warned Stacy.

Justin wondered what she meant by that. He saw a figure bent over the case examining the imported cheese and mumbling something about brie tasting like cum. Justin was afraid to look, but, he knew he would never find Brian with his eyes closed.

"Hi Michael." Justin managed to say. The figure looked up from the cheese case and scowled.

"What are you doing here? Isn't it enough you take over my room and my best friend and now you are coming in here where I work? When are you going to just disappear?"

The words were Michael's the body was Emmett's. Justin could see what Stacy was talking about. Even for Michael he was particularly whiney.

"I'm looking for Brian, have you seen him?" Justin said softly. He had almost given up hope of ever seeing him again. The thought of that made Justin's head hurt even more. It occurred to him that Michael is probably feeling the same way about David. He thought to himself if things ever get back to normal he would try not to bug Michael on purpose anymore.

"Is he okay? Was he in an accident or something?" Emmett/Michael was starting to panic.

"No, I'm sure he's fine. I was supposed to meet him and he was late so I thought he might be here with you. I'll go check the loft. I'm sure he's there by now." He didn't wait for Emmett/Michael to answer, he just turned and hurried out of the store.

He sat on a bench at the bus stop and wondered what to do next. After a few minutes the cutest little dog jumped in his lap and started to lick his face. It was the first time the teenager smiled all day. "Hey, are you Brian?" he joked. The dog looked up at him with Brian like eyes he recognized. "Hello Gus." The weirdest thing was he was getting used to this nightmare.

He got on a bus and went to the diner not knowing what to expect, but, not wanting to go back to the loft to face that horny Michael/Brian person.

As soon as he opened the door, he sensed things were not normal here either. The woman behind the counter in the red wig laughing up a storm was Ted "Hi Sunshine, am I glad to see you." Ted/Deb bellowed. "We have a big dinner crowd tonight and the regular waiter called in sick. Put on your apron, would you honey?"

Justin complied, he was glad to have something to do to take his mind off his problems. Let's see, who's left? Michael was Brian, Lindsay was Emmett, Emmett was Michael, Ted was Deb and Gus was the little dog. The only ones left are Mel and Vic. Justin shuttered at the thought of having to spend a lifetime fucking either one of them. Not that he didn't love them, but, he wanted his Brian back. He was almost in tears now.

He worked way past is usual work hours until Deb said. "Sunshine, you better be getting home before Brian sends the dogs out hunting for you."

Justin was desperate, he needed to see Brian. He was ready to start clicking his heels together, even Kansas had to be better then Pittsburg gone crazy. As he sat waiting for the bus he thought he heard Brian's voice. "Come home, Justin." He felt a chill again almost like he could feel his touch. It only made him miss Brian more.

The only thing he could do was go back to the loft, to that Michael/Brian person and see what happens. Maybe he could learn to love him, or at least not vomit at the thought of his naked body crawling on top of him.

When he got there, Michael/Brian was waiting for him with dinner ready and music playing softly in the background. It would have been very romantic, if it wasn't Michael's face he saw. He heard a voice talking to him gently, it was Brian's voice, but not Brian's body. "Where were you? I missed you? I want to fuck you all night."

Justin cringed, but managed to smile a little as Michael/Brian kissed his neck. He grabbed Justin around the waist and started to slow dance with him, grinding his hard cock into Justin's groin. Michael/Brian slowly undressed the boy as he guided him gently to the bed. Justin closed his eyes and pretended it was really Brian lifting him up in his arms an sliding him under the covers.

There was something greater then their earthly forms that linked them together. He let himself be carried away mentally and allowed Michael/Brian to make love to his body. He heard the voice again "I need you." Something clicked inside Justin's head. Brian was all around him, loving him, talking to him, kissing him gently. Justin was afraid to open his eyes so he kept them shut tightly. He fought the voice that kept telling him to wake up, to open his eyes. "I love you Justin."

Brian never said he loved me. Justin was tempted to open his eyes, just a little to see if it was really was Brian making love to him.. He held his breath and listened. "I love you Justin. You can't leave me, you promised you wouldn't leave."

"Brian?" It was the first thing that Justin said when he woke out of the coma. He had been out for days since Chris Hobbs hit him in the head with a baseball bat.

"Justin." Brian whispered. Justin open his eyes and looked at that face that he loved so much. Brian had been crying, it looked like he had been crying for a long time. Justin knew the tears were for him. He felt really bad about sleeping so long, fighting waking up.

Everyone came to see him in the hospital. Justin was really glad they were back in their appropriate bodies. They were all being so nice to him. Aside from Daphne Justin never had many friends and he was grateful they had accepted him into the group.

He never told anyone about the dream, but at Lindsay's birthday party everyone was surprise at Justin gift, a pink Spandex halter top.

Weeks later the guys sat in the diner talking about Michael's new boyfriend. "He's not my boyfriend, at least not until after tonight." They had not had sex yet, how old fashioned. Michael was ambivalent about who would take the lead. He had always been a bottom and had resigned himself to the fact that he always would be. He was concerned this new guy might want more.

Justin chimed in, "I think you should go for it Michael. Take it from me, you would make a great top." He grinned a silly grin only he understood as he got up to take an order from another booth. Brian gave Michael a curious stare, the other guys just laughed. He heard Michael defending himself to Brian. "That hit on the head must have scrambled his wonder brains. Nothing ever happened between me and your boyfriend Brian."

Justin looked over at Brian from behind the counter. He was still glaring at Michael, but, he would get over it. Brian can be such a grouch sometimes. But, Justin loved him, and would stay with him forever, not matter what. He had proven it to himself the night he had sex with the Michael's body just so he could be with Brian's soul.

Revelation

Brian makes a discovery which changes his life and the lives of everyone who is close to him.

It was damp and cold and Brian hated the thought of getting out of the car, much less trudging up the hill to the grave site. He didn't know why he felt the compulsion to come to this dreadful place once a month, but it had become a ritual for him and he was stuck with it.

When he got to the top of the hill, he noticed a figure out of the corner of his eye. There was a woman walking down the hill on the opposite side. His father was buried in an older part of the cemetery which didn't usually get many people visiting, especially on a cold, damp day like this one. There was a small rock sitting on top of his father's head stone. This was a sign that someone had been visiting. His mother and sister always brought flowers when they came. Brian picked it up and it felt warm, like someone had been holding it and just left it there. He looked in the direction where he had seen the woman leaving. Had she been to his father's grave? Did he know her?

Michael sat on the couch with Vic watching an old black and white movie on the television in the Novotny livingroom. A breathless Debbie rushed in the door. "I'm sorry I'm late. It was so busy at the diner."

"I started the sauce already Mom." Michael got up from the couch and kissed her cheek. "I'll check on it."

Debbie flopped down on the couch. Vic gave her a sly stare. "Where were you really? I called the diner and they said you left there two hours ago."

"None of your business." Deb whispered as she lightly smacked her brother's arm.

"Always a mystery. You should tell him the truth someday. Michael can handle it. He's a grown man."

"Maybe he could. But, I'm not ready for him to hate me. There's no reason for him to know, not now anyway."

"Michael, why don't you call Brian and Justin and invite them for dinner. I want you and Justin to sort out the stuff in your room so I can go in there and clean."

Michael picked up the phone and dialed Brian's number. "My Mom wants you to come to dinner. And you can drag along your boy wonder if he's there. It's time for him to take his crap out of my room."

"They'll be here in an hour." Michael still resented Justin's intrusion into Brian's life, and for that matter into his own family. Things hadn't been the same since he arrived on the scene. The only time he managed to have Brian to himself was at Woody's and Babylon on a school night when Justin wouldn't be there. He was glad, at least, to be getting the last of Justin's belongings out of his old bedroom.

After dinner Justin was busy packing the last of his stuff into the box that Deb had left on the bed. Brian and Michael were laughing at old photos of themselves in high school. Justin loved to share in anything about Brian's life so he looked at every picture. "You really were a geek."

"I was not a geek. I was a serious student." Brian playfully pulled him onto the bed and pinned him down. He never could resist kissing the boy's luscious lips when he had him in this position.

"Don't you two get enough of that in your own bed?" Michael shot them an annoyed look. "We have work to do here."

"There's no such thing as enough of Justin, Michael. I thought I told you that a long time ago." Brian released Justin and picked up another photo from the draw.

"Hey who's this hot chick Mikey?" Brian held up the photo for him to see. "I'd DO her."

Michael tried to grab the photo, but Brian held back his arm. Justin took the photo out of Brian's hand.

"That's a picture of my Mom." Michael jerked it out of Justin's hand.

"That's Deb? Oh, my God she WAS hot." Justin remarked.

"Let me see it again Michael." Michael surrendered the photo to his friend. "Where was this taken? It looks familiar. Look at the old car in the background. My Dad had one just like it."

"It was taken in front of some bar she used to work at before I was born. Are you finished here? I want to get to Babylon before all the hot guys are gone." Michael picked up the box with his belongings and left the room.

The two looked at each other and began to giggle at Michael's reaction. Stealing one more kiss from his sweet boy Brian picked up the box from the bed and they made their way out to the car.

The next afternoon Brian stopped at the diner for lunch. Out of the corner of his eye he watched Justin flit around the room flirting with the customers. He swore he only did it to improve his tips, but Brian knew the kid reveled in the thought that he could fuck any guy that walked in the door. They all adored him, and why not. He had the cutest ass he'd ever seen, not to mention the sweet way he moved his hips when he walked. The hair, the skin and that smile . . . that smile could drop any man to his knees from across the room. His Justin was the complete package: looks, brains, personality and charm. If he didn't finish his lunch and leave the diner now he was going to have to throw Justin across the counter and fuck him right in front of everyone.

"I'm going over to my mother's house. She's been on my case to clean out some boxes that my father stored in the garage. As long as we're spring cleaning, I thought I'd get it over with since you have to work all day. It shouldn't take long. It's mostly papers and photos."

"I get off at 10:00." Justin said.

"I'll meet the guys at Woody's early and then come back and pick you up for Babylon."

"If you find any baby pictures of you bring them home." Justin smiled at him, forcing Brian to bolt out the door before his primal urges gave way to his better judgment.

The thought of going to Babylon was losing its appeal. Most of the night he would spend keeping track of Justin and soothing Michael's bruised ego. Even if he did spot a guy he'd like to take to the back room, having Justin around was too much of a distraction for him to actually do anything. What he really wanted to do was go to Woody's to hang with the guys, then bring Justin back to the loft and make love to him.

He pulled up to his boyhood home and as usual he got a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. These visits home were trying at best, but today he got lucky. His mother had left a note that she had gone shopping with Clare. He went directly to the garage so he would be able to finish the chore before they returned.

At a glance he could see that most of the papers were more than 10 years old, so he just tossed them all without even looking at them. He opened the metal cabinet on the wall and discovered his father's porn collection. So that's why he spent so much time out here, he was jerking off with Hustler magazines. He grabbed a rag from the work bench, and wrapping it around his hand he managed to remove the magazines from their hiding place without touching them. After disposing of them in the trash can he returned to the metal cabinet. There was a cigar box stuck under the shelf which had been hidden by the magazines. Reaching in with the rag still wrapped around his hand he managed to extract the box.

His father had never been sentimental, at least not that he had witnessed. But, the contents of the box were obviously things that meant a great deal to him. There were several military medals and some photos of men in uniform. He recognized one of them as a very young Jack Kinney. He might as well be looking at himself at 20.

Something he picked up was dropping red sparkles on the floor, it was a father's day card which he had made when he was little. Brian was starting to see his father in a new light. The man must have had a heart at one point in his life. He wondered what happened to change him. There were several photos of him and his sister in the box, along with a few other hand made mementos. The last remaining item in the box was a stack of letters which were tied with a blue ribbon. They must have been letters written by his mother to his father when he was in the service. He lifted them out and looked at the handwriting, it was definitely not his mother's perfectly formed script. They were addressed to his father at a post office box. His curiosity peaked, he opened the letter on the bottom of the pile.

He read the first line and found that he had stumbled upon his father's secret life. My Darling Jack, was the greeting and the text of the letter referred to his loving caresses and sweet gentle touch. Brian stopped reading. He sat down on the bench and stared at the letter. The post mark was dated January 1970. His father had an affair with this woman a year before he was born. It wasn't the fact that his father had been unfaithful that shocked Brian, but that someone had found the man loving and gentle.

The rest of the letters were pretty much the same. They were all signed, Your Sunshine. It appeared that they were very much in love and except for the fact that his daughter was ill he would have left his wife to be with her. At least that's what he had led this woman to believe. Of course Brian knew that his mother would never have consented to a divorce, and would have moved heaven and earth to keep her family intact.

There was a time gap of a few months. The last letter from Sunshine was dated December 1970. This one was the most disturbing. She said that she knew there was no way he could leave his wife now that she was pregnant with their second child and planned on giving their own baby, who was due any day, up for adoption. The letter went on to say how she didn't blame him for not answering all her other letters. She had known from the beginning that he was a married man and she had no claim on him.

It was almost 4:00 and Brian did not want to face his mother today. He finished the cleaning task and gathered the letters back into the box along with his father's other treasured belongings. Taking one last look into the metal cabinet he noticed something he'd missed. There was an envelope which had been stuck under the self where the box had been. He recognized his father's handwriting and took a deep breath before opening it. There was a picture inside, one which he recognized from the day before. The photo was of a young and beautiful Debbie Novotny.

He sat in the jeep in front of the Novotny house for a very long time. The letter his father had written and never mailed told her that his wife had intercepted her letters and discovered their affair several months before. She had somehow gotten herself pregnant and threatened to expose him to his friends and family if he ever left her. It would surely kill his Irish Catholic mother to find out that her son was a sinner. He had no choice but to stay in this loveless marriage for the sake of his children. He was sorry to cause her pain and told her it was probably best for the child she was carrying to be raised by a family who will be there for him.

As Debbie approached the house, she was surprised to see Brian's car parked across the street. "Hi honey. Did you forget something last night?"

Brian got out of the car and went into the house with her. "Where's Vic?"

"Out shopping I suppose. Why, is something wrong with Sunshine?"

Looking at Debbie Novotny as she might have been years ago, Brian could understand why his dad had called her Sunshine. It just occurred to him that he had started to think of Justin as the sunshine in his life. How ironic that the term had originally been his father's pet name for Debbie.

There was no easy way to say it. Brian held out the pack of letters to Debbie. "You tell me, Sunshine."

Debbie's face went white. Brian was afraid she might fall so he took her arm and lead her over to the sofa. "It's okay Deb, no one knows. I just found these today, in with my father's belongings." Brian had a soft spot in his heart for

this woman. In fact he loved her in a way he could never love his own mother. He didn't blame her for anything, but he had to know about the baby.

Brian came right to the point. "Is Michael my brother?"

"Yes, Brian, he's your half brother." Debbie felt strangely relieved that Brian finally knew her secret. "You can never tell him."

"No, I won't be telling him. But, you will."

"Michael will hate me for lying to him all these years. I never wanted him to know that his father didn't want him."

"Jack didn't know Debbie. My mother took the letters and hid them, she made sure she got pregnant to clinch the deal. That defines my life doesn't it, deal clincher. If anyone wasn't wanted by my father, it was me." Brian sat on the chair opposite Debbie.

"What happened Deb? Did she confront you and make you write this last letter telling my father you were giving the baby up? Did she quote scriptures at you and tell you all about her ailing little girl?"

Her mind went back to that day more than 30 years ago. He was right. His mother had confronted her. She was so intimidated by this high and mighty woman that she agreed to write the letter to Jack finalizing their relationship. Of course, there was no way she would ever give up her child so she decided to make up a name and raise the boy alone.

"The first time Michael brought you home, I couldn't believe it. You walk into the house and I'm looking at Jack Kinney's little boy. The kid who was responsible for destroying any chance I ever had for happiness. Then I looked at your sweet face and saw your father's eyes looking back at me. I don't mean the hard obnoxious boozier he became. I'm talking about the sweet, loving young man that I had fallen in love with all those years ago. I looked at you and fell in love all over again. And, I don't mean what you think. You brought back the memory of the man I loved before everything got so fucked up."

"Watching you with Michael gave me a great deal of joy. If you couldn't be brothers, you could at least be friends. And I came to love you honey, as Brian, Michael's best friend."

Brian moved over to the couch and Debbie put her arms around him. She could only imagine what the man was feeling. There was no question that she loved him like a son. Brian was right, he was a part of Michael and she had to finally be honest about it, no matter what it cost her. "You're right, baby, I'll tell Michael tonight."

"He was a son of a bitch. You didn't deserve to be treated like that Deb. So, why do you go to his grave?" He had figured out that the woman he had seen at the cemetery must have been Debbie. If someone did to him what his father had done to Debbie he would not have been so forgiving.

"Time heals the pain Brian. When we were together he was sweet and gentle. He was my first love and I believe that he really did love me too. It was just the circumstances that kept us from being together. My first time was a beautiful experience for me and he gave me Michael. How could I stay bitter?"

Brian thought of Justin's first time. He had been sweet and gentle with the boy. Maybe he was like his father in some ways. Justin would always love him, that he knew.

Debbie took Brian's face in her hands and looked him straight in his Jack Kinney eyes. "Don't you go around feeling like nobody wanted you. None of this was your fault. You were a sweet innocent baby just like your brother. And babies only bring joy. I'm sure that Jack loved you, sweetheart."

Brian got up from the couch. "Just be sure you tell Mikey tonight."

Debbie grabbed his hand. "Brian, do you want some left over lasagna? I don't really want to be alone right now."

"Yeah, me too . . . Sunshine." He smiled at her as she got up from the couch.

"Listen you, there's only one Sunshine in this family and he belongs to you." Moving past him she started for the kitchen.

Brian staggered out of the elevator, practically falling face down onto the floor. He was as drunk as he had ever been in his whole life. And why not, his best friend - make that ex best friend - is an asshole. Michael had blamed him for everything. For the first time since they'd met Michael lost his temper and hit him square on the jaw. He proceeded to knock him down and pummel his face until Emmett and Ted dragged him off. Brian never raised a finger to defend himself.

He managed to get his key in the lock and open the door. Holding on to the furniture he made his way up the steps to the bedroom. Justin wasn't there.

"Oh, shit. He must think I hooked up with someone and forgot about him waiting for me. FUCK, he left me." In his mind he started to panic, but in his heart he knew Justin couldn't leave him. "No Justin wouldn't do that because he REALLY loves me. Michael never did, he only pretended to so I would fuck him someday."

He looked over in the direction of the sofa and spotted the blond head lying on the pillow. "Thank you, God. I must have done something right. Justin won't leave me."

In his inebriated state it was difficult to maneuver down the steps without crashing into the wall, which is exactly what happened. Justin still didn't move. "I'll just check on him and make sure he's okay." Brian plopped down in a chair opposite the couch and stared at Justin as he slept.

"I wonder if he's breathing - I don't hear him breathing." Brian slid off the chair onto the floor and crawled over to the couch. His face was inches away from Justin's now. He could hear him breathing heavily, like when they're having sex. This thought struck him funny for some reason and he started to laugh.

Finally Justin woke rubbing eyes, "What happened to your face?"

"I don't want to talk about it. Go back to sleep." Brian grabbed hold of the end of the couch and attempted to pull himself up. After several failed tries, Justin got the message. Dragging himself up from the sofa he stood in back of Brian and pulled him up into a standing position. Holding on to the back of his shirt he directed him toward the bathroom. Brian stopped at the door and turned toward the sleepy boy. Grabbing the front of Justin's T-shirt, he roughly pulled the boy toward him. Cupping his face in his hands he said, "I knew you wouldn't leave me."

The smell of alcohol was so strong Justin gagged. Realizing that the man was way drunker than he had ever seen him he decided to just go along with everything he said until he could talk him into going to sleep.

"Why would I do that?"

"That's what I said. Even if I spent all night fucking every guy at Babylon, you would stay. You said I can't push you away no matter what." Brian was starting to get emotional.

Justin wondered what had happened that had left him feeling so vulnerable. "What happened tonight Brian?"

"I don't wanna talk about it. Go to bed."

Brian leaned up against the sink and started to wash the blood off his face. Examining the damage in the mirror, he determined it could have been worse. It was just a split lip which was starting to swell a little, and a cut on the hand he used to protect his face.

As curious as he was Justin realized it was pointless to question the man tonight. It had been a long day at work and a long walk home. Brian was supposed to pick him up at the diner at 10:00, but he never showed.

Five minutes after Justin got into the bed Brian emerged from the bathroom. Justin feigned sleep, but to no avail. Brian was pacing at the foot of the bed.

"What's the matter?"

"We got any band aides?"

"Yeah, in the kitchen. I'll get them."

Justin got up and retrieved the band aides from the kitchen cabinet. When he came back Brian was gone.

"Where are you? " Justin called out. He could hear him talking.

"Why's he blaming me? I wasn't ever born yet. "

Justin followed his voice and spotted him lying on his stomach on the floor next to the bed. Knowing it would take all his efforts to drag him up onto the bed Justin decided it would be easier to lie down on the floor with him and let him talk.

"Don't tell me to go to bed." Justin said. "You've done nothing but rant since you got home. I'm awake, okay. Tell me what happened. Who hit you?"

Brian turned his face toward the boy and smiled, a silly drunken smile, "my big brother hit me." The sound of the words made him giggle.

"Are you saying that somewhere between lunch and bedtime you got yourself a big brother? Brian, you're not making sense. Maybe we should both go to bed and you can tell me in the morning." Justin rolled him over and pulled him up into a sitting position. As Justin sat on the bed preparing to drag his limp body onto the mattress, Brian suddenly turned to face him. Resting his head on Justin's lap he began to explain.

He told Justin about the letters he found and about what Debbie had revealed to him that afternoon. "Michael found the letters when Debbie was sleeping and read them. He thought that I'd known about it all these years. He was so mad . . I've never seen him like that. It was scary"

Justin was still trying to comprehend what Brian had just told him. Brian and Michael were half brothers. It didn't strike him as far fetched or strange, in fact it seemed to explain a lot of things.

"I hope you straightened him out." Justin said as he petted Brian's head.

"What for. If he doesn't know I would never keep a secret like that from him, then he doesn't really know me very well."

Justin got some peroxide from the bathroom and cleaned and bandaged the cut on Brian's hand. He was just sitting on the floor now staring into space. The boy managed to get behind him and drag him up onto the bed. Covering him with the comforter Justin slip in next to him. Brian turned on his side with his back toward the boy. Not allowing himself to be shut out, Justin snuggled up next to his back and put his arm around his shoulder.

Justin had almost drifted off to sleep when he heard Brian say, "I'm sorry I didn't pick you up tonight."

"I know."

Silence.

"Justin I REALLY love you too."

Justin dragged himself out of bed at 7:00, even though he had the morning off. There was someone he had to see, and he had to leave before Brian woke up. He looked over at the man, who was snoring like a buzz saw, and smiled. Putting on his jacket he grabbed the keys to the jeep and crept quietly out the door.

"Alright, I'm coming." Emmett dragged himself across the living room. Someone had been leaning on the buzzer, driving him crazy. Pulling open the door he was surprised to see Justin standing there.

"What are you doing out of bed at this hour?"

"I need to speak to Michael." Justin was adamant.

"Now?"

"Right now."

"He had a rough night, maybe you should come back later."

"He's going to have an even rougher morning if I don't see him right now."

Michael stumbled out of his bedroom. "Okay, okay. Why are YOU here? If Brian sent you here to apologize to me you can just tell him to forget it. I don't ever want to see him again."

Justin had never been madder in his whole life. Nothing that his father had said to him, nothing that Kip did to Brian and nothing that Chris Hobbs ever said or did to him made him as mad as he was this moment.

He stormed at Michael and grabbed him by the front of his shirt. He pulled him over to the couch and threw him down onto the cushions. Emmett started to intervene, but, Justin shoot him a warning glance and he backed off.

"Michael?" Emmett managed to say.

Realizing that Justin was serious Michael sat up straight on the couch and said, "It's okay Emmett, go back to bed. I'll listen to what Brian's messenger boy has to say."

Justin stood firm until Emmett left the room. Then, without preamble, he finally let Michael have it.

"In the first place Michael, Brian didn't know about you being his brother until yesterday. He found those letters and confronted your mom. She finally admitted it, but, freaked out that he would tell you first. He promised her he wouldn't.

Michael slowly looked up at him, "I don't believe you. I don't believe any of this. My mom and I are close, she wouldn't lie to me."

"It's the truth Michael. You should have asked her first before you tore into Brian." The boy was just getting started. There were a lot of things he had to straighten out with this man who professed to love Brian all these years.

"How could you do that to him Michael? You, of all people know how sensitive he is. If you would just stop and think about someone besides yourself for a minute. How do you think he felt when he found out? Jack was his father, he's dead now and there is no way that Brian can confront him."

"The two of you have always had a connection. Brian always treated you like a brother, when he found out you were related he was happy. If you really loved him you would be happy too. But no, you attack him. You blamed him for what his father and your mother did before he was born. That was so unfair, Michael. If you ever loved him like a

real friend you would have let him explain. Your reaction could only mean one thing, you never thought of him as a friend. What people say about you is true, you want Brian as a lover."

"Everything you've ever done in the name of friendship has been self serving, to gain his affection. He doesn't love you like that Michael, he never did, he never will. Brian NEVER lied to you."

"What you did last night hurt him, not just his face, but inside. If you ever cared anything about the real Brian Kinney as a friend you'll fix this Michael. I don't care if you hate me for coming here, but, I won't let anyone hurt him . . . not even you. So you either fix your friendship or get out of his life for good."

Michael sat dumbfounded. Was everything Justin said true?

When Justin got back to the loft he was surprised to see Brian sitting at the computer staring at a blank screen.

"Are you writing to Michael?" Justin threw his jacket on the chair and put his arms around Brian.

"Where were you?" Asked Brian, avoiding Justin's question.

"I went out to get us something for breakfast." He handed Brian a Starbucks cup.

"I don't want any coffee."

"It's not coffee, it's hot chocolate. I figured you didn't need any more caffeine. I got bagels too." Justin brought the bag into the kitchen and started preparing breakfast.

As Brian sipped the hot chocolate his eyes followed Justin across the room. He was thinking about the phone call he'd just had. How does he do it? He always knows what makes me feel better. It's because he isn't thinking about himself, but, only about what I need. I don't deserve him, but I'm really glad he's here. Brian knew what he wanted to say now, and he started to type.

Justin arrived home from his shift at the diner early. In a way he was glad that Brian wasn't home. The weekend had not really worked out like he'd planned. Brian standing him up the night before, then coming home drunk, then ignoring him all morning, was not Justin's idea of a fun weekend.

Not that he blamed Brian, finding out that Michael was his brother must have been traumatic for him. Add to that the fact that his mother got pregnant just to keep her husband from leaving her. Justin felt bad that he was thinking about himself and not about what Brian was going through. He had enough people in his life who used him, Justin would never be one of them. Instead of stealing time for a nap, he decided to cook a nice meal for dinner. Maybe that would make Brian feel better.

Tossing his shirt on the bed he began to undress for his shower. He noticed there was an envelope on his pillow. It said "To Justin" in Brian's handwriting. Justin wasn't sure what to expect. Brian had never written anything to him longer than a post-it sized note. Maybe he wanted to be alone and was asking him to leave.

With a shaking hand he opened the envelope. It was a letter to him from Brian. It began "Dear Sunshine."

I starting out writing a letter to the man I called my best friend for most of my life. I sat in front of the screen and thought about the definition of a friend. The thesaurus in Word Perfect came up with a bunch of words: champion, hero, helper, defender, devotee, angel, lover.

I laughed when I thought of Michael in those terms. I guess he's been some of the above, at times over the years. But, it was always because he wanted something back, he wanted me to feel something that I don't feel. In other words, he's only been my friend all these years because he was holding out the hope I would give into him someday.

All my life people have been trying to make me into something I'm not. I could never live up to my father's idea of the perfect son. Lindsay always wanted me to be the perfect family man. Michael wanted me to be his perfect lover.

I'm not perfect, not even close. Instead of living up to everyone's idea of the perfect Brian Kinney, I have spent my life fucking up on purpose so people would stop expecting things from me.

Now, all of a sudden, there is someone in my life who is willing to love me no matter what stupid thing I say or do. When I get drunk, he drags me to bed and holds me. When I have doubts about making a decision, he talks to me, and all of a sudden I figure out what to do . . like it was my own idea. When other people attack me, he defends me, no question. When some asshole decides to sue me, he somehow saves my ass and doesn't even gloat about it.

You just walked in the door with a bag from Starbucks. You said that you went out to get breakfast. Michael just called and told me what you did. We fucked up our friendship and you fixed it. What's in it for you?

It occurred to me that the things I mentioned are probably not the only times you changed my life without me knowing. I've come to depend on you more than I care to admit.

I just wanted you to know . . . "I'm on to you."

Justin, you're all of the above to me: champion, hero, helper, defender, devotee, angel, lover.

You're my best friend.

Love,

Brian

Justin felt tears welling up in his eyes. He never thought that Brian even noticed the things he'd done for him. Justin was truly touched, he would cherish the letter forever. Folding it carefully back into the envelope he felt the soft hands of his lover encircle his naked torso.

"You found my note." Brian had been sitting on the living room sofa watching Justin read the letter.

Justin smiled and turned toward him. "Sunshine? You never call me that."

"You brighten my world?" Brian groaned. "Give me a break, I'm not good with terms of endearment. It just seems to suit you."

Justin kissed him softly on the lips. "I love you Brian."

"I love you too."

Epilogue:

Brian and Michael sat with their backs up against the tombstone. Each had a bottle of Heineken's, the last two from the six pack. The four empty bottles now adorned the top of the stone which marked their father's grave.

"I'm glad we finally did this Brian. It's such a relief to come out to my father after all these years." Michael smiled over at the man he now called his little brother.

"You have to admit I paved the way for you, big brother. After all I came out to the man while he was still breathing."

"But, it's so much easier this way. You really should have waited."

"I can just picture it." Brian stood up and faced the stone, spilling a good amount of his beer onto the ground. "Jack, this is my brother Michael. You'll be pleased to know you have, not ONE, but TWO gay sons."

"We better keep it down, we don't want to wake him."

"Shit, did I just feel the earth move. He must be spinning like a top."

Michael laughed. "So, how is your new best friend working out?"

"Well, he's not as punctual as my old best friend, but, he does have his moments." Brian smiled at Michael. It felt good to be able to talk to him again without the painfully awkward moments they had suffered through a few months before.

Michael had begun to see a therapist and it was helping him to understand himself a little better, and to understand his mother as well. Brian swore he didn't need therapy. The truth was that he had been seeing someone since Justin was attacked at the prom. As for finding out that Michael was his brother, it was never a problem for Brian. He had always felt that way about Michael.

"Are you two finished up here?" Justin came up the hill.

"It's about time." Michael complained.

"Your mother is a slave driver, she made me clean the grill before I left." Justin helped Brian pull Michael to his feet.

"Wait. We forgot to introduce you." Brian put his arm around Justin. "Jack, this is Justin, the 18 year old I've been fucking for over a year. I think he's the one, Pop. Got room in your life for another gay son?" Brian leaned over and kissed Justin.

"I think we better get out of here before the earth splits open and we disappear into the vortex." Michael warned.

Justin considered Michael's comment. "You read too many comic books."

Brian put his other arm around Michael and the three of them left Jack Kinney pondering his new found family.

Season Two

Seduction of a Fearless Soul

Justin is offered the job of his dreams. He will be using his artistic talents to recreate a mural for the wealthy owner of a mansion just outside of town. The young artist and his lover Brian form a bond with the mysterious millionaire which leads to adventure and much more.

Justin couldn't wait to get home so he could tell Brian his news. He had submitted sketches to the administrators of a project which would involve recreating several murals on the walls of a mansion out near a lake outside of Pittsburgh. He had seen the house many times as child and had always been curious to see the inside. It had recently been purchased by a wealthy businessman. No one was quite sure who he was or what his business was, but there were rumors that he led a daredevil existence. He apparently traveled all over the world to participate in all sorts of death defying activities. These rumors had piqued Justin's curiosity and he was hopeful that he would be one of those chosen for the project. It would be his first job doing what he loved best.

There was to be a reception at the mansion on Friday evening. The students would have an opportunity to see the house and interview for the position. It was to be a social gathering and the invitation said that they could bring one guest. Justin had formulated a plan in his mind on how he would present the invitation to Brian. He knew that Brian would not want to miss out on a Friday night at Babylon. He could just imagine the reaction if he just came out and asked Brian to come with him.

"Hey." Justin dropped his backpack on a chair and joined Brian on the sofa.

"Hey, yourself." Brian pulled on Justin's shirt until he was just close enough to kiss.

"I need a favor," Justin began.

Brian grabbed Justin's balls and lowered his head to the boy's lap. "Blow job?"

Justin pulled Brian's head up. "No. That can wait 'til after dinner. I need to borrow the Jeep on Friday. Do you think you can get a ride to the bar with Ted?"

"Where are you going?" Brian tried to sound nonchalant.

Justin explained about the mural work at the mansion. He knew this wouldn't be enough to pique Brian's interest so he embellished a little. "Actually, I'm anxious to meet Mr. Carey. I've heard all kinds of rumors about him and I'm curious. Aside from being rich, he's also a celebrity. He's written a bunch of novels, some of which feature gay characters. I want to find out if he's gay. He's supposed to be one of the richest men in the world."

"Are you turning into a little queer gold digger? Maybe I ought to go out there with you. I wouldn't want to lose you to some ancient philanthropic pedophile."

Justin relaxed. He would have to pretend to be outraged that Brian didn't trust him. But once again, Brian had played right into his hand.

"If you feel that way, maybe you better come with me. I don't want you accusing me of being attracted to pedophiles."

"Are you?" Brian raised his eyebrows.

Justin flashed a naughty grin at Brian. "You should know."

The Carey Mansion was set high on a bluff overlooking the lake. From the public road, only the top turrets of the gray stone battlements could be seen. A tall brick wall surrounded the property, interspersed with security cameras and culminating in double gates created from intricate wrought iron bars. Because of the party, the gates were open, but a uniformed guard was there to carefully check the letter of invitation with every guest.

"Did you know this place used to be a private school for wealthy boys?" Brian informed Justin. "Before I was born. Then it was abandoned for decades until Carey bought it and restored it. I heard he spent millions just on the interior." They followed a steep, winding road with manicured gardens, tall trees, and elegant outbuildings on one side, and a sharp drop down to the lake on the other side. Brian was grateful for the Indian Summer night they were enjoying. He wouldn't want to make this drive from Pittsburgh on an icy wintry day.

When they stopped in the circular drive fronting the huge castle-like structure, a valet appeared to take the car keys. Brian assumed a bored look, calculated to inform anyone watching that he was unimpressed. A butler met them at the door and Brian's ennui chipped as he stared up at a domed ceiling high over the entry. Inside the dome, against a pale blue sky drifting with white clouds, a band of cherubs painted with the delicacy of Botticelli trailed satin ribbons among loose floating florals. Brian's entire loft could easily fit within this alcove. Justin looked up, then down at the floor where three tones of marble formed a Greek Key pattern. He glanced at Brian with a 'holy shit!' expression, but Brian warned him to be cool by raising a single brow.

The reception was being held in a glass-walled conservatory, which overlooked the sloping back gardens. Dancing fountains were lit with gently tinted lights, and performed their happy routines at variable, pre-timed intervals. Inside, panels in the ceiling featured etched glass depicting wisteria, lilies of the valley, and purple irises. The glass panels had been fashioned by Louis Comfort Tiffany.

Below, real flowers grew in sweet profusion. An almost tropical atmosphere prevailed among the plants, as guests snacked on hors d'oeuvres served on silver trays passed by white-jacketed cater waiters. Brian sipped champagne and checked out the waiters while Justin checked out his competition for the job. When the initial shock of such excessive wealth had passed, Brian left Justin as he wandered out to the terrace to have a smoke.

It was warm for late October, and he could smell the newly mowed grass. He admired the perfectly landscaped formal gardens. When he was a child, he had loved to lay on the grass at his grandparents' house and daydream. There was something comforting about the feel and smell of the grass. When he had recently found a piece of astro turf at an art deco store, he hadn't been able to resist buying it for the loft. He found it comforting just to run his hand across the top.

"Incredible view, isn't it?" Justin had come up behind him and put his arms around his waist. Brian turned to face him. "Now it is." He smiled down at Justin. He was almost embarrassed at being caught communing with nature. "How did your interview go?"

"I don't know. There are a lot of applicants. Most of them are more experienced than me."

"But nobody can draw dicks like you can."

Justin had put mousse in his hair in an attempt to style it to make him look older. Brian secretly thought he looked adorable, but not older. He could not resist the temptation to reach over and rub Justin's hair.

"What are you doing?" Justin brushed his hand away.

"Just getting comfortable." Brian smiled. He loved Justin's youthful enthusiasm. It had been a while since they had been out together anywhere else but the bars on Liberty Avenue. Holding Justin in these lavish surrounding was giving Brian a hard-on. He pulled Justin closer and kissed him tenderly.

As Justin returned Brian's kiss, he sensed that a presence had invaded the intimacy of the moment. Brian must have sensed it also, for at the same moment they parted and raised their faces upward.

Simultaneously their jaws dropped as they stood gazing up at a man standing above on balcony. His body was drenched in sweat and his muscles were taut, as if he had just finished an exercise session. The black sweat pants he wore clung to the hardened muscles of his lower body as he leaned against the archway, one foot braced against the wall. His torso was bare, except for a white towel which hung loosely around his neck. For a moment he glanced down and caught their stare. His eyes lingered on the couple briefly as if in a trance before he straightened up and disappeared inside the house.

Justin felt the pressure of Brian's finger as he tapped the boys chin. "You can close your mouth now. He's not gay," Brian said. He hoped that Justin had not noticed that his reaction to the encounter with the tall impressive figure above had been the same.

"How can you tell?" Justin asked.

"I can always tell." Brian put his arm around Justin and walked with him back into the house.

Tom Carey sat on the floor in his bedroom studying the art work that he had laid out before him. The image of the handsome couple locked in an embrace had been strangely alluring to him. He was no innocent. While his sexual experience was with women, lots of women, he found the mystery of same sex attraction compelling. He was titillated by two women making love, as were most heterosexual men, but he had also ventured into the eroticism of man-to-man sex, mostly as research for a character in one of his most successful novels. He was a stickler for accuracy, so he had interviewed gay men, watched gay porn, and read gay literature. What began as cold research had melded into curiosity. He had even toyed with the thought of engaging in a gay sexual encounter, but he could never follow through with it. No man appealed to him enough to penetrate his gender barriers. He was a romantic, and man-to-man sex seemed almost animalistic in its intensity and lack of delicacy. Yet, the embracing couple were loving and tender, touching some nerve in the lonely man's deepest psyche. Forcing the image from his mind, Tom turned his attention to the artwork before him. He had always admired those people who had the ability to draw. Not that he was lacking in creative talent. The ability to express himself on paper was his only salvation. Without the release writing provided he would surely have gone insane, but it had always been a dream of his to create a true work of art. He had purchased this house in hopes of creating a home. A warm, comfortable, inviting place he could look forward to returning to after his many adventures.

He had hoped that by hiring young artists to recreate the murals he would be contributing to the art world, not only by preserving the art itself, but by encouraging and challenging the young artists involved in the project. It wasn't perfection of technique and form that he was looking for in these drawings. It was magic that he wanted to see. He hoped to find an artist that had the ability to capture the subject's soul with his eye and convey that spirit to the canvas with his brush.

One sketch stood out from the rest. He picked it up and studied it. The label on the back said "Justin Taylor". The drawing was of a man lying on a bed peeling an apple. There was something about the detail and the facial expression that he found intriguing. He looked at the face again and realized that the man in the portrait was the same man whom he'd seen in the garden kissing a blond-haired boy.

"I got it!" Justin waved the envelope at Brian as slid into the booth next to him.

"Got what? Some kind of communicable disease?" Michael asked as he sipped his coffee.

"No. The job at the mansion. I was one of the students chosen for the job!"

Emmett grinned. "That's great, Justin. Maybe your assignment will be to paint in all the penises. Every gay boy artist's dream job."

Justin rolled his eyes at Emmett. "I wonder if he'll be there?"

"Who?" Michael asked.

"Thomas Carey."

"Why do you care?" Brian asked. "I told you he's straight. There's no point in wasting your time trying to convert him."

"I think he's an interesting person. He's so worldly. I read somewhere that he's a genius, like me." Justin smiled.

"Of course, you wouldn't mind getting a closer look at that hard body of his."

"Whose hard body?" Ted asked as he returned from the bathroom.

"Thomas Carey."

"The millionaire recluse?" Ted was impressed. "Like you would ever get to even see his body. I heard he never goes out in public."

"We've seen it. It's not bad. But, it doesn't matter. I keep telling Justin the man is straight."

"You don't know everything, Brian."

"Justin, are you sure you're up to the challenge?" Michael asked. "Your hand still shakes when you're pouring hot coffee."

"He's up to it all right," Brian defended Justin.

"I'm bad as new!" Justin smiled.

A schedule was drawn up at the school for the students who had been chosen to work on the mural. Justin had chosen Saturday afternoon to work. He wanted to go early so he would have time to check the place out before starting to paint. It had been raining all night and into the morning. The sky was bleak and there was a damp chill in the loft.

"Justin, the storm is getting worse. Maybe you should call and cancel."

"Are you kidding? There are other applicants who would be falling all over themselves to take my place. I'm not calling in 'chicken' on my first day."

"Since you're so set on going, fine. I'll drive you." Brian started to put on his shoes.

"No way! I'm not a baby. I know how to drive in the rain."

Brian grabbed his car keys from the counter and turned to Justin. "Are you coming or not?"

Justin knew better than to try to argue with Brian when he was in protector mode. He put on his coat and grabbed his supplies. "Okay, but you have to stay out of the way while I'm working."

"I thought I could pose for you," Brian joked. "You know, for the penis reproductions."

"You don't need to pose. I can draw your dick in my sleep."

The drive up to the mansion had been treacherous but they arrived safely. To Justin's disappointment there was no one around but the housekeeper. He looked at his assignment sheet and studied the artwork before him. As Justin concentrated on his work, Brian sat on a sofa across the room and read a book. Every once in a while, Justin would feel Brian's eyes watching him work. He thought it was sweet that the man felt he needed to hide his interest.

Justin stopped working and took a moment to study the photographs and sketches of the mural. It was an English landscape. There was a castle in the background, but the focal point of the mural were children playing blind man's bluff near a lake in the foreground. The mothers were busy preparing a picnic lunch as the fathers stood nearby, presumably discussing the news of the day. Justin liked it very much. The scene had a very warm family feel to it. He wondered if Brian had even noticed it. Justin turned to find that Brian was also studying the photographs of the mural.

Brian rose from the couch and stretched his lanky body. "Are you done yet? The weather sucks and the roads are probably going to ice up if we stay much longer."

"We should go. Let me get my stuff together and tell the housekeeper we're leaving."

Brian stood in front of the scene Justin had been working on.

"What do you think of the mural?" Justin asked.

"I like it. I guess it was easier to be gay in merry old England."

"What makes you say that?" Justin asked as he wiped his brushes.

"Look at the way they're dressed. That guy's pants are so tight you can see his whole package. And look at that guy's ass in those white tights."

Justin grinned. "I guess Emmett would have fit right in. Maybe I should paint him into the mural." Justin grabbed his bag and went to talk to the housekeeper.

Brian put on his jacket and looked out the window. The rain had increased and it looked like there was a thin layer of ice on the driveway. It would have to be a slow ride home. Once Justin had loaded his bag into the back seat, Brian started the engine and began the perilous trip down the hill to the main highway. It was difficult to see and the road had become very slippery. Brian looked over at Justin and saw that the boy had fallen asleep. Well, at least he's relaxed. Brian smiled to himself at the trust that Justin had in him to get them home safely. He briefly took his eyes from the road to take one more glance over at his sleeping beauty. It was an indulgence he would very quickly regret. The Jeep began to swerve to one side of the road. Brian could barely see the road at this point and his first instinct was to turn the wheels away from the edge of the road. This caused the Jeep to skid sideways and speed up as it made its descent down the hill. That was the last thing Brian remembered before everything went black.

He woke up on the side of the road dazed and confused. He had been thrown from the Jeep when it turned over. But, where was the Jeep? More importantly, where was Justin? He began to call his name as he dragged himself into a standing position, ignoring a stabbing pain in his ankle.

"JUSTIN!" Bran limped toward the edge of the cliff where the road ended. There was a steep drop straight down into the lake from this point on the road. If the Jeep had left the road and gone over the cliff, Justin might be at the bottom of the lake trapped inside of the car.

Brian screamed his name again. "JUSTIN!" He was convinced that Justin was drowning. Brian was not the world's greatest swimmer, but Justin trusted him to protect him and Brian was not about to let him down. He moved closer to the edge and prepared to jump off the cliff into the icy water. Before he could take another step forward, he saw something move out of the corner of his eye. "Justin?" The figure ran past Brian and without hesitation leaped from the ledge and hurled himself into the lake below. Brian felt his ankle give way and he dropped to his knees. He watched helplessly as the figure dragged a small body from the cold water.

"Get a rope!" The man called out. "In my trunk. The key is up there. Hurry, he's pretty cold!"

Brian once again pulled himself up and staggered to the car. He found the rope and lowered it down the side of the cliff. The man put Justin on his shoulder and pulled himself back up to the top. "Get a blanket." The man was still carrying Justin's limp body. Brian retrieved a blanket from the trunk of the car as the man put Justin into the back seat. Brian got in after him and wrapped the shivering boy in the blanket. He held him as close as he dared as the man who had rescued them drove up the road toward the mansion where they had begun their fateful journey.

By the time they got inside of the house, Justin was coughing and cursing. "Fucking ice. Your Jeep is at the bottom of the fucking lake, Brian. Are you okay?" Justin examined Brian for injuries.

"You're the one who did the free fall off a cliff. I can't believe you're not hurt." Brian kissed him on the head.

"I don't remember anything except someone pulling on my foot. It must have been stuck. Then he dragged me out of the water. Where did he go?"

"To get some firewood." The man spoke with a slight Virginia drawl. "There's nothing like a roaring fire to take the chill off." He began to build a fire in the fireplace.

"Are you Mr. Carey?" Justin asked.

"Call me Tom," was the reply.

"You saved my life. Thank you."

"You saved both our lives," Brian added. "That was some act of bravery, jumping off that cliff the way you did. I owe you."

"Oh, you would have done the same had you not sprained your ankle. Is the ice pack helping? "

"Yeah. I'm bad as new," Brian said.

"I'm glad you're both okay. What were you doing way out here in this weather?"

"I was working on your mural. I'm Justin Taylor, one of the art students. This is my boyfriend, Brian Kinney."

Tom strolled over to study the progress done on the mural. He seemed to be lost in thought.

"I love your house." Justin tried to draw him into conversation. "I can't wait to see how it will look once the murals are finished."

Tom turned and studied the two men on the couch. Brian had his arm draped protectively around Justin. It seemed to Tom like the man was still in shock. The boy appeared to be unshaken by his brush with death. "You two should stay here tonight. The roads are completely iced over by now. If you're sure you don't need medical attention tonight, I will ask the housekeeper to make up a room for you." He started to leave, but stopped and turned when he got to the door.

"Justin, you're a very talented artist. I hope you'll continue to work on the murals. They're the heart and soul of this house."

"Thanks."

"Good night."

Justin sank deeper into Brian's arms. Brian had been unusually silent and Justin hoped that he wasn't in one of his self-loathing moods because of what had happened. "What are you thinking?"

"I wasn't. I wasn't thinking, Justin. I took my eyes off the road and I almost got you killed."

Justin put his hands on Brian's face and looked into his eyes. "It was an accident. I'm fine."

"I was going to jump. He ran past me like he was enjoying himself. He never even hesitated before he jumped off that cliff. Tom Carey is one fucked-up crazy bastard."

"I told you he was interesting. And he is soooo hot!"

"Speaking of hot. . . Let's go to bed so I can warm you up properly, from the inside out."

"Yeah," Justin purred, "let's go to bed."

Justin got under the covers on the four-poster bed. He looked around the room at the large ornamental furniture. There was a fire lit in the fireplace in the corner of the room. It was a warm, beautiful room, but it would not feel like home until Brian joined him in the bed.

The moment Brian entered the room he knew that Justin was already asleep. He had spent every night for the past few months listening to the steady sound of Justin's breathing as he watched the boy sleep. Sliding into the bed, Brian gently took Justin's hand and laid it across his chest. He could barely remember what it had been like before Justin came into his life. His bed had been most often empty in the morning, because his tricks rarely spent the night. The fact was he preferred that they be gone when he awoke. Now that he and Justin were a couple, it had become routine for him to wake up and turn to his left where Justin's blond head would be peeking out from beneath the covers. It was such a warm feeling to find him there, every morning. His bed had become their bed. He had never stopped to think about it in those terms. Tonight, as he lay on his back looking over at the sleeping boy, he realized that it didn't matter where they slept. As long as Justin was there it was home.

Brian looked out of the window near the bed and saw that the moon was visible. The storm appeared to be over now. Brian had a brief flashback to the moment when he realized that Justin's life was once again in danger. And once again he was to blame. He wondered if it was an omen. Justin stirred at his side and pulled his hand from Brian's chest. Brian turned to see that Justin was now awake and ready for action.

Justin returned to the house every weekend to continue his work on the mural. He had not seen the mysterious Mr. Carey since the night of the accident. The housekeeper told him that the man was out of the country and would not be returning until Spring. It was the third week of March and the weather was unseasonably warm. Brian had driven out to the mansion every week with Justin. He swore it was because he didn't trust Justin driving his Jeep around all those curves in the road. Justin had a feeling he just liked watching him work.

After helping Justin to set up, Brian went outside and lit up a cigarette.

"I hear those things will kill you." Tom stood up next to a motorcycle which he had been preparing for the road.

"I hear those things will kill you quicker," Brian shot back.

Tom was dressed in a T-shirt and jeans. Brian once again was struck by the haunting presence of this strange man. He had never been attracted to a straight man before and he wasn't sure how to act. Tom put Brian at ease when he

walked up the steps and put out his hand. Brian shook his hand and when he looked up he saw that the man was actually smiling at him. Justin had been right about Tom's mysterious facade masking a desperate need for human connection. His smile was sincere.

"You know, you don't have to come out here to chaperone Justin. Even if I were gay I wouldn't hit on him."

"Why not?"

"The way you two look at each other, you throw off sparks from across a room. A man would have to be crazy to try to come between you. I'm not that much of a dare-devil."

Brian laughed. "Are we that obvious, even to straight people? We'll try to tone it down."

"Don't," Tom responded almost too quickly. "It's nice." He started to walk back to the bike and then turned midway and spoke to Brian. "Wanna ride with me?"

Brian considered it a moment and said. "Sure, why not? I'll go tell Justin."

"Wait. Hop on and we'll both tell him."

Tom revved up the motorcycle and Brian got on the back, not sure what to expect. Seconds later, Tom sped up the bike and without hesitation bounded up the steps and into the house to where Justin was working.

"What the fuck . . .?" Justin dropped his brush.

"We're going for a ride!" Tom yelled over the roar of the engine.

Justin looked at Brian and slowly nodded his head. The men took off out the door and down the steps and headed in the direction of the lake.

Brian hated to admit it, but he was terrified. Tom raced the bike around the lake at a break-neck speed. Up and down hills they sped, barely slowing at the curves. The best Brian could do was to hold on to Tom for dear life. The man is an expert, Brian kept telling himself. He's probably done this 100 times. He leaned into the man's back and felt his heart thumping with unbridled excitement.

As they rode up a hill on the other side of the lake, Tom momentarily slowed the bike and Brian began to relax. When they were almost at the top of the hill, Tom accelerated and the bike took off. The man was not slowing down for the curve in the road and Brian thought that at any moment they would be hurled off the cliff and down into the ravine 30 feet below. And then it happened. Brian involuntarily tightened his grip around Tom's waist and let out a scream as the man sent the bike careening over the edge. Barely missing a tree, Tom swerved the bike, which had made contact with a steep dirt path that led down to the ravine below. Brian closed his eyes and hung on for dear life as Tom skillfully maneuvered down the path to the safety of the road below. Once he reached the bottom he slowed and finally stopped the bike.

Brian, whose body had been frozen with fear, felt his heart racing. As soon as he felt the muscles in his limbs relax enough for him to move, he lifted his leg and dismounted the bike. Stumbling into the underbrush, he fell to his knees and vomited.

Tom walked to the shore of the lake and stripped off his shirt and then his jeans. Naked, he plunged into the freezing water. Brian sat on the ground shivering awaiting the man's return. Several seconds later, Tom emerged from the lake wearing nothing but an ear to ear devilish grin. As angry as he had been at the perilous ordeal the man had just put him through, Brian could not help but smile back. The man's body was perfection. Tall, straight, muscular and uncut.

Brian hoped that he had not betrayed himself with his blatant stare, but he was powerless to avert his eyes. Tom knew he was gay, so it was obvious to Brian that this display was a clear invitation. Not meant to seduce him, but to offer acceptance. And openness.

Tom slipped into his jeans and began to button his shirt. "Sorry .I get carried away sometimes. I hope I haven't offended you."

"Fuck, no. But you did scare the living shit out of me on the way down here. Do you have some kind of death wish?"

Tom looked surprised. "No. . . 'No fear', that's my motto. You can never really enjoy life being afraid all the time."

"Well, I'm not getting on that fucking bike again unless I'm in the driver's seat."

Tom smiled and nodded. "I've never ridden on the back before. I always like to try new things."

Brian wondered if he had understood the man correctly. Was he coming on to him? Shit, you would think that after all the years he had spent "coming on" to men he would know when he was being hit on. He dismissed the idea as being predicated by the death-defying descent down to the lake.

Brian mounted the bike and Tom got on behind him, wrapping his arms around Brian's waist. With the bike now in his control, Brian started to relax and even enjoy the trip back to the house. When they arrived, Tom got off the bike and left without a word about what had happened. Brian went into the house to look for Justin. Not finding him in the dining room, he began to call his name as he walked down the hall.

"In here," Justin whispered loud enough for Brian to hear.

Assuming that Justin had found a private place in which to fuck, Brian smiled to himself and followed the seductive voice into a room near the end of the hallway. "Holy shit!" was Brian's reaction to what he saw.

The room was piled high with photos, trophies, plaques and newspaper clippings, all relating to the accomplishments of the owner of the house, Tom Carey. There were photos of him barreling down ski slopes, dangling from bungee cords, behind the wheels of race cars. He had participated in almost every conceivable dangerous activity know to man. There were many photos of him standing on platforms receiving medals, plaques, trophies and kisses from scantily clad women.

"Do you notice anything strange?" Justin asked.

"What are you talking about? The man has won first prize in every event. He's fucking amazing."

"I'm talking about the photos. He's not smiling in one picture. His eyes are expressionless, like he doesn't even care that he won. Don't you think that's odd?"

"It's the thrill of the sport I enjoy, not the prize," Tom said from the open doorway. "I see you've found my collection."

"Sorry. I was curious and the door was open," Justin said.

"I guess I should put them up on the walls or something. Someone is always asking to see them, but I haven't a clue as to how to arrange them."

"I can do it!" Justin offered.

"Justin, these things are personal. Maybe he wants to do it himself," Brian suggested.

"No. I don't care. I'd be grateful if you could do it, Justin. You have a flare for the artistic. I was just admiring your work on the mural. You've captured the expressions perfectly."

"Thanks, I really like working on the project. I can take care of this room on my next visit."

"I'll be out of the country for a month. You can come out here any time you'd like. I'll tell the housekeeper to expect you."

Justin worked diligently for two weeks because he wanted to finish decorating the trophy room before Tom's return. Even if the man showed no interest in the collection, Justin felt that once he saw it displayed properly he would be pleased. Justin had to admit that he very much wanted to please Tom Carey. For once, it wasn't because he found the man attractive. Justin wanted to make the man smile.

He arrived back at the loft at 5:00 p.m. and started to prepare dinner for Brian and himself. It was Friday and they planned to meet the guys and go to Babylon that night. When Brian arrived home, he removed his tie and his shoes and turned on the evening news. Justin looked over at him from the kitchen. As he cooked, he thought about how happy he had been lately. He was enjoying his classes at the art school, his job at the mansion was challenging and rewarding and Brian was the perfect mate for him. There was just the right combination of sweet domesticity and excitement in his life to keep things interesting.

Justin brought two glasses of wine over to the couch and plopped himself down next to Brian. The news anchor had just made an announcement about some late-breaking news. They both stared in disbelief as a photo of Justin's employer flashed on the screen. The anchor went on to describe a terrible accident which had left the man near death. The report was followed by a film clip of a helicopter crashing onto the roadway of a rally car race in Spain. The car that had been in the lead careened out of control when the helicopter, which had been filming the race, went down. The film footage went on to show the car crashing into a wall and bursting into flames. Rescuers immediately ran to help the injured driver. Brian and Justin watched as they pulled the seemingly lifeless body from the wreckage. Brian felt Justin squeeze his hand.

The next morning, Justin called the house to see if there had been any word on Mr. Carey. The woman who answered the phone told him that he was still in a coma and would remain in a hospital in Spain until his family could bring him home. Justin asked if it would be all right for him to work on the mural and on the trophy room. She said she thought it would be, as Mr. Carey would be anxious to see the progress made when he did return from Spain.

In the coming weeks, Justin finished the trophy room and, along with the other students, had almost completed the mural in the dining room. They had begun work on a mural that would adorn the wall in the drawing room when Mr. Carey's family brought him home from Spain. Tom had been in a coma for almost a week after the accident. Miraculously, his injuries were not life-threatening and his father and brother had brought him home to recover.

Justin was busy cleaning his brushes in the workroom off the kitchen when he heard a commotion. He moved closer to the back staircase leading to the main hallway upstairs. Two men were arguing loudly, but Justin could not hear what they were arguing about. Moments later Justin saw a man, whom he assumed was Tom's father, rush down the main staircase and out the front door. Justin decided to sneak up the back stairs to see if Tom needed anything. He stopped in his tracks outside a door when he heard more arguing followed by a loud crash. A man emerged from the room before Justin could make his retreat. The man stopped and looked at him briefly; then, without a word, he exited down the staircase. Justin cautiously peeked in the door, which had been left ajar.

"Are you okay?" Justin slipped slowly into the room. He looked down and saw the remains of a laptop computer which had most likely been the victim of a tantrum. Justin attempted to pick up the pieces when Tom spoke.

"Leave it. I don't want it. Go away, Justin."

Justin could see that the weeks of confinement had taken their toll on the once energetic man. He was pale and thin. The right side of his face was discolored and slightly swollen. But it was the look in his eyes that bothered Justin the most. It was a look he knew all too well. The man had given up on life.

"You look like shit," Justin said. "Do you want me to help you up? Maybe if we went out on the terrace you could get some sun."

"I can't get up. I can't walk or type or even fucking think. Working on my tan is not really a priority."

Justin decided to change the subject. "Who was that guy? The one you threw the laptop at?"

"My doting brother, Dr. John Carey," Tom answered. "He came here to gloat. John has never appreciated my zest for adventure. He thinks that I'm trying to kill myself to make a point."

"Were you? Trying to kill yourself?" Justin asked.

Tom looked Justin in the eye. "No, I wasn't, Justin. Not when I was racing. I just don't see the point of living now. Not if I have to go through the rest of my life as a pathetic invalid."

"I remember the feeling," Justin said.

"What do you mean?"

"Some asshole hit me in the head with a bat a few months ago. I was in a coma, too. When I came out of it, I thought I could never draw again."

"Why did the asshole hit you with a bat?"

"Because I'm gay," Justin answered.

Tom stared at Justin for a moment, and then turned toward the window. Justin thought he had been dismissed, but then Tom spoke again. "I think I may be able to walk a little, if you help me out of the bed."

Justin helped Tom pull his legs over the side of the bed. He let the man put his weight on his shoulder as he stood. Tom leaned heavily on him for a moment and then straightened his body. With some assistance from Justin, he was able to walk out the French doors to the terrace. Justin helped him into a chair.

"Were you scared? I saw the accident on T.V. That helicopter headed right for your car . . ." Justin paused and waited for Tom's response.

"I don't remember anything," Tom answered flatly.

"Brian told me all about what happened the night I got bashed, but I couldn't remember any of it. That was pretty scary, missing a whole piece of your life. Maybe you should try to remember. I felt a lot better after my memory came back."

"I don't need to remember it, Justin. All I have to do is watch CNN. It wasn't the high point of my life. You asked me if I felt fear. The answer would be no. I don't feel fear, or pain or joy. . . I feel nothing," Tom stated coldly. He looked over at Justin and saw the shocked look on the boy's face. He thought he'd better explain.

"It has nothing to do with what happened in Spain. I've been like this for as long as I can remember. I can't explain it and I've given up trying to understand it. I risk my life without hesitation because it means nothing to me. I'm already dead inside."

"That's fucked up, and it isn't entirely true. You were angry at your father and brother, and you're frustrated with yourself. Those are feelings."

Tom chuckled. "Justin, you don't give up easily, do you?"

"Not when I believe in something . . . someone." Justin flashed Tom one of his famous 'Sunshine smiles'. "Are you going to be okay alone? I have to go home and talk to Brian about something."

"I'm sure my overprotective brother is lurking somewhere. I'm not alone. Although I would prefer it."

"Hey, I have an idea. We just may be able to help each other." Justin confided his secret to Tom and then got up to leave.

"Justin, do you think you could take that computer somewhere and get it fixed?"

"I can try. I'll come back tomorrow. I still do my exercises for my hand. Maybe they would help you, too."

"Yeah. Come back tomorrow."

Justin was about to leave when he noticed Tom's brother in the dining room studying the mural.

"It's not quite finished," Justin said as he stood next to the tall stranger. He looked very much like his younger brother, except that his eyes were hazel, like Brian's.

"I know. I remember two more children, over there by the tree." John pointed and then turned to look at Justin.

"You've seen it before? Where?" Justin had been curious as to the origin of the murals.

"At our grandparents' home in Virginia. My grandmother was an artist. She had painted murals on every wall of the house. She said that a house was not a home unless it was filled with children."

Justin found it odd that Tom's brother had a slight British accent. "Did you grow up there?"

"No. I was raised by my mother in Kent, England. My brother was raised by my father. When he was in Viet Nam, my grandparents took care of Tom."

Once again, Justin was surprised. He had been under the impression that Tom's mother was dead. Justin put out his right hand to John. "My name is Justin Taylor. I've been working on the mural."

John shook Justin's hand. "You did a nice job with the children. My grandmother would have appreciated that." John noticed the computer remains in Justin's hands. "Did he ask you to throw that away?"

"No," Justin answered. "Tom wants me to get it fixed. He wants to start writing. Why don't you try talking to him again?" Justin suggested. "I left him out on the terrace. He isn't mad at you, really. He's just frustrated with himself."

John smiled. "I know. I'm not about to abandon him. It's been nice talking to you, Justin."

John started to walk back to the staircase. Justin stopped him. "What happened to the original mural?"

"The house burned to the ground when Tom was 10. My grandfather died in the fire." John turned and walked up the staircase.

When he arrived home, Justin was not pleased to find that everyone had gathered at the loft that evening. He had something to discuss with Brian that needed a delicate approach. Once he realized that Mel and Lindsay were there,

he knew he had to make his announcement and explain what his plans were. Maybe it wasn't such a bad thing that they had company tonight. He was sure his plan would get support from at least some of their friends.

"Hi, Justin. Have you made your decision yet?" Mel had pulled Justin aside and was speaking in a quiet whisper. "I want you to know that I haven't discussed this with anyone, so there's no pressure for you to bring it up now. You might want to talk to Brian in private first."

"No. I think it's great that everyone's here. I've decided. I'm going to accept the settlement."

Justin smiled at Mel and went to join the others. He kissed Brian on the mouth and then he made his announcement.

"I'm going to settle my lawsuit with St. James and Hobbs. No amount of money could ever erase what happened to me, but it will help to end things. Mel worked out a really good structured settlement. I will be getting a lump sum now and then they will be paying a set amount every year."

"Honey, that's great. Brian can sell this drafty old loft and the two of you can buy a big house in the country," Emmett suggested.

Everyone's eyes were on Brian. "What the fuck would I want with a house in the country?"

That life is for straight people and munchers with little ones." He got up and went to the kitchen to get another beer. Out of the corner of his eye he watched Justin.

"I don't think that the suburbs are for me, either. I've been to a realtor in the city." Justin looked over at Brian. "I'm going to be able to pay my own way now, so we could definitely afford a bigger place."

Brian returned to the couch and slid over the top to sit next to Justin. "I'm not selling this loft. It's my loft and you live here with me. If you want to leave, there are no locks on the door."

Lindsay sat up in her chair and spoke. "Brian, you're being unreasonable. Justin should have a say about where you both live."

"It's okay, Linz. I had a feeling he would react this way." Justin was smiling. "So I'm going to buy a loft of my own."

Michael could not conceal his glee. "You're moving out?"

Brian's face had turned to stone. He couldn't believe that Justin would just move out. They were more than just roommates.

"Fuck, no. I'd never leave Brian," Justin shot back in Michael's direction.

Brian relaxed a little, but he was still confused. "So you're going to buy a loft as an investment? Very smart idea. You can rent it out and have a steady income."

"I'm not going to rent it. I'm going to live in it." He turned to Brian. "I'm buying the loft next door." He held his breath and waited for Brian's reaction.

"You'll still be sleeping in our bed, right?" Brian asked.

"Of course! Where else would I sleep?"

"So what will you do with all that space? That place is bigger than mine."

"I thought we could break through the wall and make one big place. I can have my own space for my art work and you can have your own gym. The best part is that there's a hot tub in the bathroom."

Brian's eyes lit up. He had a secret fantasy about fucking Justin in a hot tub. The idea was starting to excite him but he didn't want to appear too anxious.

"I'll have to think about it."

Everyone in the room picked up pillows and whatever else was handy and threw them at Brian. "What the fuck is wrong with you?" Mel asked.

"All that dust and dirt. . . remodeling is a real pain in the ass. Not to mention the army of architects, decorators and construction workers in and out all day long."

"Funny, that never seemed to bother you before," Emmett joked.

Later that evening, after everyone had gone home, Justin decided to bring up the loft idea again. "I'm sorry I brought it up in front of everyone. I know you like your loft the way it is. I just wanted to be able to contribute something. I can always rent it out instead."

"No. I was just being an asshole in front of them to keep up my bastard image. It sounds like a great idea. I was getting tired of tripping over your shit anyway. You're right, we need more room."

"Really? When can we start? I have so many ideas. We'll have to hire an architect, but maybe we can do some of the work ourselves. This wall will have to go and maybe we should think about moving the kitchen. The new loft has a lot more windows, and there's even a skylight. Maybe we could move the bed over there and we can fuck under the stars."

Brian smiled at Justin's enthusiasm. They went over to the computer and started making plans. "Justin, with all the construction that's got to be done, I don't think we'll be able to live here while they're working."

"I've already thought of that."

"Do you think of everything?"

"Pretty much. Once I decide I want something, I have to make a plan."

"Like when you decided you wanted me?"

Justin blushed. "You have to admit my plan worked."

"Not without protest."

"Are you happy?"

"Yeah." Brian lifted Justin's shirt and tickled his belly.

"So shut up." Justin grinned at Brian's tickling and pushed his hand away. "I saw Tom today when I was working at the mansion. He's having a pretty rough time recovering at the house. He had a big fight with his father and he threw his brother out. He won't see anyone. I snuck in there today and got him to talk to me."

"Don't you ever take 'no' for an answer?"

"I know what it's like to feel helpless. For him it's a million times worse. He doesn't have a 'Brian' to help him heal himself."

"All right. What does this have to do with the loft?"

"I asked if we could stay there for a while."

"You what?"

"Come on, Brian, you like him, too. If we stay there we might be able to help him out and we'd have a really cool place to live until the loft is finished."

Brian knew that Justin had made up his mind. He was right. Brian figured he owed Tom for saving Justin's life. And he did like the man. Even if he wasn't gay he was an all right guy.

"Okay. We can stay there, but only if you promise not to interfere in his life. He has a family who'll get him help."

"You didn't hear him. He was yelling at his dad and then he threw his laptop at his brother. He's angry. I remember the feeling. I promise not to press it if he throws something at me. It's going to be fun, you'll see."

"I better get to fuck you in every room of that place. I'm pretty sure there are 500 or more."

The plans for the new loft were shaping up. Justin had a vision for their new home, but Brian winced every time Justin would mention adding a room or putting up a wall. "I fucking hate walls. They make me feel trapped," Brian groaned.

"We have to think about the future, Brian. What about Gus? He's going to be staying here sometimes and he should have a space of his own. I don't think he needs to be watching us fuck all night long. I walked in on my parents once when I was a kid and I freaked. I couldn't even look at my mother for a week."

"Maybe that's why you're gay," Brian grinned. "I guess you're right. But just don't make a lot of walls, okay? And don't mess with our bedroom. I like it where it is. If I want to fuck you under the skylight, I'll drag your ass over there and fuck you."

Justin was really excited about the plans and had sketched out his ideas for the loft. He had decided that since Brian had given him his conditions, the rest of the loft was his to design. Justin met with the architect and was confident that his plans were going to work. Construction was to begin immediately, so Brian and Justin packed up what they would need for a few weeks stay away from home. Brian dropped Justin and their luggage off at the mansion on his way to work.

Justin was surprised when he arrived at the mansion that morning. He had expected to find Tom in his bedroom, but the man was nowhere to be found. Justin decided to set up his equipment and begin work. It was mid-morning when he stopped for a break. He went into the kitchen for a drink. As he was pouring some juice into a glass, he heard a loud crash from a room at the back of the house. He went to investigate. When he got to a far doorway, he saw Tom Carey lying on his back on the floor next to a treadmill.

As Justin slowly entered the room, he saw that Tom's eyes were following him. Justin suspected that if he made a big scene and tried to help the man up, Tom would probably react like Brian would and tell him to fuck off. Instead of making a scene Justin lay down on the floor next to Tom and asked. "What the fuck are you looking at?"

Tom grinned at Justin. The last thing he needed was another person coddling him and telling him he should not over-do. "I was just studying the ceiling. It looks so white and bare. I was trying to picture how it would look with a mural painted on it. I envision a dark blue sky with some puffy clouds and a bunch of twinkling stars. What do you think?"

"I do some of my best work lying on my back," Justin joked. " You can ask Brian."

Tom chuckled. "I'm serious, Justin. I saw it on one of those home improvement shows this morning. They didn't exactly paint it on the ceiling, though - they painted it on paper and then they stuck it up on the ceiling. I liked how it looked when they were finished. Maybe I'll do that in my bedroom. It would be like sleeping out under the stars."

"Why would anyone want to sleep outside when they own what is possibly the coolest house in the whole universe?"

"The truth is. . . I hate walls."

Justin smiled to himself 'where have I heard that before?'

"On rainy days, I used to sit on the floor in my Grandmother's dinning room and pretend I was outside playing with the children in the mural."

"Didn't you have any friends?"

"At school there were kids I played sports with, but I didn't consider them friends. I never really fit in."

"I know the feeling. In high school I was surrounded by a crowd of kids and still felt like I was alone."

Tom looked at Justin sadly. He understood the comparison.

Justin sat up and started rubbing his arm. "You wanna go outside? I've been working all morning and my hand is starting to cramp."

Tom pulled himself up slowly. Justin pretended not to notice the pained look on his face. The man then took Justin's hand in his and started to massage it.

"I'm sorry that someone thought that they had the right to do this to you, Justin. Was it one of your classmates? Why was he so mad at you?"

"It was this jock named Chris Hobbs. I had a crush on him before I met Brian. I gave him a hand job once and he loved it. But after, he got all freaked out. He started pushing me around and calling me names. No one at the school would do anything to stop him. I hated going to school. On the night of the prom, Brian showed up and danced with me. I guess that drove Hobbs nuts and that's when he attacked me with a base ball bat to my head. I was in a coma for two weeks and they told me I could have died if Brian hadn't called out my name and made me turn. The bat hit me here." Justin indicated the spot where he had been hit.

Tom ran his hand over the spot on Justin forehead. It was hard for him to comprehend that Justin might have died. He was so young and so full of life. Anger stirred inside of him at a society that would not only excuse, but also condone such a vicious act. "Let's go for a walk," Tom suggested.

They spent an hour walking in the gardens and then returned to the house for lunch. After they ate, Justin returned to his work and Tom retreated to his bedroom to write. When Brian arrived at 7:00 p. m., Justin ran out to the car to meet him. Tom watched from his bedroom window as Justin threw his arms around Brian's neck and the two kissed passionately. Justin started to sniff Brian's shirt and Brian chuckled. 'What was that all about?' Tom wondered. The two men disappeared inside the house and moments later Tom could hear them laughing from inside their room down the hall from his own room. Having these two around full time was going to be very interesting.

One day, Justin asked Tom if he would like to drive into town and check out the progress on the loft. The two had become close over the past two weeks and Justin thought it would be good for Tom to get out of the house. The man was hesitant at first, claiming that he was involved in writing a difficult chapter, but Justin was nothing if not persistent. They decided to go in early and, after visiting the loft, they would meet up with Brian for lunch.

"Wow! What a fucking mess! Brian would kill me if he saw this," Justin chuckled. He went over to speak to a man working on the new kitchen. Tom stood in the middle of the room and looked around. There were no walls, no rooms. It was just one big empty space. In one corner there was a platform which resembled a stage. Tom assumed that this was their bedroom.

Justin confirmed that fact when he came up behind Tom and announced, "This is our bed." He turned on the light fixture behind the bed and threw himself down on the plastic-covered mattress. He motioned for Tom to join him. "This is where I lost my virginity. I was seventeen years old. We were just getting started when Brian got a phone

call from Mel, who is Lindsay's partner. She told him that he better get to the hospital because Lindsay had just given birth to his son."

"Brian is a father?" Tom was amazed.

"Yeah. His name is Gus. I got to name him. Brian took me with him to the hospital. You should have seen his face when he held his baby for the first time." Justin looked up at the ceiling dreamily. "I think it was that very moment when I fell in love with him. We came back here and fucked all night and the next morning he fucked me again in the shower."

"So it was love at first sight for both of you?"

"For me, yeah. I guess so. Brian blew me off after that night. He said he didn't believe in love, he believed in fucking. He didn't want me around."

"Why do I have the feeling that you didn't accept that?"

Justin grinned. "I followed him to Babylon one night. He had just picked up two tricks and was dancing with them. I started flirting with them behind his back and they dropped him and started dancing with me."

Tom laughed out loud. Justin like his laugh. "Brian pushed them both away and grabbed me and started dancing with me and kissing me. We came back here and fucked all night again."

"So then it was love at second sight."

"No, not really. In fact, I don't think Brian realized how much he cared about me 'til I got bashed in the head."

Tom winced at the thought of Justin lying on the cold cement, bleeding. "And when you awoke from the coma he was at your side declaring his undying love."

"No. In fact he never even came to visit me at the hospital. Brian has his own way of expressing his feelings. He's not like most people."

"He just left you there thinking that he didn't give shit what happened to you? Is that how he expressed his love? What would he do if he hated you?" Tom turned onto his stomach and looked Justin in the eye. "So, how did you get together after the bashing?."

"I couldn't remember anything from that night. The doctors said I had blocked it out. Brian had tried to help me remember by telling me exactly what happened that night. But I still couldn't remember. I think it was harder on him than it was on me. He felt so guilty about what had happened. My mother blamed Brian for the bashing, and told him to stay away from me, which only made things worse. One day I totally freaked out and she asked Brian to take me to live with him. My memory came back all at once at Gus's birthday party. Someone had given him a bat and when he started swinging it everything came back to me all at once. I really freaked out then and so did Brian. He brought me back to the loft and made love to me. We've been together ever since."

"Happily ever after, I guess. . . whatever it takes. So, are you married or something?"

"Fuck, no. We have an arrangement, with rules. We can both fuck anyone we want, one time only. And we always come home by 3 a.m."

"You mean you're not a couple? You don't mind him being with other men?" Tom was shocked. This revelation really shook his growing interest in the dynamics of his new-found friends' relationship.

"Of course we're a couple. Sometimes we do guys together - threesomes, foursomes. . . " Justin explained.

Tom changed the subject. "Let's go eat lunch."

All through lunch, Tom could not get Justin's revelation out of his mind. He looked at Brian Kinney and wondered why he would want to share this incredible boy with anyone. How could he watch him be taken by another man? Tom knew that he could never deal with such an arrangement. He wondered if all gay men felt this way. Tom found that although his infatuation with their romance had faded somewhat, he was still very much attracted to them.

That evening, Justin decided that since he had taken off most of the day to go into town he would pick up his brushes and continue work on the mural. Brian had stretched out on the sofa with a book and Tom sat at his desk reviewing his manuscript. Tom found his mind wandering and he looked up to observe his guests.

What was it about them? What was it that drew him in like a magnetic force? He'd never been attracted to a man. He was beginning to realize, however, that he had developed an aversion toward women. What else was there? He was running out of genders. The events of the day had puzzled him. Had he been suppressing a secret desire to bed a man? One had to consider the men in question.

He watched from a distance as Justin went about his work. There was something about Justin's hands that intrigued Tom. He had large hands for a young man his size. His fingers were round and thick. Tom thought that if he were to touch his hands they would be warm. Justin's fair skin and handsome facial features combined with the graceful way he moved when he walked would always give him a youthful appearance. His hands would be his strength, his tool of artistic expression. As skillfully as he used them to guide the brush across the canvas, he also used them to express love, passion and tenderness for Brian.

Everything about Justin was unique. He was a highly intelligent young man with a gift for seeing past the bullshit and getting to the very heart of a person. His adolescent curiosity and candid observations were a refreshing change from the superficial banter which passed for polite conversation at the rare social occasions it had been Tom's duty to attend. Tom thoroughly enjoyed the boy's company. It didn't hurt, of course, that he was physically as beautiful as any woman Tom had ever been with. Justin's innocent, trusting nature had been tarnished, but not completely destroyed, by the vicious attack on his life. He was sensitive to the suffering of others whose pain had, similarly, been trapped inside the recesses of their own souls.

What motivated Justin was love. Tom could only imagine what the boy had been like before his heart was completely captivated by the bold and equally beautiful Brian Kinney. This was a man whose very nature was an enigma. There was an innocence reflected in his eyes that contradicted every story Tom had heard of Brian's ruthless business dealings and his personal licentious reputation. Could it be that Mr. Kinney had been transformed by his handsome young Prince/Princess?

Tom looked over at Brian, who was sitting near the fireplace reading. Every few minutes he would look up from his book and glance over at Justin. A warm smile would appear briefly and then dissipate as his eyes returned to the pages. Tom smiled to himself at the sight of this 30 year-old man who couldn't concentrate for two minutes without checking to make sure his lover was still there. It must have been traumatic for him to witness that beautiful boy being brutally attacked in a parking garage. Brian watched over Justin like a mother cat protecting her kitten, ready to pounce should he be threatened.

Tom considered Brian for a moment. What was it that Justin saw in him besides the obvious external packaging? There wasn't one particular aspect of Mr. Kinney's good looks that held the most appeal. His expressive face was, at most, a mask for his conflicted feelings. It was the mystery about him that Tom found intriguing. There was a lot more to Brian Kinney than met the eye.

Tom knew it was more than the physical attraction he felt for both men that had been preying on his mind. His thoughts had been wandering back to his childhood. He remembered his grandparents and the close, loving relationship they had shared. Growing up in their home had been the happiest time of his young life. They were truly in love. He remembered the way they would look at each other and communicate without words. Tom had not thought of those memories for years. He had tried to block them out of his mind by telling himself that love was an illusion. And yet here it was right before him. Two people who radiated loving emotion so strong he could feel it from across the room.

Justin was engrossed in his work and Brian had wandered out onto the terrace. Tom decided to join him. "You mind if I ask you a personal question?"

"What do you mean by personal?" Brian asked. He turned and looked Tom in the eye.

"Justin told me about your arrangement. I have to admit that I was surprised. I thought that you two were tight. . . you know, a couple."

"Just because we like to fuck other men doesn't mean we're not close. It's our hobby, like you collect art . . . we collect cocks." Brian smiled. "It's a turn-on for both of us."

"Aren't you afraid of losing him?"

"Sex with other men is no big deal to us. It's just our way to unwind and have fun. It's exciting, like your motorcycle racing, rock climbing shit . . . 'no fear.' There are no locks on the doors, Tom. If Justin is unhappy, he is free to leave. Does he look unhappy to you?"

"No, not now. But you are taking a big risk, Brian. I wouldn't be so careless if I had someone who adored me as much as Justin adores you. Don't misunderstand me. I'm not trying to interfere. As a writer, I've had the opportunity to observe the dynamics between couples. I've never seen anything like the deep, intense feeling that exists between the two of you. I just wanted to tell you to be careful, that's all. I wouldn't want to see either of you get hurt."

"Thanks for the warning, but I'm not worried. Justin and I understand each other."

Brian watched as the man walked back into the house. Was there something personal about his warning? Was he trying to tell Brian that he had feelings for Justin? Brian tried to put that nagging thought out of his mind. Tom and Justin had spent a lot of time together over the past few weeks and it was only natural for them to become friendly. Just the same, he would be glad when they could go home to the loft and resume their lives.

"Do you miss our bed?" Justin asked as they lay side by side in the big four-poster bed.

"This one is fine. As long as you're right here next to me." Brian looked over and smiled at Justin.

"I miss the loft, but I really do like staying here. I feel so privileged." Justin turned and rested his head on Brian's chest. "I think that Tom likes having us here. He seems lonely. Brian, are you sure he's straight?"

"Why? Did he say something to you?" Brian asked.

"It just seems like he's been trying to figure out his life, you know, since his accident. Does it ever happen like that, Brian? I mean, I've known that I was gay since I was little. Maybe he's just figuring it out now. He probably never had much time to think about what he really wanted out of life. I guess us flaunting ourselves all over his house is giving him ideas. Anyway, I'm glad we're here. I feel sorry for him."

"Justin, stay out of his personal life. If he wants to fuck men because we're so damned fascinating, let him. But don't fuck with his head. I know how irresistible you can be once you've got your mind set."

"I wasn't going to seduce him, if that's what you're concerned about. If I didn't know better I would swear that you were jealous," Justin teased. He ran his index finger up Brian's chest.

"Fuck you." Brian brushed his hand away.

"That's what I had in mind." Justin climbed on top of him and the conversation came to an abrupt end.

Tom had just finished his afternoon run on the treadmill when Justin came into the gym.

"This music really sucks." Justin went over to the shelf where the stereo was and began to search for some decent CDs.

"Hey! I know a little something about music and I'll have you know that I am an excellent dancer," Tom called out from across the room. "I've taken lessons from the best dance instructors in the world. You shouldn't limit yourself to that fucking disco crap you are so fond of blasting all day. If you would just open your mind to different experiences, you might find yourself . . . "

Tom turned to see that Justin was standing right in front of him with his arms raised and an evil grin on his face. "That's what I've been trying to tell you."

Tom smiled and allowed Justin to embrace him. The feel of the boy's hard young body against his own overwhelmed the man for a moment. Justin started to sway his hips seductively as he drew Tom out to the middle of the gym floor.

"Not bad," Tom gasped as Justin turned and pressed his body against the man's loose-fitting sweat pants.

"I was the King of Babylon last year. You wanna see my pole dance?"

"Why do I get the feeling you won't be needing a pole?" Tom laughed at Justin's playful grin.

Justin turned to see Brian standing in the doorway watching them. "Justin, why don't you just fuck him and get it over with?"

"Don't be such an asshole. You're the one who told me that he's straight. We were working on his physical therapy." Justin kissed Brian on the mouth.

"I think I may need some physical therapy myself. I have this odd swelling in my pants, right here." Brian took Justin's hand and placed it on his crotch.

Tom laughed. "Do you mind taking that elsewhere? I have work to do."

"Okay, Sunshine, it's your turn to pick the spot. We're leaving for our humble home tomorrow and I want to make sure that we have completely exhausted every fuckable square inch of this museum."

Justin took Brian by the hand and started to lead him out of the room. "Upstairs. I found a hidden staircase that leads all the way up to the top of the turret. We can look down on the whole world while we fuck." Brian turned and gave Tom a 'come hither' look. Tom just laughed and went back to his workout.

Later that evening, the three men had a pleasant last meal together out on the terrace. Having consumed several bottles of wine the conversation turned to sex.

"The gym?" Tom asked.

"Twice. Once on the weight bench and once on the treadmill," Justin giggled. Brian and Justin were going over the list of places in the house where they had fucked.

"The treadmill?" Tom asked.

"It wasn't moving!" Justin exclaimed. "At least, not the whole time."

"I may just have to move away and leave you both this house. I don't know how I'm ever going to serve dinner on that dining room table after what you did in there."

Justin, who had been sitting on Brian's lap, got up suddenly. He staggered a little as he moved over to where Tom was sitting and perched himself on Tom's lap. "You know what we should do. . . ?"

"What?" Brian and Tom asked in unison.

"We should take Tom to Babylon tonight. Let him see what he's been missing."

Brian agreed. "Yeah, come on. You'd fit right in with that tight body of yours."

Tom considered their suggestion through a haze of alcohol. "But, what if someone recognizes me and asks me for an autograph? It would turn into a freak show."

Both Brian and Justin laughed out loud. Justin blurted out, "Babylon is its own freak show. The only way they would recognize you is if you appeared in a gay porn movie . . . and only then if you whipped out your uncut cock."

Justin covered his mouth as soon as he said the words. Brian pulled on his shirt until they were head to head. "And just how did you know he was uncut?"

Justin lowered his eyes and grinned mischievously, " . . . the shower room off the gym."

It was Brian and Tom's turn to laugh. "Why, you little peeping . . . Tom." Brian pulled Justin up from Tom's lap and swatted the boy on the butt.

"Let's do it," Brian announced. " Let's go have some fun at Babylon. It's time for Tom to get his uncut cock sucked man-on-man style."

They decided it wouldn't be prudent for any of them to get behind the wheel of a car, so Tom called a limo to pick them up. As soon as they entered Babylon Justin took Tom by the hand and dragged him out into the sea of gyrating hard bodies on the dance floor. Brian found Michael, Ted and Emmett at the bar.

"Hey. Who's your trick de jour? He is really hot!" Emmett asked.

"That is our illustrious host . . . 'The Great Tom Carey'."

"No shit?" Ted exclaimed. "He never even goes out in public and you two drag him to Babylon. What did he ever do to you?"

"Nothing . . . yet." Brian grinned playfully.

"You're kidding, right?" asked Michael. "You said he was straight. After a few weeks of living with you and the boy wonder, he's converted? Yeah, nice try Brian."

"Well, I'm going over and introducing myself," declared Emmett. "Why should you two have all the fun?"

Emmett worked his way over to where Justin and Tom were dancing and cut in. Justin found Brian and the two molded into each other's arms like there was no one else in the room. Tom danced with Emmett and then Michael and then Ted dragged him over to the bar to talk.

As Ted yammered on about some stupid web venture he was involved in, Tom looked over at Brian and Justin out on the dance floor. They had their foreheads pressed together and were flirting with each other as they sensually

moved their bodies together in rhythm to the music. Tom smiled to himself at the sweetness that they shared even in the midst of this carnal atmosphere. He approached the boys out on the dance floor and told them that he would like to leave. They climbed into the limo and drank champagne and talked on the way back. After paying the driver, they went inside the house. Tom said, "I know of one place that you haven't fucked yet." They both looked at him curiously.

"My bed," he answered. The alcoholic haze had lifted. He was dead serious.

"Well, actually . . ." Justin blurted before Brian covered his mouth with his hand.

Brian looked Tom in the eye and asked, "Are you sure?"

"Yes." He led them up the stairs.

There was an awkward moment with the three of them were in the room and nothing was happening. It fell to Brian to break the tension. He began to leisurely remove his clothing, slow enough so that Tom could enjoy the nuances of his physique. Justin came over to help, and Tom watched as the two kissed and embraced. Mostly naked, Brian danced Justin back to the bed and moved above him. Justin peeled off his sweater so he could feel Brian's skin against his own. Tom felt a flicker of excitement as Justin's hand went over Brian's butt, inside his underwear, and slowly rolled it down his thighs.

He had a great ass, Tom noticed, and by the way he was grinding into Justin, it was obvious that he was strongly aroused. Justin threw a leg over Brian's calves, and then lifted up so Brian could remove his jeans. Tom craned his neck to get a view of Justin's erection and wasn't disappointed by what he saw. Suddenly, Brian turned to level an eagle's stare at Tom. "Are you playing or just watching? Or playing while you're watching?"

"You guys seem to be doing fine without me."

"Not the point. Take off your clothes and join us," Brian suggested seductively.

"Yeah, Tom," Justin chimed in, his fair skin flushed with desire. "No fear."

Brian kissed Justin at that moment and they became lost in each other. Tom took that time to undress, embarrassed by the fact that he was already erect. He fully tucked back his foreskin and quickly slid in on the other side of the bed, under the paisley duvet. Nothing seemed to get past Brian, who raised a brow as he drawled, "Hiding something?"

"No, I.."

Brian pulled the duvet off with a single movement and smiled as he focused on Tom's erection. "Looks like someone decided to come to the party."

Justin exchanged a silent communication with Brian, who nodded. He then went over to Tom and kissed his nipples, followed by attention given to his pecs, and moved on to draw a line down his hard belly with his tongue and tickling it across his pubes.

Tom groaned as he felt his desire surge and then he met Brian's gaze as if seeking permission. Brian smiled and moved closer, kissing Justin's back and round, firm ass as he continued his downward descent on their host. When Justin finally let his lips graze the sensitive glands of Tom's cock, he moaned and writhed under the tender fellatio, feeling a blast of heat unlike any sexual reaction he had known before. Brian moved up to kiss Tom, plunging his tongue into his mouth while Justin stroked the length of Tom's phallus with his tongue.

"Give in," Brian whispered in Tom's ear. With that encouragement, Tom relaxed his inhibitions, determined to enjoy this incredible experience in its entirety.

The sun poured into the bedroom through French doors which led out to the terrace. Justin opened his eyes, at first not sure where he was. He looked down and saw Brian's head resting on his chest. Justin smiled as he smoothed his lover's hair and the man began to stir. "Good morning, stud." Justin smiled down at him.

"Fuck. I should never drink red wine. My head is splitting." Brian pulled himself up on his elbows. "What the fuck is this?" A key had fallen out of Brian's hand. Justin picked it up off the mattress.

"Looks like a car key." Justin turned and looked around the room. "There's a note on the table." He got out of bed and picked up the note.

Brian, barely awake, stared at Justin's naked form as he stood at the table reading the note. "What does it say?"

"He's gone. He says he'll be back in a few months. The key is to the motorcycle - it's for you. He says, 'Remember. . . no fear'."

When they got out of the loft's elevator Brian turned left out of habit. Justin pulled on his arm to turn him the other way. At the end of the hallway, Justin took out his key put it in the lock and pulled opened the door. He turned and took Brian's hand and together they entered their new home.

They stepped into the huge dark room. Justin had instructed Brian to close his eyes before entering. Now, he positioned Brian's body to where he wanted him to be when he opened his eyes. "Okay, open them," Justin said.

Brian opened his eyes. The only thing that he could see was an eerie glow coming from an area which seemed to be at least a mile away. "What the fuck is that? The Starship Enterprise?"

"Shut up and start walking." Justin took Brian's hand and led him slowly across the expanse of the new apartment. Brian could see the familiar blue lights that hung over their bed. He could now see that the glowing lights were coming from the space that used to be next to his kitchen.

As they got closer to the glowing light, Brian could see yards of white fabric hanging from a curtain rod. Justin put Brian's hand on the curtain and told him to enter the room. The light was coming from fluorescent light bulbs that had been covered with rainbow-colored plastic tubes. There were stuffed animals inside of little plastic bubbles mounted on the walls. A small bed in the corner of the room had colorful pillows and a blanket on it. "This is Gus's room." Justin explained. He braced himself for Brian's reaction and was rewarded with a sweet smile from the awestruck man.

"This . . . is amazing."

"I know that you don't like walls, but Gus does need to have some privacy." Justin could see that Brian was truly pleased with what he had done. "Are you ready to see the rest of it?"

"Ready as I'll ever be, I guess," Brian replied.

Justin once again took Brian's hand and positioned him facing the length of the new apartment. He picked up a remote which controlled the lighting and slowly illuminated each space. To their right, where the kitchen had been was a work-out area. "Now we won't have to keep tripping over your gym equipment."

Across the room what had been the livingroom was now a dining room. There was a V-shaped counter which separated the dining room from the brand new sunlit kitchen with skylights all the way across the ceiling. On the other side of the kitchen was Justin's studio area.

"This is where I will be creating my masterpieces." Justin smiled. "And over there . . ." he turned Brian's body around so that he could see large bookcases and comfortable reclining chairs on the other side of the room "that's just for you."

"Am I just going to sit there and watch you draw?"

"No, you're going to be creating. Maybe you could write your memoirs," Justin suggested.

At the end of the long room was a large living room area. Under a bay window sat the red motorcycle Tom had given to Brian. When Brian saw it he smiled. "Now that's decorating. Very cool."

They stood in the living room and looked down the large expanse to the other end of the loft. Justin put his arms around Brian's neck. "So, do you like it?"

"It's okay." Brian tried not to let Justin see the enthusiasm in his eyes.

"You didn't see the best part yet."

"There's more?"

Justin took his hand again and led him to a doorway opposite the living room. "Are you ready?"

"Do I have a choice?"

Justin opened the door to reveal a bathroom, the centerpiece of which was a large hot tub. There were candles burning all around the tub area. On the shelf that surrounded the tub was a bottle of wine and two glasses. There was also a large unopened envelope.

Justin stripped off his clothes and had started to help Brian out of his jeans when Brian noticed the envelope. "What's that? The bill for all this?"

"No. It's from Tom. It came by messenger this afternoon. It's addressed to both of us so I thought I would wait for you to open it."

"Now, that's a first." Brian picked up the envelope and peeled it open. Justin got into the water and reached for the papers that Brian held in his hands. Brian pulled them out of Justin's reach and began to read aloud as he climbed into the tub.

Justin lay his head back on Brian's chest as he listened to him read the manuscript. It was a draft of Tom's latest book. The story was all about the two of them.



The Gospel According to Brian

Justin realizes that Brian's hedonistic lifestyle is not for him. Brian attempts to understand the depth of his feelings for Justin.

'There must be something wrong with me,' Justin thought to himself. 'All gay men want to fuck everything in sight, especially 18 year old gay men. I should be the happiest fucking gay man on the face of the earth. I get it every morning and every night from the hottest gay man who ever lived. Then I'm supposed to go out and party? If I find some hot stud, he tells me, "Fuck him for me." Why does that make me feel bad?'

Justin took his cereal bowl to the living room and turned on the TV. He thought about all the gay men that he knew. Emmett would probably fuck a different guy every night. In fact, he probably did. But, Justin thought, if he had a choice Emmett would probably be just as happy curled up in bed with the right man. Then there was Ted. Justin tried to remember if he had ever had an actual conversation with the man. The truth was that they had absolutely nothing in common except for being gay and knowing Brian. Justin remembered how Ted was with Blake when they were a couple for a while. No way Ted looked at another man when he was with Blake. That left Michael. He and David loved each other, Justin had thought. But David did go to the baths once and Michael had a hard time with that. Yet Justin knew if the opportunity arose Michael would have fucked Brian, David or no David. That was different because Michael really loved Brian. If Michael ever did find someone else to love, Justin was sure that he would be monogamous.

If Justin had a choice there would be no other man in his life but Brian, but there was no way that Brian Kinney could ever become monogamous. Justin knew that if he started to whine and bitch about Brian's tricking, it would be over. Brian would never choose him over his firmly established, hedonistic lifestyle. It was enough that Brian had asked him to stay. That was something, even though it came with conditions. Justin was still in shock about what had happened that night. For once his departure from the loft had been his own idea. It hadn't been a trick to force Brian's hand. He'd felt that the longer he stayed with Brian, the more difficult it would be for him to break away. He had been happy at Deb's, even if he did have to sleep alone there, so he'd gone to see if she would take him back. He'd been so miserable and heartbroken that night. Debbie had told him to take a shower to warm up, and that she would be back in a little while. After he got dressed, he'd decided to go to Babylon and find some hot stud to cheer him up. When he'd heard Brian telling that trick to fuck off, Justin couldn't help but laugh. It seemed so out of character for Brian to tell a hot guy to fuck off. Justin wondered how long Brian had practiced that little speech he had made about all the things they were NOT, never mentioning the reason he wanted him to stay. But Justin knew all the same. Brian loved him. Justin had known it all along, and felt it more and more every day. Each time they made love the bond would grow stronger. Justin was sure it was the real thing. So sure that he was willing to do almost anything to be able to stay with Brian, until Brian figured it out. Justin had thought it would be easy. He had faked his way through an entire year of his young life, pretending to be unaffected by Brian's tricking. The truth was that it hurt every time he saw him with another guy. That's why Justin was able to come up with the demands he had made on a moment's notice. He'd had a year to think about it. The thing that hurt the most about seeing Brian with other men was the kissing. Justin knew that Brian was probably the best kisser in Pittsburgh, maybe even in the whole world. He would never forget the kiss in the parking garage before . . . well, he would never forget it again. That was the very moment things had changed between them.

"Why are you here?" the doctor finally asked the man who was lying on his couch.

"What?" Brian had been lost in thought.

"Why are you here? Do you know? Are you here because someone told you to come? Or was it your own idea?"

"It was my idea," Brian admitted.

"Tell me what you're feeling," the doctor asked, relieved to be making some progress.

"About what?"

"Do I have to remind you what this is costing you an hour, Brian?"

"All right. There's something wrong. I know there is. He hasn't said anything, but I think he's getting ready to leave. I don't know what I can do."

"Now we're getting somewhere. You don't want him to leave. Do you know why you want him to stay? Is the sex still good?"

"It's better than good, it's great. It's always great with Justin. I never thought it would be. I mean having sex with the same person every night, and every morning, and when I come home from work and . . ."

"Stop! Brian, we've established that the sex hasn't changed."

"That's the funny part, Doc. It has changed. It feels different since he moved in."

"How is it different? Describe how having sex with Justin is different from having sex with other men."

Brian felt a smile come to his lips. He had never discussed this before with anyone, not even Justin. Especially not with Justin. He didn't want the kid to think he was in control.

"We touch each other, sometimes for hours, before actually fucking. His skin is so soft and warm. I know every inch of him, what makes him tingle, what makes him moan, what makes him cum. It's the same with him." Brian looked over at the doctor to see if he was listening.

"Go on." The man sat, stone-faced.

Brian closed his eyes and thought about the first night they had actually made love. He knew that he had felt different. There was no urgency, no lust. It was more emotional. They made love with their hearts that night, and every night since. Brian knew that he had strong feelings for Justin, but he could never express it in words. So he expressed it the only way he knew how.

"It's like I disappear. I feel his body under me and I let go and fly. There is no conscious thought to it. It's the only time in my life that I feel free. I don't need to be in control because I'm not alone. He's there with me, in my mind and in my heart. I never have to guess what he wants. I just know." Brian opened his eyes. The doctor's eyes were closed and Brian wondered if he had just put the man to sleep.

The doctor cleared his throat and shifted his body in the chair. "I can see why you would be concerned about Justin leaving you. You love him."

Brian lowered his eyes and spoke honestly. "I don't know what that means. I have strong feelings for Justin. I don't want to lose him. That's why I'm here. But I don't know if I can say those words to someone unless I know for sure what they mean. What if I say I love him and then find out that he doesn't love me? What if I say I love him and he starts expecting things from me? What happens then? Do I tell him, 'I changed my mind . . . I don't love you'? No. Once the words are out, I'd be stuck with them. There's no going back."

Brian would always be Brian. Justin knew that. He had accepted the fact that he would never be enough to satisfy the man sexually. When Brian had come to him at Babylon that night and had given him the rules, Justin had needed to have some control, too. So he'd blurted out that he would be tricking, as well, as long as it was only once, with no names or numbers exchanged and no matter what they were doing they each would have to be home by 3 a.m. It had sounded good at the time, but now Justin was wondering if he had made a mistake. All he had ever wanted was to be with Brian. Babylon had become a game to them. They would look down at the dance floor together and seek out their prey. Justin went along with it, but he was starting to dread going out. Their relationship had turned into a competition and Justin didn't know how to fix it. One thing he did know was that the tricking wasn't for him. He couldn't be Brian. He had to go back to being himself, even if it meant losing the only man he would ever love.

"Hey," Justin said when Brian walked in the door. Brian looked a little sheepish, like he had been out tricking. It wasn't even dinnertime yet and he was at it already.

Justin came from behind the counter and put his arms around Brian's neck. For once Brian didn't smell like cologne. Justin wondered if he had been wrong. "What's up?"

"I went to see someone today," Brian admitted.

"So early in the day? Couldn't wait for Babylon?"

"I went to see a shrink."

"Why?" Justin was amazed at Brian's admission.

"Are you going to leave me?" Brian blurted out.

Justin didn't answer.

"I know I said there are no locks on the door, but I want to know why."

Brian looked so unhappy that Justin almost put his arms around him to comfort him. But this was his chance. It was now or never. Justin had to be honest about what he was feeling. "It's not you, Brian." Justin walked into the living room and sat on the couch. "It's me. I can't do this anymore."

Brian followed him into the living room and threw himself into the chair opposite Justin. "Then, you really are leaving?" Brian repeated his question.

Justin studied Brian's face. He saw the pain, the love, the loss. Justin knew that the words would never come, but Brian felt them all the same. He got up from the couch and sat across Brian's lap. Putting his arms around Brian's neck he said, "No. I could never leave you." He looked right into Brian's eyes and said the words that he so longed hear Brian say. "I love you, Brian."

Brian looked at Justin's face in confusion. "What, then?"

"I'm not going to do it anymore. You can go out and fuck whomever you want. I'll be here waiting for you."

"What about the game?"

"It's not a game, Brian. I saw your face last night. You looked like I felt when you brought home that Hotlanta guy. I can't stand the thought of me being the cause of that 'look'. The tricks are not that important to me."

Brian didn't know how to react to Justin's proclamation. He wasn't going to leave and he was not going to fuck other guys. This was too good to be true.

Justin wasn't finished. "This doesn't mean that I'm going to be your perfect little fuck buddy. If I see a hot guy at school who's ready for some action, I'm going for it. But it won't involve you, you'll never know. That way you

won't get hurt. If I go to Babylon with you, then we're together. We dance together, drink together and go home together. If you want to go tricking you can do it with the guys or alone. I don't care. As long as you come home to me every night."

Brian didn't know what to say. He did know that the night before he had been upset at a scene he had witnessed. Justin had been with a guy at the bar. They hadn't even been fucking. They had just been talking. It was the way that the guy had been looking at Justin that bothered Brian. Even worse had been the way that Justin had been looking back at the other man. Brian had seen that look before on many occasions. He'd thought it was reserved only for him, like kissing on the lips. But last night Justin had been sharing something with this guy that was more intimate and personal than fucking. Brian was sure that the guy wanted something more from Justin. As he'd stood there watching them from the catwalk, Brian felt his stomach knot and his eyes sting as he fought to hold back tears. The trick had taken Justin's hand and intertwined their fingers as he stared into Justin's eyes. At that moment Justin had looked up and seen Brian watching.

Brian had turned and run down the stairs to the backroom. He'd picked the nearest twink and pushed him up against the wall. A few minutes after Brian had fucked the surprised young man, Justin had appeared in the backroom. Alone.

"Hey, stud," Justin had said. "Wanna dance?"

Brian had taken Justin's hand and allowed himself to be led to the dance floor. They hadn't discussed what had happened. Brian had felt stupid at having had such a jealous reaction. Justin had done nothing wrong. They had no rules about talking and holding hands. Still, Brian had played the scene over and over in his mind the following day. Finally he had made a call to his friend, the shrink. It was time to get serious.

Guilt was eating away at Justin. When he'd seen the look on Brian's face the night before, he'd wanted to die. On the surface it had been innocent encounter with the man at the bar. He had met Daniel at school several weeks before, in an art history class they had together. They had hit it off right away. Daniel was gorgeous: dark hair, dark eyes, with a tall lanky body, and the best part had been finding out that he was gay. He also had a great sense of humor. Justin enjoyed being with him. He had decided that it would not be a good idea to fuck the guy if he was going to see him all the time. That would be a violation of the rules: no names, etc. So he'd told Daniel that he was involved in a relationship. It was agreed that there would be no sex between them. Justin felt comfortable just hanging out with a guy his own age. After all, Brian had told him to get some friends his own age.

Daniel had dropped by at the diner one night as Justin was getting off from work. Brian had gone out with the boys to Woody's and had not invited Justin to join them. Daniel had asked if he would like to go to a movie, so they had spent the evening together talking about art, laughing about their teachers and other students and, in general, had a good time. Nothing had happened between them physically, but Justin felt guilty. He had really enjoyed being out somewhere that didn't involve sex, drugs and loud music. The worst thing was he had not thought about Brian all evening.

The next time he had seen Daniel was at a school concert. Several students had planned to go out to dinner afterwards, and they asked Daniel and Justin to join them. Once again, Justin had a great time. Daniel offered to drive him home. It was early so they decided to stop at a bar for a drink. Daniel had reached across the table and taken Justin's hand. "How serious are things between you and Brian?"

"We have a relationship." Justin had felt slightly uncomfortable with the physical contact, but he figured that it did not break the rules because he had seen Brian being physical with Michael and they were only friends. Justin had also felt a tingling in his groin brought on by the touch of Daniel's hand, but he hadn't pull away.

"What kind of a relationship is it, when you are both still fucking anyone you want? I don't think he appreciates you, Justin. If you were my boyfriend I wouldn't let you out of my sight. I would make sure that you knew you were the only one I needed."

"Brian says that's how all relationships start out. But then everyone ends up cheating and someone gets hurt. At least with us we're open and honest right from the start. We have rules and Brian says as long as we stick to the rules we'll be okay."

"The gospel according to Brian Kinney. If you ask me, Justin, he's full of shit. He thinks he can have it both ways. He gets to party every night and then come home to you. Does he cuddle up next to you after fucking some trick and tell you that he loves you?"

Justin had yanked his hand back. "Let's get out of here." He'd turned his back on Daniel and walked out the door, hoping that Daniel would not see that tears had started to well up in his eyes.

It was clear that Daniel had strong feelings for Justin. Even though Justin knew in his heart it was wrong, he'd continued to see him. He rationalized that they were just friends. There was no fucking so it was okay. Just like Michael and Brian. If Michael had his way, he and Brian would be lovers. This was no different. As long as Justin was able to control his emotions, he was not breaking any rules.

'This is stupid,' Brian said to himself. Justin was sound asleep. Brian knew that he was sound asleep because the only thing that would wake Justin before noon on a weekend was having a stiff dick shoved up his ass. And even then he probably would not wake up right away. So it was perfectly safe.

Brian had been awake since 8:00 a.m. practicing. First he covered Justin's face with a pillow. When there was no reaction from the sleeping boy, Brian slid his body into the bed and put his face up against the pillow and whispered the words, "I love you."

Justin didn't budge. 'This is so stupid.' Brian removed the pillow from Justin's face and slowly turned him over on his side. Justin whimpered a little and stretched. A few second later his breathing had steadied and once again Brian was convinced that the boy was asleep. He put his own head up against Justin's and faced him. Watching Justin sleep had always given Brian pleasure. The boy was so perfect. Perfect eyes, perfect teeth, perfect skin, perfect dick. And, when he was sleeping, he was a perfect angel. Brian took the pillow that he had used on Justin's face and placed it over his own mouth. Looking into Justin's sleeping face, Brian muttered the muffled words, "I love you, Justin."

This was a waste of time. The doctor had made the suggestion that Brian practice saying the words to Justin's photograph. After he had mastered the art of making a perfect fool of himself at the office when Cynthia had walked in on him while he was talking to the picture, he had decided that he was ready to try the words on the real thing. The only problem was that he still wasn't sure what the words meant. What was it he was trying to say to Justin? People are always saying those words, even when everyone knows they don't mean them . And what would happen if he ever did get the words out? Would it be enough? Would Justin believe him?

'Maybe it was the way you said the words that was most important.' Brian mused, 'If I yell it out over a loud speaker at the airport, would that count? That way, if I fuck it up, I could pretend it was a joke. The dykes are constantly saying mushy things to each other. Frankly, I never believed a word of it. I have to make sure I say it right, so there is no doubt. Maybe I should take acting lessons.'

Brian decided that since Justin would probably sleep 'til noon, and it was only 9:00 a.m. now, that he would go out to the diner and get some breakfast. He scribbled a note and left it on the counter. Before he left, he went back to the bed and lightly kissed Justin on his sleeping blond head.

When Brian got to his Jeep, he noticed a car parked in front of his building. The boy getting out of car looked familiar. It was the guy from the bar. The one that Justin had been holding hands with. Brian's anger got the better of him and he approached the boy in a jealous rage.

"What the fuck are you doing here? Are you stalking him? Don't get any ideas, because if you lay a hand on him, I'll fucking kill you."

"You must be Mr. Kinney, Justin's sorta boyfriend." Daniel was unperturbed by Brian's appearance. "Don't get excited. I didn't come here to fuck him. I'm Daniel, or should I say Justin's Michael. At least, that's how Justin put it. If that bothers you . . . too bad. Justin hasn't broken any of your precious rules. I have them written down so we don't forget. No kissing, no numbers, fucking is okay, but no seconds and be home by 3 am. Did I forget anything? Oh, yeah, Daniel's not my real name." The boy flashed Brian an impish grin.

Brian was at a loss for words. He glared at the boy before he got in his Jeep and floored the accelerator.

When Justin returned to the loft later that afternoon, he saw that Brian had been pacing. It appeared that he had also been drinking, but that was nothing new for Brian.

"Where the fuck have you been?" Brian shouted.

"Out," Justin responded.

"With who?"

"Are you my mother? Since when do I have to ask permission to go to a museum? In case you haven't noticed, Brian, there are no locks on the doors."

"I want you to stop seeing that asshole who was here today!"

"Why?"

"I don't trust him, Justin. He's going to cause trouble."

"You don't even know him, Brian. You're the one who told me I should have friends my own age. He's my age, he likes art and music, he's funny, and he doesn't treat me like a two year old. I haven't done anything wrong."

"He's in love with you."

"You don't know what you're talking about. And what if he is? Michael has been in love with you for 15 years. I never asked you to stop seeing him."

"That's different."

"How is it different, Brian? Is it so hard to believe that someone would love me?"

The room fell silent.

Justin could hear his own heart beating. He walked over to Brian and looked him in the eye. "Brian, do you love me?" Brian turned his face away.

Justin picked up his backpack and ran from the loft.

Brian couldn't believe that Justin was gone. It had been two weeks since Justin had returned to the loft, packed up his belongings and left. What Justin didn't know was that while Justin had been packing, Brian had been out driving all over Pittsburgh looking for him. He had been determined to tell Justin what he wanted to hear, no matter what it meant, no matter what it cost Brian.

Brian had now slowly come to the realization that the persistent little kid who had worked his way into his heart was not coming back. This time it was Brian who was going to be persistent. He thought about what Justin would do, if the situation were reversed. Brian had called Daphne and asked if she had seen Justin. She had told him that Justin had moved into a dorm at school, but that she had not seen him recently. Brian had no intention of confronting Justin at school. That was his turf. Brian knew that when he did finally speak to Justin it would have to be on neutral ground. There was only one person who could help him now. Brian walked the college campus until he finally ran into Daniel. He was sitting out on the lawn smoking a joint in broad daylight.

Brian came right to the point. "I want Justin back. If you care about him, you know that he wants to come back. So help me."

Daniel chuckled. "You are one fucking arrogant asshole. Why would I help you?"

"That's very good. You're very observant. I know you'll help me because you love Justin."

"Then why would I want him to spend his life with a man who treats him like a whore?"

Brian was stung by the words. "Look, I fucked up. I know that. But I also know that Justin loves me. He isn't very happy without me, is he?"

Daniel turned his face up toward Brian. "What is it that you think I can do?"

"I need to see him. Bring him to Babylon tonight."

"Are you going to make up more rules?"

"No. I just have to tell him something. Then we can work it out."

"I'm not going to stop seeing him, no matter what you say. If you slip up just once, I'll be right there . . . waiting."

It was Brian's turn to chuckle. "He's never going to fuck you, you know."

"Look at me. I can fuck anybody I want. Fucking's not that important. Love is important. I can wait. Just watch your back, Mr. Kinney."

Daniel got up and swaggered across the campus. He was right, he probably could fuck anyone he wanted. And he wanted Justin. Brian began to wonder if he had made a mistake.

Brian had been at Babylon for two hours without taking so much as a sip of beer. He had asked his friends to back off earlier. Their lighthearted banter was making him nervous. He was anxious to see Justin. Who was he kidding? He was desperate to see Justin. Babylon was far more crowded than usual for a Friday night. Brian went up onto the catwalk and stood near Michael and Emmett, pretending to listen to their conversation. He surveyed the floor for Justin. Finally he saw them. Daniel had his arm around Justin and was leading him over to the bar. The sight of Justin with Daniel hit Brian harder than he had expected. He fought to control his temper as he approached them.

"Hey." Brian put his hand on Justin's shoulder and turned him around. Daniel took the hint and disappeared into the crowd. Justin looked into Brian's eyes. "What? Am I going to get another lecture? Or are you ready to talk to me like an adult?"

"I'm sorry. I had no right to tell you who your friends should be. You can see Daniel."

"Is that all you have to say? Because if it is, then you wasted your time and mine. Daniel had nothing to do with the reason I left. I left because I realized that I deserve to be with someone who loves me. If you really loved me, you'd be able to say the words, Brian. They're just words."

"No, they aren't just words. They're more than just words."

"I'm so tired of this, Brian. I'm sick of you pulling me close, just to push me away. I love you and I'm not ashamed to say it. But I'm not going to let you fuck with my head anymore. You either love me or you don't, so which is it?"

Brian instinctively turned his face away.

"I thought so. Why don't you go find someone to fuck? I'm going to find someone who loves me." Justin pushed his way through the crowd in the direction of the backroom. Brian tried to follow, but lost him in the crowd. The music was blasting and the crowd was getting wild. Michael and Emmett met him near the door and saw that he was upset.

"Let him go, Brian. You'll never find him in this crowd anyway. Why don't we go outside and get some air?" Michael suggested.

Michael and Emmett managed to pull Brian down the steps and out the door. They had never seen him so upset. They watched as he paced up and down the parking lot, like a wounded animal. The air outside was thick and pungent. "It stinks out here," Emmett said. "It smells like gas."

No sooner had Emmett gotten the words out when there was a tremendous explosion, the force of which threw all three men to the ground. When they recovered they looked up and saw the unthinkable. . . . Babylon was engulfed in flames. Men were running from the burning building in every direction. Michael and Emmett looked back and saw that Brian was gone. He had run past them and was trying to get back into the disco.

"JUSTIN!!!!" he screamed.

Michael pulled at his sleeve. "Brian, you can't go back inside. You'll be killed."

"Justin's in there, Michael." His eyes were wild. Michael released his sleeve and let him go.

Michael and Emmett tried to help the other patrons as they exited the building gasping for breath. Michael frequently looked back over his shoulder, hoping that Brian would reappear. It was almost a half an hour before he saw him again. He found him sitting on the curb shivering. It reminded Michael of how he had found Brian at the hospital over one year ago when Justin had been injured. He sat down next to him and tried to comfort his friend.

"He's dead, Michael. I finally managed to kill him," Brian said softly.

"You don't know that," Michael said.

"I don't feel him, Michael. I could always feel him . . . always."

Michael knew there would be no consoling Brian. The best thing to do right now was to retrieve Emmett and get them all away from this scene of horror.

"I'm going to get Em. You stay right here."

Brian didn't answer. He sat looking at the burning building. His car was parked a block away. When he had arrived at the bar he had been pissed because he couldn't find a closer spot. All the cars that had been parked closer to the club were now piles of smoldering metal. He got up from the curb and began walking in the direction of the car. He couldn't think about what had happened. Justin had left his sweatshirt in the Jeep. Brian needed to touch it. It was his only earthly link to the boy who had so loved him. How was he ever going to survive now? His mother had said he would be going to hell. Now he knew exactly what being in hell felt like.

It was dark on the corner where he had parked. The commotion was all centered on Liberty Avenue, and he was glad that he would not have to deal with the crowds. When he got to the Jeep he looked in the mirror. His face was black with soot and there were streaks on his face from his tears. His hair was a mess and his shirt was in shreds. As he stood there glaring at his hideous reflection, there was a flash of light. Then he saw him. There was no mistaking that walk. It was Justin. Brian turned and ran in the direction of the shadow. He grabbed the dazed boy by the shoulders and turned him around. Justin threw his arms around Brian's neck.

Brian held him close. "I love you, Justin. I love you." The words came naturally.

"I know. I've always known, Brian," Justin whispered.

"Daniel?" Brian looked back toward the building.

"He's fine. We were outside when it happened. I went back in to look for you. Brian, I thought you were dead. I gave up on you. I'll never give up on you again. Let's go home."

"No. That's not good enough, Justin. I want you to be sure of how I feel about you."

"It's okay, Brian. You said it and I believe you. I don't need anything else."

"You deserve more. We both do."

Justin's face was also covered with soot and streaked with tears. His shirt was torn and his blond hair, which was always perfectly in place even when he was sleeping, was sticking out in every direction. They looked at each other and began to laugh.

Michael and Emmett had found their way back to the Jeep. When they saw the soot-covered couple kissing they both burst into tears. Daniel had joined them a few minutes later.

"Get in the Jeep," Brian commanded. He looked at Daniel and handed him his keys. "You drive. Michael, get out your cell phone and start calling everyone we know. You, too, Emmett." Brian got into the back seat and pulled Justin into his lap and kissed him.

"Brian, are you sure about this?" Michael asked.

"I am so fucking sure of this, Michael, that I actually called ahead and made reservations."

When they arrived at their destination, Brian pulled Justin out of the Jeep and the rest of the group followed. When they got to the door they were greeted by Ted, Lindsay, Mel, Debbie, Vic and Jennifer. Michael and Emmett had been able to reach everyone that Brian had asked them to call.

"Brian Kinney, you better have a damn good explanation for dragging us all out here at this hour," Debbie complained. She kissed Michael on the cheek. "What have you guys been doing? Digging graves?" she asked, commenting on their appearance.

Brian opened the door and was greeted by his friend. "Is everything ready?" Brian asked.

"Let's do this before the whole neighborhood notices the lights," Tom replied nervously.

Brian led Justin up the steps before the altar and turned toward him. Tom took his place at the altar and the astonished guests took their seats in the pews. Tom proceeded to read the traditional marriage vows and Brian and Justin answered each question without ever taking their eyes from each other. In their hearts they were as married as any couple who had ever been united at this altar. They might never have the privilege of a legally sanctioned ceremony, but everyone present knew that they were witnessing a celebration of true love.

The Gospel According to Justin

Brian and Justin find a new game to play, but Brian's mother is not amused.

"Wake up, Brian! We're gonna be late." Brian opened one eye and surveyed the room. Justin was already dressed and was going through the closet looking for something for Brian to wear.

"Late for what? It's Saturday. Get back in bed. I have a surprise for you." Brian lifted the covers to show Justin his morning hard-on.

"The only surprise about that is the fact that we've already been through your morning wood, and mine. In fact, we've been fucking since yesterday afternoon. And for your information it's Sunday, not Saturday. So get up or we'll be late for church."

Justin tossed him his blue shirt and his jeans. Brian stumbled out of bed and headed for the shower. "What's for breakfast?"

"We're going to Lindsay's for brunch after church. She said they have some big surprise. I bet they got back the wedding pictures. They must be really beautiful. They had that famous photographer take them."

Brian finished dressing and joined Justin in the living room. He picked up a photo from a shelf and held it up to Justin. "What's wrong with our wedding photo? I think it says it all."

The photo showed the couple in tattered clothing and covered with black soot. They had their heads together and were looking at each other with love in their eyes and smiles on their faces. The photo was both comical and touching. After the impromptu ceremony, they had gone back to the loft to make love. The next morning Brian had arranged for them to take a trip to St. Thomas. The rest of the photos on the shelf were of Brian and Justin on their vacation. There was one photo of the two of them dressed in white lying in each other's arms on the beach. They were truly a beautiful couple and they both knew it. But if asked which photo was their favorite, they would both pick the picture of the soot-covered pair with the smiles on their faces.

"I wouldn't have had it any other way." Justin kissed Brian tenderly. "Let's go."

It had been Justin's idea that they start attending church on Sunday. Reverend Tom had taken a tremendous risk by allowing them to use the church to get married. Justin really liked Tom, even though he had not found the courage to be truthful about his own sexuality. When they had returned from their trip they had gone to the church to thank him. He had invited them to attend services on Sunday. At first, Brian had balked at the idea of getting out of bed on Sunday to go to church. Justin had pointed out to him that they would go there together, as a couple. The irreverence of walking into his mother's house of worship with Justin on his arm appealed to Brian. The first week they had gone to the 8 a. m. service. It was shorter and not as well-attended as the later service. Justin had dressed in a white shirt, dark slacks and a tie. Brian had worn his traditional black. They had arrived late and sat in the back of the church. During the sermon Brian reached over and grabbed Justin's hand. Several older parishioners seated in the opposite pew began to stare at them. Brian and Justin turned their heads and flashed them their sweetest smiles. The women smiled back and Brian and Justin realized that they had found themselves a new game to play.

One Sunday they had gotten up too late for the 8 a. m. service. Justin had been surprised when Brian suggested going to the later service, knowing that his mother would be attending. They walked into the church together holding hands just as they had done every week for the last few months. Once again heads turned to stare at them, and once again Brian and Justin turned on the charm. Several of the older parishioners who now recognized them waved. All through the service Brian sat with his eyes defiantly glaring at the back of his mother's head. When the service was over, Brian had insisted on staying seated until his mother walked past. As she approached their pew Brian called to her and waved. With a big smile on his face he pointed to an unsuspecting Justin, who had struck up a conversation with the elderly couple next to them. Joan Kinney hurried past them, and continued on toward the

door where Reverend Tom was greeting the congregation. Brian dragged Justin out of the pew and got in line behind his mother.

"Great sermon, Rev." Brian had brushed past his mother to shake hands with the minister. "This service is so much more traditional than the 8:00. And Justin and I will get to stay in bed longer if we come to this service."

Joan waited until the minister's head was turned and then grabbed her son by the arm. "Just what do you think you're doing, Brian? This is a house of God, you and your . . . lover don't belong here."

"Tom thinks we do. And Justin is making all kinds of friends." Brian turned in Justin's direction. He was having his ear chewed off by a group of old biddies. He looked pleadingly at Brian to rescue him.

"See you next week, Mom." Brian took Justin by the hand and led him to the Jeep.

Once they were a safe distance away they both started to laugh. "I've never had so much fun at church. Next week we'll sit closer to my mother. We'll creep up on her until we are sitting together, worshiping as a family. It'll make her skin crawl."

"I had no idea what I was getting into when I suggested we go to church. Some of it's not so bad. That old guy who was sitting next to us owns an art supply store in town. He said he'd give me a discount because we go to the same church."

"You and your sweet baby face are a big hit with the geriatric set," Brian teased.

"You should know," Justin responded. Brian made a face in Justin's direction which made the boy laugh.

Brian had insisted that each week they move closer to where his mother was sitting. This week they sat in the pew directly behind his mother. He greeted her with a sweet smile when she walked past them. He was using Justin's method of killing her with kindness. From what Justin could see it wasn't working very well, but Brian did seem to be enjoying himself. After the service Justin waited outside the church while Brian talked to the reverend. A group of old ladies had adopted Justin. They enjoyed instructing the young man on the fine art of cooking. He had picked up several decent recipes and a lot of good cooking tips. This week he listened with interest as Mrs. Connelly recited her recipe for seafood chowder.

"Justin, dear, you must make sure to use fresh clams and . . ."

"No!" Joan Kinney yelled out. She had been standing near the door listening to the conversation. When she heard Mrs. Connelly tell Justin to use fresh clams she just had to intervene. "Brian is allergic to clams. He had to be hospitalized once when he had eaten raw clams."

Justin turned and faced her. "I didn't know that. Thanks for telling me. I wouldn't want to make him sick with my cooking."

She would never accept them as a couple. There was nothing she could do about the fact that they had chosen to infiltrate her church. She knew that Brian was only doing it to mock her, but the other members of the ladies' auxiliary had taken to the young man named Justin. Joan realized that Justin was the only person who was aware of the fact that she had been arrested for drunk driving. He had bailed her out and driven her home. In fact, she felt no animosity toward him. She knew that Brian was making the boy accompany him to church to torture her. If she was civil toward Justin, perhaps Brian would tire of his little game and leave her alone.

"You can use crabmeat in its place," she suggested. Justin thanked her and left to join Brian, who was now waiting for him in the car.

"Look at all the recipes I got." Justin pulled a handful of papers out of his jacket pocket. "Mrs. Connelly gave me a recipe for seafood chowder. Your mother saved your life, you know."

"What?" Brian turned his attention from the road to Justin.

"She heard Mrs. Connelly tell me to use fresh clams. Your mother had a fit. She said that you're allergic to clams and that you almost died from eating them."

"Don't be a drama princess. I ate too many raw clams and I passed out. No big deal. "

"You had to go to the hospital. You should have told me. Is there anything else that you're allergic to? I don't want to accidentally kill you with my cooking."

Brian laughed as they pulled up to Lindsay's house. He stopped Justin before he opened the door to get out and pulled him over to his side of the Jeep. He kissed him gently on the lips. "Have I told you today I love you?"

"Yes. About a million times since we got up, but you can tell me again. I won't object."

Lindsay opened the door with Gus in her arms and greeted them. Michael, Emmett and Ted were already in the living room looking at wedding photos.

"So, what have you two been up to so early on a Sunday morning?" Emmett asked.

"We went to church," Brian responded sarcastically.

"Yeah, right. I thought I felt the earth shake a few minutes ago," Michael said.

"Okay. You're right. We were out in the Jeep fucking," Brian joked.

"Now that's more like it. How is your sex life now that you're an old married couple?" Ted asked.

"Great!" Justin responded quickly.

"You might say it's like a religious experience," Brian added.

Lindsay stood and spoke. "Before we eat, I have an announcement to make. Mel and I have decided that it's time for Gus to have a little brother or sister. We've been talking about it for a while and we've decided that I should get pregnant soon so that they baby will be born in the Spring."

"So where's the cup?" Brian asked matter-of-factly. "Justin, you can prime the pump for me." Brian pulled Justin closer and kissed him.

"Ah, wait, Brian. The reason we asked you all here is because. . ." Lindsay began.

Mel entered the conversation. "Fuck it, Lindsay. Just say it. We don't want you to be the father, Brian. We want Justin."

Everyone spoke at once: that is everyone except Brian. He sat silently brooding.

"You want me?" Justin was beaming. "Really?"

"Oh, my God, this baby will be so beautiful," Emmett said. "He/she is sure to be blonde and blue-eyed. If it's a boy, he has to have Justin's cute little ass. Oh, I'm so happy for you, baby!" Emmett pulled Justin from Brian's grasp and kissed him.

"The kid will be artistic, that's for sure. And smart, too," Ted added.

"What do you want me to do? When should I do it? Do I need a special cup? Can I name the baby again?" Questions poured from Justin, who hadn't noticed the look on Brian's face.

Mel was cooing into Lindsay's ear. "Hell, with Justin we may not want to use a cup. We could make it a threesome." Everyone laughed. . . everyone except Brian.

"Forget it!" Brian got up from the couch and headed for the door.

Justin reluctantly followed. "We haven't eaten yet." Brian was already opening the door to the Jeep.

Lindsay followed Justin outside. "Brian, I'm sorry. We just thought that it would be a chance for Justin to become a father also, to pass on his genes. They would grow up as siblings, Brian. Gus and Justin's baby. Please give it some thought."

Brian glared at Lindsay as Justin got in the Jeep. "I said forget it. Justin's genes and everything inside Justin's jeans belongs to me."

The day had started off so great. Brian had been in such a good mood after church. Now he paced the loft as he sipped Jim Beam. Justin decided that he needed a break. He wanted to clear his head and think about what had happened without having to deal with Brian's brooding. Luckily, before too long, Brian fell asleep in a chair. Justin covered him and left a note on the counter. Once outside, he took his cell phone out and dialed Daniel's number.

"What are you doing?" Justin asked.

"Nothing much. What's up?" Daniel replied.

"Wanna hang out?"

"Don't tell me. Mr. Perfect Husband is at it again. The honeymoon is over." Daniel joked.

"No. I just need a break, that's all. Can you pick me up on Main Street?"

"Sure."

They decided to drive to the museum. It had become their favorite place to hang out and talk. Justin explained to Daniel what had happened at Lindsay and Mel's.

"Justin, as much as it sounds like Brian over-reacted, I have to agree with him on this one. A kid. That's pretty heavy stuff for someone your age."

"I love Gus. I'm almost like a second father to him."

"But he's not yours. It costs a fortune to raise a kid. You haven't even started your life yet."

"But Lindsay and Mel would be raising it. And the baby would have Gus as a brother. I kinda like the idea of our kids being raised together."

"Justin, don't you think you're rushing into this? What's the hurry? You can always have a baby later. What's the real reason you're so pissed?"

"You're right. I guess it's just the way Brian put his foot down like that. He never even asked me what I wanted. He just stormed out of there. I don't think he'll ever talk to Lindsay again. He didn't say a word in the car on the ride home. He told Lindsay that my genes and everything in my jeans belonged to him."

Daniel laughed so loud that the museum's security guard gave him a dirty look. Daniel waved his apologies. "That's pretty funny." Justin started laughing also.

"I guess you're right. I am too young to have a kid. But I don't think that Brian will ever want me to have a baby. We've never talked about it. I just thought someday I could jerk off in a cup, like he did, and be a father. All the way home in the car he wouldn't talk to me. Then he drank himself into oblivion and passed out. He can be such an asshole sometimes."

"You want me to kill him?" Daniel joked.

Justin grinned. "Not yet. I'll let you know."

"Justin, when he introduces you to someone, what does he call you? Does he say, this is my partner, husband, wife, teenage love-toy? What does he call you?"

"He says, 'This is Justin.' That's all."

"That's worse than I thought," Daniel frowned.

"What?"

"He doesn't consider you an equal, Justin. He won't define your relationship. As long as he controls you and every aspect of your life, he's the man. You're his . . . Justin."

Justin considered what Daniel had said. "I better get home."

"I'll go with you," Daniel offered.

The boys arrived at the loft and saw Brian busy at the computer preparing a report for work. Justin kissed him and he kissed Justin back. "I'll be done in a few minutes then we can go out to eat." Justin looked at the answering machine. There were eleven messages. He pushed the play button. Six of the messages were from Lindsay, and the rest were from the guys telling Brian to call Lindsay.

Justin picked up the phone and went into the bedroom to call Lindsay. Daniel sat opposite Brian at the desk where he was working. "Watcha doing, Mr. Kinney?"

"Earning a living, Danny boy," Brian shot back.

"You're going about it all wrong."

"I've been earning a living since I was your age. I'm pretty fucking good at it."

"I mean about Justin and that baby idea. I agree with you. That woman is using Justin for his genetic perfection. The bitch, who the fuck does she think she is?"

"Stay out of it," Brian warned.

"Justin is my friend. When you block him out with Mr. Jim Beam, he calls me. As long as you turn your back on him, I'll always be there . . . waiting."

Brian turned off the computer and gathered papers from the printer.

"Well, you'll be waiting a long, long time, Danny boy. I'm not going anywhere."

"Not right away. But you're old, you smoke, you drink like a fish and you take way too many drugs that don't have prescription labels. I figure you have about 10 or 15 good years before you drop dead of something. I can wait. In

the meantime, I want Justin to be happy. And I'm going to help you keep him that way. Once you're dead, I'll look like a hero."

Brian sighed. He was stuck with this annoying little asshole for the rest of his life and he knew it. He might as well use the boy's friendship with Justin to his advantage. "What do you suggest, Mr. Hero?"

"Talk to him. He's your partner, not some play toy you picked up at Babylon. Justin is really smart. A lot smarter than you or me. Let him figure it out for himself. Trust that he's going to do what's best for both of you."

Justin came out of the bedroom and replaced the phone in its cradle. "What do you want to eat?" Justin asked.

"I don't care," Brian responded as he put on his jacket.

"I feel like hero," Daniel answered as he smiled and put his arm around Justin. Justin laughed and grabbed Brian by the hand.

Daniel had driven them to the restaurant in his car. When they parted company after dinner, Brian and Justin decided to walk home.

"Lindsay is really upset," Justin began. "You shouldn't be so mad at her. Why are you mad anyway? Is it because they don't want your sperm?"

Brian put his arm around Justin and pulled him close. "No. If I were them and I had a choice between you and me . . . I'd choose you. It's just that I didn't like the way they announced their intentions. Making a baby is serious shit, Justin. They should have talked to us about it first. Let us discuss it in private, instead of turning into a carnival."

"You're right. I shouldn't have gotten so carried away. It's just that you have Gus, and I don't know if I'll ever get the chance to have a kid."

"Justin, it's your decision, not mine. You do what you think is best."

"I already told her 'no'."

Brian let out a sigh of relief. Danny boy had been right.

"Brian, do you think I'll ever be able to have a kid? Lindsay isn't getting any younger and I don't know any other lesbians who would want my sperm."

Brian stopped walking and turned Justin toward him. "I know you, Justin. You'd never be happy with someone else raising your baby. You'd want to be involved, full time. I'd never be able to share you with some woman and a kid. If you want a baby, we'll have one. We'll raise it together."

"Really. You would do that for me?" Justin was deeply touched.

"Yeah, I would. I want you to be happy." Brian kissed Justin's forehead and they continued walking. "It won't be for a while though, right?"

"I guess, maybe ten or fifteen years from now," Justin said.

"According to Danny boy, I'll be dead by then. Maybe we should make that five years."

Justin chuckled. "He offered to kill you for me today. I told him 'no'."

"What a pal." They had arrived at their building and were greeted by a surprise visitor.

"Brian, Justin. I came by to drop off these cookies." Joan Kinney stood on their doorstep with a large shopping bag. "Brian, it's cold out here. Can we go inside, dear?"

Brian rolled his eyes as he walked past his mother and opened the door. Once inside, Justin took the bag from her and offered to make a pot of coffee. Brian tried to shoot him a warning look, but Justin smiled at him and mouthed the word "kindness".

Joan roamed the apartment looking at the artwork. When she came to the shelf of photographs, she picked up the one of Brian and Justin on the beach. It was a beautiful likeness of the two of them. She put the photo down and her hand slid across the shelf. She stopped at the photo of them covered in soot. "Brian, was this taken at the altar of my church?" Joan was astonished.

"Our church. Yes, it was." Brian prayed that she would not question it further.

"What's the meaning of this photo? Why are you both so filthy? Are you practicing your hedonistic rituals at the altar?"

Justin came into the room with a plate of cookies and the coffee pot. Brian took the photo out of his mother's hand. "This picture is very precious to me. I don't want you to touch it. There is no reason in the world that I need to share this with you, because you don't deserve to know. This is our wedding picture, Mother. It was taken on the night that Babylon caught fire. The night that we each thought the other was dead. I couldn't imagine anything worse than living the rest of my life separated from Justin. That would be hell on earth. We found each other that night and we went to the church. Reverend Tom married us. That's right, Mother, Justin and I were married in the church right at the very same altar where you married my father. Justin will be my partner for the rest of my life. That's why I've been going to church every week, to thank God for bringing us together. Your God finally makes sense to me."

"How dare you! A man cannot marry another man. The Reverend would never be a part of this. You've disgraced the family and the church. Your father and I were married in God's eyes. You can't compare this sham of a ceremony with our marriage."

"Of course, they don't compare. Justin wasn't pregnant at the time. If you don't believe me, why don't you go ask the Rev.?"

"If Reverend Tom did participate, he'll pay for his indiscretion."

Brian closed the door after his mother's hurried departure. He turned and faced Justin, who had witnessed the exchange with his mouth wide open.

Justin held out the plate to Brian. "Wanna cookie?" Brian chuckled and took several from the plate. Justin poured the coffee and sat down next to Brian on the sofa.

"Between your culinary experiments, my mother's cookies and your buddy Danny's death wish for me . . . maybe I ought to get a food taster."

Justin was relieved that Brian seemed unperturbed by his mother's visit.

"Do you think we should call the reverend and warn him?" Justin asked.

"What good would it do? She's out for blood now. There's no turning back."

"Brian." Justin reached for the phone and handed it to Brian. "Call him. The least you can do is warn him."

"Where are you going?" Brian started to dial as Justin put on his jacket.

"There's something I have to do." Justin kissed him on the cheek and grabbed the car keys from the counter. "Trust me."

Justin sat quietly in the back of the church while Joan Kinney let loose her wrath on poor Reverend Tom. When she stormed down the aisle, Justin stood up and blocked her path.

"Get out of my way, Justin." She was visibly shaken.

Justin stood firm. "What did Reverend Tom tell you?"

Joan turned her head away like Justin had seen Brian do so many times. She turned back and spoke to Justin. "All of you are sinners. And he's the worst of all." She turned and glared in the direction in which Tom had exited. "He's not only a homosexual, he's a liar as well. He must be exposed."

"What about you? Are you the only one in the church who is sin-free? We both know that's a lie. I wonder how my friends in the ladies' auxiliary would react if they found out one of their membership had been arrested for driving under the influence? Or, better yet, that she had conceived a child out of wedlock? I wonder if they would like to hear the story of how you almost aborted your son? Not to mention the fact that you're probably the world's worst parent. My mother told me that you've encouraged Brian to take pills to kill himself. No wonder he's such a fucking emotional mess."

"So, you're going to blackmail me?"

"Whatever it takes. I told you once I won't let anyone hurt Brian, not even you. If you expose his friend Tom, you'll ruin any chance we ever had of fitting in here. Brian would never admit it, but he finds comfort in this place. He could have told you right off about Reverend Tom. Did you ever stop to think about why he didn't? For once, maybe you should stop being such a bitter old bitch and think about your son. He didn't want to hurt you."

Justin moved out of her path and sat down. "It isn't easy for us, you know. People hate us for no reason. Reverend Tom made us feel welcome here. Half of the parish ignores us, a few openly glare and the rest have just accepted us for what we are. Everyone in this parish has committed a sin at one time or another. You could have killed someone driving drunk, not to mention all the pain you've caused your son. The only sin that we've committed is loving each other. Reverend Tom is a good man. You've said yourself how much comfort he has given you since your husband died. If it wasn't for him, you'd have been alone. I'm sure every one in this parish has a similar story. He's a kind man who wants to help people. What do you hope to accomplish by exposing him? The church will lose a good minister and Brian will never speak to you again. Before you pass judgment on us, maybe you'd better think about whose sins are worse."

When Justin arrived home Brian was on the phone with Lindsay. Brian hung up the phone and pulled Justin to him for a hug.

"Weirdness over?" Justin asked.

"Yeah. Guess who the lucky father is going to be?"

"Emmett?"

"No, Ted. Mel said they wanted to have an accountant in the family."

Justin laughed. Brian pushed him back and looked into his eyes. "What happened at the church?"

"How did you know I went to the church?"

"Reverend Tom called. It seems my mother went there and chewed him a new asshole. She threatened to expose him for allowing us to perform homosexual rituals at the altar. She came back a few minutes later to apologize. She said

she'd had a change of heart and maybe his sin was not so bad. You blackmailed her, didn't you? The Rev mentioned seeing your sweet little blond head peeking out from behind the pew tonight."

"Blackmail has been proven to be a highly effective means of achieving ones goals."

"I thought that was kindness."

"If kindness doesn't work, it's okay to use blackmail."

"The gospel according to Justin."

"Brian, do you think your mother will talk to you ever again?"

"Of course she will. She'll get lonely, or bored, and brew up a batch of some fattening concoction. Then she'll and drag out her broom and show up on our doorstep. Believe me, Justin, tonight was a mild battle. She's always been like this."

"Wow! My mother is looking better and better to me. No wonder you're such a fucking mess."

"Thank you very much."

"It may take me the rest of my life to make you feel loved."

"You wanna start now?" Brian pulled on Justin's shirt and started leading him toward the bedroom.

"I thought you'd never ask."

Slay the Dragon

Brian's mother tries to interfere in his relationship with Justin.

The apartment seemed so empty with Brian away on business. At first, Justin thought he might enjoy the freedom of being unattached . . . just for a little while. He had invited Daphne and a few of her friends over and they had partied until midnight. After they had all gone home, Justin had gotten into bed and tossed and turned while trying to get comfortable. For the past few months he had spent every night with his head nuzzled on Brian's chest. Tonight he finally managed to position Brian's pillow up near his face. He could still smell his scent on it and it was comforting. He thought about Brian and his body ached. When they had spoken on the phone earlier in the evening, Justin had made the mistake of asking if Brian had fucked anyone interesting. Brian had bluntly responded, "I have to have some secrets." The thought of Brian being alone in New York City with all those hot men put a knot in Justin's stomach. He decided to put these thoughts out of his mind. The important thing was that Brian would be coming home to HIM. Just one more night alone and then they would make up for lost time. Justin drifted off to sleep with a smile on his face.

At 1:00 am the telephone woke Justin out of a sound sleep. He dragged himself over to Brian's side of the bed and answered it. A woman on the other end of the line was hysterical. Justin was about to hang up, assuming it was a wrong number or a crank call, when he heard Brian's name.

In between sobs Claire managed to speak. "I need to talk to my brother, right away. Tell Brian his sister is on the phone."

"He's not here," Justin responded. Brian is away on business. He'll be back on Friday. Do you want the number where he is staying?"

"Who are you?" Claire demanded.

"Justin," he said sheepishly.

"Right. You live there." Claire came to the point. "Look, I just got a call from my mother. She's been arrested and she wants me to bring her bail money. I don't have any money and I have no car to go and get her."

"What was she arrested for?"

"Drunk driving," Claire said matter-of-factly. "Does Brian keep any money in the apartment that you can get your hands on?"

"Some. How much do you need?"

"\$500. You will have to take it to the jail and then drive her home."

Before Justin could think of a reason why this would be impossible, he found himself writing down the particulars as Claire dictated them. He hung up the phone and went to the desk where Brian had left the food money. He counting out almost \$ 400 and then dug into his own stash of tip money to come up with the rest. He pulled on the clothes he had worn the night before and retrieved Brian's car keys from the counter.

It was an hour before Justin was able to arrange for the release of Mrs. Kinney. She walked out of the holding area and stood in front of Justin, staring at him in confusion.

"Who are you? Where is my daughter?" Joan Kinney's speech was still slightly slurred.

"I'm Justin. We met once at Brian's apartment," Justin reminded her.

The memory of that particular afternoon hit her full force. "His lover," she blurted out, "Well, I'm sorry that Claire disturbed you. I can make it home by myself. I will return Brian's money as soon as the bank opens in the morning."

As she tried to walk toward the door, she stumbled. Justin grabbed her arm instinctively and led her out into the hall. "I'll drive you home." He was not about to take 'no' for an answer. Joan allowed him to lead her out to the Jeep.

As he drove he could feel her hard stare on his face. "How old are you?" Joan Kinney broke the silence, her curiosity getting the better of her.

"Eighteen. I'll be nineteen in a few weeks," Justin grinned.

"On top of everything else, my son is a pedophile." Joan Kinney closed her eyes and shook her head.

For once Justin decided to ignore the comment. She was obviously still quite drunk and from her attitude and reputation, he knew it would do no good to argue. He pulled up to her house and got out of the Jeep to help the woman inside. She waited for him to open the door and, as he turned to leave she said, "Wait. I think I may have some money inside. I can give it to you now and repay the rest tomorrow."

"You really don't need to . . ." Justin said. But Joan was already inside searching through a desk draw.

"Are you going to just stand there? Close the door. I may have some more in the kitchen. Sit down."

Justin realized that he was standing in the very house where Brian had grown up. Always curious about what Brian's life had been like as a boy, Justin surveyed the shelves for photos. He found several of Brian and his sister when they were babies. Brian looked exactly like Gus did now. Justin was not surprised. There was the usual high school graduation photo, which Justin had already seen in Michael's yearbook. There was one interesting photo of Brian at about the age of 10 or 11. He was dressed as a traditional altar boy. Justin picked up the photo. If it weren't for the very serious look on the boy's face, Justin would have laughed. There was something about the look in Brian's eyes in this photo that had Justin captivated. He could not stop staring at the boy with the haunting hazel eyes.

"I always thought that he might become a minister. He was a very serious student. Brian loved to read as a child. He had many passages of the Bible memorized." Joan had returned to the living room with a tray of cookies and a glass of milk. She set the tray down in front of Justin.

Before he realized it, Justin had eaten the entire tray of cookie and was emptying his second glass of milk. He had been questioning Joan about Brian's childhood and she was only too happy to respond with family stories. Justin realized that she must be very lonely in this house since her husband died. She was so desperate for company she was willing to entertain her son's teenage lover. It was very late and he knew that if he was going to get any sleep at all he had better leave right away. He stood up and handed Mrs. Kinney his plate and glass. "Thanks for the cookies. They were really good. I have to get up for school tomorrow, so I better be going."

"School? Not high school?"

"No. I go to the Pittsburgh Institute of Fine Arts. I'm studying to be an artist."

"Can one make a living as an artist in this day and age?"

"I'm hoping I can. Brian helped me regain the use of my hand. I was in a coma for two weeks after getting bashed in the head with a baseball bat. Brian saved my life. Did you know that?"

"No. He never mentioned it."

"Well, he's really a good man, once you get to know him," Justin said hopefully.

"I know him, far better than anyone ever could. He's led you astray, boy. It's pure evil, what he is doing to you."

Justin saw that any further discussion of Brian would be a mistake. He did want to make sure that Brian's mother understood one thing. "I love your son, Mrs. Kinney. I won't let anyone hurt him, not even you. I'm not going to tell him about what happened tonight. It would be best if you didn't either."

Justin turned to go, but realized that he was still holding the photo of Brian in his hand. He held it out to Mrs. Kinney. "No, you keep it. That boy is dead to me."

Brian arrived home the following morning. He had taken an earlier flight than he had originally planned. Justin was still in bed when Brian opened the door of the loft. He found it odd that Justin was completely dressed and lying on top of the comforter, like he had just thrown his body down and fallen asleep. The sight of the boy's adorable little ass covered with soft grey sweatpants got Brian aroused. He gently sat on the edge of the bed and looked down at the sleeping boy. Justin looked like an angel, so sweet and peaceful. Brian would have to be careful not to let on just how much he had missed him. There would be no living with him if he ever found out that Brian had gotten a 5am flight just so he could see him before he had to leave for school. Looking over at the clock, Brian saw that it was almost 7:30. Justin would probably have to get up for school soon and Brian will have missed his window of opportunity. Brian gently started to rub Justin's beautiful bottom. He was rewarded with a soft whimper which emanated from the depths of the pillows. Justin had every pillow on the bed propped up underneath him. Quickly Brian removed his own clothing and slid his hand under the waistband of the sweatpants. As Brian had suspected, Justin wasn't wearing underwear. As he worked his hand down Justin's tight belly, Brian found that Justin was aware of his presence. As he stroked the boy's morning wood Justin began to moan.

The early morning activities combined with the lack of sleep had taken its toll. It was not yet noon and Brian was already running out of steam. He decided that what he really needed was to take a break and get something to eat. Traveling across town to the diner was a pain in the ass this time of day, but the bonus of surprising Justin made it worth the trouble. Brian pulled up across the street from the diner and immediately spotted Justin standing outside on the sidewalk talking to a woman. Puzzled, Brian started to get out of the Jeep, but when the woman turned in his direction, he stopped dead in his tracks. The woman with Justin was Brian's own mother, Joan Kinney. She was handing Justin an envelope along with a large paper bag. After delivering the packages, she walked in the opposite direction of where the Jeep was parked. She got on a bus at the corner. Sure that the coast was clear, and dying to know what had transpired between Justin and the woman who called herself his mother, Brian ran across the street and grabbed a surprised Justin around the waist.

"Hey, Sunshine," Brian cooed into the nap of Justin's neck.

"Hey, yourself. What are you doing here?" Justin greeted him with a kiss. "You look like shit."

"That's the thanks I get for traipsing all the way over here to surprise you? And speaking of surprises, what the fuck was my mother doing here?"

Justin pocketed the envelope and opened the paper bag. "Delivering cookies?"

"What's going on, Justin?" Brian asked. "Are you blackmailing my mother?"

Justin grinned sheepishly and pulled Brian into the diner. "I can have some secrets, too."

"Keeping secrets with that woman can be bad for you health. I ought to know. My Dad would beat the shit out of me if he caught me conspiring with 'the warden'."

"It's nothing, Brian. Really, forget it. Sit down and I'll bring you a turkey sandwich."

Brian dropped Justin off at the library when his lunch shift ended. They did not bring up the subject of Brian's mother's visit again. Brian was still unsettled by this new-found kinship between Justin and his mother, but he was not in the mood to argue with anyone today. He would have to work late to make up for the time he had lost at lunch and his head was already beginning to pound.

Gus was being particularly difficult. Lindsay had called Justin earlier to ask if he could sit for Gus while she ran some errands. Justin figured that Gus would play with his toys while he did his homework so he had agreed. The baby had cried non-stop for the last hour. Justin had been walking the floor trying to calm him down, but nothing was working. At one point he realized that he had left his book bag at the library. He would have to go there and retrieve it before the library closed in order to finish his assignments. Lindsay had not left a car seat, which didn't even matter because Justin didn't have a car. Brian had phoned earlier to say that he would be home late. As Justin tried to figure a way out of his predicament, the buzzer rang.

"Justin? It's Mom, honey."

He had never been so glad to see his mother as he was at that moment. "Mom, I'm so glad to see you." He kissed her cheek while little Gus screamed in his arms. "I need a favor. I left my book bag at the library and it's going to close soon. Can you watch Gus for a few minutes while I go and get it?" Justin handed the baby to his mother. The minute Gus saw her he began to smile.

"I guess so, honey. Where is Brian?" Gus put his head on her chest and closed his eyes.

"He's working late. I wouldn't ask, Mom, but I need my book to finish my homework. Oh, yeah, can I borrow your car?"

Jennifer handed him the keys. "Don't drive too fast. I'm sure you'll make it there before they close." She settled down on the sofa with Gus sleeping in her arms. It had been many years since her own babies had cuddled up to her, but she had not forgotten how good it felt. When Gus was sleeping soundly she shifted his body to the sofa with his head resting on her lap. As she looked down at the sleeping child, she was reminded of how much the boy looked like his father. She picked up an art magazine from the table and settled in to wait for Justin's return. She had almost nodded off to sleep herself when she heard the door slide open.

"Hi. Where is Justin?" Brian looked at her curiously.

"He left his book bag at the library and had to go back before it closed. I'm just minding Gus for him," Jennifer explained. She thought that Brian looked tired.

"Do you want me to take him?" Brian asked, half-heartedly.

"We're fine. He was having a cranky day. I have to wait for Justin anyway because he has my car."

This was not exactly the scene Brian had anticipated when he got home. Gus was not the only one having a cranky day. The afternoon had been just as stressful as the morning had been. All Brian wanted to do was take a nap and not have to deal with the rest of the world for a couple of hours. The pounding in his head had increased tenfold since lunchtime. The last thing he needed now was a phone call from his secretary. "Brian, I can't find your report. We'll need it for the meeting first thing tomorrow." He made several suggestions to his secretary as to where she might look and, as he hung up the phone, there was a knock on the door. Lindsay had arrived to pick up Gus.

"I can't thank you enough, Mrs. Taylor. I had car trouble at the mall. I'm so sorry you had to wait for me," said Lindsay.

"I enjoyed staying with him. This is a wonderful age."

Brian helped Lindsay pack up Gus and his toys and walked her to the door. Just as she was about to leave there was another knock on the door. Brian slid it open. "Mom?" "Can this day get any worse?" Brian thought. "What are you doing here?"

"I need to speak with you, Brian. I've had something on my mind all day and I need for you to hear it."

Brian rolled his eyes and followed his mother into the kitchen. Lindsay waved to Jennifer who had retreated to the sofa. "Nice to see you, Mrs. Kinney." Joan never looked in the direction of the woman who was carrying a baby.

"You are beyond redemption, Brian. I realize that. I will continue to pray for your immortal soul, but I no longer consider you my son."

"Good, maybe you'll stop dropping by unannounced." Brian pinched his fingers over the bridge of his nose to try to relieve the pounding in his head. There must be something he could take for this headache, as his head was about to explode. He began opening cabinet doors in search of some kind of miracle headache drug. One that would get rid of his headache and, if at all possible, the annoying nagging woman who used to call herself his mother.

"I mean it, Brian. I will not condone or even recognize this disgusting lifestyle that you have chosen to adopt. I know that you were unhappy growing up. I guess I am partially to blame for not seeing the problem early on, when we could have gotten you some help."

"For what? Do you think therapy would have straightened me out, so to speak? Well, I have news for you, Mom. It doesn't work like that. I was born a deviate. Maybe it was something you ate when you were pregnant. And, by the way, if one day we find out that in some bizarre way you ARE responsible for me being gay . . . I'll send you a bouquet of roses on Mother's Day. If I had to go through life chained to a whining, nagging bitch like you, I'd kill myself."

Brian tuned out his mother's response as he continued his search through the cabinets. He finally found a prescription bottle with Justin's name on it. Brian knew that they were painkillers and that Justin had had a bad reaction from them so the bottle was still almost full. He opened it and popped two pills in his mouth without even washing them down with water.

"Is that what you're trying to with those pills? Kill yourself?" His mother's voice was muffled in his head as the pounding continued, but her vicious comments were not lost on him.

"Maybe I should just take the whole bottle, ending not only my pain, but yours as well. Is that why you came here, to drive me insane?"

"That's right, mock me. I came here to ask you to do something that may redeem your soul. You must stop seeing that young man. I know it's too late for you, but he's so young. If you let him go, he could get help. You'll destroy that boy, Brian, like you've destroyed yourself."

Brian couldn't believe his ears. She was talking about Justin. "Stop calling him 'that young man'. His name is Justin. He's as gay as I am. He always was, and always will be. No matter how much you think he can change, he can't. And he would never want to."

"I don't believe that. Maybe if I had been more careful about the people you associated with. .. I never liked that Novotny boy. "

Brian opened the bottle and popped two more pills into his mouth. He opened the next cabinet and removed a bottle of Jim Beam. Maybe if he could just drug himself enough to pass out, maybe the pain would go away. . . and maybe his headache would go away, too.

"Go ahead, Brian. Take the whole bottle. I know you're only doing this to shock me so I'll leave you alone."

Brian heard the muffled sounds of the dragon as she droned on. It didn't matter anymore. The room was starting to fade and the pounding in his head had become constant. He was convinced that the dragon was about to slay him and he welcomed it. She had brought him into the world and she was welcome to take him out. It was almost funny. He thought that he may have laughed, but he wasn't sure. Still, the droning continued.

Jennifer Taylor had taken all she could. She had sat in silence in the living room afraid to move, for fear of being noticed. She had deduced that the woman who had barged in after Lindsay left with the baby had to be Brian's mother. Both mother and son must not be aware of her presence because the words that had passed between them were never meant to be overheard, she was sure. Poor Brian. For the first time since she had known him, it seemed like he was not in control. It had been obvious from the moment he came home that he was not feeling well. This woman's attack was cruel. Jennifer had decided to stay out of it, if possible. She still had to deal with Brian, after all, as her son was living here. Out of the corner of her eye she watched as Brian downed the pills. She prayed that Justin would come home and rescue the man from this brutal attack and possibly worse. Every word they spoke was intended to sting. Jennifer felt that Brian was losing the battle. He had slumped down onto a chair in front of the counter. His mother stood facing him with her hands crossed over her chest. Jennifer decided that she had to do something.

"Can't you see that he's sick?" Jennifer finally spoke.

"He's sick, all right. His soul is sick. He is paving his way to hell. Brian, who is this woman?"

What was that? Brian wasn't sure, but there was another dragon in the room. He turned to look in the direction of the new dragon. It was taller and blonder than the old dragon, but not quite as loud.

"I'm Jennifer Taylor, Justin's mother. You must be Mrs. Kinney. I wish I could say it was a pleasure to meet you, but it isn't. You've made some outrageous remarks and I want to set you straight right now. Both of our sons are gay, Mrs. Kinney. It has nothing to do with choice, or religion, or who they grew up with. It's just a fact, like the color of their eyes or the texture of their hair. When I first became aware of the fact that Justin was gay, I wanted to help him. I thought, at first, that he was confused and maybe he could change his mind and become NORMAL. But being gay is normal for Justin. I'm the one who had to change. I thank God I've been able to do that, to accept him and love him as he is, not as I would like him to be. My husband was not so fortunate and, as a result, our son is lost to him."

"You should not have given up on changing him," Joan shot back. "Brian has turned him into a sinner and he will go to hell. The Bible says so."

Jennifer was burning mad. She tried valiantly to control her temper. Glancing over at Brian she noticed that he was staring at her. "Brian, are you all right?"

He took a deep breath and opened his eyes wider. The blonde dragon was talking to him. He closed his eyes tightly and opened them again. Still, he could not understand what she was saying.

"Suicide is a sin also, Brian," Joan said.

The older dragon was talking now. He understood the words. "Does that mean, I'm going to hell, twice?" He started to laugh.

"You are evil, Brian. You can go to hell now, for all I care. Go ahead, finish the job."

Jennifer was outraged. "How dare you! How can you say such a thing to your own child? You're the one who is evil, Mrs. Kinney!"

"Stay out of our family business."

"Do you know what it's like to lose a child? To sit by his bed and hold his lifeless hand as you try to say goodbye? I know what that's like, Mrs. Kinney. A few months ago Justin was near death. Believe me, there is no greater pain in hell. For two weeks he was in a coma. He couldn't hear me tell him how much I loved him. I didn't know what he would be like, if and when he did wake up. He might have been severely brain damaged or paralyzed. Let me tell you that I would have accepted him in any way, shape or form, if he would just live. I prayed to God to save my gay son. I have cherished every moment I have been able to spend with him since. You don't know how much you love your children until you are faced with losing them."

Having said all that she felt she could, Jennifer collected her coat and bag. She had decided to wait for Justin downstairs. Before she left, she walked back to the kitchen and looked at Brian, who had tears rolling down his face. He hadn't said a word, but he did not appear to be ill. "Justin's my family, Mrs. Kinney. You can abandon your son, if that's what you need to do. It doesn't matter. Brian is a part of our family, too." She kissed Brian on the cheek as Justin walked in the door.

Joan Kinney glared at her son once again and then hurried past Justin and out the door.

"Mom? What's going on?" Justin asked.

"It's okay. I think Brian may need some medical attention. He took several of these prescription pills."

"I'm fine," Brian managed to say. Jennifer shook her head and then kissed Justin good-bye.

"Brian, what the fuck happened here?" Justin got a wash cloth and began to dry Brian's face.

Brian grinned at him and said, "You missed it. There were two dragons fighting over me. The old one told me to go to hell. So I did, twice. I think she likes you."

"Okay. How many of these pills did you take?" Justin noticed the glass of Jim Beam on the counter. "Brian, tell me you didn't wash them down with this."

Brian tried to grab the glass out of Justin's hand. "I forgot. Give it to me."

Justin dumped the whiskey down the drain and debated whether or not he should take Brian to the emergency room for treatment. He had seen him in worse shape and he knew that once Brian recovered there would be hell to pay for dragging him to the hospital for nothing. Brian started to gag and Justin helped him up the stairs to the bathroom where Brian vomited up most of what he had taken. Pushing Justin's hand away, Brian stumbled into the bedroom and fell onto the bed. Justin removed his pants and shirt and covered him. Brian finally got to take his nap.

"That must have been some battle between our mothers. What happened?" Justin asked as he stirred a pot of sauce.

Brian stumbled down the steps and found his way to the kitchen where he put his warm arms around Justin's waist. "Fuck if I know. The last thing I remember is coming home and seeing your mother on the sofa with Gus. Was there much bloodshed?"

"When I walked in my mother was kissing you. Your Mom looked like she was about to burst into flames."

"Justin, why did my mother come to see you at the diner today?"

Justin took the salad plates to the dining room and set them on the table. Brian joined him at the table. "I won't get mad, I promise. Just tell me."

"I bailed her out of jail last night. She had been arrested for drunk driving. Claire called looking for you, so I went to the jail with the money. I drove your mother home and she fed me cookies and told me all about your sainted

childhood. Oh, and she gave me this picture." Justin went to where he had left his backpack and showed the photo to Brian.

Brian handed the photo back after glancing at it briefly. "Get rid of it. That kid doesn't exist anymore."

"That's what she said, sorta. I like it. You look so innocent."

"That was before the boy in the picture started sucking cock and taking it up the ass. Before he started carving his path to hell."

Justin studied the photo again. "Brian," he said softly, "did something happen to you at church? Did some perv clergyman grope you or something?"

"Maybe. I don't remember," Brian mumbled.

Justin finally understood. Something had happened to Brian when he was young. Some asshole had molested him or maybe worse. That would explain a lot. Especially if that person was someone that Brian had trusted, like a priest. Justin decided not to press it. He took one last look at the photo and slipped it back into his bag. The reason that he liked the photo so much was because of the look of innocence and vulnerability on the boy's face. This was the face that Justin had seen in their private, loving moments. Justin had touched the heart of the boy that lived inside Brian.

After dinner Brian retreated to the sofa and switched on CNN. Justin decided to call his mother. "Hi. I wanted to thank you for today."

"Gus is a very sweet little boy. You can call me anytime you need a babysitter. How is Brian?"

"Better. He says, 'Hi'." Justin looked over at Brian.

Brian waved his hand at the phone, and then turned his attention back toward the T.V. His drug-induced malaise had started to lift and he was remembering some of the conversation between his mother and Mrs. Taylor. She had said something about Justin almost dying and he wondered if she knew that was what had triggered his tears. He had long ago dismissed his mother's vicious verbal attacks as alcoholic ramblings not worth his time. He would have tuned her out completely if she had not brought up Justin.

Justin had walked away from the sofa and was speaking to his mother in a low tone. Brian knew that they were probably talking about him. Jennifer Taylor had been dead set against him ever seeing Justin again after the attack in the parking garage. Yet she put her own feelings aside for Justin's sake. His own mother had always been so rigid. It had always been either her way or no way. Brian understood why his father had given her the nickname 'the warden'. Justin was lucky to have a mother like Jennifer.

"Thanks again for being there for me . . . for us. I love you, Mom."

"Are you kissing up, again?" Said Brian. "Is your birthday coming up or something? Maybe she'll buy you a car."

Justin hung up the phone and plopped down on the sofa next to Brian. He put both arms around him and hugged him. "Feeling better?"

Brian snuggled close to Justin and began to plant little kisses all around his neck. "Much."

Justin giggled and gently pushed him away. "Stop it. I want to talk to you."

"What could be more important than this?" Brian protested.

"My mom told me some of the things that your mother said to you. She's wrong, you know. You're not going to hell and you haven't corrupted me. Even if you had, I wouldn't have it any other way."

"That's what I told her."

"Besides, even if you are going to hell, I'll be right there with you."

"I knew you'd stick by me, no matter what." The words triggered a memory of something his mother had said to him. She had asked him if he had anyone in his life that would be there, no matter what. Brian realized that he did.

Epilogue

As Jennifer was busy the next morning arranging paperwork that she would need for her client meetings for the day, a delivery man came into the office with a large bouquet of red roses. Assuming it was being delivered to one of the young secretaries, she went back to her paperwork.

"Jennifer Taylor?" The delivery man read from the card.

"Yes?"

"These are for you. Would you sign here, please?"

The girls in the office were all cooing over how lovely the roses were and asked who had sent them. Jennifer couldn't imagine who they were from. Craig had never sent her flowers. In fact, this was the first time she had ever received a bouquet. She opened the card. It read: 'Thanks for slaying the dragon.' And it was signed - 'your family'

At first she was confused. But then she remembered that yesterday she had called Brian part of her family and she could only assume that the dragon was his mother. She picked up the phone and dialed Brian's office.

"Thank you for the flowers, Brian. It was very sweet of you to send them."

"I want you to know that as a mom, you're not so bad. If I had a mom like you when I was growing up maybe I wouldn't be such an infidel."

"Thank you, Brian. I know we haven't always agreed about Justin, but I think I can say that as a son, you're not so bad either."

The Worst That Could Happen

This story is based on a collection of season two spoilers. Most of these spoilers are as fictional as the stories that I write. I put together the story based on what I consider to be the worst that could happen. Brian somehow loses Justin and winds up with Michael. No matter how hard I tried I could not keep them apart for long. Brian and Justin are destined to be together, no matter what.

Brian barely made it up the stairs of the fourth floor walk-up he shared with Mikey. He had been out drinking at Woody's since early afternoon. His position at the advertising agency had been in jeopardy for months and he had finally told his boss, the infamous Kip, to fuck off. In more lucid moments he had wondered where his creative genius had disappeared to. The answer was in his hand . . . an empty bottle of Jim Beam.

His life had been in a downward spiral for years. After Debbie Novotny was killed by a runaway car which had crashed through the front window of the diner, Brian had taken on the task of nursing Michael's broken heart. It had been his ex-lover, David, at the wheel of the car. He had plowed through the window in a fit of rage after returning to Pittsburgh to reclaim Michael, only to find him in the arms of another man. Michael had felt responsible for the deaths of two people that he had loved so much. Michael, as always turned to Brian for comfort.

Brian had taken Michael back to the loft after Debbie's funeral. Brian's own life had already hit rock bottom after losing the only person he had ever truly loved. Looking back it, was easy to see what had gone wrong. His own ego and controlling nature was to blame for his misery. The night he had found Justin in the arms of another man, he had freaked out. He hadn't expected Justin to give him an ultimatum: . . .either commit to him or fuck off. Brian had wanted to say the words Justin needed to hear. He tried to say them, but his entire body had frozen with fear. Justin had finally given up on him. Brian could see it in his eyes. Before Justin left he stroked Brian's face and kissed him good-bye. And then Justin walked out of the loft for the last time.

He had fucked Michael after Debbie's funeral. Afterwards, as he lay in bed next to the man he had always counted on as his best friend, he had looked up at the ceiling and cried. He had only cried after sex once before, on the night he had made love to Justin for the first time. Those had been tears of joy. The tears he shed after fucking Michael were tears of despair. His only hope was that Michael felt the same. If they could just forget what had been the worst sex Brian had ever experienced, maybe they could go back to being just friends.

But when Michael awoke, he had turned to Brian and smiled up at him, and Brian knew his fate had been sealed. So, this was his punishment for fucking up everything he'd ever touched. There was no way on earth he could ever leave Michael. The man depended on him for everything. The longer they were together, the more Brian resented the very sight of him.

Brian's time with Justin had been the happiest years of his life. When they made love and he looked into Justin's adoring eyes, he had been consumed with love and the desire to possess him. When Michael looked at him with that puppy dog adoring look of his, Brian wanted to puke.

As Brian entered the walk-up apartment, Michael whined in his sleep "Brian? Is that you?"

"No. Go back to sleep," Brian snapped as he slid into the bed.

Michael turned on the light. Brian put the pillow over his face but Michael pulled it away.

"Where the fuck were you? It's almost time to get up for work. I've been waiting for you all night. I want you to fuck me, right now."

"I don't have to get up for work. I quit my fucking job today."

"Brian, how can you do that to me? You know I don't make enough money at the comic book store to support us. How are we going to live?"

"That's your problem. I have other plans." Brian tried to end the conversation.

"If Justin were here I bet you would fuck him."

Brian turned and looked at the man he had grown up with. He had that scrunched up look that he always got whenever he said Justin's name. Brian realized at that moment the difference between himself and Michael. When he had lived with Justin he had grown-up emotionally, regrettably not enough to save him. Michael had not grown at all. In fact, if anything, he was regressing back to the maturity of a 14 year old who lived in a comic book world.

It didn't matter anymore. Brian had made a decision and his pain would be over soon. He had one more thing he needed to do. Once he had accomplished it, he would be free.

Michael had turned his back on Brian and, mercifully, fallen back to sleep. Brian quietly slipped out from under the covers and reached into the closet. He took out a small leather back pack fastened at the top with a combination lock. It was the only thing that Brian had thought to rescue from the flames when his loft had caught on fire years ago. It was also the only thing in the world that really mattered to him.

He looked over to make sure that Michael was still asleep, even though the deafening sound of his snoring was a dead give away. Quietly he spun the numbers on the combination lock and freed the clasp. Gently he removed the articles inside and spread them out before him on the table. He looked at the photos of Justin and himself, smiling and happy. They had been so in love with each other that they glowed. He allowed himself the secret pleasure of smiling back at the young faces in the pictures. In his 39+ years of living there were not many moments in time that he could remember what it was he was feeling, or if he was feeling anything at all. But he could remember every moment of every day that he had spent with Justin. The photos were merely paper and ink, but he cherished the memories forever etched in his heart. He put the photos back into the bag and removed the remaining items. They were the most precious. He took the red sweatshirt and pressed it to his face. In his imagination he could still smell the scent of Justin's skin. He closed his eyes and could almost feel the soft blond hair which so often tickled him under his chin as Justin lay sleeping on his chest. As he clung to the sweatshirt, he picked up the sketch pad and opened it to his favorite page. It was a drawing that Justin had done of the two of them in a loving embrace.

He stared at the picture for a moment and then retrieved the final item. It was a gun that he had purchased that very afternoon. The instrument of death which would free him from his earthly misery.

While sitting in his car parked in front of an office building on Madison Avenue, Brian began to feel shaky. He knew his addiction to alcohol was taking over his mind and for once he was fighting the urge to hit the bottle. And then he saw him. The one he'd been watching for. He hadn't changed all that much since he had left Pittsburgh to finish art school in New York City. Brian had been devastated when Lindsay told him that Justin had changed schools and moved to New York. In his mind, he had assumed that they would be able to get back together after their big fight. He had even started to make plans to win him back, but it had been too late. Maybe it had been better for Justin to be far away from him. Maybe Brian had poisoned his young life and stolen his innocence, just like Bedwetter had suggested. Maybe Justin was better off without him.

Brian slouched down in his seat as his eyes followed Justin crossing the street and then disappearing down the stairs to the subway. Brian started the car and drove downtown. This was not his first trip to New York City. And it was not the first time he had watched Justin since their break-up. At least once a month he would give in to the urge to drive into the city and spy on Justin. He had stolen a peek at Lindsay's address book and found out where he was living. On many nights he had sat out in the cold and watched as Justin would return home, each time with a different trick. They would be clinging to each other in anticipation and Brian would feel his blood boiling.

Sometimes they would stop on the street and the trick would try to kiss Justin. Justin would always turn his head away from the kiss and pull the man into the building.

Brian never saw him kiss anyone on the mouth. It had been the one sacrifice that Justin had negotiated when they had first started out. It was not until months after their final breakup that Brian realized he was free to kiss whomever he wanted. He also realized that he didn't want to kiss anyone else. He had often wondered if Justin felt the same.

He pulled up across from building where Justin lived and waited for him to arrive. A few moments later Brian recognized the familiar sexy gait as Justin approached the building where he lived. Brian adjusted his mirror to get a closer look at Justin's face. He didn't look happy today and Brian wondered what was wrong. Maybe Justin remembered what day it was today and was thinking about Brian. Now he knew he was being ridiculous. Why would Justin remember it was the day before Brian's 40th birthday? It was a day that Brian swore he would never live to see.

Brian fought the urge to leave the car and step into the bar on the corner. He was determined to work up the courage to see Justin. He needed to talk to him and finally tell him that he was sorry.

Seconds later, a man who had entered the building after Justin, came rushing out into the street. He looked angry, a fact that was confirmed when Brian saw the man punch a mailbox as he made his way down the street. Justin came out of the building a few minutes later and looked distraught. He stopped for a moment and turned to look in Brian's direction. Brian quickly ducked behind the wheel of his Jeep. Justin put his head down and then turned and walked up the street in the same direction the other man had walked. Brian didn't like the looks of the guy. If he was someone that Justin was seeing, Brian hoped that Justin had broken it off.

Brian got out of his Jeep and walked to a corner bar, where he spent the rest of the afternoon. There was no point in trying to see Justin. He had no right to interfere in his life. It was time. He would forget his plan to ask for Justin's forgiveness. It was a selfish idea and it was too late anyway. Once it got dark, he would find a place near the river to park his Jeep and would do what he had come here to do.

He decided that he would pull the trigger at 11:59pm. That would give him the entire evening to socialize with his friend Jim Beam. He looked around at the patrons in the bar. It was a gay bar. He must have a built-in radar system for locating these places. Either that or Justin had picked out his apartment because there was a gay bar on the corner. He thought about the possibility of hooking up with one last trick. After looking around for a possible recipient of his last fling, Brian decided he would just pass his last hours in the company of his best friend, Mr. Beam.

At 10:30pm, the bartender noticed that the drunk who had occupied the bar stool at the end of the bar had fallen head first onto the floor. He walked around and offered the man a hand up. The bastard shrugged him off and pulled himself back onto the stool.

"Another bottle," Brian demanded. He lifted his eyes and managed to give the bartender a sweet Brian Kinney smile.

"Sorry, buddy. The bar is closed to you. Why don't you go sleep it off somewhere? You look like shit."

Brian slammed his glass down on the bar. "I WANT ANOTHER DRINK!"

"Forget it. Now, get out of here before I call the cops."

Brian leaned in toward the bar. "WHO DO I HAVE TO FUCK TO GET A DRINK AROUND HERE?"

"Me." There was a hand on Brian's back and, even in his inebriated state, he knew who's hand it was. He turned slowly and looked into Justin's sweet face. He was smiling at him. His Justin was smiling at him. It was the last thing he remembered seeing before he passed out.

Justin asked some friends in the bar and the bartender to help him get Brian to his feet. Once he was upright, Justin draped Brian's arm around his neck and half-walked, half-dragged the man out the door. Brian roused a little in the fresh outdoor air and tried to stand on his own. He staggered for a moment before grabbing the wall and leaning into the alley. Justin stood behind him and rubbed his neck while he vomited. Then Justin gently pulled Brian back toward him and slipped in under Brian's arm. Together they walked back to Justin's loft.

Once in the loft, Justin sat Brian down at a table and went to the bathroom to get a cold washcloth. He applied it to Brian's neck and went to the kitchen for a bottle of water. "Do you want a glass, or do you want me to pour it over your head?"

Through a foggy haze Brian could see that Justin was smiling at him. He tried to return the favor, but he wasn't sure if his face was working properly. "This isn't what it looks like." Once again Brian was trying to cover for himself. Stupid, stupid, stupid. . . he had come here to be honest with Justin. "I was a shitty boyfriend. I fucked up. Is anyone surprised?" Brian put his head down on the table.

"Brian, you weren't a shitty boyfriend. Believe me, I know from shitty boyfriends."

Brian felt a familiar twinge of jealousy. "So, you have a boyfriend?"

"No." Justin frowned and did not elaborate on the statement.

"I better go. I have plans for tonight."

"Unless your plans include lying face down in your own puke in an alley somewhere you better stay here where I can take care of you. Do you want me to call Michael?" Justin asked.

"NO! Don't call him. I don't want Michael. I want you."

"Lindsay told me you were together. Just like you'd always planned it."

"Just like Michael always planned it. I stayed with him because there was nothing else I could do. It's over now."

"Well, apparently he doesn't know that because Lindsay called me at work today to tell me that Michael was going crazy looking for you. She said that when he woke up he found a piece of paper with a stick figure drawn on it. The figure was waving and had a balloon over his head which said 'Later'."

Brian grinned. "I figured it was the only way he would finally get it, if he could see it in cartoon form."

Justin found himself smiling, too. "Poor Michael."

"Yeah, poor Michael." Brian was starting to get uncomfortable talking to Justin about Michael. "I'm feeling better. I'll leave now and let you get back to your 'life without Brian'." He went to stand up and slammed back down into the chair.

Justin got behind him and, after helping him up, steered him toward the couch. "You can stay here. On the couch." Justin pulled off Brian's shoes and covered him with a blanket. "And don't jerk off on it."

Brian never heard the last statement. He was already snoring. Justin took the opportunity to study the man who had captured his heart when he was 17 years old. The alcohol abuse had taken its toll. His color wasn't good, and he was very thin. But his face was still beautiful. Justin's eyes lingered for a moment on Brian's mouth. He had so loved Brian's mouth: kissing him, sucking his cock, smiling that goofy Brian Kinney smile that always made Justin's heart skip a beat. Justin tenderly passed his hand over Brian's thin frame. He left him there to sleep it off.

Brian awakened to the sound of glass breaking. His sight was still a bit hazy, but he thought he could see Justin in the kitchen. He wasn't alone. The man Brian had seen leaving the apartment in a huff earlier that evening had returned and was yelling at Justin. He had something in his hand that looked like a broken bottle. Justin was pinned

against the refrigerator. The other man was much bigger than Justin. Brian had to do something fast. His hand went down to the leather bag on the floor. He quietly felt around inside until he came up with the gun he had intended to use on himself.

"Justin, who the fuck is that guy?" the stranger asked. Justin didn't answer. He looked over the man's shoulder at Brian.

"Who the fuck are you?" Brian asked calmly.

The man turned and attempted to punch Brian in the face. Brian ducked the punch and slid over the counter to come between the man and Justin. "Why don't you get the fuck out of here?" Brian demanded.

"I live here, asshole! You get the fuck out! Justin, tell him."

Justin opened his mouth and Brian saw that it was full of blood. He looked closer at Justin's face and saw the bruises. Brian approached the man and pulled out his weapon. He held the gun to the man's temple. "You don't live here anymore. Now get the fuck out. If you ever come near Justin again, I'll kill you."

Justin wiped his mouth with a washcloth. "You can get your shit out of here tomorrow when I'm at work, Jeremy. I never want to see you again."

Jeremy took one last look at Justin and left the apartment, banging the door shut behind him. Brian attempted to put his arms around Justin, but Justin pushed him away. Brian tried again and Justin let him touch his face. Justin could see tears forming in Brian's eyes.

"I told you I knew all about shitty boyfriends. You never hurt me like he did. You see, you weren't all that bad."

Brian got some ice from the freezer and wrapped a clean cloth around it. He gently held it to Justin's mouth until the bleeding had stopped. Upon closer inspecting Brian could see that Justin had bruises all over his neck and face. Some were fresh, while others were not.

"Why would you let someone do this to you?" Brian asked.

"Justin Taylor, human punching bag. At least he didn't use a bat." Justin tried to smile.

"Fuck that, Justin. You don't deserve it. What could you possibly do to make him so mad?"

Justin didn't answer, but Brian got the message. Justin had been beaten tonight because he had brought Brian home. "I'm sorry."

"It's my fault. I'm attracted to the jealous type."

"Who wouldn't be jealous when they're with you?"

Brian took the washcloth from Justin's face. He moved in closer and touched his lips to Justin's. Justin winced in pain but did not pull away. It was the first time he had been kissed since leaving Pittsburgh . . . since he had kissed Brian good-bye.

The next morning, Brian opened his eyes and tried to pull himself up into a sitting position. His head was throbbing. He felt as if he had spent the night sitting inside one of the speakers at Babylon. He looked around and realized that it hadn't been a dream. This was Justin's place. The last thing he remembered from the night before was the kiss. Slowly he got to his feet and dragged himself into the kitchen. Leaning heavily against the sink, he stuck his head under the faucet and turned on the cold water. It didn't help his headache, but at least now he was fully awake. He ran his hand along the counter in search of a towel; but, instead came into contact with warm flesh.

Justin pulled him way from the sink and dried his face with a towel. "Good morning! You look like shit!" He said cheerfully.

"Shut the fuck up." Brian managed to put together an entire sentence before his stomach spasmed , causing him to barf into the kitchen sink.

"Want some breakfast?" Justin teased.

Brian stared at him in disbelief. "Just coffee."

"You really should eat something. How about some toast? And drink some water before you dehydrate."

"I didn't come here for medical advice."

Justin put a cup of black coffee in front of Brian and poured one for himself. He sat down at the table opposite Brian. "Why did you come here?"

Brian's head was starting to clear and a voice inside of him screamed out. "I LOVE YOU!" The words never made it to his lips. "I can't remember."

"I remember everything. You've been here before. I've seen you sitting in that fucking ugly red Jeep. I'm on to you, Brian. Why did you bring a gun? Are you going to shot me so no one else can have me?"

"NO! I'd never hurt you." Brian exclaimed. "The gun was for me. My life's a fucking mess. I have no place to live, no job, no money, and no friends. I've completely destroyed everything that was good in my life."

"You have a place to live. You can stay here at my place. But nothing is ever going to change for you unless you honestly want to change yourself. The first thing you're going to do is take a shower, because you reek. The second thing you're going to do is get rid of that stupid gun, along with the bullets.

"Bullets? Shit, I knew I forgot something."

"You mean last night you defended my honor with an empty gun?"

"It worked, didn't it?"

"Yeah. Thanks for saving me. . . again."

"You're welcome."

"Where was I? . . . oh, yeah, get rid of the gun. Then you're going to call Michael and finally tell him the truth. If he's hurt, then that's his problem. You never should have let things go as far as they did. Maybe if you would have talked to him instead of fucking him he would have understood."

Brian said nothing, he just sat and listened.

Justin went to the bedroom to get his suit jacket. He took out his wallet and handed Brian his credit card. "Buy yourself some decent clothes and go out and get a job. And, if you really mean to change your life, you'll stop drinking and get your skinny ass back into a gym."

"Is that it? Is there anything else I need to do for myself?"

"That's enough for today."

"Today?"

"Well you can start today." Justin said. "There is ONE thing that you can do . . . for me."

"Here it comes." Brian put his head down on the table.

Justin smiled. "Shave that fucking beard off your face. It makes me itchy." He ran his hand over Brian's beard. Brian grabbed his hand and held it there as he looked at Justin hopefully. "I gotta go to work." Justin pulled back gently. "If you're here when Jeremy comes back for his stuff, be nice. He's only violent when he's drunk or jealous. And don't let him steal anything."

"Is that it?" Brian asked as he walked with Justin toward the door.

Justin turned and said. "One more thing. . . Happy Birthday, Brian."

Brian stared at the door for a long time after Justin left. If only he could find a way to say what he wanted to say instead of relying on his sarcastic wit to cover his true feelings. Is that what Justin wanted? He knew he would do anything for Justin. But Justin had said that he had to want to change himself. What was it that Brian Kinney wanted? The answer was always there. Brian smiled and went in to shower and shave.

By 4pm Brian had accomplished almost everything on the list. He had hocked the gun and sold that God awful red Jeep to buy a Hugo Boss suit. Brian Kinney was back. He hadn't even bothered to buy a newspaper. That was no way to find a real job. He had gone straight to the top. The largest advertising firm was on Madison Avenue near the building where Justin worked. Brian had charmed his way into the office of the managing partner and made the sales pitch of his career. He had offered his services at only a fraction of a percentage higher than what he had been making at his old firm at the peak of his career. After all, this was New York and his expenses would be higher. He had made it clear that this was a limited time offer as he was on his way to interview a rival firm. Since he was in the neighborhood, and they had an interesting client list, he had decided to give them an opportunity to hire him first. He had given the names of several former clients who would, of course, be signing on with whatever firm he chose to go with.

There was one more thing he needed to do for himself. He dialed Michael's number at the comic book store. The conversation was brief. "Michael. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I led you on all those years. I'm sorry I fucked you. I'm sorry I stole your credit card."

"Who is this?" Michael asked.

"Shit, Mikey you are so pathetic. We're still best friends, right?"

"Sure, Brian."

After the call to Michael, he made a series of calls to the clients he had dangled under the nose of his new boss. By 4:30 they were all on board. Brian heard a key in the door and looked up. It wasn't Justin, it was Jeremy.

"Hey," Brian said calmly. He continued to make his calls as Jeremy collected his belongings. Jeremy went into the bathroom and then the bedroom he had shared with Justin. Brian watched him as he opened the door to another room. Brian had not noticed there was another bedroom. He got up and followed Jeremy into the room. It was a sparsely furnished spare bedroom. Jeremy was packing the clothes from the closet into a bag. Brian walked further into the room and noticed a drawing in a frame on the wall. It was a drawing that Justin had done of the two of them. Brian recognized the moment Justin had captured on paper the instant he saw the picture. It was the night they had made love to each other for the first time. Justin was in the foreground lying on his side with Brian in back of him. His left hand rested on Justin's hip and his right hand was intertwined with Justin's hand. Justin had his head tilted his head back and Brian was kissing him tenderly as he entered him for the first time since the night of the prom.

As Brian stood staring at the artwork, Jeremy finished his packing and started to leave the room. He turned to Brian before he left and spoke. "If you came here looking for the boy in the picture, you can forget it. He doesn't exist anymore. Justin's as cold as ice on the inside. Christ, he never even kissed me when we were fucking."

Brian smiled to himself when he heard the outside door close. He couldn't take his eyes from the picture. His emotions overtook him as he put his hand out to touch the glass that covered the drawing. "Justin. . . I love you," he said softly to the boy in the picture.

"Just as I always suspected." Justin stood in the doorway.

Brian regained his composure. "He said you never kissed him."

"No, I never did. I keep my promises." Justin came into the room and sat on the bed.

Brian sat down next to him on the bed. "I did all the things on your list."

"I can see that. You look great."

"I didn't use your credit card." Brian reached into his pocket and handed the card to Justin.

"What did you use to buy the suit?"

"I hocked the gun and sold my Jeep."

"I guess you're not going back to Pittsburgh."

"No, my life is here now." Brian moved closer to Justin. He shyly put out his hand to touch him.

"Brian, you did all this for yourself, right? You didn't do it because you thought I wanted you to, did you?"

Brian felt his heart sink. He wasn't sure how to answer. "No?"

They sat there in silence until Brian couldn't take it anymore. "Justin, what is it that you want? Tell me and I'll do it. Whatever it takes, please. Just tell me what you want me to do," Brian begged.

Justin stood up and faced him. "Talk to me, Brian," he said softly. "That's all you ever had to do. I don't mean lecture me, or baby me, or tell me the fuck off. We never talked about how we felt. Maybe if we had we wouldn't be so fucked up."

"You're not fucked up. You have everything here."

"What do you know about me? What I had is an endless string of nameless tricks and a handful of abusive relationships. No one ever measured up to Brian Kinney. I started at the top with the love of my life and the only way to go was down. I don't think either one of us realized how special it was."

"Can we fix it?" Brian asked hopefully.

"Talk to me, Brian. You can talk to a fucking picture on the wall, but you can't say the words to me. Why?"

"I'm afraid to," Brian admitted.

"You shouldn't be afraid. You know me, Brian. More than anyone else in my life. Trust me."

He felt the words form in his heart, then escape from his mouth. He didn't have to think about it, he didn't have to be afraid that he would be rejected. He trusted Justin.

"I love you," Brian said softly. Justin took his hand and held it. They looked into each other's eyes. "I love you," Brian said again as a smile came to his lips.

That's a good start," replied Justin.

"Uh-oh. There's more?" groaned Brian.

"Yes," Justin continued. "We never talked about what happened. I didn't pick up men to make you jealous. You made me feel like it was expected of me. I thought that every gay man was supposed to want to fuck a different guy every night. I never stopped to think about what I really wanted."

"It just wasn't in me to be monogamous." Brian said.

"There you go again. Putting words in my mouth. I wasn't talking about you. I could have had it either way. It never mattered to me. What hurt was the look on your face when you saw me with Eric. I was responsible for putting that look on your face. I felt so guilty for hurting you. I never wanted to see that look on your face again. That's why I said what I did. But I was wrong. I never should have left."

"I hurt you like that all the time."

"So what? I had already accepted that it was just you being you. There wasn't any reason for ME to be you. I turned it into a competition. If I had it to do over again, I would have let you go out and do what you wanted to do. I should have stayed at home and waited for you. Brian, you're the only man I have loved. You're the one I wanted to be with. If I felt the urge to jerk off some hot guy in the bathroom at school, that would be different. You would never be involved, it wouldn't be payback. It would be me being me."

Brian thought for a moment. "Is that what you really want?"

"Yeah." Justin lay back on the bed and looked up at the ceiling. "What do you really want, Brian?"

Brian looked at Justin and then pointed to the framed drawing on the wall. "That. That's what I want." He looked back at Justin for his reaction

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Justin smiled and propped himself up on his elbows. "That'll take some doing. My stomach is not quite that flat anymore and I think my thighs are thicker than yours now. And I may have some trouble getting my neck to contort like that."

Brian was quiet for a moment. Then he spoke softly. "Can we try? I mean, to have a relationship again."

Justin sat up and put his hands on Brian's face. "You can stay here with me at my place and if it works out we can finally go and get a place that belongs to both of us. Let's take it slow."

"Not too slow. I'm 40 now, you know. Things are going to start to deteriorate pretty fast."

Justin pushed Brian back on the bed. "Will you stop with the old age shit. . . it's not like you're 50!"

Series

Crazy Little Thing

This story takes place right after Justin gets out of the hospital. Brian comes to terms with his feelings for Justin. Justin turns the tables.

"You know you shouldn't be doing that." Daphne admonished Justin as she watched him light up a joint.

"Why not? What's a few more dead brain cells? It doesn't matter what I do anyway. My life is over." Justin held out the joint out for her.

Daphne hesitated briefly before turning down the offer. "Stop saying that, Justin. You'll be able to draw again. It might take some time, but at least you're not dead."

"Not on the outside anyway."

Daphne was worried about her friend's mood lately. He was clearly depressed, and not because of his temporary disabilities. It was all about Brian Kinney. That selfish prick hadn't even found the time to visit Justin in the hospital. Every day she would go to the hospital and bring something that Justin liked to eat. After he awakened from the coma all he did was complain about the food. Daphne took that as a sign he was returning to normal. They would talk for a while and he would pretend to listen, but the whole time she knew he was secretly watching the door wishing that Brian would finally make an appearance. It broke her heart watching his spirit die a little each day.

He finally had given up on Brian, and now, apparently on his whole life. She was determined to do something to help him.

"I think it's time we got laid." She declared.

Justin laughed for the first time since he had come home. "We tried that, remember? It was a BIG mistake."

"Not us, you idiot. What do you say we go out and pick up some hot guys? One for me and one for you."

"And just where would we go to pick up these hot guys . . . Hot Guys R Us? Maybe they have a web site and we could order them in . . . one from column A and one from column B." Justin was only half joking, he was almost that desperate. After living in the fast lane of hot sex that Brian had introduced him to, living at his mother's home was like being in prison. He wasn't allowed to drive yet and public transportation was limited.

"I guess you're right. We don't exactly travel in the same circles, even though we are after the same thing. If you're going to get laid, you'll have to go to a gay bar. So, let's go." She knew she would be in a lot of trouble if Mrs. Taylor found out she had driven Justin downtown, but right at this moment helping her friend realize there's more than one fish in the sea was worth the risk.

Justin perked up and grabbed his jacket. "But, what about you?"

"I'm thinking of switching over. It would make hanging out a lot easier!" Daphne joked as she picked up her car keys.

On the trip downtown Justin seemed more like his old self, joking and singing along with the radio; that is, until they passed Babylon. His dour mood returned and he got very quiet.

"You want to forget it and see a movie instead?" Daphne was sorry she had even brought up the idea of coming here tonight. Justin looked so sad. If she had Brian Kinney in front of her she would smack that stupid smug grin off his face.

"No, you're right. This is where I belong Daph, you go home. I'll be fine."

Before she could protest Justin was out the door and making his way across Liberty Avenue. "Justin wait!" she yelled after him, but it was too late, he had disappeared into the crowd.

Justin stood across the alley from Babylon. The thought of actually going inside terrified him as much as it had that first night. It was early and he knew that he had about an hour before Brian and the guys would show up. If he wasn't too picky he could probably hook up with someone and be out of there before they arrived.

Trying not to attract too much attention with his limp he struggled to the door and showed his fake pass. Nothing had changed since the last time he had been there. It was the night he asked Brian to go to the prom. They had been standing right here by the stairway. He remembered how nervous he had been about asking and how much it hurt when Brian turned him down flat.

There was no use wasting time thinking about Brian Kinney, Justin thought. For sure he isn't thinking about me. The dance floor was not too crowded, which was good because Justin wasn't too sure if he could manage to dance in a crowd without getting knocked to the floor and stomped on. The patrons of Babylon were not known for their compassion.

He gravitated toward a group of older dancers and smiled at the one with the biggest muscles. At least his boyish charm was still intact and he was able to hook up with the guy after the first dance. Unfortunately the guy's boyfriend was not very understanding and before they could make it down the stairs to the backroom he felt himself being pushed aside. Venturing out for a second time, he noticed a difference in the mood of the place. The floor was more crowded and the dancers were getting aggressive.

He was about to give up the whole idea and call Daphne to pick him up when a big biker type came over and nodded toward the stairs. Justin was not crazy about the looks of the guy, but he had not been with a man in weeks and this might be his last chance for a while.

The minute they got downstairs he regretted his decision. The asshole was all over him and Justin was repulsed by his touch. "Look, I made a mistake. Get off, I'm not interested."

He tried to slip out from under the guys weight, only to find himself trapped against the wall. The more he struggled, the more the guy seemed to be enjoying himself. Justin started to panic when he found he could barely breathe. Everything had started to go black, when he heard a familiar voice.

"I think he said he wasn't interested." Emmett put his hand on the biker guy's shoulder. Next to Emmett was a tall black Adonis, standing there with his arms folded, and looking very intimidating.

At first Justin thought his attacker was going to punch Emmett, but when he saw the other guy he backed off fast. Justin slumped against the wall for a minute and took a deep breath.

"Are you okay, baby?" Emmett tried to touch his arm and Justin jerked away.

"Yeah, Emmett, thanks." Justin looked over at the black man and nodded his head.

"I gotta go, Em. Please don't tell anyone about this." Putting his head down, Justin made his way up the stairs as fast as he could while dragging one leg. His heart was still pounding against his chest when he finally got outside. He braced himself against a lamp post to catch his breath.

"Where are you headed?" The sound of the familiar seductive voice cause a tidal wave of emotion inside of Justin's body.

His own words echoed in his head "No place special", but Justin did not respond out loud. It occurred to him that this was the very lamp post which marked the first night of the downward spiral of his life.

Trying to control his limp arm and shaking hand, Justin turned to face him.

"Go away."

"What are you doing here? Are you back to stalking me?" Brian asked, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Don't flatter yourself." Justin tried to walk, but his leg would not support him. He almost fell as he turned. Brian reached out to steady him.

His touch sent Justin into a rage. He shrugged off Brian's hand and reached back for the post to steady himself. After gaining control of his emotions and his fragile limbs, he straightened up and started to walk away.

Brian followed. "You really shouldn't be out here alone." The sarcasm was replaced by true concern.

"Where should I be? Alone in my hospital room?"

Brian stepped in front of him and stopped him in his path. "Get in the Jeep. I'm taking you home."

"I don't want to go home."

"Where do you want to go?"

"Away from you."

"You better get in the Jeep. I wouldn't want to be accused of leaving you out here alone."

It was clear that he was not going away. Justin gave in and walked back to the Jeep. Once or twice Brian tried to help him, but, Justin shoved him off vehemently.

"Where are we going?"

"Back to the loft. You said you didn't want to go home."

"I guess I could pick up the stuff I left there and then I'll call Daphne."

After arriving at the loft Justin set about collecting his belongings. Nothing had changed much, but the apartment seemed different. He remembered that first night and how cool he thought the place was. Tonight it seemed cold and uninviting, just like the person who lived there.

"Have you seen my red sweatshirt?"

"No. Maybe you left it at Deb's," Brian responded, almost too quickly. He sat at the counter watching Justin. He needed to say something, but the kid wasn't making it easy. He had hoped he would have more time to figure out his own feelings, but when Justin rejected his touch he realized how much the boy was hurting.

"Justin, stay away from Babylon."

"Why? I have just as much right to be there as you do. If you don't want to run into me you can go somewhere else."

"That's not what I meant. There are some pretty nasty characters in that place. You've only gone there with me and the guys. Going alone, you could get badly hurt."

"I don't need to go to Babylon to get hurt."

Brian had not expected him to show up at Babylon so soon after getting out of the hospital. It was lucky that he had Emmett keeping watch earlier. That new boyfriend of his was going to come in handy.

"Justin, let's not get into this tonight. I'll help you with your stuff."

"No. I want to get into it tonight because I won't be seeing you again. You're nothing to me."

"Did your mother tell you that?" Brian was losing patience.

"NO, you did. Don't you remember I'm nothing to you? I guess you really meant it."

"That was a long time ago. Before . . ." He struggled for the words he wanted to say.

"Before what? Before I got my head bashed in?"

"Before I fell in love with you."

The room fell silent. Brian heard the words that had just blurted from his lips, but they sounded foreign to him. For a moment he wished he could take them back, pretend he meant something different. But, no . . . it was the truth. It was what he had been trying to say since that horrible night. He braced himself for Justin's reaction.

As the silence in the room continued, Justin's face was unreadable. Brian thought maybe he hadn't heard him, or was just in shock. Then the boy did something completely unexpected. He sat down on a chair at the kitchen table, put his head on the table, and began to sob.

The sobbing continued for what seemed like an eternity. Brian didn't know what to do. Should I go over and touch him? Get him some water? Dial 911?

After several more minutes the sobbing quieted a little. Justin was barely whimpering now. Somehow that was worse. Brian felt his eyes well up with tears. Slowly he crossed the room and approached the boy. When he had gotten just close enough to touch him he reached out his hand.

WAAACK!

Justin swatted his hand away. Defeated, Brian slumped down in the black leather chair in the living room. Now what? For the first time in his life he had revealed his true feelings to another human being. The words lingered in the room like the lame punch line of a bad joke.

Brian turned his head away from Justin and sat motionless in the chair. His thoughts went back over the past year with Justin. Their first night, Gus being born, the hotel room in New York City, dancing with him at Babylon. He never realized before that fateful night how much he cherished those beautiful memories. Once they had made love in this very chair. Justin's sweet sexy voice echoed in his head, "Ice cream kisses."

He had managed to keep the visions of prom night from entering into his waking thoughts. It was a different story when he slept. In his dreams he would relive those horrible moments, Hobbs with the bat, Justin lying on the floor bleeding, the terrible fight with Jennifer. She blamed him for everything that happened. The police were called and he was escorted from the hospital. He'd never felt so helpless. All he had wanted to do was see Justin, hold him, talk to him, but most of all he had needed to tell him how he felt about him.

He closed his eyes for a moment and when he opened them Justin was standing next to him. "You scared the shit out of me." Brian jumped back in the chair, pulling up his knees as he did so.

"Did you mean it?" said Justin as he wiped his swollen eyes on his sleeve.

"I guess I did." Brian whispered.

Justin stood with his arms crossed as if guarding himself. "When?"

"When what?"

"When did you figure it out?"

"I'm not sure. I just know it now."

Justin sat on the foot of the black chair and faced Brian.

"Why didn't you visit me in the hospital? I needed you. Every time the door opened I hoped it was you. I thought if I could just touch you everything would be better and I wouldn't hurt so much. But you never came, not even once. If you love someone you don't just leave them alone in the hospital."

Brian was making faces and Justin could tell he was trying to hide something. "Don't make something up because you think it's what I want to hear," he warned. "Just tell me the truth."

Brian hesitated. Once it was out, things wouldn't be the same. There was no going back now.

"Your mother had me banned."

"She what?"

"She had me banned from visiting you. It was her way of protecting you. She blamed me for what happened that night."

It was a relief to finally let him know what really happened. Justin was trying to comprehend what he had just heard. Brian had to finish and tell him the whole story. No more hiding things.

"I didn't leave you alone. I went to the hospital every night after your mother went home. You were sleeping and I sat outside and watched you. The nurse felt sorry for me and let me stay there all night."

"You sat in the hall all night, every night?"

"Yeah, it was fucking uncomfortable, too, let me tell you. Sitting on those plastic chairs all night can really give you a pain in the ass."

They both smiled.

"I guess you really do love me."

"Did you ever give me a choice?"

"No." Justin smiled and hugged Brian's legs.

A car horn beeped outside and Justin picked up his jacket. "I better go."

"Wait. When will I see you again? And DON'T tell me in my dreams."

"Tomorrow."

"What about your mother?"

"I'm moving out. She had no right to do that to us."

"Maybe she did Justin. Was it my fault? "

"No. It was Chris Hobbs' fault. I wanted you there because I care . . . because I love you."

Brian wanted Justin to stay the night more than anything else in the world. He wanted to show him how much he missed him. "Why don't you go home, get your stuff, and then come back here?"

"No. I'm moving into the dorm."

"I don't get it. I thought you wanted to be with me?"

"I love you, Brian. I'll always love you. But, I'm 18 years old and I want it ALL: the courtship, the boyfriend, the angst, the commitment, the partner. We love each other and for now that's all we need to know. Let's start from the beginning and enjoy every moment. It may take years, but I promise , when we're both ready we'll be together. NOBODY will ever come between us."

Brian was still confused. Justin was 18 and he was 30. So what? He wanted Justin in his bed every night starting right now. Why was Justin saying it might take years? No way was he waiting years. He had to think of a way to speed up the process.

Justin put his arms around Brian's waist and Brian hugged him back. This was the first physical contact they'd had since prom night. After Justin had rejected him so many times tonight, he was beginning to wonder if he would ever be allowed to touch him again. After the torturous nights at the hospital, longing to hold him, but separated by circumstances, Brian swore he would never take Justin's touch for granted again.

Daphne was getting impatient and Justin gently pulled himself free from Brian's arms.

"Later," he whispered.

Brian stood at the window and watched Justin limp across the street. After hitting the play button on his CD player he retrieved the red sweatshirt he had hidden under his pillow and started dancing with his imaginary partner. The music that came on was "Crazy Little Thing Called Love" by Queen. How appropriate, he thought as he swayed to the music. In his mind he was formulating the most important marketing campaign of his career . . . Selling himself as a boyfriend.

Brian's Bag of Tricks

Brian and Justin work on their new relationship.

Justin waited until he heard his mother start her car to drive Molly to school before getting out of bed. He gathered the stuff he would need at his new place, and then went into the kitchen to wait for his mother to return.

"Justin, what are you still doing home? I thought Daphne was going to give you a ride to school."

"I don't have class till 11:00 and I wanted to talk to you." He poured her a cup of coffee and sat down at the table.

"Mom, I want you to know that I appreciate everything you've done for me since I got out of the hospital." Justin began.

"You're my son. There's no need to thank me."

"I know I'm your son, but, I'm no longer your little boy. I want you to understand that I can take care of myself."

"Justin, what's this about?"

"I'm moving into the dorm. I don't think I'm progressing here. I need to know that I can function on my own."

"It's too soon. You've only been home two weeks. Why don't you wait till next semester? We'll talk about it then."

"I've already arranged it. I'm moving today."

"Justin. . . "

"Let me finish. What you did to Brian and me was cruel."

"Have you been seeing him? What did he tell you? I'm calling the police. He's not supposed to come near you."

"Don't you dare. He was NOT responsible for what happened to me."

"He should never have gone to that dance. He had no right."

"He had every right, Mom. I asked him to come because I love him. He showed up because he loves me. If anyone didn't belong at that prom it was me. The only reason I went was because you and Debbie talked me into going. Doesn't that make you more responsible than Brian? He was a convenient scapegoat. You managed to get him out of my life and, at the same time, exonerate yourself."

"Please, don't leave today. We can talk about it."

"I need to start my own life now. I have a long way to go with therapy. And an even longer way to go with Brian. You're my mother, and I love you. But, if you ever try to come between Brian and me again, I won't forgive you."

He picked up his bag and struggled with it out the front door. Daphne had been waiting in her car. She got out and helped him load the rest of his belongings into the back seat. Jennifer watched from the kitchen as her little boy left home for the last time.

Brian sat at the computer completely engrossed in his project. Gathering information on Justin wasn't as easy as he thought it would be. He considered asking Daphne for help, but somehow that seemed like cheating. It would be too easy, and she would most definitely tell Justin what he was up to.

He had concocted a plan. He would use the internet and Justin's inability to delete junk mail to make it work. Brian had put together a survey. Posing as the moderator of a gay and lesbian group, he'd sent email invitations to several addresses, including Justin's. The email introduced a weekly dating survey that was supposed to help the club members find mates. He started with the simple stuff: favorite color, favorite song, etc. Just a few general questions at first. When he needed more information, he would generate another survey. All he had to do now was wait for Justin to reply. "I'm a genius." Brian exclaimed.

"Don't flatter yourself." Justin was standing in front of him.

"Why do you keep sneaking up on me?"

"I rang the buzzer. When you didn't answer, I used my key. Did you find a good porn site? Make sure you bookmark it for me."

"I'm working." Brian had quickly changed screens to the sneaker campaign he was working on.

"I still can't find my red sweatshirt. Can you help me look?"

"No. Look, I have a lot of work to do. If you leave me the fuck alone and let me finish, we can go shopping and I'll buy you a new one."

"Okay. You got anything to eat? I'm starving."

"Did your mom stop feeding you when she found out I told you her little secret?"

"I moved out this morning. The food in the school cafeteria sucks."

Brian had to admit that he was surprised Justin had followed through with his plan to move out of his mother's home. He made sure not to let Justin see his pleasure at the news. "Eat whatever you want. And be quiet about it, okay?"

Brian was busy putting together a list of things he knew about Justin. It wasn't going to be easy with the kid sitting right in front of him, but he was in a hurry to put his plan into action. He sat in front of the screen and thought for a moment. It occurred to him that there was very little he did know about Justin. His favorite movie was "Yellow Submarine", he liked Moby, and he loved to dance. That was pretty much it. Well he would just have to wait for Justin to provide him with the information he needed.

"Do you want to check your email while I have the computer on?"

Justin took Brian's place at the computer and typed in his password.

"I'm going to take a shower. We can get something to eat at the mall."

Justin was busy typing, so Brian left him alone. Good, he had probably found the survey and was filling it out. This plan was moving right along.

After his shower, Brian went into the bedroom to get dressed. He never expected to see Justin sprawled out on the bed naked.

"What are you doing?"

"Waiting for you."

"I thought we were going to take things slow. You know, the courtship, the boyfriend, yadda, yadda."

"Did I forgot to mention the fucking? I want to enjoy that, too."

"You constantly surprise me. I figured it would be at least a year or two before you would allow me to touch you."

Justin held out his hand and Brian slid down onto the bed next to him. This wasn't going to be easy. Brian was concerned about Justin's reaction the day before. He wanted to make sure that the boy was ready.

Justin sensed his concern. "Don't worry, Brian. I'm not going to bite your head off or go crazy again. I feel safe with you."

"You are safe with me." He gently kissed him on the lips and at once knew everything would be all right.

Later Brian asked, "Do you know why you did that?" He rolled over on his side and pushed the hair away from Justin's eyes. "I mean, why you cried when I said . . . you know."

"No. It just happened. I guess it was bottled up for so long that when I finally heard you say it, I lost it. Don't take it personally. You can tell me you love me anytime. I promise I won't cry." Justin took Brian's hand and threaded their fingers together. "When I stopped crying I felt good. Like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders."

"Maybe I should try that some time."

"Maybe you should."

"I guess you're not repulsed by my touch anymore. At least not in bed."

"I was never repulsed by your touch, Brian. I was just pissed at you for abandoning me. I still get the creeps when anyone else tries to touch me, though. I guess something is shorted out in my head. It's so weird. How does my brain know the difference?"

"Just as long as it does. Maybe it will keep you out of the backroom at Babylon for a while."

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

"Yeah. Throw me my jeans."

Justin reached down next to the bed and came up with his red sweatshirt.

"Give me that." Brian grabbed at the garment.

"You stole my sweatshirt?"

"I use it to clean the bathroom, okay? I told you I'd buy you a new one."

Justin was careful not to smile too much. Brian had been sleeping with his sweatshirt.

He was still Brian. Even after admitting that he loved him yesterday, he was still trying to hide his feelings. Justin thought it was sweet. If the man ever knew the collection of "Brian" memorabilia he had hidden under his own bed he would probably call the police and report a grand theft.

Justin woke up with smile on his face. He had been dreaming about Brian, and what it would be like going out on a date with him. Earlier in the week they had gone shopping together. Justin was amazed at Brian's patience. When he

went shopping with his mother it always took forever to decide on anything. They usually wound up fighting over the size or the color.

Brian had taken him to the Gap. When he couldn't decide what color sweatshirt to buy, Brian suggested one in each color so they could get it over with and eat. Justin laughed at that, but he did get two sweatshirts. One to wear and one to leave at Brian's.

They had decided that it would be better for Justin to stay in during the week and do his school work. On the weekends they would see each other. Justin told him that he expected more than just sex. He wanted to go out on a real date. Brian groaned and feigned protest, but Justin could see that he had resigned himself to the fact that their relationship was in for a major overhaul.

Justin didn't really care where they went or what they did, as long as they were together. They talked on the phone several times a day and Brian had teased him all week with "What color dress are you going to wear?" and "Are you going to get your nails done?"

Justin made him laugh when he told him in no uncertain terms that he was a gay boy, and not a girl with a dick.

School was going well. He was able to keep up with the classes by using his left hand to draw. His physical condition was a different story. His leg had been bothering him a great deal with the change of weather. Some days it was a struggle to get from class to class carrying his art supplies and books in his backpack.

He was in pain all the time. The pills he was taking were not really working anymore. It was always worse right after his physical therapy appointments. His mother had been picking him up and driving him to them twice a week. Their relationship was strained, making the ride there uncomfortable. The ride back was almost unbearable. She was constantly accusing him of neglecting his exercises because he was spending time with Brian. There was no point in telling her that it wasn't true. She would never believe him.

Today he could ignore all that because tonight he would be with Brian. That was the only medicine that he needed. He showered and dressed in jeans and the sweatshirt that Brian had bought him. After grabbing a donut in the cafeteria he headed to class.

On the way to class his cell phone rang, "Hey."

"Hey yourself." Brian responded. "Are you still going to make me go through with this date thing tonight?"

"Only if you want to." He thought Brian sounded tired and wondered just how much sleep he had gotten the night before.

Justin was a little concerned about the fact that Brian not sleeping well. He was even more concerned about the fact that he was using pills to keep himself going. But, he was a big boy and had been doing drugs for a long time. Justin had even considered asking Brian to get him stronger pills for the pain he was still experiencing. He was very hesitant, however, to let Brian know how bad it had become. Furthermore even though he constantly reassured him that he wasn't responsible for what had happened, Justin had the feeling that Brian would always feel guilty.

"Just be sure you're outside at 6:00. Don't make me go looking for you in the dorm. I just may see someone hotter than you and take off with him."

"There is no one hotter than me here," Justin joked. "I'll be waiting."

The pain in his leg was already slowing him down and it was only 4:00. Justin took one of his prescription painkillers. The last time the doctor gave him the prescription he had asked for something stronger, but the doctor said it would be a bad idea to get dependent on them. He was just going to have to tough it out. He laid down on the bed to rest before his "date." He wondered what Brian had planned. Probably dinner, then Babylon and back to the loft. It was okay with Justin as long as they were officially together.

After his nap, he felt better. He showered and dressed in his best jeans and white sweater. He knew that Brian liked the way he looked in it. He teased him about it being his virgin wool sweater.

He spotted a few of his classmates standing near the door smoking, and he stopped to talk to them. All of a sudden everyone's head turned toward the road as a shiny black motorcycle came barreling toward the crowd. The rider came to a stop next to Justin and took off his helmet.

Justin's mouth dropped open, "Brian? Where the fuck did you get a motorcycle?"

"Don't you like it?" Brian threw him a helmet and a brand new leather jacket.

"Are you just going to stand there all night gawking, or are we going to get this date thing over with?"

After donning the helmet and jacket, Justin hopped on the bike behind Brian and put his arms around his waist. Brian took off as the rest of the students stared after them. Justin had been swept off his feet. Riding a motorcycle had been a dream of his since he was a little kid. In fact, he had put that down as his answer for an on-line survey about dream dates.

After riding on the open highway for an hour or so, they stopped for dinner at a bar. It was a quiet place, unlike Woody's or Babylon. It was nice to be able to just sit and talk. No difficult topics, no discussion of the past, no phone calls from friends or tricks. Just talk about school and work and things in general. For once they did not have to keep up the witty banter they had perfected as a way of communicating when they were out with the guys.

As the motorcycle purred to a halt in front of the dorm, Justin still clung to Brian's waist. His first date had been perfect, almost as if Brian had read his mind. "Let's go back to the loft." Justin whispered seductively into Brian's ear.

Brian turned around and touched Justin's cheek. "Not on our first date."

"You've got to be kidding! I want you so much." Justin wasn't lying, but the pain in his side was almost winning out.

"I'll pick you up tomorrow morning. Get some sleep, you're going to need it."

Justin dragged his weary body from the bike with a little help from Brian, who had noticed the trouble he was having. "Are you okay? Riding the bike didn't make your leg worse, did it?"

"I'm fine, just tired. I had a great time." Justin smiled up at him.

Brian continued to look into Justin's eyes. He knew the boy was lying. He only wished there was more he could do to help him get through it.

Justin started to take off the jacket, but Brian stopped him. "Keep it."

Their eyes met and held briefly before Brian bent down to kiss him. Temptation almost won out the minute Brian tasted the sweetness of his lover's lips. Breaking away was his only defense. Minutes later, Justin stood alone outside the dorm building wishing he had never made his little speech to Brian about wanting it all. What he wanted was to be with Brian. It was all he had ever wanted.

The sun beaming across Brian's face awakened him with a start. He should have picked up Justin hours ago. He had planned to take him to The Frick Art and Historical Center. It was on Justin's list of favorite places on the survey Brian had concocted. After the museum he was going to take him to eat at a really nice restaurant that he had taken a client to a few weeks before.

"Shit!" He jumped out of bed and realized that he wasn't alone.

"I made coffee." Justin called from the kitchen.

"What are you doing here? I said I would pick you up."

"I've been here for hours. I tried to wake you up a couple of times, but you wouldn't budge. I was just about to dial 911."

Justin was only half joking. When Brian hadn't answered his phone calls that morning he had been worried enough to take the bus to the apartment. Brian was sprawled out on the bed fully dressed, leather jacket and all. It seemed like he had just passed out. Justin saw that he was breathing, so he pulled off the jacket and covered him. It was the first time he really had been afraid that Brian might have taken one too many pills that had been manufactured in someone's basement.

Brian recovered quickly and dressed for their outing. He had to admit he was actually looking forward to getting out of Pittsburgh for a few hours today. Living up to the expectations outlined in Justin's survey answers had been challenging, but so far Brian thought he was making rapid progress. He hoped that soon he would be able to move up the boyfriend ladder to live-in-lover status.

The weekend had been a great success. Justin was truly enjoying the attention Brian was bestowing upon him. He had caught on to Brian's little plan with the on-line survey after the motorcycle date. He had to admit he was playing it for all it was worth. Next weekend he would give Brian a break and write something about staying at home and cooking. He thought they both could use the downtime and he had to admit that it would be nice to just stay home and rest on the weekend.

He was just about to wrap up his evening shift at the diner when Michael came in and sat at the counter.

"Hey, boy wonder, how's the recovery going?"

"My Mom is taking me to therapy tomorrow. I can't say I'm looking forward to it. It's exhausting and I don't know if it's really working."

"It's only been a couple of weeks. Hang in there."

"I guess."

Michael's cell phone rang and when he answered Justin saw the alarmed look on his face.

"Where is he?" Michael asked.

"Is it Brian?" Justin asked.

"Yes, he's in the emergency room."

Justin ripped off his apron and ran out the door with Michael.

The minute they got to the hospital a nurse put them at ease. "He's okay. We just thought someone should be with him in case he had another episode."

Brian was lying on an examination table behind a curtain. Justin pushed past Michael and the nurse and grabbed Brian's hand. "Are you really okay?"

"Of course. I fell, that's all. It's no big deal," Brian answered quietly. There was a gash over his eye that had required stitches. His neighbor had found him lying on the floor near the stairs. He must have fallen on his way home from working late. When she had seen he was unconscious, she had phoned the 911.

Brian turned toward the wall and Justin took the hint. He wandered out into the hallway to wait for Michael to finish with the paperwork when he heard a familiar voice greet him. "Hello ,Justin. How are you, dear?"

Nurse Gina Price had been a favorite of Justin's when he was in the hospital. He found out later that she had been the one who allowed Brian to sit in the hall after visiting hours.

"I'm fine. I'm just waiting for my friend."

"Yes, I know. I checked him in earlier. I warned him those pills weren't the answer. When you were in the coma, he would sit right where you're sitting and watch you sleep all night. Every time you would wince, he would pop a pill. It was like he was trying to take your pain away by medicating himself."

"He said he fell."

"I'm sure he did." Gina sat down next to him. "Justin, you're a good kid and I like Brian, too. If you ever feel like you need help, or if he wants to talk, you should call this doctor." She produced a card from her wallet. "He's a friend of mine. He may be able to help."

Justin took the card and thanked her.

Michael drove them back to the loft and helped Brian upstairs. Justin removed his clothes and covered him with the comforter.

"Are you staying with him?" Michael asked.

"I'll stay. Thanks, Michael." Reluctantly, Michael left them alone.

Justin sat quietly in the dark before making his decision. It was time he made his feelings know to Brian. The man was far too important in his life for Justin to stand by and watch him slowly destroy himself. It didn't take long for him to find the offending pills wrapped in foil in the kitchen cabinet.

He heard Brian stir in the bed and then get up to go to the bathroom. It was time to make his move. Brian emerged from the bathroom to find Justin lying naked on his bed. "Get in." The boy lifted the covers for Brian.

Brian was aware of the effect his chemical abuse was having on his body. It had started when Justin was in the coma. He'd had to stay awake to make sure the boy was still alive. In the morning he would take more pills so that he could go to work. What happened this evening had put him on the alert that it was time to cut back.

"Sorry about tonight. I've been working a lot of hours lately. I guess it's all catching up to me. Maybe an evening in bed together is exactly what we both need."

Justin let him lie down flat on his back and then he straddled his legs. "I understand. I haven't had too much energy lately, either. The pain in my leg is getting worse. Sometimes it hurts so much I want to scream."

Justin started unwrapping the foil packet he'd found. "So, which ones do you think I should take?"

"Where the fuck did you get those?" Brian tried to pull himself up, but Justin held him down.

"I found them. You take them all the time, right? You're still alive."

"You don't know what you're talking about. Give them to me."

Justin held him back and took a handful of pills out of the foil. "Maybe if I took all of them I would stop hurting for good." He shoved the handful of pills into his mouth.

Brian's reaction was immediate. He pulled Justin's head toward him and pried open his mouth with his fingers. He made sure that each and every pill was removed before releasing him.

Justin surprised Brian by placing his knees on his chest and pushing him back down onto the mattress. He held his hand over Brian's mouth before he could protest.

"Why did you do that? Think before you answer. You might give yourself away. You think my life has value and your life doesn't. It doesn't matter what you do to your body because you don't care if you live or die. Isn't that right? Brian, your life is just as precious to me as my life is to you. I'm not going to tell you what to do. But, before you take chances with yourself, understand that if anything happens to you, my life wouldn't be worth living."

Justin released Brian and rolled over onto his side to await the fallout from his demonstration. The room fell silent.

Brian got up from the bed and picked up the pills which had scattered all over the room. Justin's heart began to pound as he watched Brian return them to the foil. Crumpling up the package, he walked into the kitchen and tossed them into the trash.

Falling back into bed, Brian put out his arm so Justin could rest his head on his chest. "Okay, I get it. I'll be more careful. But, that was a fucking stupid thing to do, Justin."

"They were Tic Tacs. I really don't like the minty kind, though."

Brian grabbed the boy by the hair. "You little shit."

"Ouch." Justin pulled Brian's hand away and looked him in the eye. "Brian, I meant what I said. I had to do something to get your attention. You're too fucking important to me."

Brian lay back down on the pillow as Justin pressed his lips against his neck. In turn Brian kissed the top of the boy's head.

"So, would you consider what happened today as angst?"

"What?" Justin lifted his head.

"The angst, remember? The courtship, the boyfriend, the angst. I'm up to angst already. That's pretty good progress. How long before I get to keep you? "

"I don't know? The next step is pretty big. The "C" word."

"Right. Maybe we could just skip over that one. How soon before I get to fuck you every night?"

"Why don't we consider it one fuck at a time."

After he and Justin relieved the tension they had created that evening, Brian tried to sleep. By 3:00 a.m., however, he realized that it was useless. He carefully shifted Justin's head from his chest and got out of bed. While switching on the computer he began to consider his plight. Justin's little prank had scared him to death. It would be just like the little prick to off himself to make a point. He got the point, but it wasn't going to be easy getting through the next few days.

Tomorrow's meeting was going to be a killer. The big sneaker manufacturer was coming in to allow them to make their annual pitch. It was well known that snagging this account would almost guarantee a partnership for whoever was brilliant enough to convince them to switch over from their current advertising agency. Brian had been burning the midnight oil for weeks in order to put together a killer campaign. After losing out on the New York job offer, he had started to feel like he was going nowhere professionally. If he could pull this off tomorrow, it would be a real ego boost.

He began to go over his presentation in his mind as he read his notes. He felt Justin's warm hands caress his neck. "Can't sleep?"

"It's okay. I have to get this ready for tomorrow." Brian pulled Justin onto his lap.

"The big sneaker ad? It looks great. The models are kinda old, though." Justin studied the photos in the plastic covers.

"You think everyone is old." Brian swatted him on the butt.

"You're not old. In fact, you're kinda hot. Wanna fuck me again?"

Brian laughed. "What else am I good for?" He let Justin drag him back to bed.

The alarm went off at 8:00 a.m. Brian was surprised that he had actually gotten some sleep after Justin wore him down. He showered and got ready for his meeting while Justin fixed breakfast.

"How's your eye?" Justin asked.

"Fine. I'll just tell everyone I cut myself shaving." Brian ran his fingers over the bandage near his eye.

"You look great." Justin said as he poured the coffee. "You always look great."

Brian finished eating and began gathering what he needed into his briefcase. "Wish me luck."

"Good luck." Justin said as Brian walked out the door. "I love you."

Brian smile back at him. "Me too, baby."

"Your ideas are very exciting, Brian. Really exceptional. I'd love to go with this. But, the model is wrong."

"You name it, Mr. Walker, and we can provide it."

"We want someone more youthful. Someone who jumps out at you. Sensual and seductive, but still innocent. Do you have anyone like that in your bag of tricks?"

Brian opened his briefcase and searched for the plastic folders.

"Shit" he murmured under his breath. "Can you give me moment? I must have left them in my office."

Brian stormed out into the hall toward his secretary's desk. "Where did I put the fucking photos?"

"You didn't leave them on your desk, Brian. I never saw them. Did you leave them at home? I could send a messenger."

"Justin. Shit, he never put them back in my briefcase." Not that it would have mattered anyway. Justin had been right. All the models that he'd selected were too old. He might as well just give up now.

"Forget it, Cynthia. Today's a bust. We don't have what they're looking for."

He started walking back toward the conference room. Mr. Walker was standing in the hall. As he approached the man, the elevator door opened and out walked Justin. He was dressed in his parachute pants and GAP sweatshirt and was busy dancing to whatever disco tune was playing in his Walkman, oblivious to his audience. Ironically, he was wearing the sneakers that the client manufactured.

Brian didn't know whether to hit him or hug him. Before he could make up his mind, Mr. Walker had grabbed him by the arm.

"Brilliant , Brian. Just . . . brilliant. He's absolutely perfect."

Justin had turned toward them and when he saw Brian he flashed that incredible "Justin Taylor" smile. Brian felt Mr. Walker's grip tighten.

"Hey, you forgo . . . , " Justin began.

Brian grabbed the boy by the arm and squeezed, hoping that Justin would catch on."Mr. Taylor, your late. Mr. Walker and his staff were getting ready to leave."

"Sorry. I was lacing up my new sneakers. Pretty cool, huh?"

"Very cool." Brian answered.

Mr. Walker had regained his composure and was pressing Brian to continue with the meeting. Brian half-dragged Justin into the conference room where the other executives were waiting.

"Gentleman, meet Justin Taylor. I just pulled him out of my bag of tricks."

Battle Lines

Brian has to find a way to deal with Justin's growing independence and Jennifer's interference.

I'm still not sure what happened. One minute, I'm riding the elevator, praying I can get the photos to him in time. The next minute, I'm standing in a room full of old guys who are looking at me like as if I'd just arrived from another planet."

Michael, Ted and Emmett sat in the booth with Justin, lapping up every detail of his incredible story. "And then they sent you off to school in a limo?" Emmett asked.

"I kept trying to tell them I had to get to class. Finally, Brian had Cynthia call a limo. Then Brian dragged me out to the elevator. I couldn't tell if he was mad or not. He just said he would meet me here after school."

The door to the diner opened and Brian walked in. His face was unreadable, which was usually the case with Brian Kinney.

"Justin." Brian put out his arm and Justin rose from the booth and tucked himself into his favorite spot. . . as close to Brian Kinney as humanly possible.

Brian looked at his friends and commanded their attention with one of his penetrating gazes.

"Men . . you're looking at the newest partner of the advertising firm of Ryder, Young, Ruben, Farrell & Kinney."

He lifted Justin up, and held him over his head. I owe it all to 'gorgeous face' right here. He lowered Justin down to eye level and kissed him.

Michael, Ted and Emmett all rose from their seats to congratulate Brian. Debbie came over to the table to see what the fuss was about.

"Brian, put him down. His mother will be here any minute to take him to therapy."

She kissed Brian on the cheek. "Congratulations, honey. What is it that you did?"

"After presenting the most brilliant campaign of my career to the holy grail of clients, I discovered that I was a few years off from their targeted age-group. I was about the throw in the towel when my 'boy wonder'. . ."

". . . whose boy wonder?" Michael interjected.

"Mine." Brian responded, grabbing Justin tightly around the waist. ". . when Justin flashed them his blinding smile and every cock under the table came to attention. I swear that table rose at least 10 inches off the floor. Ryder called me into his office after the meeting and gave me the good news."

"What will I have to do?" Justin was still not sure of his part in all this.

"All you have to do is stand in front of the camera and be your natural, sensual, and seductive, yet innocent, self. And, let them take your picture with the sneakers on."

"Just the sneakers?" Ted asked.

"Of course not." Brian shot Ted a look of disgust.

"Brian, there's a lot more to modeling than just getting your picture taken." Emmett said.

"I'll take care of Justin. Don't worry, I'll be at all the photo sessions." Brian assured them. "You want to do it, don't you, baby?"

Justin loved being the center of attention. He had always considered that a career in modeling might be right up his alley.

"Sure, when do I start?"

Brian pulled him over to the counter away from the guys. "I guess I've made it all the way to the top. You said you wanted a partner, and now I'm a partner."

"Leave it to you to find a way to become a partner all by yourself. That's not what I meant and you know it. And, aren't you forgetting the 'C' word?"

"Oh, right. . .the contract. Here, I brought it with me. You'll need to sign it." Brian opened his briefcase on the counter and handed the contract to Justin.

Justin sat down and studied the pages in front of him. "Seems like a lot of words just so I can stand in front of a camera wearing sneakers."

"It's just your standard legal bullshit," Brian explained. "Why don't you ask Mel to go over it with you? I've already made sure that they added a clause saying they have to work around your class schedule."

"Work what around your class schedule, honey?" Jennifer Taylor had entered the diner and come up behind Justin.

"I'm going to be modeling sneakers for Brian's client!" Justin was beaming.

"NO, You won't be doing any such thing. Justin, you already have more than enough on your plate to keep you busy. You'll wear yourself out if you try to take on MORE responsibilities." She glared at Brian. "Is this your idea?"

"But, Mom, I WANT to do it. Brian will be there the whole time. He's not going to let them wear me out."

Brian turned away from the counter and sat down in the booth with his friends. The last thing he needed right now was Justin's self-righteous mother accusing him of abusing her son.

"Justin, you're still in therapy. You need to work on your recovery. We're going to be late for your appointment if we don't leave right now."

Justin looked from his mother to the booth where Brian was now picking at the french fries on Michael's plate. He took a deep breath and smoothed out the document before him on the counter. Taking a pen out of his backpack, he signed the contract and handed it over to Brian. He collected his belongings from the counter and stormed out the door. Jennifer followed closely behind.

"That went well. . ." Emmett observed.

"I hope you know what you're getting him into Brian." Debbie stood by the table looking down at Brian. "She's right about the therapy. Justin's not anywhere near 100%. And you know it."

"You always side with her, Deb. Justin will be great at this and he'll be making a lot of money. I'll get him a better doctor. He's going to be fine."

"You better make sure of that, Brian," Debbie warned. "He's still pretty fragile."

Feeling that his finest hour had been tarnished, Brian got up from the booth and left the diner. He had kept his feelings about Jennifer Taylor to himself, for Justin's sake. Today she had crossed over the line. Sooner or later the two would have it out, once and for all.

After work, Brian picked Justin up at the loft, to take him to Lindsay and Mel's house. "I'm not filing that contract you signed until you understand everything. It wasn't very smart of you to do that just because your mother goaded you into it."

"I'm sick of her interfering in my life. . . in our lives. I know you'd never do anything to hurt me. She's my mother, and I know she thinks she's helping me, but she makes it so obvious that she hates you. I don't understand why."

"That's her problem, not ours." Brian looked over at Justin. The boy had slumped down in the seat and was rubbing his arm.

"Do you want to go back to the loft and rest? I'm sure Mel would come over later."

"No. I want to see Gus. It's just that therapy was difficult today."

Brian reached over and touched Justin's cheek with the back of his hand. "I'm sorry you're hurting, baby."

"It doesn't help that she nags me all the way over and all the way back. The way she sees it, I'm going to spend the rest of my life just short of a vegetable. Sparring with her constantly is exhausting."

"I'm going to take you next time. I want to talk to the doctor. Maybe there's another way of going about this."

While Melanie went over the contract with Justin, Lindsay and Brian drank coffee in the living room. "You should have seen Walker's face when Justin came out of that elevator. We could have asked for any amount of money and he would have forked it over. Justin had them all eating out of his hand." Brian was beaming with pride.

"Didn't they notice the limp or the weakness in his arm?"

"He's getting better, Linz. The limp is barely noticeable in the mornings. Besides, he had his Walkman on and he was dancing. Nothing can keep Justin's feet still when the music starts."

"He seemed so tired tonight."

"Yeah, he had therapy today." Brian stood up and slammed his hand against the wall. The noise made Mel and Justin turn toward him.

"What was that about?" Lindsay asked when he sat back down.

"I swear, Linz, I've tried to keep my mouth shut about his mother, but she never lets up. She nags him constantly. I think she's the reason his recovery is taking so long."

"What is she nagging him about?"

"What else would she be nagging him about?"

"You?"

"I'm not going to leave him, Lindsay. I'm trying to help him. Why does she hate me so much?"

"She doesn't see you the same way that Justin does. On the surface you can be rather abrasive. She's never seen they way your are with Justin . . . the way you are together."

"She has no right to judge us."

"She has every right, Brian. She's his mother. We're the ones that don't have rights when it comes to our loved ones. You're just going to have to be patient. Once she allows herself to get to know you, she'll see what a sweet, gentle man you are."

"Sweet and gentle? What the fuck did you put in that coffee Lindsay?" Mel entered the room and handed Brian the papers.

"These look fine. You did a good job, Brian. The kid's going to be set for life." Mel cuddled up next to Lindsay on the couch.

Justin slid into his favorite spot under Brian's arm. "I'm going to be famous, thanks to you."

"Don't thank me yet. You still have to get in front of that camera tomorrow. Do you think you're up to it?"

"I'm 18. I'm up for anything." Justin tried to hide a yawn.

"Sure you are."

Before he had driven to the end of the street, Brian looked over and noticed that Justin had fallen asleep. It had become one of his guilty pleasures to watch the boy sleep. His blond hair and fair skin gave him an angelic appearance. He looked so peaceful. Brian fought to keep his eyes on the road for the short ride home.

After parking the Jeep in front of his building, Brian walked around and opened the passenger door. "Are we here already?" Justin asked, rubbing his eyes as he struggled to move his stiff limbs.

Brian reached in and lifted him into his arms.

"I can walk, Brian. I'm not a baby."

"You're my baby. Can't you just shut up and enjoy my moment of weakness?"

The next morning Brian made sure the appointments with the photographer were set up for early afternoon. He planned to drive Justin to school for his early class and then pick him up for lunch before taking him to his first photo shoot.

He did not plan to go in to the office today. After he dropped Justin off, he drove over to see the doctor he had made an appointment with the day before. He wanted to research different methods of physical therapy. If he was the one working with Justin he thought the boy would be more motivated. When he left the doctor's office, he felt he had made some progress. He was going to structure every moment of Justin's day to avoid putting too much pressure on his fragile body.

Justin was in great spirits at lunch. He could hardly wait to get in front of the camera and start his modeling career. Brian was having his doubts, as he always did before starting a big project. It turned out his fears were unwarranted. Justin was a natural in front of the lens of a camera.

"That's it . . . beautiful. Justin you're gorgeous, so young and sexy. Show me that famous smile. Oh, you're killing me boy." Brian watched in amusement as Carlos, the photographer, coaxed Justin into submission. "Sooooo hot. On fire . . ."

The music was blasting and Justin was having a ball dancing in front of the room full of professionals. When they'd arrived at 1:30, Justin had been whisked off immediately to have his hair styled and make-up applied where necessary. Brian thought they would find nothing about Justin's appearance that wasn't perfect.

"What color do you use in your hair, Justin?" The hairdresser asked.

Brian answered. "He doesn't use color. He's a natural blond all over."

Justin blushed, and pushed Brian away. "Why don't you go entertain the clients and stop talking for me."

Brian sat with Mr. Walker and his staff waiting for the session to begin. When the music started, Brian was reminded of the first time he had watched Justin dance. He had just scored two tricks, who were about to provide him with an evening's entertainment. Then Justin came along and lured them away with his seductive little body. He had taken them right out from under Brian's nose. If anyone else on the planet had tried such a move, he would have made sure they never danced again; but, as he had watched the boy move he had become absolutely mesmerized.

Justin was in rare form today. He moved with the music just like he had before the accident. There was no evidence of the weakness in his limb. All eyes in the room were on Justin. Brian looked over at Mr. Walker and began to get an uneasy feeling. The man was practically drooling as he watched Justin dance. Client or no client, if he ever made a move on Justin, Brian would kill him.

The music stopped and the photographer went over to talk to Justin. Brian took this opportunity to make it clear to everyone involved that he was in charge.

"That's enough for today," Brian announced as he put a protective arm around Justin. "I think you should get changed so you can go home and rest."

"Brian, I'm not tired. They want to do another set of photos with a different pair of sneakers."

Brian ignored Justin's enthusiasm and stated, "He has a doctor's appointment."

"What . . . ?" Justin started to ask.

Brian grabbed the back of his neck. "Excuse us," he said politely to the client.

He pulled Justin back toward the make up room. "Justin, you have to take it slow. It's your first day."

"Brian, I was having fun." Justin proclaimed. "I feel fine." He shrugged Brian's hand off his neck. "Stop treating me like a baby. I don't like it, and it's making you look pathetic in front of your client. I'm doing the next set and then we'll leave. You don't have to make up imaginary appointments. If I get tired, I'll tell you."

The battle lines had been drawn and Justin had won this particular skirmish. Brian could see that keeping Justin in line wasn't going to be easy. He had to get control of the situation before it got out of hand. Balancing school work, therapy and the photo sessions without wearing Justin out was not going to be easy. Brian was determined to accomplish it all, and without anyone's interference. Somehow he would have to find a way to get Justin to cooperate.

Justin returned to the set. Brian followed, to make sure Justin was still up to the challenge. And to keep an eye on his voyeuristic client.

"Hi, Jennifer. Let's go over to the booth and take a load off." Debbie was glad to have a break in the middle of the day to chat with her friend.

"Hi Deb." Jennifer looked upset. "I know that I sound like a broken record, but have you seen Justin?"

"Not since he got his fancy new job, I haven't."

"I don't know what to do, Debbie." Jennifer broke down.

"Is something wrong with Sunshine?"

Jennifer tried to compose herself. "That's just the point. I don't know. I haven't heard from him in weeks. We had a terrible fight about his new job and the fact that he had stopped going to therapy. Debbie, he refused to even discuss his medical condition with me. Brian has him so brainwashed. I know the man is trying to turn him against me. Justin even accused me of being responsible for what happened at the prom.

Last week I tried to call him, but his cell phone was disconnected. I went to his school and his roommate said that Justin comes and goes. He was very vague about the details, but I get the impression that he doesn't spend much time there. I got so worried I actually went to Brian's office. They told me that Brian was out of town and that they couldn't give me any information about Justin. I left a message, but Brian never called me back. I'm terrified that Justin is sick, or hurt. And he has no one."

"Debbie, when was the last time you saw Brian?"

"Last night. He was here with Michael and the boys. They were going to Babylon." Debbie put her hand on Jenn's. "Honey, I'm sure Justin's fine. Brian must be taking care of him."

"Oh, he's taking care of someone all right . . . himself. He probably has Justin working all kinds of hours, while he goes out to bars to pick up men. Either that or he's broken up with Justin and the kid's is too embarrassed to admit I was right. No, Debbie, don't try to defend him. He's done something terrible to Justin. I just know it."

Debbie looked up as Michael walked in the door. "Over here, Michael." She called him to the table.

"Have you seen Justin lately?"

"No, I haven't. Why?"

"Sit down." Debbie commanded. "Jennifer thinks Brian has done something to Justin. Do you know anything?"

Michael looked confused. "No. He never mentions Justin, and I never ask. What is it that you think Brian has done?"

"Michael, Justin is missing. I need for you to ask Brian what happened. Please, he won't talk to me," Jennifer pleaded.

"Brian would never hurt anyone. If they broke up, that's between the two of them. I can't get involved."

"Michael. We need to speak to Brian. Let's go." Debbie retrieved her coat from the back room and the three left for Brian's apartment.

There was no answer when they rang the buzzer. "That's not unusual," Michael said. "Sometimes he has the music on loud and doesn't hear it."

"I don't hear any music," said Debbie. "And the lights are on. He's just not coming to the door. Michael, use your key."

Reluctantly, Michael obeyed his mother. He was well aware of the fact that once Debbie Novotny had made up her mind to do something, it damned well better get done.

As they entered the apartment, Michael noticed things had changed. "What the fuck happened? All the furniture has been pushed up against the wall."

Brian and Justin were nowhere in sight. But, behind the counter in the kitchen, a man was busy packing a small gym bag. He looked over at them in surprise.

"Who the hell are you and where the hell is my son?" Jennifer shouted at him.

The man behind the counter looked shocked. Unfortunately, his English was limited and he did not understand what this excited woman was saying.

"Are you here to FUCK Mr. Kinney?"

"FUCK . . . yes. Fuck Mr. Kinney." Raoul knew those words so he smiled and nodded his head.

"Get out!" She screamed out of frustration.

"Calm down, Jenn. There has to be a logical explanation." Debbie tried to grab her arm.

"That thought would never occur to her, Would it JENN?" Brian came down the stairs from the bedroom. He picked up the gym bag on the counter and handed it to Raoul, along with the hundred dollar bill he had in his hand. After the confused Raoul took his leave, Brian slammed the door shut behind him.

"Are you paying for it now, Brian? Wasn't my son enough for you?"

"Brian, where's Justin?" Debbie approached him.

He kept his stare fixed on Jennifer Taylor. "I murdered him, and stuffed his body in the incinerator. Does that sound like a logical explanation?"

"Don't say those things, Brian, she's really concerned about her son." Debbie said.

"HER son. HER Justin. Where does she come off claiming him like that? She doesn't know the first thing about Justin."

"You have no right, Brian. I love him, he's my flesh and blood."

Brian crossed the room in a rage.

Debbie tried to intercede. "Please, just tell us where he is and we'll leave."

"NO. We're going to have this out, once and for all." Brian took Debbie's shoulders and gently moved her aside. "Deb, stay out of it."

Jennifer braced herself for his attack.

"You think you have the right to come here to my home and accuse me of perpetrating evil, illicit acts on your son? I'm going to tell you this once. You have no 'rights' in my home and you have no 'rights' where my relationship with Justin is concerned."

"I have a right to try to protect my family from harm." Jennifer retorted.

"Family. Is that what it all comes down to? You will always be Justin's family, and I won't ever have that privilege. Tell me, Mrs. Taylor, what makes you a family? You straight people are so fond of that word. The fact that you married Craig Taylor . . . that makes him your family. Well, where the fuck is he now?"

"I fell in love with Craig Taylor and married him. Yes, that made us a family. Until you came along."

"Oh, I see. You're going to blame me for that, too. You couldn't hold on to your man because you were too busy meddling in my life to keep him satisfied in bed."

Michael pulled on Brian's arm . "Brian, that's enough."

Brian pushed him away. "No, Michael. She needs to hear this. In fact, you all need to hear it. None of you know anything about Justin and me. You don't know how we feel about each other, because we've chosen to keep it to ourselves. You've only seen what we wanted you to see."

"Go ahead, Michael. Tell Mrs Taylor where I've been every night." Brian said smugly.

"You've been with me at Babylon," Michael answered.

"Good boy. And how long do I stay there with you?"

"Not long. You've been busy with work."

"Right. And, when I leave, who do I leave with?"

"No one. You leave alone."

"That's right. Do you want to know why I go out to bars every night, Mrs Taylor? I leave my apartment so Justin can do his homework in peace, and get some rest. He's been living here for months, because I knew he needed help. He was miserable and in pain all the time. That therapist wasn't doing him any good because he wasn't motivating him. And, believe me, I'm an expert at motivating Justin. Isn't that right, baby?"

Justin came out of the bedroom and stood next to Brian. "It's true, Mom. He learned the exercises and helped me with them everyday."

"Only it never hurt when we were finished." Brian put his hand under Justin's chin and tilted his face toward him. "And then you got your reward, right baby?"

"BRIAN!" said Michael, anticipating what was coming next.

"There's more to life than sex, Michael," said Brian, not taking his eyes from Justin's face.

He put his arm around Justin and took his hand. "Did you know that Justin loves to dance? I don't mean like dancing on the floor at Babylon. I mean every kind of dance: the waltz, swing, the tango, everything. And he's pretty good at it. So I hired dance instructors to teach us the steps. When we finish exercising, we practice dancing."

Brian released Justin and looked right into Jennifer Taylor's eyes. "The reason that no one has seen Justin is because we got tired of everyone's bullshit. We got tired of hearing what a controlling bastard I am, and how Justin would never recover. We worked out Justin's school, job and physical therapy without anyone's help. Justin is fully recovered, he's doing well in school and he has money in the bank. Lucky for him, he didn't listen to you. If he had, he'd still be dragging his ass around your condo watching the world pass him by."

Jennifer looked away from Brian's stare and spoke to Justin. "Justin, I'm sorry I couldn't find a better way to help. Can you forgive me"

"No. Not until you apologize to Brian."

"I can't. I'm grateful that he was able to help you recover, but as your mother I must say that I still don't trust him. I still believe that he's using you for his own gain. Men like Brian don't change. I don't believe he really loves you. He WILL hurt you eventually."

"'Love' is something that straight people tell themselves they're in so they can get laid. Is that what Craig Taylor told you, to get into your pants? Is that the same word he used on his secretary? Is it the WORD you want to hear from me? Okay. I LOVE Justin. I LOVE every inch of his sweet, porcelain flesh; every soft blond hair on his sweet head; every drop of cum that . . . "

"BRIAN!" Debbie tried to stop him.

"NO, Deb, she's still trying to come between us. I want her to understand. We know how we feel when we're together. Whatever you straight people want to call it, it makes no difference. I don't give a fuck about words. So don't come here claiming to be Justin's family." Brian proclaimed. "Justin is my family, and I'm his. And you haven't earned the right to be a part of it."

Jennifer had taken her stand. She took one last look at her only son. Justin turned and buried his face in Brian's chest. Jennifer silently walked out of the loft, followed closely by Michael and Debbie.

Without a word, Brian picked up the remote and turned on some music. He pulled Justin back and looked into his face as they swayed to the music. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, she had it coming. I feel sorry for her. She doesn't even know what she's missing. The Taylor-Kinney family is pretty special."

"I don't think she's going to be inviting us to tea anytime soon. Are you okay with that? If you want, I could apologize."

"Don't you dare. I hate tea." Justin smiled up at him. "We're doing okay at this relationship stuff, aren't we?"

"I guess. I haven't killed you and stuffed you in the incinerator yet."

"You would never do that."

"What makes you so sure?"

"You wouldn't have anyone to dance with."

"I could always call Raoul."

"No, he won't be back. My mother scared the shit out of him." Justin smiled at Brian. "You know, making me your family is kinda like a commitment."

"Oh, shit. I guess I'm stuck with you now."

"Well, if you feel that way about it I could always get my own place near the campus. I heard there are some hot guys at school who want to fuck the campus celebrity. And then there's always good old Mr. Walker. He keeps asking if he can fuck me with the sneakers on. Just the sneakers, nothing else."

"I'm going to have to work on that presentation myself." Brian was getting aroused at the thought of fucking Justin dressed only in his sneakers.

They continued to sway to the rhythm of a favorite Rolling Stones tune, "Time is on my Side." Brian held Justin close.

Justin joked after Brian dipped him. "You dance divinely."

"I have a great partner."

"And who would that be?" Justin asked.

"Justin Kinney-Taylor, who else."

Queer as Family

Five years after cutting herself from her son's life, Jennifer seeks Justin's help as another family member suffers through a crisis.

Jennifer drove slowly down the dark, winding road. She could not believe that Justin would want to live so far out of the city. It had been five years since she had seen her son. Five years since the night Brian had given her the ultimatum: either accept them as a family, or leave them alone.

Justin had called sporadically over the years. They never discussed what had happened that night, or anything of importance, really. It was just the basic check-in call. It had been several months since she'd heard from him. Last week she'd summoned the courage to dial the number. When she had discovered the service had been disconnected she had gone into a panic. She had immediately called Debbie Novotny who told her that Brian and Justin had moved. Debbie had given her their new address and phone number.

Jennifer had struggled with the decision of whether to call, or to just appear on their doorstep. She had chosen the latter. What she had to discuss with Justin was better done face to face. The fact was, it would also give her the opportunity to see his sweet face again.

After reaching her destination, Jennifer took a deep breath and said a little prayer before exiting the car. She never thought she would be here, at THEIR home. She was prepared to beg Brian Kinney, if need be, for the opportunity to see her own son.

Jennifer finally got up the courage to ring the doorbell. She glanced over at the driveway and noticed two identical Jeeps and, to her surprise, a motorcycle. Moments later, a woman dressed in a wool coat opened the door a crack. She greeted her in Spanish, and Jennifer was beginning to think that she had come to the wrong house.

"I'm looking for Justin Taylor," she told the woman.

"Si, Joosta Tayla." The woman nodded her head, but did not offer to let her in.

"Is he here? I'm his mother. I need to speak with him."

The woman nodded again and backed away from the door. A moment later the door opened wide and Jennifer came face to face with Brian Kinney. He was dressed in jeans and a soiled white T-shirt. He was also barefoot, and looked as if he'd been working on some home project. He didn't greet her, or acknowledge her arrival. He merely turned his back and yelled up the stairs, "Justin! Some woman who calls herself your mother is at the door."

Brian took some bills out of his wallet and handed them to the woman who had opened the door. She once again nodded to Jennifer as she made her retreat. Brian called out again, this time with more force. "JUSTIN!"

"I heard you the first time." Justin came down the stairs and cautiously greeted his mother.

"Hi." He looked at her curiously. "Is something wrong? Did someone die?" It seemed the only logical explanation for his mother's sudden appearance on their doorstep.

Brian disappeared up the stairs and Justin ushered his mother into the den. Jennifer took in the feel of the room. The furniture was large and overstuffed, very comfortable and inviting. It was quite different from the contemporary decor of Brian's loft.

Justin looked older, but could still pass for a teenager. His hair was the same white blond she remembered; however, she suspected that he retained the color with a little help from Miss Clairol. Jennifer couldn't help but stare at the

handsome man her little boy had become. She regretted the fact that she had allowed their relationship to deteriorate to the point where Justin would assume she only had come to deliver bad news.

"I'm sorry to come out here with no warning. I got your address from Debbie."

"It's okay. We just moved in a few months ago. I've been busy putting the house together. I was going to call you. So, you didn't tell me. . . who died?"

"No one died. I've missed you, Justin. I needed to talk to you."

Justin hesitated a moment and looked back at the staircase. "I've missed you, too." He put his arms out and hugged her.

They both started talking at once, uttering apologies and then laughing.

They sat down on the sofa and Justin offered her a drink. "Would you like some wine?"

"That would be nice. Just a small glass. I won't be staying long."

Brian stomped down the stairs and passed through the hall and into the kitchen, muttering something under his breath.

Justin ignored him. "How's Molly?"

Jennifer knew the carefree visit with her son was about to come to an end. "Justin, she's the reason I need to talk to you."

Brian had started pacing back and forth in the hall. He went back into the kitchen and emerged with a roll of paper towels.

"Justin. I'm not doing it. We had a deal. It's YOUR turn."

"Brian, please . . ." Justin smiled sweetly at the man in the doorway.

"All right, but the next FIVE times, you're doing it." He stomped back up the stairs.

"Am I keeping you from something, honey?"

"Brian can handle it. What's wrong with Molly?"

Jennifer told Justin the story from the beginning.

Molly was now sixteen years old. In the past few years she had become quite a handful. First there were the fights at school, and then there were some shoplifting incidents. Her grades had begun to drop. They had tried counseling, but Molly was not very cooperative. Craig had insisted her problems had started after her gay brother had appeared in the newspapers when he was attacked by Chris Hobbs. Jennifer knew that this wasn't the case. Molly had cried when Jennifer told her Justin was never come home again.

A few years later, Molly had discovered boys. She was reckless and willful. The boys she dated were much older and not the kind of men that a mother would want to see her daughter get involved with. But Jennifer tried to see Molly's side. Her experience with Justin had made her a little too lenient as far as disciplining her daughter was concerned. She was terrified to exert any kind of authority with the girl, for fear of losing another child. Finally, Craig had put his foot down. He insisted that Molly move in with him, saying he was not afraid to discipline Molly. He also told Jennifer that she was not being a responsible parent.

Toward the end of her sophomore year at St. James, Molly had started dating a college freshman. He had seemed to be a nice young man from a respectable family. Molly swore she was in love with him. Things had settled down for awhile until Craig caught them having sex in back seat of the boy's car. Not having learned anything from his dealings with Justin, Craig had gone berserk and beat the boy senseless. Molly had been mortified.

They had assumed the affair was over, but Jennifer discovered that Molly had become pregnant. Her boyfriend was now long gone, and Molly was desperate. Not knowing what to do, the girl had gone to a clinic and had an abortion. That had been six weeks ago, and Molly was showing no signs of recovering emotionally. Jennifer was desperate to help her daughter.

"Justin, would you talk to her? She misses her big brother. Maybe it would cheer her up to see you."

Justin was very concerned for his sister. "Mom, I love Molly, but I don't know what I could do. We're strangers. I haven't spoken with her in years."

"Still, honey," Jennifer pleaded, "it wouldn't hurt to try."

Even after all the grief she had caused him, Justin still loved his mother. He couldn't deny her request. "I'll call and arrange to see her."

"Thank you, sweetheart." Jennifer hugged her son.

"Would you like to see the rest of the house?" Justin asked. In truth, he was very anxious for her to see everything his life had become.

"I don't think Brian would appreciate you giving me a tour. I don't want to make him uncomfortable in his own home, . . .again." Jennifer said. "I must be a terrible mother. My instincts about my children couldn't have been more wrong. I fretted for years that Brian would hurt you badly. From the looks of things, it appears that I was very wrong about Mr. Kinney."

"You were." Justin said. "I understand. You were just trying to protect me."

"Justin, I want to be able to see you again. I want to bring the family together."

"Does that include Brian?"

"I don't think he would even consider allowing me to become a part of your family. I haven't earned that right."

"Don't try to guess what Brian is thinking, Mom. I learned that lesson a long time ago. He constantly surprises me. If you really mean it, just be honest with him. Why don't you try apologizing? If Dad had apologized when I asked him to, who knows what might have happened."

Justin led her up the stairs and showed her the master bedroom and bath. It struck her that the furniture in the room was the same soft inviting style as the furnishings in the den; however, the neon light fixture still glowed over the bed.

Justin noticed his mother staring at the light. "Brian insisted on keeping one memento of his lurid past," he explained.

They strolled through a few sparsely furnished rooms on the second floor. Justin described their plans for each room as they walked. At the end of the hall, Justin opened one last door and waved his mother into the room. Brian was standing next to a crib. He held a baby close to his chest, supporting the back of the child's head with his large hand.

At first Jennifer, was too surprised to react. It all seemed so surreal. Brian Kinney cradling this little child's head as he rocked back and forth. This was the man whom she had accused of violating her son when he was seventeen. The same man whom she had held responsible for the attack that had almost killed her son.

For once she wasn't going to jump to conclusions. She stayed silent and allowed Justin to explain.

Justin gently took the baby from Brian brought him over to his mother.

"Mom, I'd like you to meet your grandson. His name is Brian Justin Kinney-Taylor."

Jennifer held out her arms and allowed Justin to give her the baby to hold. Even if he had never said a word, she would have known that this was Justin's child. His features were identical to Justin's at that age. Her mind flashed through images of her children at each stage of their development. Each hair on their little blond heads, each new tooth . . . all had created an indelible mark in her mind. She savored every moment as she held the warm little bundle in her arms. She had dreaded coming here tonight. The thought of swallowing her pride and facing Justin and Brian had almost made her turn and run. If she had known what joy awaited her, wild horses could not have kept her from making the trip.

The baby put his head on her chest and closed his eyes. Justin smiled at the sight of his mother holding his baby son. He had made the decision to tell her when he sensed how miserable her life had become. Years ago he might have thought that she deserved it, for trying to break up his relationship with Brian. Now that he was a parent himself, he could almost understand the overwhelming need to protect your child from heartache.

Jennifer looked over at Brian. He stood with his arms folded across his chest, his face toward the wall, as if to shut them out. It was her turn to surprise them both. She handed the baby back to Justin and went over to where Brian stood.

She took her hand and gently turned his face toward her. "Brian, I'm genuinely sorry for the way I've behaved toward you. I apologize from the bottom of my heart for accusing you of hurting Justin. I know that you're capable of loving him as much as anyone could. I want to be able to start calling myself little Brian's grandmother, if you would allow me to be a part of your family."

Brian let her hug him and he slowly returned the embrace. Looking over her shoulder, he watched as Justin wiped his tears with the baby's blanket.

"Apology accepted . . . Grandma."

Little Brian started to wail and all three adults in the room offered their immediate attention. "Brian? You did change him, didn't you?" Justin asked.

"Of course I did. What did you think this is in my hand, a fucking bouquet?" He showed Justin the soiled diaper he held.

"Maybe he's hungry?" Jennifer suggested.

"Of course, he's hungry. All he's done since he got here is eat, scream and make a mess." Brian headed toward the door.

As he passed Justin he said, "No wonder no one had to guess who's kid he is!"

Jennifer took the screaming child in her arms and sat down in the rocker.

"He's kinda cranky." Justin sat on the overstuffed chair opposite her.

"All babies cry when they're hungry."

"I was talking about Brian." Justin smiled.

"How is he adjusting to . . . fatherhood?"

"Well, it's different than when Gus was a baby. Baby Brian is with us all the time. We don't get to drop him off with his mommies when we've had enough."

"Who takes care of him when you're working?"

"I was taking him to the studio with me, but I don't think the paint smell is good for him. We had a babysitter, but Brian didn't like her. He's very particular about who is taking care of HIS baby. I guess we'll have to start interviewing again."

"Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?"

"We got the egg from Brian's sister, and Lindsay was our surrogate."

"That's not what I was going to ask."

"It's okay, Mom, everyone does."

"They do? Just like that? Ask who the mother is? That's very rude. You shouldn't answer them."

"That's what I said." Brian had returned with the heated formula. Jennifer took it from him and began to feed her grandson for the first time.

"We're not ashamed of who he is, or how he got here." Justin said.

Brian sat on the chair next to Justin. He had picked up his camera from the dresser and started taking pictures of Jennifer feeding the baby.

"Still, you shouldn't allow strangers to be rude to you."

"What did you want to ask me?"

"I was wondering if you would consider letting me come out and help once in a while. I'd like to get to know my grandson." She looked at Brian for his reaction, but his face was unreadable. "I'm good with babies. I promise not to interfere with his love life until he's at least five or six years old." She saw the beginning of a smile at the corner of Brian's lips.

Justin asked, "Do you think Molly will be upset about being an aunt? She might not like the idea of her gay brother having a baby when she had to . . . you know."

"What are you talking about, Justin?" Brian asked.

Jennifer told Brian what had been happening with Molly. If she was serious about becoming a part of his family, then she would have to be open with him.

"I'm going to tell her about little Brian, if it's okay with you. I wouldn't want her to find out from someone else. She would feel even more isolated."

The baby had fallen asleep and Justin gratefully took him from Jennifer and deposited him in his crib. This had become his favorite time of day. The baby would sleep for a few hours and he and Brian could get into bed and fuck all night. At least, until the baby woke up again.

"I'm going to be leaving now. I can't tell you how happy you've made me today." As she put her arms around Justin, she turned her head to look at Brian. "Both of you."

Brian nodded in acknowledgment and said. "I don't know about you, Justin, but I think this lady might know something about taking care of babies."

Later, in bed as he watched the light reflected off Justin's perfect, soft, fair skin, Brian marveled at how much he was still attracted to his partner. How could one person possess another so completely, and yet not smother them? Justin had accomplished just that. It was still a mystery to Brian.

Justin stirred. "How come you're not sleeping? We need to sleep when he does."

"The light reflecting . . . never mind."

"I know what you're doing. You can't stay up all night listening to him breathe. If you run in there every time you think he exhales too slowly, he's going to get spoiled."

"I can spoil MY baby if I want to. You didn't seem to mind it, when I spoiled you."

Justin turned and put his head on Brian's chest. "I miss this."

"What?"

"Just talking. We don't get to do that much, now that we're parents."

"Kids can really fuck up your life. Look at your mother."

"I feel bad for her. But kicking us out of her life was her decision. I guess if I thought somebody was going to hurt little Brian, I would try to stop him, wouldn't you?"

"Yeah, I'd fucking ram his Jeep through a red light with my BMW." Brian laughed. "I wonder how long it will be before your Dad shows up on our doorstep."

"Hell would have to freeze over first."

"Waaaaah . . ." The sound came from the intercom.

Brian jumped out of bed. "I'll get him. You go back to sleep."

"Brian, you don't think the baby fucked up our lives, do you?"

"Of course not. Let's just hope we don't fuck up his."

Justin debated all morning about calling his mother. He never would have been the first to make contact because of the way she had treated Brian, but he had to admit he was glad to have her back in his life.

B.J. was being difficult. He was nothing like Gus had been when he was small. Having a baby around could be a real pain. B.J. hadn't slept more than a few hours at a time since he was born. And he cried -a lot. Sometimes Justin thought he would go out of his mind if he had to change one more dirty diaper. Then B.J. would look up at him and smile and he wondered how he could ever be mad at him for anything.

There was also the way that Brian acted around the baby. He had claimed little B.J. from the beginning as HIS baby. Even though the child was technically related to Brian, he looked exactly like Justin. When they had first brought him back to the loft Justin needed to drag Brian away from the cradle to get him to sleep. All he wanted to do was stare at B.J. Justin had to admit that he sometimes got jealous of all the attention Brian was bestowing on their son. Was that normal, Justin wondered? Had they made a mistake allowing this little stranger into their lives?

He was also hesitant about making the call to his mother for fear that she would sense his life might not be as perfect as he had let her to believe. Suddenly the phone rang and the decision was taken out of his hands.

"Hi, honey. Sorry to call so early, but I wanted to ask a favor. Do you think I could come over and see my grandson again today? I can't get his sweet little face out of my mind. And your sweet face too, of course."

"Yeah. Sure. C'mon over. Brian's at work so we can spend the whole day together. I do have someone coming over in the afternoon to pose for a portrait."

"That would be perfect, Justin. You can work in your studio while I start to spoil my grandson."

She arrived an hour later with several packages. "I stopped off to get a few things for the baby. I hope you don't mind."

She took B.J. out of Justin's arms, leaving him to unload the rest of the packages from the car. They spent the morning playing with B.J. Jennifer had bought him a rattle in the shape of a sunflower with a mirror in the middle.

"He really loves looking at his reflection in the mirror," Justin remarked "He must have inherited that from Brian."

"I can remember one young man we had pry away from the mirror." Jennifer had brought a photo album with photos of Justin as a baby. It was amazing how much the baby in the photos resembled the baby on the floor.

After putting the B.J. down for a nap, they decided to make lunch. "Mom, when I was born, how did it make you feel? I mean, I know you loved me and everything. But did you ever feel . . . ?"

"Trapped? Tied down? Like I'd made the biggest mistake of my life? Of course I did. Everyone does. It's perfectly normal. Once the baby gets on a schedule and starts sleeping through the night, things will calm down. Justin, if you ever feel like you need a break, you can always call your mother."

"Thanks Mom." Justin gave her a hug. It had been so long since he had been able to have a conversation with her without fighting. He had forgotten how good she could make him feel.

"Is it normal to be jealous of a baby?" he asked.

"Is Brian jealous? Sometimes fathers get jealous. That's pretty normal also."

"No, I meant me. I get jealous when Brian dotes on the baby. I know it's crazy, but he's so intense sometimes. He just sits there holding him, when he's not even crying or anything. He could just hold him for hours. And he's so protective. We interviewed a whole bunch of babysitters, but he found something wrong with every single one of them. No one was good enough to trust with HIS baby."

"Honey, I wouldn't worry about it. I think it's just Brian's nature to be like that. And besides, you have nothing to be jealous about. It's perfectly obvious that Brian is crazy about you."

After lunch, Justin left his mother in the nursery with B.J. and walked out the back door and down the path to his studio. One of the selling points of this particular house was the fact that it had a pool house big enough for Justin to convert into a studio. It was great not to have to commute into the city and rent space. His clients didn't mind the drive out to the country and Justin found they were more likely to be relaxed for their sessions.

This was the first session with Chas Martinez. His boyfriend, Blair Cahill, was a partner in a very successful law firm. He had recently purchased a new home, for which he had commissioned Justin to do several landscapes. He had been very pleased with Justin's his work and had invited him to visit at his new home. At the time, Blair was unattached and Justin, feeling uncomfortable with the invitation, had turned him down. Blair was nice looking and rich, but Justin was not really attracted to older men. Except, of course, for one particular older man.

Then, a few weeks ago, he had received a call from Blair asking him to do a portrait of his new Latin lover. Justin was thrilled to be getting paid for doing what he loved best, draw pictures of gorgeous naked men. He gave Blair the address and set up an appointment for Chaz to come and pose.

Justin began to set up the equipment he would need for the session, including Brian's camera to take photos so he could work on details when the model was not available to pose in person. There was a knock at the door and Justin went to open it.

Chaz Martinez was over six feet tall and slender. By profession he was a dancer, and the streamlined form of his body was evident under his tightfitting black bicycle pants and tank top. He greeted Justin with a sly smile and a firm hand shake.

"You must be Justin. Blair can't stop talking about your work. I'm looking forward to posing for you."

Justin bit his lip to keep from smiling too much. Chaz Martinez was just about the most perfect man Justin had ever laid eyes on. He wore his jet black-shoulder length hair tied in the back. As he entered the room, he undid the band and allowed his hair to flow free. He moved gracefully across the room and turned to Justin. "Where do you want me?"

Justin attempted to regain his composure. "Over there would be fine." He indicated a small couch near the window.

With his back to Justin, Chaz slowly removed his tank top, revealing the intricate outline of well-toned muscles across his back. He then removed his bicycle shorts .

Justin could barely breathe. When the man bent over to retrieve his clothing from the floor he gave Justin an incredible view of his tight firm buttocks. Justin moved forward toward his model and offered his hand. "Let me put them away for you."

Chaz smiled and handed him the garments, allowing his fingers to seductively brush up against the back of Justin's hand.

Struggling to remain professional, Justin turned to retrieve the camera from the desk. He paused for a moment before turning back to drink in the incredible vision of masculine perfection stretched out before him on the sofa.

"That's perfect," he managed to say as he lifted the camera to his eye.

The roar of the motorcycle coming up the drive made Jennifer jump. She looked down at the tiny child in her arms. He hadn't even winced. Justin was busy chopping vegetables for a salad. She had volunteered to stay just a few more minutes, to give him time to prepare dinner. It had been the most delightful visit, and she couldn't wait to come again.

Brian stormed in the front door. He dropped his briefcase and leather jacket on the table in the hall and entered the kitchen. "Give me my baby," he demanded.

Jennifer relinquished the child and looked over at Justin, who seemed unperturbed by his partner's behavior.

After Brian had taken little B.J. upstairs, Justin looked over at his mother and said. "I'm sorry. He gets like that sometimes. I know it's rude. Something must have happened at work. When he gets like this, the first thing he does is grab the baby. I think he uses him as a security blanket, or as an excuse to rock himself into oblivion."

"It's okay. I'm getting used to it. He does have his good points." Jennifer got up to leave.

Once his mother was gone, Justin went to see what Brian was up to. "Hey. Don't I even get a hello anymore?"

Brian grunted, "Hello." never taking his eyes from his sleeping namesake.

"You were pretty rude to my mother."

"Sorry." Brian mumbled.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing!" It was clear that Brian did not want to discuss the reason for his foul mood with Justin. "Are those new?" Brian pointed to the photo package on the dresser.

"Yeah, I just picked them up a little while ago." Justin tossed Brian the photos.

There was a photo that Justin's mother had taken of the two of them with the baby that stood out from the rest. "I love that picture." Justin sat on the arm of the chair admiring the photos over Brian's shoulder. "He's looking right at us and smiling. We should use it for our Christmas card."

Brian laughed at the thought of the three of them adorning a Christmas card. As he shuffled through the rest of the pictures, he asked Justin how things went with his mother.

"It was nice. I enjoyed having the company of someone who doesn't spit up on me."

"I never spit up on you. Not lately, anyway."

Justin threw a stuffed bear at him as he left the room with a laundry basket.

Brian's mood brightened, as he enjoyed the photos, until he got halfway through the stack.

"JUSTIN!!!" Brian roared.

"Shhhhhh, you'll wake him up". Justin called from the hallway.

Brian stormed out of the nursery and pulled Justin's arm to turn him around. "Who the fuck is this guy, Justin?"

Justin hadn't seen Brian this angry since his loft was robbed. "That's Chaz." Justin tried to sound nonchalant. He had forgotten that the first group of photos he had taken were on the same roll as the baby photos. "He's Blair Cahill's boyfriend. I was commissioned to do his portrait."

"These pictures look like the cover of an x-rated Harlequin Romance novel. Is that what you do here all day? Get guys to come out here to take off their clothes for you?"

"Brian, I'm an artist. It's what I do. I get paid big bucks, to paint big bucks." Justin was losing patience with Brian's attitude.

"I'm calling your Mr. Blair Cahill right now and telling him to keep his money. You can't do this kind of thing anymore, Justin. We have a baby to think about."

The next thing that came out of Brian's mouth drove Justin over the edge.

"Did you fuck him?"

"Did I fuck him? Yes Brian, I had my mother come over to watch the baby so I could fuck my client's boyfriend."

"Call it off, Justin. Tell Cahill you can't do the portrait."

"Fuck you, Brian. What am I supposed to do all day? You insisted that we move out here to the fucking woods. I have no friends, no contact with anyone for that matter. You come home, from God knows where, in one of your fucking dark moods, and you won't even talk to me. All you ever think about is that stupid baby."

Justin dropped the wash basket and stormed off into their bedroom.

Brian followed him into the dark room and found him lying face down on the bed.

"I didn't mean it," Justin whispered between sobs. "I love the baby."

Brian sat on the bed and rubbed Justin's back. "I know you do."

Justin brushed his hand across his face to wipe away the tears. He turned around and sat up on the bed. Brian put his finger under Justin's chin and angled his face toward him. "What's wrong?" He asked .

"I don't know. Everything is so different. Living way out here, taking care of a baby all day. It's a lot for me to deal with. I miss the loft. I miss the guys and going to Babylon. I miss having you all to myself. I feel like we're losing each other."

Brian put his arms around Justin and held him tight. "Don't ever say that."

"I feel so stupid. I'm jealous of my own baby."

"Justin. Do you want to know why I love him so much? I love him because when I look at him, I see you. Smaller and smellier, but he's you all over. I remember the first time I saw you on Liberty Avenue. You were so perfect, and so sweet. I did my best to fuck you up. I almost succeeded a few times. When B.J. was born I looked at him and thought, 'This is my chance to fix it. To make up for all the rotten things I did to Justin'."

"He's a brand new part of you, baby."

"You haven't called me that in years."

"That's because when you were modeling for Walker, you made sure I knew, in no uncertain terms, that you were a man and not a baby. I had to treat you as an equal or lose you. But in my mind you were always my baby, and you always will be."

Justin started to get up from the bed.

"Where are you going?"

"I want to apologize to B.J. What if he heard me, Brian? I called him stupid."

"I'm sure he didn't hear you. He'll be up screaming in a few hours and then you can go in and explain. You can tell him it was my fault for being an asshole."

"I guess he'd buy that." Justin lay back down on the bed and Brian stretched out on top of him. "Brian, I didn't fuck Chaz. The thought never entered my head."

"Oh, sure it didn't." Brian smiled coyly as he looked at the photo he still held in his hand. "I'd have fucked him. He's pretty hot. In fact, I think we should use this picture for our Christmas card."

Justin took the photo out of Brian's hand and let it drop onto the floor. He pulled Brian's face to his and kissed him hungrily on the lips.

Jennifer's mood changed quickly when she arrived home and saw Craig's car in front of her condo. She had decided not to tell the man about his grandson. He hadn't earned the right to be a part of the Kinney-Taylor family. She wasn't about to risk the outcome if he found out from her and reacted badly. She feared that he would do or say something to the boys to alienate them further, and put an end to her newfound closeness with Justin.

"Where have you been?" Craig got out of his car.

"That's none of your business. Where is Molly?"

"She went inside. I wanted to talk to you. She's not getting any better, Jenn. I think she needs help. I've looked into some mental health facilities that handle this type of depression."

"Absolutely not. You're not going to push her away from us like you did Justin. I'll make sure her therapist is aware of her mood. She'll stay with me." Jennifer stood firm.

"I think you're making a mistake. She needs more help than we can give her. Jennifer, please, we need to talk this out, for Molly's sake." He reached out and touched her arm, but she recoiled.

Without further comment, Craig got in his car and drove off.

Molly Taylor lay on her bed with her headphones on. She was staring at the ceiling wondering how the fuck she was going to get past her watchdog mother and down to the bar on Front Street.

Jennifer opened the door and was overcome by the aroma of smoke. She wasn't sure, but she thought it might be pot. Rather than confront her daughter about her suspicions, Jennifer decided to ignore it.

"Can I come in? I have some news from Justin."

Molly removed the headphones and blew a bubble with the gum in her mouth. "What's the little queer up to?"

"I went to see him today. He looks wonderful. He said to say 'hello' to you, dear."

Molly kept her eyes riveted to the ceiling and said nothing.

"Molly, he . . . he and Brian have a new baby."

The girl stopped chewing and sat up on the bed.

"Wow, Mom . . . you should alert the media with that news. Isn't that, like, physically impossible.?"

Jennifer ignored her comments. "He wants to see you, Molly. He's going to call tomorrow."

"Whatever." Molly replaced the headphones, signaling an end to their conversation.

The alarm went off at 6:00 a.m. the next morning and Brian and Justin both jumped out of bed. They hadn't been awakened by the alarm going off since before B.J. was born. "Did you have the monitor on, Brian? Something must be wrong! He usually wakes up screaming by 4:30."

After racing to the nursery, they were shocked when they looked into the crib and saw baby Brian smiling up at them. "I can't believe it! He slept through the whole night! It must have been the cereal my mother put in the formula."

"Great. Now that he's sleeping through the night we can use our bed for its intended purpose. . . . fucking all night long. Brian grabbed Justin around the waist."

"You better get the formula ready. I'll change him," Justin said.

As Justin took off the diaper, he was rewarded with a golden shower from his son.

Brian came back into the room as Justin was wiping his face. "Well, I found something that little Brian inherited from you. Your shooting power. He got me right in the eye."

"Good boy." Brian picked up the baby and began to feed him his breakfast.

Justin sat on the arm of the chair. "Brian, you never told me why you were so pissed off when you came home yesterday. What happened?"

Brian looked up at him. "I went to Lindsay's after work. She told me that she and Mel want to move to California. They're taking Gus with them, of course. She said there wasn't a God damned thing I could do about it. She went on to describe me as a shitty father who only comes around when it's convenient. I think she's still pissed that I don't want her to sit for B.J."

"You're not a shitty father," Justin assured him. "You were kinda mean to her after B.J. was born. She probably thinks we moved so she couldn't drop in and see him everyday."

"Maybe it was one reason. No one is ever going to take B.J. away from me." Brian stared down at his child. "Justin, if anything ever happened to him, I don't know what I'd do. If we stayed in the city he would start playing with kids who have normal families. They would tease him, or worse. He'd end up hating us."

"Hey, he's our kid. Nobody is going to make fun of him, and get away with it. I know how you feel. Nothing is going to happen to him. Not with his two daddies around to protect him."

"Have I ever told you that I love you?"

"Not in the last few minutes."

"Well, I do. Now you know all my secrets. So, shut the fuck up and make me breakfast."

Justin sensed that Molly was less than receptive when he phoned her that morning. He was sure their mother was forcing her to meet with him. They decided that the condo was not the best place to meet. Molly suggested the park next to St. James Academy.

On the way there, Justin mentally reviewed what he wanted to say. He was no expert on teenage girls. In fact, it was one topic about which he was totally ignorant. If he agreed with Molly, his mother would be mad. If he agreed with his mother, Molly would never listen to him.

If they had not been the only two people in the park that morning, he never would have recognized his own sister. Her formerly wavy blonde hair was jet black. It hung long and straight down to the middle of her back, with the top spiked and tinted blue. Her make-up was extreme, to say the least. And her clothing was just out and out grunge.

"Mol?" Justin asked as she approached the Jeep.

"Who the fuck else would be out here waiting for you?"

Justin went to kiss her on the cheek and she pulled away. "Look, Mom would make my life even more impossible if I didn't come out here to talk to you. That's the only reason I'm here, Justin. So, let's get this little family reunion the fuck over with, fast."

Justin unload B.J. from the car and put him in his stroller.

"This is B.J." Justin introduced his son, who had fallen asleep in the car.

"Yeah, someday you'll tell me how you did that." Molly turned on her heel and began to walk down the path. She showed no interest in the baby, or in her brother, whom she hadn't seen in 5 years.

Justin followed after her. "Molly, Mom is really worried about you."

"I know. Ain't it cool?"

"Hey, I came all the way out here to talk to you. I'm sorry about . . . the baby."

"I got knocked up and got rid of it, just like Mom and Dad got rid of you. Like they want to get rid of me. Isn't that a Taylor family tradition? Your kids get in the way, you just get rid of them."

"Why are you being so hostile? What did I ever do to you?"

Molly turned to face her brother. "What did you ever DO? Mr. 'Perfect', Mr. 'Sparkly White Teeth', Mr. '1500 SAT score', Mr. 'Art Institute Grad', Mr. 'I married a millionaire and had a perfect baby' Taylor. I'll tell you what you did to me! You left me with the aftermath. I grew up hating you for leaving me alone. Dad was never the same without his perfect son. Mom did nothing but cry for years. And there I was, little Miss 'you have to make up for everything your brother did to us.' "Everyday was like a funeral at my house. You wrecked my life. I have nothing to say to you. So, you can take your perfect little faggot ass, and your little baby, Blow Job, back to your perfect homo Jeep, and get the fuck out of my life."

Molly ran across the park and got into the passenger side of a white van that had been parked on the side street. The driver peeled off down the road leaving a cloud of dust.

Justin took the baby out of the stroller and held him. "I don't think she likes us, B.J."

Brian sat at his desk and stared out the window. He couldn't believe that Lindsay was being so vindictive. He tried to be a good father to Gus, but with Mel around it was almost impossible. Everything he did was wrong. Every toy he bought was too big or too small. When he wanted to take Justin and Gus to Wally World, she nixed that too, saying that Gus should see the big rodent with his real family.

Justin had put the photo of the two of them and B.J. in a frame for his desk. He smiled at the photo and wondered what they were doing right now. Before he reached for the phone, he opened his desk drawer and looked down at his favorite picture. It was the one Michael had taken of Justin and him just after they first met. He had his arm around the sweet faced-teen and was biting his ear. Justin loved it when he did that. As he picked up the receiver to dial, he heard a familiar voice out in the hall.

"Hey. Are you busy?" Justin came through the door with B.J. in his arms.

Brian smiled as he walked around his desk. He picked up B.J. and held him up to his face. He then put his arm around Justin and pulled him close. "I was just going to call you." The feeling of security that he got from Justin and B.J. was all Brian ever needed in his life.

"How did things go with your sister?"

"Not too good. It seems I somehow ruined her life. I don't get it. I wasn't even there. How could I have ruined her life?"

"Women. Who the fuck needs 'em? I'm glad I'm gay. I never have to wonder what you're thinking. I just have to feel your crotch, right about here."

Justin smiled and leaned against the desk. "Let's break this in. I bet you never did it on your desk before."

Brian smiled. "Of course not."

Brian buzzed his secretary. "Cynthia. How do you feel about keeping company with a younger man?"

"If Daddy Brian ever knew I was doing this, he would kill me." Justin unhooked B.J. from his car seat and carried him up the steps of Lindsay and Mel's home.

Lindsay couldn't contain her happiness when Justin handed her the little bundle who had, until very recently, been a part of her. "Oh, Justin, he's so beautiful. And he's gotten so big."

"Justin!" Gus came running down the hallway.

"Hey, Gus, come here and see little B.J." He picked up the little boy so he could get a better look.

Gus took one look at the baby and made a face. "He smells bad."

"Can I change him, Justin?" Lindsay asked.

Justin handed her the diaper bag. "Be my guest."

Gus took Justin by the hand and dragged him into the living room. "Look at my pictures, Justin. I can draw just like you."

After B.J. had settled down for a nap and Gus was busy drawing a picture of the sleeping baby, Lindsay and Justin sat down with their coffee.

"Lindsay, why are you and Mel moving? Is it because Brian was such an asshole after B.J. was born?"

"That's what I like about you, Justin, You always get right to the point. It was more difficult than I thought it would be to hand little B.J. over to you. He lived inside me for nine months, Justin. It created a bond. I knew I would have to give him up, but I always thought I could at least share in his life. I never thought Brian would react like he has. He's so possessive of the baby."

"I think it's because he had to give up Gus. He never realized that he would feel something for his son. I guess it's because he never felt close to his real family. Lindsay, give him another chance. He felt threatened by your closeness to B.J. Now that we've bonded as a family, he'll realize that you love B.J., just like he loves Gus."

"I hope he does, Justin."

It had been almost five days and Brian was just about at the end of his rope. The baby had cried non-stop almost all day and was not showing any signs of letting up. No amount of rocking, coddling, soothing or sucking would stop his incessant bawling. Brian was beginning to understand what Justin was talking about when he said B.J. was 'difficult'.

Justin had taken some of his artwork to a dealer in New York City. The dealer was busy preparing for a show, and asked Justin to stay and help. At first, Brian had been against the idea; but, since that little blowup about the photo of Chaz, he had felt a little guilty. He had more than enough vacation time coming, so he volunteered to stay home with B.J. and let Justin have some of the grown-up time he'd been craving since the baby was born. He hadn't counted on spending every waking moment cleaning up after and coddling the little noisemaker. The truth was, if he

didn't get out of this fucking house in the next few hours, he was going to go insane. He was sitting in the den weighing his options when the phone rang.

"Hello Brian." Jennifer said. "Has Justin come home yet?"

Brian, thought she sounded down. "No, he's driving home tonight after the show. Is something wrong?"

"No. Yes. I don't know. Molly and I had another fight. She ran out of here a few minutes ago. I think she's seeing someone. I just asked her a few questions, and she blew up at me. Brian, do you think I could come out and see the baby? It's been a whole week and I miss him. I know you're busy, so I won't stay long."

"Sure, I think he misses Justin. He's been pretty cranky. Maybe it would cheer him up to see his grandma."

It took Jennifer less than 30 minutes to drive out to their house. The trip seemed to be getting shorter now that she knew the way. Brian was on the phone when she arrived. He handed her a bottle and motioned for her to go upstairs. The baby was wailing up an storm, but as soon as she started talking he stopped crying and looked in her direction. A smile came over his little face.

"Looks like he remembers you." Brian entered the room.

"He's almost asleep."

"He's been crying non-stop for days. Do you think he's okay?"

"Justin cried non-stop from the minute we got him home from the hospital."

"I guess mothers have a special understanding when it comes to babies. I bet you just loved every minute."

"Are you kidding? I wanted to flush him down the toilet!"

Brian laughed out loud.

"I was young. Craig was working all the time. My parents had just moved to Florida. I had nobody but this little tiny baby. After a while, I figured out how to manage. We learned from each other. For the longest time , Justin was my best friend, and I was his."

"Until I came along."

"I didn't mean it that way, Brian. I just envisioned his life differently. You can't help but make plans for your children when they're growing up. He would go to the best schools, have a brilliant career, get married to a wonderful girl who would give him the sweetest blond haired, blue-eyed babies. When I realized he was gay, all those things I had planned for him just vanished. I didn't know what to expect. I was scared for him, and so was Craig. I wish I had been able to get past my fears. Look at him now. He has everything I'd ever planned for him, and more."

"Except for the wonderful GIRL."

"So, he has a wonderful man. Who loves him more than I could ever have imagined. I think he's a very lucky guy."

"I don't suppose I could talk you into spending some time alone with your sweet blond haired, blue-eyed grandson? I need to go into town for a couple of hours."

"Brian, there's nothing I would want more, but I have to get back to the house in case Molly shows up."

"Do you want to take him home? I don't think he would mind waiting up with you."

"If you would trust me to take him overnight, I'd be thrilled to have him."

"What do you say B.J.? Do you want to visit overnight with Grandma Jennifer?"

The baby cooed and smiled at Brian.

After loading them into the car with B.J.'s baby seat and playpen, Brian started to feel a little guilty.

"Are you sure you want to do this? It is a long drive and if he wakes up, he may scream all the way."

"Brian, it wouldn't be the first time I've driven with a screaming baby. B.J. and I will manage. We might be able to teach each other a few things."

He smiled as they drove away. "Babylon, here I come."

"I'm on my way. Yeah, it's fine. Grandma is thrilled to have the little bundle of noise. I'll meet you in about an hour." Brian hung up his cell phone.

I don't know what the fuck I was thinking, moving so far away from the city, he mused. The commute is a killer. With brutal honesty Brian faced the truth. He had moved away from the city to hold on to Justin.

Ever since the sneaker campaign, Brian's attitude toward Justin had changed. After the first photo shoot, the proofs had been sent to his office for review. Cynthia had opened the package and placed the photos on his desk. He arrived at the office early the next morning, tired, cranky and slightly hung-over. When he saw the first photo he was awestruck. Justin was a handsome kid. Brian had always been aware of that fact. But he had not been prepared for the intoxicating allure of the young man who jumped out at him from the pictures. As he examined each photo, he became increasingly aware of the fact that Mr. Walker had been right about the model he had chosen. "Fuck, I would buy a pair of these sneakers." It had never occurred to him how Justin's expressive face and agile young body would have such broad appeal. The photographer had captured a variety of Justin's expressions ranging from sweet, innocent and slightly feminine to seductive, erotic and almost macho. Brian couldn't believe he had found this treasure simply standing under a lamppost on Liberty Avenue.

With every photo shoot it became more and more apparent that Justin was a man magnet. No matter what he did or where he went, men would come out of the woodwork just to gawk at him. Brian tried to ignore it, and even joked to Justin's face that maybe he should play the field a little before he decided to settle down.

All during the campaign he, had watched the kid take charge of his own life. He wanted Brian to understand that he was to be considered an equal, not a possession or a project. It dawned on Brian that Justin was becoming financially independent and physically whole again. The fact was, Justin didn't really NEED him any more.

Justin was still starry-eyed in love with him, and he took advantage of that fact. He insisted that they get married. Not that it meant a whole lot, legally, but, Brian knew that Justin needed the commitment. They stayed at the loft and, for a while, everything was fine. Justin finished college and was offered a great job. The problem was that the job was in New York City. The only solution Brian could think of was to tie Justin to him for good. That was when he had come up with the idea of having a baby.

At first, Justin had been reluctant. He was anxious to start his career, and he enjoyed their club hopping lifestyle. Brian told him that if they were ever going to connect in a physical sense, they would have to do it soon. His sister was in her late 30's and he didn't know how much longer it would be before her eggs would rot. He desperately wanted a baby. He talked his sister into it by offering to put up the down payment on a condo for her in Florida. Lindsay was an easy sell,. She loved being pregnant, and she did owe him a baby. All he had to do was buy a house far away from Babylon. He wouldn't have to worry about losing Justin to some hot young, trick he might meet up with at the club.

The night that little B.J. was born, Brian's whole world changed once again. Lindsay and Justin were beaming as they handed him the warm little bundle in the hospital room. He took one look at that sweet little face and fell in love all over again.

"Fuck!" Brian was jerked into the present when the Jeep began to swerve on an icy spot on the road. He was almost at the exit for Babylon when his cell phone rang.

"What? I'm almost there."

"Brian. . . " Jennifer's voice wavered.

"What's wrong?" He pulled off at his exit.

"Oh, my God! B.J.'s gone! I left him in the car so that I could open the front door and make room for the playpen in the living room. Molly was home. She and I got into a fight before I even got in the door. She ran down the driveway and took off in the car. Oh, God, Brian, she didn't know the baby was in the back seat. I don't know what to do. Should I try to call Justin?"

"No. He's on his way home from New York. There's nothing he can do, and the roads are slick. He would try to drive too fast. Stay where you are. Once Molly realizes the baby is in the back seat, she'll bring him home. Is there anyplace you can think of that she might drive to?"

"There's a bar. I think it's near the shopping center. She has some friends in that area."

"I'll drive around and see if I can spot her. Don't panic."

His heart began to race as he turned the Jeep around. His perfect little Brian Justin was in danger. He hated himself for dumping him on Jennifer. If anything happened, it would be his fault once again. Justin would never forgive him this time.

As he drove toward the shopping center, the phone rang again. It was Jennifer.

"Brian, they found the car. She went off the road near Craig's apartment. They've taken them to the hospital. I'll meet you there."

He felt bile rise in his throat as he contemplated the unimaginable. An image of Justin sprawled out on the floor of the parking garage flashed through his mind. This couldn't be happening. He raced into the parking lot of the hospital, parked the car, and ran through the emergency room doors.

A wave of relief swept over him when he saw Craig Taylor sitting in the hallway holding B.J.. Craig was holding the baby close to his body. He had his eyes shut. When he looked up and saw Brian he stood, and handed him the baby.

The boy was wide awake. He gave Brian a big smile and stretched his arms up over his head and yawned. Brian looked at Craig Taylor, expecting a long-winded speech about responsibility or his disgusting lifestyle or something equally insulting. The man just looked at him and sat back down silently.

"Where's Molly?" Brian asked, not expecting an answer.

"She slid off the road when she heard the baby cry. The car swerved into a tree and she hit her head. She didn't know he was in the car, Brian. I'm sorry."

This was the first civil conversation he could ever remember having with Craig Taylor. He looked down at little Brian comfortably resting on his shoulder.

"Is she going to be okay?"

"She wasn't going fast. The car suffered more damage than she did. Thank God the baby was secured in a good car seat." Craig looked over at B.J. and smiled.

Another first. Brian could not recall ever seeing Craig Taylor smile. He sat down on the plastic chair next to the man who was, after all, his son's grandfather.

"I should call Justin and tell him what happened. Do you think you could hold B.J. for a few more minutes?" Brian passed the baby over to the older man, who took the child without a word.

Brian called Justin and began the conversation with, "Don't panic or drive faster, or anything. Everyone is okay. At least, I'm pretty sure."

"Brian, you're scaring the shit out of me! Tell me what happened."

Brian told him what had happened, and again told him not to panic. Justin was almost at the exit for the hospital and would be there shortly. When Brian returned to the waiting room, Jennifer was sitting on the chair next to Craig. It never occurred to him before what a striking couple they were. It was a shame they hadn't been able to keep it together. He wondered if Jennifer was truly happier being alone.

"How is she?" he asked, as he retrieved the baby.

"Shaken. They're putting stitches in her head and then she'll be released. She feels terrible about the baby, Brian."

"He's had a busy night. Did you notice he hasn't cried at all? I think he likes all this attention. He's his father's son all right."

Minutes later, Justin rushed in the door and ran over to Brian and B.J.. He put his arms around them both and hugged them.

Craig Taylor turned away and walked toward the window. Justin took the baby from Brian's arms and studied him thoroughly. "I think he's grown a few inches since last Saturday. I can't believe how much I missed him. And you." He reached up and kissed Brian on the mouth.

When Craig turned back, Justin could see there were tears in his eyes.

"Is Molly okay?"

Jennifer said, "I think she'd like to see you, honey. She feels so guilty about the baby."

"I don't blame her, Mom. It was an accident. Thank God everyone's okay."

Justin and his mother went in to talk to Molly. Once again, Brian was left alone with Craig. He was getting a little tired of all this Taylor family angst.

"You know, a couple of months ago I never would have believed it. You and me sitting here, not killing each other. I think that maybe I was wrong about you. That time I said you hated Justin. I don't see how anyone can hate their own kid. It's not possible. Just look at how they start out. " Brian looked down at B.J. "He's so small and helpless. I would do just about anything to keep him safe. I don't know how you can stay mad at Justin. You're missing out on a really great kid and a terrific grandson. Why don't you just lighten up, and talk to him? It took your wife a while, but she got used to us. In fact, I think maybe my abrasive personality might be growing on her. She hasn't insulted me in weeks."

Craig looked at Brian. "I don't know if I can do it. The thought of two men together still makes my skin crawl. You're not a normal family."

"What's normal? We have great jobs, we take care of our family, we own a home in the country, we have an adorable baby, and we love each other. And we found a way to stay together, no matter who or what tries to fuck us up. Look at your 'normal' family. You fucked your secretary. You divorced your wife who, I might add, is still pretty hot for a female. You don't talk to your only son, who adores you. Your daughter is on her way to becoming one fucked-up little drama princess. And you call US queer!"

Brian held B.J. up in front of Craig. "And, what about him? What about little B.J.? Suppose, God forbid, he's straight? Who is he going to have as a role model? Come on Grandpa, give us a chance. What have you got to lose?"

Craig cracked a smile and took the baby from Brian.

The music was as deafening as ever. Babylon itself never changed. Only the faces in the crowd did. Brian stood at his regular perch above the dance floor enjoying the view.

"Hey, sexy. Wanna fuck?" Justin handed him a beer.

"Don't say it unless you mean it. We've got a long drive home. I haven't fucked you in almost a week. I don't think I'm going to make it all the way home."

"I don't think I'm going to make it to the car. Let's go downstairs." Justin took Brian's hand and dragged him through the crowd to the familiar backroom.

As they descended the staircase, the odor of sex, pot, and stale beer struck Brian's senses, and stopped him on the steps. He looked around at the scene before him, and then looked over at Justin. "Wait. We don't belong here."

Justin looked up at Brian. "Yeah, it's pretty gross. What are we going to do?"

"Your Mom gave you a key to her place. She said we could stay in her spare room. Maybe we should do it. The roads are pretty nasty tonight. And, we'd have to come back tomorrow to pick up B.J. anyway."

"Brian! I haven't been with you in 5 days. And you want us to sleep at my mother's house? With all the noise we make fucking, she'll think that we're murdering each other and call the police."

"It was her idea. She wanted keep her grandson tonight. So she's stuck with us, carnal noises and all. It's part of the Kinney-Taylor family package. Let's go."

They hurried out to the Jeep and sped off toward Jennifer's condo.

"Stop it. I can't get the key in the door." Justin half-heartedly attempted to push Brian's hand from his ass.

"Hurry up." Brian pushed his body against Justin's back just as the key turned in the latch. The door opened and the two fell forward into the foyer.

"MOM! DAD!" Justin's mouth flew open when he saw his mother and father in a compromising position on the couch. They struggled to straighten their clothing. Baby B.J. was sound asleep in the playpen.

"Do you have to flaunt your disgusting lifestyle right in front of our son?" Brian asked, fighting back the urge to laugh out loud. "Justin, let's go to bed. I think I feel my skin crawling."

When Justin woke up the next morning, he left Brian's side and went down into the living room to see his son. The room had been straightened and the playpen was empty. He went back upstairs and saw that the door to Molly's room was open. He peeked inside and spotted the baby lying on his sister's bed. Molly was playing peek-a-boo with B.J. by hiding behind his flower mirror.

"Did B.J. tell you what Mom and Dad did last night?"

"He didn't have to. Between the two of THEM downstairs and the two of YOU in the next room, I didn't get much sleep. Christ, Justin. How many times a night does that old guy you're married to get it up? I counted four."

"Five, actually. And he's not THAT old."

"I was kidding. He's kinda cute, really. The baby looks like you, though."

"D'ya think? I always thought that you and I kinda looked alike."

"If I ever get to have a kid, I hope he looks like B.J."

"You'll have a baby. When you want to."

"It doesn't seem like anything GOOD will ever happen to me. You're so lucky, Justin. You have everything you ever wanted. And your boyfriend stuck by you."

"That's because we really love each other. It wasn't always easy you know. You were too young to remember, but I had it pretty tough for a while. Dad threw me out and he even tried to kill Brian with his car. Mom blamed Brian for everything that went wrong in her life. And, for a while, Brian didn't want any part of me."

"So, what did you do?"

"I decided that I had to believe in myself, no matter what. I couldn't convince people to love me if I didn't love myself. So I did everything that I wanted to do, even if it was difficult. I came out as a gay man. I got through art school. I earned a bunch of money modeling and dancing. And every time I stood up for myself, Brian would get closer. I didn't have to chase him anymore. He started to chase me."

"It was the same with Mom and Dad. I knew I'd never convince them to accept us as a couple. We just had to BE a couple, and let them decide if they wanted to be a part of our family."

"Shit, Justin, you sound like a public service announcement."

"People are always telling me that." Justin smiled. "You're going to have to stop cursing in front of my son."

"Fuck you, Justin. Where do you think I learned the words?"

"JUSTIN?" Brian's muffled voice came from the next room.

"Is that his mating call, AGAIN?"

Justin grinned. "Can you watch B.J.? This might take a while."

"Yeah, he can hang here."

After Justin left the room Molly, went over to the dresser and took out her old photo album. She showed pictures to a smiling B.J. "This is what I looked like in my former life." The baby laughed. The photo was of a young, blonde, slender, pre-teen in a dancer's leotard.

"Pretty funny, huh?" She walked over to her mirror and lifted up her oversized sweatshirt revealing her skintight stretch pants. "Oh My God! I've got Justin's ass! That may be cute on a queer guy, but it's never going to cut it on a girl dancer. I guess I'll have to switch to light beer."

Jennifer came into the kitchen with a grocery bag. "I bought bacon and eggs. I hope everyone is hungry. "

Brian and Justin were sitting at the kitchen table.

Molly came up behind her mother. "You know I don't eat breakfast."

"Honey, please, everyone's together today. It would be nice to share a meal for once."

"NO, Mom." Molly placed B.J.'s seat in the middle of the table and turned to leave.

When Jennifer's back was turned, Brian pulled down on Molly's long hair until her face was next to his. "Listen, Morticia. Either you do as your Mom asks, or I'll tell her about your stash under the mattress in the guest room."

Molly reluctantly sat in the chair opposite Brian. "I just want cereal."

Brian picked up a box of Corn Flakes and started to fling handfuls of the cereal into a big bowl which he then put in front of her. Molly stuck her tongue out at him.

The phone rang and Jennifer answered. It was Craig. "No, everyone's here. We're having breakfast. Molly's fine. The baby is fine, too. Yes, Craig, me too. Justin, your father wants to talk to you."

"Me?" Justin got up from the table and took the phone from his mother.

Jennifer stood back and watched the scene before her. Brian was busy cutting big chunks of bananas and tossing them into Molly's cereal. In turn, she would take her spoon and fling them back at him. One of the bananas hit Justin in the butt as was talking to his Dad "Cut it out, Brian." Justin hit him in the head with a stuffed toy. Brian retaliated by twisting the phone wire around Justin's legs and pulling him into his lap. Molly was laughing, and B.J. was busy studying his reflection in his flower mirror.

Up until a few months ago, Jennifer had eaten every meal alone. The collection of people whom she had now come to consider her family might be unconventional, but she liked having them around. In fact, she loved her queer little family.

"Mom, Can you drive me to the mall?"

"I don't have a car, remember? What do you need at the mall?"

"I was thinking about changing my hair color."

"What's the matter? Did they run out of tar at the pits?" teased Brian.

"While I'm there, Brian, maybe I could pick you up a case of Grecian Formula. To cover that unsightly gray." Molly retorted.

"Where? Justin, she's kidding isn't she?" Brian grabbed the flower mirror from B.J. and examined his head. "I don't have any gray hair! Justin, you look."

"You're gorgeous, Brian. No. No gray hair." Justin smiled and lifted his eyebrows in Molly's direction.

"Justin, can you take me to the mall?"

"We have to get home. I have a client coming in to pose this afternoon."

Molly pleaded, "But you have two cars and we don't have any."

"Why don't you ask your friend in the white van to drive you?"

"He got arrested. His boss told him he could use the van to drive to and from work, but nowhere else. Spider was on the highway going to a party a few nights ago and some asshole cut him off so he had to hit him. Of course, he couldn't stop and wait for the police, so he took the van to a parking lot and got a bunch of his friends to set fire to it. Then he reported it stolen. The asshole he hit described him to the police and he got arrested. And, on top of that, his stupid boss fired him."

"Well, fuck him, if he can't take a joke." Brian found her story to be very amusing.

"Molly, you're making me seem like a choir boy . . . a straight choir boy. I never pulled anything that bad."

"Justin, you stole my fucking credit card and ran away to New York City. I had to go up there and drag your ass back home."

"Saint Justin' stole your credit card?" Molly was intrigued. "Tell me more, Brian."

"There is no more." Justin said as he ran his hand through Brian's hair. "I've been a perfect angel ever since. Isn't that right, Brian?"

"That's right, baby. Except maybe for the, Kip incident. . ."

Justin pulled on Brian's hair. "I think that's enough enlightenment for one day. Let's go, Bri."

As they drove home, Justin remarked to Brian, "I can't believe you let my mother borrow your Jeep."

"I can't believe I gave your sister \$50."

"No way! Why did you do that?"

"To get her 'Fright Night' hair fixed. She'll make a much better babysitter with her brother's natural blond hair color."

"You would really trust her with B.J.?" Justin asked.

"She's family, isn't she? Besides, your mom will make sure nothing happens to her grandson. This way you can work where ever, and whenever you want. You won't have to be stuck out in the fucking woods all day."

"I don't mind being stuck out in the woods. As long as you come home every night to keep me company."

"So, what did you and your Dad talk about?"

"He wanted B. J. and me to have lunch with him next week."

"Are you gonna go?"

"No. I told him I would only meet him if you were invited, too."

"Justin. . ."

"He said 'okay'. Just like that, 'bring Brian'."

"No wonder it's getting so cold. Hell must have frozen over."

One day Brian arrived home from work early. It was only a few weeks until Christmas and he wanted to surprise Justin. He had arranged for Jennifer and Molly to babysit for B.J. while he took Justin to New York City for a long

weekend. Justin's car was in the driveway and the lights were on in the house, but when he called out, there was no answer.

After making his way upstairs, Brian went into the nursery. The crib was empty. From the window he could see that the lights were on in Justin's studio. It hadn't occurred to him that Justin might be working on the portrait of Chaz. He had resigned himself to the fact that Justin wanted to work. It was not easy for him to think about Justin being alone all day with a naked Adonis. The fact that he had B.J. out there with him was another matter.

Brian stormed down the stairs and out the back door. He slowed himself down before he got to the door of the studio. He didn't want to make a scene and embarrass Justin in front of his client. Brian decided he would just get the baby and then leave. He and Justin would have a discussion later.

He opened the door. The scene before him was hardly what he'd expected. Justin was at his easel painting. Gus was sitting on the couch stoically posing with little B.J. firmly ensconced on his lap. Lindsay, who had been sitting near the window, stood up and greeted Brian.

"Well, I guess you ruined your Christmas surprise from your family."

"Hi, Daddy," said Gus, still stiffly posing for Justin.

"It's okay, Gus. We needed a break, anyway. You've been a really good model."

Lindsay picked up B.J. and Gus ran over to his dad.

"Hey, sonny boy." Brian bent down and ruffled his son's hair. "Can I see what you've been doing?"

Gus took his hand and led him around to where Justin sat. "This is your Christmas present from me and B.J. and Justin."

"And Lindsay. She drove Gus out here to pose for me," Justin added.

Brian looked over at Lindsay, who was still holding baby B.J.

He went over and kissed her cheek. "Hi. You're still here?"

"Don't be mad at Justin. I needed to see B.J., to know that he was okay. Just like you need to see Gus." She handed B.J. to Brian.

"Gus, let's go. Mel is taking us Hanukkah shopping tonight."

Lindsay and Gus said their goodbyes and left for home. Brian walked over to Justin and put his free hand on his shoulder.

Tears formed in Brian's eyes as he looked at the portrait. "You're getting pretty good at this. It looks just like them."

"It kinda looks like us, in miniature," Justin said. "You're not mad, are you? About me having Lindsay come out here to see the baby?"

"Of course I'm not mad."

"She's not so hot anymore on the idea of moving. Gus is great with the baby. He sat there holding him up straight so I could paint them. After watching them together, I think Lindsay realized that they need each other, too. They are kinda like brothers, or cousins or something."

"We've creating a whole new category of relatives 'bro-sins'." Brian laughed. "All this family bullshit is getting boring. Why don't you put down the brush, pack up the baby and get your sweet little ass into the car."

"Where are we going?" Justin asked.

"First, we're going to your mother's to drop off B.J. Then we're off to New York City for an all grown-up, x-rated, homosexual weekend. No babies, no family crap, no business. Just you and me and all the hot gay men in New York. We'll hit every bar and club we can find."

"You mean I get to dance with someone other than my partner?"

"You can do anything you want, as long as you save the last dance for me."

The Last Dance

This story takes place 10 years after "Queer as Family." Brian comes home with disturbing news which tests the couple's strength and devotion to each other.

Justin Kinney-Taylor - Saturday morning soccer Dad. Who would have believed it? Ten year old B.J. Kinney-Taylor was a jock. Well, not really a jock yet, but he was pretty good. He ran like a gazelle, fast and graceful. Justin was reminded of when he himself used to play baseball on the weekends when he was a kid. Mostly he did it to please his dad, but he had to admit he'd loved all the attention he would get when he had hit the ball and got to run the bases.

He was not surprised when B.J. asked if he could join the soccer team. His big brother, Gus, had started out playing soccer and was now the star player on the football team. Anything that Gus did, B.J. was sure to follow. It had become a Kinney-Taylor family tradition for Justin and his dad to attend B.J.'s soccer game in the morning and Gus's football game in the afternoon. Every weekend Craig Taylor would meet them at the soccer field to watch his grandson play. Of course B.J. would insist that he attend Gus's football games also.

At first Brian would go through the motions and meet up with them at one point in the day to watch his sons play ball. The only problem was that Chris Hobbs was Gus's football coach. On Saturday mornings he was also a volunteer coach for his daughter's soccer team. Unfortunately it was the same team that B.J. Kinney-Taylor played for. Try as he might, Brian could not get over the fact that the man had never paid for what he had done to Justin.

Chris Hobbs went on to college, but he was never the student that Justin had been. The injury that Brian had inflicted on his knee cap had kept him from getting a football scholarship. Shortly after he graduated from St. James, his girlfriend had become pregnant and the two married before their son, Morgan, was born. He'd attended a local college and when he graduated he took a job coaching high school sports.

To look at him now, it was hard to believe that Chris was only 35 years old. His once brown hair was almost completely grey and he was starting to bald in the back. He was overweight and out of shape, especially for someone who made his living teaching kids how to play football.

One thing about Chris Hobbs that had not changed, he was still a bully. The years had not been kind to Chris, and his bitter nature had been magnified tenfold. The boys on the team, including his own son, lived in fear that he would find something to tease them about. He was cruel and heartless, and there were rumors that he also used physical violence on the kids. However, he kept the boys in line and he knew how to win football games.

Craig watched as his grandson kicked the ball into the net. "B.J. is becoming quite a runner. He reminds me of you when you were on the baseball team. You were pretty good for . . . "

". . . for a faggot." Justin grinned. "You know, I didn't hate playing ball. I did have fun in the locker room." Even after all these years, Justin took every opportunity to ruffle his father's homophobic feathers.

"All right, I get the picture." Craig cover his ears. "I wasn't going to call you a faggot, I was going to say for someone so small. B.J. is taller than you were at his age."

"I thought he might be. Maybe he'll be tall, like Brian and you."

"I can see him trying out for the football team in high school. He really is a fast runner. It's too bad that bastard Chris Hobbs is the coach. I wouldn't want to see him exposed to that character any more than necessary."

"Dad, if B.J. wants to play football I won't let Chris Hobbs or anyone else stop him. Besides Hobbs knows he can only go so far. After all, coaching is his job. The way his wife spends money, I don't think he could afford to risk losing it."

"Still, he is a vicious man. Has Gus ever had a problem with him?"

"He said that he kinda leaves him alone because he is a good player. He only picks on smaller kids." Justin wasn't sure that Gus was being honest when he made those comments, but the kid did enjoy playing ball and Hobbs was a part of the package.

The game had ended and B.J.'s team had won. The boy came running over to Justin and Craig with a big grin on his face. "Ice cream, Justin?"

"You did a great job out there, sonny boy." Justin never minded that B.J. called him by his first name instead of calling him, 'Daddy.' When he first started talking he would imitate everything that Gus did, and since Gus always called him Justin, B.J. called him that too. It worked out fine because Justin always considered Brian to be the "Daddy" in the family.

B.J. Was the spitting image of his father. He had Justin's white blond hair and incredible smile. However, every once in a while Justin noticed a bit of the Kinney attitude in B.J. When he was mad about something or bored he would roll his tongue in his mouth, just like Brian does.

Gus had arrived with his moms to watch the game. "B.J., you played really well today. Before you know it you'll be trying out for the football team, like me." Gus was sixteen and tall for his age. He had Brian's face and hazel eyes, though he was more solidly built than Brian. Justin suspected that Gus made a conscious effort to build up his body. Like Brian, Gus was a self-appointed protector. He put his arm around B.J. and mimicked the boys plea. "Ice cream, Justin?"

Gus and Justin were as close as father and son. They shared a kinship in the fact that they had come into Brian Kinney's life on the very same day. Brian had always had the best of intentions as far as raising his son was concerned. Still, Gus knew that it was Justin who could be counted on. He was always around to help him with his homework, drive him to practice, or give him advice about standing up for himself at school. Ever since B.J. was born Justin had made sure that Gus felt like he was a part of the Kinney-Taylor family.

Craig and Justin, along with Lindsay and Mel, took Gus and B.J. to the local ice cream store after the football game. Gus never asked where Brian was, and Justin never offered an explanation of his father's absence. The truth was Justin wasn't sure where Brian was or when he would be returning. For several weeks Brian had been behaving very secretly. Justin was used to Brian's moods and learned to ignore most of his odd behavior. But he was becoming concerned because he had not heard from the man in three days. The last time they spoke Brian had told him that Michael was sick and he needed to take care of him. It seemed a little strange to Justin that Michael would ask Brian, of all people, to take care of him when he was sick. Brian hated being around doctors or hospitals, or for that matter sick people in general. Justin had tried to call Michael's apartment and Brian's cell phone several times and was only able to leave messages. He hoped that when he returned home today Brian will have at least left a message.

Justin was relieved that when he and B.J. arrived home, Brian and Michael were standing on the front porch.

"Michael. You look great. I guess Brian took really good care of you." Justin gave Michael a hug.

"Daddy! I missed you. We won at soccer today. Gus said I would make a good football player. Justin and Grandpa took us all for ice cream." B.J. had run up the steps and was already hugging Brian's knees. His father picked him up and held him close. Brian had always been very affectionate with his sons. Justin figured it was because he'd been starved for affection when he was young.

"Daddy you're squishing me." B.J. wriggled down from Brian's arms. "We brought you some ice cream." He held up the container.

"Great. Honey, would you go put that in the freezer? I'll eat it later."

"Sure. Uncle Michael, do you want to see my new video game?" B.J. ran off to the kitchen.

Before the boy returned from his errand, Michael turned to Brian and said, "you better tell him, Brian. And make sure you tell him everything." He'd said it loud enough for Justin to hear, and frown in response.

B.J. ran back outside and grabbed Michael by the hand. The two went up to B.J.'s room to play with the video game. Brian put his arm around Justin and pulled him into the livingroom.

"What's he talking about, Brian? Tell me what?"

"No hello kiss?" Brian was not smiling.

"What the fuck is wrong, Brian?"

Brian walked across the room and looked out the window. "I wasn't taking care of Michael. He isn't the one who's sick. I have a tumor. I'm dying."

Before Justin could react Brian turned and grabbed Justin by his arms. "Don't cry! If you cry I swear, I will fucking walk out of this house and you'll never see me again."

Justin gulped back his tears and took a deep breath. "Tell me everything, Brian. From the beginning."

"Daddy. Justin. Guess what! Uncle Michael is taking me to see X-Men V. He said we could pick up Gus and I can stay over night. Is it okay?"

"Yeah, sure." Justin said. "Go and get your stuff."

B.J. took off up the stairs and Michael looked over at Justin. "Are you guys okay? I thought it would be better if you could talk alone."

"Thanks Michael." Justin didn't know how long he could keep talking like everything was fine. It wasn't fine. His life was crashing down around him.

B.J. returned to the room with his backpack. "I'm ready."

Brian had been silently staring out the window. He turned and said to B.J. "Wait. Don't I get a hug good-bye?"

B.J. ran over to his dad and Brian picked him up. Justin had to bite his lip to keep from bursting into tears.

B.J. kissed both his dads and took Michael hand as they walked out to the car. Brian took Justin's hand and sat him down on the sofa. "I went for tests. The tumor is in my spine. I have maybe a year or so. Everything is taken care of financially. You'll have the house and the boys have the insurance policies I took out when they were born. I've left some stocks that I bought a long time ago to Michael. Everything else I've left to you in my will."

"Just like that. You're gonna die on me. Brian you're only 47 years old. There has to be something more. Michael said for you to tell me everything. Brian, this is no time to be protecting me. What else did the doctor say?"

"There are treatments. Operations that could kill me right off , or leave me soiling my diapers for the rest of my unnatural life. Chemo that will make me nauseous, impotent and bald. More than likely they won't work. It's not for me, baby."

Justin was numb. Brian was giving up. In a year he would be sitting here alone with a big gapping whole in his life where Brian had been. This can't be happening. He reached over and put his arms around Brian's neck.

Brian held him for a moment, then pushed him back. "Justin," he began softly, "I meant what I said. I couldn't bear to watch you cry for the next year. It's my time to go, sooner or later you'll have to accept it and get on with your life."

"Life, what life? Brian, you are my life."

"You're young, beautiful, and full of love. You'll find someone else. You and B.J. will be fine."

Justin couldn't believe what he was hearing, but he understood where it was coming from. He would probably feel the same way if he was dying. "I'm okay. I just need some time to myself." Justin got up and started to leave the room. He looked back and saw that Brian had returned to the window. Justin stared at his silhouette in the back-light of the sun. His artist's eye took a mental picture of the scene. He would spend the rest of his life with images of Brian Kinney in his head. How was he ever going to go on without him?

They ate dinner in silence. Brian said he was tired and went into the den and switched on the TV. Justin walked out the backdoor with the intention of tossing the bag of garbage in the bin. After accomplishing that task he looked up at the sunset and a feeling of loneliness overwhelmed him. He began to run. He ran as fast as he could into the surrounding woods. When he reached the edge of the stream he collapsed onto his knees. He had gotten far enough from the house that he was sure no one would hear him. He began to scream. NOOOOOOOO! Over and over, until he was out of breath and exhausted. He reached down close to the ground and clutched his knees. He stayed there sobbing, until the sky was almost completely black. He then slowly found his way back to the house.

Brian had fallen asleep in front of the television. Justin pulled the comforter over him and slid in next to him on the couch. He pulled Brian's arm around him and counted the minutes until morning, knowing full well that he was not going to sleep tonight. All he had ever wanted in life was to belong to Brian Kinney.

In the morning Justin relived that terrible moment all over again. The moment Brian said the word tumor. It seemed like a dream, only Justin knew it was real. He was losing his Brian. Last night Justin had made a decision. He was going to find out exactly what the doctor's could do for Brian. If there was any chance at all to save his life, Justin would find a way to convince Brian to get help.

His first phone call was to his old pal Daphne. She had become a doctor, and was now living in New York City with her pediatrician husband, and their three children. Her specialty was AIDS research.

Justin dialed the number and was relieved that Daphne herself answered the phone. After the usual greetings and family inquiries, Justin broke down and told Daphne what was happening to Brian.

"Justin, I'm so sorry. If there's anything I can do, just ask." Daphne offered.

"I was hoping you could help me get more information about the operation and the treatment. He's just giving up Daph, he doesn't want to even talk about it."

"I'll do what I can Justin. The hospital that I work at specializes in that type of surgery. I'll look into it and get back to you."

Justin thanked his friend and hung up the phone. He knew that whatever he found out it would be useless unless he could get Brian to cooperate. Justin knew from experience how stubborn his partner could be, especially when it came to something so personal. He knew he would have to act fast. No matter what it took Justin was determined to save Brian.

"Good morning." Justin sat next to Brian on the couch and handed him a cup of coffee.

Brian pushed his hand away. "I don't want any coffee."

"Please, don't push me away." Justin pleaded.

"I won't push you away, as long as you don't put pressure on me."

"I promise. I just want to be with you, it's all I've ever wanted."

"Come here." Brian put out his arm and Justin crawled up next to him.

"Justin, don't waste time dragging your ass around here crying after I'm gone. You should hook up with some one else right away. You need to belong to someone. Just make sure he isn't hotter than me."

"There is no one hotter than you." Justin managed to smile. "Don't worry about me, Brian. I'm a big boy, I know what makes me happy."

"Well, it sure wasn't me. Not right away. I made your little life miserable when you were seventeen. Don't let some asshole treat you like that. Not ever again. You're a very special person. And not just because you're beautiful and incredible in bed. I know I'm not easy to live with. You put up with a lot of bullshit from me over the years and you always stood by me. I just want you to know I appreciate it. I wouldn't want you to hook up with some asshole who takes advantage of you like I did."

Justin was getting an idea. "Do you want breakfast?"

"No, I'm going to take a shower and we can go pick up B.J. and Gus. I think we should tell them together." Brian kissed Justin on top of his blond head and left the room to go up stairs.

Justin went out to his studio to work on his plan. He knew that the best way to "get" to Brian was to use his insecure and jealous nature. The best way to get his attention was with sex. Justin booted up the computer and started to write.

After picking up B.J. and Gus at Michael's, Brian and Justin drove out to the park. They sat the boys down and explained to them what was happening to Brian. B.J. cried and clung to his father. Gus turned his back and walked toward the lake, his Kinney features unreadable.

After they'd returned home, Brian had gone upstairs to take a nap and B.J. sat with Justin in the kitchen. "Justin, why does Daddy want to leave us? Can't we do something?"

"He doesn't want to, B.J. He's sick, baby. It's not his fault. Dying is a natural part of life." Justin fought to hold back his tears.

"I hate Daddy. He doesn't love us anymore." B.J. exploded into tears and ran up the stairs to his bedroom.

Gus had been sitting in the den and heard the commotion. He went into the kitchen and found Justin cutting up vegetables for a salad, tears streaming down his face. When he saw Gus he wiped his face with his sleeve and said, "onions."

"Yeah, right. What's the real deal, Justin?" Gus looked Justin in the eye. His gaze had the same effect on Justin that Brian's "look" always had. He couldn't lie to the boy.

"There's an operation. And maybe other treatments. Daphne said they've had pretty good success with the surgery at the hospital where she works. Brian won't go. He's afraid they'll fuck up and he'll wind up a vegetable. You know he would never want to live like that, Gus. He would never want to be dependant on anyone. Not even me."

"Can't you talk him into trying? You could always talk him into anything." Gus suggested.

"Maybe not this time, Gus. If I push too hard, he'll leave. I want to hold on to every minute we have left. We have to be very careful what we say to him."

Gus crossed the room and embraced Justin. As much as he loved his father, he hated the power that Brian had to hurt Justin.

"So, you're checking out." Gus sat by his father's bed and lit up a joint.

"Justin would kill you if he saw you smoking in the house. Give me that." Brian put out his hand and Gus surrendered the joint to him. Brian took a deep drag and handed it back.

"It won't make much difference in your life. I know I've been a shitty father. Your Mommy Mel is probably going to have Justin add that title to my tombstone."

"I never thought you were a shitty father. In fact I always thought you were pretty cool. Most of my friends' parents are divorced. They don't even see their fathers. You always showed up eventually. Besides, if I needed a father for something I could always count on Justin."

"Good, so you won't miss me. You have Justin. And your muncher moms."

Gus looked Brian straight in the eye. "Are you kidding? It didn't matter that you missed a birthday party or a soccer game. When you were with me, it was because you wanted to be. You can make a person feel special just by looking at them. Do you know what I mean?"

"Like you're looking at me right now."

"Yeah, I kinda like the way I look. I have you to thank for that. Too bad you're gay. You have no idea how this Kinney face of ours attracts the ladies."

"So you're coming out to your old man. You're straight. I always thought the collection of Playboys were Mel's."

"Yeah, Dad. I like pussy. I like putting my dick in pussy. I like eating pussy. And, I'm really good at it."

Brian laughed. "I guess your life is pretty complicated. What do your girlfriends say when you tell them you have two moms and two dads and they're all gay?"

"I don't have a girlfriend. That's not my style. I believe in fucking, not in relationships. I hate that word."

"I guess it's genetic. I never did believe in love. But I was wrong. You just need to find the right person. Someone who loves you and sticks by you."

"You're lucky, you have Justin. I don't think I'm ever going to find someone like that."

"Gus, I'm the last person you should ever take advice from. But, keep an open mind about love. When you least expect it, it might show up and bite you on the ass. Don't waste time with bullshit. Go for it, no matter what."

Gus sat there silently for a long time. He watched his father close his eyes and doze off. The thought of his "larger than life" old man just giving in to cancer was starting to piss him off. Justin would never give up on life. Gus sprung up out of the chair and headed for the door. His father's voice stopped him.

"Gus, take care of Justin and B.J. for me."

Gus froze in his step, then turned and walked toward the bed. "That's bullshit. If there's anybody that can survive a fucking operation that might save your life, it's you. You're Brian Kinney, for fuck sake. Stop feeling sorry for yourself, and fight this thing."

Gus turned to leave, but Brian grabbed his hand. "I love you, Gus."

"Me too." Gus managed to utter. He pulled away from his father and left the room.

B.J. had cried for hours. It hadn't helped, his dad was still going to die. If only he could think of a way to save him. He wished that he was an X-Man, then he could use his superpower to fix the tumor.

There was a knock at the door and B.J. called out, "Come in."

"Hey, B.J." Gus threw himself down on the bed next to his brother. "Are you okay?"

"No. I am so mad at Daddy. Both my dads. How can they just give up, Gus?"

"Maybe they just aren't strong enough, B. We have to be strong for them. There's something about the two of them together that's really special."

"Yeah, like Batman and Robin."

"Sorta. They really love each other. I can't believe they would let each other down. Maybe Justin will come up with something to help Dad. We just have to believe in them."

"You really think so, Gus?"

"Yeah. There is something that you can do, B. You live here so it would be easier for you. I want you to try to get Dad to talk. It doesn't matter what he talks about, as long as he keeps talking. It will be good for him."

"I'll try, Gus."

"And one more thing, B. You should try to smile for him. He loves your smile, it reminds him of Justin when he was a kid. I don't think Justin will be smiling too much for the next couple of weeks. Dad really needs to see that smile."

Justin sensed that Brian was once again retreating into himself. Over the years he had found ways of getting passed the walls Brian created to protect his sensitive side. It was always a challenge, but this time there was so much more at stake.

Brian had been coming home from work early. He would retreat to their bedroom for a nap before dinner. As Justin lay on their bed waiting for him, he went over his plan in his mind. He couldn't believe what he was about to do, but he was desperate. It was apparent that Brian was getting weaker by the day.

Brian opened the door to the bedroom and spotted Justin lying naked on their bed. "What the fuck are you doing up here in the middle of the day?"

In his most seductive voice Justin explained. "I'm waiting for you. I wanted to share something."

As tired as he was, Brian was intrigued. And as always Justin's bare naked form had his undivided attention. He took off his clothes and lay down next to his partner.

Justin took a deep breath and began. "Remember when you said that I should hook up with someone else after you're dead? Well, since you've always been my mentor when it comes to sex I decided that I want you to help me pick your replacement.

Brian was shocked at the statement that Justin had made. What the fuck was he trying to do, put him in his grave earlier than necessary? "Justin what the fuck are you talking about? I'm not dead yet and I don't want to discuss your

sexual compatibility with another man." Still, the vision of Justin's pale skin on the black satin sheets had his complete attention.

"I need your expertise. You're the master when it comes to sex. Except for a few twinkles here and there, I've only been with you. How am I supposed to know I'm what I'm getting into? What I've decided to do is try out a few guys and tell you what happens. You can tell me if they are any good. I've already started. I picked up this guy last night and I wrote it all down." Justin got up and straddled Brian's legs. As he did so, he could see that his mate was becoming aroused. Justin began to stroke Brian's dick.

"Justin this is fucked up. Get off me."

"I took the bus from the train station yesterday. It was crowded at first, but then I found a seat next to this older guy. He had a mustache and dark hair with a little bit of gray at the temple . . . right about here." Justin lightly rubbed Brian's temple with his index finger. He let his finger follow Brian's jaw line and come to rest on the man's lower lip. Brian opened his mouth slightly and gently sucked on the tip of Justin's finger.

Justin removed his finger from Brian's mouth and continued to read. "I could tell he was checking me out so I undid my zipper. It was getting dark outside and the back of the bus was pretty empty. My dick was rock hard. I started rubbing the tip and he was watching me. I could see the bulge in his pants where his cock was pushing against the zipper. He looked at me and then he rang the buzzer for the bus to stop. He grabbed my hand and I followed him off the bus."

"There's your problem right there Justin. What would you want with some asshole who rides a bus?" Brian was fully aroused and started stroking his own cock as he listened to Justin's story.

"Give me a break. I'm pretty rusty at picking up older men. Besides he was wearing a decent suit, maybe his BMW was in the shop. Now shut the fuck up and listen."

Justin rolled onto his side. Brian reached over and began to stroke his lover's dick.

"The neighborhood was pretty seedy, but he seemed familiar with the streets. He had a firm grip on my hand and he pulled me into an alley. The next thing I knew he me pushed up against the wall and pulling at my underwear down and fingering my ass. My cock got so hard I thought I would explode. He had my hands trapped up against the wall and I couldn't even rub myself. Then he turned me around and he was staring at my dick. When he finally lowered his mouth onto me I had to bite my lip to keep from coming. He took me deep into his mouth and then he pulled back a little and circled the with his tongue. I could see that he had undone his pants zipper and his cock was poking out of the top. He was really big and . . ."

Brian had entered Justin while he was reading. "Was he bigger than me?"

"About the same, I think." It had been a while since he'd had Brian inside of him. Justin could hardly concentrate on what he was doing. The paper fell to the floor and Justin melted into Brian's warm embrace.

"Shit, this isn't going to work. I stink at writing sex." Justin mumbled to himself as he sat in front of the blank screen on the computer. Last night had been a complete disaster. After they had finished making love, Justin tried to return to his story, but Brian had gotten bored and fallen asleep. If he was going to make his plan work he was going to need much, much hotter sex than he could write himself. He clicked on the search button on his browser and began to type.

"Daddy, are you awake?" B.J. tip-toed into the room

"Sure, sonny boy. Come on in." Brian lifted up the covers and B.J. slid into the bed next to his dad.

"Soccer practice was cancelled today," B.J. began. "I was wondering if you would talk to me?"

"About what?"

"Anything. Since you gonna die and I don't really know too much about you, I thought I would write some stuff down for later." B.J. produced the pad and pen he had brought into the room. "Tell me something about you that nobody else knows."

Brian smiled and thought for a moment. "Did you know that when I was your age I wore braces on my teeth?"

B.J. giggled. "No way. You must have looked pretty funny with braces."

"I only had to wear them for a year, but just between you and me, yeah I did look funny."

B.J. wrote down the word "braces." "Tell me something else."

"When I was 9 years old, I played soccer, just like you."

"You did? I didn't know that. How long did you play?"

"Only for a year. I was pretty good, too. But, I wasn't good enough for my father. He said I ran like a girl and refused to take me to the games." Brian winced at the painful memory. B.J. noticed and decided to change tactics.

"Tell me about you and Justin. How did you meet?"

"That's an easy one. I picked him up on Liberty Avenue. I took him back to my place and we . . . got to know each other." Brian smiled to himself at the memory. "Oh yeah, it was the same night that Gus was born. I took Justin with me to the hospital and let him name the baby."

"You must have really liked him a lot. You let him name your baby, and you just met him. Did you love him from that first night?"

Brian relived the memory of that first night in his mind. "Yeah, B.J. I think maybe I did love him from that first minute I saw him. Only I was too stupid to realize it."

"Did you ever tell him that?" B.J. asked.

Brian tried to shove B.J. off the bed. "You ask too many questions."

"How am I ever going to know if I don't ask." B.J. remembered what Gus had told him. He gave Brian one of his incredible sunshine smile. Brian's eyes reflected the love that he felt for his little boy.

"Why don't you leave the paper here. I'll write down some stuff for you."

"Okay, you were talking way too fast anyway." B.J. climbed down off the bed.

"Wait a minute, B.J. I want you to do something for me. I think it's time you start calling Justin, 'Dad.' He is your father and after I'm gone you're going to need each other."

"I'll think about it, Dad. Maybe after." B.J. tried to smile again, but his face would not cooperate.

Brian got up from the bed. "B.J., you cheered me up so much by coming to talk to me. I think I feel well enough to go to the football game later to watch Gus play. Go tell Justin to wait for me."

B.J. hugged his father and ran to find Justin.

Brian realized that there were a lot of things he had never told Justin. If he didn't do it now, Justin would never know his true feelings. He felt he owed him that much. He picked up the pad that B.J. had left on the bed and began to write.

Craig was surprised to see Brian with his family at the football game. Jennifer had told him the news about Brian's health. It was rare that he and Brian had any contact. Craig was not as accepting of him as Jennifer had become over the years. But in an odd way he did consider him 'family' and, he was very sad for Justin and Brian. The best he could do was to be there for Brian's sons. He adored his grandson B.J. and had grown fond of Brian's other son Gus. The boy was a very talented ball player and Craig was happy to sit in the stands with B.J. every weekend to cheer him on.

"Hey, sport." Craig greeted his grandson. He shook hands with Brian and Justin and told them how sorry he was about their troubles.

"I want to be there for the boys. If you need someone to take them to games and watch out for them at practice, just let me know."

"Thanks." Brian said.

"Come on Daddy, you promised to get me a hot dog." B.J. dragged Brian off the hot dog stand.

After they'd left, Craig spoke again. "Justin. If you need anything. . ."

"What I need is Brian." Justin choked back his tears. "Dad, Brian promised B.J. that he would stay for the game, but I don't think he's feeling very well. If he gets tired I'd like to take him home to rest. Do you think you could stay with B.J. and then bring him home after the game? He loves to watch Gus play, he would be disappointed if we left in the middle."

"Sure, Justin. I'd be happy to."

At half-time Justin explained to B.J. that Brian was tired and they needed to go home. B.J. understood and said he would be happy to keep Grandpa company and then have ice cream with Gus after the game.

Gus sat on the bench in the locker room. He stared out into nothingness as he anticipated the wrath he was about to incur from his coach. He had not played well today. By the end of the third quarter he had dropped the ball twice and was removed from the game.

"What the fuck was wrong with you out there today? You played like you'd been out all night getting your ass reamed like one of your homo 'daddys'." Chris Hobbs had stormed into the locker room and had cornered Gus up against the wall. When Gus did not respond to Hobbs's attack the man took the back of his hand and slammed it across Gus's face.

"Coach, give him a break. His dad is dying, for Christ's sake." One of the assistant coaches had overheard the conversation and tried to intervene. Hobbs's face was beet red from anger. His drinking binges and volatile temper had gotten him into a lot of trouble over the years and recently the administrators of the school had called him in and warned him about physically attacking the students.

"Is that true?" Chris had loosened his grip on Gus's shirt and the boy had slumped down against the wall.

"Yeah, Dad. It's true. He has cancer." Morgan Hobbs volunteered.

A sneer came across the coach's lips. "Well, that's one less faggot in the world. Good, I hope he rots in hell." Hobbs retreated into his office next to the showers.

"Sorry." Morgan attempted to help Gus, but the boy shrugged him off. "I mean, about your dad. And mine." Morgan was nothing like his father. In fact Gus suspected that Morgan was gay. Wasn't that ironic? If he ever came out to his father there was no doubt in Gus's mind what would happen to him. They had been friends since grammar school and Gus felt sorry for him. Not because he was gay, but because his father was such an asshole.

"Yeah." Was all Gus could manage to say. He picked up his backpack and left the room. He was not aware of the man who had been standing in the hall listening to what had happened between the coach and his star player. Craig Taylor waited until the last of the team had left the locker room. He made his way down the hall to the office next to the showers. Chris Hobbs was standing at the toilet in his private bathroom taking a leak. The door was opened and Craig saw an opportunity to make his point with the man. At 60 Craig was still in good shape. It was not a problem for him to overpower the overweight coach, whom he had taken by surprise. He grabbed him by the back of the neck and with all the power he could muster he forced Chris Hobbs's head into the toilet filled with his own piss.

"This is something I should have done 15 years ago when you almost killed my son. What you did to Gus just now was pure evil. As a grandparent and an influential member of this community I plan to make sure that you NEVER come near another kid as long as you live." Craig flushed the toilet and watched as Hobbs struggled to breathe. "And, let me make one thing perfectly clear. If you ever come near a member of my family, and that includes Gus, I'll get a fucking baseball bat and bash your head in." Craig released the stunned coach and made his way back to the parking lot.

"Ice cream, Grandpa?" B.J. pleaded. Gus was leaning against the car far away from B.J. and his mothers. His head was turned in an attempt to hide the red mark that Hobbs had left on his face.

"B.J. why don't we walk to the ice cream store? You and Mel and Lindsay can lead the way." Craig looked over at the women and then back at Gus. They understood that he needed to speak to the boy in private.

Gus turned his back when Craig approached him. Craig grabbed his shoulders and turned him back toward him. He gently lifted the boy's head and surveyed the damage that Chris Hobbs had inflicted on the boy's face. Gus stood motionless as Craig ran his hand over the red mark. Without a word Craig pulled Gus away from the car and put his arms around the boy. For the first time since he had heard the devastating news about his father, Gus was able to cry.

Brian had rested for a few hours and was feeling better. Since they were alone in the house, Justin thought it was the perfect opportunity to read Brian another story. He walked into the bedroom and stripped off his clothes in front of Brian who was sitting at the desk writing.

"What are you doing?" Brian looked up and put the paper into the drawer.

"I thought I would tell you about another guy I tried out last night. This one is really hot. You want to hear it?"

"No. I'm too tired. Besides, I think this whole idea is pretty sick."

"Come on, I want to tell you about it." Justin began reading before Brian could speak again.

"I met him at the market. His name is Bill, he's an architect. I kinda teased him with the size of my zucchini. He laughed and said he was remodeling a condo nearby and asked if I wanted to see it."

Brian felt his stomach knot. He wished that Justin had not insisted they both be naked when he related his sexual odysseys in that breathy sexy voice he used. It was impossible for him to conceal his carnal interest.

"The building was in the north section of town. It was one of the older townhouses with great architectural details. He took me around and showed me the work he had done. I told him that I was an artist and he said that maybe we

should collaborate sometime. The people who owned the building had put a lot of money into the remodeling. He took me to one particular unit they had just finished. It was incredible, the furniture was very modern and very expensive.

"He pushed me down onto the bed, unbuttoned my jeans and pulled them off. Then he removed my briefs and climbed over me in two quick movements. His mouth descended upon mine, and he used his own tongue to rhythmically stroke my tongue. His kisses steadily became more aggressive, and I relented to them, until finally I broke away, gasping for breath.

"Bill attacked my neck and collarbone next, licking and kissing the zones where I'm most sensitive. . . "

Brian was well aware of the spots where Justin was most sensitive. He tried to concentrate on the reason he was going along with Justin's little porno story hour. Was this the right man for Justin to be with after he was gone? An architect who picks up a trick in a market and then takes him back to an apartment in the crappy section of town? An apartment which he doesn't even own. Brian tried to stop Justin from going any further, but the dialogue was captivating. He felt himself becoming aroused at the thought of Justin being held down and licked in his sensitive areas.

" . . . while his hands fondle my chest, paying particular attention to my nipples. I moved to place my arms around him, but Bill pinned them, not allowing it. He then moved down to my pierced nipple to slowly lick the bit of flesh, ultra-sensitive from already having been manipulated by his nimble fingers.

"On sensory overload, but unable to move, I can only grin and bare Bill's deliberate torture. He lightly nipped the skin of my stomach and around my navel, leaving tiny bite marks.

Justin pointed to the mark on his stomach. "See, right here. Touch it."

Brian complied and felt his hand tremble as he imagined another man's mouth leaving his mark on Justin's sweet tender flesh.

"His tongue made a slow circle around my belly button and then quickly dipped inside before following the light hairs of my pleasure line toward my groin. Breathing heavily, I moved my hips in an upward motion but I was only rewarded with more restraints.

"Bill used one hand to hold my wrists and one against my hip to keep me still. My cock was now fully erect and leaking, but he merely breathed upon and then ignored, causing me to moan in complaint. Bill instead nibbled and kissed the skin between my thigh and groin, moving in a straight line until he reached his destination. He lapped at my sac and then briefly took each one of my ball into his mouth. He made a soft humming noise as he sucked them, causing a vibration that sent a shiver from my groin to the top of my spine. Tiny noises escape me as I gasps for breath, struggling to control myself. I had to bite my lip to keep from making a request, knowing it would only lead to more teasing.

"Bill moved to the side and turned me over onto my belly. My hands were finally freed but all I could do now was grab at the sheets. Kneeling between my lower legs, Bill pulled my hips off the bed slightly and made leisurely licks along my crack from the bottom to the top. He repeats the motion again and again, each time delving further into the depths of my ass until the tip of his tongue brushes against my hole, causing me to moan.

"Bill used his hands to spread my cheeks and took a good long look at my throbbing opening. I whimpered and shifted, impatient. Bill brought his lips as close to my hole as he could without touching it and breathes, 'all mine.' He kissed my pulsing flesh, 'say it, Justin'."

"I loved the way he said my name. Deep and breathy."

"JUST-IN two syllables. How hard could it be?"

"You couldn't even remember my name."

Brian put his head back on the pillow and pouted. "So, do you LOVE him?"

"Well he was a big improvement over the guy in the alley. His technique was pretty good for a day time fuck. I rate him about an 8."

"Me being a what?"

"10. Perfect score." Justin grinned down at him. "So, what do you think?"

"I guess he did okay. He did pick up on your sensitive areas right off." Out of habit, Brian tugged at the nipple ring on Justin's right nipple.

"I think I need some more of the real thing, right now." Justin slid down on the bed next to Brian.

It had been three weeks since the nightly ritual started. Brian would come home from work and Justin would be waiting with a new story of his sexual encounters. Brian agonized every night while his mate was out partying. Justin would slip into the bed in the early hours of the morning reeking of sex. The whole thing was freaking Brian out. The stories were incredibly hot. But the fact was, the thought of Justin having sex with anyone but him was killing him faster than the cancer.

The last story Justin came home with had driven Brian crazy. It seems that Justin had picked up this professor who was into spanking. The thought of anyone putting his hands on Justin's ass in that manner was more than Brian could stomach. He made the decision to move in with Michael. As he drove home from work he prepared himself to tell Justin he was leaving him.

Brian found Justin stretched across the bed as had become the custom for their nightly ritual.

"Before you start. I have to tell you something." Brian began.

"I think I have him." Justin interrupted. "Last night was almost a 10. As close to perfect as I am ever going to get after you are gone. Pleeeease, one more time, just listen."

Brian was helpless to resist Justin's lispy pleeease. He removed his jacket and tie and allowed Justin to undo the zipper on his trousers leaving them to drop onto the floor.

"He's rich, very rich. In fact, you kinda know him. Last night I spent the evening with Blair Cahill."

Brian could almost feel his skin crawl. The memory of Justin's photo session with Blair's fuck hunk "Chaz what's-his-face" came back in vivid detail. They had just moved into the house and he had found the photo of the naked dancer in with a batch of pictures of B.J. Brian never trusted Cahill and was secretly glad when Justin had lost touch with him.

"Is he still alive? What is he. . . like, 70 now?"

"No. He's in his late 50's, but he's well preserved. I met up with him at the art dealer's yesterday. He invited me back to see his latest acquisitions."

"So, what's his name?"

"Who?"

"His latest acquisition."

"Oh, him. His name is Max." Justin shuttered a little as he mentioned the name.

Bri, you'd love him . . . he gives the word hung like a horse new meaning."

"Really. So is he your new love?"

"It's kind of a package deal. Blair's a little kinky. It turns out he's always had the hots for me."

"What a surprise."

"He brought me home and took me into the den to show me the portraits that he'd just bought. While I was admiring them I could sense that he was eyeing my ass. He was standing so close to me I could feel his breath on my neck. I turned toward him and he pushed me up against the desk and put his hand on my groin. It was so intense. Here he was, old enough to be my father and he was 'molesting me.'"

"You little perv." Brian managed a sarcastic smile as he could feel the heat building in his own cock.

"Instead of ravaging me he started talking. He told me that he'd lusted after me since the day he met me. He'd never made a move because he knew I was in love with you. I told him that maybe soon I would be available."

Brian's jaw tensed. He wanted to scream at Justin to make him stop. But how could he be that selfish. He knew that Justin would never make it alone. Maybe this guy really cared for Justin. He made himself listen to the story.

"He started to rub the material that was drawing taunt over my cock. I wanted him to undress me piece by piece. Slowly, like you would do. He took my hand and let me upstairs to the bedroom.

"He said he didn't want me to lie on the bed, but to stand in front of this ornate antique full length mirror. He unbuttoned my shirt and put his hand inside, rubbing the tips of his fingers over my nipples. His hand was warm . . . no, it was HOT. It burned my flesh as he rubbed harder and harder working his way down my torso to my belly.

"I love it when you touch my belly like that, Brian."

Brian had massaged his belly and was already working his hand down to Justin's abdomen. "I know, baby." Brian whispered, sadly.

Justin felt himself gulp as he tried to conceal his tears from Brian. He knew that what he was doing was necessary to save Brian's life. He hated himself for putting the pained look on his lover's face.

"I was so into feeling his hands on me that I almost didn't see Max at first. He was standing in back of Blair, and all at once his reflection filled the mirror. He was almost identical to Blair's ex Chaz, only he was bigger, much bigger. Oh, I almost forgot, he was totally naked.

"Blair continued to explore my body with his hand as Max watched. The thought of someone watching what Blair and I were doing made it twice as erotic. I thought I would come in my shorts before I had the chance for any kind of physical contact with either one of them. Blair must have realized this and he finally opened the zipper on my jeans and exposed my throbbing cock.

"As Blair ran his hand over my erection, Max removed the older man's clothing. For an older guy Blair was in very good shape. I had a hard time prying my eyes from the reflection in the mirror. Blair, Max and me . . . all naked . . . all horny as hell.

"Blair took my hand and led me over toward the bed. I had no idea what to expect. I'd never done a threesome before. I didn't have long to wait. Max got on his knees and began to suck on my cock. Blair began to finger my ass. It was so intense. He said that he thought I could handle Max's enormous cock inside my hole and he wanted to watch my face when Max entered me. They switched positions and Blair told me to get on my knees on the bed and bend over. Max got in his knees and I could feel the heat of his cock as he rubbed it between my ass cheeks. Blair sat on the bed in front of me and looked right into my eyes while he masturbated."

Brian struggled to keep his attention on Justin's words as his lover fingered his ass. Justin was obviously horny as hell. While he was describing the feeling of being penetrated by "the most enormous cock he'd ever seen" Justin began to lube Brian's ass.

"I want to cum inside of you." Justin whispered.

Over the years the couple had experienced each other in every possible position, even a few that were quite impossible. But, for the most part Brian had been the top. Justin's request was unexpected, but Brian complied by sliding down into position and placing his legs over Justin shoulders.

Justin himself was surprised at the effect that this story session was having on him. He had an overwhelming need to top Brian. Maybe it was out of a need to control what was happening to them both. Maybe it was because he needed to enfold himself into Brian's body, to become a part of him for as long as it was possible. Whatever the reason, the moment he entered Brian, Justin lost all control. He kissed Brian passionately as he pumped his seed inside of his partner, hot tears running down his face.

Once he was finished he quickly shifted positions. He mounted Brian's cock with the same urgency he'd used to fuck him. He needed to feel Brian inside of him now, to be possessed by the man that he would love for the rest of his life.

Justin woke to find his partner's side of the bed empty. He showered and dressed as he had every evening since he'd started the charade. He'd hoped the last story was enough to shake Brian out of his defeatist attitude. Justin was afraid he was running out of time.

Brian had returned to their bedroom with a suitcase. "I won't be here when you get back. I'm leaving."

"Why? I thought you were enjoying my stories. It's only sex with other men, after all. You should understand that better than anyone."

"You've turned into a whore, Justin. I won't help you choose your next victim. What was our life together based on anyway? Has it all been payback for the way I treated you 16 years ago? Well consider the score even."

"I just wanted you to talk to me, Brian. How else could I get your attention? Sex is all you ever understood."

Justin left the room. When he got into the hallway he clung to the wall and bit his lip to keep from screaming out. This wasn't the way he'd planned it. He couldn't let Brian leave now. But he couldn't give up either. It was the only way to save his lover's life. He pulled himself together and ran down the stairs and out the front door.

After packing a few of his belongings Brian went out back to Justin's studio. It broke his heart to think that he may never again, in this lifetime, look into his lover's eyes. He regretted that the last words they had spoken had been in anger. Brian took the letter he held in his hand and put it on the desk in the corner. When he turned to leave he saw that Justin was asleep on the couch. Brian guessed he was resting up for a big night out on the town. He softly moved over to where Justin lay sleeping. It had always been his secret pleasure, to watch Justin sleep.

"What?" Justin woke up in a daze, his eyes still swollen from crying.

"I thought you'd be fucking one of your new boyfriends by now."

"Wait. What about B.J.? What should I tell him?"

Brian sat down next to Justin. "Tell him it was time. Everyone's got to die. Let him remember me like I used to be."

"Is that what I'm supposed to do? Just forget all about the years we've been together. Brian, you're were my whole world. You still are."

"Justin, don't. . ."

"Don't tell me I can't cry in my own place." Justin looked over at the desk. "What's in that envelope?"

"It's a letter I wrote. You can read it after the funeral."

"I don't want it. I want you to talk to me. Tell me to my face why you're leaving me."

"I don't have a choice. I'm moving in with Michael."

"What are you going to do there that you can't do here? Are you just going to sit in a room, until it's time to lie in a box?"

"It's better like this. For once let it go, Justin. I'm too tired to fight with you."

When Brian got up to leave, he glanced over at the computer screen. "Justin, what the fuck is this?"

Justin had forgotten to log out of the website and the last fanfic he copied was up on the screen. Brian started reading out loud. "He said that he thought I could handle Max's enormous cock inside my hole and he wanted to watch my face when Max entered me."

"Now you know. I made up the whole thing Brian, the men, the hot sex. I wanted to make sure it was really detailed so you would believe it actually happened. But I couldn't write the sex parts for shit. I found this great web site that has stories that fans had written about this gay TV couple. They were really awesome, just what I needed. I copied them and pretended it really happened. Then I would jerk off in here so you would smell it on me when I got into bed."

"Why?" Brian was truly puzzled.

"To piss you off. It was the only way I could think of to get a reaction from you. I thought if you would get jealous enough I might be able to talk you into going for treatment so you could sticking around a few more years. I guess my plan backfired this time."

Brian was once again struck speechless by Justin's devotion. He managed to grin at his partner. "You always could find a way to get to me."

"So you'll do it?" Justin was hopeful.

"There's no point. I don't want to live the last few month of my life as a breathing corpse. You'd get your hopes up, and I would die anyway."

"I'm not giving up on you. I want you to know that. You can leave here and go to Michael's or Timbuktu. I'll still find a way to get to you. I believe in you, Brian. I always have. Remember that night at Babylon after you blew me off for the first time? You told me that you'd had me, that I was nothing to you. I followed you there and MADE you notice me."

"So you're going to stalk me again? Justin, you live in a dream world. Face it, what we have is beautiful. But it wasn't me that did the work, it was you. It was always you. You can do it again with someone else. I'm not that special."

"You really don't know, do you? You don't know the effect that you have on the people who you love. You challenge us, Brian. All of us: Michael, Lindsay, Gus, B.J., and especially me. If it wasn't for you, I might have lived

my life in the closet and been miserable. You made me stand up for myself. Remember that little speech you gave me about Dartmouth and art school. You were right, I had to do what made me happy."

"You would have figured it out eventually."

"Maybe, when it was too late."

"For a whole year I took your shit about not believing in love. You just wanted to fuck everything in sight. I stayed close to you because there was something about you that cried out to me. You needed me then, and you need me now. I'll be there for you no matter what."

"Then what? You'll be stuck with a sick old man. If the operation doesn't kill me the treatments will. I'll be nauseous all the time, my dick will go limp, my hair will fall out."

"I don't care. I believe there's still time. I'm not through with you yet, Brian Kinney. I'll take care of you, we'll take care of each other. Our friends will . . ."

"I'M FUCKING TERRIFIED!"

Brian fell to his knees in front of Justin. His face revealed what he had been hiding from Justin, what he'd been hiding from the world. He was scared. Justin had once again reached passed the facade and touched him to his very core. No amount of physical pain and suffering could match the stabbing emptiness that he felt in his soul at the thought of being separated from Justin. He had no choice but to fight the cancer that was threatening to destroy them both.

Justin had only seen fear in Brian's eyes once before. It was on the night of the prom in the ambulance. He knew that the only fear greater than death was the fear of losing each other. That's why he had tortured Brian with his stories. And now he had to be the brave one, the protector. He would do anything in his power to get Brian through this crisis.

Justin reached out and put his arms around Brian and rocked him while the older man cried, then screamed and then cried some more. It was a release of all the anger, fear and outrage he had kept bottled up for years. All the while Justin held him close and cried with him.

Later, when they were all cried out, he looked up at Justin and said, "You were right."

"Right about what?" Justin asked.

"Remember the first time I said 'I love you'? You sat down at the table and cried. When I asked you why you did it, you said you didn't know but that it felt good."

"You said you'd try it some time." Justin replied.

"It did feel good. I should have done of that a long time ago."

"You can come out here with me every night. That's what I've been doing. We can cry together. Brian, please give us a chance. We can beat this thing, I know we can."

"If you believe it, then I guess it must be so. You haven't been wrong yet."

Justin kissed him softly on the lips. They made love on the couch and fell asleep in each other's arms.

Justin woke first and headed for the kitchen. He made a call to the doctor and arranged for an appointment for the following day. He made a second call to Daphne and left a message to call him with her service. After one more

check in call to B.J. , who had stayed overnight with Gus, he made waffles with strawberries and brought them out to the studio. Brian was on the computer looking up medical sites.

"If we're going to do this, let's do it right. I want the best fucking doctor in the country. And they better make sure the scar is not too big. That reminds me we have to find a plastic surgeon for after."

Justin couldn't believe his eyes. Brian's demeanor had completely turned around. This fucking disease had met its match. Justin felt like he did the night that Brian showed up at the prom.

Things progressed quickly from that point. They had a long talk with B.J. and told him that Daddy was going to be really sick for a long time, but he was going to have an operation and he might be sticking around after all

They had decided that Columbia University Medical Center in New York City where Daphne worked was the best place for Brian to be treated. Jennifer would care for B.J. and Justin arranged to stay at his sister's apartment. Molly had just broken up with another, in a long string of, abusive boyfriends and had decided to go on tour with her dance group for six months. Michael volunteered to drive Jenn, B.J. and Gus to New York on the day before the operation.

Brian opened his eyes expecting to see Justin, but instead Jennifer Taylor was sitting beside his bed.

"I sent Justin and the boys out for dinner. The only way he would leave was if I promised to stay with you."

"Thanks."

"I have something to give you." Jennifer went to the dresser and picked up a plastic bag. I don't know if he told you, but when Justin was very young he had several close calls with allergic reactions and had to be hospitalized."

"Yeah, he told me. Codeine."

"Right. We almost lost him. I'll never forget how small and helpless he looked in the hospital bed. The whole time he was in the hospital he clung to his Teddy bear, Gus. He swore that it was Gus who made him better." Jennifer reached into the plastic bag.

"Meet Gus. Justin would kill me if he knew I had kept him all these years."

Jennifer handed the bear to Brian. He let out a chuckle. The bear was not your ordinary brown variety. Gus was made of a soft pale yellow material that one associated with babies. His eyes and nose were sewn on, as was a big, ear to ear grin. There was evidence that some one had attempted to draw pants and a shirt over his little yellow body with some kind of marker. Justin's first attempt at fashion design. Gus was an original, just like his owner.

"He kinda looks like Justin." Brian managed a smile.

"I want you to have him, Brian." Jennifer tried to choke back tears. "Who knows, maybe Justin was right, maybe Gus is a magic bear."

Brian was surprised when he looked up and saw the tears streaming down Jennifer's face. He reached out and took her hand. She bent and kissed his cheek. "I love you, Brian Kinney-Taylor."

"I guess I really am dying. I never thought I'd hear you say that to me."

"You grow on a person." Jennifer composed herself. "Honey, do you want me to call your family? Give them a chance to . . ."

"Say goodbye. No. I have all the family I need right here. They wrote me off a long time ago. If something should happen . . . then you could call. Just to let them know they can stop praying for me to change. It's too late."

Jennifer stroked Brian's hair as he dozed off again. His strange, dark beauty had always intrigued her. His good looks had not faded with age, he was still a very attractive man. The first time she had ever seen Brian was when he had put his arms around Justin at the art show and kissed him. At that moment she had wanted to kill Brian Kinney. She would never forget the look on his face the day she had stormed into his office with Justin's belongings. "You seduced him. You fucked him. Now he's yours." Jennifer smiled to herself at her audacity. She wondered what would have happened had Justin not fallen completely, madly in love with the first man he had ever been with. What if that man had not been Brian Kinney?

Brian had been good for Justin. Looking back it was clear that he had protected Justin and guided him into manhood. She was very proud of her gay son and his wonderful family. What Brian had said about his own family had made her sad. No matter what he said, she felt it must pain him to be alienated from his own mother. What will that woman feel when she has to deal with the death of the son she had cast out of her life? Jennifer thought of the years that she had spent apart from Justin. But for the grace of God and Brian Kinney, she might have suffered the same fate.

Brian stirred in the bed. "Justin?" he mumbled in his sleep.

Jennifer straightened his covers. He clung to Gus, as Justin had when he was a baby.

She made a vow to herself at that moment: if Brian survived she would be kinder to him and let him know that she loves him as much as she loves Justin and B.J. "Gus, work your magic, and take care of our Brian."

Michael and Justin sat in the booth at the food court while the boys played the arcade games. "Look at them. That could be you and Brian 20 years ago." Michael smiled. "I'm glad that Brian had the chance to know his kids. He really enjoys being a dad."

"That's the world's worst kept secret. You can see it in his face every time he looks at them." Justin finished his coffee. I should get back, Michael. Can you take the boys to my sister's place? I don't think that Brian wants a big goodbye scene at the hospital tonight."

"Justin. He's going to be okay. He has to be, he's Brian Kinney for fuck's sake." Michael attempted to smile.

Justin put his head down and covered his face with his hands. "Michael, what if I was wrong? He could die tomorrow. If he doesn't have the operation we could have another whole year, maybe more. I talked him into it Michael. It'll be my fault."

Michael reached over and grabbed Justin's arm. "Look at me, Justin. That's bullshit and you know it. He's NOT going to die. He'd be furious if he heard you taking like that." Michael reached over in the booth and put his arms around Justin.

"Go back and be with him. I'll take the kids to Molly's."

The last few weeks Brian and Justin had spent almost every waking moment together. They worked at gathering information about the disease and the treatments. They searched the web for the best doctors and hospitals. Then they prepared B.J. and Gus and their friends as to what to expect. The rest of the time they spent talking to each other. Justin encouraged Brian talk about his feelings and his fears. The man began to open up as he had never done before. It took the fear of death to finally make him realize that his life had meaning. Justin silently listened to every word, secretly committing each syllable to memory. He found the sound of Brian's voice comforting.

The operation was scheduled for early the next morning. Brian and Justin sat together in total silence holding hands. Visiting hours were over an hour ago, but Justin had talked the nurse into letting him stay until Brian fell asleep.

"I don't want you to make a scene tomorrow. No tears. If you cry, I swear I'll die on purpose just to get even."

"I'm pretty much cried out."

"In fact, I want you to smile. Promise me the last thing I see before fading out into oblivion is your incredible smile. Have I ever told you how much I love your smile?"

"About a million times in the last three weeks alone. I promise, my smile will be the last thing you see before the operation, and the first thing that you see after."

It was getting late and Justin could see that Brian was ready to sleep. "Is there anything you want, before I go?"

Brian rallied. "Yeah, there is something. Turn on the radio."

Justin switched on the radio. The tune "Chances Are" by Johnny Mathis was playing.

Brian slowly moved the covers and got out of bed. "Dance with me?"

Justin put his arms around Brian's waist and the two swayed slowly to the music. Brian put his forehead up against Justin's and looked deep into his eyes. Justin managed to smile. It was all over too soon.

"I hate the way I look in black." Justin gazed into the mirror as he got dressed the suit his son had brought to him. "What about the tie?"

"Here." B.J. held up a black tie.

"It's kinda drab, isn't it?"

"You look nice, Dad. It's important that you look formal."

"I guess."

"Dad, can I wear my soccer uniform to the funeral?"

"That sounds like a good idea, B.J."

B.J. took off down the hall to get himself dressed. Justin sat down on the bed and picked up the sketch pad. He leafed through the pages. Most of the drawings were of Brian, some were of Brian with B.J. and Gus. Of course there were a few of Brian and Justin together.

The past few months had been stressful, to say the least. Brian had survived the operation, but the doctors were unable to reach some of the cancer. This particular area would not be responsive to radiation or chemotherapy, and could not be reached with surgery. The prognosis was not good, but Justin tried to remain optimistic.

Out of desperation, Justin had confided in Daphne that he would consider any treatment, no matter how experimental, if there was any chance at all it would help Brian. Daphne was touched by Justin's plea and said she would try, but the reality was Brian was dying.

Brian had some good days and some very bad days. Sometimes Justin would sit next to the bed and Brian would just stare into space. Other times Justin was able to get him to talk, and even make him laugh. Through it all Justin was compelled to draw. Somehow sketching Brian as his loving heart saw him was keeping Justin's hope alive. He needed to record these moments, which could very well be his lover's last. Brian's charismatic spirit inhabited this

frail shadow of his former self and clung to life. Justin could feel him . . . still. No matter who he was ever with, Brian would always be there.

"I'm ready to go." B.J. stood in the doorway wearing his soccer uniform and carrying his suitcase.

"I'll be right there B.J." Justin closed the sketch pad and put it in the closet. It was a chapter in his life that was over. It was time to move ahead.

As they pulled up to next to the line up of cars at the cemetery B.J. saw his friends from the soccer team and waved. "You coming?" the boy asked his father as he opened the car door.

"You go ahead. I need to do something." B.J. went to join his friends as Justin retrieved an envelope from the glove compartment. He opened it and began to read.

He was halfway through the letter when his cell phone rang.

"What the fuck are you doing? I'm waiting for you!" Brian's voice boomed over the telephone.

"I'm at the cemetery with B.J." Justin answered.

"I don't know why the fuck you went to that asshole's funeral, Justin. He practically killed you, in case you forgot."

"I didn't forget, Brian. B.J. wanted to be here with his friends. He was their soccer coach, after all. It is kinda weird, he's my age and he's dead."

"Well no one deserved a bullet more. The guy who did it should get a medal.."

Chris Hobbs's body had been found in an alley outside of a gay bar in Philadelphia. The police were still in the process of investigating, but they had no leads at this time. When Justin first heard the news he had been shocked. But then things started making sense to him. He had always felt that Chris was gay, but in denial. He must have gotten himself into trouble with his big mouth.

"I thought it would be better if I stayed here in the car and waited for B.J. Besides, it gives me a chance to read your letter."

"What? Why are you reading it now?" Brian exclaimed.

"You said I should read it after the funeral."

"MY funeral, you little prick. And that's a long way off."

"I love what you said about the first time you saw me on Liberty Avenue. I can't believe you had to work up the courage to talk to me. You really thought I would laugh in your face when you tried to pick me up? That's the sweetest thing I ever heard."

"Will you put that thing away before your swelled head explodes? And get your little faggot ass over here. I'm in a hurry to get this over with and go on our vacation."

"Looks like the ceremony is breaking up. B.J. is saying goodbye to his friends. I should be there in a few minutes."

"Good. I love you, baby."

"I love you too, Brian."

Ever since his brush with death Brian had insisted on telling Justin that he loved him every chance he got. Leave it to Brian Kinney to defy nature and medical science. That's what Daphne said the day she came to see Brian after the

trial drug therapy. It had only been two months since they made their desperate last ditch effort to save the man's life. If it hadn't been for Justin's heart wrenching plea she would never have even suggested such a risky course of treatment.

She had mentioned to Justin that there was a possibility that using an AIDS drug cocktail to boost Brian's immune system might help his own body fight the cancer. As far as she was aware no one had ever attempted to use the drugs for this purpose. But at the rate Brian's body was deteriorating, it might be his only hope.

Brian became ill almost immediately after being given the drugs for the first time. The nausea was the worst. Justin cringed every time he would hear Brian retching. The man had been thin to begin with; any weight he lost made a dramatic difference in his appearance. Justin wondered if he had made a mistake. The last thing he wanted was for Brian to have to endure any more suffering. Two months later they were given the good news. There was NO sign of any cancer in Brian's body. The experimental drug therapy had done its job.

Brian sat in the empty meeting room at the Gay and Lesbian Center. He was busy writing his thoughts down on paper. It was important for him not to forget anything. Justin deserved to hear it out loud in front of everyone just how much Brian loved him. So many promises are made at weddings and commitment ceremonies that are never kept. He knew that he would honor his commitment to Justin for the rest of his life. They had gone through the motions of a 'marriage ceremony' years ago, before B.J. was born. It was cold and impersonal and none of their friends were in attendance. Brian only went through with it because he knew that Justin needed to hear the words. This time Brian could not wait to say them . . . they meant so much more now.

He couldn't imagine what his life would have been like if they'd never met. What Justin just said about the night they had met was true. Brian had worn an impenetrable veneer for most of his life. He'd used it to cover the fact that he had a very sensitive nature. The night he saw Justin in the street light his heart leaped in his chest. If it hadn't been for the fact that Michael and the guys were watching, he might never have summoned the courage to approach the angelic looking young man who stood bathed in the soft yellow light. He had a reputation to uphold in front of the guys . No one laughs at Brian Kinney. He'd crossed the alley and spoke to Justin. Justin's gaze penetrated him to his very soul. The boy knew it too. He'd looked right passed the surface, to the real man beneath. The shy, insecure, sweet loving man who lived inside him.

Brian was both intrigued and terrified by the feelings this young man had stirred up inside of him. His guard was up. He'd fought with every defense he could muster. He'd tried to push the boy away with words. When that didn't work he'd hurt him over and over again. Still Justin clung to him. Brian was so desperate at one point he'd almost moved to New York City to get away. No matter what he did, the boy hung on. It wasn't until Brian was faced with losing Justin at the hands of Chris Hobbs that he'd finally surrendered to his feelings.

He had always wondered what it was that Justin saw in him. Why would this beautiful, brilliant, talented young man want him so badly? Brian had always considered himself damaged goods. As a child his sensitive nature was always under attack by his parents. His mother was cold and distant and his father was abusive. Deep down they knew he was not like other boys. Instead of nurturing their son they shunned him, forcing Brian to retreat into himself. When he met Michael Novotny he realized he wasn't alone. For years they'd shared the bond of friendship, protecting and encouraging each other through the trying times of their youth.

It wasn't until Brian met Justin that he was able to allow another human being to get close to him. It was a mystery to him just how it happened. But here was at 47, settled, happy and healthy. All thanks to this courageous young man.

Justin moved into the right lane as the traffic began to slow. He happened to glance at a storefront window and got an idea. Pulling over to the curb, he stopped the car and turned to B.J. "Wait here for a minute. I have to get something for the ceremony."

"Sure Dad." B.J.'s eye's never left the video game he had in his hand.

Justin jumped out of the car and ran to the window. There was the symbol that he had been looking for to express his commitment to Brian. In a flash he was back in his car with his gift firmly tucked in his breast pocket.

"I don't think I'm supposed to see the bride before the ceremony." Brian said as Justin and B.J. came into the room.

"B.J. go and change into your suit." Brian got up from his chair and put his arms around his partner.

"I'm NOT a girl with a dick, remember?" Justin straightened Brian's bow tie. "I'm your equal partner."

"Is that what you're going to say in your speech, sweetheart?" Brian made a flicking motion with his tongue and Justin laughed.

The guests began to arrive and Brian and Justin greeted them. They were both surprised to see Craig and Jennifer Taylor arrive together. Craig had sworn he would not attend a gay wedding. Jennifer had assured him it was not a wedding, and that if he did not attend, HE would be the one to explain his absence to his grandson.

Jennifer stood by the door called Justin aside, while Craig and Gus strolled off together to discuss the upcoming football season and the new coach.

"Justin, I need to talk to you. I don't know how Brian will react, but I've invited someone else to the party."

"I'm sure he won't mind one more guest. Who did you invite?"

Before his mother could answer Justin gasped, "Mrs. Kinney?"

Joan Kinney had arrived alone and stood in the doorway. She hesitated a moment and then Jennifer went over and took her hand and introduced her to Justin. "I wish I could say that my son has told me about you, but he never has."

Justin didn't know what to say. The only reaction he could think of was a smile, it always worked on Brian. "I'm glad you came today. It'll mean a lot to Brian."

It was obvious that the woman was uncomfortable in these surroundings. But Jennifer was determined that the reunion between mother and son be a positive step. She brought Joan over to where Brian was greeting his friends.

Justin touched him on the sleeve and nodded for Brian to turn and greet them.

Brian's mouth fell open. He never expected to see his mother standing hand in hand with Jennifer Taylor. "Wha . . . ?" He almost asked her what the fuck she was doing there.

"Brian, you look well. Jennifer called me when you were in the hospital. I know it's been a long time, but I wanted you to know that I care about you." Joan stopped short of saying the words, but her presence at the ceremony was an indication that she was the one who was ready to change. Jennifer Taylor had called her when Brian was recovering from surgery that could have taken his life. The fact that her son was so gravely ill, and had not contacted her pained her deeply. With Jennifer's help she made the decision to come here today to show Brian that she supported him as her son, even if she disagreed the way he lived his life.

B.J. emerged from the men's room wearing his tux. He took his fathers' hands and led them up to the stage. Brian and Justin faced their friends and family who had gathered in the room.

Brian spoke first. "This isn't a wedding or a commitment ceremony. We don't need any of that. We know we love each other, and you all know that too. We wanted you all to be here today to celebrate our love with us."

He turned and faced his partner. "Justin, I love you. It took almost losing you before the fact sunk into this thick Irish head of mine. I never thought I was capable of loving anyone. You changed all that. I thought changing my lifestyle would be impossible. You made it easy. I realize now that before I had you, I had nothing. "

"I want you to know that I haven't regretted one moment of our life together. You've been a joy to me since the first moment I saw your beautiful face. This past year has been a test of our commitment and devotion to each other. If it wasn't for you, I would never have had the courage to go on. Before all of our family, our friends and God . . ." Brian turned toward the congregation and rested his eyes on his mother. ". . . yes I said God. I can't believe that God hates me. He's given me the greatest gift of all . . . life." He turned back to Justin. "Where was I? Oh yeah. Before everyone, I want to thank you for always believing in me."

It was Justin's turn. He knew it would be difficult speaking last, but Brian had insisted. The words Brian had just spoken had touched Justin deeply. He took a deep breath and composed himself.

"The night we met you said you would always be with me. I don't think you realized that I would take that comment literally. I knew in my heart it was true. All I ever wanted from that first night was to belong to Brian Kinney. Right from the beginning you were my mentor, my lover, my teacher. Everything I've ever accomplished in my life, you have been there with me. I can't even imagine what my life would be without you around to protect me and to challenge me.

"On the night of the prom something changed between us. I'm not talking about the 'incident.' I'd asked you to go with me as my date, and you turned me down. I never understood what changed your mind until I read your letter this morning. You said you had a vision that night. You were watching yourself from outside of your body. . . you were dancing alone. That's what your life was destined to become, a solitary dance . . . no partner. You said that it scared you more than anything. When you sobered up you thought about me, and you knew it was time to give up your past and surrender to your future.

Justin reached into his jacket pocket and produced a white silk scarf. "I guess this was supposed to be the white flag. I kinda messed up the last one." Justin put the scarf around Brian's neck and the two shared a romantic kiss. The music Justin requested, "Save the Last Dance" started and the two recreated their now famous performance. While they danced on the stage the rest of those in attendance took their partners hands and joined them in their celebration.

Gus walked out onto Liberty Avenue and lit a joint. He'd had enough of celebrating the over rated emotion of love for the time being. He leaned up against the lamp post and took a deep drag. He was happy for his dad and Justin. They deserved to be together, if that's what they wanted. There was no way he could ever completely surrender his heart to another human being. It just wasn't in him to be that trusting.

"Pretty corny, wasn't it?" The voice came from behind him. Gus turned and came face the face with the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Her hair was golden blonde and her eyes were cornflower blue. She looked at him and smile and he thought he'd seen the face of God.

"What . . ." Gus stuttered and almost dropped the joint.

The girl put out her hand and took it from him. "I'm kidding. I love the way they are together, but it just seems so unreal. Like magic or something."

Her voice and her face started to look vaguely familiar to Gus. He struggled to regain his composure. "Do you dance?"

"It just so happens I do. What did you have in mind?"

The music was playing as Brian and Justin stared lovingly into each other's eyes. All of a sudden the energy in the room changed. It became apparent that Brian and Justin were no longer the main focus. Another couple had taken

the spotlight. Gus and Molly were weaving expertly across the dance floor. What an incredibly beautiful couple they made. Gus's tall, dark and masculine form combined with Molly's blonde hair, fair skin and tiny body made a captivating contrast. There was something magical about the way they were dancing, like there was no one else in the room. When the dance was over the two disappeared behind the crowd at the buffet table.

Justin handed Brian the a plate of food he'd prepared for him. "What did your mother have to say?"

"It was kinda weird. She never once mentioned my sinful ways or praying for forgiveness. In fact she said that she was glad to see that I was happy. Your mother must have drugged her or something. I don't think she'll ever except the fact that I'm gay. She did say that you were sweet. But, I already knew that." Brian pulled Justin towards him and kissed him.

"Where's my mother? We have to say goodbye before we leave."

"I think she's downstairs in the kitchen with her head in the oven."

Justin grinned. "Come on, Brian, they were just dancing. Molly is 10 years older than Gus."

"And I'm 12 years older than you." Brian responded.

Justin's expression changed. "You don't think they're hooking up, do you? That's practically incest."

"They're aren't related, Justin."

It took Justin a few minute to untangle the family tree in his head. "They are a little related. I mean B.J. is related to both of them."

"Love is strange, baby. Nobody knows it better than we do. Leave them alone."

The music started and Brian took Justin into his arms for the last dance before they would leave for their trip.

Justin grinned. "You're right about Gus and Molly. If they want to hook up, it guess it's up to them. Molly's been through a lot of men. Mostly older, abusive assholes. Gus isn't like them. Hey, if they have a kid, it would be my nephew and your grandson."

Brian stopped dancing and stared at Justin. "No fucking way is that kid of mine making me grandfather before I'm ready. Where is that little cradle robbing sister of yours, anyway?" Brian started to pull away from Justin. Justin laughed and pulled him back to the dance floor.

"I was only kidding, Brian." Justin was trying not to laugh. Brian smiled at him and put his forehead up against Justin's.

"Have I told you how much I love?" Brian asked.

"Yes you have, you sweet, man. And I love you back. . . Grandpa." Justin grinned and Brian smacked him on the butt before kissing him gently on the lips.

Gus and B.J. sat on the bench outside of the center. Brian and Justin had gotten into the limo and left for the airport after saying goodbye to everyone. Molly had left for New York and Gus was deep in thought about the future.

B.J. broke the silence. "You dance really great, Gus. Can you show me how?"

The music could still be heard from inside the center and Gus stood up next to the bench. He smiled and held out his hand to his little brother. B.J. rose and took Gus's hands and the two began to sway to the music.

Jennifer and Craig watched the boys from the steps of the center. Craig put his arms around his wife's waist. "If I didn't know better, Jenn. I would swear we were in for a second generation Kinney-Taylor pairing."

"They're just playing, Craig." Jennifer smiled at B.J. as he waved to them.

"I wasn't talking about the boys."

"Let's not jump to conclusions about Molly and Gus, Craig. I would think that you'd have learned your lesson by now. We can't control who our children fall in love with. It's up to them to decide. It's our job to love and support them, no matter what. We were horrified when Justin fell in love Brian, and look what happened. Justin is still with him and they're as happy as any married couple we know. And, we have a beautiful grandson.

As Craig glanced over at the boys his demeanor softened. "Make that two beautiful grandsons."

Jennifer turned and smiled at Craig. "Have I told you lately that I love you?"

"No dear, I don't think you have."

"Well I do . . . Grandpa."

They held each other close until the last dance ended.

Season Three

Stand Alone Story

The Songbirds - A Ghost Story

As if on auto-pilot, Brian Kinney descended the steps leading to the backroom at Babylon. How many times had he entered this hallway of depravity in his lifetime? The number must have been in the thousands. He felt nothing as he searched in the semi-darkness for a nameless, faceless sex-partner. As he stood alone in the middle of the room, Brian felt a blast of cool air on his face. It shook him out of his drug-induced, semi-trance like state. Just as he zeroed in on his prey, the lights went out and the backroom was plunged into darkness. Moans of pleasure continued to emanate from the men who were already engaged in copulation. They seemed oblivious to the sudden onset of darkness. Brian found the wall with the palms of his hands and started to feel his way back toward the staircase. Another blast of cool air brushed his cheek as he felt his way to a corner of the room. The moans from the men echoed in his ears and they were making his dick twitch. Light or no light, he was determined that he was going to be pleased right here, right now. He reached out his hand and came in contact with a body which had been pressed up against the wall by a much larger man. Brian ran the back of his hand over the flesh of the trick pinned up against the wall. It felt cool to the touch. Grunts of pleasure poured from the larger man, signaling that he was about to cum. The lights flickered back on and Brian caught a glimpse of the young man who had been the object of his attention.

"Oh, fuck!" Brian exclaimed. The trick pinned against the wall was Justin. He had not seen or heard from the boy since the night of the 'Rage' party. The lights went off again and then flickered back on. Justin turned to face him. He did not appear to be surprised to see Brian standing in front of him. The larger man who had been fucking Justin had disappeared. Brian and Justin stood alone in the backroom.

Justin looked up at Brian with a defiant glare. "Why don't you fuck me, before I pass out?" Justin's skin was pale gray in color. Brian thought that he might be sick or suffering from a drug addiction. The boy had bags under his eyes and there were also several bruises on his face. Brian's instinct was to back away from this living/dead creature who stood before him. This boy could not be Justin. . . not HIS Justin! Justin was warm and loving. He was also smart enough not to become addicted to drugs.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Brian demanded. "You look like shit."

"Nothing that your stiff dick can't cure. Fuck me, Brian." Justin moved closer to Brian and put his arms around his neck. Brian could feel himself grow hard as Justin pressed up against his most sensitive area. For a moment he could almost feel the 'old' Justin clinging to him. When Justin had lived at the loft, they had slept with their bodies pressed together all night long. Brian closed his eyes and tried to imagine the sweet, innocent young boy who had been his companion, what seemed like a life time ago. He felt the boy's hands reach up to caress his face. They were so icy cold that Brian jumped a little, but he did not push Justin away. As disturbing as Justin's appearance was to him, Brian craved his touch.

"This is just for you, baby." Justin whispered seductively in Brian's ear. "First I'm going to suck your dick until you feel like it's going to explode." Brian could only groan at the thought of his dick in Justin's mouth. "Then I am going

to take you and shove you into my hot little hole . . . so deep. How does that sound, Brian? Do you want to fuck me one last time?" Justin wasn't whispering anymore, he was shouting. "Isn't that all I ever was to you . . . your whore? Someone you kept around in case you ran out of tricks to fuck?" Justin pushed Brian away with all the strength that his frail body could muster. Brian was caught off guard and lost his footing. He wound up sitting on the floor against the wall with Justin looking down at him.

"I never promised you anything more," Brian defended himself. When Justin had pushed him away Brian felt like the skin had been ripped from his chest. Using the wall for support, he slowly got to his feet. Justin's face was red with anger as he continued his attack.

"You lied! Not with words, Brian. You lied to me with your cock, your lips, your hands! Every time you made love to me . . . you lied. And you know it!"

Brian tried to change the subject. "What happened to your face? Why do you look like this? Are you sick?"

Justin let out a sarcastic chuckle before he continued. "I had to drop out of school. I had nowhere to live. I had no job. I started taking money for sex. Now I live on the street and I get beaten up on a regular basis. It's been a real blast, Brian. So, how have you been?" Justin took a cigarette out of the pocket of his shirt, lit it and took a drag.

Brian was dumbfounded. "You're smarter than that. There's no reason for you to be out on the streets. You shouldn't let these assholes beat up on you."

"I can take it, Brian. I can take almost anything. You taught me that."

"Justin, I never hurt you."

Justin threw the cigarette down on the ground and crushed it with his sneaker. The anger had returned to his face. "You hurt my heart!" he screamed. He then turned his back to Brian.

"I'll help you." Brian was desperate to save the boy from himself. "You can't stay out here on the street. You'll get killed."

Justin started to laugh. It was a strange, maniacal laugh. He turned to face Brian. "They can't kill me, Brian. They can't kill me, because I'm already dead. You killed me." The laughter stopped and Justin's expression changed. Brian could see a flicker of the sweet, innocent boy that Justin had once been. "I died on the night of the prom."

The lights flickered for a moment and then the room was once again plunged into darkness. Before his eyes Brian saw images of that horrible night of the prom. He saw Justin's face beaming at him when he walked up and took his hand. The dance that they had shared that night played before his eyes like a scene from a movie. Then he saw the moment that they had kissed in the parking garage. There was a look of pure love in Justin's eyes, a look that Brian realized was evident on his own face. He had let that moment pass without expressing his true feelings. That had been a mistake. He realized that now. If only he could go back in time to prom night, he would tell Justin the truth. But it was too late, Justin was walking away and Hobbs was running after him. Brian tried to stop him, but again, it was too late - Justin lay on the cold cement bleeding from his wound. Brian watched himself lift Justin into his arms and kiss him on the mouth. Justin died at that moment. He never knew that Brian had said, "I love you."

The image played over and over until Brian found the strength to scream. He tried to move toward the staircase, but he stumbled in the dark and fell. In desperation he pushed himself up and started to run.

THUD!

Brian Kinney found himself lying on the floor in his bedroom. His heart was racing and beads of sweat dripped from his forehead into his eyes. He dragged himself across the floor and, with his back to the closet, pulled his body into a sitting position. Brian reached for his cigarettes and lighter which he kept on the night stand next to his bed. His hands were shaking so badly that he had difficulty lighting the cigarette. It was a good ten minutes before his heartbeat slowed to normal and the shaking stopped.

He looked over at his bed. The sheets were soaked with sweat. They usually were when he had one of these 'episodes', as he had come to think of them. It was more than just a nightmare. Once you wake up from a nightmare, you realize that what had scared the crap out of your subconscious was not real . . . it didn't really happen. Brian was convinced that the nightmares he'd been having lately were more reality than was his real life.

Brian took another cigarette out of the pack and lit it. Then he reached for the lamp on his night stand and turned it on. He kept a notebook next to his bed so that he could keep a record of these nightly occurrences. He picked up the notebook and pen and sat back down on the floor. He tried to remember what it was that Justin had said to him. Brian wrote down the phrases . . . "You hurt my heart" and "I died on the night of the prom." These phrases were new. Brian looked back at his notes. Every dream had been different, but in every one Justin had been angry with him. Justin accused him of using him as a whore and lying about his feelings. Tonight's dream had been the very worst. . . Justin had never accused Brian of killing him before. Brian thought about what Justin had said. 'I died on the night of the prom.' At this point Brian was beginning to doubt his own sanity. He had not had a decent night's sleep since the nightmares began over a month ago. Had Justin died at the prom? Brian wondered if that was the truth. He thought about the events of the past year. Justin had lived with him at the loft. They had made love hundreds of times. They had been inseparable. At least, that's what Brian had thought at the time.

He tried to remember conversations that Justin might have had with the others: Emmett, Michael and Ted. He could not recall any. Had he only imagined that Justin had been living with him? Had the boy died that night? If that was true, then Justin was right. Brian had been responsible for his death.

No! Wait! There was 'Rage'. That was real and it had happened after the prom. Brian was relieved. It did happen, didn't it? Yes, Michael and Justin had written the comic book over three months ago. Brian had proof . . . he had the photograph. He thought about that photo and the day that he had first seen it. Later on that same evening the nightmares had begun.

On the night of the Rage party Justin had left Babylon with Ethan. Brian remembered the look on Justin's face and recalled the phrase from the dream . . . 'You hurt my heart'.

That was how Justin left him. He'd walked out the door and never returned to the loft. Brian had not seen or heard from Justin since that night. Brian knew that he could never show his true feelings about what had happened that night to anyone. He had buried himself in his work during the day. Every night he could be found at his old haunts doing what he did best. . . fucking strangers senseless.

His friends had shown concern for him, but no one ever brought up the subject of Justin. Brian had been sure that eventually Justin would come back into his life. He'd thought he would at least have heard news of Justin from someone, like Debbie or Daphne. But Justin's name was never brought up. After two months, Brian had almost convinced himself that he didn't care. If Justin had needed him, he would have contacted him. Therefore, he must be safe, happy and fucking his new boyfriend. He could put Justin out of his mind for good. Brian had started to wonder if the kid had ever really existed at all. This tack may have worked except for the fact that Brian had somehow fallen desperately in love with the boy. No matter how hard he tried to deny it, Justin was always on his mind.

It had bothered Brian that he was starting to have trouble picturing Justin's face. At work he would sit in his office with his eyes closed and try to picture Justin. Was the image too painful? Had his subconscious mind blocked out Justin's face? Brian had thought that this was entirely possible. His subconscious mind was starting to piss him off. Brian had decided that it would not hurt if he ran into Justin accidentally. He had started to drive around town looking for the boy. He'd had no intention of speaking to Justin or letting himself be seen. All he wanted was to see Justin's face, so he could remember. At night Brian would drive past the apartment where Ethan Gold lived. He'd seen Ethan on several occasions, but never Justin. Brian had decided that maybe they had broken up. He had driven past the condo where Justin's mother lived. He had seen Jennifer, Molly, Daphne and even Debbie, but never Justin.

Brian had begun to take long lunch hour drives. He would scour the campus of Pittsburgh's Institute of Fine Arts on a daily basis . . . no Justin. Brian had even checked to make sure that Justin was still registered at the school. The records showed that he was.

One evening Brian had returned to his office after a dinner meeting with a client. He'd had a bad day, and after the meeting he had stayed at the bar a little too long. His head was starting to throb as he slumped down into his chair. He had noticed a file on his desk. There was a post-it attached with a message from his secretary. . . 'What do you want to do with these?' He'd guessed that she must have been cleaning her file drawer and come across some material from an old ad campaign. Brian had opened the file and dumped the contents out onto his desk. The material was from an ad campaign that he had started to work up for Michael and Justin's comic book. He had sent them both to a photographer to have publicity pictures taken. Brian had opened a package that contained four 8 x 10 pictures of Michael. Michael had that typical 'boy next door' smile on his face that Brian had always thought was his friend's most appealing feature. As he looked at the 31 year old man smiling up from the photos, Brian suddenly realized that the 'boy next door' was looking a little long in the tooth. He'd put Michael's photos aside and, without thinking, opened the second package. Nothing could have prepared him for what he saw fall from the envelope. Justin's angelic face was staring up at him from the photograph. The image took Brian's breath away. Justin was a beautiful kid, and this photo was absolutely extraordinary. In the photograph Justin wore a loose-fitting, white silk shirt which was open at the neck. He also wore a pendant which hung from a black leather necklace. Brian had taken a closer look and had seen that it was Justin's zodiac sign. The photographer had posed Justin leaning against a wall. His body was relaxed and he held something in his hands. Brian could not make out what the object was, but Justin looked very much at peace toying with it.

Brian had taken a deep breath and turned on the lamp on his desk. He'd held the photograph up so that he could better study Justin's face. It was the look in the boy's eyes that had Brian mesmerized. He remembered that look. He had seen it on Justin's face many, many times. If the boy ever knew the affect that look had on Brian's heart, he would have know the truth.

'Do you love me, Brian?' The look on Justin's face was always the same when he silently asked that question. It was a sweet, innocent, honest plea. . . Justin's need for reassurance that Brian had always refused to answer. They would lay in bed after sex and Justin would look up at him. Never having the nerve to actually ask the question out loud, Justin would express himself with his eyes. Brian had pretended not to notice. He would see Justin's expression change to disappointment as he'd rolled onto his side, turning his back to Brian.

'You don't get that, Sunshine! You don't get to have control of me! I give you everything. You have to know how I feel about you!'

Brian was convinced that this is what had ended their relationship. It had nothing to do with Ethan Gold, or Michael's revelation, or even Brian's tricking. It was Justin's need for reassurance and Brian's fear of losing control that had caused their break up.

Brian had then dropped the photograph onto his desk. Hot tears had streamed down his face. He had put his head down on his desk and wept for a long, long time. Later that night, Brian had experienced the first nightmare.

After jotting down the new phrases and comparing this new dream to his notes of the previous dreams, Brian began to feel sleepy. He put down his notebook and stared into space. To his friends Brian Kinney was unshakable, unfeeling, uncaring. Brian Kinney did not NEED anyone. And yet here he sat, naked, cowering in the corner of his bedroom, too terrified to get back into his bed. He stood up and walked to the other side of the room. He opened the top drawer of his dresser and took out the photograph of Justin. It was the only thing that could comfort him after one of his 'episodes'. He carried a pillow, a blanket and the photograph into the living room. He stretched out his long, lanky body on the couch and studied the photograph in his hand. After an hour of staring at the photo, Brian mercifully fell asleep.

"BRIAN!!!! BRIAN!!!!" the boy screamed out in terror.

"Hey, it's okay, Goldielocks. It's just a dream."

Muscular arms reached out and embraced him. Justin felt relief, until he realized that he had no idea who it was that was comforting him. Justin pulled himself free from the man's embrace. "Who the fuck are you?"

The man looked embarrassed as he stood up and introduced himself. "I'm John Patrick. I live here. Might I be so bold as to ask the name of the young man with whom I have been sharing my bed?" His face showed amusement rather than anger.

Justin was awake and fully aware of the awkward position he was in. He had broken into this man's house and made himself at home for a month. He'd assumed that the house, which was usually occupied by visiting professors, had been empty and that by squatting there he was hurting no one. He'd had no idea that anyone had been living here.

"My name is Justin Taylor. I'm a student at P.I.F.A. I can explain. You see I was living with someone and . . . "

John interrupted. "I figured. Starving artist and all that. Welcome to the club. I've been there. It's okay, really. I found you sleeping in my bed when I arrived. I thought that since I don't use it very much anyway, we could share it. Don't worry - I haven't taken advantage of you while you were sleeping. I'm not some kind of pedophile or anything like that."

Justin smiled as he studied John Patrick's face. He guessed that the man must be about Brian's age. His dark brown hair was long, unfashionably long, but somehow it suited him. He had dark blue eyes and long dark lashes. At that moment John Patrick flashed a sincere smile at him, which put Justin completely at ease.

"What were you dreaming about?" John asked.

Suddenly the fear surged up again. Justin felt like he was falling. He reached out and grabbed John's arm. "Sorry. It was a really bad one."

"You have bad dreams a lot. I've heard you calling out several times. This time the boogie man must have caught up with you." John's voice was calm and soothing.

"It's always the same dream. I mean, the same kind of dream. I always end up falling, big time. I was climbing on some rocks, like the ones you see on the beach in California. My foot kept slipping down and getting stuck between them. I was falling behind and they weren't waiting for me. I called out to them. . . "

"Who? You keep calling out for a 'Brian' in your sleep."

"Brian and his friend Michael were climbing on the rocks. They had start up a steep incline. I kept falling behind because of my stupid sneakers."

"Is Brian your . . . ?"

"He's the man I'd been living with. Michael is his best friend. Brian and I broke up three months ago. It's a long story. I left him for another guy, but that turned out to be a mistake. Michael was the one who had told Brian that I was seeing someone else. I haven't seen either of them since the night I left. I know they both must hate me, but I don't think that Brian would let me die."

"I don't think he would, either," John said, sympathetically. "Finish telling me your dream."

"I tried to catch up, but they were way ahead of me. I finally got close enough to ask them to help me. Michael started laughing at me. Brian just looked at me like he wanted to say something, but he didn't. I started to climb and I almost caught up, when my foot slipped. There was a crevice in the rocks and I knew that if I fell in I would just keep falling forever. I called out to Brian to help me. Michael told him to leave me there, and he continued to climb. But Brian came toward me and put out his hand. I reached for him, but I didn't make it. I fell into the crevice and Brian said something to me, but I couldn't hear what he'd said. Then he turned and followed Michael. I just kept falling." Justin started to shiver. "Sorry, I'm terrified of heights. The nightmare really scares me."

John crawled into bed next to Justin and put his arm around him. Justin felt perfectly comfortable with the handsome stranger. He rested his head on John's shoulder.

"What do you think it was that Brian wanted to say?" John asked.

Justin thought for a moment and then answered, "I guess I'll never know."

"Why don't you call and ask him?" John suggested.

"It's over. He doesn't care about me. He never really did. It was all in my head." Justin said sadly. "You must think I'm pretty stupid. First I break into your house and now I am telling you my life story. I'm sorry. I won't bother you any more." Justin started to get up but John pulled him back down on the bed.

"Hey, I don't own a T.V.," John protested. "Watching you sleep is the only entertainment that I have. You wouldn't deprive a fellow artist of his one guilty pleasure, would you?"

Justin smiled at John's comments. He flopped back down on the bed. "Are you a professor at the college? I've never seen you on campus before."

"I'm filling in for a dance instructor who is on maternity leave. I used to be a dancer, but now I am writing a book. That's why I never use the bed. I'm a night owl, and that's when I do my best work."

"I used to love to dance. I don't get out much anymore. There is a dance club in town called Babylon. That's where I met Brian."

"Sounds like a happening place. Why don't we go there some night? I bet that you and I would make a big splash on the dance floor." John got up and started dancing around the room with his arms around a pretend partner.

Justin laughed at the man's antics. "You sound like you're stuck in the 70's. Babylon is more of a meeting place for horny gay men than a dance club. And Brian is probably there every night picking up tricks. I don't want to run into him. Not ever again."

John sat down on the bed and faced Justin. "You don't mean that. I can tell that it's not over for you. Justin, you need to clear the air between the two of you. The nightmares will never stop until you come to some kind of understanding between you and Brian. Believe me, I know."

"You had a 'Brian' in your life?" Justin asked.

"I was a 'Brian'," John answered. "Trust me, Justin, it's not over for him, either. You and I have our creative outlets to keep us sane. What does he have?"

"He has his friends. And he has his hobby. . . fucking."

"I'm sure he tells his friends that he's fine. And that he's already forgotten what you look like. But it's not true!" John said emphatically. "He's hurting as much as you are. And I'm sure he finds no real comfort in his hobby. You aren't being fair to him."

"It's too late for us," Justin said sadly. "The nightmares will end soon. " He turned his back to the man and buried his head in his pillow.

"Hey, maybe tomorrow I can show you some new steps. You'll get your rhythm back, Justin, and don't give up on Brian."

John Patrick turned out the light and headed for the door. Before he left the room he stopped and looked down at Justin, who had already fallen asleep. "Hang in there, Goldielocks. It's not too late . . . not yet."

Brian had been at Babylon for over an hour and still had not found anyone who interested him. He stood on the catwalk and observed the crowd. It was late and his friends had already left for the evening with their respective mates. Brian found it ironic that he was the only one of the group who was not with someone. He had always assumed that he would never become involved in a relationship. Brian Kinney was a loner, and he liked it that way. At least that's what he'd thought, until Justin came into his life. He'd never realized how comforting it had been to have someone to come home to. No matter how bad things got between them, he and Justin had always been able to make love. And it was always perfect. As he stood on the catwalk looking down into the sea of nameless faces, he wondered if he'd become too choosy. Was it because he was measuring every man he had sex with by the standards that he and Justin had set? There would never be another Justin in his life. Brian was sure of it. He would never let another heart touch his. He was living out the destiny that he had chosen for himself before he understood the consequences. Brian Kinney would live out the rest of his life alone. And the prospect of that fucking terrified him.

Suddenly Brian felt cold hands caressing his neck. He tried to turn, but the man behind him grabbed him around the waist firmly, not allowing him to turn. The hard body attached to the cold hands began to sway with the music. In one brisk movement, the man swung Brian around and faced him. Brian was awestruck. The man was beautiful. His long dark hair fell almost to his shoulders. His eyes were a perfect almond shape. They were as blue as the shirt he was wearing and they were outlined with long dark lashes. He flashed a boyish grin at Brian and pulled him over to staircase and down to the dance floor. The other dancers moved to the sidelines and allowed the dark haired stranger to take over the floor. Brian was mesmerized and for a brief moment he considered the fact that he may have been too hasty in his decision never to let another heart touch his. When the music stopped the stranger finally spoke to him. "Wanna fuck?"

Strange as it might seem, the thought of fucking this perfect man had not even occurred to Brian. There was something about him that was familiar. Had they fucked before? No! Brian was sure that he would have remembered it. When the stranger had been close to him, caressing his face, he had felt something familiar, but he could not put his finger on what it was. Brian fumbled to find his voice so that he could answer the man's question. "Yeah, sure. Let's go back to my place." Brian was already hard and ready for action. He wasn't sure he could make it all the way back to his apartment. He put his hand on the stranger's arm. "Or we could go downstairs?" He regretted the words the moment they were out of his mouth. This was not just any nameless, faceless trick. This man would require special attention. Before Brian could correct his mistake the man spoke again.

"Not tonight. Tomorrow at 10:00 p.m.." He handed Brian a card with his name and the address of a nearby community center. When Brian looked up from the card he saw that the stranger, whose name was John Patrick if the card was correct, had disappeared into the crowd.

"What the fuck . . .?" Brian said out loud. What was this, a scam? Was this guy an Amway salesman or something? Brian pictured himself sitting on a folding chair, along with 100 octogenarians, listening to this guy giving his pitch. He had to admit, John Patrick was quite a salesman. Brian tossed the card into an ashtray and left the club. All the way home, Brian thought about the strange encounter. Something about the man haunted him. He began to get the feeling that there was some connection between John Patrick and Justin.

John took off the blue shirt the moment he entered the room. He carefully returned it to the pile of clothing next to the bed in which Justin lay sleeping. He took a moment to touch the soft blond hair that protruded from underneath the pillow. Justin did not stir, but John became aware of another presence in the house. He closed the door as he left the bedroom.

"How was he?" a blond boy asked.

"Right on the edge, Charley-boy. This one is going to be close," John answered. He sat down on the sofa and pulled the boy into his arms. Charley's blond hair was almost as long as John's. He was young, about Justin's age. His soft brown eyes looked up at John with complete adoration.

"Did he pick up on Justin's scent from the shirt?" Charley asked.

"Of course. He had no idea what hit him."

"Very clever. When will it happen?"

"Tomorrow night. Have you spoken to Justin? How was he tonight?"

Charley straightened his body so that he was looking directly into his partner's eyes. "You have been working with him, haven't you? Teaching him the steps?"

John nodded. Charley got up and walked toward the door. Before he left he turned and said, "Justin is very sad, John. You'd better hurry. "

Brian arrived at the community center at 10:05 p.m. He did not want to appear too anxious, but he also did not want to miss a moment of the show. He had convinced himself that John Patrick was a scam artist. Brian was determined to confront the man in a 'one on one' battle of words in front of the entire crowd. He would show this asshole that no one fucks with Brian Kinney.

He entered the building and followed the crowd. He was shocked to discover that the room was filled with couples dancing. 'Okay, now I get it. It was a gimmick to get me to come down here and sign up for six months of samba

lessons.' As he turned to leave, he felt a hand reach out and grab his arm. John Patrick stood in front of him grinning like a Cheshire cat. Once again Brian was struck speechless by the man's personal magnetism.

"I didn't mean to put you off last night, but there was someone I had to attend to. I'm sure you understand. I'm glad you could come to my party." Brian allowed himself to be dragged onto the crowded dance floor. For the next hour or so John Patrick held Brian seductively in his well-toned arms as he guided him skillfully across the dance floor. Brian had never considered himself an expert dancer, but he felt that he was able to hold his own with this talented professional. He could not shake the feeling, however, that this man had lured him here this evening to evaluate his dancing skills. Brian did not like the idea that someone had outwitted him, but the way that John Patrick was carefully observing his abilities on the dance floor amused him. During a break in the music John excused himself, telling Brian that he would return. He stroked Brian's face and said, "Don't worry, before the evening is over I will make good on my promise from last night." Before John left he introduced Brian to a young man with long blond hair. "This is my assistant, Charley. He'll fill in as your partner in my absence."

Brian watched as John disappeared into the crowd. He had observed a look that passed between John and his young assistant. John shrugged his shoulders at the young man before he walked away. "That looked serious. Is there a problem?" Brian asked.

Charley looked at him and smiled. "No, everything's fine." His grin reminded Brian of Justin. But these days it seemed that everything reminded him of Justin. He put the feeling aside and put his arms around young Charley as the music began to play. The boy was almost as skillful as his teacher. Brian had to admit that despite the strange circumstances he was enjoying himself.

The room was crowded with dancers, most of whom were same sex couples. And why not? Everyone knew that gays were better dancers than straights. The music slowed and Brian was reminded of the song that was playing during the dance at Justin's prom. It wasn't the same tune, but the rhythm was similar. He found himself trying to imitate the steps that he and Justin had performed that night. Charley followed his lead. Out of the corner of his eye Brian saw John approaching them. He was dancing with someone, but Brian could not see who it was. As John got closer, Charley pushed away from Brian. Before Brian knew what was happening, John had pulled Charley out of his arms and replaced him with another blond boy.

Brian could not believe his eyes. Justin looked up at him in complete surprise. They were in each other's arms for the first time in months. There was nothing else to do but dance.

John and Charley stood on the sidelines and watched the couple's awkward attempt to blend together on the dance floor. Brian held Justin a little too tightly and Justin kept tripping over his own feet. They were not smiling and they were not even looking at each other.

Charley was visibly upset. He punched John in the arm and said, "He's not ready. You said you would take care of things, John. Look at them. It's fucking embarrassing to watch."

John put his arms around the young man to comfort him. "Brian's a tough case, Charley. Don't give up on him yet. I'll take care of it. I promise. Tomorrow they will be sleeping in each other's arms and we can rest."

The music ended and John approached Brian and Justin on the dance floor. They were still swaying together as if they had not noticed that the music had stopped. Brian saw John approach and looked up at him. John swiftly pulled Justin out of Brian's embrace and held the boy close to his chest. He signaled to Charley to start the music. John guided Justin across the dance floor and out of Brian's sight.

Brian was furious. He felt the blood rush to his face as he pushed his way through the crowd and into the locker room where he had left his jacket and car keys. His breathing was labored, like when he was having one of his 'episodes.' He slammed the locker shut and jumped as John Patrick spoke to him. "Jealousy becomes you, Brian. Aren't you forgetting something? I promised to fuck you. Isn't that what you're all about?"

"What the fuck are you trying to pull? Where's Justin?" Brian managed to get out the words between gasps for air.

"Forget the kid." John put his hand on Brian's shoulder, hoping it would have a calming effect. It did. Brian's breathing slowed and he was focused on what John was saying. "You're not ready for him." John spoke in a quiet tone.

Brian put on his jacket and said, "Tonight. My place. It's tonight, or never."

John watched Brian get into his Jeep and take off down the street. "It has to be, Brian." After what had happened tonight, John wasn't sure how much more Justin could take.

Charley had walked with Justin back to the house. Justin had not spoken a word, but the look on his face told Charley everything he needed to know.

"Hey, you guys were great together," Charley said, trying to cheer Justin up.

Justin looked at him sadly. "We used to dance. It's been a long time. I guess we lost it."

"No, I don't think so. It takes time to get your rhythm. You can't expect to recapture it with one dance. Besides, you were both in shock. What did he say to you?"

Justin turned and looked at Charley. "Nothing. He didn't say anything. He didn't even try. It's over, Charley."

"Don't be so hard on him, Justin. Men like John and Brian are different than most people. They fight tooth and nail for control, but they have no idea why - or what the consequences will be. John was way worse than Brian."

"Really?"

"I'm still working on him, and it's been a lot of years."

"It can't have been that many years. How old are you?"

"I'm older than I look." Charley smiled.

"You must be, 'cause you look like you're 12," Justin joked.

"John feels bad about what happened tonight. He'll fix things with Brian. You'll see. Hang in there, Goldielocks." Charley stroked Justin's hair as they fell asleep on the sofa. He could feel the boy slipping away and falling through the rocks.

Brian sat up in bed smoking a cigarette and thinking about the events of the evening. It had felt so good to hold Justin in his arms. He was warm and beautiful, not like the boy in his nightmare. If only he'd had a few more seconds, he would have told Justin what he wanted to hear and it would have been over. Justin would be with him right now. Instead, Brian sat while waiting for his doorbell to ring. He was waiting for an explanation from that asshole who had ripped Justin out of his arms tonight. The pain still lingered in his chest. It felt as if John had ripped out his heart. If he didn't show up tonight, Brian would be out searching for him in the morning. And when he found him he would kick his ass. The doorbell rang and Brian jumped up out of bed and ran to the door. He slid it open and was greeted by John Patrick's boyishly charming smile.

"You weren't ready," John said before Brian could ask the question.

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Justin."

"I thought you came here to fuck me."

"You're doing a pretty good job of fucking yourself."

"Okay, I give up. You're going to fucking explain what this is all about right now, or you can get the fuck out of my house!"

"Talking will do no good. Not with men like us. I have to show you." As the two men stood in the living room facing each other, John Patrick pulled out a silver pistol and fired one shot directly into Brian's chest.

"Fuck!" Brian looked down at the spot where the bullet had entered his body. There was nothing there. Not on his chest, not anywhere on his body. He had seen the blast from the gun. He knew that the bullet had hit him. He'd felt it enter his body. At least he thought he had.

Brian looked at John, who was walking past him and on into the bedroom. Brian followed in complete disbelief that this was really happening. He decided that he must be having one of his nightmares. Any minute now, Justin would walk in here and blame him for fucking up his life and accuse him of lying about his feelings. Brian looked toward the door to see if the boy had arrived, but Justin was nowhere to be seen. John was standing at the foot of Brian's bed and looking down at something. Brian directed his gaze at the spot where John's attention was focused. What he saw was his own dead body. The big gaping hole in his chest was leaking blood all over the light blue duvet cover. His eyes were open, but not focused on anything in particular. He looked as dead as any corpse that he'd seen in the movies.

If he'd had time to think about it, Brian would have been upset by the sight of his own bloody, dead as a doornail, rapidly decomposing corpse lying on his new duvet cover. But since he was convinced that this was a nightmare, he figured he would deal with the trauma of this disturbing vision once he was fully awake.

John stood there smiling down at 'Dead Brian'. "You're free! I've freed you! Now you can start thinking with your head and your heart, without unwelcome interference from your dick," he announced proudly.

Brian was about to protest when John took hold of his arm. "We have to hurry," John said.

Brian pulled away from John's grasp. "Who the fuck are you? The ghost of Christmas past? Let go of me!"

John dropped his grip on Brian's arm. "Brian, if you don't let me help you, Justin will die by his own hands very soon. You're his only hope."

His sincere tone and the urgency in John's voice shocked Brian. He stopped protesting and listened carefully to what John was saying. If there was even a remote possibility that Justin was about to kill himself, Brian would be willing to do anything to save the boy. Including giving up his own life.

John spoke softly. "Close your eyes, Brian. There are things that you don't know that you need to know. Justin is your angel. He was put on this earth to save you from yourself."

"He tried so hard, but he's failed you. That's why he'll end his life. If you can't love him, no one ever will. You were designed to fit together perfectly. Think about it, Brian. Sex with Justin is perfect, isn't it? Not everyone gets so lucky, you know. You're so fucked up that God created an angel just to save your sorry ass. Sounds fucking incredible, doesn't it? Brian Kinney . . . the chosen one."

"You are fucking insane. Do you know that? Or maybe I am? That would explain a lot." Brian opened his eyes. "Justin's no angel. And I was doing just fine before he came along."

John was holding Justin's photograph in his hand. Brian grabbed it away from him and held it to his chest. Justin was in trouble and here he was arguing with a fucking madman. Brian turned and tried to open the door to the loft. He had to get to Justin. If he could just talk to him, everything would be fine.

"No, Brian. It wouldn't be fine. Don't you think I would have brought him here with me if I thought that would work?"

"So now you're reading my mind? Good! It will make things a lot easier. Tell me what the fuck I have to do!"

"You need to find your truth. If you can't, Justin will have no partner, and no reason to stay. You need to be honest with yourself. Don't let that guy in the bed influence you. Believe me, if Justin is lost, that man in the bed will become a reality. Save him, Brian. Save yourself."

Brian closed his eyes and allowed John to take control. When he opened his eyes again, Brian saw that he was standing in the alley outside of Babylon. Mikey, Ted, and Emmett were talking about some guy that was trying to pick up Michael. Brian saw himself exiting the bar and putting his arm around Michael.

"That was quick."

"I got bored."

The image froze on Brian's face. "Look at yourself, Brian. This time you were telling the truth. You were bored. Bored with your life, bored with your friends and bored with yourself."

"Bullshit! Look at me. I could have fucked any man in that bar including Michael, Ted and Emmett, and still have had Justin for dessert."

John advanced the images and Justin arrived on the scene. "Look at him, Brian. Can you honestly say that this boy was just a one night stand?" John froze the image on Justin's face.

"Okay, I'll give you that. Justin was no one night stand. I enjoyed being with him. I thought that he was sweet. But dealing with all the problems that he created for me was a real pain in the ass. I could have lived without all that crap."

"You create your own problems, Brian. Can you look at this boy now and tell me that you would rather he never came into your life?"

Brian lowered his eyes before he quietly answered. "No."

"Not good enough! You don't sound very convinced. Let me do a little 'Jimmy Stewart' number on you."

Brian didn't recognize the scene that was playing out before him. "This is Michael's apartment. What's this got to do with Justin?"

"This is what your life would have become if Justin had not shown up that night. You're getting ready for work. Don't worry, you're not fucking Michael. You're just sleeping on his couch until you can get back on your feet. Look, there you are in your work clothes."

"This is bullshit!" Brian cried out. "I would never be working at Q-Mart! What the fuck is going on?"

"Remember Kip?"

"What's that asshole have to do with anything?"

"Shut up, and watch."

The scene changed and Brian saw Justin talking to Kip in the alley outside of Woody's Bar. In the next scene, Kip was sucking Justin's dick. Justin was saying something to Kip and the man stopped what he was doing and looked up at the boy.

"I'm 17," Justin announced. "My father had the last guy I was with arrested. He'll be getting out of jail in a few years."

"You wouldn't tell your father about me, would you?" Kip asked.

"No, I would never do that. Provided, of course, you do something for me."

John froze the scene and looked at Brian. "If you had never met Justin, Kip would have won that lawsuit, Brian. The money, the loft, the Jeep, the Armani suits . . . gone. Justin saved your ass and never told anyone what he'd done. So, are you ready to answer my question? Would you have been better off never meeting Justin?"

"Okay. You're right. Having Justin in my life is a good thing. Now, can we move on from there?"

The scene changed and Brian found himself standing at the foot of his bed once again. When he opened his eyes as John instructed, he saw that 'Dead Brian' was gone. Then he heard voices and turned his head in that direction. He saw himself standing in front of Justin. "I won't! I won't think of you!" Justin began to cry and Brian saw himself put his arms around the boy to comfort him.

"That was shitty. I know it was. What can I say? It was for his own good."

"Brian, look again. I didn't bring you here to show you what a shit you are. You already knew that. I want you to look at yourself. Look at your face as you're petting his head to comfort him. What do you see?"

Brian looked at his the expression on his own face as if he was watching the scene play out on a movie screen. "He looks . . . I don't know. . . sad. I felt bad about making Justin cry."

"Wrong answer!" John yelled out as if he were presiding over a tacky daytime game show. "Find your truth, Brian. For once in your fucking life, look at yourself!"

Brian watched the scene again. This time he understood. He saw what John was talking about. "I felt his hair touch my face. It smelled like that herbal shampoo that he's so fond of. I was trying to commit it to memory so I could conjure him up again once I left Pittsburgh. Then I put my face up against his and touched his head. I wanted to memorize everything about him. I knew that I would miss him very much, because I loved him."

"That wasn't very fair, was it? You would have left him here in Pittsburgh thinking that you never loved him. And all the while, you're stealing his essence to take with you because you knew you'd need it to sustain you. You already knew that you loved him. "

John repeated Justin's words from the dream: "You lie with your hands. LIAR!"

The room grew dark and John turned his face toward the bed. The blue lights cast an eerie shadow on the couple in the bed. "I want you inside of me," Justin whispered.

John watched Brian's face as the scene unfurled before their eyes. Watching himself making love to Justin on that special night had shaken Brian badly. "I can stop it, Brian. I'll show you something else."

"No!" Brian protested. "I want to see it. I know the answer. I lied to him with my cock. I made love to him for the first time that night. It was the perfect opportunity to let Justin into my heart. I regret that I didn't tell him that I loved him then." A quiet calm had overtaken Brian. He was ready.

"You can let go of it now, Brian," John told him. " Now that you see your truth, you can let go."

Brian started to protest. He had worn his guilt like a suit of armor for almost his entire life. He'd hidden behind it and it had protected him from pain. It would be difficult to let it go. But if John was right, he had no choice. Justin was in trouble and he needed to do as John requested.

Brian lifted up his head and once again the scene had changed. Justin was sitting at the table having breakfast with Michael. "What the fuck is this? I'm not even there. What could I have done to fuck with Justin's head if I wasn't even in the room?"

"This is about Justin's pain, not yours. I told you, there are things that you need to know. Listen."

"I want someone who wants to be with me. Someone who at least gets jealous when another man is sucking my dick right in front of him."

"That's not Brian," Michael responded. A sarcastic little smile crossed his face. "It never will be."

Brian was dumbfounded. Michael had sealed his fate. Justin had lost faith in Brian and in himself because Michael had told Justin he was doomed to fail. No wonder Justin had lost hope. It was because of Michael that my angel Justin will never get his wings. 'Fuck you, Michael!'

"Justin has nightmares too, Brian. In them he is falling into a crevice in the rocks. Michael is there with you. He laughs at Justin when he calls for your help. As long as Michael is pulling you toward him, there is no way that you can save Justin, or yourself."

"I'm ready now. I want to see Justin," Brian announced.

"Not yet, Brian. One more scene."

Brian closed his eyes and when he opened them he cried out in protest. "No! Please, not this. I can't bear to watch." Brian put his head down and shut his eyes tightly but the image remained.

John put his hand on Brian's arm. "You have to, Brian. It's important. This night, and everything that followed, are significant. You need to overcome your demons so that you can help Justin."

Brian watched his own face as he searched the room for Justin. It was obvious that he knew the danger, but he continued into the room.

"What are you thinking, Brian? Why did you go to the prom?" John asked.

Brian answered honestly, "I was lonely. I had tried to commit suicide that night, but Mikey had talked me out of it. I know that Mikey would have stayed with me if I'd asked him to, but that was not what I wanted. I wanted Justin. I needed Justin. So I went to the prom. Not because it would make Justin happy, but for my own selfish reasons. I needed to be with him."

They watched as Brian and Justin danced together. At the end of the dance Brian said to John, "You were right. Justin is my angel. We had our perfect rhythm that night and if that asshole Hobbs had not tried to crush Justin's skull with a bat, he would have come back to the loft with me. I would have told him then that I loved him. I know I would have." Brian turned to John. "The dance was perfect, wasn't it? We were perfect."

John shrugged his shoulders. "You were all right." He turned his head and smiled at Brian's reaction.

The image had stopped with the kiss in the parking garage. John lingered on it for a moment and then turned to Brian. "Justin needs to talk about that night, Brian. You can't continued to pretend that it never happened. All the unanswered questions eat away at him. He needs you to help him cope with what happened that night."

They were back in Brian's bedroom now and 'Dead Brian' was staring up at them.

"It's all up to you now, Brian. You're ready."

"What am I supposed to do with him?" Brian pointed to 'Dead Brian.'

"He's your party-boy image, your anger, your fear of commitment. He's your wall, your armor, your candy-coated shell. You created him to protect yourself from getting hurt." John stood in back of Brian and gently put his arms around him. He whispered softly into his ear. "Let him go, Brian. He's holding you back. You don't need him anymore. You have Justin."

Brian turned to look in John's direction, but the man had disappeared. "What about the blood on my new duvet?" Brian's question echoed in an empty room. He turned back toward the bed and saw himself sleeping peacefully. 'Dead Brian' was gone and so was the mess.

The sound of the telephone ringing startled him. He turned to pick up the phone, but he saw that 'sleeping Brian' had gotten up and had already answered it.

Brian answered the phone the way he always did when someone woke him up. "What the fuck do you want?"

John Patrick replied, "Tomorrow, 10:00 p.m., at the community center."

"Is everything okay?" Brian asked.

"Yeah. Wanna fuck me?"

"No," Brian answered, truthfully. "I don't." A contented smile crept to his lips. He hung up the phone and got back into bed.

"Hey, Goldielocks, it's time to get ready." John stood next to the bed looking down at Justin.

The boy turned and tried to put the pillow back over his head. He had spent most of the day in bed and he had no intention of getting out of that bed until the police came to drag him away. John had announced that the teacher he had been subbing for was returning to work. He would be vacating the house soon, and Justin would have to find other accommodations.

"Hey, you have to get ready. You have a date tonight."

"Go away!"

"Okay. I'll call Brian and tell him that Goldielocks would rather sleep."

"What? Are you sure that Brian wants to see me?" Justin asked.

"He wants more than that, Justin. Are you ready?"

"I was born ready." Justin jumped up out of bed and began to dig through the collection of clothes that he had piled on the floor next to the bed.

John reached out his hand to stop him. "You can't arrive for a date with your prince charming dressed in decaying laundry. Here, this is a going away present from me and Charley."

John handed Justin the shirt which he had worn in the photograph.

"Thanks. Where did you find this?"

"Trade secret."

Justin was as nervous as he had been on the night of the prom. He hoped that nothing bad would happen to him before he had a chance to see Brian one last time. For the past three months he had found himself wishing that he had never awakened from the coma. If he had died then, he would not have had to deal with the pain of losing Brian. But it was okay now. He would see Brian tonight to say goodbye, and tomorrow he would walk out onto the bridge outside of town and end his suffering.

John took Justin's hand and led him out onto the empty dance floor. Charley started the music and then he joined them. Brian arrived promptly at 10:00 p.m. He was dressed in a tuxedo and looked as handsome as he had looked on the night of the prom. In his arms he carried a bouquet of red roses. He walked up to Justin and handed him the roses.

"These are for your birthday."

"It's not my birthday, Brian." Justin took the roses anyway.

"They're for your next birthday, and for every other birthday after that. Which we will be spending together on a dance floor somewhere." Brian put out his hand and pulled Justin into his arms. Justin handed the flowers to Charley and clung to Brian. The music was soft and slow and they began to sway to the rhythm, their own special rhythm. John and Charley joined them on the dance floor. Justin looked into Brian's eyes and realized that he had changed. There were no harsh, reproachful looks that Justin remembered from the weeks before his departure from the loft. The man in his arms was the same man who had made love to him the night that his memory of the bashing had returned. The walls were down and Justin was hopeful that Brian would tell him everything now.

The soft melodic sound of Fleetwood Mac's "Songbird" echoed in the nearly empty room.

"For you, there'll be no more crying.

For you, the sun will be shining.

And I feel that when I'm with you, it's all right.

I know it's right.

To you, I'll give the world.

To you, I'll never be cold.

'Cause I feel that when I'm with you, it's all right.

I know it's right.

And the songbirds are singing, like they know the score.

And I love you, I love you, I love you.

Like never before.

And I wish you all the love in the world.

But most of all, I wish it from myself.

And the songbirds keep singing like they know the score.

And I love you, I love you, I love you like never before."

That night in bed Justin didn't have to ask. Brian said, "I love you, Justin" over and over again. Brian had found his truth and together they had found their rhythm. They were one. Justin was sure that no matter what happened in the future, he could always count on the fact that Brian loved him. Nothing else mattered.

As they lay sleeping in each other's arms a soft rain began to fall. Outside their window a solitary figure could be seen strolling rhythmically down the street. His footsteps increased in speed and it might have appeared to an observer that he was jogging or running from the rain. This was not the case. The man was dancing. Just like Gene Kelly in the movie "Singing in the Rain." As he jumped down from the park bench, his feet skillfully carried him to the lamp post which he circled several times before returning to sidewalk. He slowed his pace a little when he became aware of a second set of footsteps echoing in the darkness. The second dancer came into view and the first man gathered the blond boy into his arms and carried him off in a swirl of light drizzle. A fog encircled the duo and seconds later the happy couple vanished into the darkness. The sound of their dancing footsteps lingered for a few moments before they, too, disappeared into the night air.

Justin returned to the house the next morning to retrieve his laundry and to clean up. He planned to leave a thank you note for John and Charley, but when he entered the house he realized that a note would not be necessary. . . the house was completely empty. His belongings were packed in a plastic bag which had been left on the living room floor where the sofa had been. On top of the bag Justin found a newspaper which had been left neatly folded to a particular page. He picked it up and what he saw left him speechless.

Brian arrived home from work early. He was a little surprised that Justin wasn't home, but then he saw the note that Justin had left him. 'Gone to get my stuff. Be back soon. I love you, I love you, I love you.' Brian smiled at Justin's reference to the Fleetwood Mac song.

'And I feel, that when I'm with you, it's all right.' That's exactly how Brian felt about Justin.

Brian heard the loft door slide open and saw Justin walk in slowly, dragging a plastic bag behind him. He dropped the bag in the middle of the room and looked over at Brian. At once, Brian could tell that something was wrong.

"What happened? Are you okay?" Brian was at his side.

"Yeah, I think so. But I don't know how to tell you this. You're never going to believe it."

Justin looked like he was in shock. Brian was becoming concerned. "Now you're scaring me. Will you just spit it out?"

Justin held up the newspaper so Brian could see the picture. It was a black and white photo of John Patrick with the headline: 'Local Fine Arts Professor Commits Suicide'.

Brian took the newspaper from Justin's hand and read the article. The body of 31 year old John Patrick was found by a caretaker at the local cemetery. He had shot himself in the head. His body was propped up against the tombstone of 19 year old Charles Howe, who had committed suicide six weeks earlier. The boy had jumped from a bridge just outside of town. It was John Patrick himself who had found young Charley's body. The article went on to say that it was suspected that the two had been involved in a homosexual relationship. Charley Howe's friends had told the reporter that Charley had fallen in love with the teacher, but John did not return his feelings. The older man had a sordid reputation and Charley's parents had forbidden him ever to see John. The newspaper was dated October 18, 1977.

"Charley was John's angel," Justin whispered softly. "They've been dead for twenty-five years."

Brian nodded his head. He took the newspaper over to the table and held one corner of it to a candle which he had lit earlier. When he was sure that the article was completely destroyed, he tossed the remains into the sink and doused them with water.

Justin pulled Brian toward him and buried his head in the man's chest.

"You're not crying. Are you?" Brian asked.

"No,." Justin sniffed. "It's just so sad. If it weren't for them I might have. . . "

"Stop it." Brian tightened his arms around the boy.

Justin pulled away from Brian's embrace and faced him. "You can't always push the bad things away, Brian. Sometimes you need to talk about them to make sense of them."

"All right. Let's talk about it. They fucked up their lives and then they died. But we were with them only yesterday. They looked pretty hot for two guys who've been dead for 25 years. Maybe they're like the songbirds. They know the score, and they taught us the steps. Now they can rest in peace. We helped each other out. What's so bad about that?"

"It's just so sad. . . the way they died."

"Justin, you spent time with them. Did they seem sad to you?"

"No. In fact, they were very happy together." Justin's face brightened. "Brian, do you know what this means?"

"I'm sure you're gonna tell me."

"People like us live forever. We're two parts of the same perfect sex machine. As long as we stay together, death isn't the end. It's more like a speed bump. We'll just get past it and move on to the next life."

"If it's okay with you, let's wait another 60 or 70 years before we test out your theory."

Justin smiled. "I guess so."

"Are we finished talking?"

"I did have something to tell you," Justin grinned.

"What?" Brian asked cautiously.

"I had another dream last night." Justin gently pushed Brian down onto the sofa and then straddled his legs. "I was at my prom and a handsome prince asked me to dance. He was really hot, so I said okay. We danced all night. We looked so great together that everyone else in the room stopped to watch us. Afterwards, he whisked me off to his loft . . . I mean his castle . . . where he fucked my brains out all night long."

"He sounds really hot," Brian teased. "Is he still here? Maybe I could fuck him too."

Justin playfully slapped Brian on the side of the head. "This is my dream, so shut up. I was just getting to the best part."

"Better than fucking?"

"Much better. The handsome prince looked me right in the eyes and he told me that he loved me. He said it about a million times and then he fucked me again."

"Sounds like a great pick-up line to me. I'll have to try it sometime."

Justin was busy planting soft little kisses on Brian's neck. He whispered, "How about now?"

Brian put his palms on Justin's cheeks and looked him in the eyes. "I love you. Let's fuck."

Justin laughed as Brian took his hand and dragged him up the steps to the bedroom. "Wait a minute," Justin said as Brian began to tug at the boys shirt. "I have to go to the bathroom first."

Brian released him and then started to undress. He opened the closet door and hung up his pants. He turned around and gasped at the sight before him. 'Dead Brian' was back. He was lying in the bed staring up at Brian with his stupid unfocused eyes. Brian checked to make sure that Justin hadn't seen the body in their bed. The bathroom door was still closed. He looked back, and 'Dead Brian' winked at him.

"Oh, no you don't! You're history! Dead! Gone! Finished! Go the fuck away!"

'Dead Brian' did not move. Brian looked back nervously at the bathroom door. If Justin came out of the bathroom and found this fucking, rotting corpse in their bed, he was going to freak. And then Brian remembered what John had said 'Dead Brian' represented and why he wasn't needed anymore.

Brian stood next to the bed, crossed his arms and said firmly to the corpse, "If you're still lying there in a puddle of blood and guts when my angel comes out of the bathroom, he's going to kick your ass!"

At that moment Justin ran out of the bathroom and jumped on Brian's back, knocking him face down onto the bed. They rolled around playfully while kissing, laughing and tugging at each other's clothes.

'Dead Brian' was gone! He was gone for good!

Series

Rage

A chance encounter in New York brings Brian and Justin together for the first time since the break up. Justin struggles to understand his feeling for the two men in his life.

Rage - Part One

Justin entered the Liberty Diner and carefully selected a booth near the door. He watched through the window as Michael crossed the street on his way to the diner.

"Hi," Justin said as Michael entered the booth which Justin occupied.

Michael smiled uncomfortably and said, "Hey, boy wonder. How's it going?"

"It's going." Justin nervously looked out of the window as Michael ordered coffee and a bowl of cereal.

Silence hung heavy between them until Michael spoke. "It's okay. He's at work."

Justin let out a sigh and turned to look at Michael. "Michael, what do you want? Why did you ask me to meet you here? This place has way too many memories, and I am trying to move on with my life."

Michael wanted to press Justin for details about his new life and his relationship with the violin player, but he could sense the tension in the air and decided to come straight to the point. "I want you to continue to work on Rage, Justin. The comics are flying off the shelves at my store and the on-line sales are incredible. It would be foolish to stop now. Both of us could use the money."

Justin rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. "Michael, I don't think you understand. I loved Brian with all of my heart, and I always will. I didn't leave him because I stopped loving him. I just couldn't live with my own pain anymore. You can't ask me to torture myself by making me draw Rage and J.T. together. Come on, Michael, even you have to see how painful that would be for me."

"I thought maybe you'd be over him by now. It's been three weeks. You do have a new boyfriend. It's just that Rage means so much to me and I can't do it without you."

Justin stared at Michael in amazement. He wondered how someone could live for 31 years on this earth and still be so clueless. "Why don't you put a notice up at my school? Maybe one of the other art students would want to do it. But, Michael, if you do continue with Rage you have to promise me one thing. You have to kill off J.T. I can't be a part of it in any way."

Michael studied Justin's face. He had expected Justin to be reluctant and even angry, but Michael wondered if what he saw on Justin's face was more . . . to Michael it looked like fear.

Justin looked out of the window once again and then hurriedly started to collect his backpack. "I gotta go, Michael." Justin started to leave, but turned and stood next to where Michael sat. "Is he okay?"

"Brian's fine. Nothing ever changes," Michael lied.

Michael looked out of the window and saw the reason for Justin's hasty exit. The young violin player was standing across the street watching the diner. Justin approached him and, to Michael, the conversation seemed one-sided. It appeared as though Ethan was upset. Justin stood there with his hands in his pockets and said nothing. After a few moments, Ethan put his arm around Justin's neck and led him away from the diner.

Michael heard Brian's phone ring several times before the voice mail message came on. "Where the fuck are you?" Michael asked. "If you want to go to Babylon later, give me a call." Michael was not about to hold his breath waiting for Brian to return his call. The truth was that Michael had only seen Brian a few times since the night of the Rage party. He had always been in a hurry, and had always promised to call . . . but he never did. Michael was beginning to worry. Brian didn't seem like himself. He had told Justin that nothing had changed with Brian but he wondered if that was just his own wishful thinking.

Brian rolled his head to relieve the tension in his neck as he stood in line at the airport check-in. The new airport security regulations were literally giving him a pain in the neck. He had been traveling all over the country for almost a month. In the past, Brian had dreaded business trips. Now it was a relief to be able to get away from Pittsburgh, his well-meaning friends, Babylon, and, most of all, from his own painful memories. How many weeks had it been since Justin had walked out of his life? It really didn't matter. The memories were just as painful today as they had been the night of the Rage party. It never let up, it was always on his mind. . . guilt. He had pushed Justin away. He knew that. It wasn't Justin's fault. It was his own. The problem was, he had no idea why he'd done it. Why had he been so hateful and selfish? Why the fuck was he even thinking about this right now? He should be concentrating on his career. The only aspect of his life that was going very well. Brian took his cell phone out of his breast pocket and dialed the code to check his messages. As he listened to Michael's voice whining on about Babylon, Brian's attention was distracted. He spied a blond head just up in the front of the line. He craned his neck to get a better look, but the boy had finished with the check-in and had moved on through the gate to the waiting room.

"Great. On top of not sleeping, and turning into a work-a-holic, now I'm having hallucinations." Brian deleted Michael's message and moved forward in the line. Once he had finished with the luggage check-in he moved on to the waiting room. Unconsciously, he surveyed the room for a blond-haired boy. He had almost given up hope of finding the young man, who may or may not be a Justin look-a-like, when he spotted him. There was no mistaking that walk. He hadn't seen or spoken to Justin since the day he had come to move his belongings out of the loft. They had both agreed that it was for the best. There were no locks on the doors, no hard feelings, all that crap. Before he'd left, Justin had softly touched Brian's cheek and said, "I love you."

Brian hadn't been able to utter a word, even after Justin had gone. He had just stood in the middle of his empty loft, alone and staring at the door. He tried to rationalize his actions. Justin was better off with someone younger, someone who would appreciate him. Brian Kinney was never cut out for a life of domestic bliss. Still, none of the rationalizing could dull the aching emptiness he had felt as he lay awake in bed, alone, that night and every night since.

Without thinking, Brian came up behind Justin and grabbed his arm. "Hey, stud."

Justin turned and gasped. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

Not exactly the greeting he had expected. Brian once again slipped back into bastard mode. "Sorry, I can't resist following a great ass. I didn't recognize you." Yeah, right, that was the stupidest thing he'd ever heard himself say. He would recognize Justin's ass in the crowd in Times Square on New Year's Eve.

Justin recovered his composure. He sat down in a chair in the waiting room and Brian joined him. "Where are you off to?" Justin asked.

"New York. I have a new client. Business is booming." Brian tried to sound excited about it. "You?"

"Me, too." Justin said. "I'm taking some classes in New York City over the summer."

"Great. Lots of hot guys in the city." What the fuck was he saying? Stupid . . . stupid . . . stupid.

"That's not why I'm going," Justin said flatly.

"What about the boyfriend?" The words stuck in his throat.

"He's preparing for a concert in Philadelphia and then he's going to Boston."

The boarding announcement came over the loud speaker and they got in line to board. The conversation had ended and Brian figured that it had gone badly. He had never felt uncomfortable around Justin before. He didn't know what to say or how to act. Justin had always made him feel special. He never had to think about what he said to Justin. It didn't matter. Justin would hang on every word like it had come out of the Bible. Maybe if he had been more thoughtful, they would still be together.

After placing his carry-on in the overhead compartment, Brian settled in his seat and took out his notebook to review his notes for his meetings. His eyes wandered to the aisle on his left, two rows back. Justin's blond head was hard to miss. He had taken out a pillow from the overhead compartment and was getting ready to sleep. Through the entire flight Brian craned his neck to get a better view of Justin sleeping. He hadn't realized how much he missed waking up to that sweet pouty mouth and turned-up nose. Watching Justin sleep was like a drug to Brian.

After the plane landed, they both carried their bags to the taxi line. "I have a limo waiting. You want a ride? It's company money."

"Sure. Where are you staying?"

"Some midtown hotel. You?"

"The N.Y.U. Dorms." Justin answered.

Brian had to bite his tongue. All those hot guys. None of them could hold a candle to Justin. They parted company at Justin's dorm and promised to call each other. Brian sensed a change in Justin. He had been quiet and sullen on the trip into the city. That wasn't like Justin at all. The boy was always so excited about going anywhere. He would talk non-stop. Brian recalled the time that Justin had stolen his credit card and ran away to New York. At first he had been furious with the boy, but once he had located him, safe and sound in a \$ 300 a night hotel suite, he'd found Justin irresistible. No matter what fate had befallen him, Justin had always had a smile on his face for Brian.

Justin found his room and opened the door with the key given to him at the desk. He tossed his bag in the corner. His cell phone rang and he answered. "How was your flight? Did you meet any tall handsome strangers?" Ethan joked.

"Don't be ridiculous." For some reason, Justin felt guilty. He had decided not to tell Ethan that Brian had been on the flight. Justin had the feeling that Ethan could see right through his lies. The day that he had met Michael in the diner, Ethan told him that he had a feeling he was with someone from his past and followed him to make sure he was okay. Justin was starting to feel weird about their relationship. Ethan was really sweet and very romantic, but he was also controlling and possessive. When Justin had been with Brian, he'd had endless freedom. But it wasn't freedom that he had wanted. He'd thought that he wanted a boyfriend who wanted to be only with him. Now that he had that, he wasn't sure if it was what he had really wanted at all. Maybe he was more like Brian Kinney than he thought. Maybe he had made a big mistake. There was no going back now. He knew that Brian could never change. He also knew that Ethan loved him and wanted to share his life. Justin wasn't sure what the fuck it was that he wanted. It was the

reason he had jumped at the chance to come to New York this summer. He had some heavy thinking to do before he fucked up his life beyond repair. He really needed to be alone to think things out for himself. But now there was a complication . . . Brian Kinney was in town. Was it fate that had put them on that plane together?

Justin finished up his conversation with Ethan and began to unpack. Moments later, the phone rang again.

Brian checked into his hotel and made several business calls to set up his meetings for the next day. When he was finished he looked at the room service menu and then tossed it aside. There was nothing on that menu that he wanted. He got up and walked to the window and looked out onto Broadway. What he wanted was out there somewhere, only a cab ride away. He picked up his cell phone and dialed.

"Have you eaten yet?" Brian asked.

"No. I was just unpacking. I'm kinda tired," Justin answered.

"Remember who you're talking to, Sunshine. You slept all the way here on the plane. You're aching to go out on the town. We could see a play, if you want."

"Really?" Justin's resistance was breaking down. He had always dreamed of having Brian all to himself in New York City. Ethan's words echoed in his ears. "I love you, Justin . . ." ". . . me, too." Justin had responded. Justin that knew Ethan had sensed something was wrong. But this would be his only chance to spend time with Brian: away from Pittsburgh, away from Brian's friends, away from Babylon. Maybe . . . just maybe . . . he would get to see the real Brian Kinney one more time. The man that he had fallen in love with a lifetime ago. "Sure, I guess so." 'Don't get your hopes up, Sunshine.' Justin mentally warned himself.

Brian met Justin at the Arch D'Triumph in Washington Square Park. They walked around the village for a while before deciding on a small Italian restaurant. Five minutes after they ordered, Justin's cell phone rang. He excused himself and took the call out in the hallway. The conversation was brief. Ethan was at the airport in Philadelphia waiting for his flight to Boston. Justin wished him good luck with his performance.

"I miss you," Ethan's said.

"Me, too," Justin heard himself answer.

Justin had decided to put all thoughts of Ethan to rest for the evening. He turned off his cell phone and turned his attention to Brian, who was sitting at the table smiling up at him. Brian was being sweet and kind and caring. This was Justin's dream and he was going to have it. Even if it was only for one night, he was going to savor every moment.

When they finished dinner they took a cab uptown to the theater district. Brian had gotten tickets to "The Producers." It was a funny play, and just what they both needed to relieve the tension that had grown between them. After the show they started walking downtown. Justin thought it odd that Brian wasn't trying to drag him back to his hotel room for sex. In fact, Brian hadn't made any sexual advances at all. They walked side by side, not touching, not speaking. Justin stopped walking and Brian turned to look at him. "What? Do you want to get a cab?" he asked.

"No. I just wanted to tell you thanks. I really had a good time tonight." Justin smiled and reached for Brian's hand. They continued to walk in silence. Justin felt like he was floating on air. He wanted to make this moment last forever. Brian was being the perfect date. Justin had almost forgotten what it had been like to be in the company the sweet and charming Brian Kinney. Almost as if he'd read his thoughts, Brian squeezed Justin's hand, looked at him and smiled. Was Brian feeling this connection, too? Was he enjoying this moment as much as Justin was? 'Don't get your hopes up, Sunshine' the little voice in Justin's head resounded.

When they reached Washington Square Park, they stopped walking. "I have an early class tomorrow," Justin said. He was still clinging to Brian's hand.

Brian looked down at the ground and said, "I have meetings all day."

"I guess I better go then." Justin reluctantly released Brian's hand and turned to walk toward his dorm building.

"I love you, Justin," Brian said softly. Justin slowly turned to face him.

Brian stood very still and stared at Justin. Justin's expression was difficult to read. Brian thought that he may have gone too far. Saying those three words now might seem like a ploy to get Justin into bed. That wasn't the case. Brian meant what he'd said. He wished that he'd had the courage to say it months ago. He held his breath while Justin stood there and looked at him for what seemed like an eternity. All of a sudden Justin smiled and ran to Brian. He threw his arms around Brian's neck and kissed him.

Feeling Justin leap into his arms, Brian knew that he had finally done the right thing. They needed each other. No matter what had happened before, they needed to be together. They kissed passionately under the arch. Passers-by glanced at them and grinned.

"I want you," Justin managed to utter between kisses. They broke away from each other's embrace and ran off toward the dorm building together. In the elevator they kissed and fondled each other until they both thought they would burst. As Justin fumbled with the key, Brian grabbed him from behind and kissed his neck.

Once inside the room they, clawed at each other's clothing until it was all stacked in a heap on the floor. Justin threw the covers back from the bed and got in, pulling Brian on top of him. Seconds later they were almost lost in each other when Brian stopped. "Do you have a condom?" he asked.

Justin looked up at him with both passion and pleading in his eyes. "No. No condom, Brian."

Brian understood. He hesitated a moment, and then entered Justin. Bare. The sensation immediately overwhelmed him. He had never felt so close to another person, and the feeling was beyond the physical sensation of skin to skin. As his emotions shifted into overdrive, Brian hesitated for a moment. He looked down into Justin's eyes and saw everything he'd ever want or need. The men resumed their familiar rhythm. And that rhythm became an intimate dance of love. As their emotions drove them, their pace accelerated. Each knew the dance would be short and yet profound. "Justin...Justin!" cried Brian, and his mind went blank as he pumped his juices into his lover. Brian felt Justin's hot cum spurting between their bellies as he spasmed over and over. When he was finished, Brian felt dizzy. He put his hand to his face and realized that he was crying. Justin had never seen him cry. What would he think? He looked down at the boy and saw that he was crying also. They had shared their love and now they shared their tears. Brian realized that he had nothing to hide from Justin. He trusted him completely. Brian rolled over onto his side and pulled Justin over with him. They fell asleep in each other's tight embrace. They were home.

Brian awoke to daylight streaming through the curtains. He looked over at the clock and saw that he had plenty of time before his meetings. As he watched Justin sleep, he thought about what had happened the night before. It was what he had been looking for his whole life. Complete release from his fears. In his entire life, he'd never experienced sex like that before. Justin opened his eyes and smiled at Brian.

"That was the most incredible sex, ever," Brian announced.

"Because it was raw?"

Brian cocked his head and looked into Justin's eyes. "Because it was . . . you."

Justin stared into Brian's eyes for a moment, and then said, "You better get up and go to your meetings. I have an early class today."

They got up and showered together. As they were dressing, Brian said. "I shouldn't have . . . "

Justin stopped him. His voice was shaking. "Don't say that, Brian! It was my night! One perfect night! I needed to feel you inside me for real, even if it was for the last time." Justin was sobbing. Brian pulled him to his chest and held him.

"I was going to say that I shouldn't have eaten so much garlic last night. What the fuck are you crying about? I knew if I said that I loved you, that you would turn into a lesbian." Brian teased. He put his fingers under Justin's chin and turned his face toward him. "I would never hurt you, Justin. I was just tested and I'm negative. I never would have touched you like that if I wasn't sure."

Justin buried his head in Brian's chest. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Fine, now you don't want to talk." Brian put his hands on Justin's shoulders. "When am I going to see you again?"

"I don't know." Justin seemed upset but Brian had no idea why. He decided to ignore Justin's mood.

"I'm going to call you after my meetings. We'll have dinner and talk. . . really talk. I promise."

Brian was not about to take 'no' for an answer. He kissed Justin good-bye and went out the door. Justin sat on the bed and sighed. What had he done? He'd cheated on Brian with Ethan and now, he was cheating on Ethan with Brian. What kind of a man had he become? What did he really want out of a relationship? Did he even want to be in a relationship at all? Suddenly, he remembered that he had turned off his cell phone the night before. He switched it on and dialed up his messages. There were three messages from Ethan. 'I love you'. . . 'I miss you' . . . 'Where are you?'

"Fuck," Justin said out loud. He dial Ethan's number and left a feeble message about his battery being dead. He finished dressing and left for class. He was more unsure of his own feelings than he had been before he left Pittsburgh.

Brian was true to his word. He'd called Justin's cell phone every hour on the hour and left him sickly sweet messages. "Honey, I miss you. I'll be home when my meetings are finished. Kiss the twins for me. I love you, baby" . . . "Sweetheart, I know it's your birthday, but this is business. I promise to make it up to you." He had obviously made the calls when he was with his clients. Justin couldn't believe he would call him during a business meeting just to tease him. The last message was Brian singing a line from "Save the Last Dance" . . . "I loooove you ooooooh, sooooo much." Justin couldn't control his laughter. One thing for sure, Brian was the world's best salesman, even when it came to selling himself.

When his phone rang again Justin picked it up. "Hey. I was about to change my number. Some sicko has been leaving me freaky messages all day."

"Make that love sicko. Get dressed up. I'm taking you someplace romantic."

Justin was glad that he had brought the jacket his mother had bought him for his birthday. He put on gray pants, a clean shirt and tie, and the jacket and went downstairs to catch a cab. The doubts that he'd had that morning were still in his head, but Brian was wearing down his resistance. Still, he reminded himself that he had to keep up his guard. They were in New York, and away from the pressures of living together under the same roof. What would happen when they returned to Pittsburgh? Would Brian go back to tricking and ignoring Justin? There were no easy answers. Justin was determined to enjoy what ever time he would have with the new and improved Brian Kinney. As he rode uptown in the cab, Justin realized that he had not heard from Ethan all day.

Brian had been sitting at the bar for a half-hour before he spotted Justin walking into the restaurant. When Justin saw Brian, his face lit up. Brian loved the way that Justin looked at him with such love and devotion in his eyes. Tonight he was sure his face reflected those same emotions. Justin was so beautiful. Everything about him was perfect. So why did Brian still have a need to cruise other men? For the first time in his life he wondered if the demons that possessed that part of his being would ever free him.

Brian greeted Justin with a kiss which earned them a few curious glances from other patrons. They were led to their table and Brian ordered a bottle of the restaurant's best champagne.

"What are we celebrating?" Justin asked.

"It's your birthday," Brian joked.

"It's not my birthday, Brian."

The waiter poured the champagne and took their order. After he had gone, Brian reached over and grabbed Justin's hand. "Come home with me."

"What? In the first place, I just started classes. In the second place, I'm living with someone else."

"I'll wait. When you finish your classes you'll tell that home wrecking plot device that you're going back home where you belong. . . with me."

"No, Brian. I'm not going to do that. We've never even discussed the real reason I left. I won't put up with your lifestyle, Brian. I love you with all my heart. You know that. But I can't live with the constant tricking. I hate it when you fuck other men right in front of me. I hate it even more when you stand by and watch them fuck me. It's like you don't even care about me. You've been really sweet these past two days and I've loved it. But we both know that when we get back to Pittsburgh, it'll be business as usual."

Before Brian could respond to Justin's comments, he spotted a young man walking into the restaurant. He stared at the man as he walked toward their table. Brian was about to say something when Justin recognized the expression on Brian's face and remarked. "I guess we don't even have to be in Pittsburgh. You can't get through dinner without cruising other men." Justin put down his glass and was about to get up to leave when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

Ethan Gold put heavy pressure on Justin's shoulder as he spoke. "When I couldn't get in touch with you last night, I got worried. I changed my ticket from Boston to New York. I guess I had good reason for concern." He looked over at Brian, who was speechless.

Justin finally broke the silence. "Brian's in New York on business. We were just having dinner, Ethan."

Ethan looked down at the table. Brian still held Justin's hand. Justin pulled his hand back and got up from the table. "I wasn't very hungry anyway."

Ethan put his arm around Justin and led him away from Brian's table. Brian could see the look on Justin's face as he turned back toward the table one last time. He'd seen that look before and it wasn't love. It was fear.

Ethan turned to Justin and smiled. "It's okay, we're together now. I forgive you. Brian put pressure on you and you don't handle pressure very well. Do you, Justin?"

"Let's get out of here."

Ethan ignored Justin's request. "I have a surprise for you. I wasn't following you tonight. I had no idea I would run into you. I guess it was just fate. I'm having dinner here with my parents. They live in New York City and I want you to meet them."

Before he could protest, Justin found himself face-to-face with Ethan's parents.

Ethan introduced him. "Mom, Dad, this is the love of my life, Justin Taylor."

Brian overheard Ethan's introduction. It was time to make a hasty departure.

The next morning, Ethan waited until Justin had gone into the bathroom to shower before he picked up the boy's cell phone to examine it. As he had suspected, every recently received call was from the same number - Brian Kinney's cell phone, no doubt. Ethan dialed the message center number and when the recorded voice asked for Justin's password, Ethan didn't have to think very hard. He dialed B - R - I - A - N . The messages began to play. 'Justin, you are so predictable,' thought Ethan. Every message was a plea from Brian asking Justin to call him at his hotel. Ethan deleted every message. When he was finished he went to Justin's phone book and deleted Brian Kinney's number from the speed dial. Knowing Justin, Ethan guessed that the boy would not have bothered to memorize or even write down a number which he could easily store in his cell phone. The phone in Ethan's hand rang and he answered it. There was no doubt in his mind who the caller was.

"Justin?" Brian asked.

"Good morning, Brian. This is Ethan," the musician said smugly into the phone. "Justin has asked me to give you a message. He wants you to stop fucking with his head. He's finished with you and he wants you to stop calling." Ethan heard a crashing sound as he hung up the phone.

In a rage Brian had flung his cell phone across the room. "That little prick!" He paced the room as he sipped brown liquid from a glass. After he'd left the restaurant the night before he had blindly walked the city streets. He had come upon an all-night liquor store and purchased a bottle of his favorite mind-numbing drug. . . Jim Beam. In his mind he had gone over the events that had so dramatically altered the course of the evening he'd planned. He had intended to ask Justin to come home with him. He was prepared to negotiate terms with the boy, just as they had done that night at Babylon. This time there was so much more at stake. Brian wanted the arrangement to be permanent and he was willing to do some self-examination if it would convince Justin that his intentions were serious.

Two weeks after that fateful night, Justin sat alone in his dorm room studying his cell phone. Brian had not called him once since that night. Justin checked his messages as often as he dared with Ethan watching his every move. Ethan had resumed his trip and gone on to Boston a few days after the dinner they'd had with his parents. Justin had taken the time since to evaluate his feelings for the young musician. On the surface, it appeared that Ethan would be his perfect mate. They liked the same music, they were both artists, they were almost the same age, and they both wanted the same things from a relationship. When Ethan had introduced Justin to his parents, he'd said that Justin was the love of his life. Therein lay the problem: Justin did not love Ethan. In the beginning, Justin had thought he did . . . a little, anyway. But if there was one thing that Justin was sure of, it was how it felt to be deeply in love with someone. He'd thought that if he could stay with Ethan and forget about Brian that he would grow to love Ethan. But the longer he stayed in the relationship, the more it was clear to him that he would never feel for Ethan what he felt for Brian. Life was funny like that. It seemed to Justin that he was fated to live a life without love.

It was almost time for him to return to Pittsburgh. He had made a decision. He was going to break it off with Ethan. It wasn't fair to allow Ethan to think they had a future together. As bad as it made him feel, he knew it was the right thing to do.

As for Brian . . . if he had been sincere about his feelings, he would have at least called. Justin had watched as Brian had stormed out of the restaurant. Brian must have been very angry that Justin had allowed Ethan to interrupt their evening. He imagined that Brian had gone to the nearest gay hang-out and found comfort there. So much for love.

The phone rang and Justin answered. "Hello."

"Hello, boy wonder. It's me, your partner," Michael announced.

"Hello, Michael."

"Have you made your decision about working on Rage with me? I don't want to pressure you . . . fuck! I'm begging here."

"Michael, I don't know. I haven't had time to think about it."

"Justin, what is there to think about? We both need the money. That's the bottom line."

Justin thought for a moment. He would have to get his own place when he moved out of Ethan's. And there was still tuition to pay.

"Look, Justin. I'll give you a 60/40 split. You do most of the work, anyway. What do you say . . . please?"

"All right, Michael. We'll talk when I get home."

The thought of getting his own place was sinking in. He had never lived alone and he liked the idea of it. He would be independent and free. That was what he wanted for now. Maybe someday he would find the right man to settle down with, but first he had to be his own man. He would talk to Ethan tonight and tell him. Justin looked at his cell phone again. He would call Brian and tell him he was off the hook. No one had to take care of "Little Justin." He would take care of himself. Justin pressed number one on his speed dial and nothing happened. He checked his phone book. Brian's number had been erased.

Michael put down the phone and turned to Brian. "60/40? Thanks a lot, Brian!"

"I'll make up the difference. You need him, and you know it. Without Justin, Rage would be a distant memory."

"So what's the plan, Rage?"

Earlier that evening, Brian had surprised Michael by appearing at the comic book store. To Michael he seemed different than the last time they'd been together at Woody's. That was just after Brian had returned from New York and had been drinking like there was no tomorrow. This evening Brian was totally sober and he seemed to be on a mission. Brian had talked Michael into calling Justin and making him an offer he could not refuse. He'd done some serious thinking and he had become obsessed with the idea of getting Justin away from Ethan Gold. What better way to pump Justin for information about Ethan and their relationship than to use his best friend and Justin's business partner . . . Michael Novotny.

"You can't let on that I had anything to do with this, Michael. I need to know the fiddle player's weakness. I want to know everything about him down to the size of his dick. I know I can count on you, Michael. You're so good at getting people to open up."

"Like you've been so open with me all these years," Michael said sarcastically. "I don't even know if Justin will talk to me. You know he fucking hates my guts for telling you about Ethan in the first place. Brian, what if they really are happy together? What if Justin really loves this kid?"

"I've seen them together, Michael. There is something fucked up with their so-called 'relationship.' When Justin left the table with that guy, he did not look happy . . . he looked fucking terrified."

"That's what I thought when I saw them together." Michael lowered his eyes.

Brian stood in front of Michael and put his hands on his friend's shoulders. "Are you going to help me or not?"

Justin was surprised to see that Ethan was home when he arrived at the apartment that they had shared. Their phone conversation the week before had not gone well, in Justin's opinion. Ethan had begged and pleaded for Justin to give him another chance. But Justin's mind had been made up. When Ethan had asked if he was moving back in with Brian, Justin had become furious. "What the fuck ever gave you that idea, Ethan? I need some space. Some time alone. I can take care of myself. Brian Kinney has nothing to do with this. You had no right to erase his number from my phone. You can't erase him from my life. And you can't make me love you by controlling me."

Ethan was practicing when Justin walked in the door. He put down his violin and greeted Justin with a kiss. "You're home." He put his arms around Justin and kissed him. Ethan had a way of staring into Justin's eyes that gave Justin chills.

"I came to get my things." Justin had brought boxes to pack. He put them down on the sofa and began to collect his belongings.

Ethan put his hand on Justin's arm. "I'm sorry. I know that I can be controlling. It's just that I love you so much. We belong together, Justin. Give me another chance."

The man looked so profoundly sad that Justin put down the box he was carrying and hugged him. "It's my fault, Ethan. It was too soon after Brian for me to move in with you. I care for you, I really do. But I'm not sure what I want anymore. I really need to be on my own for a while."

"I understand," the musician lied, his eyes still riveted to Justin's face. "I want us to remain friends. I still need to be with you, Justin."

Justin was becoming uncomfortable under Ethan's stare. "Sure. We can be friends. Call me." Justin was anxious to leave. Ethan had never been violent toward Justin, but Justin sensed somehow that Ethan had a capacity for violent behavior.

Michael had suggested that Justin set up what he would need at the comic book store. That way they could work together and still not be involved with each other's personal life. Justin brought his computer and art supplies to the store and started to arrange his workspace in the corner of the backroom.

"So, you're still going to see Ethan?" Michael asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

"Sure, why not? I don't have many friends, anymore."

"I suppose you blame me for that, too."

"Look, Michael, before we start to work together again, I want to get one thing straight. You had no right to tell Brian about Ethan. But at least I know now for sure exactly where you are coming from. You want Brian for yourself and you always have. You've resented every single moment that Brian and I were together. You did what you did to get me out of his life. Don't stand there and even try to deny it. I'm only here because I need the money to live and to continue going to school. I don't like you and I'll never trust you again. So what we have here is a business arrangement, nothing more. Agreed?"

Michael was in no position to argue with the boy. "Agreed," he said softly.

"And, Michael, I don't want to talk about Ethan," Justin said, putting an end to the conversation for now.

Michael reported back to Brian the next morning. "He is still seeing him, Brian. But I think the attraction has worn thin, at least for Justin. He said that they would be just friends."

"Yeah, right. I don't trust that little fiddle playing dirt-bag."

"I don't either. The way that he looks at Justin . . . it's creepy, like he can see what he's thinking. One of his parents is a psychologist or something. I think he's been brought up on mind control. That must be why Justin seemed to be intimidated by him."

"What else, Michael? I need more. Something that will keep him away for good."

"He owns a cat."

"What the fuck am I going to do with that piece of useless information? I need more! I want to know the name of everyone he's ever fucked."

"Well, that won't be easy. Justin hates me. He blames me for breaking you up. Can you imagine?" Michael looked at Brian and waited for his reply. None was forthcoming. Brian had turned his attention to his coffee cup.

"You don't blame me, Brian? Do you?"

"For what? Justin fucking another man? No. That was my fault. . .or maybe both our faults. But Justin was right about one thing, Michael. It had nothing to do with you."

"But, Brian, you're my friend. That kid was making a fool out of you."

Since Brian had returned from New York he had spent a lot of time alone, thinking about his relationship with Justin. Like Debbie had said, Justin had gotten in under the wire and somehow, for better or worse, had changed him. After spending the past few months without him, Brian had realized just how much Justin had contributed to his life. It wasn't fair of Michael to judge Justin. Until Michael had come up with the idea of using Justin's artistic talent to make his comic book dream a reality, he hadn't given Justin the time of day. The thought had occurred to Brian that the problems between he and Justin had begun right around the time Justin had started spending time with Michael.

Michael's comment had brought Brian's anger to a head. If Michael had in some way contributed to Justin's rebellion, Brian would never forgive him. He needed to know the truth.

"What do you know about Justin, Michael? You've treated him like something that was stuck to the bottom of your shoe since the night I brought him home. He doesn't owe me anything. And you have no right to judge him."

Brian got up and threw some bills on the table. He bent down and said menacingly into Michael's ear, "What did you two talk about while you were working on that comic book, Michael? If there is something I should know, tell me now."

Michael didn't answer and Brian left the diner, knowing that his suspicions had been correct.

Justin sat staring at the blank computer screen while Michael paced the floor of the store. "We can't kill off J.T., Justin." Michael stopped pacing and sat opposite Justin at the table. "People want to see them together. They say it's the main reason that they buy the comic."

"I can't do this, Michael. I'm sorry."

"Justin, this is your chance to have things your way. You can do anything you want to with Rage and J.T. They could get married and live in a lair with a white picket fence, or J.T. could become a go-go dancer and drive Rage crazy. The public will love it and maybe it will help you to put your feelings down on paper."

There was a knock at the door. Michael went to answer it. "What's up, Mikey?" Brian asked, a little too cheerfully.

Justin cringed. This was all he needed now . . . Brian Kinney a/k/a/ Rage was here to save the day. At least now he could stop this farce. Brian probably wanted Michael to go to Babylon with him. Good. Now he could go back to his apartment and try to think of another way to make the money he needed to pay his rent.

Justin looked up and saw Brian grinning down at him. "How's it going, boy genius?"

The sarcastic tone in his voice and the fact that Brian seemed not to care that they hadn't been in touch since New York pissed Justin off. He picked up his pen and began to draw a distorted version of Brian's likeness onto the computer screen. The picture of Rage that Justin was drawing was not at all flattering. In fact, it was rather grotesque. J.T., on the other hand, had taken on an angelic appearance. Justin continued to work as Brian watched in amusement. The phone rang and Michael answered. Minutes later, Michael came into the room struggling into his jacket. "I gotta go. Ted needs my help with . . . ah, . . . something. Justin, lock up the store when you leave."

Before Justin could protest, Michael was out the door and gone and he was left alone with Brian. It never occurred to Justin that this had been the plan all along. He decided to get his feelings out into the open. He stopped drawing and looked into Brian's eyes. "I need to know something, and don't even try to lie to me. Did you try to call me that night in New York?"

Without hesitation Brian answered his question, "Yes. I left messages on your cell phone. I even spoke to your boyfriend. He told me you didn't want to talk to me so I stopped calling."

"He's not my boyfriend, at least we're not living together anymore. I have my own place now. I'm unattached . . . and loving it." Justin tried to sound convincing. "Just so you know, I never got your messages."

"I thought as much. The phone works both ways, you know."

"That's a long story." Justin began to relax. He smiled, and Brian smiled back.

Brian turned his attention to the computer screen "Hey, what are you doing to me? I look like Freddie Kreuger."

"When it comes to Rage, I'm the one in total control. He's MY creation."

"And you are mine." Brian grinned at the boy.

"Yeah, right." Justin changed the subject. "Aren't you going to Babylon?"

Brian responded, "No, I came here to see you."

Justin was surprised, yet not sure what Brian meant by that statement. He wasn't about to get caught up in another Brian Kinney web of seduction. But, somehow, Brian seemed different. He had lost weight, and his face looked gaunt. As angry as Justin was, he still cared about the well-being of the man who sat before him. "Oh, because I owe you money. Don't worry. Everything I earn on the comic will go to you. I'll pay the rest back as soon as I can."

Brian looked confused. "Okay?"

Justin had run out of ideas. "I better go home. I have studying to do."

"I'll drive you." Brian staggered a little as he started to get up.

"No. I can take the bus. It's not that far."

Brian huffed. "So, what. . . now we can't be civil to one another? I was just offering to drive you home, that's all." Brian paced nervously around the room. Justin realized that Brian was high on something. Justin gave it some

thought, and decided that there was no way he would be able to avoid seeing Brian while still working with Michael. He wanted to be friends with Brian. To help him deal with his pain. Justin still adored the man. He would just have to keep his guard up.

"Brian, you're drunk."

"And loving it?"

"How about I let you walk me home?" Justin was remembering New York and the walk down Broadway.

To Justin's surprise Brian agreed. They locked up the store and walked up the street without touching, without talking.

Brian tried not to gasp when Justin opened the door of his small one room apartment. The thought of the boy actually living in this squalor in the middle of this unsavory neighborhood gave Brian the chills.

Brian sat down on the only place there was to sit . . . Justin's small bed. "This place is a real man-magnet."

Justin grinned. "It may not be a cool loft with Italian furniture, but it's all mine and I like it."

Brian was amused by the boy's enthusiasm. Justin could always see the bright side of every situation. When he had stolen Brian's credit card to run away to New York City, he had shrugged off the idea of being caught and going to jail. "At least I'd have a place to live."

Justin sat on the bed next to Brian and held out his hand. "Come with me. I want to show you something."

Brian got up from the bed enjoyed the sensation of Justin's hand in his. Justin walked him over to the other side of the room where the bathroom was located. "Look, I have something that you don't have . . . a bathtub."

"Good. That way you won't stink."

Justin dropped Brian's hand and put his head down. That remark stung deeply. He remembered the night that he had come home from Ethan's and Brian had wrestled him to the floor, only to tell him to take a shower because he stank.

"I'm sorry." Brian realized that Justin was remembering that night. He put his arms around Justin and held him.

"You better go," Justin said.

"Are you throwing me out already?" He began to rub Justin's shoulders.

Justin pulled away, afraid of what he was feeling. "Yes. I have studying to do."

Brian was not ready to leave. He wasn't going to allow Justin to get away again. He had been practicing what he was going to say and it was now or never. "Give me chance, Justin. Remember when we met, you said you could mean something to me if I would just give you a chance. I want my chance now. . . to mean something to you, again."

Justin looked into Brian's eyes and saw that the man was being sincere. It touched him deeply that Brian had remember the exact words he'd used when he first told Brian how he felt about him. That was the thing about Brian Kinney. . . just when you gave up hope, he'd show you how much he really does care.

Justin's defenses broke down. He reached up and kissed Brian gently on the lips. Brian returned the kiss and swiftly moved Justin back toward the bed. They made love for the rest of the evening. As they lay in each other's arms in the dark, Brian asked, "You still want me to leave?"

"You can't. My doors have locks on them."

Rage - Part Two

Brian Kinney sat alone at his dining room table. He looked across at an empty chair which, until a few months ago, had been occupied by a nineteen year old, motor-mouthed, soda-guzzling, human eating machine. Brian still felt a pang of loneliness whenever he looked over at the empty chair. Before Justin had come into his life, he had very rarely eaten at the table. He had usually grabbed a quick salad and mineral water and watched the news on T.V. before leaving for Woody's or Babylon. Justin had brought a sense of home to his starkly furnished loft. There was always a meal on the table when he arrived home from work. Justin was always ready to please him. No matter what he was doing, once Brian walked in the door, Justin's world revolved around only him. Brian had never truly appreciated that about Justin until he was gone.

He finished his meal and then dialed the phone. "Hey, Sunshine. What are you doing?"

"Homework."

"Want some company? I have a housewarming present for you."

"Sure." Justin was bursting with curiosity, but he tried not to let Brian hear the excitement in his voice.

Brian smiled to himself as he put on his jacket and retrieved his "gift" from the kitchen floor.

"Holy shit! That's a big box! What's in it? It's not another hustler, is it?" Justin tried to grab at the big blue bow.

Brian made him close his eyes and then took the lid off the box. Slowly Justin opened his eyes, almost afraid to look at the kind of a 'gift' Brian would give him. Inside the box was a sweet-faced Golden Retriever puppy.

Justin couldn't believe his eyes. He picked up the puppy who, as if on command, began to lick his face. "Brian, I can't believe you got me a dog! Oh, he's so cute!"

'Score one for Brian Kinney.' Brian thought to himself as he smiled at Justin's reaction. He had used the one piece of information that he had obtained from Michael to come up with the idea of a gift for Justin. What better way to counteract a sweet little kitty, than with a giant pussy-hating dog. There was no way that Justin would ever be able to move back in with the street musician.

"What should I call him?" Justin asked.

"His name is Angst. You always say I provide you with plenty."

Justin put the puppy on the floor and turned his attention to Brian. They were lovers again, but there had been no discussion about the future of their relationship. Justin was happy to be free, to be with whomver he wanted . . . whenever he wanted. And, as always, what Justin wanted was to be with Brian Kinney. Only this time things would be on his terms.

"I love him, Brian. Thank you!"

They played with the puppy on the floor until the dog fell asleep and then they made love in Justin's tiny bed. "I don't understand why you won't come home. This place is down right scary and this bed isn't even big enough for your sexy, little body. I'm getting cramps in my legs."

"Let me rub them for you," Justin offered.

Brian sat up and looked into Justin's eyes. "What are you waiting for, Justin? I told you how I feel about you. And you adore me. So why won't you come home?"

"Nothing's changed, Brian. I told you, I don't want to feel trapped in the same situation where you control everything. I want to find out who I am, and what I really want out of a relationship."

"You said you didn't want me to change. And if you do, I'm not sure I can."

"This isn't about you, for once. I know who you are. Now, shut up and let's get something to eat. I'm starving."

Brian paced the floor of the comic book store as he grilled Michael. "He's still seeing him, Michael."

"So what, Brian? It doesn't mean anything. They go to art stuff and music stuff and sometimes one of those French films. Justin says that they're just friends."

"He's fucking him. I know he is."

"And you are fucking half . . . make that 75% . . . of the gay population. It doesn't mean anything."

Brian was still pacing anxiously. "What do they talk about, Michael?"

"How the fuck should I know?"

"I want you to tell Justin to bring him here. Make something up. Tell Justin he should create a new character using Ethan for a model."

"Brian, that kid gives me the creeps."

"Then we need to get rid of him for good. You have to find out what kind of hold he has on Justin. After that, you leave it to me. I'll take care of him."

"Listen, Rage. Don't go doing anything stupid."

"Don't worry, Mikey," Brian flashed him a silly grin. "I have my super powers to protect me."

"His name is Angst," Justin said as he allowed the dog to pull him down the street. The dog had practically doubled in size Brian had brought him to Justin's apartment.

Ethan followed closely. "How original. Imagine, Brian Kinney giving you Angst."

Angst stopped and turned around at the sound of his name. He jumped on Ethan almost knocking him to the ground. Ethan pushed him down and the dog began to growl at him.

"Brian must have trained the dog well. He hates me already."

"He doesn't hate you, Ethan. He probably smells your cat."

When they got to the comic book store, Justin let Angst loose and the dog went directly to the corner where Justin had set up his computer. "He loves it here. He greets everyone who comes in the door."

"Hi, Ethan." Michael said to the young musician. "I'll leave you to work on the next story board, Justin. I wrote down some notes over there for you. I have to get back to work on my inventory."

Michael watched and listened as Ethan and Justin sat at the computer desk in the back of the store. The conversation was barely audible, but Michael took note of what he picked up. Justin seemed to be more at ease with Ethan now, than when they were living together.

After a while Michael joined them and asked Justin what he thought of his idea. Rage and Zephyr were discussing the quirks of old boyfriends. Michael tried to draw Justin and Ethan into a discussion about boyfriends. "When David and I were together, he was so fucking controlling. He was able to draw them out a little as he became more comfortable with Ethan, he turned to Justin and said, "I think your dog needs to go outside, Justin. . . now!" The puppy was sniffing the corner of a comic rack.

Justin jumped up and took Angst outside before he could do any damage. This left Michael alone with Ethan. "He's become very attached to that dog," Michael commented.

"Once Justin becomes attached, it's permanent."

"Like with Brian."

"And me. He still loves me very much. That's what he tells me when we're fucking."

Michael was anxious to learn more, but he was rapidly losing control of the conversation, "You and Justin have a lot in common. But don't you care that he's fucking Brian, too?"

"Do you? I mean, you are in love with the man. At least that's what Justin said. Maybe we could work together. We do have a common goal. . . to make sure that Brian and Justin part company as quickly as possible."

Justin and Angst returned from their walk. Ethan gave Michael a sly smile. "Justin, let's go. I need to practice stroking my instrument before I can sleep." Ethan raised his hands, put them on either side of Justin's face and pulled him in for a kiss. Angst began to bark.

After they had gone, Michael dialed Brian's cell number. "They're gone. According to the little twerp they are fucking. I got a few names and some other stuff. I fucking hate that kid, Brian. Whatever Rage is planning, count me in."

Ethan returned to his room and tore off his coat in a rage. Justin had told him that he didn't think it was a good idea for them to be fucking. He wanted to remain friends. 'Fuck that!!!' I don't need any friends, Justin. I need a warm body to wake up with every morning. Someone who wants only me. You were almost there. I know that I can get you back . I just need to teach you a lesson first. After that I will get rid of Brian Kinney for good. And what better way than to use your precious Brian's best friend, that dolt Novotny, to accomplish my goals.

Brian came home from work and threw his jacket on the chair. While leafing through the mail he began to talk to himself. "You want something to eat?" He asked in Justin's little voice.

"Not really." He answered in his own deep voice.

"You've got to eat something. You're too skinny," the little Justin voice replied.

"I'm not skinny, I'm toned. Wanna check out my muscle?" Brian stopped talking when he realized what he was doing. He was having a conversation with Justin, using Justin's ventriloquist method. "At least I get the answers I want."

What was it Justin really wanted? Brian guessed that the boy wanted a commitment. He wanted a permanent, monogamous relationship. Brian was okay with the permanent part and even the commitment part was doable. It was the monogamous aspect of it that had Brian in turmoil. Sex was all he ever thought about. Sex with Justin was incredible. It was sacred. But sometimes he needed more. He needed down and dirty sex with a stranger. It was a turn-on for him to even think about it. Brian understood Justin's objection, but even though he loved Justin, he wasn't sure he could ever promise him that he would be 100 percent faithful.

'I am standing in my kitchen talking to myself in a little Justin voice.' This was the last straw. He needed to have Justin around full time again. He needed a partner and he was going to get him back in his bed, even if it killed him.

"Hello." Justin picked up the phone and tried to pretend that he hadn't been sleeping.

"What are you doing?" Brian said in his most seductive tone.

"Studying," Justin lied.

"It's 8:00 PM. Do you know where your lover is?" Brian joked.

"He's making crank phone calls." Justin was fully awake.

"Come over . . . please?" Brian spoke softly.

Justin hesitated. Ethan had come over earlier that day and they'd had an argument. Ethan had tried to come on to him. Justin had told him that if he continued he would stop seeing him. Justin wasn't sure if he was ready for another round with boyfriend number one.

"Okay." Justin poured fresh water for the Angst and promised he wouldn't be gone long. Angst gave him a longing look as he watch his master open the door. Justin regretted not being able to take him, but he had to ride the bus to get to Brian's neighborhood.

The ride over had been worth it. Brian greeted him with sweet longing kisses and they spent the evening in bed. Brian once again asked Justin why he wasn't moving back in with him.

"Are you sure you really want to know?"

"That bad?"

"I don't want to be tied down. I love you. But there are other things in life besides going to Babylon and getting my dick sucked by strangers. I don't want that for myself and I don't want it for my partner, if I ever find one. I won't be the one to ask you to change, Brian. You'd end up hating me for it."

Brian had no smart answer. He knew that Justin was right. It didn't stop him from feeling sad.

"In the meantime," Justin proclaimed, "we can be together when ever we both want to be together. Wasn't that the plan to begin with? It was a mistake for me to move in here."

"Don't say that. I loved having you here. Even if I didn't always show it." Brian hesitated then he said softly, "I miss you."

Justin nuzzled up to him and laid there quietly while Brian fell asleep. Careful not to wake him, Justin got dressed and left for home. It was almost midnight and the streets were damp and dimly lit. It didn't really bother Justin to travel alone late at night. Many nights Brian had abandoned him at Babylon and he'd had to find his own way home.

There was something about this evening, though, that gave Justin a bad feeling. He had gotten lucky and caught the bus just as he turned the corner. Justin was tired and he still had to walk Angst and take a shower. When he got to his building, he was surprised to see that the lights over the staircase were not working. They had been fine when he'd left the building earlier that evening. He felt his way up the stairs. He could hear Angst barking when he got to his floor. It was comforting to know that he would not really be spending the night alone after all.

Justin managed to find keyhole in the dark and was just about put the key in when he heard someone come up behind him. Before he could react he felt the pressure of an arm across his throat. The animal on the other side of the door was barking furiously. Justin struggled with the man behind him and was able to free his hand long enough to turn the key in the lock. The door burst open and Angst took charge. The dog lunged at Justin's attacker and the man fell backwards. As he struggled to his feet, Angst nipped at his pant legs. Before his assailant got away Justin felt something cold and sharp pierce the skin of his left hand.

Brian had thrown on his clothes and pulled on his shoes the minute he had gotten the call from Justin. The boy's voice was shaky, but he seemed to be in control of the situation. Brian got in his Jeep and drove to Justin's place. Justin was in the bathroom trying to stop the bleeding from a cut on his hand.

"Let's go to the hospital."

"No! I've had enough of hospitals to last me a lifetime. It's just a cut." He removed the wash cloth and Brian saw that it was a very deep cut which had not yet stopped bleeding.

"Don't be a drama princess. We're going to the hospital," Brian insisted. "Then we're going back to my place."

Justin, who didn't really want to spend the night alone, agreed. "What about Angst? I can't leave him here alone, Brian. He just saved my life."

Angst sat on the floor next to Justin observing every move. When he heard his name mentioned, his ears went up and he turned his pleading gaze toward Brian.

"He can sleep in his crate at my place. I'll put it in the car. You go and get what you'll need. We can come back for the rest tomorrow."

Justin was too tired to argue. His hand was throbbing and so was his head. He gathered a few things into a bag and went with Brian to the hospital.

After Justin was treated at the emergency room, they returned to the loft. Brian set up the dog's crate before returning to the bedroom. Justin was lying face down on the bed and had fallen sound asleep. Angst was lying along side of Justin with his head comfortably resting on Justin's butt.

"Hey, that's my spot," Brian complained.

The dog looked up at him and sighed. Brian broke down. "All right. I guess you've earned it. But, just for tonight. . . and no rimming. Tomorrow you find some other butt to bury your face in. . . he's taken." Brian slid into bed on the other side and stroked Justin's soft blond hair until he fell asleep.

The morning following the attack, Justin awakened and asked Brian to drive him home.

"Let's get some boxes so we can pack up your things," Brian suggested.

"I'm not moving back here, Brian," said Justin.

"You can't be serious. Last night you were almost killed. I want you to come back home where you're safe."

"Is that why you want me back here, Brian? So you can play Rage and protect poor, helpless little J.T? You still don't get it. I left here because I was hurting. And it wasn't from a bat to the head or a knife wound. Nothing has changed. Just like Michael said, Brian will never change. You're still going to be out fucking every chance you get. That's more painful to me than what happened last night." Justin saw that his words had stung Brian. He hadn't meant to be so blunt, but he knew that Brian was going to insist that he move in. "Brian you were right all along. All I need is myself. All I have is myself . . . that's probably all I'll ever have."

Justin put his arms around Brian's neck and kissed his cheek. Brian sat in the chair motionless. "I love you, Brian. Thanks for helping me last night, but I want to go home now. I'll be fine."

All day long Brian thought about what Justin had said. He was NEVER coming home. This realization hit Brian like a ton of bricks. He finally understood that no matter what he did for Justin, the only way he would ever have a chance would be to change his evil ways. Well, no way. . . no fucking way was this little blond brat going to run his life. Fuck him. He could have his fucking fiddle player and may they live happily ever after.

Michael had decided to go to Brian's loft to check on his friend. It had been weeks since he'd seen him and the night before Brian had finally shown up at Woody's. His appearance had frightened Michael. He looked worse than when Justin was in the hospital after the bashing. Michael had tried to speak to him, but Brian looked right past him like he wasn't even there. It was like watching the walking dead and Michael was scared.

After ringing the bell several times and knocking on the door, Michael used his key and entered the loft. It was late afternoon and the loft was in total darkness. Assuming that Brian was out, Michael started to leave. He looked toward the bedroom and saw his friend standing alone in the dark room. He was totally naked.

"Brian, what's wrong with you?"

Brian hesitated and then staggered down the steps to face Michael. "Nothing's changed, Michael. Brian Kinney will never change. Is that what you told Justin? You sealed my fate, best friend. I'll never get him back."

"Brian, you're drunk. Let me get you into bed." Michael tried to steady his friend.

"Sure, why the fuck not? It's what you've wanted your whole life. You want me to fuck you. You sure fucked me, didn't you, best friend? He never would have gotten the idea in his head if you hadn't told him that I would never change."

Michael did the only thing that he could think of to shut Brian up. He pulled his face toward him and kissed him on the mouth. Brian returned the kiss with his eyes closed at first, but when he opened them his body froze. Justin was standing in the doorway watching.

"Justin!" Brian called out. The boy disappeared down the stairway.

Michael saw the pained look on his friend's face. "Brian, wait! I'll bring Justin back, I promise. This is my fault, not yours."

Brian looked pleadingly at Michael and then sat on a chair at the counter.

"Justin! Wait!" Michael ran after the boy and grabbed him by the arm and spun him around.

"Fuck him, Michael! And fuck you, too! You two assholes deserve each other." Justin screamed at him. Hot tears were streaming down his face.

"I know what you're thinking. But we both have to stop thinking of ourselves and what we want. Brian is in a bad way and he needs you, Justin . . . not me. I don't care if either one of you ever talks to me again. Go back there and save his life, for Christ sake."

Justin pulled away from Michael and ran back in the direction of the loft. Once in the loft he searched for Brian. He found him sitting in the dark in the living room just staring into space. Brian didn't flinch when Justin sat down and pulled him into his arms.

Justin knew that there was something seriously wrong with Brian. He had nursed the man through numerous hangovers and drug reactions, but this was something quite different. Justin remembered a doctor that his mother had him see when he was in the hospital after the bashing. He had been very understanding and Justin trusted him. He dug out the doctor's card from his wallet and dialed the number.

"I didn't know who to call. Do you think you can help him?"

"Bring him to the hospital. I'll meet you there."

Justin found Brian's shoes under the bed. He gathered the shoes and Brian's t-shirt and jeans and returned to where Brian was sitting. The man had not moved from his spot on the couch. He didn't look at Justin or respond to his touch as the boy dressed him. Justin was frightened. He had never seen Brian in this condition. He had never seen anyone in this condition. He wondered if it was the alcohol and drugs or if Brian had had some kind of mental breakdown. Whatever it was that was wrong with Brian, Justin was convinced that it was his fault. As gently as he could he pulled Brian to his feet and walked him down to the Jeep.

Justin waited in the hallway while the doctor examined Brian. When the doctor finally re-appeared, Justin asked. "Is he okay? Can I take him home?"

"Justin, the man is a mess. But I think you already knew that. He's sleeping now. I spoke with him and explained what he needs to do in order to take care of himself. Once he wakes up you can take him home. But I must warn you. Unless he makes some extreme changes in his lifestyle, when he makes the next trip to the hospital he just may end up in the morgue."

Justin sat in a chair next to the bed where Brian was sleeping. He was still the most beautiful man that Justin had ever seen. They had been through so much together, and yet, they never seemed to be at peace with each other. There was always something or someone getting in the middle and tearing them apart. This time it was Michael. Justin made a decision.

"Hey, stud." Justin said softly when he saw that Brian was awake. "You ready to go home?"

"What for? Nobody there." Brian turned his back to Justin.

"Look again."

Brian looked at him sadly. "What if Michael is right? What if I try to change, and I can't? What if I fuck it up? What happens then?"

"If you want to change, then you will. If you don't, it doesn't matter."

"Are you coming home?"

"You want me to?"

"It's up to you."

Justin let out a sigh. "I still want to be my own man, Brian. And I still want the same things. I want a man who loves me and wants to be with me. If I meet a tall handsome stranger with smoldering hazel bedroom eyes and an incredibly sexy body who drives me wild in bed and then tells me that he loves me and wants to be with me only . . . if I meet someone like that, Brian . . . I'm outta there."

"I'll take my chances." Brian's expression brightened. "The dog sleeps in the crate. Not on your ass."

"Deal" Justin smiled.

Justin was about to drain the pasta when he heard Brian's key in the door. It had been three weeks since he had moved back into the loft and things had been going well. Brian came home from work every night and they spent their evenings together.

Justin greeted Brian with hug and a kiss as Angst nudged the man's leg. "I thought we weren't going to let another man come between us."

"Maybe we should have him fixed," Justin suggested.

Brian grimaced. "Talk about angst."

Justin was happy, but he sensed that Brian was restless. "The guys are going to Babylon tonight. You wanna go?"

"With you?"

"Of course, with me. We haven't danced in forever."

"We can dance right here, right now." Brian picked up the remote for the stereo. Ethan Gold's violin music blasted from the speakers. Brian looked questioningly at Justin.

"I thought I got rid of it, Brian. I'm sorry." Justin pushed the button, removed the disc from the machine and threw it into the trash. He returned to Brian's arms. "You want to go out?"

"I can't. I have an appointment," Brian answered.

"For work?" Justin asked.

"Of course, for work. I have to see a client," Brian lied.

"Okay, then can you drop me off somewhere?" Justin tried not to show his disappointment. "Daphne asked me to go with her to this dance class she wants to take. She needs a partner to join up and her boyfriend doesn't dance. I told her I might do it if you didn't care. Do you care, Brian?"

"I'll drop you off on the way to my meeting."

Justin arranged to meet Daphne at her school and when Brian was ready to leave they both got into the Jeep.

"Daphne said she would drive me home."

"Good, because I don't know how late I'll be." Brian leaned over and kissed Justin good-bye. Justin then got out of the jeep and waved to him. Just before Brian pulled away from the curb, he noticed a man walking toward the

school. He was absolutely gorgeous. Tall, dark and handsome, smoldering hazel bedroom eyes. Brian swore the guy was eyeing Justin's ass as he walked past him. "Justin!" Brian called out.

Justin turned around and returned to the Jeep. "What?"

"What time should I pick you up?" Brian asked.

Justin wrinkled his brow. "I guess around 11:00. I'll call you on your cell phone."

"I care, Sunshine. . . Later." Brian said. He then started the Jeep and left a bewildered Justin standing in front of the school.

"Hey!" Daphne nudged her friend. "What are you looking at?"

"Oh, nothing. It's just that Brian is acting kinda strange."

"What else is new?" Daphne changed the subject. "I am so excited about this class. The teacher is from New York City. I heard that he is really hot."

"Daph, you have a boyfriend," Justin responded.

"Yeah, and so do you. We can still look, can't we?"

Justin was surprised that he actually enjoyed the class. There were three instructors and a room full of students. Most of them were girls who were paired up together. The instructors would pick students to demonstrate the steps. One instructor stayed in the background and observed. Every once in a while he would call one of the other instructors over and make suggestions. He did not get up to dance until later on in the evening. Daphne had been correct. The man was drop-dead gorgeous and all of the girls were dying to dance with him. "Justin, look! He's getting up to dance. I think he is going to pick a partner. Move away from me." Daphne gave Justin a shove.

"Daph, what the fuck are you doing?" Justin was surprised at his friend's sudden rejection.

She stood in the front of the crowd with a big smile on her face. The instructor moved slowly and gracefully across the room. He stopped and put out his hand. At first Justin thought the man had made a mistake, but when he put his hand out and grabbed Justin around the waist, Justin melted into his arms.

You never really appreciate something unless you have to work hard to get it. Brian was ready to work hard to keep Justin in his life. It wasn't going to be easy and he knew that he would need help. He didn't have much faith in the medical profession. All they wanted was to keep you in therapy forever so they could have a steady income. What he needed was guidance. Someone who would tell him what he needed to do to help himself. Today he had made a decision and tonight he was ready to begin his transformation. It was the reason that he had turned down Justin's offer to go to Babylon. He pulled up in front of the church and was greeted by the Reverend Tom.

Tom was the minister at Brian's mother's church. Brian had chosen him because the man was also gay. As a young boy, Brian had spent many hours at the church and he felt comfortable talking to this minister. He had to start somewhere. If it didn't work, then he would find another way.

"Brian, you seem distracted. Are you sure you want to pursue this tonight? We could set up another meeting."

"No. I'm listening. It's just that something Justin said has been on my mind."

"Am I going to have to drag it out of you?"

"It's all my fault. Every word I have ever spoken to him, Justin has stored up in his head. It seems like he's been saving it all to throw right back in my face. Like, when I asked him to come home. He said that all he ever needed was himself. I told him that two years ago when I was trying to get rid of him."

"I'm sure he's just trying to protect himself, Brian. He's right, he can't depend on you for everything."

"He'd only be disappointed. I've seen to that."

"You've been there when it was important. Doesn't that count for something?"

Brian did not respond. The minister asked, "You seem nervous, Brian. Is there something else?"

"Maybe. When he agreed to move back in, he said he still wanted the same things he wanted before. He knows that I may not be able to give them to him. He said if he found someone who looked like me and was willing to give him what he needs, that he'd leave."

"Brian, that doesn't sound like a threat. What are the odds he would find a man like that?" He must have been joking."

"That's what I thought, until tonight. I dropped him off at dance class and there was this guy who was cruising Justin. He did sorta look like me. Who knows, maybe he'll fall madly in love and beg Justin to marry him tonight. I could be wasting my time here." Brian chuckled. "I must really be nuts."

"I think you underestimate Justin's devotion to you, Brian. You need to develop some kind of communication with him."

"I do communicate with him. When we have sex. It's what I do best, Rev. And when we are together like that . . . I am so sure. But, once we get out of bed . . . I start thinking."

"Maybe next time you should bring Justin. You really should be working this out together."

"No! He doesn't know I'm here. I don't want him to know until I am sure I can do this."

Justin and Daphne walked out of the school together. When Daphne reached the door to her car she looked at Justin, who'd just climbed into the Jeep, and stuck out her tongue.

"What the fuck was that about?" Brian asked.

Justin laughed at his friend's antics. "She's pissed at me. The dance instructor was really hot and Daphne wanted to be his partner. She pushed me half-way across the room so that he would think she was alone. Guess who he picked?" Justin flashed a big grin in Brian's direction."

"Ahhhh. . . you?" Brian managed to grin at the boy.

"Yeah. It was so awesome. We were amazing. He said that I should pursue a career in dance." Justin spotted the instructor as he was leaving the building. "That's him."

It was the same man that Brian had seen earlier. "So how big is his dick?" Brian asked as he started the engine.

"Don't be ridiculous, Brian. I didn't fuck him."

"Justin, I know you. If you spent the night pressed up against this guy's dick, I'm sure you made your presence known."

Justin sighed. "So, how did your meeting go?"

"It was all right." Brian realized the Justin didn't believe him about tonight's meeting being work related. He was tempted to tell him where he had been and what was really on his mind. But it was too soon.

The next day Brian decided to drop in to see Michael on his lunch hour. He waited as Michael finished with a customer. Before he realized it, he had blurted out the story about the dance instructor.

"You're right not to trust him. After all, he did cheat on you before. He may still be fucking Ethan, for all you know. I've seen them hanging around together few times. "

"I don't care about that. Justin told me they are just friends. He should have friends. I have you."

"You never fucked me."

"He made a mistake. We're working on it. I trust him." Brian tried to sound convincing. He didn't want Michael to think he was unsure. Justin was right. They shouldn't allow anyone to interfere in their relationship, not even their friends.

"What about you? How are you managing to keep your tricking a secret?"

"Justin and I don't have secrets. Stay out of it, Michael."

"Sure, stay out of it until they cart you away in a straight jacket because the kid gets restless again. Then you'll need me - again."

"Fuck you, Michael," Justin emerged from the backroom.

Brian put his arm around the boy. "It's okay. He's just looking out for me."

"Like the last time. He hates me, Brian. He wants me out of your life." Justin gathered his books and took off for class.

Brian glared at his friend before leaving the store. When he got to his Jeep he saw Justin on the corner talking to Ethan. Brian got into the Jeep and drove off. It was starting all over again. Brian began to think. How had Ethan known where Justin would be? Was he following him, or had Justin called him? Was Michael right? Were they more than just friends?

Brian arrived at the gym and changed in the locker room. He took his CD player out of his gym bag and when he got onto the treadmill he pressed the play button. Ethan Gold's violin music echoed in his ears. He looked down and realized that he had taken Justin's CD player.

"Justin, how can you be so blind? That old faggot, Michael has had the hots for Brian since they were kids. They're making a fool out of you, Justin. Why else would Brian be defending him?" Ethan asked.

Justin couldn't answer. The seed of doubt had been planted. Even if they weren't fucking, Michael did have a lot of influence over Brian. He wanted Justin out of Brian's life and he was willing to do anything to accomplish his goal.

Ethan sensed that his plan was working. "I bet that's where he's going at night. While you're off dancing with Daphne, he's out with Michael . . . fucking."

"Brian, are you going out tonight?" Justin asked.

"Yeah. Business."

Justin nodded his head. "Daphne called and said that she is dropping out of dance class. Her boyfriend wants her to spend more time with him."

"That's selfish of him. You should still go. You said they are having some kind of contest soon, right?"

"Yeah, but I don't have a partner now."

"Well maybe you'll get lucky and Prince Charming will make you his partner. Really, Justin you should go to class."

"I guess. Hey, too bad you have a meeting tonight. You could be my partner," Justin said hopefully.

Brian sighed. "Justin, it's an important meeting. Now run along to class. I'll pick you up afterward."

"I don't know what to believe. He's been out every night this week at that stupid dance school. He's still seeing that musician. I've been fooling myself, Rev."

"You said that he asked you to be his partner. So what are you doing here?"

"Working on my evil ways?"

"Brian, it's time now to make up your mind about what you really want. Justin is alone tonight. He wants you to be with him. He asked you to dance. If you aren't in his arms, someone else will fill the void. Who's to blame?"

Justin had to concentrate to keep up with his dance partner. Tonight his heart just wasn't in it. He wondered where Brian was right now. Was he in the arms of another man? Was he with Michael? He felt a tap on his shoulder. When he turned around, his heart leaped. Brian Kinney was standing next to him asking him to dance. His partner graciously departed and Justin spent the rest of the evening floating on air.

Later that evening, after they had made love for hours, Justin wanted to talk. "You can't believe all the things I was thinking, Brian. I actually wondered if you were out fucking Michael."

Brian rolled over in bed and looked into Justin's eyes. "Why would you ever think that?"

"I guess I was letting my imagination run wild. When I'm alone I get like that. I start wondering what you're doing and who you're with. And then people start to make suggestions and I start to doubt you."

"Tomorrow night we're going out. . . together."

"We were awesome tonight." Justin looked up at his lover and smiled.

"We're always awesome in bed." Brian smiled back at him.

"I meant dancing. We could win that contest, I bet. The first prize is a trip to the Bahamas. Will you be my partner?"

"I thought you'd never ask."

"What are we doing here?" Justin asked the next evening as they pulled up to a church. "I thought we were going out."

"This is what I wanted to show you. I've been meeting with the minister here every night. I'm trying to work some things out. He thinks that maybe you should be here, too."

"You're getting therapy? That's great, Brian. Now I feel like such a shit doubting you like I did. We let our so-called friends interfere, again."

"You think we'd learn." Brian smiled ruefully.

"Let's go inside. Maybe we could go to dance class to practice afterwards."

Everything was going smoothly. Brian attended dance classes with Justin and Justin accompanied Brian to the church for counseling. Business was also busy and among all these activities Brian had not had much time to think about his former lifestyle. He still had pangs of desire every now and then and he still was not sure if he would ever be able to change his ways completely. But every time he needed something, Justin was there for him.

The dance contest was to be held on Thursday night. Justin had invited everyone to attend, even Michael and Ethan. "I want them to see how perfect we are together." He was really looking forward to that night. Brian took pleasure in the fact that he was able to make Justin happy for once. Until he got a call from a client in Dallas. It seemed that the client was unhappy about some commercials that Brian had been working on for them and they wanted him to come to Dallas or face losing the account.

"I can't go to the contest with you. I have to go to Dallas. It's business. It's very important that I keep this client, Justin."

Justin was crushed, but he knew that Brian was not just dumping him. His job was important to him. "I understand. Go. I'll get someone else to dance with."

That evening Brian got on the plane with a heavy heart. He'd let Justin down once again, choosing his career instead of Justin's happiness. How was he ever going to make it up to him? Brian was grateful that he had been booked into first class. He put his carry-on into the overhead compartment and took out a pillow. He sat next to the window and tried to get some sleep.

Just as he had nodded off, he felt someone nudge his leg. Not wanting to encourage conversation with his neighbor, he decided to ignore it.

"Hey, stud." Justin whispered in his ear.

Brian opened his eyes and came face-to-face with the most beautiful smile he'd ever seen.

"What the fuck are you doing here? What about the contest?"

"Fuck the contest. I thought about what I really wanted to do tonight you know I've never been to Texas. I bet they have some really hot guys there."

"Justin, I have to work. You'll be stuck in a hotel room for the entire trip."

"I love waiting for you in hotel rooms. If I get bored, I'll go out and sketch some cowboys or something. I want to be where you are. By the way, I put the ticket on your credit card."

Brian reached over and hugged him. "You never cease to amaze me."

"And you me. Now, what about that mile high club? Does it really work? Where's the bathroom?"

"Save it, Sunshine, we're still on the runway."

"I told you it would never work. I don't want you coming around here anymore." Michael stocked the shelves as Ethan followed him around the store.

"You've got a lot of years invested in Brian, Michael. You can't give up. They may seem close now, but you know that sooner or later Brian will fuck things up for good. We have to be ready."

Ethan left the store. Michael continued to be torn about his involvement in Ethan's plan. If Brian ever found out that he was trying to break up his relationship with Justin, he would never forgive him. In his heart Michael knew that it was wrong. Brian loved Justin and was much happier with him in his life. But Ethan Gold had a way of wearing Michael down and giving him hope for a future with Brian. The boy was pure evil. Michael was no match for his manipulative controlling manner.

Brian and Justin arrived at Woody's wearing matching black cowboy hats and boots. They were both grinning ear to ear as if they had just returned from a honeymoon trip.

"So, how was Texas? Did you two do any bareback riding?" Emmett asked sarcastically.

"Only in our bed," Brian shot back.

"How did things go with your client?"

"Great. He wanted to change the commercial to show a bunch of cowboys line dancing on tables. Guess who's featured in the commercial?"

Justin grinned. "The hottest gay dancing couple from Pittsburgh."

"You and Brian are in the commercial? That ought to sell a lot of beef," Emmett joked.

"Come on, Emmett, have you ever done line dancing?"

"Only in the men's room at Babylon." Justin dragged Emmett out to the dance floor.

"Where's Michael?" Brian asked as he looked around the bar.

"Probably at the store," Ted offered. "He spends way too much time there. I can't believe he's got that much to inventory. I wonder if maybe he is carrying on with someone and he doesn't want his friends interfering"

"And he'd be right. There's nothing worse than someone who uses the term 'friend' to stab you in the back," Brian said.

"Where did that come from, Brian?" Ted asked.

"Forget it." Brian dropped the subject. While he'd been away with Justin he'd done some thinking about the events that had led up to Justin going off with Ethan. Brian did not want to think that Michael had intentionally poisoned Justin's mind against Brian to get rid of the boy once and for all. But while they were away from Pittsburgh, he and Justin had begun to talk. Several things that Justin said were almost exact quotes that Michael had used.

Could it be that his best friend had betrayed him in the worst possible way?

Brian and Justin left early for home. When they arrived, Angst crawled under the bed and retrieved an article of clothing. He brought the offending garment to Brian, growling the whole time.

"What the fuck is this?" Brian asked.

Justin took a scarf from Brian's hand. "This is Ethan's scarf. No wonder the dog went nuts, he hates Ethan."

Brian looked questioningly at Justin. "Just how the fuck did this get under our bed?"

Justin looked up at him innocently. "I don't know. I've never brought Ethan here, Brian. I swear."

Angst looked up at Brian and growled again. Brian looked back at Justin and things started to come together in his head. "I believe you. Someone is fucking with our heads. I'm going to straighten this out tonight."

"I'll go with you, Brian. Ethan is a little nuts. I can't believe he would break into our place. I'm going to tell him to fuck off."

"No, you stay here. I'll take the dog." Brian snapped the leash on Angst and left the apartment with the scarf in his hand.

To Brian's surprise the door to Michael's comic book store was not locked. When he entered the store Michael emerged from the back room. Angst wagged his tail and greeted Michael. Brian took the scarf and placed it on the counter between them.

"You've seen this before?" Brian knew the answer before he asked the question. "Come on, Mikey. You can't lie to me."

"All right, Brian. What do you want me to say?"

"I want you to tell me why you would do this to me. I trusted you with my life, Michael, and you stabbed me in the back. You used your key to my place to plant this and the CD. And you also switched my CD player with Justin's and put in Ethan's disc, didn't you?" Brian was becoming angry. "What else did you and that pathetic kid plan? I know you're the one who planted this because the dog would have ripped Ethan to shreds."

"It was all his idea, Brian. That kid is unbelievably controlling. He said that we needed to be ready. He said that Justin would never stay with you if you didn't change and I believed him."

"You are so pathetic. You're the one who planted doubts in Justin's head about me way before Ethan came into the picture. Justin told me that you were the one who made the suggestion that he was living with me only because I felt

guilty about the bashing. He left me that first time because of you, Michael. Your mother talked some sense into me that night. She said that I loved him as much as he loved me, and I knew that she was right. I wanted him to stay, so I went to Babylon and brought him home. But you weren't so happy about that, were you? You started to hang out with him using that comic book crap as an excuse so that you could plant more doubts in his head. I was so stupid. I let you do it and I even defended you."

"I did it because I love you, Brian. Always have, always will. Remember?"

"Nice try, best friend. I have news for you. I love Justin, and I always will. You're just a distant memory from the past which is fading quickly." Brian took the dog and left Michael standing behind the counter with a blank stare on his face.

"You're home!" Justin leaped into Brian's arms and kissed him. "What did Ethan do? You didn't hit him or anything, did you?"

"It wasn't Ethan who did this, Justin. It was Michael. Ethan took full advantage of Mikey's simple mind to manipulate him. If I were you, I would just call that asshole and tell him his plan didn't work. He's no threat to us and he never will be. Michael's the one who's dangerous to have around."

"Michael?" Justin slumped down onto the sofa and Brian joined him. "Brian . . ."

"Don't try to defend him, Justin."

"But . . . he's your best friend."

"Not anymore. I have a new best friend."

Justin grinned. "The dog?"

"No, you . . . you little twat. I hope you're up to it. I can be pretty difficult to deal with at times. You may have to push me off a cliff to get me to realize when I'm acting like an asshole."

"I'm up to it. You wanna see?" Justin climbed onto Brian's lap and kissed him. Brian returned the kiss and then lifted the boy off his lap and stood up.

"Let's go to bed," Brian suggested. "And remind me tomorrow that we need to put new locks on the door."

"To keep everyone out of our lives," Justin agreed.

"And to keep us in here . . . together."

Sins of the Father

Brian and Justin deal with the aftermath of the destruction of their relationship.

Sins of the Father - Part One

"Brian, would you care if I wasn't here? Would you miss me?" Justin's words echoed in his head.

"What the fuck?" Brian Kinney awoke out of a drug-induced sleep. He instinctively reached across the bed to seek comfort from the warm body on his left, as he had done every morning for months. But, the pillow was cold . . . Justin was gone. The reality of the situation sunk in as Brian got up to shower. He stood under the warm water and soaped his body and thought about the last time that he and Justin had had sex up against the glass. It had been the last time, the very last time. Had he known it then? Had Justin?

"Fuck him!" Brian turned off the water, stepped out of the shower and went to the sink. He recalled the time that Justin had admonished him for wanting to give up Gus. 'He'll think you didn't want him.' That little twat had infiltrated every inch of Brian's loft with his presence. In the kitchen Brian could feel him still. 'You gotta eat something.' There was no escaping him in this place. Thank God he had a job to go to, with no time to think about personal matters at the office.

His growing business would be his salvation. Justin had never even been to his office. There were no painful memories there. Brian had not anticipated the pressure that would be placed on him once he became a partner in the firm. He wasn't sure he was up to the challenge, but he had no choice. For now on it would be work, work, work and fucking, fucking, fucking. No time for thinking. Life would continue on as it had before that fateful night. The night that he spotted that angelic blond figure walking out of the fog. "Fuck him! I don't need him. I don't need anyone," Brian said out loud as he finished his coffee and left for work.

"One, two-year-long fuck. That's all I was to him. He never loved me. It was just my school- boy fantasy. I was a fool to think that he did."

"Now, you listen to me, Sunshine." Debbie Novotny shook her finger at the boy in front of her to emphasis her point. "I've known Brian Kinney since he was a school-boy, and I am telling you that he most certainly does love you."

"Deb, you don't know how it was. He never treated me like a partner. In all the months I lived with him, slept with him, fucked him, he never once said that he loved me. Lately I felt like he didn't even care about me. I need that, Deb. Ethan loves me and wants to be with me."

"Yeah, but you don't love him. How the hell is he going to feel when he figures that out? You're using him to push Brian out of your head."

Justin did not answer.

"Honey, Brian is a difficult man to love. I always thought that you would be the only one strong enough to get through that wall he hides behind. You have touched his heart, honey. I can see that, even Michael has finally accepted it. Brian Kinney loves you."

"What am I going to do, Deb? I like Ethan. I like the way he makes me feel. I don't want to hurt him. I've hurt so many people that I love - my parents and now Brian. There must be something wrong with me."

"You're a 19 year old boy, who's fallen in love. It's not your fault that you picked the most ornery, stubborn asshole on the face of the earth to devote yourself to. I can't tell you what's right or wrong, baby. Your heart will tell you that. You have to believe in yourself. But please, take it slow with Ethan. That poor boy doesn't know what he's gotten himself into."

"I'll be careful, Deb. I've already told him that I won't move in with him."

"Of course you're not moving in with him. You're coming home with Vic and me. You have no idea how much he's missed seeing your smiling face at the breakfast table every morning. He loves you very much, you know. And so do I. And I'm not afraid to say it."

"I love you both, too. But I don't think that Michael would like it if I moved back. He hates me for what I did. And I hate him for telling Brian."

"What did Michael tell Brian?"

"He's the one who told him about Ethan. He saw me kissing Ethan and he went running to Brian. He's always hated me, Deb. He's wanted me to disappear from that first night. I bet he's happy now that he has Brian all to himself."

"Michael does not hate you. He admires you. He'd never admit it, but you are everything that Michael has always want to be. You're brilliant, talented, gorgeous and blond. . . and you've got Brian Kinney's heart. I'm sure that Michael said what he did to warn Brian, not to hurt you. It doesn't matter anyway, Sunshine. You're a part of our family whether Michael likes it or not. If you want to come home, I'll deal with Michael."

"Thanks, Deb, but I think that I have to straighten things out with Michael myself."

Brian tried to concentrate as the video commercial played on the small T.V. The conference room was full of young men and women, all intent on making an impression on their new boss. As the image of a young couple eating ice cream from the same cup flashed on the screen, Brian unconsciously uttered the words, "Ice cream kisses."

"Brilliant, Mr. Kinney. That says it all. Love, innocence, sweetness, sex . . . " Brian shook his head and left the conference room. He made his way back to his office and locked the door. There was no place to hide. No sanctuary. Justin was in his head and his heart. What the fuck was he going to do? He physically hurt. The pain was unbearable. It had only been a week, but it felt like years. He had to find something that would stop the pain. Brian opened the top drawer in his desk and took out a photo. Justin's sweet innocent young face smiled back at him.

After work Brian went directly back to the loft. Once inside he slammed the door shut and turned off his phone. He had stocked up on liquor and drugs and was planning on spending the evening alone. . . totally alone. He found no comfort in being with his friends. Michael had been the one to tell him about Justin's infidelity. It was unreasonable to associate Michael with what had happened, but he was not thinking reasonably. Mel and Lindsay blamed him for what had happened. Mel had warned him that Justin was unhappy. He had shrugged it off. If only he had known how much it would hurt . . . Maybe he should have bought those stupid roses. Would Justin still be here? Would it have been enough? How could he have convinced Justin that he cared, without leaving himself exposed?

To his dismay, there was a knock at the door. "What the fuck? Go away!"

"Brian. It's Mother. I have some things for you. Please let me in."

'Oh, fuck.' Of all the people on the face of the earth, the last person that he wanted to see right now was his mother.

"It's not a good time."

"Brian, I took the bus here. I am not leaving until you open this door."

Brian took a deep breath and then complied with his mother's wishes.

"Well, I see you've started drinking early."

"Started. I haven't stopped."

"You're just like your father. He was unbearable when he was drunk. And violent. Oh, he was violent when he was sober, but when he drank . . ."

"If you're in fear for your life, Mother, then maybe you'd better leave now."

"I'm thinking about selling the house. I've started to clean up the attic and I found these photos. I thought you might like to have them. They're mostly pictures of you and of your sister when you were little."

"What's the matter, Mother? Are you finally sick of dwelling in the past . . . the so-called good times?"

"You should have them. I won't be around forever and you should have a record of your childhood, Brian. To pass on to. . . " Joan Kinney stopped mid-sentence. She had yet to come to terms with the fact that her son was gay. He would never have a family to carry on his name.

Brian took the photo albums from her and put them down on the bookcase. "Thanks. Do you want a drink? I have some wine." He hadn't realized it, but sparing with his mother was a welcome diversion from wallowing in pain. There was nothing that tied his mother with Justin. It would be safe to talk to her. He poured her a glass and they sat facing each other at the table.

"Are you planning on moving in with Clair?" Brian asked, hopefully.

His mother laughed out loud. It was the first time in a long time that he had heard his mother's laughter. "Lord, no. I love your sister dearly, but we could never live under the same roof. I haven't really given it much thought. I suppose a warmer climate would be nice. I was thinking of looking in the area where my sister is in Florida."

"That's a great idea," said Brian.

"Would you miss me, Brian?"

Unexpectedly, emotion gripped Brian's heart. Those were Justin's words. Why hadn't he answered him? Of course I would fucking miss you. You should have known that. Brian didn't realize that tears were streaming down his face.

"Brian, are you all right?" His mother's voice brought him back to the moment.

Brian wiped his tears with the back of his hand. "Yeah . . . it's allergies," he muttered. "Would you excuse me a minute?" Brian disappeared into the bathroom. He splashed cold water on his face and looked into the mirror. Justin's face looked back at him. 'Fuck him for me.' The look on Justin's sweet face broke Brian's heart. Justin had been hurt that Brian wanted him to fuck another guy. Why hadn't Brian seen that look then?

Brian returned to the living room and pick up the photo album. He brought it over to the table where his mother was sipping her second glass of wine. As he turned the pages Brian studied the faces in the photos. He had not seen these pictures in years. He studied the faces of his parents. Had they ever been that young? Had they ever been in love? The photos of his mother reflected the gradual decline of her spirit. By the time she'd given birth to Brian she'd know that the man who had fathered her children no longer loved her and, in fact, probably never had.

"Brian, I'll be going. You look tired. You should try to get to bed early."

"I'll drive you home."

"No, thank you. You've had far too much to drink. I will, however, let you call me a cab."

After his mother had gone Brian tried to take her advice and get some sleep. After lying awake for a while he decided to get up and look at the pictures again. He sat on the sofa and poured himself a glass of Jim Beam as he looked through the album. He thought about his parents. His mother had always said that he was just like his father. He looked like him, sure. But, there were differences. The main difference being that his father had not been gay. He'd have affairs with other women, but Brian was convinced that all men did. Whether gay or straight, every man had the capacity to cheat on their mates. Brian realized that, like his father, he did drink far more than he should, but he had never been violent. He recalled the time that Justin read him an article from the newspaper about the boy who had been murdered. They'd had rough sex that night, but Justin was never in danger. Brian was sure that he would never hurt the boy. At least not physically.

Brian recalled a conversation that he'd had with his mother at church. She'd said that his father was cruel. He'd never given her a kind word in over thirty years. She'd said that he ignored her. 'Shit. . . I am my father.'

"More coffee?" Deb held the pot over the cup and looked into Brian's expressionless face.

"Are you trying to kill me? This coffee sucks. These eggs suck. Everything about this place sucks."

"Well pardon me. If you're waiting for the scenery to change, forget it. He was here earlier, but he went to class." Debbie put the pot down on the counter and returned to the booth. "Move over." Brian grimaced as she slid in next to him in the booth. He braced himself for one of her pseudo Mom lectures.

"I'm not going to say anything that you haven't already heard. I'm not going to interfere I just wanted you to know that I love you. A person needs to hear that every once in a while to remind them that they are important to someone. And that's all I have to say on the subject." She reached over with both hands and caressed Brian's face. "As for you, Brian Kinney, don't give up on him. He still loves you every bit as much as he ever did, if not more so."

"I'm sure calls out my name every morning when his lover puts his dick up his ass."

"You still don't get it. There are other things in life besides sex. Like good tasting coffee and eggs." Debbie got up to leave.

"Has he moved in with . . . him?" Brian looked up at her with puppy dog eyes.

"No. At least he's matured in the past two years. The kid's smart enough to know not to jump from one bed to the next without a safety net. Look, Brian, I don't know what went on between the two of you. But Justin lost hope, and that's why he left. No one can tell you how to live your life, but as I see it, the next move is yours to make . . . or not to make. It's up to you."

"Of course I don't hate Justin," Michael insisted. "Why would he think that?"

"Because you spilled the beans to Brian," Debbie explained. "I'm not even going to get into that. Although I do hope that your intention was to help them. I wouldn't want to think that you had some kind of plan to get rid of Justin. You can't blame Justin for thinking it, Michael. You've never made a secret about your feelings for Brian."

"He's my best friend. I had to tell him. It's in the Best Friend Handbook. Now if you're finished reaming me out, I have customers."

"I just wanted you to know that I've asked Justin to move back with me and Vic. And before you start whining about it, I want you to know that I consider Justin family. I'm not going to abandon him because he fucked up. If I abandoned you every time you fucked up . . . well you get my point. There'll be no discussion about it."

"I wasn't going to complain. I think it would be a good idea for him to move back in. No matter what he thinks, I care about him. It's just that I have to care about Brian more. He has no one else to look out for him."

"How is he holding up, honey? He was in the diner today and he looked thin and tired."

"Brian will always be Brian. He'll get over it."

"I'm not so sure," said Debbie.

Michael looked up from his computer screen and was surprised to see Justin standing in front of him.

"Hi, Michael."

"What do you want, Boy Wonder?"

"That's J.T. to you. I want to continue to work with you on the comic book. I need the money."

"Are you sure you won't be using your super powers to slowly suck the life out of me?"

"Business is business, Michael. We shouldn't piss on our success because of our personal differences. I can work with you, if you're willing to give it a try."

"The comic book is selling great. The on-line orders are pouring in and I get e-mails everyday asking when the next issue will be coming out."

"Then we'd better get to work."

Michael touched Justin on the arm as he was setting up his computer. "Justin, I'm sorry. Not for telling Brian, but for not talking to you first. I should have known something was wrong. I was supposed to be your friend too."

"I fucked up," Justin answered. "I should have told him myself. Let's not talk about it. I want to put Brian Kinney out of my mind. It helps for me to bury myself in my art work."

"It helps me to forget my problems when I'm working on the story. So let's get busy."

Michael and Justin came up with the outline of a story and Justin began to do some preliminary drawings in his sketch book. It felt good to be working on something that was total fantasy. When he was drawing, Justin felt like he was in control of his life.

One afternoon Michael was in the backroom after Justin had left for the day. He had accidently knocked Justin's sketch pad off the table. He picked it up and smiled as he leafed through the pages of drawings of their creation. Then he got to the last page that Justin had drawn on. It was in the back of the book separate from the other pages. On that page were the most beautifully detailed drawings of the human form that Michael had ever seen. They were drawings of Brian and Justin embracing in different poses. Each one was a work of art in its own right. Michael

could see the deep emotional tie that bound the two men and the depth of devotion that Justin had in his heart for the subject. It touched Michael deeply. He carefully removed the page from the book.

Justin sat quietly and listened to Ethan play his violin. When he was finished the musician jumped off the bed and kissed his audience of one. "I was amazing. I know I'm going to win that contest. And I will have you to thank, my inspiration."

"You'll have yourself to thank. You've worked very hard. I had nothing to do with it," Justin answered.

"You have everything to do with it. I close my eyes and I see you when I play. I feel you inside me and it makes the most incredible music flow."

Justin smiled. "Ethan, you're so full of shit. You were great before you met me."

"But now I am magnificent. Now I am complete. At least as complete as I am going to be until you move in here with me."

"That would be a mistake. I need time, Ethan. I need to have my own space."

"So, are you still living with your mother?"

"Until the weekend. I found an apartment. Mel and Lindsay are letting me move into the apartment over their garage. I can supplement my rent by babysitting for Gus.

"Brian's kid?" Ethan asked.

"It's okay. I don't think that Brian has even been to see him in a month."

"Great Dad."

"It's not his fault. He's been working a lot since . . . at least that's what I've heard. I don't want to talk about him. I'm looking forward to having my own place for the first time in my life."

"You may need some company that first night," Ethan suggested hopefully.

"Maybe on the second night. But, yeah, I would like some company." Justin smiled at the thought of sleeping in his very own apartment.

"I've got to go. I promised Michael that we would finish up the new story. He's anxious to get it done so that we can start taking orders."

"You're working with Michael again? You never told me that."

"I guess I forgot. The comic book is selling well and we both need the money."

"Justin, what's going on? You're moving in with Brian's lesbians, babysitting his kid and working with his best friend. Do I see a pattern developing here? When is it my turn?"

"Ethan, you've been busy with your music. My life has revolved around Brian Kinney since I was in high school. Did you think I could just snap my fingers and forget him? His friends are a part of my life."

"And what am I, Justin? Would you even care if I wasn't here?"

"Of course I would care. Ethan, I love being with you. I love the way you make me feel."

"But you don't love me."

"Ethan, it takes time to love someone. I want to go slow, get to know you before I allow myself that privilege. Can you understand?"

Ethan put his violin down and embraced Justin. "Don't take too long . . . please."

"Michael, what's up?" Brian asked as he opened the door. "I thought you and Benjy were going to Babylon."

"And I thought that you were dead. Where have you been Brian? You haven't called me all week."

"I've been busy. Work, work, work, fucking, fucking, fucking. Business as usual."

"At least you're not drunk yet. I want to talk to you about Justin."

"Who has he been kissing now? Oh, didn't I tell you? It doesn't matter anymore. He moved out."

"Stop playing games and listen to me. It was hard for me to tell you about Justin. I know you, Brian Kinney. I know how much you love him. I sat there in the hospital with you for three days while you cried your eyes out. You were terrified of losing him. You still are. I'm not even going to try to make sense of your behavior. Justin had told me that he was miserable. He tried to talk to you, he tried to talk to me. But we both ignored him. What was he supposed to do? Hold his feeling inside for 10 or 20 years and let it eat away at him? You're a strange man, Brian. I have loved you for a lot of years, but you are not an easy person to love."

Brian sat on a stool at the counter, expressionless, as Michael continued his lecture.

"Now for once in your life you are going to listen to me. Justin still loves you. I know it for a fact. If you still love him, and I believe that you do, go find him and tell him."

"Did he tell you that? He probably said it to make you jealous. Besides, he's with someone else. How much could he have loved me in the first place?"

Michael took a folded paper out of his pocket and handed it to his friend. "This much, Brian. He loves you this much." Brian spread the paper out on the counter and stared at the drawings. "I found it in his sketch book. He drew those pictures today."

Brian's eyes did not move from the paper before him.

"It's your move, Brian."

After Michael left, Brian carefully folded the paper and put it into his pocket. He sat down at the computer desk and thought for a moment. "What next?" He needed to let Justin know how he felt. He owed him that much. But, what would he say and how would he approach the boy? Brian took out a pen and paper and began to write a letter to Justin. The next morning he stopped off at Michael's store before work to leave the letter where Justin would be sure to find it.

"Where have you been?" Ethan asked.

"Out on Liberty Avenue peddling my body for coins, why?" Justin was in no mood for one of Ethan's jealous rants.

"I just miss you when you're not here, that's all. My mind start to imagine all kinds of things." Ethan looked incredibly sad. Justin, regretting his harsh words, put his arms around the musician and kissed him.

"I'm sorry. I'm just tired, that's all. I had to stay late at school to do some research and then I had to go to the comic book store to get the next edition ready for the printer. Being independent does have its drawbacks."

"Justin, you weren't at the comic book store. I went there looking for you a little while ago. Michael told me that he hadn't seen you all day."

Justin's patience was wearing thin. "Fuck you, Ethan. I was home, if you must know. I was babysitting for Gus. I know you hate it when I spend time with Brian's son. I don't like lying to you, but you're making me crazy. And I don't like being stalked."

"Justin, do you love me?"

"Ethan, don't do this."

"I need to know."

"I don't know what I feel for you. I don't know what I feel about anything anymore." Justin grabbed his books and stormed out of Ethan's apartment.

"Michael, has Justin been here since Monday?"

"Yeah, he's been here almost every day. We have a lot of work to do. Don't worry . He went out to get some art supplies. You won't run into him."

"Has he said anything to you about . . . me?" Brian asked. He had not wanted to involve Michael, but he needed to know. Justin must have read the letter by now. Why hadn't he called? Everything that Justin ever wanted to know was in that letter. Brian had poured his heart out and opened up to another human being for the first time in his life, and he had been ignored.

"No. We don't talk about you . . . at all. It's sorta like an unspoken rule. It's the only way we can work together."

"Has he been acting . . . differently?" Brian tried to coax information from his friend.

"We've been really busy getting the next issue ready for the printer. We finished it yesterday. Tomorrow we're going to Woody's to celebrate. I haven't noticed Justin acting differently. Why? Did you finally talk to him? What did he say to you?"

"No, I didn't talk to him. I haven't seen or heard from him since that night. Forget it, Michael. I have to go."

Brian had parked his Jeep in a parking lot across the street. He got in and sat in the driver's seat, thinking. What did it mean? Why was Justin ignoring him? Brian thought about the drawings that Michael had shown him. If Justin still thought of him in that way, then there must be another reason why he hadn't called. Maybe he had feelings for Ethan, maybe Justin was starting to fall in love with him. 'Fuck this! What am I doing sitting here agonizing over a fucking teenager? If he wants the musician, let him go.'

Brian was about to start the Jeep when he saw Justin running down the street. The boy slowed down before approaching the comic book store. Justin stopped and looked over his shoulder, then he opened the door and went inside.

Brian was frozen in his seat. He stared at the door and fought the urge to run across the street and go inside. He had not seen Justin since that horrible night at Babylon. If he'd had any doubts about his own feelings, they evaporated the moment he laid eyes on the boy. It wasn't over. He had to find another way to get Justin back.

Brian pulled up to the bar in his Jeep and turned to his companion. "Here's the deal. We go inside and I introduce you as my new boyfriend, the love of my life. We kiss and grope each other all night like we can't get enough. I'll give you \$100 now and \$100 more after you do your job and convince everyone that we're together."

"Two hundred bucks! You don't expect me to fuck you, do you? Just because I'm an actor, doesn't mean that I'm gay."

Brian turned to the boy and gave him a look of disgust. "Yeah, right. Don't worry, you're not my type."

The entire gang had gathered at the bar to celebrate the completion of the second issue of Rage. Every head at the table turned when Brian and the blond trick entered the bar. The boy was the spitting image of Justin. "Hi, boys! Are you having a party without me?" Brian grabbed the young man and kissed him passionately on the mouth. "Let me introduce you. I want to meet my new boyfriend . . . the love of my life, Jeffery."

Jeffery smiled uncomfortably. Brian pulled out a chair and sat down, pulling Jeffery into his lap. No one at the table spoke until Michael broke the silence. "Brian, what the fuck do you think you're doing? This is a private party. You don't belong here."

Justin, who had been sitting silently at the other end of the table next to Ethan, got up and raised his glass. "Leave him alone, Michael. I think it's great that Brian is here with us. Rage would never have been so successful if it hadn't been for Brian. We should all toast his new found happiness."

Slowly everyone at the table complied with Justin's request. Brian sat there with the blond kid on his lap and downed a glass of Jim Beam in one gulp. His plan had been shot down before it even got off the ground. Justin didn't give a shit. Brian half-heartedly attempted to continue with the charade. But by the end of the evening, the boy he'd proclaimed to be the love of his life stood at the bar watching a movie on the television as Brian drank an entire bottle of whiskey all by himself. As soon as Justin and Ethan left, Brian grabbed his 'boyfriend' and made a hasty exit out the back door. He paid off the actor and offered to drive him home.

"You have to be kidding. I don't get into cars with drunks. If I were you I'd call a cab." Brian stood in the alley. . . alone and defeated.

"I don't get it, Justin." Ethan said when they returned to his place. "How could you be so calm? The so-called love of your life shows up with his new boyfriend and you act like you're happy."

"Ethan, I love Brian. Of course I want him to be happy."

"You really do love him, don't you?"

"I never stopped loving him. I just finally woke up to the fact that he did not love me."

Ethan sighed and gave Justin a hug.

"What was that for?"

"That was good-bye, Justin."

Ethan went over to his dresser and opened a drawer. He took out an envelope and handed it to Justin.

"This belongs to you. I've kept it from you because I thought your feelings toward Brian had changed. I was wrong. It was wrong of me to take your letter."

"What is this?" Justin took the envelope from Ethan. It had his name on it in Brian's handwriting.

"Brian wrote you that letter and left it on your computer desk at the comic book store. I went there looking for you one day and I found it. I didn't want to stir up old feelings by giving you the letter. I thought that I still had a chance with you. But I know now I was wrong. You will always belong to Brian. You really do love him, unconditionally."

Brian undid his tie and poured out a glass of wine. As he read his mail he sipped his drink and tried not to think about what had happened. There was a knock at the door. Brian had expected a visit from Michael sooner or later. His behavior the night before had been deplorable and he was sure that Michael would be over to let him know that in no uncertain terms.

Bracing himself for a lecture, Brian slid open the door. Justin stood in the doorway holding Brian's letter in his hand. "Can I come in?"

Brian had been caught off guard. He had given up on the letter and on ever seeing Justin again. And yet, here was Justin hold his letter in his hand.

Justin walked past him and then turned to face him. "Ethan stole your letter. He kept it from me. Last night he returned it. I had no idea, Brian."

Brian stood silently waiting for Justin to continue.

Justin moved closer to him. Brian could almost feel his touch, smell his scent, taste his sweet lips. "It's a beautiful letter, Brian. Did you mean all the things you said?"

Brian put his head down and answered. "I wrote it, didn't I?" Justin took a step closer. Brian wanted so badly to reach out to him, to pull him into his arms and never let go.

"If you had told me half this stuff when we were together, I never would have left you. If you really feel all these things, then why can't you talk to me like this?" Justin held the letter up to Brian.

Brian looked him in the eyes and answered honestly. "I don't know why. When I look at you . . ." Brian hesitated. He could feel his emotions over take him . . . "I kinda lose my mind."

Justin put his arms out and Brian fell into his embrace. They kissed for the first time in months, gently, tenderly. The kisses turned passionate before Justin broke away. Brian clung to him, staring deeply into Justin's eyes. Before either of them could speak there was another knock at the door.

"Fuck, Michael. I'm busy! So fuck off!" Brian yelled out.

"Brian, it's your mother." Justin began to laugh. "I have something for you and I need to talk to you. It's important. I won't stay long."

At this point Justin was doubled over with laughter. "Do you want me to hide in the closet?" he asked.

"Nobody is hiding in the fucking closet. Not any more." Brian grabbed Justin around the waist from behind. He walked them both over to the door and slid it open once again. Brian greeted his mother. "Hi, Mom. You remember Justin?"

Brian held Justin firmly to him as his mother stood in the doorway. Once she had regained her composure, she commented. "Your lover?"

"Well, he was about to be, until you showed up."

Justin managed a greeting between gasps for breath. "Hi, Mrs. Kinney, nice to see you again."

Joan Kinney strode past both men and put her cake plate down on the counter. "Brian, if you don't let go of that young man, he's going to pass out." To Brian's dismay, she took off her coat and ensconced herself on the sofa. "Brian, I have something I need to discuss with you. I called my sister in Florida. She said that she was planning on starting a catering business. We decided that it would be nice if we could be in business together." Joan turned to look at her son who still stood near the front door. "Brian, come over here and listen."

Brian released his grip on Justin, but was not ready to be physically separated from him. He grabbed Justin's hand and dragged him across the room to join his mother on the sofa.

"Brian, I want you to take a look at this proposal." Joan handed Brian some papers, forcing him to release Justin's hand.

Justin saw a photo album that Mrs. Kinney had placed on the coffee table. "May I look at this album?"

Joan turned her attention toward the blond boy. "Certainly, dear. They are Brian's baby pictures. He was such a beautiful baby. It's a shame he will be the last of the line."

Brian shot Justin a warning look. Justin was enjoying watching Brian squirm.

Brian glanced at the papers in his hand and said, "I'll show them to my lawyer. Now, if there's nothing else, I really have to . . ."

"Brian, I need to discuss some financial matter with you." Joan looked over at Justin. "It's private, dear. Would you mind?"

Justin took the hint. "Sure, I have to get home." As he got up to leave, Brian followed him across the room and grabbed for him. Justin pulled away at the door and said, "I really do have to go."

Brian reluctantly released him. "When will I see you?"

Justin turned and flashed his most incredible smile. "You'll see me."

Brian collapsed against the doorframe and muttered to himself, "Why wasn't I born an orphan?"

Justin was glad that Brian's mother had interrupted them. If she had not shown up, they would have done their making-up in bed. Not that Justin wasn't ready for it, but bed was not where their problems lay. Brian had always managed to communicate while they were having sex. If Justin was upset about something, instead of talking, Brian would take him to bed and Justin would be carried away to a place where nothing else mattered. If only they could live in that place they would go on happily ever after. But, there was more to a solid relationship than sex.

That's what Justin wanted to build with Brian. He was sure that if he and Brian could learn to talk to each other, they could live a happy life together. Justin knew that the best course of action to achieve his goal would be to take things slow with Brian.

Brian slept soundly for the first time in months. When he awoke he started to think about what his next move should be. If only his mother had not barged in on them yesterday. He was sure he would have had Justin in their bed, where he belonged. Brian figured that Justin was holding out for his romantic evening. He would need some help to accomplish this, so he showered and dressed and headed for the diner.

"Buy you breakfast?" Brian offered.

Emmett Honeycutt turned his head and looked behind him, then turned back and asked Brian, "Are you talking to me, honey?"

"Fuck, yeah. I need your expertise."

"Don't ever wear that orange flannel shirt again."

"Not your fashion expertise. . . what the fuck is wrong with my shirt?"

Emmett rolled his eyes. "Brian, I know that you must be mentally challenged lately, what with the loss of not one, but two loves of your life in the past weeks. So what are you talking about?"

"Romance. You know, like in those old movies you're so fond of." Brian grinned. "I need you to help me romance Justin. . . please."

"In that case, I will be most happy to help. Frankly looking at the two of you moping around for weeks is getting boring. I miss the fondling, the kissing, the off-color sexual innuendos. Go ahead. I'm listening."

"I need you to describe a perfect romantic evening. And don't leave out one detail." Brian produced a pen and paper and began to take notes.

"First I would start off with the theater or a concert. Something romantic. Then there would be the candlelight dinner in a cozy French restaurant on the Seine."

"This is Pittsburgh, Emmett. I need a place in Pittsburgh."

Emmett continued to describe the details of romance to Brian.

Brian wrote furiously. "What kind of flowers?"

"Roses, of course."

"What color roses?"

"Red." Emmett shook his head in disgust.

"What else?"

"Candles."

Brian tore of the paper from his pad and handed it to Emmett. "Good, now I need you to set this all up for Saturday night at that Shadyside Inn that you mentioned. Here's my credit card. Buy anything and everything that will make Justin feel special. I want the best that money can buy. Nothing cheap, no Chinese lanterns."

Justin sat on Ethan's bed and listened as the violinist finished practicing. When Ethan put down his bow Justin stood up and applauded. "That was incredible. I'm sure you'll win the money. You deserve to win."

"Even after I tried to fuck up your life?"

"I fucked up my own life. I probably would have done the same thing, if I was in your place."

"I bet you would. How are things going with Brian?"

"Slow. I'm not going to rush into anything."

Ethan went to his dresser and opened a drawer. He returned with an envelope and handed it to Justin.

"Oh, fuck. Another letter? Should I open it?"

"It's a ticket to my concert. I want you to be there, Justin. Cheering me on from the balcony. I'll be playing just for you."

Justin hugged him. "I'll be there."

On the night of the concert, Justin went with Emmett to pick up his tux. It reminded him of the time that Emmett had helped him get ready for the prom. "Wow. This is one expensive tuxedo. Are you sure they didn't make a mistake?"

"Nothing but the best for you, sweetheart. You look so beautiful, they should pay you to wear it."

"Emmett, you're full of shit. But, I do look kinda . . .special. Don't I?"

Justin took a cab to the concert hall and found his seat in the balcony. Right before the concert started the lights dimmed. Justin felt a hand on his. He turned and saw Brian sitting next to him wearing a matching tuxedo.

Justin tried to concentrate on Ethan's performance, but the touch of Brian's hand on his was the only thing he could feel. Brian squeezed his hand when Ethan's performance was finished. They waited until the winners of the competition were announced and they both applauded loudly when Ethan was handed a check for \$25,000. They left the concert hall together, hand in hand ,and got into a limo waiting for them at the curb.

"Brian, thank you. It was really nice of you to come to Ethan's concert, especially after what he did. How did you know where I would be sitting?"

"That musician friend of yours drives a hard bargain. That ticket cost me almost as much as the grand prize. No complaints, sitting next to you for two hours was well worth the cost."

"Where are we going?"

"Somewhere ridiculously romantic. We are going to dine at the most romantic restaurant in glorious Pittsburgh. Then it's up to you. I will either drop you off at Mel and Lindsay's where you can go to bed . . . alone. Or you can come with me to . . . heaven."

"I'm going with you." Justin proclaimed. He put his arms around Brian's neck and kissed him. "But, Brian, what about Jeffery?"

"Who's Jeffery?" Brian asked as he poured Justin a glass of champagne.

"The love of your life, remember? From Woody's the other night?. He was hot. At least I always thought so. He goes to my school. I would have fucked him, but I found out that I'm not his type. He only dates long legged co-eds with huge breasts."

"What can I say? I guess my gay-dar wasn't working that night," Brian admitted as Justin chuckled.

Emmett had made a reservation for them at the historic Shadyside Inn. After dining in the restaurant on the first floor of the rustic, yet romantic Inn, they walked hand in hand up the stairs to their room. When they arrived, they were both struck speechless. Emmett had done an outstanding job. The scent of roses filled the room. Candles were lit and the room glowed softly. There was soft music coming from somewhere, but the couple was too engrossed in each other to notice.

Brian grabbed Justin around the waist and kissed him passionately. Justin pushed him back, but held onto his jacket. "Brian, let's take it slow. I want to savor every moment."

"You want to torture me. Okay, I get it." Brian slowly slid his hands inside of Justin's jacket.

"What the fuck is this?" He pulled an envelope out of the pocket.

Justin grabbed for it. "Give it to me. It's my letter."

Brian handed it to the boy and smiled. "You carry it around with you? Now I know you have to get out of that lesbian apartment. You're turning into one."

Justin put the letter back in his jacket which was now slung over a chair. He slowly slid his hands inside of Brian's jacket. "What the fuck is this?" He pulled a folded paper from Brian's pocket. Brian rolled his eyes as Justin placed the paper on a table and unfolded it.

Justin looked at him questioningly. "Where did you get this, Brian?"

"Michael gave it to me. That's how I knew you still cared."

"Michael? I thought Ethan had ripped it out of my book." They both looked down at the art work. Brian entwined his fingers with Justin's. With his other hand he pointed to one of the drawings. "I don't remember ever doing that. Maybe we could try it now. In fact, if we tape this up over the bed we can use it as a guide so we don't repeat ourselves."

Justin turned around and faced him. "We don't need any guides in bed. I think we have that down perfectly. It's when we get out of bed that we need some guidance."

Brian began to fumble with Justin's tie. "Can we talk about that later?"

"Yeah, later." Justin unbuttoned Brian's shirt and let it drop to the floor. His shirt, pants, and underwear soon joined Brian's on the growing pile.

The bed was large with an overstuffed mattress. They both sank into the middle of the mattress the minute they got into the bed. They made love, slowly and intensely until they finally came up for air hours later. Justin decided it was time to talk.

"What are you willing to give me, Brian? I don't mean financially. I mean what are you willing to give of yourself? Has anything changed for real? Or are we just missing each other too much to think straight?"

"I want you to come home. I want to promise that I won't ignore you or push you away again, but I'm not sure I can keep that promise. For so many years I've only had to think about myself, my desires, my needs. This relationship thing is a whole new world for me. And you've made it too easy for me to take you for granted. It's your job to make me listen when there is something important you need to tell me. You can't just take off and try to hide behind some dumb musician."

"I tried to tell you, Brian. I was scared. I thought you would make fun of me, which you did. Or that you would tell me to fuck off, which is also what you did. I couldn't find a way to get through to you. I shouldn't have given up. I love you too much. If I had know about the things you wrote in the letter, I wouldn't have been so insecure about your feelings for me. You never told me."

"Well, now you know." Brian gently pushed Justin onto his back and looked into his eyes. "Do you feel important tonight?"

"Yeah." Justin smiled up at him.

"Do you feel special?"

"Yes."

"I guess we can check out and go home then."

Justin lifted himself up by his elbows and pushed Brian back down on the bed. He straddled the man and held his hands over his head. "No fucking way!" Justin smiled as Brian struggled to get up. "No fucking way are we leaving here until you say it. Tonight you are going to tell me out loud that you love me." Brian started to laugh as Justin used his tongue to tickle him on his sides.

"It wouldn't count if you tickle me." Brian struggled against the boy's attack.

"Say it!" Justin continued his tongue assault

Brian could not control his laughter. Between gulps of air he heard himself say. "Love ya!"

He looked into Justin's eyes and said it again. "I love ya."

Justin smiled back at him. "I love you, too."

They woke up the next morning, tangled together in a loving embrace. Neither man wanted to move. They didn't want to disturb the moment. What lay outside the door was the real world. A world in which there were pressures of every kind waiting to threaten their newfound closeness.

"What next, Brian?"

"I want you to come home."

"What if it happens all over again? I don't think I can take it. Has anything really changed?"

"We'll know to be more careful. I'll try to make room for you in my life. You need to stay close and have faith in me."

"I'm scared."

"It's your move, Justin."

Sins of the Father - Part Two

Brian awoke to the sounds of thunder rumbling and rain pelting the windows. He reached over and grabbed at Justin's side of the bed. . . it was empty. Brian panicked for a brief moment, until he heard the toilet flush. Justin found his way back to bed and crawled in next to Brian. Brian reached out and pulled Justin in closer. It was Friday night. They had the whole weekend to be together and he was going to make every moment count.

Justin had decided that he wanted to continue to live in his apartment over Mel and Lindsay's garage. Brian had wanted him to pack up his stuff and move home to the loft the day after their romantic interlude at the Shadyside Inn. Justin, however, still wanted to take it slow, staying at the loft only on weekends. At first, Brian had said that he understood. Justin could take all the time he wanted. But four months had passed and weekend love fests were no longer enough for Brian. He wanted Justin to come home for good.

They had worked out a few of their problems. Communicating had become a little easier. If Justin was upset about something, he would tell Brian. If Brian ignored him or gave him a smart answer, Justin would leave little drawings where Brian could find them. It was a variation on their love-making guide. Justin would draw a picture of himself with an expression depicting the extent of his feelings. The expressions would range from a pouty mouth or scowling-faced Justin if Brian forgot an important date or forgot to call him, to a picture of Justin with his hands around Brian's throat if Brian had gotten drunk and left Justin stranded somewhere. These visual reminders that Justin needed attention were pretty much all that was needed. Brian would find the pictures in his car or in his briefcase and usually wound up smiling to himself at Justin's resourcefulness. He would write Justin a note and bring it to him at school or the comic book store. Brian would stand there while Justin read the note so that he could see him smile when he got to the end. Brian always signed the notes 'Love ya.'

Sunday evenings were always difficult. Brian would start drinking and then he would become moody. Justin found himself leaving the loft earlier and earlier to avoid an ugly scene. Brian's drinking was becoming a problem and even Brian was starting to realize it. Being a partner in his own firm was rewarding, and yet much more time-consuming and frustrating than he had anticipated. The timing of his promotion had been unfortunate and it had almost cost him any chance at happiness when he took his frustration out on the only man that he would ever love.

This particular weekend Brian had brought home several projects with Monday morning deadlines. The rain had continued all day Saturday and Justin was becoming restless. He had spent the evening arranging the baby pictures that he had framed and put on a shelf in Brian's living room. Justin had asked his mother if he could have some of his own baby pictures to keep. He carefully intermingled his photos with Brian's. Brian watched him curiously. "What are you doing, nesting?" he asked hopefully.

Justin grinned at him, and continued to fuss with the pictures. When he was finished he put his arms around Brian's neck and whispered seductively into Brian's ear, "Can we go to Babylon tonight?"

Brian had consumed almost an entire bottle of wine and was about to move on to something stronger. Justin massaged his shoulders and purred into his ear, "Take a break. You're way too tight."

Brian pulled the boy into his lap. "You're the one who's tight, remember? I can't go out. I'll never get this done if I don't stick with it. I'll make it up to you in a little while. Why don't you get the bed warmed up?"

"Right." Justin got up and got into bed as Brian had suggested.

Brian poured himself a glass of whisky and worked until the computer screen started to appear blurry. "Fucking piece of shit." Frustrated, he turned off the computer and downed what was left in the glass. He looked over at the bed. Justin had fallen asleep.

Brian stripped off his clothes and got into bed with Justin. He began to kiss the boy on the back of his neck. Justin moaned and rolled over on his side. "Let me fuck you tonight," the boy whispered.

"No! Roll over." Brian put his hand on Justin's back and tried to push him into position onto his stomach. Justin fought him playfully. Having lost patience with Justin's little game, Brian put his hands on Justin's arms and forcibly pushed him over onto his back. Justin roughly pushed Brian's hands away. Something in Brian snapped and he put his hands around Justin's throat and pressed down until the boy struggled for air. Once Justin stopped moving, Brian pushed him onto his stomach and entered him. Justin gasped in pain as Brian pushed into him. Brian ignored his partner's cries. Justin eventually fell into rhythm with Brian's thrusts and the two reached simultaneous orgasms.

It took a while for Justin to pull himself free from under Brian's unconscious form. He stumbled into the bathroom to survey the damage. He had red marks on his arms and around his neck that would be sure to turn up as bruising in the morning. His lip was bleeding and his ass was sore. They had had rough sex before, but never this rough. Justin felt his stomach churn. He bent over the toilet and vomited. His head began to spin. After throwing some cold water on his face, Justin made his way back to the bed. Brian had not moved. Justin considered getting dressed and going home, but he knew that when Brian woke up he would be very upset. It really wasn't his fault. He had a lot of pressure on him from his job. Justin did not want to add to his frustration. He lifted the covers, slid into the bed and closed his eyes.

Justin awakened from the night's rest with a headache. Brian was still sound asleep when Justin got out of bed and put on his clothes. He was glad that he had brought a long sleeved turtleneck to wear. Justin didn't know how Brian would react to the bruises. He went into the bathroom and was relieved to see that the swelling in his lip had gone down. Brian appeared in the mirror behind him. "Good morning, Sunshine." He put his arms around Justin's waist and kissed him on the ear. "Why are you all dressed?"

"I thought we'd go out for breakfast." Justin's stomach had settled down and he was hungry.

Brian picked up his toothbrush. "You're mad at me. I'm sorry I fell asleep on you. I'll make it up to you later."

Justin realized that Brian had no memory of what had happened the night before. "I'm not mad at you. I was asleep before you. I guess it's a sign of old age."

"Speak for yourself, Sonny Boy."

There was a knock at the door and the two men looked at each other with curiosity. "Who the fuck would be coming here before noon on a Sunday? It must be someone peddling religion or something."

"I'll get rid of them," Justin volunteered. He went to the door and opened it. "Hi, Mrs. Kinney."

"Good morning, Justin." Joan Kinney strolled past Justin and went directly into the kitchen.

"Brian, your mom's here!" Justin called out.

Brian didn't answer. Justin heard the shower running.

"You want me to get him?"

"No. You'll do. I want you to try this." Brian's mother had cut a piece of cake and was holding it out for Justin to taste.

"Wow! It's really good," Justin proclaimed between bites. "What is it?"

"It's called a seven layer cake. I've been having trouble getting the icing just right."

Justin smiled at her. "I think you've captured it perfectly. Can I have another piece?"

"You can have the whole thing, dear. Just make sure that I get that plate back. It's the only one I have with a cover. I was on my way to church and I thought that Brian may want to join me. It's been a long time since we've been to church together."

"Do you want me to ask him?" Justin offered as he munched on his second piece of cake.

Joan Kinney thought for a moment. "What do you think my chances are?"

Justin shook his head sympathetically. "Not good. He's had a bad week."

"I don't want to be late. I'll run along. Make sure to tell him that I expect a call from him soon. I have some things to discuss with him. Good-bye, Justin."

"Good-bye. Thanks for the cake."

The minute the loft door slid shut Brian appeared in the kitchen wearing only a towel. "What the fuck is this?"

"It's really good. You want a piece?"

Brian grabbed Justin around the waist. "Yeah, a piece of you. Come over here."

Justin giggled as Brian kissed him on the neck. "Cut it out, Brian. I'm still starving. We're going out for breakfast, remember?"

Brian pulled at Justin's collar and asked. "What's this?"

Justin tried to pull away. "Nothing. We got a little rough last night, that's all. You know I bruise easily." Justin tried to make light of the situation.

Brian removed Justin's shirt and looked at the marks that he had made on the boy's neck and arms. "I did this to you?" He was shocked.

Justin reached for his shirt. "Forget it. It was my fault. I started it."

Brian pulled the shirt back over Justin's head and kissed him tenderly. "You shouldn't let me do that to you. If you want me to stop, just say so."

Justin was sure that saying 'stop' would not have been enough. Brian did not remember what had happened. Justin knew that his refusal to move back into the loft had Brian frustrated. Added to that, the pressure of his new job and his heavy drinking had caused Brian to snap.

"It's Sunday. You have all day to make it up to me."

"I don't know, it may take more than one day. Why don't you stay here, say, for the rest of your life, and I'll see if I can make it better?"

Justin felt a momentary dizziness. Brian steadied him. "What's wrong with you?"

Justin collected himself and answered, "I guess I'm hungry."

"You just ate half of that cake and you're still so hungry you almost pass out? Are you sure you're okay?" Brian looked at him with concern.

Justin managed to smile at him. "I'm fine. Let's go."

By Sunday evening, Brian had started drinking heavily again. This time Brian had been the one who wanted to go to Babylon. Justin said he wanted to go home early and get some sleep. This enraged the already inebriated Brian. They exchanged some heated words and then Brian grabbed his jacket and left. Justin gathered his belongings and started to leave the loft when the phone rang. Thinking that it may be Brian calling to apologize, Justin picked it up. It was the last thing that he remembered doing.

Brian grabbed his trick by the collar and pulled him out of the elevator. As he turned to put the key in his door he saw his mother standing in front of him.

"What are you doing here? It's after midnight. Did someone die?" Brian opened the door and waited for his mother to reply.

Joan Kinney turned to the man who had accompanied Brian home. "Who are you?"

"No one," Brian said, still holding onto the man's coat. "Tell me what you're doing here."

"I was worried . . . about Justin."

"Justin? He's not even here. He went home hours ago. And why do you care?"

"I phoned earlier and he answered. I asked if I could come by and get my plate. I needed it for something I was going to take to the ladies auxiliary meeting tomorrow."

"Does this story have a point?" Brian asked anxiously.

"He said that he would stay here and wait for me. I've been ringing the bell for 20 minutes. Brian, he sounded funny on the phone. His speech was slurred and he seemed confused."

Brian picked up his phone and dialed Justin's cell number. They heard a ringing coming from behind the counter in the kitchen. Brian turned and saw Justin lying face down on the floor. "Justin!" he called out as he rushed to the boy's side. He lifted him up and saw that there was blood on the floor where Justin's face had rested. Brian was frozen with terror. He looked up at his mother. "Dial 911!"

As Joan dialed the number, the trick who had come home with Brian bent down next to Justin. "Hey, let me look at him. I'm an EMT." Gratefully, Brian turned over Justin's care to the man he'd just picked up at a bar.

Brian rode to the hospital in the ambulance with Justin. Joan Kinney followed in her own car. When they got to the hospital, Brian tried to call Justin's mother. She was not at home. He had forgotten that she had gone away for the weekend with Molly. He left a message on her cell phone to call the hospital.

Luckily, everyone in the emergency room knew Justin from his long hospital stay after the bashing. They expressed concern to Brian as he sat in the hallway with his mother. The doctor came out to tell them that Justin had regained consciousness. "He has some cuts and bruises, but he'll survive. He said that he doesn't remember what happened, but that he had not been feeling well all evening. I suspect that he may have had a seizure and fallen. He needed some stitches in his head. I'd like to observe him for a while and then he can go home. I will want to see him in my office as soon as possible to find out the cause of the seizure."

Brian stood up. "Can I see him?"

"For a moment."

"You sure know all kinds of ways to scare the shit out of me." Brian put his arms around Justin and held him tightly. "You got your way tonight. Here we are, alone together. Don't say I never take you anywhere."

"I don't know what happened, Brian. Your mother called about her plate. I thought that you had put it in the cabinet over the sink. I guess I got up on the counter to get it, and then I fell."

"How long have you been having headaches, and why didn't you tell me?"

"You have enough to worry about. The doctor said that I may have had a seizure."

"He said that you can get out of here in a little while." A nurse entered the room and told Brian that Justin's mother was on the telephone at the desk. Leaving his mother with Justin, Brian went to the desk to tell Jennifer what had happened.

"Do you have a mirror, Mrs. Kinney?" Justin asked.

She produced a compact from her purse and handed it to him. He grimaced when he saw the mark under his eye. "I look like shit," Justin said.

Joan took the compact back from Justin and began to apply make-up to the discolored area. "I've gotten pretty good at this over the years. Brian's father was very heavy with his hands, especially when he was drunk." She completed the task and held the mirror up for Justin to see.

"Thanks. But Brian didn't hit me. The doctor said that I may have had a seizure."

"This time, maybe. But what about the bruises on your neck and on your arms? They look a few days old. Did you have a seizure then, too?"

Justin did not answer.

"I know that you have feelings for my son. I suppose I should be grateful that he has someone in his life. But, dear, men like Brian and his father never change. No matter how much you want it, no matter how hard you try, you will always be disappointed."

"I don't believe that. Brian loves me."

"I didn't mean to upset you. I just want you to know that if something happens, and you have nowhere to go, you could come and stay with me."

Justin wasn't sure what Mrs. Kinney meant by her offer. At that moment Brian re-entered the room and told him they were going home. Brian convinced him to spend the night at the loft with him. He was as gentle and loving as he had been when Justin was recovering from the bashing. The next morning Brian dropped him off at school.

During the week that followed, Justin's bruises healed, but his headaches became worse. He made an appointment with his doctor who told him that he had scheduled some tests. The weekend with Brian was pretty much the same as the weekend before had been. Sunday night ended the same way, with Brian storming out the door to go to Babylon. Justin decided that fighting with Brian just wasn't worth it. He should have gone with him, headache or no headache. He decided to follow Brian to Babylon.

"Hey, Emmett, have you seen Brian?" Justin shouted over the music.

"He was here earlier. Maybe he's in the backroom," Emmett suggested.

Justin dreaded going to the backroom to look for his boyfriend. He knew that he would find him fucking some trick. Justin had seen enough of that to last him a lifetime, but he had to find him tonight. He hadn't told Brian that he was going into the hospital for tests the next day. Justin didn't want to have hard feelings between them, in case he should get bad news.

Brian was nowhere to be found. Justin searched all of the man's favorite spots, but no one had seen him. Finally, Justin went outside and spotted the Jeep. When he got closer Justin could see two men fighting in the alley. One of the men was Brian. Justin ran to help him. Brian was on the ground and the other man was kicking him. Justin jumped on the man's back and they both fell to the ground. With a rush of adrenalin, Justin began to punch Brian's assailant in the face. Finally the man pushed Justin off and ran down the alley and out into the street. Justin crawled over to where Brian was lying on his side. He was conscious, but it appeared that he had been drugged. Justin helped him to his feet and drove him back to the loft.

"Do you want me to take you to the hospital?" Justin asked once he had deposited Brian's limp body on the bed.

"No!" Brian answered. "No fucking hospital. Just leave me alone."

Justin could see that Brian's pride was hurting more than his bruised body. He removed Brian's pants, shoes and socks and then covered him with a comforter. When it appeared as though Brian had fallen asleep, Justin took a pillow and an extra blanket and made himself a bed on the couch.

Brian lay awake staring at the ceiling. The drug that the trick/thief had administered had almost worn off and he was able to think. He could hear Justin's steady breathing coming from the other room. The events of the past two weeks had shaken Brian badly. He was terrified that Justin might be ill. Justin had not mentioned anything about seeing the doctor. If he'd gotten good news, Brian was sure that the boy would have said something. He couldn't bring himself to ask. Tonight he had made a fool of himself once again. He had also put Justin's life in danger. And yet, the kid was still here.

Brian got out of bed and slowly walked over to the couch. As he stood there looking down at Justin, the boy lifted the blanket. Brian slid in next to him. They both drifted off to sleep.

In the morning, Justin got up and made coffee. Brian dragged himself into the shower. He felt as if he would never make it through the day. Whatever it was that that asshole had given him still had a hold on his brain. Mondays were always stressful at the office. Justin's silence about his health made Brian even more anxious. By the time he sat down at the table he felt like a pot that was about to boil over.

"What the fuck is this?"

"It's an omelet. You'll feel better if you eat something."

"You've been spending too much time with my mother."

"Maybe if you would spend some time with her . . .," Justin said defensively.

Brian pushed the plate away. "Fuck you. Why are you here? It's Monday morning. Play time is over." Brian regretted his outburst as soon as the words were out of his mouth.

Justin glared at him and got up from the table. He picked up his jacket from the counter and was about to leave when Brian grabbed him from behind. They both lost their footing and fell to the floor. Justin lay on his back staring defiantly up at Brian who was straddling his torso. Without a word Brian released Justin and sat down on the floor, back against the counter. Justin got to his feet and started toward the door. Half-way there he stopped and returned to the spot where Brian sat. He bent down and gently kissed Brian on the cheek. "Later."

Brian looked up at him in amazement. "Later."

Brian stayed in his office for most of the day. Thankfully, by noontime, his head had started to clear. All he could think of was Justin and the gesture he had made that morning. Brian hated himself for taking out his frustrations on the boy. Justin didn't deserve to be treated like that. He wanted to make it up to the him. On his way home from work he dialed Justin's cell phone number. Justin picked up on the second ring.

"Hi," Brian said softly into the phone.

"Hi," Justin answered back.

"Where are you? I need to talk to you."

"Now's not a good time."

"Justin, we need to talk. Nothing is more important."

Justin relented and gave him the address where he should meet him. Brian thought it was odd that Justin was at a gym. Maybe he was getting some kind of therapy. Brian drove to the address and followed Justin's instructions. He found the boy sitting on some bleachers next to an indoor pool.

"What the fuck are you doing here? And what are you wearing?" Brian asked.

"They're my new Speedos. You like 'em?" Justin stood up and modeled his suit for Brian.

"You have a rainbow on your ass," Brian pointed out. "And what the fuck is that thing?"

"That's a trout."

"A what?"

"I joined a gay swim team. The Rainbow Trouts."

Brian chuckled. "You're full of surprises." He sat down on the bleachers and faced Justin. "Justin, did you see your doctor?"

"This morning. He said that they couldn't find anything wrong with my head. I'm supposed to take some medication for a while and stay off high places."

"So they don't know what was causing the headaches or the seizure?"

"Stress, maybe. They said I'll just have to wait and see."

"Why didn't you tell me? I would have gone with you."

"I know you would have. I didn't want to put any more pressure on you. I had a lot of time to think between having the tests and meeting with the doctor. I thought the worst of course that I had a brain tumor or something. I figured I was dying."

Brian shuddered at the thought. "Don't say that."

"You see? That's why I didn't tell you. You want to push all the bad things away, pretend that they never happened. Like when I got bashed."

Justin continued. " Anyway, while I was wallowing in self-pity I did some thinking about death and about life. Brian, you're twelve years older than me. Conceivably, one day I'll be left alone. I don't want to end up like your mother, bitter and angry at you, for wasting all those years. You were right, we're not like straight people. She was trapped by marriage, children and her religion. There was no way she could have left your father. We're not married, we don't have the responsibility of taking care of a kid, and since we are both going to hell, there's no point in getting religious. So we'll be together, when we want to be. And when you don't want to be with me, at least I'll have my own life. I want to experience everything, with or without you. That way when we are together, it will always be good."

"Maybe you should be with someone who can share all those things with you, like Ethan."

"I tried that. It's kinda boring spending all my time with someone who's just like me. The most important person in my life is you. I love you, no matter what. So, I guess you're stuck with me."

"For someone who uses his head for a battering ram, you're pretty smart."

"Thanks."

"I don't know why you put up with me. I could have hurt you this morning, or last week. When I saw you lying on the kitchen floor, my first thought was that I had hit you. I couldn't remember it. You're so much smaller than me. I shouldn't hit you."

"I know you didn't mean it. It wasn't you, it was the alcohol. You're always going to be bigger than me."

"Not if you keep eating all that crap that my mother drops off."

"That's the reason for the swim team. I can spend time here keeping my boyish figure while you ravage all the men at Babylon."

"It scares me to think that I'm capable of doing things like that. Justin, I could really hurt you someday. "

"I'll take my chances. The one you really hurt the most is yourself, Brian. And that really pisses me off, because you don't deserve it. Your mother has drilled it into your head that you are destined to be just like your father. You live your life as if it's preordained. Well, you're not your father. When I look at you, I only see the kind gentle man that I fell in love with. You're smart, successful and beautiful. You're nothing like him. And besides, you have something that your father never had."

"What's that?"

"Me."

A group of men clad in black Speedos with the same rainbow design as Justin's suit streamed out of the locker room. They ran past Brian and Justin and dove into the pool. Justin said, "Unless you plan on doing laps in your Armani suit, you'd better leave." He took off his T-shirt and Brian watched as he walked toward the pool. Brian noticed that every man on the team was following Justin with his eyes as he dove in. There was no doubt in Brian Kinney's mind as to who was 'stuck' with whom in this relationship.

To Justin's surprise, Brian returned to the gym to pick him up after practice. They kissed for a while in the Jeep before Brian posed a question that had been on his mind all evening. "Are you ever coming home?"

"I think about it, Brian. The way things are now, when I'm with you on the weekend, I'm the only man in your life. That's how I want it to be. I don't want to come back home and walk in on you fucking some trick in our bed. I'm not ready to come home to that."

"What if I don't bring them home? I could take care of business elsewhere."

Justin was surprise that Brian would make such a suggestion. Still, moving in with Brian did have other drawbacks. "That would be better, but I'm still not ready," Justin said firmly. "I'll think about it some more, though."

Brian knew that Justin was right. He had become his own man and Brian was proud of that fact. Still, he wondered if Justin was being entirely honest with him about his reasons for not coming home. It had occurred to Brian that Justin might be afraid of him. Brian drove Justin to his apartment at Mel and Lindsay's house. He went upstairs with Justin and the two of them made love in Justin's small bed. At 2 a.m. Brian got up to leave and Justin made no move to stop him. When he got back to the loft, Brian knew that there was no point in attempting to sleep. As he sat in living room thinking, his eyes wandered over to the shelf that Justin had decorated with family photos. Brian got up to study the photos. He smiled at the sight of Justin's toothless little baby face. Brian opened a drawer and took out the picture his father had given him before he died. He sat on the couch and spoke to the picture. "Justin was right. I'm nothing like you. And you can't hurt me anymore." Brian took the photo and carefully placed it in the corner of the framed picture of himself and his sister. He went to bed and slept soundly that night.

The weekend was approaching and Brian had made plans to take Justin to the Shadyside Inn for an evening of romance. They had spoken several times a day and Justin had proclaimed that he was feeling 'bad as new'. It was Thursday, and Brian had a dinner meeting with clients scheduled. He'd tried everything he could think of to pawn these new clients off on his partner, so that he could accompany Justin to his swim practice. His asshole of a partner had turned him down. Brian would be stuck at a boring dinner while Justin was off entertaining a bunch of Speedo-clad, horny homos. He decided to prepare himself for the meeting and make the best of it, but all he could see before his eyes was Justin's ass in those Speedos. When he opened his briefcase, he noticed that Justin had taped a drawing inside. Brian removed it from the case and studied it. The drawing was of the two of them standing, facing each other. Justin's head was resting on Brian's chest and his own head was angled down so that his chin touched Justin's soft blond hair. The couple in the drawing was not smiling, but their faces expressed a deep inner peace. Justin had written across the top of the paper. "I'm ready to come home."

The drawing took Brian's breath away. He carefully folded it and put it in his breast pocket next to his heart. This dinner would be a lot easier to take with the image of Justin's drawing in his head.

The evening progressed as Brian had figured it would. They discussed business for a while until the waitress came to take their orders. The men he was with attempted to flirt with the pretty woman. She brushed off their advances as she took their drink orders. Brian found himself grinning when she asked him if he would like something from the bar.

"I don't drink," he answered.

Sins of the Father - Part 3

"Hey, you're home!" exclaimed Justin.

"I'll bet you're surprised to see me in the light of day. I decided to work through lunch to get these presentations together before I left the office. I fucking hate bringing work home. But, since I finished this afternoon, I get spend the whole evening fucking you. Why are you still dressed?"

Brian had been working every night and every weekend since Justin had moved back into the loft. Justin had noticed a dramatic change in Brian since he'd stopped drinking. He was not sure that it was for the better. The man seemed

driven to succeed where his father had failed. He was so desperate for his firm to move ahead that he spent every waking moment of his day working.

Justin had made the decision to move back in with Brian because he realized that he would never be happy without Brian in his life. They were destined to be together, even if it was only when they were in bed. He gently pushed Brian away when he attempted to lead the boy up to the bedroom. "Later. First you're going to eat something. Then, you get to fuck me. Do you want to go to Babylon later? We haven't danced together in ages."

"We can dance right here." Brian took Justin in his arms and began to lead him around the room. "I never showed you our fancy moves from prom night." He tilted Justin's body back until the boy's head was almost resting on the floor. Then he lifted him up and began to swing him around. Brian lost his footing when they got near his desk and a box that he'd brought home fell to the floor. The contents scattered all over the room.

"FUCK!" Brian yelled. "I've got to get this back together. Everything was in order. There are two presentations in there and now they're all mixed together. It's going to take me twice as long to sort it out as it took to put it together." He got down on his knees and began to collect the papers and photos.

Justin knelt on the floor next to him. He'd rarely seen Brian this upset. Justin put his hand on Brian's arm and said gently, but firmly, "Stop. Tonight we're going to eat dinner, fuck, and then go to Babylon to dance. When we come home we'll fuck for the rest of the night. Tomorrow I'll get up early and fix this mess."

"You wouldn't know where everything goes."

"Hey, are you saying you're THAT much smarter than me? I'm practically a genius. You write down what you want, and I promise I will get it done. Now, let's eat dinner."

Brian was too tired to argue.

"We have chocolate chip cookies for desert." Justin announced.

"You're baking now?"

"No. Your mother brought them over yesterday. Didn't she tell you that she'd been here when you saw her last night?"

"I guess she forgot."

"Do you want to go out?"

Brian considered Justin's question. "I want to be with you tonight. Just you."

"It's been a long time since we had an evening alone. Don't think that I'm complaining, because I'm not. I'm happy to be living here with you, no matter what. It's just that you seem to be working a lot harder than anyone I've ever known. What about your partner? Shouldn't he be doing half the work?"

"He's still my boss. With all the business I've been bringing in you would think that he would be happy. But he hires inexperienced kids just out of school because he's too cheap to pay for quality people. I spend half my day telling them how to do things and they just fuck it up. I feel like we're running a training camp."

"You should talk to him. I worry about you. I don't want you to work yourself so hard that you get sick."

"I'm not sick. I can still fuck your brains out all night long, when I want to."

"You want to?"

They decided to spend the evening at home devouring each other in bed. It had been a long time since they had felt so close.

"Hey, don't you have swim team on Thursdays? You still have time to get into that little black Speedo thing. I could drive you there and watch you torment your teammates with your sexy stroking. Really, I don't want to keep you from living your life, just because I'm home in bed waiting for you."

"Fuck swim team. We're together when we want to be. And I want to be together with you at least 5 or 6 more times tonight."

"Does that mean you're not going to put on the suit?" Brian pouted.

"Are you making fun of me?"

"No. I think you look really sexy with that little rainbow on your ass. That group of lecherous water rats can't take their eyes off you."

"Hey, you don't know them. They're really nice to me."

"I'll bet they offer to soap you up in the shower stall."

"There are no shower stalls. Just one big room with four metal poles. Each pole has six shower heads so 24 guys can shower at the same time. Nice and cozy."

"Thank you for putting that disturbing visual into my head. Remind me to buy you some soap on a rope."

"They all know I have a boyfriend. We talk about you all the time."

"I can just imagine how I fare in that conversation."

"I would never say anything bad about you. Of course, Sly Whybach thinks that you're way too old for me. He said that if I ever need a place to stay I could move in with him and his partner. They want to adopt me." Justin teased.

"Don't let me stop you. Two dicks are better than one, I always say."

"Not everything is about sex, Brian. They're just looking out for me."

"Don't tell me you haven't notice your teammates drooling over the way your ass shakes when you get out of the pool."

"You love my ass. And I have that in writing." Justin reached for a crumpled piece of paper on the night stand. "Right here." He held the letter up for Brian to see.

"What the fuck is that?"

"It's my letter. I carry it with me everywhere. It is getting pretty fucked up, though. I guess I should wrap it in plastic or something."

"Why don't you frame it, like we did your drawing?" Brian pointed to where Justin's drawing hung on the wall over the dresser.

"Don't be ridiculous. I love having it on me. It makes me feel closer to you when I can touch it in my pocket. It's the most precious thing you've ever given me."

"Wow, I got off cheap."

Justin returned his letter to the table and then pushed Brian down onto the bed. Ready for an other round of love making he began to kiss Brian on the lips. Just as things were heating up nicely, they heard the telephone ring. The answering machine picked up the call on the second ring and they heard Brian's sister, Claire's, voice.

"Brian, pick up. Brian, it's important. Mother's had an accident."

Brian reached over and picked up the phone. "What happened?"

"She fell. Come to the emergency room. I don't want to wait here alone."

Justin had already laid out clothes on the bed for Brian. He then pulled on his own pants and T-shirt.

"Where are you going?" Brian asked.

"With you," Justin responded.

"You don't have to come. This is my family and I'll deal with it. You should go to your swim club."

"Well, you're my family, and I'm going with you," Justin said firmly.

When they arrived at the hospital they found Claire sitting in the waiting room. "It's about time."

"What happened, Claire?"

"She fell down the basement stairs yesterday afternoon. At first they thought that she had broken her hip, but the doctor just told me it was okay. Brian, she laid on the floor for an entire day. She couldn't move and no one heard her calling for help. Finally a neighbor came by and she was able to get his attention. Her leg is broken, and she has a few cuts and bruises, other than that she seems to be all right."

"So, what else?"

"Nothing. They're going to keep her here until they can set her leg. It's pretty swollen right now. Brian, she can't be alone when she comes home and she's not moving in with me. I can spend a few hours a day with her, maybe, but I have the children to think of."

"Hire someone. I'll pay for it."

Justin listened to the exchange between this brother and sister in complete astonishment. He couldn't imagine leaving his own mother with strangers when she had just been through such an ordeal. Brian did not even ask to see his mother. He simply instructed Claire to get a nurse and call him about the cost. Justin stopped him as he turned to leave the hospital.

"Brian, aren't you going to see her? She must be very upset. You should go in there and let her know that you're here."

"I can't do anything for her," Brian said. When he realized that Justin was not going to let him off the hook, he turned and asked his sister, "Where is she?"

On the ride home, Brian broke the silence abruptly. "I was at Babylon."

"You didn't have to lie to me," Justin said. "I don't expect you to change. What you do when we're not together is your business."

"I know it bothers you, so I let you think that I went to visit my mother."

"Forget it." Justin didn't want to put any further pressure on Brian by complaining about him picking up a trick instead of seeing his mother. He knew that Brian felt guilty, even though he would never admit it. If Brian had gone where he'd said he was going, he would have found his mother and taken her to the hospital. Instead, she'd spent the night on the basement floor. Joan Kinney had been very glad that Brian had come to the hospital to see her. They'd spoken briefly and he'd assured her that he would take care of everything at home. "Your mom was glad to see you. She loves you a lot. Some people have trouble expressing how much they care. You shouldn't be so hard on her."

Brian looked at Justin and smiled. "Shut the fuck up."

The next morning, Brian took a cab to work and Justin set about arranging the presentations that had fallen out of the box the night before. When he had finished he loaded the box into the Jeep and went to Brian's office to deliver it to him. He was surprised when he got off the elevator and saw his friend Daphne coming out of the ladies room.

"What are you doing here?"

"I just had an interview for a part-time job in the accounting department. Do you think your boyfriend could put in a good word for me?"

"He can't even get them to hire him an assistant, but, I'll ask him. Do you want a ride home? I have the Jeep. I just have to take this box to Brian's office."

When they got to Brian's office his assistant, Cynthia, told them that he was out and would not be back until the afternoon. The phone began to ring on several lines and Cynthia indicated that Justin should put the box in Brian's office.

Justin had never been in Brian's new office. He put the box down on the couch and turned to Daphne. "What do you think?"

"It's really nice. Kinda bare, though. It needs some family photos."

"Brian would never keep my picture at the office. Work is work, and play is play." Justin could not resist opening a few drawers in Brian's desk.

"Hey, he does have my picture. It's in the drawer, but at least it means that he thinks about me sometimes." Justin opened a few more drawers. In one drawer he found a large envelope. He picked it up and opened it. Inside were hundreds of tiny pieces of paper. On each one was a drawing that Justin had left for Brian to find. He had saved every one. Justin looked up at Daphne and blushed.

"Aw, he really does think about you a lot, Justin."

Justin put the envelope back in place and the two left Brian's office. In the car Justin told Daphne about what had happened to Brian's mother. He left out the part about Brian lying to him.

"I don't know how much more he can take, Daphne. I'm really worried about him. When he dropped that box on the floor he looked like he wanted to cry. His hands were shaking. I'm afraid he's going to burn out soon, or worse."

"Sounds serious. At least he's not drinking anymore."

"He still takes drugs, and he's smoking twice as much as he used to. I don't know what to do, Daph."

"Why doesn't he hire someone to help him?"

"That asshole he works for is too cheap. Oh, sorry, Daph, I forgot that if you get the job, he'll be your boss, too."

"Just for the summer. I don't think I will ever even meet him, so you can call him an asshole if you want."

"I have one more errand and then I'll drop you off. I have to go to the bank and deposit these checks for Brian."

"Wow," Daphne said when she saw the amount Justin was writing on the deposit slip. "His boss can't be that cheap."

"This one is his expense check. Reimbursement for money that Brian laid out on trips." Justin looked more closely at the checks. "Hey, that's strange. The authorizing signature on his paycheck says is 'Susan Vance'. I wonder who she is."

"Maybe it's his wife."

"I don't think she works there. Why would she be signing the checks?"

"Maybe the business is in her name. It must be a tax thing. Vance's name is on the other check. But it looks like a personal check. That's seems odd."

"It would be interesting to find out who she is and why Vance reimburses Brian with a personal check."

"Why don't you ask Brian?"

"No. He hates it when I get nosy. I'll find out another way."

"Did you get the box okay?" Justin asked when Brian arrived home from work.

"Yeah, thanks."

"Your new office is nice."

"I hadn't noticed. I don't spend much time in it. In fact tomorrow I'm leaving for Atlanta. I'll be there 'til the end of the week."

Justin made no comment about the trip. "What do you want for dinner?"

Brian kissed the back of Justin's neck. "Why don't we go out for dinner?"

Justin was pleased that Brian wanted to spend time with him before he left on his trip. They ate at a local steak house. Justin asked if Brian wanted to go to Babylon after dinner.

"Are you trying to get rid of me?" Brian joked.

"No, I thought you might want to see your friends. I'll go with you, if you want."

"Let's just go home."

Justin was thrilled that Brian had chosen him over his friends and Babylon. He also wanted to mention something that was on his mind. "Brian, why don't we stop and see your mother on the way home? You haven't seen her since she came home from the hospital."

"I called her a few days ago. She said she was fine. I made sure that she was taken care of by the nurses that I hired. Why would I want to spend tonight visiting her, when I could spend it fucking you?"

"It's just a suggestion. You'll be away a few days and she'd probably like to see you before you go. We don't have to stay long. Just say 'hello' and leave."

"All right." Brian gave in. "I give up. I'll play good son for an hour, but when we get back to the loft . . . it's payback time."

Joan Kinney was lying on a bed which had been set up in the living room. "Brian. How good to see you." Her leg was in a cast, but the cuts and bruises were almost healed. "Justin, would you go up to my room and get my white sweater from my closet?"

"Sure." Justin disappeared up the stairs.

"That nurse you hired can't find anything, and I think that she's stealing from me."

"So fire her and get another nurse."

"They're all the same. I hate having strangers in the house. Claire comes by every day, but the boys are so rambunctious that she spends most of her time here trying to control them. She's really not much help to me."

"I would have come by, but I've been really busy at work."

"I know, dear. It was very kind of you to send Justin over every day to check on me. He's been very helpful. He's the only one that can get the washer to work."

Justin returned with the sweater. "Is this the one you wanted?"

"Yes, dear, thank you."

Brian listened to his mother drone on about how miserable her life was for about an hour. He then announced that he was going on a business trip in the morning and had to get home to pack.

After they had gotten into the Jeep, Brian turned to Justin and said. "You've been here every fucking day? The woman has already told us that we are both going to hell. You're not going to get any brownie points by kissing up to her."

"What makes you think I'm kissing up? She's your mother. If you had the time you would have gone over to help her. The house is not that far from my school. I come here on my lunch hour and do some errands for her. Then I go up to your old room and jerk off on your bed. It's no big deal."

"Believe me, I wouldn't be there even if I did have the time. She only pretends to accept us for appearance sake. If she had a choice, we would be in hell already. Trust me, Justin, that woman is using you."

"I feel sorry for her. Your father was an asshole, your nephews are obnoxious, and your sister . . . don't get me started on her. She is such a bitch. All she does the whole time that she's there is complain about her life. She accused your mother of staging this accident to get attention. Yesterday she called me a smart ass twink. And she asked me how often I have to bleach my hair. I told her it was all natural and that everything matches. I asked her if she wanted to see for herself and she went running out of the room."

Brian laughed as Justin went on with his stories. When they got back to the loft he asked him, "Now that you see how fucked up the Kinney family tree really is, do you still want to be a part of it?"

"I already told you, you're stuck with me. So, I guess I'm stuck with your family."

Brian put out his arms. "Come over here."

Justin was only too happy to oblige. He buried his head in Brian's chest and clung to him.

"I have something for you," Brian said.

"I'll bet you do. Let's get at it." Justin pulled on Brian's arm.

"Not yet," Brian said. He took a small black box out of his jacket pocket. "I know it hasn't been easy for you, with me spending so much time working and traveling. I want you to know that I appreciate everything you do to make my life easier, even if I don't tell you all the time. So here."

Brian opened the box and showed Justin a wide gold ring with the initials B/J in small diamonds hammer set in the band. "It's not what you think. I'm not proposing or anything, but it wouldn't hurt for you to wear it to swim practice so those horny guys know that you're taken."

"Why are you giving me this? You want me to pretend that we're married so guys won't hit on me when you're not around?" Justin handed back the box.

"I just want you to have something nice to remind you of me, instead of that ratty old piece of paper you carry around with you."

"Well, if you put it that way. . . " Justin grabbed the box back from Brian and put the ring on his finger. "I love it! It must have cost a fortune."

"As long as I am making so much money, I may as well spend it. And, just so you don't think this is a one-sided deal. . . I got one for me, too. Now when guys hit on me, it will be even hotter because they'll think I'm married."

Justin put his arms around Brian's neck and pulled him down onto the sofa.

When Brian returned home from his trip to Atlanta on Sunday, Justin volunteered to pick him up at the airport. It frightened Justin to see how pale and thin Brian looked, much more so than when he had left 5 days earlier. "How was Atlanta? Any hot guys down there?" Justin tried to hide his concern.

"Yeah, me. It was so fucking hot I had to change my shirt between every meeting. The fucking rental car had no air-conditioning and the traffic down there was impossible. So, how was your week, Sunshine?" Brian managed to smile.

"All right. I missed you. Daphne got a job working at Vanguard in the accounting department."

"Good. Someone who knows how to add. Maybe I could talk her into giving me a raise."

"Maybe you should talk your boss into getting you some help. Brian, how long do you think you can keep this up? You have to go in to him and demand that he hire some decent people." Justin looked over at Brian. His lecture had fallen on deaf ears, Brian had fallen asleep.

The following day, Justin met Daphne at her new office. "I'm really worried about him, Daph. He's taking drugs to stay awake and more drugs so that he can fall sleep. Yesterday he fell asleep while we were eating dinner. If I hadn't caught him, he would have fallen face first into a plate of pasta."

"I don't get it, Justin. This place should be raking in the money. I see what comes in from the clients and it is big bucks. I wonder where it all goes?"

"I've made up my mind, Daphne. I've got to do something to help Brian. I have a feeling that his boss is hiding something, and I'm going to find out what it is."

"Count me in, Justin. I wouldn't want to see anything happen to Brian. You'd be a fucking mess."

"I knew I could count on you, Daph."

"So what's the plan?"

"We need to see if he has anything in his office that we can use. Brian has a dinner meeting with a client tonight. I'll steal his keys and we'll come back here and snoop around."

"Hey, this is exciting, Justin! Just like the old days."

"It will be exciting if we get caught. You'll get fired, and Brian will kill me."

"I'll take my chances."

Stealing Brian's keys turned out to be no problem at all. He had left them on his dresser when he went out to his meeting. Daphne picked up Justin and the two of them headed for the office. To Justin's surprise the security guard recognized him. Justin told him that Brian had sent him back to the office for some papers. The man asked if Justin needed any help and Justin replied that Brian had given him the keys to his office and he should have no problem finding the papers.

"Oh, fuck, Daph. If that guard ever tells Brian that he saw me here I'm dead meat."

"We don't have time to worry about that now. This is our floor." They got off the elevator and walked down the hall past Brian's office. At the end of the hall was the office of Mr. Vance. Justin tried the knob, but the door was locked. He tried all of Brian's keys, but none fit.

"I have an idea. I'll bet his secretary has a key in her desk." Daphne opened some drawers in the desk opposite Mr. Vance's office. She found a key in the bottom drawer. Try this, Justin."

The key worked and the pair entered the office and turned on the lights. "Quick, Daphne, turn on the computer. I'm going to look through his desk." To Justin's surprise, the desk was not locked. He searched around, but didn't find anything of interest. "Look, Daph, this must be his family." Justin showed a photo to Daphne.

"His daughter is in a wheel chair. I wonder what's wrong with her." Justin put the photo back where he'd found it.

"Look, Justin, he has an accounting program in here that is different from the one on the main servers. It looks like he is keeping his own records for some reason. One of these may be his personal checking account. First I need to figure out his password."

"Try 'Susan'." Justin suggested. Brian was the only password that Justin could ever remember.

"That didn't work, Justin."

Justin went back to the family picture and studied it. Mr. Vance had a teenage daughter and two young sons. There was a boat in the picture and the name on the boat was 'Amanda'.

"Daphne, try 'Amanda'."

"That's it!" Daphne proclaimed. "Now I can access the programs. It may take a while for me to compare the figures to what I remember from the general ledger."

"Why don't you print it out and we can take it with us? See what else is there."

Daphne searched a few programs while the printer ran. "This is interesting. This is a want ad for a newspaper. He is looking to hire a tutor/companion for his daughter. It says 'college student with background in art preferred'.

"Now who does that sound like?" Daphne asked.

"That would be one way of getting some information on the man. Print that out too, Daphne."

Once the printer had finished they removed the papers and returned everything to its proper place. They headed back to the bank of elevators. Before they reached the hallway, they heard the elevator door open and footsteps heading toward them. Justin grabbed Daphne's arm and pulled her into the men's room. The footsteps slowed. Panicking, Justin shoved Daphne into a stall just as the men's room door opened.

"What are you doing here?" a deep voice asked.

Justin felt excitement surge through him as he turned and answered. "Waiting for you."

Brian grabbed the boy and kissed him. Justin pushed Brian up against the wall and returned the kiss with equal force. As the two men grabbed at each other's clothing Justin spotted Daphne silently sneaking away.

Justin met Daphne at the diner after work the next day. "That was so close last night. What did you tell Brian?"

"I told him that I was looking for him at the office. And that the security guard let me go upstairs." Justin grinned. "After you left, I gave him the most amazing blow job. He wasn't about to question me any further as to why I was there. The whole thing totally turned him on."

Daphne covered her ears. "Please, spare me the gory details. I'm so glad I was able to sneak out of there before the sex show started."

"I'm glad it worked out the way it did. He needed a break. He said that he has another business trip to make next week. I told him he should complain and he just shrugged it off. He doesn't know what to do, Daphne. I think that he realizes that he's putting his health at risk with all this stress and very little sleep. Last night he got all loving and mushy, not like Brian at all. Then he said that he had made a new will, leaving me the loft and his money so in case anything should happen to him, I wouldn't be homeless. It really weirded me out." Justin looked at Daphne "Were you able figure out anything about the books?"

"There is definitely something screwy going on. I don't know if it's illegal, but the figures don't match at all. And he does keep a separate set of books. The business is in his wife's name. I asked someone in my department if Mrs. Vance worked there and she laughed. It seems that Susan Vance is a very wealthy woman. She must own the business and her husband runs it."

"Into the ground. He must be stealing money from her," Justin replied. "I called the number in the ad this afternoon. I have an interview with Mrs. Vance tomorrow morning. Wish me luck."

"You're going to need it."

Susan Vance was a soft-spoken, pleasant woman. She reminded Justin of his own mother. When he arrived at the impressive home, he had been led into the garden by the housekeeper. She introduced him to Mrs. Vance, who had been on her knees working with the plants. She removed her gloves and sat down on a bench under a tree. She indicated that Justin should join her on the bench.

"Well, Justin, I must say that I was surprised that you answered my ad. I wasn't expecting that a young man would want a position as a companion to a handicapped girl my daughter's age."

"I hope that won't be a problem for you. I have a sister and I know how girls can be sometimes. It was the part about 'experience in art' that drew my attention. I'm a student at the Pittsburgh Institute of Fine Arts. I've also had an experience of my own as far as being handicapped. Last year I was hit in the head with a bat. I was in a coma for two weeks and in rehab for six weeks. I had lost mobility in my right hand. I thought that I would never be able to draw again, but here I am, living proof that anything is possible."

"Before I take you upstairs to meet Amanda, I must warn you that she has outbursts. She is just finishing with her daily therapy now and that's always stressful for her."

"I understand. She just gets frustrated."

"I hope that you will want to take on the job after you meet her. I think that you two will get along just fine."

"What the fuck do you want now?" Amanda Vance screamed from the other side of the door. "Did you think of some new device to torture me with?"

Susan nodded to Justin and then opened the door. Amanda sat in a wheel chair on the other side of her bedroom. Despite the fact that it was a warm, beautiful summer day, the drapes were tightly closed. The only light came from a lamp on the desk top. The girl was slender in build and Justin thought that if she were to stand she would probably be taller than he. Her long straight blonde hair was tied in the back with a band. Justin noticed that she had focused her penetrating blue eyes directly on him.

"Amanda, this is Justin Taylor. He's answered our ad. He is a student at the Pittsburgh Institute of Fine Arts."

"Well, lah-dee-dah. He looks awfully young to be in college."

"I'm nineteen. I just completed my first year," Justin answered.

"Amanda, please, don't be rude to our guest." Mrs Vance gave her daughter a warning look. "I'll leave you two alone to talk."

Amanda maneuvered her wheel chair toward Justin. She came so close to his foot that he instinctively backed away. "Hey, your mother said not to be rude."

Amanda flashed him a wicked smile. "What's the matter, you've never seen a bitch on wheels before?" She backed the wheel chair away. "Sit down," she ordered. "I don't like looking up at people."

Justin obeyed, choosing a chair near the door. He took out his sketch pad and began to draw. Amanda watched him with interest.

"You've wasted your time. My parents are in denial about the fact that their daughter is a hopeless invalid. I can't walk, my right hand has tremors, and I can't even pee without assistance. So, why are you still here?"

"I need the money. I'm a starving artist." Justin smiled up at her as he continued to sketch. "Last year I got it in the head with a bat. I was in a coma for two weeks and when I woke up I found that I couldn't use my right hand. I thought I'd never be able to draw again. I wanted to die." He turned the sketch pad around so Amanda could see the drawing that he had done of her.

Amanda's mouth fell open. "You're really good. You made me look pretty," she said shyly.

"You are pretty."

"Only from the neck up. The rest of me is useless."

"I thought the same thing when I lost the use of my hand. But I didn't give up, not completely. I learned to draw by using a computer with a special pen. Once I got used to that, I started to sketch again. My hand still shakes when I get tired or nervous. It takes me longer to do anything. And you really don't want to ask me to pour you a cup of coffee. I'm glad I stuck with it, though. I don't know what my life would have become if I had just given up." Justin handed Amanda the sketch. He then got up and walked over to the desk. "Did you paint this?" he asked, indicating a painting on the wall.

"Yes, it was the last one I did before my accident. "

Justin studied the painting of a beach at sunset. "You're really good. I like your sense of color and composition."

"It was an inspirational view. It's the view from my bedroom window at our house on Cape Cod." Amanda guided her wheel chair to a bookcase and picked up a photograph to show Justin. "This is a picture of our house."

"Is that your dad?" Justin pointed to the man in the photo.

Amanda's mood darkened. "He used to be. Before he did this to me."

"I'm sure it was an accident. He'd never hurt you on purpose."

"He was drunk," Amanda said flatly.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Justin put the photo back on the bookcase.

"Forget it." Amanda shook her head. "I know he didn't mean to put me in a wheel chair for the rest of my life, but it helps to blame someone."

"I guess," Justin responded.

"Are you married?" Amanda asked.

"What?" Justin was surprised at the question.

"That ring on your finger. Is that a wedding ring?"

"No. I'm not married." Justin grinned.

"Where did a starving artist get an expensive ring like that?"

"My boyfriend gave it to me so that guys wouldn't hit on me when he is out of town."

"I thought so. All the hot guys are gay."

"Thanks. I think."

"So, your boyfriend travels a lot?"

"On business."

"My father is away on business all the time. Last week he was gone down south somewhere and in two days he goes to Detroit. It's hard on my mother, especially when she has such a bitchy daughter to contend with. What do you do with yourself when your boyfriend is away?"

"Draw. And I'm on a swim team."

"Really? You must look great in a Speedo. Believe it or not, I can actually swim a little. They are trying to get my legs to work, but I don't think I'm making much progress. Maybe you and I will have better luck with my hand. When can we start?"

"You mean I'm hired?" Justin asked.

"I said so, didn't I? And bring your magic pen with you next time. I want to check it out."

The next morning as Justin poured Brian a second cup of coffee, he asked, "Brian, where did you say you were going tomorrow?"

"Detroit," Brian answered while he poured himself a bowl of cereal. "Why do you ask?"

"I like to know where you are. Are you going alone?"

"Who the fuck else would want to be in Detroit? You're not planning on stowing away, are you?"

"No. I just wondered if anyone else from your firm travels. Like your boss. Doesn't he ever have to see clients?"

"He never leaves his office, the dick. He tells me where to go and I go. Someday I'd like to tell him where he can go."

"Anything can happen." Justin grinned and Brian smiled back at him.

Justin brought Daphne lunch. They ate at her desk and Justin told her his thoughts.

"I think I have it figured out. Vance tells his family that he is going to Detroit . . . only it's really Brian that goes to Detroit. When Brian comes back, he hands in his receipts and Vance pays him out of his personal checking account. That way if he has to back up his story he has proof that he was in Detroit."

"Where does he go?"

"That's what we have to find out. We need to do it soon because Brian is leaving tomorrow. I think Vance goes somewhere else, maybe with a girlfriend, and puts the expenses in under Brian's name. That way his wife, and the

business, pays for his affairs. He probably uses the money he skims from the company to keep a secret life. And he doesn't care who suffers for it."

"He's such a dick. What are you going to do next, Justin?"

"I need proof. I think that I'm going to have to hire a private investigator to follow Vance tomorrow and take pictures of where he goes."

"Where are you going to get the money for a private investigator?"

"Where else, Daph? Brian's credit card."

"Justin, he'll kill you."

"I'm desperate. He doesn't usually look at the bills. He just pays them. If he notices, then I'll have to make something up."

"Taylor, you're a dangerous man to hang out with, but, soooo much fun!"

Brian came home from Detroit with a bad cold and a fever. He refused to take Justin's advice and stay at home. Instead he dragged himself into the office to catch up on work that had piled up while he was away.

Justin came home from swim club and found Brian passed out on the sofa. He was still wearing his suit, tie and shoes. Justin pulled on his arm to wake him. "Brian, it's time to wake up and go to bed."

Brian blinked his eyes and looked up at Justin. "What time is it?"

"It's ten o'clock. How are you?"

"How do I look?"

"Beautiful." Justin kissed him. He could tell that Brian still had a fever. "Why don't you take tomorrow off?"

"I can't." Brian got to his feet. "I have a shit load of work to catch up on before my next trip. Vance just told me that I have to go away again for ten days, starting this Monday." Brian pulled at his tie and kicked off his shoes. Justin could tell that he was frustrated at the situation.

Justin put his hand up to Brian's face. "It's okay. Let's go to bed. Tomorrow things will look better."

In the morning, Justin packed up his book bag and left for his destination. He had timed his meeting so that he was sure Brian would be out of the office. The guards and office staff knew him from all the time that he had spent at the office with Daphne. He breezed past Cynthia's desk when she was on the phone. Once he got to Mr. Vance's office, he stopped at the door. His secretary was also on the phone and paid no attention to him. Justin took a deep breath, quietly opened the door and slipped inside.

"Hello, Mr. Vance. My name is Justin Taylor. We haven't met. I am a friend of your daughter, Amanda."

Vance was stunned at the audacity of the young man who stood in front of him. "What the fuck do you want, kid?" he yelled. "You can't just barge in here. Do you know who I am?"

"You are a lying sack of shit. Shut up and listen. I don't think you want anyone else to hear this." Justin took out photographs that the private investigator had taken at Cape Cod and spread them out on the desk. They showed Mr. Vance and a young woman with long blonde hair kissing on the beach.

Vance looked up from the photos. "Is this blackmail? What do you want?"

"I want you to be fair. I know that you've been stealing money from your wife's company to pay for your affairs. You're using Brian Kinney to scam your family and you're cheating him out of what he deserves. Today you're going to get on the phone and hire a top notch, experienced staff to help Brian run this business. You can use the money that you've been stealing to pay for it. And you can forget ever using him as a pawn again. Amanda and I really are friends. I'll make sure that if Brian tells me that he's going somewhere, that you're not going to the same city. If you even think of cheating him again, I will give these pictures to your wife. The party is over, Mr. Vance."

"Brian's behind this?"

"No, and don't you ever let him find out about it. I can't image what he would do to you."

Justin turned and walked toward the door.

"I love my family," Mr. Vance said softly.

"And I love mine. Don't fuck with him again."

When Justin arrived home, Brian was on the phone. "What? Since when? A week?"

Justin wondered if his meeting with Mr. Vance had accomplished his goal. He didn't have to wonder for long.

Brian hung up from the call and dialed the phone. "Cynthia, it's me. Scratch that seven city torture tour that Vance had me scheduled for next week. Book me on a flight to Hawaii. And make reservations at the fanciest hotel you can find. Yeah, that's right, a whole week. Wait, make that two weeks. I think I'm due a vacation. And make that two tickets."

"What was that about?. Another boring business trip?" Justin tried to hide his glee.

Brian grabbed him around the waist and started dancing around the room. "We. . . are going to Hawaii!"

"You're taking me?" Justin asked.

"Who else would I take?"

"Who's going to do your work for two weeks?"

"Today all the hard work that I've been doing has finally paid off. Vance called me into his office this afternoon and told me that he is hiring me a whole staff. People who actually have experience. We can finally have a normal life."

"Normal?"

"Normal for us."

Brian stood on the balcony of their suite and made his last phone call to his office in Pittsburgh. When he was finished, he hung up and walked inside.

"It's official, I'm on vacation," Brian announced.

Justin looked up from his sketch pad and smiled. "I guess your new staff is working out then?"

"Everything is under control." Brian threw himself down on the bed. "Come over here." He beckoned to Justin.

Justin put his sketch pad down and stood up. Brian began to laugh. "I can't believe you brought that silly bathing suit."

"If you don't like it, why don't you take it off me," Justin teased.

Brian grabbed Justin's hand and pulled him over to the bed. He sat up and positioned Justin between his knees. He slipped his hands inside of the swim suit and cupped Justin's well-formed buttocks. Slowly he slid the suit down, exposing Justin's erect cock. Brian ran his tongue up and down the shaft until Justin begged him to suck him off. That was when Brian's vacation began.

Brian awoke in the middle of the night with a nagging sense of dread. He quietly got out of bed, careful not to wake Justin. The feeling persisted and he went out on the balcony to smoke and think about the recent events and how his life had changed. He still craved alcohol, although he felt that of all his addictions that one would be the easiest to conquer. Brian thought about his father and wondered what his life would have been like if he would have had a 'Justin' to inspire him.

Brian was convinced that Justin must have had something to do with the improvement in his situation at work. That persistent kid would never have taken the abuse that he had endured. He would have found a way out. Somehow, he'd managed to find a way to save Brian. It was when Brian had seen the charge from a private investigator on his credit card that he had become suspicious. He'd thought about confronting Justin, but he knew that Justin preferred to do his good deeds anonymously. It would remain an unspoken secret between the two of them, for the rest of their lives. Brian loved that about Justin. He loved the way they could communicate without words, without credit for good deeds or blame for the bad ones.

Were real marriages as perfect as the silent bond that he and Justin shared? Brian didn't think they were. What they had was unique. Justin was his perfect mate. Now he had everything. A successful career, financial security, devoted friends and someone to share his life with. All that, and he even had a son. So what was nagging at him? Why was he feeling so unsettled?

Justin emerged from the room wrapped in a white sheet. "What are you doing out here?"

Brian put his arm around Justin's shoulder and kissed him on top of his head. "I just couldn't sleep."

"You're supposed to be on vacation, so relax. Stop thinking so much. Everything is perfect."

"That's what I was thinking. Everything is too perfect. What will I have to angst over? What if I get bored and start fucking things up on purpose?"

"You had to work hard for your success, for your sobriety and for me. You deserve everything you've got, Brian. And now you want angst? That's fucked up."

"You look so sexy in that sheet." Brian pulled at the material.

"I thought you were bored with me. I guess I'll have to stir things up once in a while. We could get a dog, or a baby. Or maybe we could ask your mother to move in with us."

"Will you shut up?"

"And what if I don't?"

Brian pulled him closer and kissed him passionately. "I was wrong. I'll NEVER be bored with you around. You're my pleasure and my angst all wrapped up on one natural blond package."

Coming Home To You

Coming Home To You Part I One Step Forward

Brian paced the floor of the loft with his cell phone planted next to his ear. He had called every number that Lindsay had given him and was still having no luck reaching her. Mel and Lindsay had stopped over the night before to ask Brian if he could take Gus for a few days. Mel's aunt had passed away and they needed to travel to Florida to sit Shiva. At first he was glad to have the company. The loft had seemed like a mausoleum since Justin had left him the previous weekend. But at 3:00 AM Brian had been awakened by the screams of his infant son. The boy had cried on and off for the rest of the night. It wasn't the lack of sleep that bothered Brian. It was the fact that he had a very important meeting scheduled for nine o'clock that morning. The plan had been that he would drop Gus off at the day care center at 8:30. Now it appeared as if Gus was sick and even Brian Kinney was smart enough to know not to take him out when he wasn't sure what was wrong with his son. Brian had no experience in caring for sick babies. Gus had always been sweet and happy when he'd taken him in the past. He was about to give up hope of ever reaching Lindsay. He knew that in the next few minutes he would have to make the decision to either drop the kid off at his day care and pray that they wouldn't notice he was sick, or call his office and have them cancel the meeting.

Suddenly, the door to the loft slid open, startling Brian. He hadn't expected anyone. Maybe it was Lindsay and Mel returning to claim their child.

"I thought you'd be at work," Justin said from the doorway. "I needed some of my stuff. I can come back another time."

"No!. Come in. I was just trying to reach Lindsay."

Justin walked over to the port-a-crib where Gus was sniffling. He picked up the weepy child and the boy attempted to smile at him. "Hey, Gus. What's the matter? You gotta cold, huh?" Justin cuddled and rocked the little boy. Gus rested his head on Justin's shoulder and closed his eyes.

"How sick do you think he is?" Brian asked. "I need to drop him off at day care in a few minutes and then get to work. I have a presentation to give at nine."

"He seems hot, Brian. I wouldn't take him out. Where's Lindsay?" Justin asked.

"In Florida with Mel. Someone died."

"Did you call the sitter they usually use? Maybe she could come over."

"Of course I did. I got a machine." Brian had been so caught up in his situation that he had not realized that this was the first time he had spoken to Justin since the night of the Rage party. "What are you doing here, anyway?"

"My morning classes were cancelled today so I came by to get my stuff. I guess I should have called first," Justin said. He realized how awkward the moment was for both of them. Brian was anxious about work and now he had Gus to deal with. Justin didn't want to cause him any more grief. He made a suggestion. "I can watch Gus while I pack up my stuff this morning. . . If you want."

Brian hesitated. "Are you sure you can handle it? He's been crying non-stop."

Justin was still holding the boy in his arms. He looked down at him and said, "He's not crying now. He'll probably sleep all morning. If I have any problems I can call my mom or Debbie. Don't worry, Brian. Gus is used to having me around."

Brian considered Justin's suggestion. Gus did look comfortable in Justin's arms. If he took him up on his offer he could do his presentation and come home right after he was finished.

"All right. If he gets worse, you call me at work, right away." Brian put on his suit jacket and picked his briefcase. He kissed his sleeping son's cheek. Without thinking he kissed Justin lightly on the forehead.

Justin raised his eyes and looked up at Brian. "Don't worry. Go to work." He walked over to the crib, placed the sleeping baby down and covered him.

Brian watched him from the doorway. When Justin looked at him, Brian simply said, "Thanks." And went off to work.

At eleven o'clock Brian snuck out of the meeting room and called the loft on his cell phone. Justin picked up on the first ring. "How's Gus?" Brian asked.

"He's better, I think. He woke up about a half-hour ago. I fed him some cereal and juice and now he's sitting here drawing a picture of you. "Daddy." Brian heard Gus's baby voice say.

"That's good. Did the sitter call?"

"Nope."

"What time is your class? The meeting is taking longer than I expected and . . . "

"I have a class at 1:30. I'll call Daphne and see if she can come over this afternoon. If not, I can ask Debbie or my mother to come."

"Daphne? Yeah, okay, that would be great. I'll pay her whatever she wants. . . you, too."

"Don't be ridiculous, Brian. Gus is a friend of mine. We're hanging out."

Brian heard his son laugh in the background. "Okay. I gotta go. I'll be home early."

At 8:30 Justin heard the loft door swing open. Brian looked exhausted as he walked in and tossed his jacket over a chair.

"What happened to you?" Justin asked. He had plates and silverware in his hands that he was about to put out on the table.

"You don't want to know. It's been a long day." He stretched his arms over his head and walked over to the port-a-crib. Gus was lying on his back, fast asleep. "Is he okay?"

"Yeah. We had a good time. Look, here's a picture that Gus drew of you." Justin indicated a piece of paper with black and red lines. Justin must have drawn the outline of a man and let Gus fill in the details. It was stuck up on the refrigerator door with a magnet. Justin began to put the food he had prepared onto the plates he had set out on the table.

Brian sat down and watched him. He hadn't forgotten how good it always felt to come home to Justin. The boy smiled as he spoke about the events of the day. It was like nothing had happened between them. But something had happened. Justin had met another man and was in the process of moving out of the loft. And yet, here they sat, eating dinner together. The picture of domestic bliss.

Brian didn't comment. Justin continued. "Daphne came over at noon. We had lunch and then she let me borrow her car so I could move my stuff and go to class. She used the computer to work on a paper. She said Gus watched cartoons and that he didn't cry at all. I came back about four o'clock, did my homework and started dinner. How was your day?"

Brian had not uttered a word. He just stared at Justin while he ate the meal the boy had prepared. "It sucked," he finally said. Nothing more. It wasn't that he was mad at Justin or uncomfortable in the situation. He was enjoying the boy's company tonight. It hadn't occurred to him before that these were the moments he was going to miss most once Justin moved on with his life. Eventually the school boy adoration would tarnish and Justin would finally see him as really was, a bitter, thirty-something ad exec whose selfish nature had lost him the one person he could ever love. Brian looked up and realized that Justin was becoming uncomfortable with his silence. "I miss this," he finally got up the courage to say.

Justin smiled at him. "What, my cooking?"

"Coming home to you."

Justin blushed a little and then pushed his chair back. He got up and started to clear the table. While Justin was busy in the kitchen, Brian walked over to the crib and looked down at his sleeping son. He had only spent an hour or so playing with the boy the night before. In the past few months he had barely even seen him. His job and going to Babylon had always seemed more important. He had taken both Justin and Gus for granted. They were the two most important people in his life, and he was about to lose one of them for good.

"I forgot to tell you, Lindsay called." Justin said from behind the counter. "I told her about Gus and she said she was glad that you didn't take him to day care. He probably would have cried all day and then he'd have really gotten sick. I told her you'd never do that."

"Yes. I would have. I was about to take him out when you showed up. I would have dumped him off at day care and gone to work. Lucky for him, you showed up. Because I'm a shitty father." Brian turned his back to Justin and looked down at the baby. "And I'm also a shitty boyfriend."

Justin stopped cleaning and walked over to where Brian stood staring down into the crib. He gently put his hand on Brian's arm. "You're not a shitty father. And you were not a shitty boyfriend, either. In fact you were a pretty wonderful boyfriend." Brian turned to look at Justin. "I'm the one who was the shitty boyfriend," Justin said softly.

Brian was about to protest when they heard the door to the loft open. Michael came in without knocking. "Hey, are you ready to go?" Michael walked over to Brian, ignoring Justin.

Justin went to the door and pick up his book bag. "I gotta go."

Brian tried to follow him, but Michael had grabbed his arm. "What's HE doing here?"

Brian turned and glared at the man. "What are YOU doing here?"

"We're supposed to go out tonight. Did you forget that it's Friday night?"

Brian pulled out of his grasp. "Stay here with Gus," he ordered, and then he followed Justin. The boy had disappeared down the stairway and was already outside the building when Brian caught up with him. "Wait!" He grabbed Justin's arm and turned him around.

"I'm going to miss the bus," Justin protested, turning his face away from Brian.

"Fuck the bus. I'll drive you to your boyfriend's place."

"I'm not staying at Ethan's, Brian. I have my own place."

Brian was surprised at what Justin had said. He hadn't meant to be confrontational. He softened his tone. "I wanted to thank you for staying with Gus today."

"I swear, Brian! If you take out your wallet, I'm going to fucking hit you." He tried to pull his arm free.

Brian smiled. "I just wanted to tell you that I think you're pretty wonderful, too."

Justin stopped struggling against Brian's grasp. They stood in the street staring at each other for a moment before Brian pulled Justin into his arms and embraced him. Justin looked up at Brian and then broke the embrace. "I really have to go. Have a good time at Babylon with Michael."

Brian watched as Justin ran down Tremont Avenue toward the bus stop. Tonight they'd made one step forward. They were talking. There was no way that he was going to give up on Justin. He knew that he had to find a way to bring him back into his life. And he knew that he had to move carefully, one step at a time.

When Brian returned to the loft, he saw that Michael had helped himself to a beer and was sitting on the sofa watching a porn movie on the television. Brian grabbed the remote out of his hand and turned off the television. "Hey! My son is sleeping two feet from the T.V."

"He's sound asleep, Brian. What's gotten into you? Shit, what did Justin want from you now?"

"He didn't WANT anything. He saved my ass today. I wish you wouldn't walk into my home unannounced and insult my boyfriend."

"In case you've forgotten, he's not your boyfriend anymore."

"Says who?"

"Ah . . . Ethan Gold."

"Fuck you, Michael."

"What did I do?"

"Nothing, that's what you did. You protected me, defended me and then you let me hang myself. You had to know what was going on with Justin before that incident with Ethan Gold. You were with Justin all the time working on the comic book. He must have said something to you. But you waited until it was too late, and then you couldn't wait to give me the news about Ethan." Brian realized that he was being unfair to Michael, but he needed to talk about it. These thoughts had been eating him up since Michael had told him about the kiss.

Michael got up from the sofa. "What was I supposed to do, Brian? How would you have reacted if I'd told you that Justin wanted more than you could give him? He wanted your undivided attention. I told him that wasn't you, and it never would be."

"That's what you said to him?"

"What should I have told him, Brian? That's been your motto your whole life. You've always told me that you would never change. You never wanted a boyfriend in the first place. I didn't think you cared!"

"You didn't think I cared about Justin?"

"That's not what I meant. I know that you care about him. But it's not like you wanted to spend your whole life with him. It's not like you were planning on getting married and settling down. It wouldn't be fair to the kid to let him think that it would ever be possible. Was I wrong, Brian?"

Brian sank down and sat on the arm of the sofa. "Michael, I can't go out tonight. I have to stay with Gus. I'll call you tomorrow."

"I'll stay here and keep you company."

"No. I'm tired. I'll probably go to bed early."

Michael bent to kiss Brian, but Brian turned his face away.

Lindsay came to pick up Gus on Sunday afternoon. Mel had stayed in Florida to help her family with her aunt's estate. "Thanks for letting Gus stay with you, Brian. I'm so sorry that he got sick on you Friday. If I'd known he was coming down with something I never would have gone to Florida."

"Don't you think I know how to take care of my own son?"

"I didn't say that. It was wonderful of Justin to stay with him on Friday. Gus adores him."

"Yeah, he's wonderful all right."

"Did the two of you talk?"

"That's not what we do best."

"You must miss him a lot. You should try to talk to him."

"I'll just call him at his musician friend's apartment. You must have the number, Lindsay. After all, you introduced the two of them."

"Brian, that's not fair. Remember what really happened? We wanted him to have something special on his birthday. We asked you to join us. I practically begged you. But you didn't want to celebrate his birthday. I'll never understand that part of you, Brian. You can be so cruel sometimes. And then Justin was hurt by your so called 'gift.'"

"He looked pretty happy while my 'gift' was sucking his dick."

"Brian, I am beyond feeling sorry for you. Maybe Justin is better off with Ethan. Now he'll know what it's like to feel loved."

"He knows how I feel about him. I give him everything."

"Everything but the one thing he really needs!" Lindsay packed up Gus and left Brian alone in the loft.

Justin had an early class on Monday morning. He looked around his small studio apartment and smiled. This place was his very first home. He had spent most of the weekend with Ethan. The musician had put a lot of pressure on him to move in with him. As much as Justin enjoyed being with Ethan, he was glad that he'd decided against that arrangement. Ethan had become a bit too clingy. Justin was very fond of him and he knew that Ethan loved him, but Justin was also becoming aware of the fact that he did not have the same feelings for Ethan. He planned to cool things with Ethan as soon as the competition was over. Ethan was always telling Justin that he was his inspiration. Justin didn't want to upset him now that the music competition was only a week away.

At around noon time, Justin was walking across campus when his cell phone rang. It was Brian.

"Hey, what are you doing tonight?"

"Studying, I guess. Why?"

"I want to take you to dinner as thanks for helping me out the other day. What do you say?"

"I guess." Justin thought that Brian sounded different. He sounded almost happy.

"I'll pick you up at around seven. And get dressed up because we're going somewhere special."

"Sounds like a date!"

"You do dates, don't you?"

"Me? I don't know. I've never been on one."

"This will be a first for both of us then. So, where do you live?"

Justin told him the address and hung up the phone. He felt light-headed. He couldn't keep from smiling. Ethan approached him from behind. "Hey, that must have been good news."

He grabbed Justin around the waist and kissed him. Justin got the feeling that Ethan had been spying on him. He knew that Ethan was supposed to be practicing at this time. Why was he wandering around the campus? Justin didn't like being stalked.

"That was Brian. He wants to take me to dinner to thank me for helping him with Gus."

Ethan's face fell. "Really? You're not going with him are you? Are you going to fuck him afterward, too?"

"If I want to, I will, Ethan, you don't have the right to tell me who to see. Brian is my friend and he'll always be a part of my life. If you don't like it, you can just fuck off."

Justin felt Ethan's icy stare on his back as he walked away. Why does all this romance shit have to be so complicated? Maybe Brian was right all along. Love is for straight people and lesbians.

Justin had to stand on his toes to see himself in the small mirror over his sink. He was dressed in the suit that his mother had bought him for his birthday. It was the only one that he had that fit him anymore. After all those years of wearing a uniform to school, Justin had sworn he would never wear a tie unless he absolutely had to. He didn't think that an artist would have to dress up for any reason anyway. He thought about all the fancy suits that Brian owned and how great he looked all the time. Tonight, Justin wished that he had something special to wear. Not that it would make a difference to Brian. Justin knew that no matter what he was wearing, Brian would be picturing him naked. There was no point in getting dressed up to impress Brian Kinney.

Justin heard a car pull up and looked out of the window. Brian had arrived early. He quickly grabbed his jacket and ran down the steps. He didn't want Brian to see his apartment yet. Brian was already out of the Jeep and walking toward the door when Justin came out. He looked great in a black suit with a red shirt and matching tie. Justin loved the color red on Brian.

Brian smiled at him and Justin melted inside. Still, he was determined not to let Brian's flirtatious ways get to him tonight. They were going out to dinner, as friends. And that was all.

Justin observed that a change had come over Brian. In the past few months he could not remember having seen Brian smile much. The man had been so focused on his career that it seemed to have taken him over. Thinking about the events of the past few months, Justin realized that Brian had been under a lot of pressure. All of a sudden Justin felt a pang of guilt for what he had done with Ethan. No matter what Brian or anyone else said to the contrary, Justin felt like he had cheated.

"This is nice," Justin observed.

"I've been here before with clients. The steaks are very good."

"I meant just being with you. I'm glad that we can still be friends after what I did."

"You didn't . . .," Brian began. But at that moment a waiter arrived to take their order.

They each ordered a steak with baked potato and a salad. When the waiter turned to leave they caught each other staring at the young man's ass. They both laughed.

"You should get his number. He's just your type," Justin suggested with a mischievous smile.

"Me? The guy couldn't take his eyes off of you. I bet slips his number inside your baked potato."

Justin put his head down. "That's just what I need, another stalker."

"What?" Brian asked.

"Ethan is starting to get creepy. He follows me all over campus. I can't take a piss without him standing there watching."

Brian scrunched up his brow. "I thought you loved him?"

"I never said I loved him. I said he was in love with me. Forget I said anything, Brian. I shouldn't even be talking to you about him."

"Fine by me. But, if you need me, you know where to find me. Right?"

"Right." Justin smiled.

The rest of the meal went quite well. The food was excellent. Justin was surprised at how comfortable he felt being with Brian, without the pressure of being in a relationship. Brian seemed relaxed also. He smiled and even joked throughout the entire meal. They lingered over a desert of warm raspberries served over vanilla ice cream.

"This is awesome," Brian declared after he had swallowed the first spoonful.

"I bet you never had desert here before."

"You're right. I'd never eat all this sugar unless you were there to egg me on. It's a miracle I didn't gain ton when we were . . . together."

Justin looked up from his desert. Brian was staring at him. "What? Have I got raspberry juice on my chin?" He grabbed his napkin.

Brian put his hand over Justin's. "No. You look fine. In fact, you look beautiful."

Here it comes. Brian Kinney was putting the moves on him to get him in bed. Justin was disappointed. He'd thought that tonight was different. They were enjoying each other's company, as friends. But that was not what Brian had in mind.

"Brian, don't."

Without comment Brian removed his hand from Justin's and waved at the waiter for their check. They drove back to Justin's place in silence.

"Thanks for dinner, Brian. I had a really good time."

"Don't thank me. You earned it. If it wasn't for you I may have fucked up my son for life."

Justin smiled at him. "Stop saying that. Gus is crazy about you. You haven't fucked up anything yet."

"Yes I have. I must have fucked up or we wouldn't be sitting here in the Jeep. We'd be home in our bed."

"Enough with the guilt shit. We both fucked up. At least we can talk to each other now. That's a good sign, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Brian responded. The evening hadn't gone as he had planned. He had wanted to tell the boy what he was feeling, but he just couldn't find the words. If he could just make love to Justin one more time, he could fix this. He knew that he could. He felt Justin move closer to him on the front seat of the Jeep. He put his hand on the seat next to him and Justin brushed his palm over Brian's hand until their fingers were entwined. They embraced gently and held each other for a long time. Brian put his hands on the back of Justin's head and pulled him close to kiss him. At that moment, he happened to glance in the passenger side mirror and was startled for a second. There was someone standing in the shadows watching them. It was Ethan Gold.

"Justin, don't turn around. Ethan is outside of your apartment building waiting for you. I'll start the Jeep and get the hell out of here before he realizes that we're on to him."

"No!" Justin sat up straight and reached for the door handle. "I can't do that to him, Brian. I've got to be a man and tell him the truth. I don't love him. It's better that he knows now than to let him think there's a chance. He's not a bad guy. I couldn't treat him like . . ."

"Like I treated you?"

Justin reached over and kissed Brian on the mouth. He then opened the door and got out of the Jeep. Ethan came over and embraced him and the two entered the building and went up to Justin's apartment.

Brian moved the Jeep down to the corner, turned off the engine and sat in the dark watching the building. He didn't even know which window belonged to Justin, but he did know there was no way he could leave. Not until he knew that Justin was okay. After a few minutes he dozed off. He was abruptly awoken by a sharp rap on the hood of the Jeep. Ethan Gold stood there glaring at him. There was something very disturbing about his manner. Brian returned the young man's stare and, after a few moments Ethan turned and ran down the street. Brian looked down at his watch and saw that it had been about half an hour since Justin had gone upstairs with Ethan. Anything could have happened in that time and Brian had a very bad feeling. He was about to open the door to go check on Justin when his cell phone rang.

"You can go home now." Justin's sleepy voice came over the phone.

Brian looked over at the apartment building and saw Justin waving at him from a window on the third floor. "Is everything okay? I just saw Ethan leave. He looked pissed."

"Yeah, he's pissed. He'll get over it. I don't think he'll bother me again."

"You want some company?" Brian said hopefully.

"Go home, Brian. And thanks for tonight." Justin hung up the phone.

Brian tried to put thoughts of Justin out of his mind when he went to work the next morning. He didn't know what he would say if he did call him, so he resisted the temptation. At six he packed up his briefcase with enough work to fill up his evening and left the office. The thought of going home to an empty loft was depressing. He decided to stop by Lindsay's to see his son.

"Brian! What a surprise!" Lindsay said with a smile when she opened the door.

"I wanted to check on Gus," Brian said, by way of explanation. "How is he?"

"He's in the living room. Why don't you go see for yourself?" Lindsay suggested with a sly little smile.

Brian entered the room and saw Gus sitting in front of the coffee table while coloring. Sitting opposite the child was Justin, working on his sketch pad.

"Hey!" Justin smiled when he saw Brian. Gus ran over for a hug, but quickly pulled out of Brian's arms to go back to his drawing.

"Justin is having dinner here, Brian. Would you like to join us?"

"Whatever."

Justin stopped working to instruct Gus to color inside the lines. Brian watched the two of them toil over their respective works of art. It amused Brian to watch his son mimic Justin's expression of concentration. Lindsay was right, Gus adored Justin. It must be a genetic thing.

When Gus decided that his masterpiece was finished he hurried over to his father's lap to show it to him. Justin once again had started Gus off by drawing a basic outline of a man on the paper, allowing Gus to use his imagination to color in the face and the clothing. It was all that Brian could do to keep from rolling on the floor in a fit of laughter. Gus had drawn a picture of Justin. The funny part was, it actually looked like him. A flurry of bright yellow lines adorned the top of his head. His eyes were great big pools of royal blue. His nose was pink and his mouth, of course, was red. Gus had captured Justin's ear to ear heart-stopping grin perfectly. The boy had gone on to color in brown pants, a purple shirt and green shoes. There was something red in his hand that Brian assumed was Justin's book bag. Gus had used every crayon in the box to depict his favorite person. In the corner of the picture there was a great big yellow circle. What picture of Justin would be complete without the sun shining?

Brian thought about a picture that hung on his refrigerator at home. Gus had drawn Brian using only two colors, black and red. If Brian recalled correctly he wasn't even smiling in the picture. In fact he wasn't even sure if he had a mouth. His face, was just a bunch of black lines, his hair was black, his eyes were black, his clothes were black. Brian remembered that there was only one spot where Gus had used the color red. It was near where Brian's neck would be, and he had assumed it was a tie. So, that's how his son saw him. A big black blob with no mouth. There had to be something Freudian about that.

Gus grabbed at the picture. He wanted it back so that he could show it to Justin.

"Let's show him together." Brian picked him up and brought the picture over to Justin, who was still involved in his own project.

"What do you think? Is my son an artist or what?"

Justin covered his mouth so that Gus would not see his reaction. He really wanted to laugh because it did kinda look like him. But as an artist he knew that Gus would not appreciate that kind of criticism, so he pretended to study the picture and then said, "This is really beautiful, Gus. Can I have it to take home with me? I need a picture for my refrigerator."

Gus beamed at Justin and reached out for a hug.

"Is everyone ready to eat?" Lindsay called from the dining room.

After dinner, while Lindsay cleared the dishes, Brian and Justin played with Gus in the living room. Brian had forgotten all about the paperwork that he had in his briefcase. It would keep 'til later. He was enjoying being with his two favorite people.

When Lindsay took Gus upstairs for his bath, Brian took the opportunity to ask Justin about Ethan.

"Have you heard any more from Ethan? Are you going to need a bodyguard?"

"He was pissed that I went to dinner with you. We fought, and then I told him that it wasn't going to work out. That I didn't want to see him anymore."

Brian didn't really believe that was all there was to it. Ethan had been fuming when he saw him outside. He suspected that they had not seen the last of Ethan Gold.

"You want a ride home?" Brian asked.

"Sure. Let me get my stuff together and say good-bye to Lindsay."

Brian picked up the picture of Justin that Gus had drawn.

"Hey, Gus gave that to me."

"Yeah, for your refrigerator. Do you even have a refrigerator?" Brian asked.

"No," Justin admitted.

"Well I want it. 'Cause it looks just like you. Right down to your green shoes." Brian teased. "It will look perfect hanging on my fridge next to my portrait."

"Twenty bucks," Justin said.

"What? That's extortion!"

"It's an original artwork. It may be worth more than that some day. Take it or leave it. Twenty bucks." Justin put out his hand.

Brian took out his wallet and threw a twenty dollar bill at Justin. "I better not find out that you and my kid planned this little con job."

Justin smiled coyly as he stuffed the money into his jeans. They said their good-byes to Lindsay and got into the Jeep. Brian really wanted to take Justin home with him, but drove instead directly to the apartment building where Justin lived. To Brian's surprise, it was Justin who reached over and began to kiss him.

"What are you doing?" Brian finally asked.

"I thought I was kissing you," Justin answered, his lips still sucking on Brian's lip.

Brian gently pushed him away. "I want to come upstairs with you. You're becoming a little cock teaser. Are you going to get me hard and then tell me to go home?"

"No! Tonight I want you to fuck me."

"Where? In the backseat?"

Justin smiled and opened the Jeep door. They walked to the elevator hand in hand and when they got inside they kissed some more. Justin took out his key and opened the door of his tiny apartment. Brian had to duck to avoid hitting his head on the sloped ceiling.

"Who lives here? A Hobbit? Where's the bed?"

"Here, inside the sofa." Justin took off the cushions and lowered the bed to the floor. There was barely room to stand so they both got on their knees on the bed to undress. It had only been days since their last sexual encounter. Brian made sure to be gentle and loving to Justin. He wanted him to understand how he felt.

"I can't believe you're here in my bed."

"I find it hard to believe myself."

Justin hit him on the shoulder. "Don't make fun of me. I like having my own place. If I had moved in with Ethan, I'd be homeless now."

"No you wouldn't. You have a home. You chose not to live there."

"The loft is your home, not mine."

"I never felt that way about it. I thought it was our home, our bed."

"Yours and mine and a hundred other guys."

"All right. I'll shut up. I don't care where I have to sleep, as long as I get to fuck you."

"Are you sleeping here?"

"I do have to go to work tomorrow. Do you want me to leave?"

"Do you want to leave?"

"I should."

"I guess."

Justin turned on his side and Brian snuggled up against his back.

"I'm leaving."

"Yeah. Bye."

They awoke in that position when Justin's alarm sounded at 7:00 AM the following morning. Justin stretched his arms up over his head and laughed when Brian grabbed his morning hard-on. They began their day with the familiar morning ritual that they had perfected while living together.

"Do you have a bathroom?"

"Of course I have a bathroom. It's over there." Justin pointed to a door opposite the bed.

Brian returned from the bathroom, threw himself down on the bed and groaned. "Hey, why don't you come home? There's no point in you staying here when I have plenty of room in my bed."

"That's exactly the point, Brian. You have room in your bed for me, but not in the rest of your life. I do exist outside of the bedroom, in case you haven't noticed."

"Of course. You're great in the shower, too."

Justin got out of bed and threw his pillow in Brian's direction. "Go home. I have to get ready for school." He disappeared into the bathroom.

Brian realized that he had hit a nerve. He dressed hurriedly and left the apartment while Justin was in the shower. This relationship stuff was way too complicated. He'd only been kidding about the shower. Why was Justin so sensitive all of a sudden? Brian was stumped. What was the next move? He would leave that to Justin.

Two days later Brian was still waiting for Justin to call. The kid was playing hard to get. 'Well fuck him. I can GET anyone I want.' Brian found himself laughing out loud at what he had just said to himself. 'What am I thinking, the only one I really want is Justin.' He would remain patient. Maybe he would call Lindsay and arrange another accidental meeting. It was 12:30 pm and he was considering going to the gym to work out on his lunch hour. He picked up the phone to call Michael to see if he wanted to meet him there.

Before he finished dialing there was a knock at his office door.

Cynthia opened the door a crack and announced, "You have a visitor."

"What? I'm not expecting anyone. Tell them I'm on my way to lunch."

Justin appeared behind Cynthia carrying a blanket and a large bag. "I guess I could come back another day, but I think the sandwiches will be stale," Justin said. Cynthia went back to work and Justin walked up to the desk where Brian was sitting.

"What are you doing here?" Brian inquired as he got up and walked around the desk to greet Justin. "You really should have made an appointment. I'm a busy man, you know." He kissed Justin on the mouth.

"I thought I would take a chance that you'd eat lunch at some point. Now's as good a time as any. He started to spread the blanket out on the floor.

"We could eat at the desk," Brian suggested.

"That wouldn't be very romantic," Justin flirted. "Come over here." He indicated a place next to him on the blanket.

Brian sat down and crossed his legs in front of him. He took a turkey sandwich from Justin and began to eat. "I thought you were mad at me."

"For what?"

"For thinking of you as the object of my sexual fantasies."

"I don't mind being your fantasy. As long as sex isn't the only factor."

"Where have you been for two days?"

Justin ignored the question. Instead of answering, he reached into the bag and retrieved a plastic cup.

"I got you something special," he said seductively. "Lie down and close your eyes."

Brian obeyed. He felt Justin slide his body down next to him on the blanket.

"Now open your mouth," Justin coaxed.

"Oh, no! What is it? A goldfish?"

"You'll love it."

Brian felt a cold round object enter his mouth. He let it circle his tongue before biting down. "Raspberry?" he guessed.

"Yeah. I had a hard time finding fresh ones. If I could have brought you ice cream we could have warmed them up and poured them on top."

Brian remembered the dessert that Justin was referring to. That evening had begun so perfectly and had ended with Ethan Gold assaulting the Jeep. Putting the thought of Ethan out of his mind, Brian pulled Justin on top of him. He let the boy put another berry in his mouth and then he pulled him down and kissed him, allowing the juice to roll down their chins. They continued the game until the berries were gone and lunch time was almost over.

"Hey, I have a class this afternoon. I have to go."

"So soon? I didn't get to thank you properly for bringing me lunch."

"You can make it up to me."

"When?" Brian asked.

"You'll need to make an appointment. I'm a busy man," Justin joked.

"Very funny. How about tonight? I'll pick you up at your place on my way home from work."

"No!" Justin said. "I mean, I'm putting in an extra shift at the diner this afternoon. I'll come to your place when I'm finished."

"Good. That way I get to come home to you." Brian smiled. While Justin cleared the lunch remains, Brian went into the small private bathroom next to his office. When he came out he saw Justin staring pensively out of the window. Brian quietly walked up behind him and put his arms around him. The boy jumped.

"You scared me."

"What are you looking at?"

"Nothing." Justin turned away from the window and kissed Brian good-bye. He retrieved the blanket from the floor and handed it to Brian. "Can you take this home? I'm going to have to take two busses back and I don't want to carry it."

"Sure." Brian took the blanket. "Justin, is something wrong?"

Justin flashed a big sunshine smile. "No. Everything's fine." He kissed Brian one last time. "Later."

Brian finished his work early and headed home. It was the first time in weeks that he was actually looking forward to going home. Justin would probably be sprawled out on the floor working on one of his projects. Things were going well. After tonight maybe he could talk him into moving back home. He opened the door and called out, "Hey Sunshine!" There was no answer. Justin wasn't there. Brian picked up the phone and called the diner. Debbie told him that Justin had left there two hours before.

He dialed Justin's cell phone number, but all he got was a recording. Brian decided to read his email until Justin showed up. Michael was asking him to go out to Babylon tonight. Brian wondered if that was a good idea. Justin would probably be ready for some dancing tonight. He was always anxious to go to Babylon. Brian was concerned about his own actions. It was easy enough controlling his urges when he was locked up by himself with a pile of work to do, but how would he behave in his familiar hunting ground?

He was so deep in thought that he didn't hear Justin enter the loft. The boy came up behind him and started kissing him on the neck. "Where were you?"

"I told you. I was working at the diner."

"All this time?"

"Shut up and fuck me."

Justin pulled Brian away from the computer and led him toward the bed, stripping off his clothing as he walked.

"Slow down. We have all night." Brian helped him pull his T-shirt over his head. "What have you been doing? You're all sweaty." He had also noticed that Justin was out of breath when he came in.

"Running mostly. I had some errands to do and I missed some bus connections. I wanted to be here when you got home." He had already stripped off Brian's pants and shirt and was pulling him down on top of him.

"If you stay here tonight, you could be here when I get home tomorrow."

Justin was wriggling his body into position. "Fuck me!"

Brian retrieved a condom from the night stand and rolled it on. He entered Justin and the boy dug his heels into Brian's back. Their love making was urgent and overwhelming. Justin took the lead and it was over before they could even kiss.

"That was hot," Brian said. "Running must be good for your sex drive."

Brian tried to roll off of him, but Justin held on tightly. "Don't move. I just want to feel you on top of me." Justin's breath was still labored. Brian wasn't sure if it was from having sex or from something else.

"Are you okay?" He ran his hand through the boy's sweaty hair.

Justin hesitated a moment and then said, "Yeah, I just missed you."

"You just saw me at lunch."

"But we didn't have sex. We haven't had sex in days. I can't imagine not being able to have sex with you. I think I would go insane."

Brian did not respond. He felt the same way, but he didn't understand what the boy wanted from him.

"Do you want to go to Babylon tonight?"

Justin looked surprised. "With you?"

"No, by yourself. Of course with me. I thought you would like to dance. We haven't been to Babylon together since. . ." Oh shit. What the fuck was he thinking? "Forget it. We'll stay here and send out for Chinese."

"No. It might be a good idea to go out. Are the guys going?"

"Yeah, Michael called."

"You'd stay with me, right? I can stay here or go home if you want to go out with your friends and . . ."

"I asked you to go because I want to be with you tonight. Only you."

Justin was still unsure. "You promise?"

"Yeah. I promise."

They ordered Chinese food and ate on the floor in front of the television. When they got to the Jeep Justin stopped in his tracks. "Wait, I forgot my book bag!"

"You're coming back here, leave it," Brian suggested.

"No! I need it."

"You're going to be doing homework at Babylon?" Justin had already started to walk back toward the building. Brian stopped him. "You don't trust me, do you? You think I'm going to leave you there a go off with trick."

Justin walked back. "I do trust you."

"Go wait in the Jeep. I'll get it."

Brian returned to the Jeep and dropped the bag in Justin lap. "What the fuck have you got in there, bricks? I don't know how you carry that thing around all day long."

Justin put the bag on the floor and turned to Brian. "Thanks. I'll stop being a pain in the ass now. I want to have fun tonight."

When they got to Babylon, Brian pulled into a spot near the door. He was about to get out when Justin grabbed his arm. "Brian!" Brian turned to look at him. "I love you."

Justin got out on his side of the Jeep before Brian could respond. It was the first time that Justin had actually said those words out loud. Brian crossed in front of the Jeep and caught up with Justin. He put his arm around his shoulder and Justin smiled up at him.

Once they got into the club Justin was his old self. He had promised himself a good time and he seemed to be enjoying every minute. They were dancing with their arms around each other when Justin spotted Michael, Emmett and Ted at the bar. They joined their friends and ordered two beers. Justin had his back to Brian and was talking to Emmett. A dark haired man walked up to the bar and ordered a drink. He stood close to Brian and made eye contact. He was just Brian's type- tall, dark and well hung. The man made no secret about his intension. Brian felt his dick twitch involuntarily. Then he felt Justin's hand on his shoulder. "I'm going to the bathroom." Brian turned his back to the dark stranger.

"I'll go with you."

"What for? I can hold my own dick. You just came back from the bathroom." Justin smiled at him and then walked down the stairs.

"Now's your chance," Michael grinned.

"What are you talking about?"

"Have you lost your touch? That adonis was hitting on you."

"I'm here with Justin."

"So what? You've got plenty of time. We'll cover for you."

"Fuck off, Michael."

"Don't tell us Brian Kinney has tired of his wicked ways?" Emmett teased.

"I thought my feet were getting cold. Hell must have frozen over," Ted quipped.

At that moment Brian's cell phone rang. He gratefully answer the call. "What? Where are you? Oh, shit! Is he okay?" Lindsay was on the phone. Gus had taken a fall down the front steps and cut his head and had to get stitches. They had just returned from the hospital and Lindsay wanted to fill him in.

"I can't hear you. Wait, let me go outside."

Brian went outside and light a cigarette as he listened to Lindsay relay the events of the evening. Gus should be fine, and since they'd had a plastic surgeon do the stitching he would probably not have a scar. When he finished his call he stayed outside a moment to finish his cigarette. He felt a hand on his shoulder.

Michael, Emmett and Ted were giggling like school girls when Justin approached them at the bar.

"Where's Brian?"

"Outside. He got a call from Lindsay. Gus fell and had to go to the hospital," Michael explained.

"Gus is in the hospital? Shit!" Justin started to make his way through the crowd. When he got outside he didn't see Brian. He walked over to where the Jeep was parked and looked down the alley. Justin had witnessed this scene hundreds of times. A man was on his knees in front of Brian. Brian's back was up against the wall. His pants were on the ground and he had that look on his face that he always got when a trick was sucking him off. Like he had died and gone to heaven. Justin went back to the Jeep, retrieved his back pack and then ran down Liberty Avenue as fast as he could.

"Where's Justin?" Brian asked of his friends when he returned to the bar.

"Didn't you see him? He went outside to look for you," Michael said with a grin.

Brian felt like his life had just been shattered into a million pieces. His friends began to chuckle.

"Come on, Brian. He'll get over it. He always does," Emmett said.

Brian grabbed the bar with both hands to steady himself. "No. He won't. Not this time."

Michael grabbed his arm as he turned to leave. "You're not going to chase after him, are you? You always told me never to chase after anyone."

Brian glared at Michael and pulled his arm out of his grasp. He left the bar and got into his Jeep. He had no words for what he was feeling at that moment. He looked down at the floor and saw that Justin's book bag was gone.

'I promised him.' Brian said to himself. He slammed both hands into the steering wheel as if to punish himself.

There was no point in looking for him tonight. There was nothing that he could possibly say to him. He would call him tomorrow and pray that the boy would forgive him one last time.

When he got back to the loft, he opened the refrigerator and took out a bottle of water.

He closed the door and saw Gus's picture of Justin smiling back at him. "I'm sorry, Sunshine. I love you, too."

The next morning he got up and went to work. What was the point of staying home and brooding? He waited until eleven to start calling Justin. He knew that he had an early class, but he wasn't sure how early, or if he would even go to school today. When he dialed the cell number he got a recording. It said that the number was no longer in service.

That was odd. Why would Justin disconnect his cell phone? He dialed the number again and got the same message. He phoned the diner and Debbie answered. "Is Justin working today?"

"What the fuck is going on, Brian?"

"What do you mean?"

"Justin came in here early this morning and he quit. No explanation. He just came in and said he couldn't work here any more, kissed me on the cheek and left. What the fuck did you do to that poor kid now?"

Brian hung up the phone. He'd talk to Debbie later and tell her exactly what happened. Whatever abuse she would lay on him he would take without an argument. He had really fuck up this time. Justin must have quit the diner so that he would have to see Brian there.

He probably also changed his cell number for the same reason. This time Justin was really upset. And Brian didn't blame him. If he could crawl out of his own skin and run away he would.

At four o'clock Brian left the office and drove directly to Justin's apartment. The elevator was out of service so he walked up the stairs two at a time. When he got to Justin's door, he knocked. The door swung open to reveal an empty room. Everything of Justin's was gone. Brian went to the bathroom and saw that the same was true in there. Justin had moved out. Before he closed the door to the apartment, he noticed the trash can had not been emptied. He picked it up in hopes of finding some kind of clue. What he saw on the top of the papers in the can startled him. It was an empty box of bullets.

What the fuck would Justin do with bullets? Shit, he had to find him right away. He got into the Jeep and began to drive around the neighborhood. The only person that Justin may have confided in would be Lindsay.

"Hello Brian. Have you come to check on Gus, too?"

"Is Justin here?" He asked hopefully.

"He was this afternoon. Did you two have a fight? Justin was acting very strangely."

"How do you mean?"

"Brian, what did you do to him?"

Brian knew that she would find out eventually so he told her what had happened.

"That poor kid. How could you? After what you've both been through. Brian, I want you to leave before I say something that I'll regret."

"It wouldn't be anything I haven't already said to myself. But there's something more important right now. Justin has disappeared. He's moved out of his apartment and turned off his cell phone. I know he's going to do something drastic. I have to find him."

"Brian Kinney, if I knew where he was you would be the last person in the world I would tell. Haven't you hurt him enough? Get out! I can't stand the sight of you right now."

"You have to help me, Lindsay. Justin has a gun. I don't know where he got it or why, but I've got to find him."

Lindsay thought a moment. "He asked to see Gus. I told him that Gus was taking a nap and I asked if he had eaten lunch."

"He said he didn't have time. That he had to get to the bank before it closed. He asked if it would be okay if he went up to see Gus if he promised not to wake him. I told him I would make him something to eat while he was upstairs. He left his book bag in the hall, right there. And then he went up. When I came back with his sandwich the book bag

was gone. He left without saying good-bye. He looked nervous, Brian. Like he had something very serious on his mind. You don't think that he intends to use the gun on himself, do you?"

"Call Debbie and ask her to call his mother. If he's there, call me on my cell phone."

Brian was out of ideas. He sat in his Jeep in front of Lindsay's house trying to think what Justin would do next. It was dark now and it had started to rain. The fact that Justin needed to get to the bank before it closed meant that he was going to close out his account. If it was just cash he needed he could always use the ATM. Brian wasn't sure how much money Justin had in his account, but it couldn't have been more than a few hundred dollars. An airline ticket to anywhere would be out of the question. That left the train or the bus. Brian guessed that the bus would be the cheapest mode of transportation, so he started the Jeep and headed in the direction of the bus station.

As soon as he walked in the door he saw him. He was slumped down on a bench with his hands crossed over his chest. His eyes were closed, but Brian didn't think that he was sleeping.

"Hey." Brian said gently. He kicked Justin's sneaker.

"No!" Justin sprung from the bench as if a bee had stung him. "Get the fuck away from me!"

"Justin, I didn't mean for it to happen. I'm sorry."

"You didn't mean for me to catch you. You aren't sorry that it happened."

"It was nothing. It was the worst blow job, ever. I don't even remember it."

"Well, I'll never forget it. Everyone at the bar knew you were out there, with him. Not one of them warned me. They just stood there with those 'Brian will never change' grins on their stupid faces. 'There goes that stupid little love sick kid. Won't he be surprised?' You humiliated me, Brian."

"Who cares what those assholes think? This is between you and me."

"There is no you and me. And there never will be. I'm leaving fucking Pittsburgh tonight and I'm never looking back."

"You're not going to leave Pittsburgh. Your life is here. What about school? What about your family?"

"I cause my mother nothing but grief. She and Molly would be better off if I was gone."

"Stop being a drama princess."

"Fuck you, Brian!" Justin picked up his bags and started walking.

Brian followed him. "Where do you think your going? You don't have any money." He grabbed Justin's arm and spun him around. " You spent it all on that gun you have in your pocket. Why the fuck do you need a gun?"

"Where am I going? As far away as I can get from you. And I bought the gun in case you tried to follow me. Because if I ever see your face again, I'll put it to my head and pull the trigger."

Brian released his arm and Justin walked away. The kid was serious. He was getting on a bus and going who the fuck knows where to get away from him. Brian moved into action when he saw that the bus was moving away from the curb. He ran after it and saw Justin in a window with his head turned in the other direction. "Shit!" Brian realized he was fucked. The bus was gone and Justin was never come back. He ran back to where the bus had departed the terminal and looked up at the sign. The destination was New York City. Of course! Where else would Justin run away to but one of the most fucking dangerous city in the world?!!

Coming Home To You Part II

Two Steps Back

When Brian arrived home, the first thing he did was check his answering machine for messages. There were none. He was still in shock. Everyone would blame him. 'Well, why the fuck not?' He'd pushed Justin away so hard this time that he was never coming home. This wasn't real. It wasn't happening. Justin had seen him with other men many times before. What was different? Brian knew full well that Justin had expected more this time. In fact, so had Brian. He'd wanted Justin to come home, and he was ready to make some changes. But now it was over.

Hours later, after several glasses of whiskey, Brian fell asleep on the sofa. He dreamed about Justin and Gus on the day that he had left Justin to babysit. They looked so sweet together. Brian remembered Justin rocking Gus in his arms as the baby fell asleep on his shoulder. They melted his heart.

When Brian awoke from the dream, reality smacked him in the face. He relived the scene of Justin telling him off at the bus stop. Every word was true. Justin had every right to do what he did. But Brian felt there was something not quite right about Justin's actions. It was the gun that bothered him the most. Why did Justin need a gun? Was he really going to kill himself? He would be more justified in killing ME! And when did he buy it? He surely couldn't have had time to clear out his belongings, empty his bank account and, on the way to the bus station, buy a gun. It didn't make sense.

That evening when he got back to his loft he had visitors waiting. Debbie and Jennifer Taylor were standing in front of his building. He let them inside and silently opened the door to the loft. He braced himself for their attack.

"Where is my son?"

"He's on a bus to New York. And before you say anything, I admit it. This was my fault. I hurt him. He left because of me. I have no excuses, just regrets. I don't know what to do next. Tell me what I should do?" Jennifer looked at Debbie and turned her back on Brian. She walked out of the apartment.

"You have to find him," Debbie said. "Go to New York and bring him home, like you did the last time."

"Last time he wanted to be found. He hates me, Deb. If I went after him now, he may just hurt himself."

"What do you mean, hurt himself?"

Brian told her about the gun and about what Justin had said to him at the bus stop.

"Well, you have really done it this time, kiddo. You're right. The best thing that you can do for Justin now is to leave him alone. I'm going to call Horvath and ask him to call the N.Y.P.D."

The next day was Saturday. Brian had spent the entire night sitting on a chair in his living room, staring into space. He hadn't eaten a meal since the Chinese food he and Justin had shared. Dragging himself out of the chair he shuffled into the kitchen where he was greeted by Gus's 'smiling Justin' portrait and the faceless black blob portrait named 'Daddy.' He opened the refrigerator and took out a container of milk. He sniffed the contents and immediately poured it down the sink. It had been Justin's job to buy fresh milk. Brian couldn't even remember what he had done for food before he met Justin. Maybe he would just starve to death. It would serve him right. As much as he dreaded facing the sunlight, he decided to go to the diner for breakfast.

Luckily Deb was nowhere in sight. It was early, and the place wasn't crowded. He chose a booth furthest from the door and sat down. He ordered his usual breakfast and then turned his attention to the newspaper he had bought on the way to the diner. He had finished his meal and was working on his third cup of coffee when Michael walked in.

"Hey! What happened with Justin? He must have been really pissed the other night. Why haven't you called me?"

Brian stared at Michael for a moment and thought about that night at Babylon. Michael had encouraged him to go after that trick. He thought about what Justin had said. Michael and his other friends could have prevented this whole tragedy if they had only behaved like caring human beings for a change, instead of adolescent assholes.

"Why would I call you? You don't give a shit about Justin."

"What makes you say that?"

"For one thing, you practically pushed him out the door that night. He said you were laughing at him. Is that true?"

"Brian, we were high. Everything's funny when you're high."

"Well, how's this for funny? Justin got on a fucking Greyhound the next day and headed for New York City. He said that he's never coming back to fucking Pittsburgh!"

"Did he steal your credit card again? I hope you have him locked up this time. The little shit better come back to Pittsburgh, because now he owes me money, too."

"No, he didn't steal my credit card. When did Justin borrow money from you?"

"Earlier in the week. He came running into the store one day like someone had chased him up the street. He asked if he could borrow \$50."

"I know this is stupid question, but did you ask him if anything was wrong? Did you see anyone outside the store?"

"No. He just said he would pay me back, with interest. I guess I'll never see my money now. Maybe I should call the police."

Brian shook his head in disgust. He took out his wallet and paid the check. He took then out took out three twenties and threw them at Michael. "Here's your money . . .with interest," he growled as he rose from the booth and strode out of the diner.

Michael called after him, but Brian ignored him. He got into his Jeep and headed for Lindsay's house.

As soon as he arrived at Lindsay's door, Brian asked, "Can I see my son?"

Lindsay hesitated for a moment and then, without a word, she opened the door. "He's in there." She pointed to the living room and started to walk toward the kitchen. Brian grabbed her arm.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Away from you," she shot back.

"All right. I know you hate me. Not as much as I hate myself. I need to ask you some questions. It may help me to find Justin."

"Debbie called this morning. She told me what happened at the bus station. I'm so worried about him. I can't stop thinking about Justin sitting on the floor drawing pictures with Gus. He must be so upset. And he's all alone."

"That day he was here, had you expected him to come over? Or did he just show up?"

"He came over after school. Justin doesn't have to be invited to see Gus. He drops by a few times a week."

"Did he ask to borrow money?"

"How did you know that? I gave him \$40. He said that he needed to buy art supplies and that he would pay me back. I'd forgotten about that. Do you suppose that he was planning to run away?"

"I don't think so. I think that he used the money that he borrowed to buy a gun."

"But why would he need a gun?"

"Someone must have been after him. Maybe it's Hobbs, or maybe that asshole musician is bothering him."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to find Hobbs and Ethan and ask them what they did to Justin."

"Don't you want to see your son?"

"Yeah." Brian and Lindsay went into the living room where Gus sat at the table with his box of crayons. "Hey, sonny boy. What are you drawing?"

The boy held up his picture. "Jussin."

A big red smile with a mass of yellow hair and royal blue eyes looked up at him from the paper. There was no body, because Justin wasn't there to draw one.

Brian hadn't felt so helpless since he'd held Justin's limp body as he lay bleeding on the floor of the parking garage. He went to the AIDS hospice where Hobbs had been assigned his community service. He found out the Hobbs had finished his time and had gone off to college somewhere in the mid-west.

He thought twice about talking to Ethan himself. If the musician had been bothering Justin, Brian didn't want to tip him off that Justin had left town. He decided to hire a private detective to look into Ethan Gold and to search for Justin in New York.

The days dragged on, turning into weeks. Weeks turned into months. Brian lived with a dark cloud over his head. Justin was never out of his mind. He went to work to fill the days. After work he would see Gus, if Lindsay was agreeable. Her anger had not faded. She would let him see Gus, but only if he called first. She tried to arrange her schedule so that she would not be at home when he came. Mel stayed in the room while he visited with Gus. He and Mel had never had a close relationship. He could feel her staring daggers at him from across the room.

He could understand, and even respect, the girls' reactions. They were sincerely concerned for Justin. It was the reaction of the men in his life that he found detestable. Mostly because before he'd met Justin, he would have reacted the same way. Life goes on. Party as usual. No apologies, no regrets. For them, it was like Justin had never existed.

Three months had past since Justin had disappeared. The detective in New York had no leads. Ethan Gold had stayed in Pittsburgh up until a month ago. Brian had been told that Ethan was on tour. If it had been Ethan who was bothering Justin, then Justin should be safe for now. Unless, of course, he was already dead ... or dying ... or injured ... or hungry ... or lonely. Brian never stopped imagining the worst. What if some crack-head beat him up and took his gun and shot him with it? Would anyone even report finding a dead queer's body in New York City?

Brian sneezed and then blew his nose in his handkerchief. He had the worst head cold of his life. The weather in Chicago had been deplorable and he was anxious to get on a plane and head for home. Unfortunately all flights had been cancelled until a storm front had passed. That left him sitting in an airport, miserable, cold and sad. He picked up a magazine from a table and began to turn the pages. It was one of those give-away New York gay magazines that you'd find in the Village. Brian wondered what it was doing here in Chicago. He guessed that the last faggot passing through had left it. He finished with the page where all the personal ads were printed and was about to drop the magazine back on the table when a picture on the back cover caught his eye. It was an ad for a soft drink. It featured six boys on skate boards smiling about how good it would feel to down a nice cold soft drink right about

now. "Fuck! It's him! It's Justin!" Brian cried out. The other stranded passengers stared and moved a chair or two away from him. Brian was too excited to notice. He got out his cell phone and dialed Cynthia.

"I need some information on an ad running in a small New York publication. I have to know the name of the agency that booked the models for the ad." Brian gave her all the information that he could get from the magazine cover. He then went to the airline check-in desk and asked to change his ticket from Pittsburgh to New York.

By the time Brian finally landed in New York City it was close to midnight. He got a taxi to the mid-town hotel where he usually stayed when he was in New York. His cold was forgotten, as were the signed contracts from Chicago in his brief case. He would FedEx them to the office in the morning. Cynthia had called him back with the information he'd requested. Now what? If Justin had posed for that ad, how would he get in touch with him? If he walked into the agency tomorrow with the ad in his hand and asked for the blond twink's address, it was likely they would throw him to the curb and call the police. If he identified himself as an advertising executive with the Vanguard Agency, they would be falling all over themselves to assist him. But then what? He could say that he wanted to hire the model in the photo, but as soon as Justin heard the name Vanguard he would head for the hills.

Brian searched through his wallet and found the business card he was looking for. He had kept in touch, from time to time, with Adam Lyons from the Kennedy and Collins Agency in New York. Brian formulated a plan in his mind. In the morning he would call Adam and tell him the whole story. All he would need for Adam to do would be to call the modeling agency where Justin worked, ask for the model in the ad and set up a photo shoot with Justin as the model in Central Park the following morning.

Adam seemed genuinely glad to hear from him. He suggested they get together for lunch. Brian met him at his office building at noon. They had lunch in a restaurant in the lobby of the building.

"Brian, you couldn't have come a better time. You know that position you were being considered for last year? Well, it may be opening up again. The brass is not happy with the woman that they promoted. You'd really be an asset to the firm."

"Thanks. But I didn't come here to talk about a job. I need a favor." Brian relayed the entire story to Adam. He agreed to call the agency and see if the model would be available for a photo shoot in Central Park tomorrow morning.

Brian decided to take a walk downtown to pass the time until his meeting the next morning. He mulled over in his mind what he was going to say to Justin. The problem was that he had no idea what Justin's reaction was going to be when he saw him. If he was still packing the gun he had bought before he left Pittsburgh, the boy just might decide to put Brian out of his misery for good. That would be okay with him, as long as he had the chance to talk to Justin first.

When Brian reached Canal Street, he turned left and walked down a few blocks. Small shops lined the crowded street and as he walked along aimlessly he got an idea. It would probably be better to change his appearance so that Justin would not be scared off if he saw him first. He selected a Yankee's baseball hat and T-shirt. He added a blue denim jacket. Brian was sure to blend in with the natives of Central Park in this get-up. For better or worse, he was ready.

Brian arrived at the location a half-an-hour earlier than Adam had planned with the agency. He wanted to make sure that he could see all the entrances to the park from the bench where he sat. It had started to get cloudy earlier that morning and by 10:45 the sky looked threatening. He hoped that it would not start to rain. Justin would probably think that the shoot was cancelled if it rained. There was no time to think about it because at that moment he spotted Justin walking down the path toward him. The boy was walking quickly and looking around the park for a non-existent photographer. As he got to the bench Brian stood up and blocked his path. Justin had been walking with his head down at this point and had not seen the man until it was too late. He walked right into him, almost knocking him to the ground.

"Sorry." Justin had not turned his face upward. He was simply trying to walk around the man who blocked his path.

"It's me," Brian said softly.

Justin's face reflected shock and fear. "Fuck! Fuck you, Brian! How did you find me?"

Brian grabbed hold of Justin's sweatshirt. There was something hard in the pocket. Brian felt the bulge when he brushed his arm against it. Justin was carrying a gun. Brian decided that he better speak up now, or he might be forever holding his peace.

"I just want to talk to you, that's all. Now calm down! Please! Before those old crones with the baby carriages call the police."

Justin realized that by raising his voice he was attracting attention. He sat down on the bench. Brian sat next to him, at a distance, and began his appeal.

"It took me three months to find you. And it was only by a fluke that I did. You really did mean it when you said that you didn't want to see me." Brian stared at his own hands as he talked. Out of the corner of his eye he stole a glance at Justin on the opposite side of the bench. His expression was unreadable, but at least he was still there.

"I know that I was wrong. Believe me, I know it. I never meant for that to happen, Justin. I acted out of impulse, like I always had. I thought I had the whole evening planned out. I wanted you to have fun. That's why I took you to Babylon, to dance. But then my dick took over and I lost control. You see, I have this problem with acting on impulse. After you left town, I started seeing a shrink to figure out why it is I do such awful, hurtful things."

Brian looked up. Justin appeared to be distracted. He was turning his head from side to side as if he was looking for something, or someone.

"Are you listening to me? I'm pouring my heart out here."

"Yeah. I heard you. You're seeing a shrink. Good for you. I hope it helps. Maybe someday you'll meet a nice man to settle down with."

"I'm not looking."

"Why not?"

"Cause I already have one."

"Oh. Michael. I should have known he'd move in. That's wonderful, Brian. You two belong together."

"Don't be ridiculous! I'm barely even speaking to that asshole."

This remark got Justin's full attention. "Why not?"

"It's not important. Look, none of this is coming out right. Can we please go somewhere private so that we can really talk?"

"You mean fuck." Justin got up from the bench and started pacing.

"What? Justin, why are you being such a bitch? This is really hard for me."

Justin continued to pace as he spoke. "Hard for you? It was hard for me when I told you about Ethan. You made me feel like you didn't care if I was a part of your life or not. Being free of you these past three months has given me a chance to understand for myself what really happened. You were playing with me. Like a pet cat or something. You'd pull me in and make me think that you loved me. Then you'd push me away and I would die all over again. The best thing I ever did was get on that bus. It's over, Brian! Why don't you get the fuck out of my life?!!" Justin shouted. Passers-by were beginning to stare at them.

Brian listened to the words that Justin was saying but somehow they didn't ring true. Justin's body language was all wrong. He was very upset and there were tears forming in the corners of his eyes. If he really didn't give a fuck, he would have just walked away. Brian was still in the game. He had to give it his best shot. If Justin took off, he knew he'd never see him again.

"No. I won't get out of your life. I want another chance."

"I don't have any more chances to give you," Justin said softly. He stopped pacing and started to walk back in the direction from which he'd come. He turned back and said over his shoulder. "Go home, Brian."

Brian stood up and turned in Justin's direction. "Don't give up on me!!" he shouted. Everyone within earshot turned to stare at him.

"Don't you give up on me!!!!" Brian could hear the desperation in his own voice.

Justin stopped walking and turned around to face him. The baseball cap had twisted to one side, revealing one eye while hiding the other. His lanky body was slouched forward and his face sported a few days' growth of whiskers. As the silence hung in the air between them, Brian started to shuffle his feet and stare at his fingernails. He looked up at Justin one more time and said simply, "Please?"

Justin lost his resolve. He melted at the sight of the man whom he loved more than anything else on the planet. He walked back to where Brian stood and lifted his arms. Brian fell into his embrace. "You're pathetic," Justin observed. He glanced around the park and saw that the elderly ladies with the babies were smiling at them and whispering.

Brian held onto Justin for dear life. As he enjoyed the sensation of having Justin so close to him, he tried to gauge what Justin was feeling. He could feel the boy's heart beating and started to breathe in rhythm with the pulse. Brian was about to put his hand on the back of Justin's head when he felt the boy stiffen in his arms. Before Brian could react, Justin pulled away from him and then roughly grabbed his hand. Justin started running toward the entrance of the park, dragging Brian behind him.

"Where are we going? What happened?" Brian was finding it difficult to keep up with the boy and talk at the same time.

"Just shut the fuck up, and run!" Justin had led them to the subway entrance. They ran down the stairs taking two steps at a time. Justin let go of Brian's hand and struggled to retrieve his wallet from his pocket. He pulled out a metro pass, swiped it twice, pushed Brian through the turnstile and followed right behind him. A train had just pulled into the station and Justin rushed Brian through the doors.

Justin spoke before Brian had the chance to question him. "Don't talk! Don't ask me any questions! Just follow me."

Brian nodded his head. They rode the train downtown and at one point Justin stood up and Brian took his cue. They exited the train and made their way up to the street in silence. Justin was still in mystery mode and Brian played along, hoping there was a logical explanation for such strange behavior. This was not a game. There was something seriously wrong.

They reached an apartment complex in the east village after what seemed like an eternity of walking across town. Brian kept pace with Justin, although it was becoming increasingly more difficult. Finally, they reached a building where Justin turned and entered a door on the side of the building. They got into the elevator and Justin selected the 8th floor. When they arrived at their destination, Brian noticed that Justin's expression had changed. He now looked furious. Brian saw that the object of Justin's fury was a bouquet of flowers which were placed in front of the door to apartment 8C. "Fuck!" Justin said as he kicked the flowers out of the way. He put a key in the lock and turned it. The door opened and Brian walked inside. Justin did not follow him. Instead he bent down, picked up the flowers and walked down to the end of the hall. Brian watched from the doorway as Justin opened a door in the wall and threw the flowers in.

Justin returned and led Brian back into the apartment. Brian surveyed the tiny living room and said. "It's not bad."

"It's not mine," Justin responded. "It's my roommate's apartment. I get to sleep on the couch."

"Where is he now?"

"She's at work. When I arrived at the bus terminal I saw an ad on a billboard. It said 'models wanted.' I figured that would be something I'd be good at. I still have my looks. I found the agency, went in and filled out an application. That's where I met Toni. She's 40, fat and wears glasses. She said that I was adorable and that she could put me to work right away. I told her that I had to look for a place to stay before I could work. She offered me her couch until I had time to find a place. I've been working at the agency every day since, doing clerical work and going out on jobs when I can. I have been looking for an apartment, but it's almost impossible to find anything in New York City. You have to be a millionaire to live here."

"This is my fault," Brian said.

"What's your fault?"

"This." Brian indicated the couch. "You, living on a couch. You left your home, your school, and your family all because I'm an insensitive asshole. I'm inhuman. I'm a monster."

"You're not a monster," Justin said.

Brian knew that eventually he would get Justin to defend him. His suspicions had been correct. Justin was hiding something about why he'd left Pittsburgh. Brian knew that he had to get to the bottom of this before he could get Justin to go back home with him.

"I'm too evil to live."

Justin stood up. "Shut up! Shut the fuck up!" He started pacing the room. "Not everything is about you, Brian! You're not the only reason I left Pittsburgh!"

Brian felt he was making progress so he continued to question Justin. "Tell me about the gun. Why did you think you needed it?"

"I just wanted it. That's all. It doesn't matter now. I have to leave New York."

"Why? I won't tell anyone I found you."

"It's not because of you, Brian." Justin sat down next to Brian on the couch. "I lied to you about Ethan. He never stopped bothering me in Pittsburgh. I told you that we had fought that night. I couldn't believe how unreasonable he was. He wouldn't leave. I finally had to threaten to call the police." Brian put his arms around the boy and pulled Justin's head to rest on his shoulder.

Justin continued, "The next day he came up to me at school. He acted like nothing had happened. He put his arms around me and tried to kiss me. I pushed him off and he got really angry. There were people around so he just took off. I kept seeing him all over. At school, at the diner, at your place. He followed me everywhere. Finally I confronted him. I told him to fuck off and leave me alone. He pushed me up against a wall and pulled out a knife. I kicked him in the balls and ran. And that's why I bought the gun."

"And why you left Pittsburgh."

"About a month ago I thought I saw him in New York. I wasn't sure at first, but then the flowers started coming and the phone calls. I have no idea how he got my number or how he found out where I was staying."

"Did you go to the police?"

"Yeah. He started to follow me around the city. It didn't even matter to him that I knew he was there. He would be right outside the door in the morning when I left the building. I saw him out there one day and called the police. I told them that he had been stalking me and that he'd followed me from Pittsburgh. He turned the story around and told them that I was stalking him. His parents live here, so it did seem like I was the one who followed him here. They said if I bothered him again, they would lock me up."

"But he threatened your life. Did you tell them that?"

"He didn't really threaten my life."

"Then why did you buy the gun?"

"He threatened to kill you if he ever saw me with you again. He was in the park today, Brian. That's why I ran." Justin leaned forward and rested his head on his hands. "I've made such a fucking mess of my life."

"You had help." Brian began to massage Justin's neck. "It's over. You're coming home with me. I'll straighten out Mr. Gold."

Justin turned his head to face Brian. "No fucking way! Brian, I meant everything I said to you when I left. I can't ever trust you. No matter how many doctors you see, you'll never change. You'll never really belong to me."

"People can change. If they follow the rules."

"You have to want to change. You like being a bastard and having everyone worship the ground you walk on."

"Is that what you think of me?"

"It's what everyone thinks of you. Ask Michael, or Lindsay, or Ted. Brian Kinney has it all. Why should he change? We like him the way he is. I'm the only one who has ever gotten past all that crap. Somewhere inside of you there's a man who loves me. He loves coming home to me. He loves kissing me and making love to me. And he only wants to be with me. At least that's what I thought. I know you tried, Brian, but you failed. And now you come here with your pathetic Yankee hat and your pathetic 'second chance.' What's the point in getting my hopes up? I know I could not take another scene at Babylon. I am NEVER going back to Pittsburgh."

They sat in silence for a long time. Brian thought about what Justin had said. "You're right. I can't guarantee that I'll be able to resist temptation forever. There are no guarantees in life. Did you ever expect that your father would stop loving you, or that your parents would get divorced?"

"Or that Ethan would turn into a psycho?"

"Justin, do you really think that he would hurt you or try to kill me?"

"Oh, he's capable of violence. He may have even murdered someone already."

"What!!!"

"The last time I was at his place I went to get a jacket that I had left in his closet. I grabbed another jacket by mistake. It had a ski-lift tag with a name on it. The name was Jason Kemp."

"Who's that?"

"Dumpster-boy. He was Ethan's ex-boyfriend."

"You bought a gun and left your home because you thought he would kill me. Wow, you must really love me or something."

"Yeah, something."

"Come home with me."

"No. As crappy as my life is here, it's mine. I've proven to myself that I can survive on my own. I have two jobs and a place to sleep. And I managed to get myself enrolled in art school. When I filled out the forms I told them my father was dead. He may as well be. The student loan was approved and I got some grant money, too. So I'm doing okay. There's nothing for me in Pittsburgh. I'm staying in New York."

Justin had to turn his head so Brian wouldn't see the tears in his eyes. He wiped his eyes with his sleeve and turned back to face him.

"Brian Kinney, are you crying?" Justin asked.

Brian put his palm up to his own cheek. "I guess I am."

"Don't be a drama queen. You can come and visit once in a while. You must have a million frequent flyer miles."
"It's not the same. I want more."

"Well, that's all I have to offer."

Brian knew that Justin was serious. He also knew there would be no warm body to wake up with every morning. No sweet kisses planted on his neck while he worked. No one could ever take Justin's place. Brian would spend the rest of his life alone.

"How can I leave you here alone with that madman stalking you?"

"I've made a decision about that. I'm going to take care of him once and for all. You have to stop thinking of me as a child. I can take care of myself. I hate being afraid, always having to look over my shoulder. It sucks having someone following you around. Is this how you felt about me when I was stalking you?"

Brian grinned. "Sometimes. But if you saw me looking over my shoulder, it was because I was making sure you were still there."

Brian leaned forward on the couch, and put his hands over his face. He felt Justin's arms embrace him and rest his head on Brian's back. "You're my man, Brian. You always will be. I need for you to trust me."

Justin had to leave for his second job at five o'clock. He worked as a waiter at a restaurant in the theater district. They got into a cab and rode uptown in silence. When they reached the restaurant, Brian paid the driver and they both got out of the cab. He kissed Justin good-bye and Justin smiled at him. "Later."

It was a short walk to his hotel from the theater district. Brian walked as slowly as the bustling crowd would allow. Had he accomplished anything by coming to New York? Justin seemed different, older. He had become a man in the past three months. But what was Brian's place in Justin's life now? Would they ever be together like they had been in Pittsburgh? The future frightened him. A future without Justin was unthinkable.

At ten o'clock, Brian walked back downtown to the restaurant. He sat at the bar and ordered a drink as he watched Justin flit his cute little butt around the room. By ten-thirty, Justin was ready to leave. They walked hand in hand up Broadway. Justin was talking a mile a minute, complaining about his tips and the obnoxious customers. It was like old times. Brian had always loved the sound of Justin's babbling.

"Hey, where's your coat?" Brian asked.

"I don't own a coat."

"It's freezing. Here, take my jacket."

"It's not that far to the hotel."

"Humor me. You can keep the jacket. It's not my style, anyway."

"Thanks. Can I have your shirt, too?"

"Why do you want my shirt?"

"I left Pittsburgh with the clothes on my back. I haven't had any time or money to shop."

"Sure, you can have the shirt off my back. But you're not getting my Yankee hat."

"That was going to be my next question."

"Justin, I'll send some of your stuff to New York when I get back to Pittsburgh."

"No. I have no place to put it, anyway." Justin saw that he'd upset Brian, so he changed the subject. "How's Gus?"

"He misses you. He keeps trying to draw your picture, but without a body to work with he just winds up with a bunch of floating body parts on papers."

"Poor Gus. You should help him."

"I tried. He wants Jussin, and only Jussin."

"I miss him, too. Brian, do you think you could bring him to New York one day?"

"Lindsay is barely speaking to me. I can just imagine the conversation if I asked to take Gus to New York City. 'I promise not to leave him on the subway when I get called away to have my dick sucked by some stranger.'"

"Why is she mad at you?"

"Are you kidding? Everyone is mad at me. Mel stands guard while I visit with Gus. I'm afraid to eat the food at the diner if Deb is on duty. And your mother . . . she'd happily remove my balls with dull scissors and then put them through a meat grinder."

"I'm sorry, Brian."

"It's not your fault."

"You still have Michael and the guys."

"No. I don't."

"Why would they be mad at you? You were just being yourself. No promises, no regrets."

"They aren't mad at me. And I do have regrets. Being around them just makes me feel worse."

They'd arrived at the hotel. Brian hesitated before entering the lobby.

"You wanna come up?" Brian asked.

"You want me to come up?" Justin responded, hopefully.

"Why are you always asking leading questions? You decide, because I don't want to be accused of influencing your decision. I'll just sit over here in the lobby and read the paper until you've made up your mind."

Justin laughed and grabbed him by the arm. "Why are you always such an asshole? Why can't you just say, 'Justin, I want you, and only you. I love you madly, passionately?'"

The elevator arrived and they rode up to their floor in silence. Brian stood in back of Justin and wrapped his arms around him tightly. When the elevator door opened, Brian used his knee to push Justin out the door. He held him tightly all the way down the hall as Justin giggled. Brian handed him the key card and Justin swiped it in the lock. The door opened and Brian nudged him forward with his knee. When they were both inside, Brian pushed Justin up against the wall, face first, and pinned him there with the pressure of his body.

"You never understood. I can't use those words to describe how I feel about you. They're meaningless. Mommies and daddies say "I love you" to the kiddies, friends say it to each other, people you hardly know say it all the time. They use the word 'love' to describe how they felt about a book they just read or a movie they rented or some stupid actor on a television show. And school boys use it all the time, just so they can get laid."

He relaxed the pressure that held Justin against the wall and gently turned him around. "How could I use that same word to describe what I feel for you? Words aren't enough. Saying 'I love you' would only cheapen how I feel. Now do you understand why having sex with you is so important to me?"

Brian kissed him gently. Justin plunged his tongue into his lover's hot mouth, devouring every sensation. It had been months since they had touched, but the fire within them both ignited instantly. They fell onto the bed and fought to pull off their clothes without losing contact with each other's lips. Brian held Justin's arms up over his head and began to plant kisses all over his body. Justin's moans signaled the urgency he felt. "I want you inside me, Brian." Brian found a condom on the night stand where he had left them earlier. Justin wrapped his legs around Brian's long torso and cried out as Brian entered him. The pain turned into ecstasy as Brian increased the depth of his thrusts into his young lover's firm body. Justin squeezed Brian tightly, trying to pull the man deeper into him. He closed his eyes and moaned loudly. Brian quickened his pace to keep up with his lover's needs. The minute he grabbed Justin's hard cock the boy ejaculated, shooting hot cum between their bodies. As Justin's orgasm subsided, Brian shot his load into the condom. He rolled off to the side and pulled Justin next to him on the bed. Brian looked into Justin's eyes.

"That's how I feel about you."

Justin entwined his fingers with Brian's. "Me, too."

The rest of the night was spent expressing their feelings for each other in different positions. When the sun rose, Brian was still awake. He held Justin in his arms and stroked his hair. How could he possibly leave him here? But it had been decided. Brian would fly back to Pittsburgh at noon.

Justin looked around nervously before getting into the cab with Brian for the ride to the airport. They had decided to make it appear as though Justin was leaving town, too. Justin had even asked Brian to buy two plane tickets.

"He'll know, Brian. Don't ask me how, but he will know you plan to take me with you." Justin rode out to the airport with Brian. They had promised each other there would be no 'scenes' at the airport. They kissed briefly at the terminal entrance and Justin watched as Brian walked toward the check-in counter. He took a different cab back into the city. He sat back against the seat and pulled the Yankee cap down over his eyes. In his pocket his hand rubbed up against the cold metal object which might soon end his life.

Ethan Gold packed his violin in its case and put on his coat. The pounding in his head had not subsided since the morning he had seen Justin in the arms of his former lover, Brian Kinney. Ethan wondered if it was all worth it. Justin had been his inspiration after Jason had left. He needed inspiration in order to create. Without his music, he was nothing.

The moment he'd seen Justin with Brian Kinney in the park, he'd known that it would all have to end soon. Ever since Justin had sent a request to Pittsburgh's Institute of Fine Arts for his transcript, Ethan had directed all his energy on getting Justin back into his life. It was a stroke of luck that he had been working in the administrative offices when Justin's letter arrived at the school. New York City was Ethan's home base, his old stomping grounds. It was almost too easy to keep tabs on the object of his affection. He'd dropped out of school and relocated in New York with his parents. But, no matter what he did, Justin still rejected him. And now, Justin was on a plane back to Pittsburgh with HIM.

Ethan was tired and angry. He wasn't angry at Justin ... he could never stay mad at Justin. The whole situation was all Brian Kinney's fault. Once he arrived in Pittsburgh, he would take the money he'd saved from playing his violin in the park and he would buy a gun. The minute Kinney showed his face outside of his precious loft without Justin, Ethan would make sure that he'd never hurt Justin again.

Once Kinney was dead, Justin would finally be free. Then he would reach out for the only person who really loved him. Ethan would be ready. Justin would return to him and his music would, once again, flow freely.

Justin stayed in the shadows under a steel staircase near the entrance to the building where Ethan's parents lived. It was broad daylight and he had to be very careful not to attract attention. He pressed his body as close as he could against the brick wall and pulled the Yankee cap down over his blond hair. Justin had checked the airline schedule and, assuming that Ethan had purchased a ticket on the next plane to Pittsburgh, he would have to be leaving for the airport soon. Justin was ready and waiting when he heard footsteps above his head. He thought about Brian for a moment and then he made his move. Justin grabbed Ethan from behind as he walked past and with all the strength that he could muster, he pushed him face first into the wall.

"Surprise! I guess you thought I was on my way to Pittsburgh. I have a gun in my right hand and I am not afraid to use it. You've given me no choice, Ethan. Now, put your left arm around me and walk toward the park. Just remember that guns really make me nervous. I may accidentally shoot off your fingers, one at a time."

Ethan obeyed Justin's directions without a word. They walked in silence to a park alongside the East River. Justin picked a secluded spot near a bridge. He turned Ethan around and pushed him toward the river. When he was close enough to the edge, Justin pulled back and aimed the gun at the musician.

"I hope the plane ticket you bought is refundable. You're not going anywhere, except maybe to hell for what you've put me through."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I'm sure the police will be very interested in the fact that my stalker attacked me and held me at gun point."

"I don't know how you're going to prove that, considering I'm on a plane to Pittsburgh right now? And how are you going to explain the ticket that you bought for the next flight?"

By the look on Ethan's face, Justin could tell that his suspicions had been correct. Ethan had planned follow him to Pittsburgh.

"So what are you going to do? Kill me?"

"I don't really want to hurt you, Ethan. But if you leave me no choice, only one of us will be leaving this park. You used to be a pretty reasonable guy. I don't understand what happened to you."

"You're the one who's being unreasonable. You're back with HIM again. I warned you, Justin, that I'd kill Brian before I would let him have you. He'll destroy you."

"I have to admit, Ethan, you did me a favor. I left Pittsburgh and Brian behind because I was afraid of what you would do. Here I am three months later and I'm still okay. Except for the stress you've put on my life, I'm pretty happy here. But don't think for a moment that you have won any battles. Brian is still my man. Whether he's in

Pittsburgh or on the moon, he's the man I love. I'll never have those feelings for you. So why are you wasting your time?"

"You forget what it was like for us in Pittsburgh, Justin. You were my whole world. I need you to inspire my music."

"That's bullshit. We only knew each other a few months. You fed my ego, Ethan. I needed that then. But I've survived on my own in New York and I'm proud of that. I realize now that I don't NEED anyone to make me feel good about myself. You should feel the same way. You created your own music before you met me."

"I had Jason. He inspired me. When he left, I was lost. You filled that void, Justin. I need you."

"Why didn't you follow him? Or maybe you did. Maybe he got sick of it and decided to tell you off, just like I'm doing now. Is that why you murdered him?"

"What? Jason's not dead! He left me for an asshole like Brian Kinney."

"You really don't know?! Jason IS dead, Ethan. His body was found in a dumpster outside of the diner. He was murdered."

Ethan's arrogant demeanor dissolved the moment Justin's words sank in. Tears formed in young man's eyes. "I read about the kid in the dumpster, but the paper never gave a name. How do you know it was Jason?"

"Debbie tracked down a prescription for his asthma medication. They traced it to a drug store and found out who he was. They put his name on the headstone." Justin spoke softly. He was convinced that Ethan had nothing to do with Jason's murder. Ethan was genuinely upset and Justin used this moment of weakness to get his point across.

"Ethan, is that what you want for me? A tombstone with my name on it? Because I'm not going to live like this anymore. If you kill Brian - you'll be killing me, also. So, if you won't leave us alone, I might as well get it over with now." Justin handed the gun to Ethan. "I didn't come here to hurt you, Ethan. I came here to ask for my life back. You can kill me now and spend the rest of your life in prison, or you can play your violin and touch people's hearts with your music." Ethan stared at Justin as if he'd just awakened from a dream. He tossed the gun into the river. Justin turned and started to walk away. When he heard violin music fill the air, Justin turned back and smiled. Ethan smiled back as he continued to play.

Brian got out of a taxi and collected his luggage from the trunk. He put his free arm around his young companion and led him into the building. When they got inside the loft, he flung his bag on the bed, and went directly into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator door.

"I don't have much in the way of food," Brian observed.

"That's an understatement," said the young man standing behind him.

"You want some mineral water? I'll order something in."

"Chinese?" the boy asked.

"Sure. Just check off what you want. The menu is in that drawer."

Justin had hand-picked his stand-in to accompany Brian on his flight back to Pittsburgh. Brian had balked like crazy when Justin asked him to fill the empty seat on the plane with a blond kid, George, to make his alibi more credible. George was an actor friend of Justin's who had also done some modeling at the agency where Justin worked. He

needed a way to get to L.A. where he planned to audition for a role in a television movie. Justin had suggested that Brian make a show arriving at home with his 'blond boyfriend.' That way, if anyone should see them together, it would seem as though Justin was back in Pittsburgh. Brian prayed that there would be no reason for Justin to need an alibi for anything he might do to Ethan. Not that the asshole didn't have it coming to him. How in the world had he ever let Justin talk him into this?

George ate his meal at the table while he studied his audition material. Brian ate at the computer while he sorted through his email. He picked up his cell phone every few minutes to make sure that it was still working. What could be taking so fucking long? Justin should have called by now. When the phone finally rang Brian practically jumped out of his skin.

"Hey." Justin sounded all right, but Brian didn't want to ask anything incriminating over the phone.

"How was your day?" he asked cautiously.

"Great. I'm having a great day. How was your flight?"

Brian let out a sigh of relief. "Just peachy."

"When is George's flight?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"Remember what I said? You sleep on the sofa. With all your clothes on. And your shoes, too." Brian could picture the grin on Justin's face.

"You don't trust me? I thought you said he was straight."

"I'm not taking any chances. Brian, I have to go to work. Everything's okay, really. I love you."

"Hey, no fair! I can't tell you that over the phone."

"I can wait."

"When will I see you again?"

"You'll see me." Justin broke the connection. Brian looked back at his computer screen. He found the airline's web site and made a reservation on a flight to New York for the following Friday afternoon.

Coming Home To You Part III

The Legend

Brian got in a cab at the airport and gave the driver the address that Justin had given him over the phone. When the cab pulled up in front of the place, Brian was apprehensive. The building looked all but abandoned, and the neighborhood appeared to be less than friendly. He climbed the front steps and rang the bell labeled Taylor.

"Come on up." Justin's cheerful greeting came over the speaker.

"Where's the elevator?" Brian asked.

"There is no elevator, Duh!"

Brian got to the fifth floor and saw that Justin was standing in the hallway waiting for him.

"What the fuck are you trying to do . . . kill me for real? Five floors up and NO elevator?"

"Think of all the time you waste on the 'Stairmaster' at the gym. I'm offering you the real thing."

Justin put his arms around Brian's neck and kissed him. Brian dropped his bag on the floor and pulled Justin closer to him. As anxious as he was to get Justin into bed, he was more anxious to find out the details of what had happened with Ethan the week before.

They moved their discussion into Justin's apartment. "What do you think?"

"It's bigger than a couch. But smaller than a loft."

"Now that I'm a free man I can concentrate on my future. No more looking back."

Brian crinkled his brow and pouted. "Except for you." Justin added.

"I want to know what happened last week. Are you sure he's out of your life for good?"

"I haven't seen him all week. I'm pretty sure he's gone."

"How did you leave him?"

"Playing his violin." Justin grinned. "He didn't kill Jason. He didn't even know he was dead. I felt kinda bad for him."

"Not too bad, I hope."

"We parted company with no violence. Let's leave it at that. I told you to trust me."

"I'm curious about something. How long did you have the gun? I know that you borrowed money from everyone the week before you left. What exactly happen? Were you planning on leaving all along?"

"No. You're the reason I got on the bus that night. I borrowed the money because I was desperate. I really thought that Ethan was going to kill you. I had to protect you. I felt responsible for getting involved with him in the first place. I guess everyone thinks I ran out on them. Tell them I'm going to pay them back. I owe money to everyone."

"No you don't. I paid them all. Now that Ethan is history, you can get rid of that gun. It makes me nervous that you even have it around."

"I did get rid of it. I gave it to Ethan."

"You what?"

"I handed it to him and told him to shoot me. I told him that I rather be dead than living in fear all the time. He finally got the message."

"You fucking handed your stalker a gun and told him to shoot you? You could have been killed."

"I meant what I said, and he knew it. Besides, the gun didn't have any bullets in it. I threw them into the river as soon as I got to New York. It made me nervous, carrying around a loaded gun in my pocket. I thought that if someone bumped into me on the subway I might shoot my dick off."

Brian shook his head in disbelief. "You're amazing. I'd never have the courage to buy a gun and then get on a bus to a strange city with no money, and no back up."

"I had money. I had \$ 420.00 after I bought the bus ticket."

"I don't know how you managed put together a life with \$ 420.00 and a gun. You really are a genius."

"I had back up." Justin said quietly.

"What?"

"I had a credit card."

"Where did you get a credit card?"

"It came in the mail. I activated it and set it up so that I could pay it on line."

"Who would mail you a credit card?"

Justin hesitated. "Well, it wasn't exactly mine. It kinda had your name on it."

"You stole another credit card from me?"

"I hardly used it. And I paid it all myself. Don't be mad at me."

"Why do I get the feeling there's a lot more to this New York tale? Keep talking, young man!"

"I used it as ID. I had my picture put on it. It's hard to open a bank account when you have no address or ID. I told the lady at the bank that I had moved and hadn't changed the address yet. When you're cute, people tend to trust you."

"What else?" Brian demanded.

"Your social security number. I had to fill out a form at work. I couldn't use mine because I was afraid someone would track me down."

"I guess I had it all wrong. I had a private investigator looking for you. I should have had him looking for me."

"Something like that." Justin grinned.

"I had no idea I'd been living with Al 'fucking' Capone! You are scary."

"And you really should be more careful with your stuff. Anyone can walk into your place and. . ."

". . . walk off with my money, my credit . . . my heart."

"Are you going to punish me?" Justin pulled himself into Brian's lap.

"Severely!"

Brian walked Justin to work at the restaurant. He didn't want to return to the empty apartment until Justin was ready to go home with him. It was still early so he decided to call Adam Lyons.

"Hi. It's Brian Kinney. I'm in town and I was wondering if I could buy you dinner. I want to thank you for helping me out last week."

"I'm getting ready to leave the office. Name the place and I'll meet you."

Brian picked a steak-house near the building where Adam worked. He had considered taking Adam to the restaurant where Justin was working so that he could watch him strutting around in his little waiter uniform. Then it occurred to him that Justin might get the wrong idea. Justin would know that he'd had sex with Adam. He had no intentions of causing the kid that kind of pain, ever again. It struck him that Adam might get the impression that he was coming on to him by asking him to dinner. He would make sure not to lead him on.

"I'm sorry I didn't call you back last week. I got . . . involved," Brian apologized.

"Did you find 'wet dream boy?'" Adam asked. "He sure is a cutie."

"Yeah. I can't thank you enough for helping me. He was in deep shit trouble."

"I can think of a way you could thank me." Adam said seductively.

"Sorry. I'm out of circulation."

"You rescued 'wet dream boy' and now he's stolen your heart." Adam smiled and dropped the sexual tension.

"Something like that. Only he's the one who rescued me, but that's a long, long story."

"I only have 'til seven-thirty. My partner is meeting me at the theater tonight. It's our three year anniversary."

"Three years is a long time. You must have an open relationship. I mean since you and I have . . . "

"Not really. I have slipped up from time to time when I meet someone too hot to pass up. If I do fuck up, I tell him. He forgives me and we move on from there. So far, so good."

"Does he do the same?"

"No. He doesn't play that game, thank God. I would freak if I ever caught him with another man. He knows he's hot, and he holds it over my head that he can fuck anyone he wanted. He's younger, but wiser. Seriously, if he ever left me, I would probably dig a hole and bury myself in it. I guess you know the feeling."

"Yeah."

Brian found himself enjoying the man's company. He hadn't had much in common with his friend Michael since high school. Having someone to talk business, relationships, and money with was a refreshing change. When the meal was over Adam checked his watch and said that he'd better get going or they would miss the curtain.

"Let's do this again the next time you're in town, Brian. Maybe we could bring our better halves to keep us in line."

The men shook hands and Adam left for the theater. Brian lingered over coffee thinking about how much different life was in New York City. He felt like he was trapped between his life in Pittsburgh and Justin's life in New York. He had roots in Pittsburgh. He was a partner in the firm that he had helped to build. He had a beautiful home and friends that he'd shared his life with. And last, but not least, there was Gus.

It was still early and he had hours to kill before meeting Justin. Brian decided to take in a movie. He picked a movie based on the fact that Heath Ledger was the star. It was an action type flick about two friends who fall in love with the same woman. He had thought that Heath Ledger was hot, at least he was in *The Patriot* and *A Knight's Tale*. But, Brian had lost his attraction for the baby faced Aussie. He figured it was the hair. He'd never realized how partial he was to blonds.

He retrieved his own hot blond at the restaurant and suggested that they take a cab rather than walk home.

"But, I'm starving. I need to get something to eat."

"You work in a restaurant. Didn't you eat dinner?"

"Not really. I was waiting to eat with you."

Brian had two choices. He could either sit down for a second meal with Justin and stuff himself till he puked: or he could tell Justin the truth about how he'd spent his evening.

"I had dinner with a friend."

Justin eyed him suspiciously. "You have a friend here in New York?"

"Yeah. I told you about him. Adam Lyons. He's the guy from Kennedy and Collins who helped me to find you."

"How do you know him?"

"We're in the same business. I'd run into him a few times at corporate dinners."

"Run into him?" Justin raised an eyebrow.

Justin was on to him. Brian stopped walking and turned toward Justin.

"I fucked him once. Wait, that was one fuck and a blow job. You see, I don't even remember it. It was nothing. He doesn't remember it either. I took him to dinner to thank him for helping me. We talked about business and stuff. After dinner he went to meet his partner for their three year anniversary celebration. That's the whole truth."

Justin shrugged his shoulders. "Okay. I'm still hungry."

"You believe me, right?" Brian was surprised at Justin's indifference to his confession.

"Since when do you care if I believe you or not? Sounds like you have a lot in common with him."

"Yeah. He's a nice guy. He calls you my 'wet dream boy'."

"I like him already."

"Maybe you should meet him. That way I can have him keep an eye on you when I'm not here."

"Don't you trust me?"

"I trust you."

"Good. I want pizza." They stopped at a small Italian restaurant. Brian had beer while Justin finished off an entire pie by himself.

They spent all day Saturday in bed making up for lost time. Justin had to go to work in the evening. Brian spent time reading and watching old movies on Justin's second hand 19" T.V. He would have to leave tomorrow night so that he could get to work on time. Justin didn't work on Sunday so at least they would be able to spend some time together.

For the next few weeks Brian repeated the pattern. He would leave work on Friday, and then fly to New York. On Sunday night he would fly home. Most of the time he spent in New York he was alone in Justin's small studio apartment. It wasn't enough. How would he convince Justin to move back to Pittsburgh? The situation seemed impossible.

"How do I look?"

"You look adorable." Brian teased.

"I don't want to look adorable. I want to look hot." Justin pulled his pale blue crew neck shirt over his head and tossed it on the bed. He opened a drawer and took out a black turtle neck. He pulled it over his head and went into the bathroom to examine himself in the mirror. Brian lay on the bed turning pages in a magazine, never taking his eyes from Justin. "You always look hot, even when you're adorable."

"Thanks." Justin came back into the room. "You ready?"

Brian pulled him down on the bed on top of him and kissed him. "I'm always ready."

"We're gonna be late." Justin returned the kiss with equal passion.

Brian pushed him off and got up. They took a cab to the restaurant in the Village. Adam was waiting for them at a table. He stood up and shook hands with Brian and turned his attention toward the younger man.

"Adam Lyons, this is my partner, Justin." Adam extended his hand and Justin took it. Brian had never introduced him as anything more than 'this is Justin'. He wondered why Brian had called him his partner. Nothing had changed in their relationship since they'd reconciled. He decided that Brian was just trying to impress his friend. Adam was nice looking, but nothing special. Justin wondered how Brian perceived him. He'd never seen Brian in a social situation with any of his tricks before. Brian seemed relaxed which was unusual for him.

"Ken called a few minutes ago. He was just getting on the train. He should be here in a few moments." Adam had a pleasant smile and friendly manner. Justin found himself relaxing in his presence. Maybe the evening wouldn't be the total bust that he thought it would be.

"So Justin, Brian tells me that you're an artist. You have really picked the right city to make your home. There are a lot of opportunities for artists here."

"Pittsburgh has art," said Brian, defended his hometown.

Justin giggled. "Brian you can hardly compare Pittsburgh to New York City. There are museums all over this city. I love to walk around down here in the Village. It's an artist's dream. Inspiration everywhere you look."

Brian tried to change the subject. "How was the play you saw last week?"

Adam ignored Brian and continued his conversation with Justin. "Ken went to art school here. He's started his own graphic design company a couple of years ago. He's doing quite well." Adam smiled in Justin's direction, then turned to Brian. "The play was alright. I don't really care for musicals." He looked past them toward the door and his face light up. "Here's Ken." He stood up and kissed the man who approached the table.

Brian and Justin stood up and were introduced. If it wasn't for the fact that he knew he was gay Brian would have asked where Barbi was. The young man looked exactly like a Ken doll. Light brown hair, blue eyes, a winning smile and dimples on both sides of his face. Brian looked over at Justin whom he knew was equally impressed. Justin and Ken hit it off right away. Ken had attended art school and was also a computer wiz. They talked about art and computer programs. By the end of the evening Ken had invited Justin to come to his office the next day. He needed some help on a project and it appeared that it could turn into a permanent part time job for Justin.

Autumn turned into winter and Brian was still not seeing a solution to his dilemma. The weekend trips to New York were beginning to get to him, physically, financially and emotionally. And it was getting more and more difficult to leave Justin on a weekly basis. The situation came to a head when Brian had to travel to L.A. to meet with a client. Due to a sudden illness the client had to delay the meeting over the weekend. That meant spending his first weekend away from Justin since he'd found him in New York. He picked up the phone and dialed Justin's number to tell him the bad news.

"Hey. I'm stuck here for the weekend." Brian had anticipated that Justin would be upset.

"It's okay. I'm working on a project for Ken that's due on Monday. I have to work on it over the weekend, anyway."

"I'll make it up to you next week. Maybe we could go away."

"Are you kidding? I can't take off on a weekend. That's when I make most of my tip money."

"What's more important?" Brian was getting angry at Justin's attitude.

"You are. But I have to pay my rent. You can't come this weekend because of your job."

"That's different."

"How is it different?"

Brian saw Justin's point. "Okay. You're right. I'll come see you next weekend."

"I miss you, Brian. I love you."

"Yeah."

The following weekend a storm hit the east coast that made it impossible to travel. Brian paced the floor as he spoke to Justin on the phone. "The planes are grounded. I'm going to drive."

"Brian! No! It's too dangerous. The roads are icy and I'd worry all night."

"This makes two weekends in a row, Justin."

"I know. I miss you."

"So come home."

"I am home."

Brian was devastated. As angry as he was at the situation he didn't want to take out his frustration on Justin. If the phone was all they had, he was going to make the best of it.

"What are you wearing?" He asked seductively.

The following weekend was Justin's birthday. Brian wanted to do something special for him. Something that would make him happy.

"Hello, Brian! What are you doing here?" Lindsay had softened toward him somewhat, but she was still guarded. Mel came into the room carrying Gus.

"I came to ask a favor. Next week is Justin's birthday. I know he'd love to see Gus. I want to take him with me to New York City to surprise Justin."

Lindsay and Mel looked at each other. "Brian, Gus has never even been on a plane. Mel and I will have to discuss it. I'll let you know."

Brian then decided to go to the comic book store to see Michael. They had spoken on the phone several times a week, but since Brian was in New York every weekend they had not gone out together since before Justin left town.

"Hey stranger. What are you doing in here on a weekend?"

"The weather was too bad to travel yesterday. I'm going next week. You want to have dinner or something?"

"Yeah, sure. We can go to Babylon after," Michael grinned.

"I've outgrown Babylon."

"Right. So, who are you and where's the real Brian Kinney?"

"I've changed."

"How long will that last? You're Brian Kinney and you always will be, so cut out the shit with your best friend. Your little boy toy isn't here so relax and be yourself."

"Look, do you want to eat, or not?"

They went to dinner and Michael finally talked Brian into going to Woody's. Brian looked around the bar at the familiar faces. He'd fucked everyone in the bar. There was nothing for him here. Maybe there was nothing for him in all of Pittsburgh either.

The final blow came later that weekend when Lindsay called. "Brian, I'm sorry. We discussed it, and we don't feel comfortable with you taking Gus to New York. Maybe Mel and I could make the trip to see Justin soon. Wish him a happy birthday for us."

Gus was his son, but Lindsay and Mel were his parents. "Yeah, I understand." He tried not to show his disappointment.

So this was his home. His friends bored him, his son was not his son, and the loft had become one great big lonely prison. He spent the work week contacting his most valuable clients. Then he made a call to Adam and asked him to set up an interview with his boss. Brian arrived in New York on Friday morning and went straight to the Kennedy and Collins Agency. They were impressed with his resume and with the list of clients that had promised to sign on with him. They offered him a position with the firm. After negotiating a reasonable salary, he accepted.

He arrived at Justin's apartment at the usual time. Brian did not share his plans with Justin. It would take a few weeks to complete the relocation. He told himself that he did not want Justin to get his hopes up. But in the back of his mind, he considered the fact that Justin may not want to share his new life in New York with Brian.

On Justin's birthday Brian told him that he would like to buy him some new clothes. Justin was pleased with the offer and was thrilled to drag Brian from store to store and to model each outfit for him. At the end of the day Justin put on one of his new designer outfits and Brian took him to dinner. The more time Brian spent with Justin the more he realized that he was making the right decision. His feelings for the boy increased in intensity with each weekend visit.

On the following Monday morning Jennifer Taylor was shocked to see Brian Kinney standing on the other side of her desk.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

Brian flashed her his most sincere smile. "I'm taking you up on your offer."

"What offer?" Jennifer asked. Just the sight of the man caused her to cringe.

"You said that if I ever wanted to sell my loft, to let you know. So here I am. I want to put my loft on the market."

Jennifer was shocked. "I don't know what to say. When are you planning on moving?"

"As soon as possible. I have a job offer in another city and I'm very anxious to move on this."

"What city?" Jennifer asked, not wanting to hear the answer.

"New York. There's someone waiting for me there and I'll be leaving Pittsburgh as soon as we can firm up a deal on the loft."

"You just can't leave him alone, can you?"

"No, apparently not. I love him."

"God help him. I know that Justin is beyond my control, but he's still my little boy. I don't want to see him hurt."

"Has he called you?"

"Of course. You know very well that he has, you were there."

"How does he sound?"

"Happy," Jennifer admitted.

"I'll do my best to keep him that way," Brian said sincerely. "Now, can we do business or not?"

Brian had decided to use some of his vacation days to search for an apartment in New York. He did not want to tip his hand to Vance yet. Not until his defection was complete. He would take an early morning plane on Friday, arriving in the city in time to search for an apartment. Justin's theory on renting an apartment in New York was correct. You had to be a millionaire. To Brian's surprise, when he evaluated his financial situation, he almost was a millionaire. But, his first time out with the real estate agent was a bitter disappointment. He was shown a number of apartments in various downtown neighborhoods. Every apartment he looked at had walls, rooms, doors, and windows . . . but no space. Brian liked to have space, he would suffocate in these cramped living quarters. On his second trip out he got lucky. The agent was very excited about a particular listing that had just come into the office that very morning. The owner had passed away after a long illness and the family lived out of town. They were very anxious to sell. It was out of his price range, but it wouldn't cost anything to look.

Marvin, the realtor, took him to a post-war building one block from the Hudson River. Brian rolled his eyes when he saw the doorman. A doorman had to mean big bucks. The building was old, but clean and well maintained. The

agent took him up to the 15th floor where they exited the elevator. Marvin had been directed to look for a door that said 'PH.'

'What the fuck does PH mean?' Brian wondered. 'Bet it stands for Poor House, which is where I will be living shortly.'

They walked one flight up a narrow staircase. At the top of the stairs was a door marked 'PH.' The agent used the key he'd been given and opened the door.

"Mr. Kinney, this is my first time here so bear with me."

The long hallway was dimly lit and cluttered with old furniture and seldom-used gym equipment. Marvin explained that the family was going to have it all carted away by the weekend. "I really wasn't even supposed to start showing the place, but since you are a special client and I was anxious to see the property myself I figured, what the heck?" Brian prayed that Marvin was not coming on to him. The man was sixty, bone thin and bald. He reminded Brian of Mr. Burns on Mikey's favorite cartoon show, "The Simpsons."

Brian took the lead and walked down to the end of the hallway. To the right was a small laundry room. At least, he hoped that it was a laundry room and not a kitchen. He turned to the left and knew at once that this was his place. Brian and Justin's new home.

What Brian was facing was called a great room. The entire apartment was 3,500 square feet. At least 1,500 of them were in this room. The hardwood floors gleamed in the sunlight. The white ceiling was sectioned off with blue molding from which track lighting hung. At the far end of the room was a V-shaped island that defined the kitchen area. Over the counter was a skylight. On the other side of the counter at the very end of the room there was a bay window. Along the outside wall there were two sets of french doors. Brian could not resist the temptation to check out the view. He opened the door and stepped out onto the terrace. When he reached the end of the terrace, he looked back at the apartment. He could see that what he was looking at was not an apartment, really. It was a small house which sat on top of the apartment building - a penthouse. The roof area surrounding the outside of the penthouse was approximately 2,000 square feet. Wooden decking had been arranged to form paths around the roof. Three large picture windows completed the outside wall of the great room. The view of the Hudson River was spectacular.

Marvin had not uttered a word since they entered the great room. It was obvious that the man had been struck speechless. Brian walked up to Marvin, who was staring at the view of the river. "I'll take it!" Brian said.

"But, you haven't seen . . . "

"Just get things going, Marvin. I'll want to move in by the first of next month."

A few weeks later Justin, arrived home after class on a Friday and was surprised to find Brian waiting in his apartment. "Hey, what are you doing here so early?" Justin put his arms around Brian's neck.

"I wanted to surprise you," Brian said. The first hug of the weekend was always intense for him. Having Justin so close after a week of longing was almost too much for him to bear. "Do you have plans for lunch?"

Justin held up a bag he had in his hand. "Roast beef hero, hold the mayo. Wanna share it?"

"Not here. We're going on a picnic."

Justin was not sure what to make of this sudden romantic gesture. "A surprise and a picnic on the same day? What's the catch?"

"No catch. Do you want to come with me or not?"

Brian would not answer any questions on the way to the apartment. He led Justin up the staircase and just before they got to the landing he covered the boy's eyes. He opened the door with his key and shoved Justin inside, still not allowing him to look. When he had him positioned in the middle of the great room facing the windows he let him open his eyes.

"Shit, look at that view, Brian! This place is amazing! Who lives here?"

Brian took Justin by the shoulders and turned him around to face the refrigerator where he had hung Gus's drawings up with magnets. "These two guys live here. That is, if you still want to be with me."

Justin stood staring at the pictures with his mouth open. It was still open when he turned to Brian. "Are you kidding? You're moving to New York?"

"Did I ever have a choice?" Brian was getting nervous. Justin had not said yes, no or maybe about being with him. "Will you stop standing there gawking and tell me if I need to buy one or two sets of towels?"

"One set," Justin answered. Brian's felt his heart sink. "I'll bring my own towels." Justin leaped into his arms. "Yes, yes, yes!!! Of course, I want to be with you!"

Brian was relieved. His move to New York was complete. He'd had a discussion with Vance earlier in the week. He'd made a proposal to set up a satellite office of The Vanguard Agency in New York. As he'd anticipated, Vance had turned him down and threatened to sue Brian if he took any of the clients he'd signed while working at the agency. Brian showed him a clause that he had put into the contracts of recently signed clients indicating that it was their option to stay with Vanguard or to stay with Brian. "They all opted out of Vanguard. Nice doing business with you. I'll be leaving at the end of the week."

The one regret that he had was leaving Cynthia behind in Pittsburgh. He'd made her an offer to come to New York and sign on as his assistant. She was furious with him for leaving, but understood why he needed go. She had family ties in Pittsburgh so she had turned down his offer.

Brian and Justin stood out on the roof of what was now their very own penthouse apartment. "When is your furniture coming?" Justin asked.

"It's not. Your mother was able to sell it to the new owners of the loft. I don't think it would have suited this place."

"My mother?" Justin asked in surprise.

"Yeah. She's my real estate agent. She got me a very good price, too."

"I spoke to her yesterday. She never said a word."

"I asked her not to. I wanted to surprise you." Brian put his arm around Justin.

"I'm gonna miss our bed," Justin said suddenly.

"That was one piece of furniture I decided we couldn't live without. I ordered a new one two weeks ago. It arrived today."

Brian took Justin by the hand and led him back inside their new home and down a long hallway. When he got to the bedroom door he picked Justin up in his arms and pushed the door open with his knee.

"Close your eyes." Brian instructed.

Justin obeyed. "You aren't going to toss me into the bathtub or something, are you?"

Brian put Justin down. "Open 'em."

The bed was the same style as the one they'd shared in Pittsburgh. Justin smiled when he saw that Brian had hung the familiar blue light fixture on the wall behind the bed.

"You don't mind, do you?"

"It wouldn't seem like home without it."

Brian was anxious to christen their new bed, but Justin had already moved on to the master bathroom. "Holly shit! Our very own jacuzzi! And the shower stall is almost as large as the one in the loft!" Excitement shown in Justin's blue eyes. "Let's start in here, then we can move on to the bed." He started to strip off his shirt and pants.

"Wait a minute. One thing you're going to have to get used to is the fact that every inch of this place is visible to the New Jersey shore. Before we get naked, let me close the blinds."

"Since when are you so modest? Maybe there are some hot guys in New Jersey that would enjoy the show."

"Let 'em get their own 'wet dream boy.'"

Justin laughed. Brian turned on the water in the shower as he watched Justin strip for him.

The shower had always been Brian's favorite place to enjoy Justin's many physical attributes. Twenty minutes later they lay in their new bed wrapped in brand new, royal blue towels.

"You have a lot of shopping to do," Brian said.

"Me? For what?"

"Furniture. I guess we could survive for a few months with just the bed, but one day we might want to get up and eat. We need dishes and silverware. And some chairs would be nice."

"I could bring my 19" T.V.," Justin offered.

"Leave it the roaches. We'll get one of those big screen televisions for the great room. The only entertainment we will need in the bedroom is each other. I didn't buy anything yet because I wanted you to be a part of choosing, so you would feel like this place is your home, too. Not like the loft."

"Then we should go shopping together."

"Oh, what a nightmare! We can't even agree on what color tie goes with what suit. You're the artist, you should decided."

"Okay! I'll pick out the furniture, you bring the credit card."

"All this talk about shopping is making me horny." He rolled Justin over onto his stomach and began to run his tongue down the boy's spine. It was just the beginning of a long, long night of pure pleasure.

Brian looked up from his computer screen to see Adam standing in his doorway. "What's up?" Brian asked.

"I came in here to vent." He walked into Brian's office and closed the door behind him.

"It's that bitch they promoted to managing partner. She doesn't know what the fuck she's doing. I just got reamed out for not snagging a new client I had lined up. I told you that he went with another firm. Who does she think she is? She hasn't brought one new client into the firm in months. You should have had that job, Brian."

"Fuck her! Somebody should." Brian smiled. "Any woman who wears fuck-me-pumps to an office full of gay men must be very frustrated."

"What are you working on?"

"Furniture. Justin and I are supposed to go shopping after work." Brian threw a magazine across the desk. "What do you think?"

"I think that you are a changed man, Brian Kinney. That means there is absolutely no hope for the rest of us." Adam smiled over his shoulder as he left Brian's office.

Brian enjoyed working at Kennedy and Collins. The people were more creative and intelligent than the collection of losers who he'd worked with at Vanguard. At first he thought that the competition would stress him out, but he actually found it stimulating. He had increased his client list and, along with his creative staff, had come up with some pretty interesting new marketing ideas. He now realized how stagnant his professional life had become when he lived in Pittsburgh.

Adam had said that he was a changed man. If he was, he had Justin to thank for it. No matter how involved he was with projects at work, he would always find himself checking his watch in the afternoon. At four o'clock Justin would be on his way home from class. He would probably stop at the grocery store and pick up something for dinner. Once he got home he would do his homework to get it out of the way so that when Brian got home at 6:30 they would have the whole evening to spend together. Brian found himself smiling at the thought of Justin waiting for him to arrive home. They would kiss and fondle each other for as long as they could stand it. Then they would have sex. It had become their obsession to 'do it' in each and every corner of their new home. Usually Justin would take the lead. The night before he had found a small alcove off the laundry room which had probably been used as a maid's quarters by the former owners.

It had been almost a month since Justin had moved in with him. The apartment was coming together, slowly, but surely. They were very careful to make sure that each piece of furniture fit the ambiance of the room and their personalities. Brian wanted his new home to reflect his new outlook on life. Being with Justin was warm and comfortable. The sofa and love seat, and reclining chairs were set up to surround the large screen TV. A large wood coffee table filled in the center of the area. It was an inviting place to relax, and, of course, to have sex.

Justin had found a small, round, wrought iron table with two matching chairs which fit perfectly into the curve of the bay window at the far end of the room. Brian picked out the dishes and silverware. They bought pots, pans, utensils and even a few cook books to make a good appearance.

Tonight they had planned to shop for a table and chairs that would serve as their dining room set. Brian remembered how he'd purchased the furniture for his loft. A decorator made suggestions and showed him styles and fabrics. Brian pointed to what he wanted and the deal was done. A few weeks later it appeared in his loft, as cold and impersonal as his life there had been.

That morning, when Justin had suggested the shopping trip, Brian had moaned and feigned protest. But, on his lunch hour he had purchased a decorating magazine. Living with Justin had turned him into a total . . . husband.

Until a few months ago that word would have sent him running for the hills, or maybe to the backroom at Babylon. But the more time he spent with Justin, the more obsessed he became with possessing him. Justin had spent some time on his own in New York and had acquired a confident air about him that made Brian a little nervous. Justin's cell phone was ringing constantly and their message machine at home was always full of messages from classmates

and other people who Brian did not know anything about. He was confident that he was still the center of Justin's world. But Justin's world had increased in size ten fold in the last few months, leaving Brian to wonder about Justin's new friends and how much influence they had on him. That was the thing about friends, sometimes they involve themselves in your personal relationships and cause trouble.

Brian knew that Justin loved him. But as his own feelings had intensified, he felt that Justin had grown distant. Justin's school work and his job with Ken kept him out of the house for most of the day. He'd stopped working at the modeling agency, but did take an occasional day job modeling when it was offered. And, of course, he refused to give up the weekend waiter job.

At four o'clock Brian got word that the client who was supposed to meet with him had called to reschedule. Brian decided to leave the office early and surprise Justin. When he arrived at the penthouse he heard voices coming from the great room. Justin had company.

"Hey, Brian. What are you doing home so early?" Justin sat in the middle of a crowd of about a dozen or so loud, obnoxious, giggling teenager boys and girls. "Everyone, this is my boyfriend, Brian."

Everyone shouted a greeting at once, causing Brian to grimace and retreat to the bedroom. After a few moments, Justin joined him. "That was rude."

"What's that all about? Did the after-school center burn down?"

"They're my study group. I told you that we meet every Thursday afternoon."

Brian nodded. "Well, I'm home now. Make them disappear." He tried to put his hand down the front of Justin's pants.

Justin smacked his hand away playfully. "No, I won't. We just started. They'll leave at five."

"Fine." Brian started to undo his tie. "I'll just stay in my room, by myself, and jerk off like a good 'boyfriend.'" Justin left the room without comment. That fact that Justin had introduced him as his 'boyfriend,' disturbed Brian. It didn't seem right. They were more than just boyfriends. Brian wondered if Justin had said it intentionally. He undressed and hung up his suit in the closet. When he came back into the bedroom there was a young girl with black hair and a safety-pin stuck in her eye-brow standing in the doorway staring at him. When she walked toward him he instinctively grabbed a towel from the bed and wrapped it around his waist. The little bitch was coming on to him.

"Get out!" He yelled and pointed toward the door.

"You don't know what you're missing?" She sighed as she walked out of the room.

Brian threw the towel on the bed and grabbed his sweat-pants. He pulled a T-shirt over his head and put a hooded sweatshirt on over it. He stormed out of the room and grabbed his bicycle which hung on a hook in the hallway. After slamming the front door he practically threw the bike down the narrow staircase.

Justin smiled and shook his head when he heard the commotion that Brian was causing in the hallway. When the door slammed he said to his friends, "He needs to unwind for a while when he gets home from work. When he comes back, he'll be a pussy cat. Really!"

His friends gave him a sympathetic 'Hmmmmm.' They continued their work and left promptly at five o'clock. When Brian returned to the loft he hung his bicycle back up on the hook and went to look for Justin. He found him kneeling on the floor watering the plants. "I'm sorry I embarrassed you in front of your friends. You have every right to invite them here to study. This is your home too."

Justin did not respond to Brian's apology. "What? You're mad at me? You're not talking to me now?" He moved closer and saw the reason for Justin's silence. He lifted the earphones from Justin's head.

Justin looked up at him and smiled. "Hey, feeling better?" Justin kissed him gently on the mouth.

"You're not mad?" Brian asked.

"For what? You were being you. I love you, the whole package." He kissed him one more time before returning to his chore.

"What are you doing?"

"Murdering the plants." Justin frowned. "I'm so bad at this. I'm the kiss of death to plant-life."

Brian took the watering can from Justin. "You're drowning them. I'll take over the plant-life. You stick to killing us with your cooking."

"Deal!" Justin wiped his hands on the front of his pants.

"You have every right to invite your friends here to study, Justin."

"I know." Justin replied as he searched the refrigerator for something he could prepare for dinner.

Brian came up behind him and put his arms around his waist. "Safety pin girl tried to convert me."

Justin smiled. "That's Cher. Her mission in life to show all gay boys what they are missing."

Brian turned him around. "She should only know what SHE is missing." He kissed Justin passionately and pulled him toward the sofa. It was an hour before they came up for air.

"Now you've done it. It'll be too late to shop for our table."

"Not if we go out for dinner."

"Brian, can we afford to eat AND buy furniture?"

Brian considered the question. "Probably not. I don't worry about being in debt because in a few short years, when you're CEO of some Fortune 500 Company, you can pay off all the bills."

"I thought you wanted me to be an artist."

"Of course you can be an artist, sweetheart." Brian teased. "You can be CEO in your spare time."

They took the subway downtown to the ABC store. Brian fell in love with a dark wood table. Justin picked out six chairs. No two were alike and none of them matched the table.

They pulled out an oriental area rug from one of the racks and put it under the table. Then they placed the whole mess together in the middle of the store. "It's perfect. We'll take it all." Justin grinned as Brian pulled out his American Express Card and gave the clerk the address where it was to be delivered. "Oh, don't forget to tell them that PH stands for Penthouse."

They ate dinner at a bar on Seventh Avenue. "I think that our penthouse is complete." Justin said. "We don't have to shop anymore."

"Just when I was getting the hang of it."

"Do you think we could have some people over and show off our place?"

"A party?"

"I was thinking that maybe Lindsay and Mel would bring Gus for a visit. We could fix up the small bedroom just for him. Lindsay and Mel could stay in one of the spare bedrooms."

"When do you want to do this?"

"Spring break is coming up."

Brian protested. "I thought we could go to Vermont like we'd planned last year."

"No!" Justin exclaimed.

Brian was surprised at his reaction. "I thought you might need a vacation. It's been a rough year for you."

"Brian, we just spent a lot of money fixing up our home. I don't want to leave it to go on a vacation."

"Okay, why don't you call Lindsay and invite them." Brian tried to hide his disappointment. He'd planned to do more than snowboarding in Vermont.

"Jussin!!! Jussin!!!" Gus cried out when he saw Justin. The little boy ran across the room past his father and into the arms of his favorite person.

"Hi Gus! You've gotten so big!" Justin brushed tears from his eyes with his sleeve.

"What about Daddy? Don't I get a hug?" Brian protested. Justin scooped Gus up in his arms and brought him over to Brian for a group hug.

"Oh, my! This place is so . . . you." Lindsay attempted to pull Gus's jacket off without disturbing the group hug.

Mel stood at the window admiring the view. "It's fucking unbelievable. You two must have sold your souls to the devil."

"Actually, he already has a lease on mine with an option to buy. I had to sacrifice the innocent one." Brian cupped his hands on Justin's face.

Justin elbowed Brian in the ribs. "Innocent? After living with you?"

Gus and Justin settled in at the coffee table to draw. Justin suggested that Gus work on a self-portrait to add to the refrigerator collect.

Brian sat on the bed in the guest room and watched Lindsay unpack. "Brian, I think it's amazing that you were able to change your life so dramatically. It must be exciting for you to be living in New York."

Brian rolled over onto his stomach. "New York is great. I should have moved here a long time ago."

"Maybe. If you had taken Justin with you. He looks wonderful, Brian. You must be so happy."

"I guess."

"Is there something you're not telling me? Are you two having trouble?"

Brian hesitated, then got up and closed the door. He sat back on the bed and looked up at Lindsay. "He's different than he was in Pittsburgh, more independent. He's got a whole bunch of new friends. Nothing I do bothers him. He doesn't seem to care anymore."

"Brian, what did you do?"

"Nothing like that. I can't get him angry, even if I try. He just accepts me like I am."

"Why would you want to make him angry?"

"I don't know why. All I know is that since I move to New York, I can't wait to come home at night. I think about him all day at work. Is he safe? What's he doing? What's he thinking about? I love him more every day. Maybe I just want some kind of sign that I'm not going to lose him."

"You're testing him?"

"Forget I said anything. This is nuts. Am I crazy?"

Lindsay sat next to him on the bed. "You're not crazy. What you're feeling is perfectly normal. You're overwhelmed and Justin seems not to be affected. When you're in a close relationship your feelings grow, Brian. There are stages you go through. You're at the newlywed, I can't spend a moment without him, stage. I think that Justin went through that a while ago. He's probably feeling secure and comfortable now and he's realized that he can have you, AND a life of his own."

"So what's next? Will we ever be on the same wave length?"

"I think that every couple is different. I know that it only gets better, when you're really in love. I felt like you do now when I first moved in with Mel. When we had Gus, our love changed. It got deeper and more meaningful. When we got married last year, we were lovers again."

Brian fell backward on the bed and put a pillow over his face. "Fuck! I knew this would happen to me someday. I've turned into a lesbian."

Lindsay laughed and pulled him back up. "You should be so lucky. Brian you're doing fine. It's perfectly obvious that you're made for each other. Everything will work out. Stop worrying."

The next morning Brian awoke to find that he was alone in the bed. He threw off the covers and got up. He found Justin and Gus in the kitchen eating oatmeal.

"Gus woke up early." Justin said. He leaned back in his chair and Brian kissed him on his forehead. Gus giggled and dropped a spoon full of oatmeal on the floor. Brian picked up the spoon and kissed Gus on the forehead. "Good morning, Sonny Boy." Gus giggled again and slid down from the chair. He went to Justin and pulled on his hand indicating that breakfast was over and it was time to play.

Justin allowed Gus to lead him over to the T.V. Justin turned on the cartoon station and pulled Gus onto his lap. Brian watched them as he drank his coffee. Gus had decided that it was time to draw. He leaned over the coffee table and watched Justin draw him an outline of a house to color. Brian wasn't sure how many words Gus had accumulated in his vocabulary. He watched Gus's face as Justin babbled on about drawing, colors and art. It appeared that Gus understood every word that Justin was saying, or at least he was trying to. Justin was the only one who spoke to Gus like an adult. He never spoke down or used baby talk like the girls did. And when they played it was always on Gus's level, doing what Gus wanted to do. It didn't take a genius to figure out why Gus adored Justin.

Justin left Gus to his drawing and joined Brian at the kitchen table. Brian got up to get milk and noticed a new picture on the refrigerator. He brought it back to the table to study it.

"What the fuck is this?"

"That's us. You, me and Gus. He's the short one in the middle. That's me with the sun shining over my head." Justin grinned.

Brian grinned. "I can see that. But why is it that I never have a mouth?" He put the picture on the table so Justin could see it.

"Yeah, you do. It's right here."

"On my shirt?"

"I asked Gus where your mouth was. So he put it there. Don't complain, at least he gave you some color this time."

"A blue shirt. Black hair, eyes, nose, pants, shoes. A definite improvement. I just wonder why he thinks I don't have a mouth. And if I do have one, why is it on my shirt?"

"Don't ask me why. He's the artist, that's his interpretation, not mine. Maybe it's because you don't really talk to him." Justin got up and put his bowl in the dish washer. "Next time I draw a picture of you I should put your mouth on your dick."

Brian hated Friday nights. Justin had told him not to meet him at the restaurant because there was a private party scheduled and he had no idea what time he was getting out of work. Brian had big news and he was anxious for Justin to get home so they could celebrate. A few weeks earlier Cynthia had called him at the office. She informed him that the Vanguard Agency had taken a nose dive after he left and the clients were calling asking for him personally. Vance was in Europe and had not called the office once. Cynthia figured that it would be to her advantage to give the clients Brian's number and deal with the consequences later. Vanguard was a sinking ship and New York was not really all that far away from her family in Pittsburgh.

Brian's clients from the Vanguard agency had been calling him to set up meetings. He knew there could be legal complications, but since he did not solicit them directly how could Vance blame him? If they were not happy with the services provided by Vanguard, they had every right to take their business elsewhere. He had picked up fifteen new clients in the past two weeks and his new bosses at Kennedy and Collins were impressed.

Cynthia had called him earlier in the week to tell him that Vance had returned from Europe. Realizing that it was too late to save his failing business, he decided to close up shop and move back to Chicago. The remainder of the Vanguard clients were free game and Brian had spent the rest of the week contacting them with Cynthia's help. He had tripled his client list in less than a month. Friday morning he was called into a meeting with his bosses. They informed him that they were making him managing partner. He would be receiving a bonus for every new client he'd signed, and of course his salary would increase significantly.

The only person that he'd shared this news with was Cynthia. She would be moving to New York as soon as she could arrange it. Tonight he planned on telling Justin that he could quit his jobs and concentrate on his art.

It was after eleven o'clock and Brian was getting ready to dial Justin's cell phone number when the door bell rang. "Did you forget your key again?" Brian called out as he went to open the door.

"You never gave me a key." Michael Novotny stood in the doorway grinning from ear to ear.

"Michael! What the fuck are you doing here?"

Michael walked past him into the hallway. "Nice greeting for your best friend. I needed to talk to you. I've been calling you for two weeks and you never got back to me. So I decided the only way to get your attention would be to show up unannounced." Brian followed Michael down the hallway and into the great room. "Holy shit! Is this where you live? Holy shit!"

"Hey, I'm sorry I didn't get back to you. I've had a busy week." Brian explained.

"Too busy to call your best friend? What's up?"

"Nothing. Work's been crazy, that's all." Brian wanted to save his big news for Justin.

"What did you want to talk to me about?"

"Men!"

"Is that all?"

"Ben left me."

"Why?"

"He said that I was moody, that since you left town all I did was mope around and complain. He was right. I miss you, Brian? When are you coming home? Pittsburgh is no fun without you."

"Michael, I am home. I've outgrown Pittsburgh."

"Have you outgrown me?"

"Michael . . . don't."

"What happened to 'always have always will'? I love you, Brian." Michael pulled Brian into his arms and kissed him on the mouth.

Brian responded the only way he knew how . . . until he saw Justin standing in the hallway with that horrible look on his face. It was a look that had he'd seen before, right before he'd sent the boy running to New York in the first place. Brian pushed Michael away. "JUSTIN!" Brian ran down the hallway to the bedroom. He opened the door slowly.

Justin was stripping off his T-shirt and attempting to kicked off his sneakers. Brian could see the hurt and fury in his eyes. He had to say something. "Justin, it's only Michael."

"Fuck you, Brian! And fuck Michael! Fuck you both!" Justin said in a rage. He managed to remove his sneakers and his jeans. He stood at the foot of the bed in his underwear trying to control his breathing. As Justin's breathing returned to normal, Brian watched the expression on his face change. The anger and hurt was replaced by a blank stare. Watching the transformation gave Brian chills. Justin took a deep breath and walked over to where Brian stood. A forced smile came to his lips. "I'm sorry. I'm just tired. Go out with Michael if you want. Fuck your brains out. I'm going to bed." Justin kissed him on the cheek, pulled up the covers and got into the bed.

Brian backed out of the room. The scene he had just witnessed made him ill. Knots formed in his stomach and for a moment he thought he would puke. What had just happen here? One minute Justin was having a fit of jealous rage, and the next he was telling Brian to go fuck his brains out. Was this the sign that Brian was looking for that Justin still cared? Or had he just driven the boy over the brink of insanity?

"What was that all about?" Michael asked. Brian jumped. He had forgotten that Michael was there.

"I'm not sure." Brian pulled Michael down the hall. He did not want Justin to hear them.

"Since the boy wonder is going to bed, we could go out on the town by ourselves. What do you say, Brian? There must be a million gay clubs in New York. It'll be like old times."

"Michael. Why did you come here?"

"I missed you. Life is boring without Pittsburgh's hottest fuck machine. You're the legendary Brian Kinney. Now, let's go party."

"No! You don't need me to party, Michael. All you need is yourself."

"I need you."

"And I need Justin. I think we just hurt him, badly."

"What? We didn't do anything we haven't done since we were fifteen."

"Look, Michael, you're going to have to find your own party. I have to be with. . . No! I want to be with Justin now. You're hot all by yourself, Michael. You don't need me. You'll start a new legend. Here, this is the address of a bar in the Village. Take a cab down there. You'll have a great time and you'll forget all about me. Take my key and come back here later. We'll talk in the morning." Brian handed Michael the key and some cash. Michael reluctantly left him alone.

Brian stood next to the bed and looked down at his sleeping partner. Justin's blond hair reflected the moonlight and as Brian's eyes adjusted to the dark he saw that Justin was turned on his left side facing the wall. Brian removed his pants and shirt and slipped into the bed.

"Hey. I know you're not asleep," Brian said as he put his hand on Justin's arm.

"What are you still doing here?" Justin asked without turning to face him. "I thought you and Michael were going out?"

"I don't want to go out. I want to be here, with you."

Justin rolled over onto his back and looked up at him. Brian could see his face in the moonlight and knew that he'd been crying. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. I don't care if you go out with Michael." Justin was determined not to let his feelings show. He tried to turn back on his side but Brian stopped him.

"Yes. You do care. Why else would you be upset about Michael kissing me? You know it means nothing."

"How would I know what you feel for Michael. You've never talked to me about it."

"He's my friend."

Justin threw the covers back and got out of the bed. He was fully awake now as he paced the floor at the foot of the bed. "Michael is your BEST friend. I know that, Brian. I've only heard it a million times. I know what Michael is to you. But, what am I? You introduce me to your friends as your partner. But I don't feel like a partner. A partner is someone you trust. Someone you talk to. Brian, you fucking planned the move to New York without even telling me. You talked to Adam, Michael, Lindsay, Cynthia, even my mother. But you never talked to me."

"I didn't want to tell you until I was sure it would work. What if I couldn't get a job or a place to stay? I didn't want you to get your hopes up."

"If you really wanted to be with me, none of that would have matter. You could have stayed at my place and gotten a job waiting tables or modeling that stupid handsome face of yours. We could have worked it out together, Brian. That's what partner's do. Did you think I wouldn't want you around unless you had a penthouse and a fancy job? Is that what you think of me?" Justin sat down at the foot of the bed.

Brian sat up and moved closed to him. He put his hand on Justin's back and massaged him gently. "Of course not. You're right. I should have discussed it with you." Brian realized that Justin's hero worship was a thing of the past. If he wanted Justin's respect he would have to tell him the truth. "I was afraid you'd tell me that you didn't want me here. You'd made yourself a life here that didn't include me."

"Brian, my life will always include you. If you'd have asked, I would have told you that."

"Justin, since you moved here you seem different. Sometimes I feel like you don't really care about anything. You introduced me to your friends as your boyfriend. I thought we were past that. We're not just fuck buddies."

"You never told me we were anything else. The last I remember, you said we were all about sex and there was no such thing as love."

"A lot's happened since then."

"What's happened?"

"I've changed."

"Have you?" Justin got back into bed and pulled the covers up to his chest. "Brian, when I saw you kissing Michael tonight, I remembered all the other times and how much it always hurt me. Since I've been on my own, I've had some time to get to know 'Justin Taylor - the man.' I found out what it's like to be responsible for myself. It's made me more guarded. When I first got to New York there were lots of times when I was scared, cold, hungry, lonely. For the first time in my life I had no one to protect me. Sometimes the fear was overwhelming. I had to learn to shut down my feeling when things got out of my control. My mind has developed an automatic protective shield, I guess."

"So your mind thinks that you need to be protected from me. I guess that Bellweather was right. I have stolen you innocence."

"It had to happen sometime. That's part of growing up, I guess. Brian, it doesn't mean that I love you any less. In fact, since you came to New York, I love you more. I love you more every day that we're together. When we're not together, you're all I think about. Sometimes I think I'm going insane. It's always in the back of my mind that someday I'll come home and find you in our bed with some guy. If I let myself love you too much, it would hurt me more than it ever did in Pittsburgh. I think I would die."

"Justin, I wouldn't do that."

"How would I know that, Brian? You never told me. We never talk about our feelings for each other."

"Lindsay said that it's normal for feelings to change, to get stronger."

"Lindsay? When did she say that?"

"When I told her that I thought I was going crazy. That I'm obsessed with you. And that I love you more every day. I didn't know you were feeling the same things. Nothing I did had any affect on you. When I came home that day and acted like an ass in front of your friends, I thought you'd be angry. You just accepted whatever I did as me being me. Maybe I don't want to be 'me' anymore. I was counting on you to care about helping me change. I was starting to wonder if you didn't love me as much as you did before."

"You thought that?"

"Pretty stupid, huh?"

"I guess we're both pretty stupid."

"Justin, what do I have to do to convince your mind that I'm not a bad guy? I know all about self preservation. I'd lived with a protective shield of my own for years, but you were able to shut it down. How did you do it?"

Justin smiled. "Perseverance! I believed in you. Maybe more than you believe in yourself. Brian, I know that you love me. Even if you can't talk to me about your feelings. But you can't expect me to read your mind. If you can tell Lindsay or Michael what you're feeling, why can't you tell me?"

"Because you're the only one that matters. I can't afford to fuck up. If I talk to Lindsay or Michael, it's only because I want to do the right thing. Maybe I'm not always sure what the right thing is."

"Brian, don't you trust me?"

"Of course I trust you."

Justin pulled on Brian's arm. "Come over here and talk to me . . . partner."

Michael rubbed his eyes and stumbled out into the hallway. Earlier, he'd heard Brian and Justin talking. He knew that they must be up and getting ready for work and school. Grabbing the crumpled piece of paper from his pants pocket and shuffled out into the great room to make his little speech.

Brian and Justin were sitting at a small table by the bay window eating breakfast. Michael stared at them for a moment before speaking. They were looking into each other's eyes as they fed each other cereal from one large bowl in the middle of the table.

"Don't you two ever get enough of each other?"

"No!" They said in unison.

"Well, can you stop gawking at each other for one minute? I have something to say." He referred to the piece of paper in his hand and began to read.

"I, Michael Novotny, am sincerely apologizing to Justin Taylor for giving him the impression that I want to fuck his boyfriend. I understand that Brian Kinney has no interest in fucking me. Not now, not ever. I will leave now and never return to New York to bother you."

Justin laughed and walked over to Michael. "You don't have to leave Michael. In fact, I want you to stay. And for the record Michael, Brian's not my boyfriend, he's my partner. I was never worried that Brian would want to fuck you. But, if I ever catch you kissing him again, I'm gonna fling you off the roof."

Michael looked from Justin to Brian. Brian shrugged his shoulders and went back to eating his cereal.

"Kissing? Is that what this is all about? Kissing doesn't mean anything. I'm Italian. I kiss everyone." Michael grabbed Justin's face and kissed him on the mouth. "You see, it means nothing."

Justin giggled. "I have to agree. But from now on, Brian's lips are private property." Justin glanced at the note in Michael's hand. "Michael, why is this written in Spanish?"

Michael grinned. "After I left here last night I went to a bar in the Village. I was trying to write you a letter. That's when I met Raoul."

They looked up and saw a young Puerto Rican boy standing in the hallway. He was wearing nothing but a pair of black y-back underpants. Brian and Justin looked at each other and smiled as Michael shyly backed out of the room to join his lover.

Justin phoned Brian at the office just before noon. "Hey, come home for lunch. I want to give you your birthday present."

To save time Brian took a cab back to the apartment. He opened the door and called out for Justin. From the terrace he heard Justin answer him. "I'm out here!" Justin was sitting on one of the two lounge chairs that they had just purchased for the terrace. Brian looked at him and asked. "What are you smiling at?"

Justin pointed. "Them."

Brian spotted two construction worker types leaning over the edge of the roof. "You got me the Village People for my birthday! Just what I always wanted!"

"Sit down and watch." Justin commanded. Brian obeyed.

The two men watched the sweaty shirtless workers direct a pulley which was carrying something up onto the roof. After about ten minutes Brian saw a potted tree appear in mid-air and land on the roof with a thud. The workers disconnected the ropes and put the tree onto a wagon. "Where do you want it?" They asked Justin.

He smiled and turned to Brian. "Where do you want your tree?"

Brian stood up and pointed to an area in the sun near the French doors. Justin tipped the men and escorted them to the door. When he returned to the roof Brian grabbed him and kissed him. "No one has ever given me a tree before."

"I was thinking that we should do more out here. Maybe you could plant some flowers here. And then we could put some bushes around the path and make it look like a real garden."

"We could eat dinner outside just like we lived in the burbs. I love my tree, but I have to admit I'm a little disappointed."

"Why?"

"I thought you'd give me my gift in the bedroom."

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"You have time?"

"I always have time."

After work Justin met Brian at his office and together they walked to the restaurant that Justin had selected for Brian's birthday dinner.

"It's so fucking dark in here." Brian observed. "I hope there's nothing crawling on the food when it comes. We'll never see it." He ran his hand over the wall next to the booth to check for bugs.

"It's not dark, it's romantic. I wanted to talk to you."

"In the dark? We could have stayed home in bed."

Justin smiled. "My classes are over for the year and Ken has asked me to work with him full time for the summer. The business is doing so well that he told me he was considering making me his partner."

"You already have a partner."

"Yeah, I was thinking about that. You don't have to be my partner forever."

"Are you tired of me already?"

"Of course not. I was thinking that we could take some time off next week and rent a car. We could drive up to Vermont."

"Snowboarding in June?"

"Stop being an asshole." Justin put his hand on top of Brian's and looked into his eyes. "Brian Kinney, will you marry me?"

Brian reached across the table and put his hands on Justin's face. Silverware fell to the floor and glasses overturned when he pulled Justin across the table and kissed him. "I thought you'd never ask."

"Now you know why I wanted to eat at a dark restaurant." Justin grinned. Everyone in the room had turned to stare at them.

Brian sat back down in his chair. "Why now? What am I doing right for a change?"

"You talk to me. You made me your best friend. I think you're ready to be a husband."

"So you wanna keep me now?"

"I always did."

"What do we need to get married? Are we going to have our friends come to Vermont? Have you told your mother yet? If you haven't, can I do it? I'd love to see the expression on her face when I call her Mom."

"Don't worry. I'll take care of anything we need to get married. I don't want anyone to come to Vermont. It's our marriage, we only need each other. But I would like to go somewhere else after we leave Vermont."

"Where?"

"Pittsburgh."

Brian hesitated before answering. "Pittsburgh? Are you sure? It's not exactly on the way."

"I'm sure. I want to go back there together and show everyone that we've made it."

"I don't know if that's a good idea."

"If you say yes, I'll let you be the one to tell my mother."

"Deal." Brian pulled out his cell phone and dialed. "Hello, Mom . . . "

"How did you sleep?" Debbie whispered into the phone.

"With the T.V. on and the sound turned all the way up. It barely made a dent. They were at it all night. When I was married I was lucky if. . . " Jennifer took a deep breath.

"Stop complaining. Your little boy is home and he's happy and that's all that matters. What time should I meet you at Woody's?"

"Around seven-thirty, I guess. It's going to take a while to decorate and get the food set up."

"That should give us plenty of time. Michael said that he would bring them to the bar at nine."

"Oh, my!"

"What?"

"They're in the shower together! Thank God Molly is with her father."

"Lighten up Jennifer. They're on their honeymoon."

"Maybe I could stay with you and Vic tonight."

"They're your family now, and forever. So you might as well get used to it. I'll see you later, honey."

"Hi, sweetie!" Emmett threw the door open put his arms around Justin. "Let me look at you. Emmett twirled the boy around. "Our little baby sunshine, all grown up and married." Brian followed Justin into the room and took off his jacket.

"Is that you, Michael?" Justin exclaimed. "You look so . . . different."

"I've been working out. And I got some new clothes. Someone had to carry on as Pittsburgh's hottest fuck machine when the legendary Brian Kinney left town."

"What's that in your hair? You look like that guy from 'Talk Soup'."

Michael smoothed the platinum blond hi-light on the side of his head. "What the fuck is 'Talk Soup?'"

"Some stupid talk show that no one watches. Anyway, you look really hot."

"Thanks, boy wonder. Sorry, make that Mrs. Boy Wonder. We should go, it's almost nine."

Brian pulled his jacket back on. "Oh, that's right, this town rolls up the streets at mid-night. New Yorkers get to party all night long. Isn't that right, baby?"

"I don't remember any parties. We're usually in bed by mid-night."

"Yes, but we're not sleeping so it doesn't count."

"That's true. So where are we going? Babylon?"

"We're going to Woody's. Leave Babylon us professional studs." Michael joked.

S - U - R - P - R - I - S - E!!!

Brian grabbed Justin's hand and squeezed. "What's this about?" Brian asked.

"It's your wedding party." Lindsay said as she pinned a boutonniere on his shirt. "Did you think we would let Brian and Justin get married without a party?" Lindsay kissed Brian on the cheek and turned her attention to Justin who had burst into tears. "What's the matter, honey?"

Justin wiped his eyes on Brian shirt. "Nothing. I'm just surprised that you guys would go to all this trouble for us. When I left Pittsburgh I didn't even say good-bye. I'd caused everyone to worry. I can't believe you still love me."

Michael stepped forward and pinned a boutonniere on Justin. "Of course we still love you, you little asshole. We're your family and we're stuck with you. So stop crying."

"It's his party, he can cry if he wants to." Ted quipped. Everyone groaned. And the party started.

Daphne and Justin sat across from each other in a booth near the bar. "Brian was so bad last night. He kept bumping the headboard into the wall and moaning. My mother kept turning up the sound on her television. I couldn't stop laughing. He had to put a pillow over my face"

Daphne giggled. "I hear your place in New York is awesome."

"It's more than awesome. We've started to make a garden out on the terrace. It's so cool to sit out there at night and watch the river."

"Life is good." Daphne commented.

"I never thought the bad times would end. I can hardly believe all the things that have happened to me in the past year."

"You were really brave, moving to New York to save Brian's life."

"I'd do it again. I couldn't let Ethan take him away from me. Not after all that we'd been through."

"Has he been . . . good?"

"You mean, has he changed his evil ways? If he hadn't, I wouldn't be sitting here. I'd be dead, or in prison for killing him. He really has changed, Daph. I love him more than I ever did."

"Of course you do, he's your husband. So, are heterosexual woman allowed to visit you at your penthouse?"

"I'd be insulted if you don't. Why don't you come this summer? You can bring, what's his name?"

"Arthur. We broke up. But, I bet there are lot's of eligible men in New York."

"Lots. So it's settled. You could come for the forth of July. We'll watch the fireworks from the terrace."

"Awesome."

Lindsay sat down next to Brian at the bar. "So, Brian. I guess you and Justin are on the same wave length, finally. Is he really okay? I've never seen him cry before, and he's had plenty of good reasons to cry."

"It's been an emotional week. He's fine, we're fine."

Lindsay put her hand on Brian's stomach. "Brian Kinney, you've put on weight since I last saw you!"

Brian brushed her hand away and rolled his eyes. "I've put on three pounds this week. All we've done for six days is eat, fuck and cry." He turned to her and asked. "Is that normal?"

"Very! And don't you dare ask." She grinned at him and walked back toward the table where Mel, Debbie and Jennifer were sitting.

"Who would have thought, a year ago, that we would be sitting here toasting the happy couple?" Mel raised her glass to clink with Debbie's.

"I guess anything could and usually does happen." Debbie downed third martini.

Lindsay leaned toward Jennifer and asked. "I heard you had some trouble sleeping last night, Jennifer. Tell us what happened."

Debbie snorted. Jennifer tried to maintain her composure. She had consumed several glasses of wine already. "They are very . . . affectionate."

The four woman, including Jennifer, burst into laughter.

"You mean horny." Mel corrected.

Jennifer controlled her laughter and thought for a moment before she spoke. "They're very sweet together. When they think no one is around, they speak so lovingly to one another. You wouldn't recognize Brian as the same man he was a year ago. I'm happy things worked out for Justin and the love of his life."

"Now that deserves another toast." Debbie declared. "Bartender! Another round for the ladies."

Justin appeared at his mother's side. Daphne joined them. "Mom, Brian and I decided that we're going to start driving back tonight. We're wide awake now, we can drive for a few hours and then check into a motel. This way we can say good-bye to everyone tonight, while we're all together."

"Oh, Justin. I thought we could have French Toast for breakfast."

"When you come visit me in New York, I'll make you French Toast. Thanks for the party, Mom. I love you."

"I love you too, sweetheart." Jennifer got to her feet and put her arms around her son.

Brian appeared and grabbed Jennifer around the waist. "Thank you, Mom. This has been one kick ass party."

Jennifer kissed him on the cheek. "Your welcome, Sonny, boy." Brian grimaced.

Daphne and Justin burst out laughing. "It serves you right, Brian, for teasing her all night and day." Justin punched Brian's arm, playfully.

They found Ted and Emmett sitting together at the bar. Justin asked, "Where's Michael?"

Ted grinned. "You mean, 'the legend, Novotny'?"

"What?" Justin laughed.

"That's what he's calling himself these days." Emmett explained. "He's a legend in his own mind, if you ask me. He's transformed himself."

"Hey, it gets him laid. Don't knock it." Ted responded. "If you're looking for Michael, you'll have to go to Babylon."

Justin got behind the wheel of the red convertible they had rented for the trip. He drove slowly up Liberty Avenue as Brian search the streets for his friend. Brian spotted Michael standing under a street lamp in the alley outside of Babylon. He got out of the car and Justin drove down the street to turn around.

"Hey, Mikey! No good-bye?"

"I don't do good-byes."

"I see, you've changed. Well, change can be a good thing. But if you're going to be the new 'me' be careful. There are a lot of big gaping holes in that facade."

"I'm NOT the legendary, Brian Kinney. I'm the self-confident, egotistical, fearless, legend, Novotny. My plan is to stand here under this street lamp until my 'Justin' happens along."

"Anything's possible. This is a magic street lamp. Or was it that one over there? I don't remember."

"Well, I'll never forget the night HE came along. He forced us both to grow up. If there was any magic involved that night, Justin was responsible for it."

"You're going to be okay, 'Legend Novotny.' If you get bored with Pittsburgh, there are a lot of street lamps in New York."

They looked up and saw Justin walking down the alley toward them. He'd left the car running and the moisture from the tail pipe made a smokey haze that surrounded him. Brian and Michael both laughed as they remembered that

first encounter. Brian walked back up the alley to meet Justin. He pulled him into his arms and danced him around in a circle. Justin laughed and waved to Michael. Michael waved back and said, "Later."

Michael turned and started to walk away. He heard Brian calling after him. "Hey Novotny, catch!" Michael put his hand out and caught the cowry shell bracelet that had once been Brian's good luck charm. "I don't need it anymore."

Michael put the bracelet on his wrist and walked up the steps to Babylon.

Coming Home To You Part IV



Fireworks

The 4th of July had begun with a brief rain shower. Justin crossed his fingers and prayed that the rain would end before the party started. It was the first real party that Brian and he had ever hosted in their penthouse on the Hudson River. Daphne had arrived two days earlier. She and Justin chatted in the kitchen as they prepared the food for the party.

"Justin, how many people are you having?" Daphne asked. "I've never seen so much food in one place."

"Just the gang . . . And some of the people from Brian's office. . . And some of my friends from school.. . And some of the people from the modeling agency."

"I hope the roof holds under the weight of all those people."

"Sure it will. Unless they actually eat all this food. I'm sure they won't all be here at the same time."

"What's in this bag?"

"Powered sugar for the zeppolis."

"I love those!"

"Let's eat one now." Justin search for the bag with the zeppolis.

"This place is so awesome. What was it like for you when you first arrived in New York City?"

"At first it was pretty scary. When I got off the bus I thought for sure I would chicken out and buy a ticket back to Pittsburgh. But then I got a job at the modeling agency. I had a place to sleep and food to eat at the restaurant where I worked. It was kind of exciting after that. Then, of course, Brian found me." Justin blushed.

Daphne hit his shoulder playfully. "You so love him."

"Yeah. My life is perfect. What about you? Have you met anyone new?"

"Hmmmmm, maybe. There's a guy in one of my classes who asked me out a few times. He's pre-med, also. He wants to be a psychiatrist."

"Aha! He might come in handy one day. Why didn't you bring him?"

"I didn't want to jinx it, you know, overwhelm him with my best friend's fancy penthouse. He might think I'm too good for him."

"Cut it out! You were embarrassed to introduce him to your "gay" best friend and his husband."

"Justin, you know me better than that. If he has a problem with you and Brian, then I have a problem with him. No, I just thought it was too soon for an overnigher."

"Poor Daphne. Not gettin' any?" Justin teased.

"Fuck you, Taylor!" Daphne pinched some powdered sugar between her fingers and flung it at Justin, hitting him square on the nose.

"You wish!" The bag with the powdered sugar fell to the floor and Justin picked it up. Without mercy, he began to flick pinches of sugar onto Daphne's hair.

"This is war!" Daphne searched the counter top and found a open can of chocolate frosting. With her index finger she took a scoop and plastered it in Justin's hair.

"That's not funny, Daphne!"

"I thought it was very funny," she said as she dipped her finger into the chocolate and made a stripe on Justin's cheek.

Justin grabbed a handful of powdered sugar and took aim. Daphne ducked just in time and the sugar found its mark . . . all over the front of Brian's brand new red shirt.

"What are you two children up to?" Brian asked as he tried to remove the powdered sugar with a towel.

"She started it!" Justin exclaimed.

"Me!!?"

"Now, now, children. Don't make me have to spank you." Brian walked around to the other side of the counter and licked the chocolate from Justin's face.

"Now, you have chocolate on your shirt, too." Justin observed. "Take it off and I'll wash it." Justin began to pull the shirt over Brian's head.

"Yes, dear. I think I might have some on my pants too."

"That's my cue to go and take a shower," Daphne said. She walked out of the room.

"Such a considerate house guest. Let's do it on the sink." Brian lifted Justin onto the counter.

"Brian, we're expecting about a million people here in few hours. I have things to do."

"What's more important than keeping your husband happy?"

"Nothing is more important than you." Justin felt himself get hard as Brian rubbed up against him. Brian leaned toward him and kissed him passionately. Before Justin had time to remove his pants the door bell rang.

"Fuck! It's too early." Brian exclaimed. "Let's let them stand out there in the hallway till we're finished."

Justin jumped down from the counter and headed toward the front door. "Mom! You guys are early." Jennifer kissed her son on the cheek. Vic came up behind her carrying their bags.

"Hi, Sunshine. Where's your bathroom?" Debbie asked, sounding a little desperate as she pushed past Jennifer.

"Ah, Daphne's taking a shower. You can use our bathroom, it's through here." Justin struggled his way through the group toward the bedroom door, dragging his little sister behind him.

"Justin, are there going to be fireworks here in New York? We're missing the fireworks that they have every year in the park near our condo. All my friends will be there."

"Molly, there are so many fireworks scheduled for tonight you won't know which direction to look in."

"Hey, you have friends here, too." Daphne appeared in the hallway with her hair wrapped in a towel. "Come on," Daphne grabbed Molly's hand. "I'll show you where we are sleeping. You can help me to dry my hair."

"Justin your apartment is lovely." Jennifer said.

"Mom, you haven't seen anything yet. Come on, I want you to see the great room."

Justin put his arm around his mother and led her down the hallway. She could hear Daphne and Molly chattering somewhere off to the right. She turned left and entered the showcase of the penthouse.

"Oh, Justin, it's absolutely amazing!"

"Come see the kitchen. It's got every gadget you can think of."

Brian rose from the table and greeted his mother-in-law with a kiss on the cheek. "So, what do you think this place is worth?"

"I can't even imagine, but I think my commission would send Molly to college." She looked toward the window and saw the spectacular view of the Hudson River. She walked to the French doors and stepped outside. Brian and Justin followed hand in hand.

"Oh, this is just amazing. How in the world did you ever find this place, Brian?"

"Someone died. I got lucky."

Debbie and Vic appeared in the doorway. "This is quite a place. How did you find it, Brian? Did someone die?"

Jennifer answered for her son-in-law. "He got lucky."

"Only Brian Kinney could luck into the lap of luxury. You really have a knack, Kiddo."

"I don't know how you mean that, Deb, but I'll take it as a compliment."

"Can I get anyone a drink?" Justin asked.

Justin took the beverage orders and Jennifer followed him back inside. Molly and Daphne were sitting at the counter. "Justin, why do you have chocolate in your hair?" Molly inquired.

"Ask her." Justin nudged Daphne's arm as he walked past her to the refrigerator. "Can you two take these soda's outside for Vic and Deb. Brian wants a beer. There are some cold ones in the cooler outside. I want to show Mom the rest of the place."

Justin took his mother for a tour of the bedrooms. "There are three bedrooms on the left and our bedroom, on the right, has a walk in closet and a huge bathroom with a Jacuzzi. He took her through the master bedroom suite.

The light fixture over the bed caught Jennifer's eye. "I see some things have not changed." Justin grinned and let her out into the hallway. He opened the door to show her another bathroom. This small room is where Gus sleeps when he comes to visit. I'm putting Vic in here this weekend. Mel and Linz can sleep in here with the porta crib. He opened another door and showed his mother a room containing a double bed and a small dresser and a crib for the baby. They went back out into the hallway and Justin opened the last door. This is where you and Deb will sleep. He showed her a bedroom with twin beds. The matching headboards were made of rattan and the table between the beds was an old school room desk. A brass lamp sat on top of the table. A carved glass globe surrounded the bulb area. It had once been a gas lamp but it had been converted to electric.

"Justin, I love all the furniture. It's so eclectic."

"Yeah, that's how Brian and I see ourselves. A mismatched pair who, when put together, create a unique magic."

Jennifer smiled at her handsome son. "Honey, I'm so proud of you. I'm proud of both you and Brian."

"Thanks, Mom. I love you too." He kissed her cheek.

"I've never seen so many tall buildings in my entire life." Debbie said as she enjoyed the view.

"Wait 'til you see Broadway at night." said Justin. "There are so many lights it seems like the sun is shining."

"I would love to see a Broadway play before I die. What do you think, Jenn, can we get tickets for something for tomorrow night?"

"That would be lovely. Molly would enjoy a musical. There are so many to choose from. Justin, have you seen any shows since you've been in New York?"

"Yeah, last week we saw 'The Goat'. We went with Adam and Ken. I thought it was great."

"It's a play about a guy whose fucking a goat." Brian said. "You don't even get to see him fuck the goat. So what was the point?"

"Well, three of us thought it was very funny. I think you fell asleep."

"Maybe we'll skip that one, Deb. We'll go down there tomorrow afternoon and see what's available." Jennifer decided. "Justin, it's nice that you and Brian have friends in New York. How did you meet Adam and Ken?"

"Adam works at the agency where Brian is now. He helped him to find me in New York. Then he helped Brian get a job at Kennedy and Collins. His partner Ken is younger. We get along great. He has his own graphics design company and I work for him sometimes. You'd like him, Mom. Too bad you won't get to meet him today. " Justin went on to explain. "Ken's mom is sick. He had to go home to North Carolina to see his family." Justin looked over at Adam who was standing alone near the edge of the roof. "Brian, you should go talk to him. He looks lonely without Ken."

"He not lonely, he's drunk. I better go over there before he staggers over the edge of the roof."

Justin joined Gus, Molly and Daphne in the sand box. "Hey, Gus, here's your juice." Gus giggled and handed Justin a plastic shovel. He took the cup that Justin offered and sat back down in the sand.

"This sand box was a great idea to keep Gus occupied, Justin," Daphne said.

"I'm glad he's having fun. I hope that Lindsay and Mel will let him come and stay with us once in a while."

"I think they know how responsible you are, Justin."

Gus stood up suddenly and the top of the cup came off spilling red liquid all over the front of his new outfit.

"Oh, no, Gus." Justin said. "You sure made a big mess this time." Gus frowned. Justin scooped him up in his arms and carried him inside. Daphne and Molly followed.

"I hope Lindsay didn't see what happened." Molly said. "What kind of juice is that, Justin?"

"Hawaiian Punch. Why?"

"You don't give babies Hawaiian Punch," Daphne informed him.

"Why not? He likes it."

"For one thing, it's all sugar. For another, the stain will never come out of those white pants."

"There goes your credibility as a responsible person." Molly shook her head.

"Shit! I have to get him clean up. . . fast! Molly go get him something else to wear from his suitcase. And bring me a clean diaper while you're at it."

Justin changed Gus in the bathroom off the master bedroom. He replaced the white pants with a pair of blue jeans. "There you go, Gus. You're ready for anything now. Daphne, you and Molly take him back outside. I'll try to get the stain out of these pants."

"What happened to Gus's new outfit?" Lindsay asked when she noticed the blue jeans.

"Oh, it was just a little accident." Daphne explained " Nothing, really. Justin took care of it."

"Justin is such a responsible person." Molly added.

The fireworks had started and the sky had become a pallet of color. Everyone was enjoying the show. Brian realized that he had not seen Justin since he went inside to clean up after the buffet dinner. Brian went into the house and found Justin putting things away in the kitchen.

"Hey, that can wait. I'll help you clean up later. The fireworks have started. Come outside."

Justin dropped the towel he was holding and walked over to Brian. He wrapped his arms around the man's waist and rested his head on his chest. Brian had noticed that Justin had become very quiet since right before dinner was served.

"Hey, are you okay?"

Justin raised his head and answered softly, "Yeah, I'm just tired."

"I should have helped you more. I'm sorry. I was busy keeping my some of my rowdy co-workers entertained. Everyone is having a great time. Come outside with me. I haven't had you to myself all day. I miss you."

Brian put his arm around Justin and walked toward the door. Justin stopped and look around the roof before going outside. "Where's Adam?" Justin asked.

"He was in pretty bad shape. That's one man who should never drink. He actually walked into a door or something and gave himself a bloody nose. Even after we got him cleaned up all he wanted to do was drink. Michael and I had to take him downstairs and put him in a cab."

Brian sat down on a lounge chair and pulled Justin down next to him. They looked up at the sky and saw the red, white and blue fireworks exploding overhead. The party started to break up around midnight. The overnight guests settled in for the night, except for Michael, Ted and Emmett. Justin had gotten air mattresses and put them on the floor in the great room. But instead of sleeping they opted to join Brian's co-workers who had decided to go a downtown bar.

"We should ask Brian and Justin if they want to go," Michael suggested

"Are you kidding?" Emmett replied. "Look at them!" Brian and Justin were dancing with their heads pressed together and their arms tightly wrapped around each other. "They're lost in their own little 'Brian and Justin world.' We won't see them till morning, if at all."

Brian and Justin barely noticed that their company had all disappeared. The music had stopped, and yet they remained lost in each other's eyes, swaying to their own magical rhythm.

The next day Ted and Emmett awoke and found that it was almost noon. Daphne had already left for Pittsburgh and Jenn, Deb and the others had gone out early to explore the city. Michael was still asleep on the sofa.

"I guess we should be getting started back as soon as Michael gets up." Emmett said. "He sure did carry on in traditional "Legend Novotny" fashion last night. Maybe I should get one of those streaks put in my hair. What do you think, Teddy?"

Ted shook his head. "They way you dress, you don't need to draw any more attention to yourself."

After making themselves breakfast, Ted and Emmett sat down at the small table in the kitchen. "I wonder what the great Brian Kinney does with his laptop now that he's a married man. No more scouring the internet for ten inch dicks." Ted turned on the computer, to Emmett's dismay.

"Teddy, do you think you should do that? He probably uses it for work. You may fuck something up. He would KILL you."

"Don't be such a drama queen. I'm just going to check his cookies."

"If he catches you, you'll be wearing your cookies for a hat."

"What have we here. . .Ultra-donkey.com? Is Brian marketing livestock now?"

The site got Emmett's attention. "Oh, my God. Look at those cocks. Looks like Brian Kinney hasn't changed as much as he wants us to believe."

They browsed through a few more such sites and then they came upon a site that was a real shocker. The models were young, some were very young. All of them were blond and blue eyed and resembled Justin.

"Holly shit! I guess Howard Bellweather's new book 'Stolen Innocence' isn't a work of fiction. Brian's turned into a pedophile!"

Neither man noticed that Brian was standing in back of them watching the computer screen. "What the fuck are you doing? That's all I need on my work computer, kiddie porn. Get rid of that, Ted."

"Brian! I didn't access these sites. They were in the computer's history. See for yourself."

"That's impossible. I only got this computer a couple of months ago. No one uses it but me. I've never accessed sites like that in my life."

Michael and Justin had joined the group. "What's this, BabyJustin.com?" Michael asked while he rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. He turned to Brian. "Don't you get enough of the real thing?"

"I've never seen these pictures before." Brian insisted. He turned to Justin. "Have you been on my computer playing with yourself?"

Justin looked over his shoulder at the screen. "No.! I've never touched your work computer." He watched as Ted scrolled down list of cookies.

"Well if you didn't do this, who did?" Brian persisted. "I had this thing in my briefcase in our bedroom yesterday. No one else could have touched it."

Justin looked at Brian with a blank stare. He turned and walked toward their bedroom.

"Ted! Can you get rid of this garbage?" Brian asked.

"I'll try." Ted answered.

Brian followed Justin to their bedroom. The night before Justin had been acting strangely. Brian had thought that the stress of the party and the fact that Justin was tired was the reason for his behavior. Their relationship had been progressing nicely since they had started sharing their feelings with one another. Since they got married everything had been perfect. They enjoyed a very close relationship. But Brian sensed that something was not right with Justin. He was not usually so sensitive and quiet. He was putting up walls again and Brian was not about to let Justin shut him out. No matter what the problem was they were going to confront it right now.

Justin was busy picking up clothes from the floor and putting them into a wash basket.

"What's going on?" Brian asked.

"Nothing," said Justin. There was no emotion in his response. He had his protective shield in place.

Brian was getting angry. "Justin, what the fuck have you been doing with my computer?"

Justin put the wash basket on the bed. "Brian, I haven't touched your computer."

"I didn't access those kiddie porn sites. Who else could have done it?"

"Great, now you think I'm a pedophile. Well, for your information, Brian, if you took a closer look at the screen you would have noticed that all of those files were accessed on the same day. It was two weeks ago on the 20th. Where were you and your computer on the 20th, Brian?"

"San Francisco. Shit, you're right. It must have been the maid at the hotel."

"Right, Brian. No one else could have touched your computer." Justin pick up the wash basket and started toward the door.

Brian grabbed his arm took a shirt out of the basket. "There's blood on your shirt. So that's why you changed it. What happened?"

"Nothing. I cut myself shaving." Justin tried to pull away from him.

"It's on the back of your shirt. Unless you were shaving your head or had your shirt on backwards that would be impossible."

Justin tried again to get past, but Brian held his arm tightly. Justin glared at him. "Let go!" the boy said firmly. Brian loosened his grip slowly and allowed Justin's arm to drop to his side. The wash basket fell to the floor.

Brian realized that he was coming on too strong. He softened his voice and apologized.

"I'm sorry for accusing you of messing with the computer. Hey, something's wrong. We don't keep things from each other."

Justin's expression softened and he sat down on the bed. It was time to confess. "I was going to tell you, but I didn't want to ruin the party."

Brian sat down on the bed next to him. "I'm listening."

"Remember when Gus spilled the juice on his pants? Daphne, Molly and I came inside to clean him up. I changed him in our bathroom and the girls took him back outside while I tried to get the stain out."

"This isn't juice on your shirt."

"No, it's blood. I had my back to the door and with the water running, I didn't hear him come up behind me. Before I knew it, he had me up against the shower door. He was pushing his dick up against my ass while he put his hand down the front of my shorts."

"What!!! Who did this, Justin?!!"

"Brian, you're not going to like this. It was Adam."

"Adam? I'll fucking kill him!" Brian stood up and started pacing.

"That's why I didn't tell you, Brian. I thought you would have a fit and throw him off the roof or something."

"Justin, you should have told me. Did he . . . ?"

"No! I rammed the back of my head into the bridge of his nose. He forgot all about his dick when the blood started gushing out."

Brian sat back down next to Justin and put his arms around him. "He told me that he walked into a door. That fucking asshole. I'm going to call him."

"Brian, don't do that. Look, he was really drunk. He apologized to me later and begged me not to tell you."

"Justin, we don't keep secrets. He came into our home and attacked you. There's no excuse for that, not even if he was drunk."

"I was going to tell you after the weekend. It's not like he hurt me or anything. I can take care of myself."

"Yeah, you keep reminding me of that. You take care of everything, Justin. You take care of me, my son, our friends, our home, our wash. If I can't take care of you, then what do you need me for?"

Justin put his arms around Brian's neck. "I need you for this."

Brian hugged him back. "One day you're going to wake up and see this old fossil sleeping next to you. You're going to wonder why it is you stayed with someone so useless. Let me take care of you. You're getting too fucking independent."

"That's where you're wrong, Brian. Years from now, when you're really old . . . like 40, I'm going to wake up and see the same beautiful man you are now. In my eyes, you're the man who saved my life and took care of me when I needed you. I'll always think of you as my hero. But that doesn't mean I want to you baby me for the rest of my life."

"I'm going to talk to him, Justin. Monday morning at work I'll explain that no one touches you, but me."

"I remember when you used to get off on other guys touching me."

"I just let you think that. I wanted to rip their fucking heads off."

Justin laughed and picked up the wash basket again. "Brian, wasn't Adam in San Francisco with you?"

Brian raised his eyebrow. "Yeah. Maybe there's more to that guy than we realized."

Justin smiled at Brian. "I love you, husband."

"Me too, husband." Brian answered.

Monday morning was busy for Brian. He had phone conferences until almost noon. At one o'clock he took a break and called Justin. "You wanna have lunch?" Brian asked.

"I can't, Brian. Ken called this morning and asked me to send him some files. I was just about to leave for the office."

"How's his Mom?" Brian asked.

"She's better. He's planning on coming back next week. I'm going to try to catch up on his work today. I may not be home when you get here."

"Are you okay with Ken? You don't really have to work if you don't want to. I can take care of us."

"I know that, Brian. I'm fine with Ken. I don't blame him for his asshole boyfriend getting drunk and hitting on me. Are you okay with Adam?"

"I haven't had a chance to talk to him."

"Maybe you shouldn't. He was drunk, Brian. We owe him a lot. Maybe we should just leave it alone."

"Don't worry. I'm not going to hit him or anything. I just want to make it clear that I know what happened and that it better never happen again."

Brian knew that Adam would be in a meeting until at least two o'clock. He timed his visit to Adam's office so that his secretary would be at lunch. The door was open and Brian went inside the closed the door behind him. Adam's

laptop was open on his desk. Brian turned it on and looked at the list of sites that had been accessed. Most of them were legitimate, client related sites. Brian then looked where Ted had showed him to look for the cookies. Sure enough, the same sites that were on his computer had been accessed by Adam. Brian sat down at Adams desk and began to access the kiddie porn sites. He was repulsed by the images on the screen. Up until this time Brian had admired Adam for his charismatic personality and his generous nature. He considered him to be a friend and had always enjoyed his company. It appeared now that his impression of the man had been wrong. What Adam was doing was not only unethical, but it was also illegal.

Now Brian had more to think about besides Adams attacking Justin. As he scrolled through the sites his mind wandered. Until he came upon something that shocked him more then words could express. He had hit on a site that offered custom made virtual image porn. You can send them your fantasy and they create a movie depicting any kind of sex act with any person that you choose. They take images that you sent them and create movies with celebrities, children, farm animals, whatever turns you on. They put it all together and create a tailor-made personal fantasy. The fantasy that Adam had on his computer was of himself and Justin.

Adam left the meeting room and walked back to his office with a confident air. If the kid had told Brian about their little tryst, Brian would have been on his back the minute he walked in the door. The fact that the boy kept quiet was a good sign. Maybe Justin didn't mind his little intrusion. The moment he opened the door to his office he realized that not only had Justin had given him up, but his private world had been exposed.

Brian sat with his feet resting on Adams desk. The computer in front of him was playing the video that Adam had paid to have designed just for him. The floor was about to drop and Adam felt himself falling into the vortex.

Brian flashed Adam his most impressive sarcastic smile. "Adam! I've been waiting for you. I heard that you'd been a bad boy. And now I have proof. How much does one of these little porn flicks set you back? I was thinking that maybe they could make up one where I come into you office and kick your ass right out the window. Only I guess that would be a waste of money. Forget this virtual imaging shit. I'm going to act this one out myself."

Brian picked up the computer and threw it across the room missing Adams head by an inch. He walked around the desk and grabbed Adam by the throat.

Adam pushed his hands away. "Calm down, Brian. We can talk about this. You'll see. I haven't done anything wrong. Not really."

"Coming on to Justin in our own home is not 'NOTHING,' you little shit! I should kill you just for that alone."

"You're right, Brian." Adam said calmly. "That was unforgivable. I was missing Ken and I was very drunk. There's no excuse for what I did. I apologized to Justin and now I'm apologizing to you."

"This morning I might have accepted that, Adam. But what the fuck are you doing with all these photos of Justin on your computer?"

"He's a handsome kid, Brian. I like him. He's a turn on for me."

Brian's rage was about to come to a head. He struggled to control himself. "So you took his pictures and made a little tribute using other men's, or should I say boys, bodies. You are a sick fuck! I should call the police and have you arrested."

"For what? Non of this stuff is illegal."

"The kids on that site haven't even reached puberty."

"There all fake. It's all computer imaging. It's not illegal because there are no real children involved."

Brian considered what Adam was telling him. "It's still fucking sick and it doesn't belong at the office. I can get you fired for this."

Adam sat down and looked up at Brian. "Maybe you could, but if you did that I may just have to tell the partners who the real pedophile is. Don't look so surprised, Brian. It's public knowledge. It's all in Howard Bellweather's new book 'Stolen Innocence.' And the fact that you almost got your sweet little baby twink killed at his own prom, well that was just an accident, right? Somehow I neglected to mention your sordid past when I recommended you for this job, Brian."

"Are you threatening me?"

"Relax, Brian. Look, no one was hurt or put into a coma here. Those kids don't exist, and the pictures of Justin are history. I'll delete them from the site. Let's put this all behind us."

Adam put out his hand to shake. Brian stared at him in disbelief. He pushed past him out the door.

When he arrived home at six Justin greeted him with a hug. "How was your day?"

"Fine." Brian answered. He had decided not to tell Justin about Adam's little hobby until he could figure out a way to deal with Adam himself. "How was yours?"

Justin was never at a loss for words. He went into a long story about the ride on the subway and running into one of his teachers. Brian had half tuned him out until he heard him mention Adam.

"What about Adam?"

"Weren't you listening. I said I'm glad you guys worked it out."

"Who told you that?"

"Adam did. He came by the office this afternoon."

"Adam went to your office this afternoon? Were you alone?"

"Sure. I work there alone lots of times. Don't worry, he never mentioned anything about the other night. He just said that he talked to you and that everything was fine."

"That prick!" Brian realized that he had to tell Justin the whole story. He didn't want the kid to start feeling comfortable around this pervert. The situation had gotten out of control. Brian wondered if Adam had gone to the office and talked to Justin as a message that he could get to him at any time.

"What kind of pictures, Brian?"

"They're pictures he mocked up in some program. It's your face, but definitely not your body. The video is a porn movie with him fucking you, but it isn't really you and it never will be."

"Brian, that is really freaky. What if someone else sees it? They would think I'm some kind of perv."

"I made him promise to take all your pictures off the site. I'm more concerned about the fact that after I told him to stay away from you, he went right over to the office where he knew that you would be alone. Justin, I know you're

going to tell me you can take care of yourself, and blah, blah. But please, quit the job with Ken. At least that way Adam has no excuse to be alone with you."

"Brian, I'm not going to let that asshole control my life. I had enough of that shit with Ethan. I like Ken and I like working with him. I know you don't like to hear it, but I can take care of myself. I think that I've proved that on more than one occasion. Besides, now that I'm on to him, I'll be especially careful."

"You won't ever give up on that, will you? Justin can take care of himself. Do you know how useless that makes me feel?"

"Brian, you're not useless. I can find any number of uses for you. First you can suck me off, then you can take me into the bedroom and fuck me."

"So now I'm only good for sex."

"You didn't let me finish. After you fuck me I'll let you take me out to dinner. And then we'll talk about how we're going to handle Adam and Ken. "

"I don't know where you put all the food you eat. One day I'm going to wake up next to Jabba the Hut."

"I'm still growing." Justin flashed him an impish grin.

"You better not grow any more. I like you just the way you are now." Brian had always thought his taste in men ran toward the dark haired muscle bound type. Never in a million years would he have figured himself married to a baby-faced, petite blond with no abs or pecs to speak of. Of course he made up for that by sporting the greatest ass on the planet.

"Thanks! Let's get dessert."

"You can get what ever you want. I'll have to spend the entire weekend in the gym getting rid of the extra calories I consumed at the party."

"Come on, Brian. We'll share it."

Justin ordered a sundae with hot fudge and chocolate ice cream. It came with two spoons and Brian found himself digging in without thinking.

"Brian, I'm worried about Ken. I'm pretty sure he doesn't know what kind of creep he's living with. When I first started working there I tried to feel him out to see if he knew that you and Adam had sex. Ken was adamant that he and Adam have been monogamous since they got together. In fact Adam is the only man that Ken's had sex with, ever."

"That's not what Adam led me to believe. He said that when he slips up he tells Ken and all is forgiven. That shit! I bet he's fucking around right this minute. I should follow him one night this week before Ken gets back. If he does fuck up, I want to be able to prove that he's a slime."

"I just hope that he doesn't give Ken a disease. I'm sure they don't use condoms."

"Justin, that's not our problem. I'm concerned about Adam stalking you. He has to be pretty sick just to make up those pictures of you, not to mention that video."

"How did I look in the video. Was I hot?" Justin smiled at him before popping the cherry from the Sunday into his mouth.

"No. You weren't hot. At least not to me. It was your face, but not your body. It was sick, Justin, really."

"I should tell Ken. I wouldn't want to be kept in the dark if you were cheating on me."

Brian flinched. "I don't know, Justin. Remember how you acted when Michael told me about Ethan. Kill the messenger, even if it's the truth."

"Yeah. I guess. Are you going to report Adam to your boss?"

"For what? Taking pictures of you? Adam was all too happy to explain to me that what he does with those sites is perfectly legal because it's all fake. No one gets hurt."

"That's bullshit!"

"That's what I thought. He threatened to show my bosses Bellweather's new book. Prom night has once again come back to haunt me."

"Hey, I loved that you showed up at my prom. It was the sweetest thing you ever did. Hobbs was the one who fucked everything up, Brian."

"But I was supposed to be the responsible adult. Nobody is going to see me through your eyes, Justin. I don't think that they would fire me if they found out, but it certainly would take me down a peg or two with the brass. And for what?"

"I guess you're right. You'll just have to keep working with Adam and I'll keep working for Ken. We'll see what happens."

"Promise me you'll tell me if anything unusual happens. And I don't want you to go to the office alone anymore."

"Brian, I can . . ." The look on Brian's face stopped Justin from saying what he'd intended to say. "I can work on the stuff at home. There's no reason for me to go to the office. Ken will be back soon."

"Good boy!"

The week had gone by without incident, yet Brian was becoming more and more wary of Adam. He had asked Cynthia to pull up Adam's expense sheets on the computer. There were several charges to downtown bars that Brian knew were trashy gay clubs. It was Friday night and Justin was going to be working late at the restaurant. Brian went home and changed into his party clothes. A black silk shirt and black pants. He looked in the mirror. "Not bad," He said to his reflection. "If I weren't a married man, I'd fuck you."

Brian was a little concerned about stirring up old habits once he got a taste of the New York nightlife. He kept reminding himself that he was there for Justin's sake. If Adam was capable of rape, child molesting and cheating on his mate, Brian wanted to know exactly what he was dealing with. His suspicions were confirmed by ten o'clock. It was early, but Brian had spotted Adam the moment he walked in the door. It wasn't Adam who had attracted his attention at first. It was the young blond trick he walked in with. Brian had thought at first glance that it was Justin. He'd learned something about Adam. The man WAS obsessed with Justin, or at least with his type. Brian stuck around long enough to see that the regulars in the club all knew Adam. This was his hunting ground.

When Adam disappeared down a hallway with his truck in tow, Brian decided to make his exit. Before he got to the door a large muscular black man stopped him in his tracks. The man leaned in close to Brian's face and made some very nasty suggestions. Brian grinned politely and told him that he would love to, but he was actually straight and wandered into the bar by accident. The man backed off and within minutes had hooked up with another muscle bound Adonis who had been sitting at the bar. Brian exited the bar and lit up a cigarette. 'My one remaining vice.' he thought.

Justin arrived home at 10:30 and called out for Brian. When there was no response Justin checked the answering machine for messages. There were none. It was unusual for Brian not to check-in if he was not going to be home. Justin took off his white shirt and went into the bedroom. He saw that Brian's cell phone was on a dresser and that the suit he had worn that day hung on the back of the door. Brian must have come home, changed and gone out somewhere.

Instead of taking a shower and going to bed like he had planned Justin changed into sweats, curled up on the living room sofa and turned on the television. He didn't want to allow his mind to start conjuring up all kinds of trouble. Brian had been behaving himself since he moved to New York and Justin didn't want to think there was something sinister about his absence this evening. A little after midnight Justin heard a key turn in the lock. He rose from the sofa and went to greet Brian in the hallway. For a moment Justin was taken aback by Brian's appearance. He was wearing his 'Babylon party attire' black shirt, black pants and leather jacket. Then Justin realized where Brian had been.

"I knew it! I knew eventually you would show up! I hate to tell you this, Brian, but you've been replaced by an alien clone. He loves me and he never goes out clubbing. You better get out of here before he comes home and kicks your ass to the street."

When he first caught sight of Justin, Brian thought he saw a cloud of doubt. He was relieved that he wouldn't have to deal with a lecture. "Don't I get to fuck you first?" he said seductively.

"No way! I don't cheat on my husband." Justin pulled at Brian's silk shirt. "You smell like smoke, beer and cum. Where have you been . . . at the circus?"

"I went out."

"Did you have a good time?" Justin kissed him on the cheek. "Your face smells like cologne."

"It's not what you think. I'm still a born-again-virgin."

"You were playing spy on Adam, weren't you?" Justin asked.

"Yes. I went to Adam's stomping ground. He was with some guy and they headed for the backroom, or whatever the hell they call it in New York. Now we know for sure. Adam is a sleaze."

"Let me wash your shirt, it stinks. You stink, too. You want me to wash you?" Justin asked as he removed Brian's shirt. "Brian, what was it like? Are the bars here like Babylon?"

"More fucking, less dancing."

"More fucking than Babylon? Did anyone hit on you?"

"Are you kidding? I had to beat them off with a stick. I barely made it out of there alive."

"Were you tempted?" Justin asked, seriously.

"No, I wasn't. I thought it would be difficult - being that close and not being able to participate. But, I don't fit into that world, anymore."

Adam arrived at the office at 7:30 a.m. He liked to arrive before everyone so that he could check on his web sites in private. Today he had something else in mind. He dropped his brief case on his desk and turned on his computer. He checked his email and found that he had several requests for pictures of Justin. He responded to the emails and turned off the computer. Brian Kinney rarely got to the office before nine. There was plenty of time for Adam to accomplish what he wanted to do.

Even since Adam had met Brian at the awards dinner in Pittsburgh, he had been both fascinated and repulsed by the man. Brian's sensual good looks had attracted Adam immediately. They'd had sex backstage and that was it for Adam. The sexual attraction was over. Adam was more impressed with Brian's reputation in the advertising business. He was a marketing genius. The reason Adam had suggested that Brian look into relocating to New York and joining Kennedy and Collins was because his own standing in the company had become tenuous. Brian Kinney was a rainmaker and Adam's association with him had been a plus.

He genuinely liked Brian Kinney, but the minute he laid his eyes on Justin his lecherous nature took over. He had become fascinated with the baby-faced young artist. He had never intended to act upon his fantasy, but when he spotted that perfect ass in those cut off blue jean shorts he couldn't control his impulses. He'd hoped that Justin would have kept his mouth shut. Now, he'd have to deal with Brian Kinney. If Brian didn't cooperate . . . Justin would be an easy mark.

Brian dropped his jacket on the bed and went into the bathroom to look for some aspirin. He had driven to Westchester County early in the afternoon for a meeting. The traffic on the way back to the city had been a nightmare. All he wanted to do was take some aspirin and lie down. It was almost eight o'clock and Justin wasn't home. Brian had tried to reach him on his cell phone, but was only able to leave a message. He turned on the television and slipped off his shoes. Putting his feet up on the coffee table he tried to get comfortable on the sofa until the aspirin kicked in.

At eight-thirty Justin came home. He saw that Brian had nodded off on the sofa and bent to kiss his forehead. Brian stirred and opened his eyes. Justin asked, "What happened to you?"

"I guess I fell asleep waiting for my dinner."

"But, I was waiting for you."

"What are you talking about?" Brian sat up and rubbed his face with his hands.

"I got your e-mail. I went to the hotel and waited at the bar for an hour."

"Justin, you're not making any sense. I was upstate all afternoon. I just got home a little while ago. I didn't send you an e-mail."

Justin saw that Brian had left his desktop on the kitchen counter. He opened it, went on line and logged onto his email account. "Look. Here's the e-mail you sent me. Isn't that your hotmail address?"

Brian read the e-mail. It was sexually explicit and described the acts that Justin would be expect to perform if he would meet him after work. Brian logged off of Justin's email account and on to his own. "Check my out box. I didn't send you that e-mail." Justin opened the outbox which contained 15 e-mails all with the same sexually explicit

message. They were sent to e-mail addresses that Justin recognized from the gay sex group where Brian used to pick up tricks on-line. Brian stared at the screen in disbelief.

Justin looked at Brian's face and said, "You really didn't send them, did you?"

"No. I didn't."

"I guess I should be grateful that most of the others that were sent the message live in Pittsburgh. There would have been a whole bar full of horny gay men. Look, some of them e-mailed you back."

Brian's headache had returned full force. "Delete them!" He rubbed his temple and sat down at the kitchen counter.

"Are you sure you don't want to read just . . . ?" Justin started to open an e-mail.

"Delete them!" Brian grabbed the computer and deleted all of his incoming messages. He turned off the computer and slammed the cover shut. "Someone is fucking with my privacy. I'll fucking kill that bastard Adam."

"How do you know it was him?"

"You didn't send that e-mail to yourself, did you?"

"Of course not." Justin rubbed the back of Brian's neck. Brian put his hand on Justin's and squeezed. "You must be starving." Justin observed. "I'll make you something to eat."

"I guess." Brian answered.

"How about an omelet?"

"Sure." Brian let his head rest on the counter top and watched while Justin made his dinner. Justin had gotten very good at cooking up a pretty decent meal on short notice. Brian remembered that he hadn't eaten since breakfast. Maybe that was the reason for his headache.

Justin slid an omelet onto Brian's plate and then made one for himself. "Brian, where was your computer today?"

"It was in the trunk of the company car that I drove to Westchester. I haven't been leaving it at the office like I usually do. I don't understand how someone could have messed with it."

"What about your computer at work? They could have accessed your e-mail account from there. If they knew your password, they could access it from any computer."

"The next time you get an e-mail from me asking for sex, call me before you go traipsing off to some sleazy hotel to meet me."

"It wasn't a sleazy hotel. It was pretty nice, actually. I was disappointed that you didn't show up. It would've been hot to have sex in a strange bed for a change."

Justin picked up the plates and put them in the dishwasher. Brian came up behind him and wrapped his arms around his waist. "A strange bed? That does sound hot. What about the bed in the guest room? Is that strange enough?"

"Strange for us. Let's do it." Justin took Brian's hand and led him down the hall to the guest bedroom.

Ever since the incident with Adam, Justin had felt a particular kinship with Ken. Back in Pittsburgh Brian had been a different man. Sex was a hobby for him. His life revolved around screwing one night-stands with no names and no faces. Even at the age of seventeen Justin could see how destructive that kind of behavior could be. Justin saw something in Brian that reached out and touched his heart. Love does exist and Justin had proven it to Brian. It had been a long and rocky road for them, but they had developed a close, loving relationship. Brian was a changed man. Justin knew he was happier than he'd been in Pittsburgh. And sex is much more intense when you love the person you're with.

Justin had learned that Ken met Adam in his freshman year at art school. Ken was born and raised in North Carolina. His father owned his own architectural firm and his mother was an art dealer. They owned a beautiful home in Asheville which had been built by Ken's father. When Ken decided to go to school in New York City his parents purchased a brownstone. They renovated the building and allowed Ken to live there while he went to school.

Justin had liked Ken from their first meeting. In Pittsburgh Justin had spent most of his time with Brian's friends. Daphne was the only friend he had that he'd grown up with. Justin had always considered himself mature for his age. So hanging out with older people seemed very natural to him. Ken was twenty-five, much closer to Justin's age than Brian was. It was nice to be able to talk with someone about school, art and relationships. Ken was a quiet sort, but Justin found a way to get him to come out of his shell once in a while. It became apparent to Justin that Ken didn't have any other friends besides himself and maybe Adam.

At work the next day Justin decided to tell Ken about the email incident. "Brian didn't send me that e-mail. I spent an hour sitting at a bar waiting for him."

"How can someone send an e-mail from someone else's address?"

"All they would need is a password or they would have to know how to forge the addy."

"I bet I know what Brian's password is. It starts with J." Ken grinned.

Justin laughed at his remark. "No. I tried that. It's not Justin. It has eight letters, but Brian would never tell me his password."

"Why would someone play a trick on you using Brian's e-mail? It seems so childish."

"I guess some people are just idiots. It could have been some kind of computer virus, or something. But since I had that problem with Ethan, I take these things seriously."

"Was Brian upset?"

"He was pissed."

"Adam would have had a fit if someone sent me an email to meet up. He gets really crazy when he thinks someone is looking at me, much less luring me to a hotel."

"So, Adam's the jealous type? Brian knows I can take care of myself. If someone had hit on me, I would have left the bar."

"I kinda like the fact that Adam gets jealous. It means he cares about me."

"Brian cares, believe me. He probably cares more than most people. He just has trouble showing it."

"I didn't mean that the way it sounded, Justin. It's just that Brian and Adam are so different."

"How do you mean?" Justin asked.

"Brian gives you more freedom. You're on your own a lot. Adam would have a fit if I got on the subway one night just to take a ride downtown. He expects me to be home when he gets there, unless I'm working late. In which case he comes here to pick me up."

"I've always been independent."

"I guess we're with the right men, then. If Adam doesn't call me five or six times a day I start thinking that he stopped loving me. It's the little things that mean the most. Like when he brings me Starbucks in the afternoon. Or when he surprises me with theater tickets. Does Brian ever surprise you?"

Justin chuckled. "Oh, he's given me quite a few surprises. Not all of them good." Justin reflected on his most cherished memory. "I'll never forget the night he showed up at my prom. He took my hand and led me out to the dance floor. We danced to that old song "Save the Last Dance," the other kids watched us with their mouths open. At the end of the dance he kissed me, right in front of everyone. I walked with him back to his jeep and we were laughing and dancing. Then he kissed me and for the first time I felt this incredible connection. I knew then that he loved me. When I walked away I heard him call my name and I turned around. That's when I got bashed in the head with a baseball bat by a homophobic asshole named Chris Hobbs. He's the reason my right hand is weak. I'll never forget that night. Not because I spent the next three weeks in a coma, but because Brian Kinney showed up at my prom and kissed me."

Ken wiped his sleeve across his eyes. "Wow, Justin. That story gave me goose bumps. I take it all back. Brian Kinney really does care about you."

When Brian arrived home at 4:30 Justin was not there. Brian had several reports to go over before an early morning meeting. He decided to bring them home and read them out on the terrace. If he had to put time in on reading reports, he may as well get some sun while he was doing it. He changed into shorts and was about to go outside when he heard Justin's key turn in the lock.

"Hi." Justin said. "You're home early." He gave Brian a hug. "You look hot in shorts. You should wear them more often."

"Hi yourself." before Brian could tell Justin that he looked pretty hot also, the door bell rang.

"I wonder who that could be?" Justin went to open the door. When he returned he was carrying a large bouquet of red roses. He had a big smile on his face as he read the note out loud. "Just because you're beautiful." Justin put the flowers down on the counter and put his arms around Brian's neck. "Thank you."

Brian put his hands on Justin's arms and looked into his face. "Justin, I didn't send the flowers." He watched Justin's expression change from sheer joy to total disappointment. He picked up the flowers and without a word he took them out to the hallway to dispose of them.

Justin changed into shorts and a tank top and went out to the roof to join Brian. Someone was definitely messing with Justin's head. Brian didn't know what to say to him. When he saw how happy Justin looked when he read the note, Brian almost let him think that he had sent the flowers. But if someone was stalking the kid, it was better that he be aware of it.

"Do you have any idea who might have sent them?" Brian asked.

"No."

"I guess there's no law against it. What do you want to do?"

"Stop talking about it," Justin said. "I'm going to start dinner." He got up and went inside.

Brian put the report he was reading back into his briefcase and followed Justin inside. There were times when words are necessary, and there are times when they are not. Brian communicated his feelings to Justin without words and Justin understood completely.

Justin had bought chicken cutlets for dinner and was breading them when Brian had joined him in the kitchen. Before Justin would go to the bedroom he insisted on putting them in the refrigerator so they wouldn't spoil.

Afterwards, while Justin lay on his stomach sleeping, Brian ran his index finger lightly down the boy's spine. He marveled at how perfect Justin's skin was. Just touching him was enough to get Brian's juices stirring. He looked so beautiful lying there naked. Brian put his hand on Justin's perfect ass and stroked him lightly.

Again, Brian thought about Justin's ecstatic reaction to the roses. A little guiltily, he realized that there were many things that Justin did for him every day that he took for granted. His shirts and suits magically appeared in his closet, clean and pressed. Justin always made sure that Brian's favorite cereal was on hand and that there was always plenty of coffee. When he lived on his own, Brian mostly ate at the diner or ordered take out. Justin insisted that a home-cooked meal always tasted better than food from a plastic container. Brian looked forward to coming home every evening to find Justin cooking something especially for him. Aside from paying the bills and fucking him, what did Brian do for Justin to make him feel special? The one time he tried, he'd almost gotten the kid killed.

Brian realized that it wasn't the flowers themselves that had made Justin so happy. It was the fact that he thought Brian had sent them. His man had thought of him and bought the flowers to make him feel special. Justin made Brian feel special every day. Brian finally understood what the flowers represented.

When Brian arrived home the next evening he found Justin asleep on the sofa. Normally, Justin would have awakened when he heard Brian open the door. But tonight Brian had to shake him to wake him up. "Are you sick or something?"

Justin stared at him, "I don't know. I don't even remember lying down here." He stood up and stumbled backward.

Brian caught him by the arm. "Hey, sit down before you fall down. Did you take anything today?"

"You mean drugs? No! I haven't taken anything in months. Maybe I'm not getting enough sleep at night."

Brian grinned. "If you want, I'll carry you to bed, right now."

Justin playfully smacked him on the head. "Later. I have to make dinner."

"Wait! I have something for you."

"What?" Justin asked suspiciously.

Brian went back into the hallway and returned with his hand behind his back. When he got to where Justin was sitting, he sat down on the floor and presented Justin with a bouquet of three dozen yellow roses.

"Don't say anything! I'm not giving them to you because of what happened yesterday. I want you to have them because I really do think you're beautiful."

Justin smiled and took the flowers from Brian. "Yellow roses!"

Brian grinned. "The color of sunshine," he explained.

"These are my first REAL flowers. Thank you, Brian." Justin bent forward and kissed him gently.

Brian rose to his feet and pulled Justin up from the sofa. "Don't let it go to your head. What's for dinner?"

"Oh, shit! I forgot to defrost the steak! I'm sorry. I must have fallen asleep the minute I walked in the door."

"Finally, I get to go out and eat some real food." Brian teased.

"Brian, can we order in? I'm still feeling kinda funny."

"Sure. Get the menus out and I'll change."

The next morning Justin felt fine. However, the fatigue returned right before he left work. On the subway ride home, he fell asleep on the train and missed his stop. After exiting the train and crossing over to the downtown side of the tracks, he sat on the platform and waited ten minutes for the downtown train to arrive. Forcing himself to stay awake for the trip was difficult, but Justin managed to get off the train and drag himself to the apartment building where they lived. Brian was already home when he arrived.

"What happened to you?"

"I don't know. I must be sick or something," said Justin as he collapsed onto the sofa next to Brian.

Brian put his hand across Justin's forehead. "Maybe it's just the heat. It's pretty brutal out there."

"I was fine until the afternoon. Now I feel like I did yesterday."

"Maybe you should see a doctor."

"No. It's probably nothing. I'll just take a nap before dinner." He went into the bedroom to lie down. When Brian attempted to wake him two hours later, Justin grunted, but made no attempt to get up. Brian made himself a sandwich and watched television for a few hours and then joined Justin in bed. The boy did not move when Brian kissed him good-night. If Justin felt this way in the morning, Brian resolved that he would talk him into seeing a doctor.

But the next morning Justin seemed fine. In fact, he said that he felt well rested. He went to work and for the next few days there was no recurrence of the mysterious ailment. They assumed it had been some kind of virus which had worked its way out of Justin's system.

Lindsay had called Justin saying that she and Mel had been invited to attend the wedding of Lindsay's cousin. The wedding was to be held out on Long Island and Lindsay and Mel had made plans to fly to New York and rent a car. Lindsay asked if Brian and Justin would like to pick Gus up at the airport and take him into the city to stay with them over the weekend. Justin had said yes without even consulting Brian. It was the first time that Lindsay had ever suggested that they keep Gus for a weekend.

Brian drove to the airport on Friday afternoon to pick up his son. Lindsay secured Gus into his car seat as Brian put a suitcase into the trunk. "What the fuck is in here, bricks? How much does he need to stay over one night?" Brian complained.

"Babies come with a lot of accessories. Justin said that he was going to buy a potty chair for your apartment. See that Gus at least tries. It will help with his training."

"What is he, a puppy? Come on, Sonny Boy, let's go party." Lindsay and Mel kissed Gus good-bye, telling Brian that they would pick him up on Sunday afternoon.

Brian drove into Manhattan and parked in the garage under the building. He and Gus rode the elevator to the 15th floor. Gus was very excited when he realized where they were. "Jussin!" he called out when Brian opened the door.

Justin had to work late that day and was not able to go to the airport. Brian assumed that he was in the kitchen cooking dinner. "Go into the kitchen and surprise him, Gus."

Gus ran down the hall to look for Justin while Brian took his bag and put it into the bedroom. He was looking for the potty chair when saw Gus standing in the doorway. The boy put his finger over his mouth and whispered, "Jussin seepin'."

"What?" Brian didn't understand what Gus was saying.

The boy repeated it, "Jussin seepin' shhhh."

Brian followed Gus down the hall and saw what he was talking about. Justin was sprawled out face down on the floor near the counter.

"Justin!" Brian called out. He knelt down next to Justin and turned him over. Justin did not respond at first but when Brian shook him gently he opened his eyes.

"What happened?" Justin asked.

"I was going to ask you the same question. You must have fallen and hit your head. You're bleeding." Justin put his hand up to his forehead and saw the blood. He then noticed Gus standing next to Brian. The boy looked like he was about to cry.

"Hey, Gus!" Justin said, as he attempted to smile. "Brian, help me up."

"Maybe you shouldn't move. Should I call an ambulance?"

"Brian, I'm fine. It's just a scratch."

"I'm taking you to the hospital. You're sick again, aren't you? That's why you fell. Justin, you hit your head hard enough to knock yourself out. You had a brain injury not that long ago. We need to make sure you didn't damage anything."

"Brian, don't make a big deal, you're upsetting Gus," Justin whispered.

Brian looked over at his son and saw that Justin was right. Gus was leaning back against the counter pouting. Brian helped Justin to stand up and walked him over to the sofa. Gus followed, wide-eyed. Once Justin sat down on the sofa, Gus climbed up to sit next to him. He patted Justin's shoulder comfortingly, the same way Lindsay and Melanie did when Gus was hurt or upset.

"Thanks, Gus. You're helping me to feel better." Justin smiled at the boy.

Brian got a wash cloth to wipe the blood from Justin's face. Justin assured Gus that he was okay and then instructed him to go to the shelf where they kept his crayons and paper. Justin drew an outline of a boat for Gus to color. Once Gus was settled at the coffee table out of earshot, Brian tried to coax Justin to go to the hospital.

"Brian, I'll be okay. We can't take Gus to the emergency room the first time we get to keep him for a weekend. I want him to have a good time so Lindsay and Mel will let him come more often."

"I'm sure they would understand."

"Maybe, but would Gus even want to come back here if he gets traumatized."

"You have a black eye, you know." Brian observed.

"I do? I must look horrible. Get me a mirror."

"You look beautiful. A black eye looks very sexy on you." Brian pulled Justin into his arms. He didn't want the kid to see what a mess his face was. "Look, if you feel sick or start to get a headache, promise you'll tell me. We can put Gus to bed and get a sitter. Then we could go to the emergency room."

"Brian I don't feel all that bad, really. I promise not to die on you." Justin saw Brian flinch when he mentioned dying. He'd forgotten how sensitive Brian was to that word, especially when it was associated with Justin. He changed the subject. "Go make us dinner. There's chicken in the refrigerator, all you have to do is heat it up and make a salad."

Justin forced himself to eat with Brian and Gus. After the meal he felt much better. He played with Gus while Brian cleaned up the kitchen. After Brian put Gus to bed he returned to the living room where Justin had dozed off on the sofa.

"Hey, wake up. We haven't gotten to talk all day."

Justin sat up and smiled at Brian. "I'm not sleeping. I'm just resting."

"Justin, I've been thinking about what's been happening to you and I want to ask you some questions. Do you think it's possible that someone is slipping you some kind of drug during the day? We should take you to a doctor and have your blood tested."

"Maybe, you're right. I feel normal in the morning. And all morning at work, I'm fine. In the afternoon I get really tired."

"Have you been eating anything unusual? You have a lot of allergies. That could cause you to pass out."

"I haven't been eating anything new."

"Think about it. Monday and Tuesday you were sick. Wednesday and Thursday you were fine. And today you're sick again. What did eat on the days that you got sick?"

"Today I ate cereal with you. Then I went to work and got a bagel and orange juice. Then at eleven I ate a chocolate donut. At lunch I had a tuna hero and some French Fries, oh, and a chocolate malted. At 4:30 I had a Starbucks hot chocolate and jelly donut. I felt kinda dizzy when I left work so I ate a slice of pizza before I got on the train. Then I started to get sick."

Brian stared at him. "You ate all that in one day?"

"Yeah, I'm a growing boy."

"Right. I forgot. I can't believe you spent \$3.50 on Starbucks. You're always telling me what a rip-off it is."

"I didn't buy the Starbucks. Adam brings it for Ken and me in the afternoons. Ken loves it when Adam does little things like that."

"Adam! Justin on the days that you got sick, did you drink hot chocolate that Adam brought you?"

"Yes. He comes by almost every day."

"Except for Wednesday and Thursday when he was in Boston!"

"That's right." Justin understood what Brian was getting at. Adam was slipping something into the drink. "Brian, I don't understand why he would do that!"

"To let me know that he can get to you. I'm sure he's behind the flowers and the e-mail message also. He's gone too far with this. I'm going over there right now and punch his lights out."

"You can't. He and Ken went away for the weekend," Justin informed him. "In a way I'm glad that we've figured it out. Now I know that I don't have some kind of fatal disease."

"Monday morning I'm going to fire Adam and you're going to quit your job with Ken."

"Brian, let's not discuss this now. We only have Gus for one day and I don't want it to be spoiled."

Brian agreed to put his anger aside for Gus's sake. The next day they took Gus to the Central Park Zoo followed by a visit to the new Toys R Us in Times Square. Gus was impressed with the giant Ferris wheel in the middle of the store. They picked out some books and also bought him a giant box of crayons and some coloring books.

"Next time you come to visit we'll get you some paints. You're going to learn to be an artist, just like me."

They ate lunch at Chevy's, a new Mexican restaurant on 42nd and 8th Ave. After lunch they went back home. Justin changed Gus into his bathing suit and took him out to the terrace to play in the sand box. Brian lay on the chaise longue and watched his son play. He was glad that Gus was having a good time.

But the situation with Adam was never out of Brian's mind. He was infuriated that the man had both the ability and the intent to hurt Justin. The only reason that he hadn't fired Adam after that first incident was because he had been concerned about Adam revealing his own past to the partners. If Justin had been injured or worse, once again, it would have been Brian's fault.

He could sense that Justin was reluctant to leave his job with Ken. It was going to be difficult to make Justin understand that it would be necessary for him to cut all ties with Adam and Ken. Once Brian fired Adam on Monday, he was sure that Adam would try to take it out on Justin. Brian was not about to let Justin put himself in danger. There would be no discussion about it. Justin would have to quit his job.

Lindsay and Mel arrived on Sunday afternoon to pick up their son. Gus was reluctant to leave so soon, but they promised him that he would be coming back soon and maybe spending a whole week.

"Justin, what happened to your eye?" Mel asked.

"Jussin seepin'" Gus whispered.

"You did that in your sleep?" asked Lindsay.

"No, of course not. I tripped on the rug and hit my head. It's no big deal."

"Gus help. Jussin all better."

"That's right. Gus you did a good job. Justin is all better." Brian said. They went downstairs to where the girls had parked the rental car. Brian put his arm around Justin's shoulder and they both waved to Gus as the car pulled away from the curb.

Brian put off talking to Justin until after dinner. He knew that Justin would fight him, but he was convinced that it would be best for Justin to quit.

"I want you to stay home tomorrow." Brian blurted out. He was sitting on the sofa. The television was on and some lawyer was talking about his client's rights being violated.

"I can't do that. We're swamped with work."

"It's not safe for you to continue working, or even socializing with Ken."

"Why? What did Ken do?"

"I'm sure Ken's a nice guy. But, I'm more concerned about your safety than Ken's business."

"It's my business, too. Or doesn't that count for anything?"

"You can do that kind of work anywhere, Justin. You don't owe Ken anything."

"I'm not sure that Ken's safe from Adam, either."

"Why do you say that?"

"I was thinking about what happened on the days that Adam was there. He brought in the two cups in a cardboard tray. He put them down on a desk. Ken could just as easily pick up the one with the drug. Unless both cups had the drug mixed in."

"Why would he want to drug his own boyfriend?"

"Maybe so that he could go out tricking and not have Ken get suspicious. Ken would be so tired when he got home that he would fall asleep."

Brian considered what Justin had said. Adam wanted Ken around, but he also wanted his secret life. It wouldn't surprise Brian if Justin's theory was correct.

"Well, if that's true, the guy is crazier than I thought. But Ken is not our problem. You're not going back there, Justin."

"Brian, Ken is my friend. I know he's older than me, but in some ways he's very naive. I'm afraid of what Adam might do to him."

"Why do you care so much about Ken? Are you fucking him?"

Justin flinched as if Brian had struck him across the face. Brian knew he had gone too far. Without a word, Justin turned and walked out of the apartment. Brian called after Justin to stop, but he did not follow him out the door. The argument had gotten out of hand and Brian truly regretted his accusation. He thought it best to let Justin cool off, then they would talk. Everything would work out.

It was almost one o'clock in the morning when Justin returned home. It had rained heavily for most of the night and Justin was dripping wet. He went into the bathroom and stripped off his wet clothing and slipped on a dry T-shirt and a pair of boxers. Brian was sitting up in bed waiting for him.

"Where have you been?" Brian asked. He hoped his tone did not sound confrontational. Brian had been frantic while waiting for Justin to come home. As soon as the boy was out the door Brian noticed that his cell phone was on the kitchen counter. Justin had not worn a jacket or taken an umbrella and when the rain started Brian began to worry.

Justin sat on top of the covers cross his legs and faced Brian. "I walked downtown."

"That took you all night?"

"I didn't hook up with anyone, if that's what you think."

"No. I didn't mean that. I didn't mean what I said about Ken, either. I'm sorry for saying it."

"You have a right to say and think whatever you want, Brian. I do have a history of cheating on you."

"Justin, you weren't to blame . . . "

"I walked all the way to ground zero. It was so dark down there. Some of the lights are still not working. The streets are deserted. It's kinda creepy."

"Why did you go there?"

"I just kept walking, and found myself there. I walked along the water for a while. I was thinking what it must have been like that day. Those people had left their homes in the morning to go to work and they never came home again. Anything can happen, Brian. What if they had a fight with their husband or wife the night before and never got to say, 'I'm sorry,' 'I love you' or even just 'good-bye.'" Justin got under the covers and put his head on Brian's chest. "I promise I'll never take off again, no matter what stupid thing you say to me."

"You do tend to run away when I become impossible to deal with. I didn't mean to accuse you of cheating." After seriously considering the reason for his outburst tonight, Brian had come to the conclusion that he'd been seeking some kind of reassurance that Justin was faithful. Losing Justin to Ethan, even for a few weeks, was an extremely painful experience for Brian. He never could find a way to bring up the subject with Justin without sounding judgmental.

Justin pulled himself back up into a sitting position and faced Brian. "I know why you said it, Brian. It's my fault that you think I would cheat on you. You don't trust me because I have given you a reason not to. But I'm telling you right now, there is nothing that would cause me to ever look at another man that way. So you can stop thinking it, okay?"

"Yeah." Brian said softly. Justin had given him the reassurance that he needed. Plain and right to the point. Brian wished that he had been as kind to Justin when he'd needed reassuring. If he had, Ethan never would have had the opportunity to interfere in their lives. "Get back under the covers. You're shivering."

Justin slid under the blankets. He turned on his side, Brian did the same. "I got soaked. It was raining so hard I felt like I was taking a shower."

"Why didn't you take a cab back home?"

"I forgot my wallet."

"And your cell phone."

"Luckily I had my Metrocard in my pocket. I had to wait almost an hour for the subway. I ran all the way home from the subway station."

Brian pulled him close and kissed him. Justin smiled at Brian and said, "Do you realize this is our first official fight since we got married. You know what that means?"

"The honeymoon is over?"

"No! This is our first make-up sex! Make it good, Brian!"

The next morning Brian pried Justin's arm from around his neck and slid out from under the covers. It was early for Brian but he decided to go into the office, maybe he would catch Adam in the act. In any event he was going to confront the man today. It could mean losing his own job, but he was prepared to take the consequences of his actions. Justin was more important to him than any job.

When Brian came out of the bathroom he saw that the bed was empty. Justin had gotten up and was already dressed and waiting for him in the kitchen.

"What are you doing up? I thought we decided that you were staying home today."

"I'm not going to stay home. I'm not going to let Adam, or whoever is stalking me, dictate my life. My job may not be as important as yours, but I like what I'm doing and I feel a responsibility to Ken. I know you're concerned, and I'll be careful. But, Brian, for the last time. . . I can take care of myself!"

"Have it your way! Make sure that you call me before you leave the office. And DON'T eat or drink anything while you're there!"

Brian picked up his briefcase and headed for the door. Justin called after him. "Wait!"

Brian turned around. "What?" he asked as he checked his watch.

Justin put his arms around Brian's waist and kissed him gently. "Good-bye, Brian. I love you."

Brian hugged him back. "Me, too."

When Brian got to the office, he found out that his early arrival was in vain. Adam had contacted the partners over the weekend. He told them that he'd had a family emergency and would not be in the office for a few days. This created an even bigger problem for Brian. He would have to cover several client meetings which Adam had been scheduled to attend. It would involve traveling to California and it might take an entire week. He would have to leave for the airport as soon as possible.

Brian packed up the files he would need and took a cab back to the apartment to pack a bag. He had attempted to contact Justin on his cell phone, but couldn't get through. Justin must have been on the subway. Brian took his bags downstairs and loaded them into the company car which had been parked in the garage. He drove directly downtown to the office building where Justin worked.

"Brian!" Justin exclaimed. "What are you doing here? Is something wrong."

"Are you here alone?" Brian asked.

"Yeah, Ken left a message on the answering machine that he had to go back to his parents' house. His mother is sick again."

"I guess Adam must be with him. At least he won't be here to bother you for a few days. Justin, I have to cover his meetings. I'll be away until the end of the week."

"I guess that makes sense. Don't worry, Brian. I have so much work to do I won't even miss you." Justin tried to sound convincing. But the tears forming in his eyes gave him away.

"I'll call you every night. You call me anytime, if you need me." Brian put his arms around Justin.

"I'll be fine. Don't worry. It's just, that I'm kinda used to having you around."

"I have to run to catch the plane."

"I love you, Brian. Have a safe trip. And call me, please."

"Hey, I'm kinda use to having you around, too."

Justin had worked at the office alone many times. He decided that since most of the work he had to do was on the computer, he would take it home on a disk and work at home. As he was packing up to leave the phone rang. There was no one on the other end of the line. Justin hung up, turned off the lights, and left the office.

Brian checked into the hotel and unpacked the suit he would need for his afternoon meeting. He took the laptop that he'd had in his suitcase and switched it on. He had an email from Justin which said that he was working at home. He also said that he was going to work in the nude all day just so Brian would think of him that way. Brian grinned at the thought of Justin sitting on the terrace working on his computer in the nude.

When he opened his next email he was so shocked that he almost knocked the lap top off the coffee table. The attachments on the email were digital images of Justin. They had been taken the night before when Justin took his walk down to ground zero. This meant that not only was Adam NOT in North Carolina with Ken, but he was in New York City . . . where Justin was home alone working in the nude.

Brian immediately called Justin at their apartment. "Justin, Adam is not in North Carolina with Ken. At least he wasn't last night." Brian told Justin about the photos that were sent with the email. "I know you're going to tell me not to worry. But, please, don't take any chances."

"I promise not to leave the apartment until you get home at the end of the week. Brian, do you hear how ridiculous that sounds?"

"Can you get one of your artsy friends to stay with you?"

"Maybe Cher would come over. She would love to have an entire week to convert me. Who knows, maybe it'll work."

"Don't be fresh. I worry about you being there alone."

"I won't answer the door to anyone and I won't work in the nude."

"That's a start."

Justin could hear the tension in Brian's voice. "Go to your meeting. Call me before you go to bed. I love you."

"Me, too. Be careful, baby."

Normally Justin didn't mind being alone when Brian was out of town. But tonight he was on edge. The phone had rung several times and no one was on the other end. Adam must be haunting him. He decided to let the answering machine screen the calls. It was almost ten o'clock and Brian hadn't called. Justin turned off the television and went into the bedroom. He decided to lie down on the bed and wait for Brian's call. As soon as his head hit the pillow he was asleep.

Justin was awakened by a loud crashing noise. He jumped out of bed and looked into the hallway. For a moment he thought that he must have imagined the noise, but then he heard footsteps out in the hall. Some one was coming up the stairs. Justin ran across the hall into the guest bed room. He looked around for something he could use as a weapon. The heaviest portable object was an antique brass lamp. He removed the glass bowl from the top and unplugged the lamp.

The footsteps were getting louder and Justin braced himself up against the wall near the front door. His heart was beating wildly as he heard a key turn in the lock. Someone entered the apartment. It was definitely not Brian. That was all the information Justin needed. He raised the lamp over his head and moved forward to attack the figure standing in front of him.

"Justin! It's me, Michael!" Michael was able to grab Justin's arm just before the heavy brass lamp made contact with his head.

"Fuck! Michael, what are you doing here? You nearly gave me a fucking heart attack!"

"A heart attack would be easier to recover from than a fractured skull." Michael took the lamp out of Justin's hand and put it on the floor.

Justin turned on the light. He had never been so glad to see Michael Novotny in his whole entire life. He flung his arms around Michael's neck and hugged him. "I'm so glad it's you, Michael. I thought for sure I you were Adam."

"Relax, Boy Wonder. Brian called and asked me to come up to New York." Michael pulled himself free from Justin's embrace. "He said he thought you could use some company, but that if he suggested it, you would tell him to fuck off. So here I am."

"Sit down, Michael. I'll make us some hot chocolate and fill you in on all the gory details."

Michael sat on the sofa and turned on the television. The phone rang and Justin answered. "Brian! Yeah, he's here. But I wish you'd have told me he was coming. I just bashed his brains in with a brass lamp and now he's lying on the floor in a pool of blood. I think I killed Mikey." Justin laughed. "No. I didn't dent the lamp." He handed Michael the phone.

"I missed the early flight." Michael said into the phone. "So I used the key you gave me. I thought you were going to call and tell him I was coming."

"I got stuck in a meeting," Brian explained. "Is he okay?"

"He was little jumpy. He wasn't lying about the lamp. I could have been killed."

"Next time you come over unannounced, you better wear a helmet. Let me talk to Justin again. And, Michael, thanks."

"Here, he wants to talk to you."

"Has anything happened since I left this morning?" Brian asked once Justin was on the phone.

"A few phone calls with no one on the other end. I'm okay. I'm glad that Michael is here. Thanks for not telling me he was coming. I would have told you no."

"I had to know that you were safe. If I can't be there, then I'm glad that Michael is with you to keep you company, anyway."

"Yeah. It is sure lonely in this big place without you."

"Just make sure you sleep with all your clothes on. And your shoes and socks too."

"You do the same." Justin grinned.

"I love you, husband." Brian said softly.

"I love you too, husband." Justin answered. A few minutes later he hung up the phone. It was the very first time that Brian had said 'I love you' first. Justin smile to himself at the progress they had made in their relationship. Even with all the angst brewing around them, they were closer than they'd ever been.

On Thursday morning, Michael and Justin decided to go for a run in the park. Brian was due home that evening and Justin was too keyed up to stay indoors just waiting for him to arrive. The temperature had climbed into the nineties by mid-morning, which made their run exhausting. When they got back to the air-conditioned penthouse, they both collapsed on the sofa and fell asleep. Brian arrived home a little after noon to find Justin curled up on the sofa with his head on a pillow and Michael curled up alongside Justin with his head on Justin's ass.

"Ahem!!! This isn't exactly the homecoming that I expected!"

"BRIAN!!!" Justin jumped up from the sofa and leaped over the love seat. Brian grabbed Justin and embraced him.

Michael's head had landed on the sofa with a thud, shaking him into consciousness. "Brian, it's not what it looks like. We were waiting for you and we fell asleep. How was your trip?" Michael saw that his comments landed on deaf ears. Justin had his legs wrapped around Brian's waist. They two were locked in a kiss that would probably last for an hour or two at least. Without a word the pair made their way down the hall to the bedroom. Michael heard the door bang shut. 'Hello Michael, would you excuse us while we fuck our brains out for the rest of the afternoon?'

Brian ran his index finger lightly over Justin's chest. He raised himself up on one elbow to get a better look. As Justin lay on his back asleep, Brian lowered the covers to reveal Justin's perfect, naked body. They had been having 'welcome home' sex for six hours. Brian marveled at the excitement that he felt the moment Justin jumped into his arms. They had only been apart four days. It had seemed like an eternity. How could it be that one person held the key to all of his carnal desires? In his lifetime he had experienced sex with thousands of men. Until he had fallen in love with this little blond kid, he'd never really felt completely satisfied.

Justin awoke to find Brian's hazel eyes staring down at him. "What are you doing?" the boy asked.

"Lookin' at you. I want to memorize everything about you just as you are right this moment. How you look, how you smell, how you taste, what it feels like to touch you here," Brian ran his finger over Justin's belly.

Justin giggled. "Why? I'm not going anywhere. You can touch me anytime you want."

"In case I have to go away again. I want to remember how it was coming home to you today. That way I can keep you close to me, at least in my mind." Brian let his arm drop and fell back onto the bed. "I fucking HATE sleeping alone!"

"You've slept alone most of your life. I would think you'd be used to it."

"You had to come along and spoil me."

Justin grinned. He turned on his side and faced Brian reaching out his left hand he stroked Brian's face. "Did you miss me?"

Justin flung himself on his back. He expected to hear one of Brian's remarks about how he shouldn't ask leading questions. Justin didn't know why he would risk ruining the moment, but he couldn't help it. He wanted Brian to tell him in words what he was feeling.

Brian turned on his side and moved in very close to Justin's ear. Justin closed his eyes and braced himself for 'the lecture.'

"Every. . . moment." Brian said softly into Justin's ear.

Justin's opened his eyes. "What! You said it! You missed me! Who are you really, and what have you done with my Brian?"

"Don't push your luck, little boy. It's the truth. I always tell you the truth."

Justin kissed him on the lips. Brian smiled down at him. All of a sudden Brian crinkled his nose and said, "What's that smell?"

Justin sniffed the air. "Smells like food. Oh, shit, I'm starving! I haven't eaten since breakfast. Maybe we could go and knock on all the neighbors' doors and find out where smell is coming from."

"It does smell good. Maybe they would take pity and feed us."

Justin started to pull on his clothes. He stopped short and said, "MICHAEL! Shit, Brian we forgot all about him."

They hurriedly finished dressing and went out into the hall. The delicious aroma was coming from their very own kitchen.

"Mikey! When did you get here?" Brian joked.

"Fuck you! I figured you two would need sustenance at one point. You know, to keep up with your sexual appetites."

"How do you know we were having sex?" Justin asked in jest.

"I think everyone in the building knows you were having sex. You weren't exactly discreet."

"This smells great, Mikey."

"It's Michael or Mike, okay? I'm a grown man, Brian. I don't answer to Mikey anymore."

"Whatever, Mikey. What's in the oven?"

"Garlic bread and homemade lasagna."

They ate ravenously. After the meal, Justin made coffee and the three men sat out on the terrace talking.

"I found out a few things about my buddy Adam. Thank God for my spy girl Cynthia. It turns out that Adam was supposed to be the one to work on this account. He pulled a switch somehow to make sure that I would be out of town while he messed with Justin's head."

"That prick! We spend four days apart because of him!"

"I've decided it's time to cut my ties with Mr. Adam Lyons once and for all. I'm going to the brass tomorrow morning."

"You could be putting your job on the line, Brian," Michael said. "Have you thought of what you would do? You have a lot of responsibilities."

Brian smiled. "If I lose my fancy job we can go live in Justin's old apartment. I'll get a job waiting tables and modeling my . . . 'what did you call it?' . . . my stupid handsome face."

Justin beamed at him. "And we'd be every bit as happy as we are now."

"You two have fucking lost your minds. It must be all the sex."

"Michael, what Brian is saying is that we don't need this big place and a lot of money to be happy. We just need each other. Everything else will work out. It always does."

"I can't let Adam taunt us. We can't prove anything that he's done to Justin, but I certainly have enough dirt on him to get him fired. I'm going to explain about Bellweather's book and prom night. If they want to fire their most valuable player for being a pedophile and child molester, then so be it."

"What about Ken, Brian? I wish there was a way to make him see that Adam is a sleaze."

"I haven't forgotten about Kenny boy. You're right, Justin, he doesn't deserve to be lied to. Cynthia also found out that Adam's broke. He gambled away all of his assets a long time ago. Ken is the one who owns the brownstone and the business. Adam just plays his dirty little games and lies like a dog. I have a plan, but you may lose your job with Ken."

"Ken isn't stupid, Brian. When the person you love is cheating, in your heart you know it. He just needs to admit it to himself and move on with his life."

"We need to set up a sting. Justin, has your buddy George come back from L.A.?"

"Yeah, he's back in New York. Why?"

"We need a Justin clone."

"A what?" Michael giggled.

"Someone young, blond and hot to get Adam's motor going. Call George and see if he's interested. If not we could get a Justin-clone hustler for about \$300."

Michael snickered. "Is that mail order, or over the internet?"

"How would you know how much a Justin-clone hustler costs?" Justin asked, suspiciously.

"It's in the catalog." Brian joked. "You were gone for three whole months, Justin. What did you expect me to do? I missed you."

"Hey, if we both lose our jobs, how much do you think I could get for the real thing?" Justin joked.

Brian frowned. "That's not funny."

"Yeah, that was very funny," Michael teased. "I thought it was funny, Justin."

They spend the evening formulating a workable plan.

"Can I borrow your blue tie?" Justin asked.

"Where are you going all dressed up like a grown up?" Brian teased.

"I'm going with you."

"No. You're not."

"Yes. I'm going to work with you. I'm going to make your bosses see our story through my eyes."

"Justin . . ."

"It's my story, Brian. I want to tell it myself."

"I guess we have nothing to lose. Okay, young man, here's my tie. If you spill anything on it, I will have to punish you severely."

"You promise?"

If Justin was nervous about meeting Brian's bosses he didn't show it. Brian admired Justin's ability to handle any social situation with charm and grace. They had arrived at the office early and gone directly to the executive offices. Brian gave Justin a tour of his suite.

"This is so cool. You have your own bathroom and everything. And look at that view. How do you get any work done in here?"

"I don't really do much creating in here. I prefer to go to the department involved and brainstorm with the staff on their own turf. It makes me appear to be one of the guys. When I'm in here I'm mostly on the phone with clients or staring out the window thinking about you."

Justin laughed for a moment and then got very serious. "Brian, whatever happens, remember that we're in this together. I love you."

A buzzer sounded from somewhere on Brian's desk. This was Cynthia's signal that the bosses had arrived. "It's show time!"

"Gentleman, I'd like to introduce my partner, Justin Taylor. He came here with me today because I need to explain some things about myself and about another member of the staff here."

Brian went on to describe Adam's Internet escapades in vivid detail. "I have to be very honest with you. Not that long ago, I would have shrugged off any suggestion that this kind of activity needs to be reported to the higher-ups. In fact, except for the kiddie porn aspect, I probably would have enjoyed the material on the sites. Back in Pittsburgh I indulged in drugs, abused alcohol and had a reputation for being the ultimate one-night-stand stud of Liberty Avenue. Adam knew this, and he also knew about Justin. And that's why Justin wanted to come here today. Adam's been stalking him. He had a virtual image porn movie of himself having sex with Justin made and put up on the Internet. When I found out about it I confronted him. Adam told me that since the images were computer generated and therefore not real people, there was nothing illegal about it. He accused me of being a hypocrite because of my past." Brian placed 'Stolen Innocence,' Howard Bellweather's book on the table. "He threatened to come here and tell you about this book and about my history with Justin."

Justin took his cue. He sat up straight in his chair and in his most determined, confident Justin Taylor manner he began to tell his story. "I don't know how you feel about gay men in general, and I'm not here to get in anyone's face about our lifestyle. I just want to tell you what really happened to me. This book says that Brian is a pedophile, a child molester. The man who wrote it is the self-appointed gay social conscience of Pittsburgh. He claims in the book that Brian Kinney stole my innocence. I was seventeen years old when I decided that I needed to experience sex. I went out one night to looking for a man who would teach me how it was done. The minute I saw him, I knew that Brian was something special. I stalked him. I was the predator, not Brian. When he realized that I wasn't going away willingly, he tried to push me away. But he wasn't very good at hiding his feeling, not from me anyway. He'd started to accept the fact that I was a part of his life. I think he started to like me, a little." Justin smiled shyly. "By gay standards, I'm considered pretty cute."

Brian sat silently while Justin explained their first few encounters. They had never talked about this before and Brian found Justin's interpretation amusing. Brian noticed that the partners didn't disagree. In fact two of them were smiling. 'Go, Justin'

"When my Dad found out I was gay, he threw me out of the house. Brian took me in. He made sure that I went to school and took my allergy medication. He helped me study for the SATs. I got a score of 1500. Brian never misled

me. I was only there because I had no place else to go. But he took good care of me and we got close. When he thought that I might be getting a little too close he found me a safe place to live."

"Fitting in socially at school was never easy for me. I was different from the other kids and they all knew it. I was labeled faggot, teased and beaten up on a daily basis. There was one kid who really hated me. His name was Chris Hobbs. He was a star football player and could do no wrong in the eyes of the teachers and administrators of the homophobic school that I went to. One day Hobbs set my locker on fire. I had artwork in there that I had really worked hard on. It was destroyed and they all laughed when I burned my hand trying to save it."

Justin's smile had faded. Brian could tell that the memories of his high school years were painful. "Justin, you don't have to do this."

Justin ignored him and continued. "I couldn't wait to graduate from high school. When prom time rolled around I wasn't going to go. 'What for?' I'd asked my mother. 'I don't belong there.' She insisted that I should go. It was my one and only high school prom. Of course, if she knew what I was going to do next, she would never have opened her mouth. I asked Brian to go with me. He freaked. Turned me down flat. I was crushed, of course. But I decided I had to go anyway because it was my rite of passage. My friend Daphne and I went together. We were dancing and having a pretty good time. Then, Daphne hit me on the arm and pointed toward the door." Justin's face lit up. "Brian was walking toward me. He was wearing a tux and he looked so hot. Every eye in the place was riveted on him. He came over to me and took my hand. We had one dance . . . one perfect dance. No matter what happened after, it will always be my most cherished memory."

Tears formed in Brian's eyes and he turned his head away from the table. When he turned back he saw some of the partners putting their handkerchiefs back in their pockets.

"We walked back to Brian's Jeep and said good-bye. I turned to go back inside to get Daphne. I heard Brian call out my name. I turned and . . . I don't remember first hand what happened. I was told that Chris Hobbs came at me with a baseball bat. If Brian hadn't called out my name, the blow would have been fatal. The bat hit me here." Justin indicated a spot on his forehead.

"I was in a coma for three weeks. Some people wanted to blame Brian for what happened. My mother forbid him to come see me. But he came anyway. He never came into the room, but he stood guard in the hall outside my room, all night, every night."

"How did you know that?" Brian was surprised.

"Brian never told anyone." Justin explained. "But he stayed with me. I always knew, Brian."

"It took months for me to get back the use of my hand. As an artist I thought that I was finished before I even began. Drawing was all I ever wanted to do with my life. I was ready to give up. I dropped out of art school and started to party instead. Brian put me back on track. He took care of me."

"That book was written by a bitter, self-righteous bigot. Brian hasn't always been an upstanding citizen, but he does love me. And I love him. So this book is a work of fiction. And Brian's past is in the past. He's a good man. And he deserves your respect. He's always had mine."

Justin rose from his chair and the partners all shook his hand and thanked him for coming. Brian excused himself and followed Justin out to the hall.

"Brian, you should be inside, not out here with me. Don't you want to know how they're reacting?"

"I don't have to be in there to know how they're reacting. They're all crazy about you. I wouldn't be surprised if they fire me and hire you in my place. Justin, that first night we were together . . . I knew that you were something special, too." Brian resisted the urge to kiss him. Justin grinned and walk off toward the elevator.

"Brian, we're not at all surprised about your past. In fact, we considered your reputation when you were first interviewed. It wasn't Adam Lyons' recommendation that got you hired here. It was your excellent creative work and your perseverance when soliciting clients that convinced us you would be an asset to the firm. We are all impressed with your honest revelation today. We are equally impressed with your partner's devotion."

"Justin is my husband. We're married." Brian wanted to make sure they understood the permanence of his relationship with Justin. He searched their faces for any reaction, seeing none he continued. "Gentleman, what would you do if Adam Lyons made a virtual image porn video of one of your wives, or your daughters? Now, tell me what I can do to stop him."

Justin and Michael decided to team up and cook something special for dinner. They knew how much Brian hated the fact that Adam had forced his hand. No matter what the outcome of the meeting, Brian would probably be cranky when he got home.

"Smells good," Brian said as he walked into the kitchen. He kissed Justin on the neck. "Let's eat."

Justin set the table and Michael carved the roast beef. When they were all seated at the table Justin turned to Brian and asked nonchalantly, "So what happened after I left?"

Brian answered without emotion, "Oh, that. They gave me the okay to get rid of him. Actually, they said it was up to me."

"Did you fire the asshole?" Michael asked.

"No. I'll do it tomorrow. By then he'll be ready to go quietly."

"George said he would take the Justin clone job. Are we still on for tomorrow night?"

"You bet."

The following evening, Justin called Ken and told him that Brian and Adam had made plans to meet up for a drink after work. He gave Ken the address of the hotel where Brian had arranged for George to lure Adam. When Ken arrived at the hotel bar, Brian greeted him.

"Hey, Ken. Adam got an important phone call as we were about to leave. I told him I would go ahead and meet you and Justin."

"Where's Justin?" Ken asked as he sat at the table. Brian had taken Justin's jacket and positioned it on the chair next to him. He had placed his briefcase on the other chair so that Ken would have to sit in a chair which had a clear view of the lobby.

"He went to the men's room. Do you want a drink?" Brian asked.

"I'll wait for Adam."

"Okay. I'll start without you." Brian called the waitress over and ordered a beer. "How's your Mom?"

"Much better, thanks."

Brian felt the cell phone in his pants pocket start to vibrate. It was Justin's signal that Adam and George had been spotted outside. "Ken, did Adam ever tell you the story of how we met?" Brian went on to describe the details of their tryst.

"I don't believe you. Adam doesn't cheat."

"Oh, but he does. Maybe you don't remember because he drugs your coffee so you'll be sleeping soundly while he visits the backrooms of every sleazy club in downtown New York. Justin told me that you wouldn't believe me, so I spied on him one night. Seems he favors blonds. Sweet faced petite blonds, like my Justin. In fact, Justin seems to be the object of his wildest wet dreams. He has a whole website devoted to a mock up of the two of them cyber-fucking. Your dear partner Adam is a slime."

"Fuck you, Brian! You should be ashamed of yourself. Adam's told me about your past. You're the slime, Brian. I don't know why you're telling me this shit, but I don't have to stay here and listen!"

Ken stood up but Brian grabbed his arm and nodded toward the entrance of the hotel. Adam walked in with his arms around George. When they got to the elevator George kissed Adam passionately as Brian had instructed. Adam grabbed the boy's ass and pushed the elevator button several more times.

"Looks like they're in a hurry. What do you think they're doing here, Ken?" Brian asked sarcastically.

He regretted his harsh words as soon as he saw their effect. Tears had formed in Ken's eyes and were rolling down his face. For Brian, it was a painful reminder of the past. How many times he had seen that same look of utter despair on Justin's face?

Ken pulled away from Brian and hurried toward the door. Brian walked over to the elevator, where Adam and George were still standing, locked in an embrace.

"Hey, Adam, isn't that your boyfriend rushing out the front door?" Brian asked.

Adam whirled around to face Brian and then his face froze as he caught a glimpse of Ken leaving the hotel and realized that he'd been set up.

Brian handed George his \$ 300 fee. "Well done. You make a great Justin clone."

Brian considered letting Adam have it right there in the hotel lobby, but the look on the shattered look on the man's face was enough. He would finish the job tomorrow morning.

Brian left the hotel and joined Justin outside. "Where's Michael?"

"He offered to take Ken home. I don't think that Ken wants to talk to me right now." Justin saw the look on Brian's face and tried to comfort him. "We did the right thing. Adam had Ken so brainwashed that he never would have believed the truth unless he saw it with his own eyes."

Brian nodded and put his arm around Justin as they walked toward the subway.

"I don't know, Michael. Brian came home from work and went straight out to the terrace. He hasn't moved since he sat himself down on the lounge chair. I think he may be asleep. If we decide to catch up with you guys later I'll call you. And Michael, thanks for helping out with Ken."

"Yeah, sure. He's a nice kid. I'm sure he'll be better off without that asshole in his life."

Justin hung up the phone and looked at Brian through the French doors. He appeared to be asleep. He hadn't even bothered to loosen his tie or take off his shoes. The whole situation with Adam and Ken was really eating away at Brian. Justin wasn't about to let him suffer any longer. He went into the bedroom and changed into a pair of white

spandex shorts. They were a part of the costume that he wore when he was a dancer at Babylon. He took a old white T-shirt out of a drawer and cut it off just below his nipples.

Brian had one eye open when Justin brought the CD player out to the terrace. He watched silently as Justin strutted about the roof in little white shorts and a cut off shirt. Justin put in a CD that played steel drum music and then he went back inside. Brian had both eyes open now as he watched Justin emerge from the house carrying two glasses. He put them both down on a table next to Brian. Justin then went over to the sand box that they had purchased for Gus. He removed the cover and sat down in the sand.

"Justin, what the fuck are you doing?" Brian asked.

Justin wiggled his butt in the sand and then rubbed some on his arms and legs. He got up and went over to where Brian was sitting. He bent over seductively and began to remove Brian's shoes. "I'm not Justin. I'm cabana boy. I am here to serve you, master." Justin said as he grinned ear to ear. After removing Brian's shoes and socks, Justin loosened his tie.

Brian watched Justin strut over to the table. "Here, try this." He offered Brian one of the glasses.

"What is it?"

"Sex on the beach." Justin said as he sipped the colorful drink.

Brian began to relax after a few sips of the potent drink. Justin positioned himself between Brian's legs on the lounge chair. Brian playfully slid his fingers in and out of Justin's shorts.

"You feeling better, master?" Justin asked.

Brian didn't answer him.

"Brian, Ken is going to be fine. He was here this afternoon and we talked. He doesn't blame you for what Adam did. Ken has never had sex with anyone but Adam. He's really confused right now. I hope he doesn't do anything stupid."

"I couldn't do it!" Brian blurted out. "I went right into his office this morning ready to kick his ass out to the street. He was sitting at his desk staring into space. He knew it was coming and he had no defense."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing. He didn't even look at me. It was like his soul was gone. I gave him a project to work on and left him to ponder his fate. He lost his lover, and his home. I couldn't take away his job. He did help me out a few times. Who knows, maybe this will shake him up enough to straighten him out."

"That was very generous of you, Brian. Just don't turn your back on him."

"Justin, that night at the hotel, the look on Adam's face when he realized he was going to lose Ken . . . that could have been me. I know that we did the right thing. Ken was never going to see Adam for what he really is. But, when it all went down, I thought about us. How many times I've almost blown it. Adam and I are cut from the same cloth."

"You're nothing like him. His relationship with Ken was all based on lies. He used the guy and I'm glad that Ken was able to get free of him."

"They seemed so happy together. Adam told me once that he would die if he ever lost Ken. But he kept playing his games. I never suspected he was like that, Justin. He really had me fooled."

"You and a lot of other people."

"Not you."

"I liked him at first. But I never trusted him after that incident in the bathroom. When he apologized it didn't seem sincere. It was like he just wanted to get away with something."

"I guess you never know a person. Anything could happen, couldn't it? Justin, what if it happens to us?"

"Brian, it already has. A few times, remember."

"Thanks to me and my impulses. I hate that I put you through all that. I was worse than Adam, and I tried to bring you down with me. At least Adam didn't drag his tricks home to corrupt the boy."

"The big difference is that you never lied to me, Brian. You told me that you didn't believe in love and that sex with other men was your way of life. I had to take it or leave it. I took it, because I believed you did love me and everything else would work itself out. And it did. In a way, I'm glad that I experienced all those men when I was with you. I know for sure that I'm with the right man. I'll never have to wonder if there's someone better out there."

"Smartass."

"And with the hundreds of men that you've had. . . " Justin began.

"Hundreds?" Brian interrupted.

"Thousands? I know for sure that I'm very special to you. You picked me out of all those other men."

"So you think it's out of my system?"

"I think that we'll deal with whatever happens. We got through a lot of tough times, Brian. And I'm still here."

"Yeah, you are. Thanks for not giving up on me."

"I'd never give up on you. I just hope you don't get bored with having sex with only one man for the rest of your life. I mean, here we are staying home on a Friday night, while Michael is out on the town with Ken. Maybe we should go out."

"What are you talking about? I'm not staying at home fucking the same man every night. I'm here on the beach with cabana boy. Who, I might add, has the greatest ass." Brian put his hand down the back of Justin's shorts and cupped his round bottom.

"Brian people can see us, you know. Remember the New Jersey shore?"

"Fuck 'em. Let them get their own cabana boy." Brian eyed the sand box. "Hey, why don't we do it on the beach?"

Coming Home To You Part V

Gus Rules

Michael tossed his keys and jacket onto the coffee table and flopped down onto the sofa in Brian and Justin's great room.

"Why is this sofa covered with sand?" He asked as he brushed the sand from his pant leg.

Brian smiled and answered. "I had a visit from cabana boy. We got carried away. How did your evening with Ken go?"

"He's a nice kid. But he's way too fucked up right now to be thinking straight. He blames himself for putting Justin in danger."

"That's ridiculous. Justin is my responsibility. I should have beaten that asshole Adam to a pulp when I found out he put the moves on Justin in the first place."

Justin had changed from his cabana boy costume into cut offs and a T-shirt. He joined Brian and Michael on the sofa. "For the millionth time, I can take care of myself." Brian buried his nose in Justin's freshly washed hair. "Ken is going to be fine." Justin continued "Thanks for keeping him company tonight, Michael."

"It was nice not to be the one who needed the pep talk for a change. I think I'll be heading back to the Pitts tomorrow."

"Are you sure? There's a lot more night life in New York."

"Some of us have to work for a living, Brian."

"Suit yourself." Brian responded.

"Does anyone want coffee?" Justin asked. Brian took him up on the offer and Justin went into the kitchen. When he was out of earshot Brian whispered to Michael. "Thanks for making it up here in time to keep Justin out of trouble. I owe you, big time."

Michael smiled. "I'll remember that. I'd kiss you, but I'm afraid that Justin will fling me off the roof. So I'll just go to bed and get on the train tomorrow morning. Good night."

"Good night, Michael." Justin had returned to the sofa with a cup of coffee which he handed to Brian. "Next time you come we'll go out to some clubs."

"Yeah, maybe in a couple of weeks I can take some time to come up for a visit."

A couple of weeks had turned into a couple of months and Michael had not returned to New York to visit. On a business trip to Pittsburgh Brian stopped by at the comic book store and was surprised to learn that Michael had gone to Atlanta for a convention. Brian had not been to Pittsburgh since he and Justin had made the trip down for the funeral of Lindsay's parents. They had both been killed in an auto accident several months before. Lindsay seemed to be coping at the time, but Brian had not heard from her since. He decided to drop by and find out what was going on. Mel answered the door. It was two o'clock in the afternoon and Mel was in a total state of inebriation.

"What the fuck do you want?"

"Excuse me. Is that anyway to greet the father of your son? Where is he, anyway?"

"Gone."

"What do you mean gone? Where the fuck is Lindsay?" Brian was losing patience.

"Gone, too. They're both gone. They've been gone for weeks. If you called more often you would know that."

A young woman wearing a black lace teddy came up behind Melanie and put her arms around Mel's neck. "Mel, what's going on?"

"Lindsay packed up her stuff and your son and left. She hasn't called. I don't know where she is and I can't say that I fucking care anymore. She's flipped out, Brian."

"Is Gus okay?"

"He was the last time I saw him. Brian, I don't know what to tell you. If I hear anything I'll call you." Brian stood by helplessly as Melanie closed the door in his face.

Upon returning to New York Brian phoned everyone he could think of who may have had contact with Lindsay. No one had heard from her. He was beside himself with worry for his son. Out of desperation he hired a private investigator that came to the apartment to discuss the case. When the man left Brian was even more upset than he had been before. He had taken the morning off from work in order to meet with the investigator at the apartment. It had been a hectic week and he hadn't had the opportunity to go to the gym to work off some steam. Since he knew his afternoon meeting would run long into the evening hours he decided to take the morning for himself. Justin had left for school hours before and Brian decided to go to the gym and then meet Justin for lunch before going to work. Just as he was about to leave the door bell rang. He opened the door and was greeted by Lindsay and Gus.

"Where, have you been?" Brian whispered under his breath as he took Gus from Lindsay's arms.

"Nice to see you, too, Brian." Lindsay brushed past him into the great room and sat on the sofa.

"Where's Justin?" Gus asked. His vocabulary had improved greatly in the months that Brian had not seen him.

"Justin's at school. He'll be really happy to see you when he gets home."

"Honey, why don't you go and get the crayons and paper that Justin keeps for you?"

Gus ran off down the hall and Brian took the opportunity to confront Lindsay. "You have no right to take off with my son without telling me!"

"I have every fucking right, Brian. I'm his mother." Lindsay looked tired and she was short tempered. Brian was concerned with her demeanor; he'd rarely heard her curse.

"Look, I know you've been having some problems. I saw Mel. She's a mess. If you two want some time alone to work it out, I can take Gus for a week or so."

"Work what out, Brian? We cheat on each other at every given opportunity."

"Lindsay Peterson . . . cheat?" Brian teased.

"That's right, Brian. I cheat, I drink and I've found comfort in the form of both recreational and prescription drugs. I've left Melanie. My life is a fucking mess. I've turned into . . . YOU."

Lindsay wasn't kidding. Brian had noticed the redness in her eyes. She was high on something. He sat down next to her on the sofa and took her hand. "What can I do to help?"

"Brian I need to get away. I don't know what I'm running from but I am so desperate."

"Maybe you need to see a shrink or something."

"I've seen two already. One of them started me on the drugs. The other one I fucked. They were both men."

"What about Gus? He's going to be affected by all this Lindsay."

"That's why I'm here, Brian. I need for you to take him until I can figure out what the hell is wrong with me."

"You know I'll take care of him. He's my son. But what about Melanie?"

"There's nothing I can do for Mel now. I have to heal myself. Something happened to me when my parents were killed. I don't care about anything. I can barely get out of bed in the morning. I know it's crazy. They were horrible people and they disapproved of everything that I stood for. But they were my parents."

"You can stay here. The best doctors in the world are in New York."

"No, Brian. I need to do this alone. Are you sure that Justin will be okay with you letting Gus stay here?"

"Of course, Justin is crazy about Gus."

"Thanks. I'll go and explain to Gus that he is going to live here for a while. I will check in and let you know where I am."

The morning's events had been overwhelming. Gus cried when his mother left and Brian tried to comfort him. The fact was that Gus had seen so little of Brian, even on his brief visits, that he barely remembered him. It wasn't until Brian promised the four year old that Justin would be home any minute that Gus stopped crying. He busied himself drawing pictures in his little room which had been decorated with cars and trucks.

Justin walked in the door at two o'clock. "Thank God, you're home!" Brian had been trying to reach Justin on his cell phone all day.

"Nice to see you, too." Justin smiled and gave Brian a big kiss. Brian turned him around and covered his eyes.

"Come out, come out, where ever you are!" Brian sang. Gus jumped up from behind the sofa and ran into Justin's arms.

"Gus! What are you doing here? Where's your" Brian cut him off. He didn't want Gus to be reminded of the fact that his mother had just abandoned him.

"Gus, why don't you go and get the picture that you drew for Justin?" When Gus went to retrieve the picture Brian took the opportunity to fill Justin in.

"I have to go to work. I'm already late for my meeting. You'll have to stay here with Gus."

"Brian, I have work to do! And I have a class this afternoon at 4:30!"

"I tried to find a sitter, but I've had no luck. Besides, we can't leave him with strangers on his first day as an orphan. Please, baby, please! I'll do anything you want! I'll take you to Europe this summer." Brian showered Justin with kisses. Justin giggled and pushed him away.

"I guess I can miss one class. But, Brian we have to work out some kind of day care if he's going to stay for any length of time. I'm not some little housewife. I have a job and my school work."

Brian kissed him hard on the mouth as Gus came back into the room. "Have I ever told you how much I LOVE you?"

Gus giggled.

"Give me a break!" Justin knew when he was being bribed. "Go to work. Gus and I will take care of things here."

It was after ten o'clock when Brian arrived home. He'd stopped to buy a bottle of Champaign to celebrate yet another client signed, sealed and delivered. Justin was lying on the sofa sound asleep. Gus was sprawled across his chest. Brian lifted his son without waking him and carried him to bed. He returned to the sofa and planted a kiss on Justin's blond head. "Wake up and congratulate me."

"Oh, shit! What time is it? Where's Gus?"

"It's ten o'clock and Gus is safely tucked into his imitation race car bed."

"I fell asleep. I'm sorry, Brian. What if something happened to him while I was sleeping? Man, he's changed a lot since the last time he was here. He never stops. And he asks a million questions a minute. He wants to know when Lindsay is coming back. I'd kind of like to know myself. What is going on?"

Brian took off his tie and sat down on the sofa next to Justin. He poured them each a glass of Champaign before he told Justin what was really happening with Lindsay.

"Brian, this could be permanent. What are we going to do? I can't stay home every day."

"It's okay. We'll get a nanny or something. I have Cynthia working on a finding a good nursery school for him. Thanks for staying with him today. He really loves you a lot. I don't think he even remembers who I am."

Justin smoothed Brian's hair with his hand as he sipped the Champaign. "This could be a good thing, I guess. I mean, someday maybe we could start a family. We'll need the practice."

"You're all the family I need." Brian dismissed the idea. "We'll get through this. I promise. Let's go to bed."

"I can't. I haven't done any of my homework. I was too busy drawing dinosaurs."

"You can't let a little kid rule your life. You're the adult now. You have to tell him what the rules are and make him listen."

"Brian, I can't be mean to Gus. He must be really confused and upset right now. He misses Lindsay already. And we don't know what he's been through in the last few months. It couldn't have been easy for him watching his mother fall apart and losing his home and his Mommy Mel. Don't be hard on him."

"You look exhausted. Can't you do your work tomorrow morning?" Brian massaged Justin's back.

"No. I have a test tomorrow, first class. You'll have to stay home with Gus."

"I'm taking the rest of the week off to take care of things with Gus. Tonight I'm going to help you with your homework."

"Yeah, right. I don't think I'll be able to concentrate on my books with your dick up my ass."

"Hey, I'm not all about sex. Remember the S.A.T.S. I was partially responsible for you getting into college. Now go get your stuff. I'm not going to bed without you."

Gus stared at Justin who had fallen asleep on the sofa. "Justin, wake up! Wake up! I made you coffee. JUSTIN!"

Justin awoke with a start. Gus was standing next to him with a cup in his hand. "What the . . .?" Brian opened his eyes and pulled himself out from under Justin's body.

"Gus, what is that?" Brian asked.

"Coffee. I made some for Justin. You want some, Daddy?" At that moment the cup tipped forward and the contents spilled all over Justin's face. Brian grabbed a towel from the kitchen counter and handed it to Justin. Thankfully, Gus had not thought to heat the water before adding the instant coffee crystals. Justin was covered with cold, brown, instant coffee sludge.

"Sorry." Gus said sheepishly.

"It's okay," Justin managed to say. "What are you doing out of bed, Gus? It's four o'clock in the morning."

"I made cereal. You want some?"

Justin looked up at Brian who was pacing the floor in front of him. "Justin, go to bed. You can get a few hours sleep before you have to go to school. I'll have a little talk with Gus."

Justin flashed a warning look at Brian. "Okay, but remember what we talked about."

"You want juice?" Gus offered Brian a sip from a crystal wine goblet which was overflowing with orange juice. A large salad bowl filled with Cornflakes and chunks of bananas sat on the table in front of the little boy.

"Gus, we have to get some things straight. You can't get out of bed and wander around in the middle of the night. And you have to stay out of the kitchen unless someone is around to help you."

"I can do it myself. Mommy lets me cook." Gus said defiantly.

Brian was rapidly losing patience with his rebellious son. "Well, your mommy isn't here. You have to do what Justin and I tell you to do. Now go to your room, get in your bed and go to sleep."

Gus threw the spoon he was holding on the floor and slid down from his chair. As he stomped away toward his bedroom Brian overheard him mutter. "Daddy is stoopid."

Brian cleaned up the mess that Gus had made and then sat down at the counter and contemplated what he could do to get back the perfect life that he and Justin had shared before the 'Gus' invasion.

The next morning Brian spent several hours on the telephone trying to find a suitable day care center for Gus. The problem was that most of the decent facilities in their area had a waiting list. Finally his assistant, Cynthia, called from the office with a lead on a school downtown near Justin's college. Brian arranged an afternoon meeting at the school and he and Gus took the subway there. The school was half way between the college and the office where Justin worked with his friend, Ken. Brian was satisfied that Gus would be well cared for and the fact that Justin was within walking distance was a plus. It was settled. Gus would start school on Monday morning.

The rest of the day Brian and Gus spent getting to know each other again. They went to the Central Park Zoo and then stopped at the market before going home. Brian was hopeful that the Gus was going to be okay.

Gus had been living at the penthouse for two week but he had been having trouble getting to sleep. He insisted that there were monsters in his closet. Brian and Justin took turns standing guard until Gus fell asleep.

"Have you heard from Lindsay?" Justin asked one night as he returned to their bed after Gus had fallen asleep.

"Nope."

"Do you think we ever will?"

"Maybe, when Gus gets married."

"I love Gus, but having a kid around full time is a lot of work. Between getting myself and Gus to school in the morning and then working and going to school all day I'm exhausted."

"We'll get some help. Cynthia has put an ad in the paper and the resumes are starting to come into my office fax. She'll sort them out and then we'll go over them."

"That will be one MORE person living in the house. Brian, when are we going to have some time alone?"

"We could put Gus up for adoption. Or maybe we could sell him." Brian kidded.

"Don't be stoopid." said Justin using Gus's favorite term.

"That must be four year old terminology for 'asshole.' He keeps calling me stoopid under his breath."

"He's trying to deal with the situation he's been thrown into. I wouldn't take it personally. I don't think you're stupid. I think you're HOT. Wanna fuck?"

"Fuck? What's that? Come over here and refresh my memory."

Ken studied the message pad that Gus had been scribbling on. Gus looked up at the man and giggled. He slid off the chair and ran over to the copy machine and started pushing buttons. "Ah . . . Justin, did you hire a new secretary without telling me? He's kind of young, but he does have nice penmanship."

Justin emerged from the file room. "Good morning, Ken. Meet Gus. He's my ah . . . he's my step son, I guess. That sounds so weird."

"Brian's kid. He's gotten so big since the last time he was here."

"Big and heavy. He made me carry him all the way from the subway stop. He said he was too little to walk with all the big trucks around."

"You've become quite the little mother. I thought he was in day care."

"Yeah, but there was a little problem today. He was having a hard time with one of the students and the teacher called. She said that Gus pushed the kid and boy fell. I tried to talk to him about it, but all he said was the boy called him stupid."

"Hey, Gus." Ken said. "You know that you're not stupid, don't you?"

"Gus is not stoopid. Gus is good." Gus handed a stack of paper he had taken out of the copy machine to Ken.

"Thanks, Gus. But I think that we need to make the copies before we take the paper out."

Gus was sitting at Justin's desk banging away on his computer keyboard. "Stop that Gus! These machines mess up on their own, they don't need your help."

"Why don't you call Brian to come and get him? We have a client meeting in an hour."

"I can't. Brian is away on business. Can you handle the meeting alone? I'll have to finish my project at home."

"Justin, you're much better with the clients than I am. You charm the pants off of everyone."

"I'm sorry, Ken. I just don't know what to do with Gus."

"Why don't you call a sitter?"

"I don't know any. And besides I don't want to leave him with just anyone."

Gus crawled up onto Justin's lap. He then put his arms around Justin's neck and gave him a big kiss on the cheek.
"Can we go to the zoo today?"

"Thanks Gus. But I'm on to you. Kissing up isn't going to get you anywhere. I'm going home to work and you are just going to have to watch cartoons and be quite for a little while."

"Justin. I don't want to interfere, but don't you think that Gus is Brian's problem?"

"Brian is pretty upset with the whole situation. He's already starting to lose his patience. And it looks like Gus may be staying longer then a few weeks."

"Well I have a solution for today. Why don't I take Gus to the Z-O-O and you take the client meeting? I haven't had a day out the office in months. And I have a doctor's appointment in your neighborhood this afternoon. You can pick him up at the park. What do you think?"

"Are you sure? He can be a handful."

"I think I can handle it. Leave your cell phone on and I'll give you a call if he sneaks off into the lion's cage."

Justin was happy to have the apartment to himself when he got home. After finishing his project he decided to phone his mother to fill her in. "One day at a time, that's how we're handling it, Mom. Having Gus around full time has given me more respect for my mother."

"Honey, I'll come up for a few days if you think it will help. It's pretty slow at the office and Molly is with your Dad."

"Thanks for the offer, but Brian will be home today. I just wish I knew what to do about Gus and his school. The teacher says that the other kids are giving him a hard time because he's new. I feel so bad for him, Mom. I can't imagine what's going on in his head. He must miss his mother, but he never even mentions her, or Melanie."

"It will take some time, but he'll adapt. Have you spoken to his pediatrician? Maybe he could make some suggestions?"

"I hadn't thought of that. We haven't even check out any doctors."

"Talk to the other parents in your building and see who they use. Don't take this all on yourself, sweetheart. I'm here for you any time."

"Thanks. I love you." Justin hung up the phone.

"You love who?" Brian asked as he came in the door.

"Brian! I'm so glad you're home." Justin hugged Brian tightly.

"You didn't answer my question. Who do you love?"

"You . . . and my mother."

"Where's Gus?" Brian asked between kisses. He had been away for two days and had only one thing on his mind."

"He's at the zoo with Ken. It's a long story."

"Tell it to me later. Let's fuck. NOW!"

"I can't Ken said to meet him at 3pm. He has a doctor's appointment uptown. I have to go pick up Gus. I can't be late."

Brian felt like someone had kicked him in the balls. "Fuck that! I need you!"

"I can't just leave Gus waiting for me in the park. Come with me."

"Has Lindsay called? Where the fuck is my cell phone?"

"Brian calm down. Let's go get Gus, he's probably tired and ready for a nap. We can spend some time together when he's asleep."

"You go and get him. I'll wait here. And don't take too long. I might start without you."

Justin returned to the apartment 45 minutes later with a sleeping Gus on his shoulder. He lay the little boy down in his bed and tucked him in along side of the stuffed elephant that Ken had bought for him.

Brian grabbed Justin's arm and pulled him into the bedroom. Two days was way too long to be apart. Justin straddled Brian and lowered himself down onto the man's already erect cock. It was over too fast and then it was time for round two. An hour later Brian was on top of Justin pumping his love juices into the boy's tight ass. Justin moaned with pleasure and Brian whispered 'I love you' as he came.

When Justin recovered he happened to notice that their bedroom door was open.

"Brian, did you close the door when we came into the bedroom?"

"Of course I did. He looked over and saw what Justin was talking about."

"Oh, shit!" Brian threw on his jeans and walked across the hall to check on Gus. He was in his bed with the covers pulled up to his neck.

"Brian, you don't think he saw us, do you?"

"I don't know. What if he did? Kids see their parents fucking all the time."

"Not their gay parents. Oh, man! We could be up on charges for something if Lindsay ever finds out."

"If she's so fucking concerned about her kid, then where is she?"

"Tomorrow I'll buy a lock for our bedroom door."

"No! No locks!" Brian insisted. "I can't stand closed doors, much less locked ones. I want to be free in my own home. He's just going to have to learn to stay where we put him."

"He's not a puppy, Brian."

"Okay. I'll think of something tomorrow."

Justin went into the office on Saturday to catch up on some work. The business was going well, but both he and Ken were artistic, creative types. . . not businessmen. It was becoming apparent that in order to keep their growing business from getting out of hand they were going to have to hire someone to help out with the mundane office duties such as billing clients. The peace and quite of the office was a refreshing change from the scene that he left at the apartment. Brian was trying to convince Gus that oatmeal was a good breakfast. But Gus had his own idea . . . hot dogs, like Ken bought at the zoo. Justin hoped that Brian would be able to keep his Irish temper in check while he played Mr. Mom today. Gus was getting a little out of hand, but Justin was convinced that acting out was his way of missing his mother.

When Justin arrived home at 4PM he heard a banging noise coming from their bedroom. He opened the door and saw Brian and a man dressed in overalls making holes in the ceiling with hammers. Brian jumped down from the ladder and greeted Justin with a big smile on his face.

"What are you doing?" Justin asked.

"I'm making us a loft. Come here." Brian led him across the room to where the holes were.

"Look up there." Brian showed Justin that the entire floor above their bedroom that had been used as a storage area. "All I have to do is cut out the ceiling and build a staircase. I'll make a balcony railing and voila . . . our very own private loft. There's enough room on the other side to put in a small bathroom and a workspace for you."

The man in the overalls jumped down and addressed Brian. "I'll come by tomorrow with an estimate. We can start work right away, if that's okay with you."

"Perfect! Thanks." Brian showed workman to the door and as Justin stood in the middle of the room staring up at the ceiling.

"What do you think?"

"I think we have a hole in our ceiling. Brian, why are you making us a loft?"

"I don't know how long Gus is going to be with us. We'll have to get someone to live-in so that it's not such a burden on you. I brought the resumes that came to the office home with me so we can get busy going over them. That will be another person living here 24-7. So I want us to have a place to be alone."

"You mean leave Gus alone. How is he going to feel when he sees that we don't want him around?"

"We can't let him run our lives. We'll take care of him, but we have to take care of us, too. We need to set up some rules."

"I don't know, Brian. I think that Gus is feeling the separation from Lindsay a lot more than he lets on. Did you notice that he doesn't even ask about her anymore? He's pushing away the pain by denying he's that he's hurt. Does that sound like anyone we know?"

"What do you suggest we do? Let him have his way every time he cries? Kids need to have rules. I don't want him to grow up thinking that we don't care what the fuck he does."

"Just remember, Brian. He's only four years old. We're all he's got right now so we better not screw up."

Justin vacuumed up the dust from the hammering and looked up at the ceiling one more time before he got into bed. "I've been thinking about your idea, it's not so bad. It will be nice to have our bed on another floor. And thanks for thinking about a work place for me. It is tough working here with Gus right under foot. I dread the thought of having a live in nanny. Where do you find the right person for that?"

"Other people do it. We'll start looking at the resumes tomorrow."

"It's got to be someone that Gus is comfortable with. That's the most important thing."

Brian turned on his side and pushed Justin down gently onto the bed. He kissed him slowly and then climbed on top. They kissed for a long time before Brian went to reach for a condom. When he turned toward the night stand he saw a pair of four year old eyes staring at him.

"Gus!" Brian quickly covered Justin with the blanket and reached for the underwear he had kicked to the bottom on the bed. "What are you doing out of bed? We talked about this remember? You can't wander around the apartment at night."

Gus ignored his father and spoke directly to Justin. In a whimpering voice he said, "Justin, there's a monster in my bed. I'm scared. Can I sleep with you?" Without waiting for an answer Gus climbed up onto the bed and slid under the covers. Justin struggled to get into his underwear as Gus rested his head on Justin's chest. Brian flopped back down on the bed and looked over at Justin. He realized that Gus had won this round. He turned his back to them and went to sleep.

Both Brian and Gus were in foul moods the next morning. Gus insisted on making his own snack which consisted of half a jar of peanut butter and one piece of bread. As he attempted to stuff it into the plastic sandwich bag it fell face down onto the floor.

"Gus!" Brian ordered. "Sit down at the table and eat your breakfast. I'll make your snack."

"NO!" Gus yelled at his father. He had been kneeling on a chair next to the counter. Brian scooped him up and roughly placed him at the kitchen table.

Gus took the bowl of cereal in front of him and threw it on the floor.

"Okay, Sonny boy," Brian said sternly. "Now you can go to school without your breakfast."

Gus opened his mouth and began to wail. He took deep gasping breaths and continued to cry as he slid down from the chair and ran into the hallway.

"What happened Gus?" asked Justin, who was in the middle of shaving when he heard the commotion.

"Daddy's stoopid. I hate Daddy. I don't wanna go to school." He continued to cry his way down the hall and into his room.

Brian tried to ignore Gus's behavior as he cleaned up the mess on the kitchen floor.

"You didn't hit him, did you?"

Brian glared at Justin. "Of course I didn't hit him, although he came this close to becoming another victim of that Kinney family curse. I'm going to be late. He says he's not going to school."

"Brian, I can't stay home with him."

"Well, someone is encouraging him to be a spoiled brat. That's what happens when kids don't have rules. They end up ruling you. Drag his screaming ass to school, sell him to the gypsies. I don't care how you handle it! I'm going to work!"

Gus stood whimpering in the hallway as Brian slammed the door.

"Come here, Gus." Justin kneeled down on the floor and put his arms around the boy. "Daddy didn't mean to yell at us."

"I don't like school. The kids are mean."

"It's just because they don't know you. They don't know what a great kid you are. How about I go to school and stay there with you? If the kids are mean to you, we'll tell them off and leave, okay."

"Yeah." Gus agreed.

Justin and Gus got off the subway and walked to the school. Gus sat on the floor and watched to make sure that Justin wasn't going to leave. Justin spoke to the teacher for a few minutes and then joined Gus on the floor.

"Is that your daddy?" A little boy asked Gus.

"No. He's my Justin." Gus answered. The little boy laughed and Gus smiled.

The teacher announced that it was time to draw. Everyone went to their cubby and got crayons. Justin took a pencil out of his backpack and began to draw a picture of the boy who had asked Gus who he was. The kid was delighted with the finished product. Justin drew pictures for all the kids in the class. Gus sat next to him beaming with pride. When drawing time was finished Justin asked Gus if he wanted to stay. The little boy at the table said. "Stay, Gus. Show me your picture."

"Okay. Bye, Justin." Gus said nonchalantly. He had a feeling that no one was going to be mean to him today.

Instead of going to class Justin got on the subway and headed uptown. It was almost noon and Brian was not in his office.

"He's downstairs in a meeting. It's just a production meeting, nothing important. Do you want me to buzz him?"

"Yeah, ask him if he wants me to stay?" Justin sat on a chair near Cynthia's office. A few minutes later Brian came storming down the hall. He grabbed Justin by the arm and pulled him into his office. Before he closed the door he yelled to Cynthia. "I'm at lunch, if anyone calls." Once they were inside Brian pulled Justin closed and hugged him so hard Justin had to beg for air.

"I'm sorry I lost my temper." Brian said softly. "I tried to call you all morning, but your phone was turned off. I thought you'd left me and took a bus back to Pittsburgh. Where were you?"

"Nursery school." Justin explained. "They don't allow us to have cell phones in class. I took Gus to school and stayed with him. After I drew pictures of the kids they decided that Gus was okay. So he let me leave."

"It's a good thing Gus has you around. His father's just stoopid."

"I don't think you are. We're trying to deal with something that neither of us knows anything about. We need help, Brian. A man needs to know when to ask for help, remember?"

"You mean a shrink for Gus."

"I mean some kind of counseling for all of us. They have schools for everything, there must be a place where you can learn to be a good parent. It's too important a job to fuck up."

"What will we do until we find a place?" Brian asked. "I don't want this to get out of control."

"I think what we should do is stick together. We have to make sure that Gus knows that we agree. We'll have a talk with him and work out the rules."

"He's not gonna like that."

"Tough! Like you said, we need to show him that we care what he does. Just, not so loudly."

"That sounds like a plan."

"What are you doing for lunch?"

"You." Brian pulled him down on the couch.

Justin picked Gus up from school and found Brian in the kitchen when they returned to the apartment. "You're home early." Justin kissed Brian on the cheek.

"Hi, Gus." Brian greeted his son. "Come over here." Gus walked in slow motion to his father's side. "I want to apologize for yelling at you this morning. I don't want to yell at you any more so we have to talk about some things, okay?"

"Yeah. Okay."

"I want to talk to Justin for a minute. Go to your room and we'll be right there." Gus obeyed and Brian turned his attention to Justin. "I finally got a number for Lindsay. She's at a nuthouse somewhere on Long Island. She said she's still depressed. So I guess we're on our own."

"Did she even ask about, Gus?"

"I told her that he wanted to talk to her. She agreed to a phone call."

"So far, so good. One step at a time. Did you make a list?"

"Here, what do you think?"

Justin glanced at the paper. "Good. It's a start. Let's do it."

Gus sat on his bed with his back against the wall and his arms clasped firmly across his chest. He had a curious look on his expressive face.

Brian and Justin came in and sat on the bed facing him. "Gus, it looks like you're going to be stay with us for a while. I talked to Mommy today and she's feeling better. She wants to talk to you on the telephone later. Is that okay with you?"

"Is she coming to live here, too?"

"No. She's not ALL better, yet. But she misses you. That's why she wants to talk. We know that it's hard for you, getting used to a new place. But since we're all going to be living there together Justin and I made up some rules."

"Rules?" Gus lifted an eyebrow and rolled his tongue against his cheek.

"Yes, rules. That way there won't be anymore scenes like we had this morning. So just listen to us, okay?"

Gus nodded his head once.

"First rule. Everyone has a job in this house. Daddy goes to work everyday. Justin goes to work and to school everyday. Those are our jobs. We need to earn money so we can have a nice home and take care of each other. You're job will be to go to nursery school. You have to go unless you're sick. If you're having a problem with the kids, you tell us about and we'll fix it."

"My Justin fixed it. I'll go to school."

"That was easy." Brian shrugged his shoulders and continued. "Rule number two: Everyone has their own place to sleep. We get into our own beds at night. No more roaming around or sleeping in other people's beds. Got it?"

"You sleep in the car bed and I'll sleep in Justin's bed." Gus squeezed his arms tighter across his chest and glared at Brian.

"No, that's not right. My place is in the bed with Justin."

"No, Gus sleeps with Justin 'Cause Daddy is stoopid."

Justin chimed in. "Gus why do you keep saying Daddy is stupid? What did he do to make you so mad?"

"Yeah, what did I do?" Brian asked.

"You squished Justin!" Gus yelled. He flung his little body down on his pillow and hugged it hard as he wildly gyrated his body up and down. "You hurt him and Justin was crying." Gus sat up, still hugging the pillow, he imitated Justin's moans. "And you yelled at Justin today. Daddy is very mean to my Justin."

Brian realized that Gus had been watching them the night he found the door open. "Gus, I would never hurt Justin." Brian looked over at Justin who had fallen onto the floor doubled over with laughter. "Tell him, Justin!" Brian kicked him with his foot. "Get up here and tell him!"

Justin got control of himself and sat back down on the bed. He took Brian's hand and kissed it. "Gus, Daddy doesn't hurt me. He loves me. . . and I love him. So, we can yell at each other and not be mean. It's been different for us, having you around. I love being with you, Gus. We have fun drawing and watching cartoons. And Daddy loves to be with you too. But sometimes Daddy and I want to be together. Sometimes we need to be private. When you're playing with your friends, you really don't want us hanging around, do you?"

"Yes I do. Justin is fun at school." Gus smiled.

"But would you want me there every day? Supposed someone asks you to play, are you going to tell them you have to bring your Justin with you? They'll think you're a baby."

"I'm not a baby."

"Of course not. You can have some private time too."

"Okay."

"Back to Rule number two: "No more getting out of bed at night. If you need us to help you with the monsters you can call us on the intercom and one of us will come and help you. No more getting in our bed!" Brian repeated. "That's an important rule."

"Rule number three: . . ."

"Gus wants rules, too." Gus interrupted. "I hate car beds and I hate trucks. They bring monsters in my room. I want dinosaurs. Dinosaurs eat monsters."

"Really?" Justin asked. "They do?"

"They're way bigger than monsters and they have big teeth. And I want a real big boy bed and a telephone so I can talk to Mommy."

"If we get you a new bed and a phone then you'll stay in your own room at night?" Brian asked.

"Yes, and talk to Mommy."

"Let me talk to Justin a minute." Brian took Justin's arm and led him out of the room. In the hall he asked. "What do you think?"

"I think we're making progress. I had no idea that the trucks and cars bothered him so much. He gets scared sometimes when we walk to school. Dinosaurs are a good idea. Nice job, Dad. Wanna squish me?"

"Always. Let me cement the deal with the kid and we'll cross our fingers that it'll work."

Justin went to make dinner and Brian rejoined Gus on the bed. "You've got a deal, Gus. One big boy bed and a telephone. And no getting out of bed."

"You forgot dinosaurs."

"That's Justin's department. He can help you pick out some wall paper or something."

"Can I talk to Mommy now?"

"In a minute, Gus. I want to tell you something important. I want you to remember this even when you're older. You can always tell me if something is bothering you. I mean anything at all. I won't ever get mad. I don't want you to be afraid to talk to me. Because I'm your father and I love you."

"Ah-huh. You love Justin, too."

"That's right."

"Okay Daddy. I love you, too."

The work had been completed on their new loft overlooking the downstairs bedroom. The rules they had established had accomplished their goals. Gus had adjusted to the arrangement and was happy in his new dinosaur room. "What do you want to do with our old bedroom?" Brian asked.

"Don't worry. I have big plans for that room." Justin grinned slyly.

"What? A disco ball and dance floor?"

"Something like that. I love it up here, Brian. It's so warm and comfy. Makes me want to curl up in your arms and go to sleep."

"Fuck that. I didn't spend all this money on a loft so you can sleep. We're going to spend the night privately fucking."

"Nope. No fucking up here. Up here we make love."

"Oh, really? Then where are we going to fuck?"

"I have big plans for that too."

"I can hardly wait."

"I'm going to miss you, Brian." Justin said. Brian was about to leave for a three city business trip. "A week is such a long, long time."

"Yeah, I'll miss you, too. Are you sure you're okay alone with Gus? Lindsay was talking about visiting him. Maybe she can come this week."

"It's okay, Brian. I'll ask her if she wants to come for a visit. If she doesn't, then Gus and I will manage."

"You're really wonderful with him. You'd make a great Dad. You're a natural."

"I don't think I need that. Gus is enough."

"Not for me. Someday I want a little blond miniature YOU running our lives."

"Really. You think maybe someday you'd want another kid?"

"Why not. We're getting this parent stuff down pretty good."

"Not for a long time. . . but maybe someday . . ."

"I don't know how you do it sometimes. You really have connected with Gus on a level that I never could."

"That's because when I look at him I don't see a baby. I see a little miniature you before you got so fucked up by life."

"I love you, Justin Taylor."

"I know."

The day after Brian left on his trip, Gus became cranky. Justin did everything he could to comfort the boy, but Gus just wanted to mope around and watch T.V. in his room. At first Justin thought he might be reacting to Brian's absence. But by late afternoon Justin became concerned. He took the boys temperature and found it was very high. He phoned the doctor and got an answering service. They took a message and told him that the doctor would get back to him. He put Gus in his bed, gave him a baby aspirin and got a cold compress for his forehead. By the time the doctor called back and Justin described the symptoms the doctor told him that he would meet at the emergency room. Justin bundled up Gus and took him to the hospital in a cab. At the hospital they asked for the insurance information. He wasn't sure if Brian or Lindsay covered Gus. Then the woman at the desk asked if he was Gus's father. When he told her that he wasn't she said that he should have one of Gus's parents fax a letter allowing them to treat Gus.

Justin wondered if Brian was considered Gus's legal parent, since he had signed his rights over to Melanie. He decided to phone all three parents and let them work it out. Mel faxed the letter and told Justin that she would be flying to New York tonight. Lindsay also would come to New York. Brian was the first to arrive at the hospital.

"I hope I didn't worry everyone for nothing. The doctor said it could be serious. Gus has strep and he was dehydrated. They needed to give him an I.V."

"You did the right thing. Where is he now?"

"In that room over there. They told me to wait out here because I'm not his father."

Brian was about to barge into the room when Mel and Lindsay came down the hall.

"Where is he? Justin is he okay?"

Justin filled them in on what was happening. To Justin's surprise neither Mel nor Lindsay asked to see Gus. They took their emotions out on Brian and each other while Justin stood by in disbelief. Lindsay and Mel attacked Brian for leaving town while Gus was sick. Mel accused Lindsay of being a bad mother. Brian told them both to go the fuck back to Pittsburgh and leave his son alone.

"I'm taking him home with me tonight." Lindsay announced.

"Like hell you are." Brian responded. "What gives you the right to call yourself a mother? You fucking abandoned him on my doorstep months ago without looking back."

"He's not yours!" Melanie chimed in. "You have no legal right to him, Brian!"

"I don't care what it was I signed. Gus will always be my son? I'll hire a team of Park Avenue lawyers to make sure Gus never sees either of you ever again."

Justin couldn't take anymore. "Listen to yourselves!" He demanded. "Doesn't anyone even care about what Gus wants? Lindsay, you never bother to come visit him. We always have to call you. He sits by that telephone in his room every night waiting for it to ring. I have to dial your number and pretend the phone rang. And, Mel, you haven't even called Gus since day one. He may not even remember who the fuck you are. Brian, are you really planning on dragging this through the courts? If anyone ever saw the three of you here tonight they would put him in a foster home. Which is where he just may end up if you don't all grow up and start acting like parents."

The nurse came out into the hall and approached them. "I'm Gus's father." Brian told her.

"I'm his mother." Lindsay said.

"He's much better. You can take him home once the I.V. is finished. Gus is asking for his Justin. Is that it?" She indicated the stuffed elephant in Justin's hand.

"I'm his Justin." She smiled and led Justin into the room.

When Gus was ready to leave the hospital they decided they would all go back to the penthouse to talk. In the end it was Gus that decided to go home with his Mommy Lindsay. Brian tried to pretend to be okay with it, but Justin could tell that he was devastated. Mel had given up and left for home. Lindsay told Brian that she would be willing to move somewhere closer than Pittsburgh so he could see his son more often. They left the next morning. Gus had almost recovered from his ordeal. He made Justin promise not to bring back the cars and trucks and to make sure to take care of the dinosaurs. He gave Brian a big hug and said. "I love you Daddy."

"I love you too Gus."

Justin called Gus every afternoon after school. Lindsay came on the phone and asked about Brian. "Brian's having a hard time with it." Justin said honestly. "Every time I look at him he's got one of Gus's toys in his hand. When I ask him about it he says he found it on the floor and he was putting it away. He really misses him."

"Gus misses him, too. He misses you both."

"In a way I'm glad that Brian decided to finish his business trip. It will take his mind off Gus for a few days."

"Tell Brian I'll call him to work something out that will be fair to everyone. Justin, you've been wonderful to Gus. He loves you so much."

"I love him, too. Give him a kiss for me."

Brian came into the room and put down his suitcase.

"Hey, your back! How was Atlanta?"

"All right. Who was on the phone?"

"Lindsay? She said she'll call you soon to work something out. She wants to be fair to everyone. I think we'll get to see Gus a lot more than we did before. She's moving to New Jersey. She got a teaching job."

"Is Gus okay? How's his throat?"

"He's fine. If you want to talk to him all you have to do is call."

"I know. I will later. I want to kiss you hello first."

"Wait!" Justin put his hand over Brian's mouth. "I have a surprise!"

Justin covered Brian's eyes and led him down the hallway to their bedroom. He opened the door and let Brian see what he had done to their former bedroom. The room was bathed in the soft glow of the blue neon lights. Justin had bought an overstuffed couch and chair and several large pillows for the floor. He had planted a collection of sex toys and erotic paraphernalia around the room. "Oh, my God! It's Sodom and Gomorrah. Where did you get all this stuff?" Brian surveyed the collection of dildos and gay porn tapes. He noticed that Justin had mounted a video camera on a shelf facing the couch. A brand new plasma T.V. monitor was plastered to the wall.

"What's that for?"

"That's my new hobby. We're going to make our own porn movies."

"Oh, no we're not!"

Justin slid down onto the couch and pushed play on the video tape. He had recorded himself masturbating while he spoke on the phone with Brian the night before. Brian watched in amazement.

"What do you think?" Justin flashed his sunshine grin at Brian.

"It's like having our very own backroom . . . without the stench." He gabbed Justin around the waist. "My own little decorating genius."

"I wrote a script. I'm cabana boy and you're the horny pirate."

"Fuck that. I don't need a script. Turn that sucker on and I'll ad-lib a classic."

COMING HOME TO YOU -- Part VI

Follow Your Dream

Brian and Michael sat in their favorite booth at the Liberty Avenue Diner eating the burgers and fries they had ordered. "So Novotny, where have you been? You promised to come back to New York to try the clubs out and that was over a year ago."

"I know, Brian. I've been busy. I had a great Christmas season at the store. I think that I may be expanding to add video games and maybe some other toys. People seem to like the idea of shopping in a small store rather than at the mall."

"I'm glad things are working out for you. What about your love life? Have you heard from Ben?"

"Not a word. I guess I'm destined to be the old maid of the group. Who would have guess that you, of all people, would have the most successful relationship. How is Justin, anyway?"

"He's great. He let his hair grow outrageously long -- I guess it's the artist in him -- and it's a real turn on for me."

"How do you do it? How can you, of all people, be so satisfied with only one man in your life?"

Brian grinned, "Justin doesn't let me get bored. He invents hot new ways of having sex together all the time. Last Friday night, when I got home, I found a blond Elvis in my bed."

"I don't get it, Brian. I was always the one who wanted to settle down with one guy. What the fuck am I doing wrong?"

"Since you asked I'll give you my opinion. You're getting older Michael and so are the guys you're attracted to are... much older. You're going about it all wrong. Why do you still need a father figure, haven't you had enough? If you want to remain young and beautiful, you need to find someone younger and more beautiful than yourself."

"I'm not sure I'm up to it, if you know what I mean?"

"Prescription drugs anybody?"

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

"And what you really need, Mikey, is a make over -- that boy-next door appeal is so over. Why don't you come to New York with me? We'll book a day at one of the high priced SPA, and then go shopping for new party clothes. Consider it my birthday gift to you."

"You just want to get back to New York to be with Justin."

"I don't like to leave him alone for too long. You never know what kind of trouble that boy can get himself into in two days?"

"Justin is still a boy, isn't he?"

"You see what I mean. I have to think young and look young in order to keep up with him. Justin is the reason I still look twenty-eight."

"Leave it to you to find a fountain of youth standing under a street lamp on Liberty Avenue."

"It's not all fun and games, you know. It's really hard work to stay on top of things."

"You mean he still lets you get on top."

Brian grinned and said, "Top, bottom and everything in between. Our sex life gets better every day."

"Okay, you talked me into it. But, no funny colored stripes in my hair again. The last time I did that it took forever to grow out. I looked like a skunk."

"Whatever works, Mikey."

Michael listened as the moans from the master bedroom got louder and more urgent. There was no point in sticking around to wait for Brian and Justin to finish. They had gone into the bedroom after dinner and from experience Michael knew that they would not emerge again until morning. When Justin had first come into their lives Michael

resented every moment that Brian spent with the kid. Michael had been jealous that this persistent little pest had been able to do the impossible... capture Brian Kinney's heart. Since he was fourteen years old Michael had fantasized that he and Brian would someday fall in love and marry. Looking back at his life, Michael realized what a mistake that would have been. They would have wound up resenting each other and then the unthinkable would have happened; their friendship would have ended. It was his friendship with Brian that Michael valued above any other relationship in his life. Brian was truly happy with Justin and that was good enough for Michael. He had come to love Justin as a part of his extended family.

The weekend did start off with a make over and a shopping trip, as Brian had promised. Michael looked in the mirror as he put on the Brooks Brothers long wool coat which his friend had bought him. He had to admit the coat and the new hair style made him look damn good -- so more sophisticated. The problem was he didn't feel sophisticated, he felt like Darth Vader.

It was chilly and Michael was thankful for his new coat as he walked down Sixth Avenue. He'd had high hopes for the weekend visit. On Saturday night he had a date with a school friend of Justin's. The four of them went to dinner at a fancy Italian Restaurant downtown. The boy was bright, beautiful and on the way to being a successful artist, but Michael felt out of place and uncomfortable. New York City was a fun place for people like Brian and Justin, but Michael felt he would always belong in Pittsburgh. No fancy haircut... no fancy wool coat... nothing was going to change that.

As Michael walked the city aimlessly pondering his lonely fate he heard a voice call out to him from the darkness.

"I'm taking up a collection to kill my parents!" A young man sitting on a park bench under a street lamp grinned up at Michael.

"What?"

"Ahhh... UNICEF? "

Michael laughed out loud at the response and was rewarded with a brilliantly charming smile from the boy.

"Can't make up your mind?" Michael joked.

There was something in the way that the kid looked at him that made Michael feel good. The boy was about Justin's age and had the most expressive hazel eyes, which momentarily mesmerized Michael.

Michael decided that there was nothing to fear from the kid. He did not look high or anything, just cold and hungry.

"You wanna get something to eat? I hate eating alone."

They ran across the street together and entered a diner.

"What's your name?" Michael asked.

"Billy... William... Will. My name is Will. What's yours?"

"You really do have a problem making up your mind? You're worse than me. I'm Michael, pleased to meet you." Michael extended his hand across the table and Will shook it.

"My parents called me Billy because my dad's name is William. At least they used to call me that before they threw me out. I always hated being called Billy, it sounds so... juvenile -- William is too formal. Will, suits me."

Will went on to tell the story of how his parent had thrown him out of the house when they caught him in bed with a male friend of his fathers. With no means of support, Will had to drop out of college and attempt living arrangements with friends. He had been on his own for three years. Work was hard to find for a homeless boy in New York City.

"Three years is a long time to be without a family. I don't know what I'd do without my Mom and Uncle Vic. Don't you have any friends that you could stay with?"

"Not any more. They all graduated and moved on with their lives. It's hard to keep in touch when you live on a park bench."

"Your friends couldn't have cared very much about you. If one of my friends were homeless, I'd try to help him."

"That's because you're a nice man. What kind of work do you do, Michael?"

Michael smiled, "I own a comic book store back in Pittsburgh. I've been into comic books since I was a kid. A couple of years ago I decided to follow my dream. So far, it's paid the bills."

"I admire that. Most people just work for a living. It must be awesome going to work every day and doing something that you love. I bet it's not like work at all."

"Oh, it's work. But at least I am my own boss. What's your dream, Will?"

Will became quiet and stared out the window for a moment before answering, "It's been so long since I've thought about it. Mostly I get by day to day. It scares me to think about the future. But I seem to remember that in high school I had decided that I wanted to become an actor, or maybe a writer."

"You could still do that, you know. You're still young and handsome."

"How could I possibly hope to do anything like that? I have no education, no home, no family and no friends."

"Well you have a friend now. I may not be smart or rich or anything, but I know for sure that I'm good at being a friend. And friends look out for each other."

It had started to rain and Michael saw the look of dread on Will's face as he gazed out into the cold, windy darkness, probably wondering where he would be sleeping tonight.

"Hey, it's pretty nasty out there. I don't know the city very well and the subway scares the crap out of me. Do you think you could lead the way back to my friends' neighborhood? They have plenty of room and I'm sure they wouldn't mind if you spent the night."

The look of relief on Will's face gave Michael a warm feeling. In fact everything about this kid made Michael feel different. For the first time in his life Michael felt like someone needed him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Will look up at him as Michael paid the bill at the register. It reminded Michael of how Justin used to look up to Brian. Michael finally realized what Brian had meant: having someone to look after made Michael feel like a man.

Michael led Will to the bathroom near the guest room. They had gotten soaked on their trip up town. It was a cold and nasty night, and Will was shivering. Michael went to see if he could borrow some dry clothes from Justin: he gently knocked on Brian and Justin's bedroom door. There was no answer; no noise came from behind the door so Michael slowly opened it and went inside.

"Holy shit!" Michael whispered under his breath when he saw the room. He had not been inside of Brian and Justin's lair since his last visit. Apparently they had made some changes. As Michael's eyes adjusted to the semi-darkness he

felt for the wall and made his way across the room. He found a light switch and turned on the blue neon lights. The blue lights still adorned the wall, but the bed was gone. Michael came to the conclusion that they had worn the bed out from fucking and now slept on the floor, covered with overstuffed pillows. In the corner he spotted a familiar looking square wooden box. Upon taking a closer look he realized that it was the toy box which had been in his room at his mother's house. It still had the word TOYS painted on the front in blue letters. The only difference was the combination lock on the front of the box. There were lava lights, candles and other mood creating paraphernalia arranged about the room. It looked like a porn movie set or the backroom at Babylon. One wall was adorned with a flat screen plasma T.V, and a collection of gay porn movies and other unmarked tapes were stacked on a table next to the sofa.

Michael was in awe of the hedonistic atmosphere that had been created in the room which had once been Brian and Justin's ordinary bedroom. This set up was positively amazing. Michael suddenly remembered the reason for which he was here in the first place: to ask Justin for something that Will could wear once he got out of the shower. Michael spotted a narrow spiral staircase in the corner of the room. He looked up and saw that the staircase led to a balcony. Slowly and cautiously Michael climbed the staircase. He almost expected to find a movie crew filming a "Brian and Justin Do New York" porn movie. What he found was a loving couple asleep in each other's arms in their perfectly normal bed. He approached Justin's side of the bed, fearing the repercussions if Brian Kinney ever woke up and found him spying on them.

"Justin?" Michael whispered. "Sorry to wake you. I need to borrow some of your clothes."

"What?" Justin muttered, still half asleep.

"I need some clothes. I brought someone home with me and his clothes are wet. Do you have something he can sleep in?"

Justin propped himself up on one elbow and pointed toward the downstairs room. "Downstairs. The door next to the bathroom, our closet, left side is my stuff. Take what you need."

"Thanks."

Michael heard Brian stir as Justin flopped back down on the bed. Before he mounted the staircase he heard them kissing. As quickly as he dared, Michael descended the staircase. In the closet Michael found what he needed. The bathroom door was still closed, but not locked. He put the clothes on the counter by the sink and went back out into the hall.

Michael opened the door to the guest room he had occupied the night before. He quickly gathered his belongings and moved them into another room. The reason for the move was because the other room was furnished with twin beds rather than a double bed. The last thing that Michael wanted to do was scare the boy off. Michael slipped into one of the beds and pulled the covers up. After leaving the diner Michael and Will had walked to the subway and rode the train uptown. Michael had talked to Will about Pittsburgh and his friends back home. Will had become very quiet and Michael assumed that he was nervous about going home with a complete stranger.

Once they got inside the apartment Will asked if he could take a shower. Michael had gotten him a towel and showed him where the bathroom was. The boy looked tired and glad to be out of the rain. The poor kid walked with a limp because of a sore on his foot. He said that he'd had it a few weeks and it had gotten worse when the rain had started earlier in the week. It was obvious to Michael that the kid was in a lot of pain. In the morning he would ask Justin for the name of their doctor.

Will came into the room carrying his wet clothing. Michael told him to leave them on the floor and they could wash them in the morning. Justin's sweat pants covered the boy's legs and hung over his feet. Michael noticed that he could see Will's ribs through the light material of the borrowed T-shirt.

"Let me see your foot," Michael said as he sat up on the side of the bed.

Will pulled up the pant leg and showed Michael the sore. Michael gasped, "That must be really painful. I'm sorry I made you walk from the subway. We should have taken a cab."

"I'm kinda used to the pain. I've had this for while. It mostly hurts at night when I try to sleep."

"Tomorrow I'll take you to a doctor."

"I don't have money for a doctor, Michael," Will protested.

"You don't need to worry about it."

There was a silent pause and rustling under the sheets as Will rolled over to face Michael's bed.

"Michael," Will said in a low whisper. "Are you going to sleep all the way over in that bed?"

"Um... what?"

"I thought you wanted to..." Will uttered, "Most guys expect me to..."

"That's not why I brought you here."

"You don't like me? I gross you out, right? You don't know where I've been. Is that it?"

"No. Why would you think a thing like that? I do like you. That's why I brought you here... but I don't expect anything in return. That's not the way I am."

Silence.

"Okay," Will said, "I understand. I'm sorry I said what I did... sorry I assumed... it's just that I'm not used to..."

"I know... the kindness of strangers..."

"That's from a movie isn't it?
Tennessee Williams?"

"Oh yeah, I guess it is. Say... sounds like you've taken Gay Culture 101 too."

They both laughed.

"Get some sleep, Will. We'll talk more in the morning."

"Michael, can I get into bed with you? Not to do anything. Just hold me. It's been so long since someone just held me... no sex. I just want... someone close to me."

Michael hesitated, and then slowly pulled up the covers inviting Will to get into the bed with him. Careful not to put pressure on the boy's sore foot, Michael slide over to one side as Will got into the small bed next to him. He wrapped his arms around the boy who cuddled close and rested his head on Michael's chest. The boy fell asleep instantly. Michael caressed Will's hair and gently kisses the top of his head. In his entire life, no one had ever looked to Michael as a protector. Maybe fate delivered this boy to him to show him that HE, Michael Novotny, could make a difference in someone's life. That he could find love with a younger man who needed HIM.

Michael fought sleep and allowed his mind to wander. Was this feeling of compassion what fueled Brian Kinney's attraction to the beautiful blond boy who had become his partner? Michael remembered the pain on Brian's face the night Justin had almost been killed. To this day Michael didn't believe that Brian had ever gotten over the trauma. He had watched helplessly as the young man who had depended on him was beaten over the head with a bat right before his eyes. 'There was nothing I could do.' Brian repeated the phrase over and over as they waited in the

hospital corridor for news of Justin's condition. Michael believed at the time that Brian felt guilty for causing the bashing. It was deeper than that. Justin wouldn't have blamed Brian for showing up and dancing with him at his prom. What Brian feared most was losing Justin's trust. He had failed in his duty to protect the boy. Justin had chosen Brian to be his protector. Brian would never acknowledge the fact, but in his heart he'd felt proud. It was the first time that Brian had allowed himself to feel like a man. It was an awesome responsibility.

Finally Michael fell asleep lulled by Will's steady breathing and the warmth of the boy's body on his.

Brian heard the dryer going in the laundry room as he passed it. He thought it was odd that Justin would be doing wash at this hour of the morning. Then he remembered that Michael had spent the night. He rapped on the bathroom door. "Hey, Mikey, what happened. Did you have a wet dream and mess up our sheets?" He heard the shower running and assumed his friend had not heard him. Brian walked into the great room and found a young man sitting at the kitchen counter. He was wearing Justin's sweat pants and T-shirt.

"Who the fuck are you?" Brian asked.

"Will. I'm a friend of Michael's. He asked me to spend the night. I hope that's okay. We got stuck in the rain last night and Michael is drying our clothes. That's why I'm wearing your stuff."

"It's not my stuff. What was your name again?"

"Will -- pleased to meet you," he extended his hand to Brian who ignored him and walked behind the counter to get his breakfast.

"Good morning, Brian," Michael had showered and was drying his hair with a towel, "Did you meet Will?"

"Yeah, I think so. Not much of a name, though. It's only like one syllable. I think there must be more to this story, but I don't have time to listen. I have got to go to work. Michael, are you going to leave today? I can't drive you to the airport, but maybe Justin can."

"No. I'm not leaving," Michael stated. He looked over at Will who had finished his coffee. Will looked up and smiled at him melting Michael's heart.

"I think I heard the dryer stop," Will said, "I'll get my stuff." He limped off toward the laundry room.

"Brian, why are you being so rude to the kid?"

"Where did you find him, adopt-a-trick? Get him out of here Michael; you don't know where he's been."

"Fuck you Brian! He's a sweet kid who's had some tough breaks. I seem to remember playing nurse maid to your adopt-a-trick plenty of times. You even dumped him in my old room, with my own mother, in case you forgot."

"Michael, you're not comparing your one night stand to my Justin?"

"Look, I think he may be sick."

"Big surprise. Don't bother washing the sheets: I'll burn them."

"I'm going to take him to a clinic or something. I'm sure he has an infection. He's just a kid, Brian. He has nobody to help him. He could die if he doesn't take care of it. Just tell me the name of a doctor or a clinic I can take him too. And can I borrow some money? I'll pay you back as soon as I get home."

Brian took out his wallet and gave Michael some fifties. "Here, take him to a vet and get him a tick bath. And Michael, while you're at it, get him tested."

Michael took the money and put it in his pants pocket. He didn't understand his friend's behavior. It wasn't like Brian to make judgments about people based on their appearance. He usually waited until he got to know them before he displayed his disdain.

Justin appeared in the hallway as Brian was leaving for work. They kissed passionately before Brian left. From experience Michael knew that they had probably had sex twice already that day; first in bed and then whilst showering. Michael wondered where they got the energy.

Will followed Justin into the great room carrying a neatly folded stack of wash.

"I'm ready to go," Will announced.

Michael took the clothes from Will and sat him down in a chair. "You're not going anywhere. I'm going to take you to a doctor."

"Hi," Justin said, "I'm Justin."

"This is Will. We met last night. He's having a problem with his foot and I think he should see a doctor. What's the best place to take him?"

"I'll give you the name our doctor. He's really nice and his office is in the building."

"How much does he charge?" Will asked.

"Never mind," Michael interjected, "What's his number? I'll give him a call."

Justin wrote the number down and handed it to Michael, who promptly went into the bedroom to phone the doctor.

"Tell him you're a friend of ours from out of town," Justin called out, "Perhaps he can take you right away." Justin walked over and shook hands with Will, "Sorry you're not feeling well. I hate it when I have a problem with my feet. It really slows you down. What happened?"

"I think it's a sore that got infected."

"That can be serious. Lucky for you, you met Michael."

"Yeah... he's a really sweet guy. Do you know if he has a boyfriend?"

"Michael?" Justin smiled knowingly, "Not anymore, why?"

"I just wondered... do you know how old he is?"

"He's thirty-four. Michael is six month older than Brian."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-one."

"Wow, that's a big age difference. Between you and your ah... 'boyfriend'?"

"Husband. We got married in Vermont last year, in June. He's twelve years older than me."

"He's nice looking but he's kinda rude," Will quietly stated, making Justin softly laugh.

"He's not a morning person. He's very sweet, really," Justin looked down smiling thoughtfully, before it dawned on him that it was time to go to class, "Can I get you anything? I have to leave for school soon. Will you be here when I get back?"

"I'm not sure. I'll see what Michael says. Thanks for lending me your clothes. I'll wash them before I leave."

"That's okay. Keep 'em if you want. They're too small on me anyway."

"Thanks..."

Michael was grateful the doctor asked him to come down right away, before even bothering to look at his scheduled appointments. He was young, maybe in his mid-thirties. He invited Michael to wait in his office while he examined Will in an adjoining room. Upon completing his exam he joined Michael in his office.

"Is he going to be okay?"

"He was very lucky that you brought him in here today. His infection is very bad. I put some of this salve on and covered it for now. He must start taking the antibiotics right away," the physician turned around and walked to a nearby key-locked cabinet, "Here -- I have some samples I can give you. I'll have the blood sample sent out today. Should I have the lab bill you at Mr. Kinney's address?"

"Yes. That'll be fine. Is Will going to be okay? How serious is this, doctor?"

"I won't beat around the bush. His condition is a very serious one. He may still lose his foot and, if he is not treated properly, the infection could turn out fatal."

Will had dressed and was standing in the doorway. "Am I going to die?" he asked.

Michael went to him and pulled him into his arms, "Of course not! I won't let that happen. I'm going to take good care of you."

"Call me if there is any change," the doctor smiled, "Stay off your feet and get some bed rest."

They thanked the doctor and Michael took Will back upstairs, "You're getting into bed, right now. You need to rest to regain your strength."

"Michael, stop worrying. I feel better already," Will attempted a smile. The pain he was experiencing was excruciating, "What will Brian say when he comes home and find out I'm still here."

"Don't worry about Brian. He was just in a bad mood for some reason. I'll call him. Now go to sleep. Michael kissed him on the head and pulled the covers up.

"Brian," Michael said in the receiver, "I need a big favor. Will has got a really bad infection. The doctor said that if it isn't treated properly he'll die. Unless you want a sweet innocent dead boy's face haunting you for the rest of your life you'll let him stay here."

"Okay, okay. Just don't get too attached, Mikey. You don't know anything about this kid."

"You didn't know anything about Justin and you let him move in with you."

"Michael, don't compare a boy you met a night ago with Justin," he warned, "I'm not going to get into this with you now. The kid can stay until the doctor tells you that 'Tiny Tim' can walk again. But, Michael, keep him the hell out of my way."

Will slept for most of the day. Michael woke him to give him his pills at regular intervals. Justin returned home at 4pm.

"What did the doctor say?" Justin asked.

"Will has an infection. It's pretty bad, Justin. The doctor said if it's not treated properly, he could die."

"Poor, guy. It must hurt like hell."

"He's been asleep most of the time. Something tells me the infection is not so new; he seems to be accustomed to the pain. Justin, what the fuck is Brian's problem with Will? He's not giving the kid a chance at all. I don't understand why!"

"Think about it, Michael. Maybe Brian sees something that we don't. It could be that he noticed how you've taken the kid under your wing and he's feeling jealous. You know how he can be. And," Justin added with an evident glee, "I don't recall you being too enthusiastic when Brian and I started 'dating'."

"Well he better get over it. What if I DO want to let Will into my life? There are worse things."

"Hey, I agree with you, Michael. He seems really nice. He's kinda cute, too."

"Yeah, he is cute, isn't he."

"He's young, Michael, he'll be fine."

Two days later the doctor called to let Will know that the HIV test came back negative. Michael grabbed the opportunity to make an appointment for the afternoon, and have the doctor check the sore.

After examination, the general practitioner, much more optimistic now, continued to stress the importance of continuing on the antibiotics until the infection was gone. Michael didn't leave the boy's side until he showed signs of improvement a week later.

They took the time to get to know each other. Michael told Will about the comic book that Justin and he had designed. Will told Michael about his life at home, with his parents, before they knew the truth. His father had been a cruel drunk and, in the vein of Brian's father, he beat Will from the time he was very young. His mother was Italian and very pious. He had always known that she would consider his homosexuality as a sin, but he had hoped that someday she would find it in her heart to forgive him. Once again Michael was reminded of how wonderful his own mother had always been.

"I hope you can meet her someday," said Michael, "I have to warn you, though. She can be a bit much to take the first time you meet her. And you would have to be prepared for her to start mothering you right away. It's what she does. You should have seen how she was with Justin when he lived in my old room. It was like she had given birth to a 17 year old. The day that he got bashed at the prom and she came to the hospital, you would have thought it was her own baby lying there in a coma."

"You're really lucky Michael. You have a nice family and some really great friends. I can't believe you talked Brian into letting me stay here. I haven't had a chance to thank him. He kinda avoids me."

"Don't let him get to you. He's the most difficult person on the planet to get to know. But once you do, you'll understand him. He's a really terrific guy."

As the days went by Brian had become unusually quiet and there was an obvious tension between him and Michael. Then Uncle Vic called, unexpectedly. There had been a storm in Pittsburgh and there was some flood damage at the store. Michael had to leave right away. Will was still under the doctor's care. So Michael approached Justin with his request.

"Justin, you've been really sweet to Will and I want you to know I appreciate it. He's doing much better. I think that pretty soon the doctor will give him a clean bill of health. I was wondering if you could maybe help him find a job. He's a really smart kid. He would have done very well in college if he'd have been able to graduate. Do you think you could help him out?"

"Can he type? I suck at it, and so does Ken. We're desperate to get some good clerical help at the office. I'll talk to Will. Don't worry, I'm not going to let Brian throw him to the wolves. You get your store back in order and by the time you come back Will is going to be a productive member of society."

"Justin, did I ever tell you that I'm glad you hung around."

"Thanks, Michael. I'm glad I did too," Justin answered smiling, before hugging the other man.

Will was sitting up reading when Michael went in to say goodbye, "I've got a plane to catch, I have to contact the insurance company and then check out the damage. My Uncle Vic is fine behind the register, but he's of no use during a crisis."

"Michael, are you going to come back?" The look of sadness on Will's expressive face was enough to bring Michael to tears.

"Yes! Of course I'm coming back. Justin is going to discuss a job with you. Don't let Brian put any pressure on you. He owes me for letting Justin take over my room when he was a run-a-way teen. I'll call you every day."

Will reached up and put his arms around Michael's neck. They had slept in the same bed while Will was recovering, but they had not had sex. Michael could feel himself reacting to the closeness of Will's body. This wasn't the time. He gently pulled himself out of Will's grasp and kissed him on top of his head.

When Will was ready, Justin brought him into the office to show him around, "Ken and I haven't got a clue as to how this billing program works, the computers keeps self destructing, the files are a mess, I don't even know where to tell you to start."

Will sat down at one of the computers and typed a few commands, "I know this accounting program. It looks like you need a memory upgrade to run the program properly. I can add the memory, if you want."

"Yes! We want! Take the company credit card and buy what you need."

By that afternoon both Justin and Ken were very pleased with the company's newest addition. Will was a computer wiz. He had the program up and running before lunch. He then proceeded to organize the files and fix the copy machine.

Will asked Justin if he would mind if he used one of the computers to do some writing. Justin gave him his old laptop to use. He'd had so many stories floating around in his head for years; stories he'd had no way of writing down. When Justin came back to the apartment after doing some errands, he found Will lost in thoughts.

"What are you up to?"

"I was trying to think of a way to describe Michael."

Justin laughed, "Are you writing a comic book?"

"No. It's just a short story. I'm going to make Michael the main character, the hero."

"No way! He'd love that. In our comic stories he was always the sidekick; Brian was the hero."

"What were you?"

"In trouble, mostly."

Will laughed, "Non-fiction comics." He closed the cover on the laptop and opened the newspaper that Justin had opened on the table at the classified section.

"I don't have a clue about apartment hunting. The only places I've ever lived were my parents home in Queens and then as a roommate with people who already had apartments. I think I would have to work about a million years to save up for one month's rent and deposit. I might as well go back to the park before someone steals my bench."

"Fuck the park, Will. You'll stay here until you find something. When I first came to New York the only place I had to sleep was a kind woman's sofa. I stayed there for months until I finally found my own place."

Will looked around at the great room and rolled his eyes at Justin, "You won the lottery?"

"Not this place!" Justin laughed, "Brian found this apartment for us. Before we got back together, I lived in a studio apartment in a five story walk up. I had to run to the subway every morning because the neighbors weren't exactly civilized."

"I don't think that Brian likes me staying here, Justin. And for sure he doesn't want me to see Michael again. I think he hates me."

"Brian doesn't hate you, Will. You can't judge what Brian's thinking by what he says or how he acts. You have to understand that he's been Michael's protector since they were kids. Once he gets to know you, he'll back off."

"Michael told me that you met Brian in Pittsburgh when you were seventeen. How did you two meet up again in a city the size of New York?"

"I moved to New York to get away from Brian. He was a different man back in Pittsburgh. It's a long story, but one night I had just had enough of his shit and I got on a bus."

"You came here on purpose?" Will kidded.

Justin smiled, "Yeah, I had been here before and had some fond memories of the place."

"Anyway, Brian missed me so much that he tracked me down from a photo that I had posed for when I was modeling," which gave Justin an idea, "Hey! That's something you could do, to earn extra money. You have an amazing face. And your body's not bad either," Justin smiled.

Will blushed at the compliments, "Fuck you."

"You would be great at modeling. You have a very interesting face. In fact, your mouth and your eyes somewhat remind me of someone."

"Who?"

"Brian."

"No way."

"I'm not kidding. I already noticed it the first time I saw you. Don't tell him I said that though -- he'd think I was going to leave him for a younger man," They both laughed.

"Justin, it's really nice of you to let me stay here. You've been really great. First you get me a job at your company and now you tell me I look good enough to be a model. I just want you to know that I appreciate everything you've done for me."

Justin hugged Will, to which the young boy responded by giving a peck on Justin's cheek. They both jumped when they heard Brian's voice.

"Justin, can I see you in the bedroom?" Brian ordered.

Justin rolled his eyes and then put his hand on Will's shoulder before he followed Brian into the other room.

"When is he leaving?" Brian asked point blank as he loosened his tie.

"He thinks that you hate him," Justin responded.

"And he'd be right," Brian said, raising his voice.

Justin took Brian's tie from where he had thrown it onto the floor, "Brian, what's gotten into you? It's not like you to judge people. You don't even know him."

"But, you do. You LIKE having him here," Brian began to unbutton his shirt.

Justin put his hand over Brian's and slowly undid the buttons as he spoke softly, "I do like having him here. You want to know why?"

"Not really."

"Will got a bad deal. Sleeping in the park... that could have been me. I just got lucky. I had you to protect me. You took me in when I had no place to go and you kept me close. You're a very kind and generous man, Brian Kinney. Having Will here reminds me how wonderful you are."

"Bullshit! You'd never be out in the middle of the night picking up old men in the park. You're too smart. You would have found another way."

"I would do what I had to do to survive. Just like him. His only crime was the fact that he's gay and his parents found out. You'll never know what would have happened if your parents had found out you were gay. You might have been living in the streets yourself."

Brian considered what Justin had said. He nodded his head and allowed Justin to remove his shirt, "Still, Michael can do better."

"That's for Michael to decide. Maybe the reason you don't like Will is because you think he may take your place as the center of Michael's world."

"What do you mean?"

"You never let go of Michael, not really. It's not fair to him, Brian. We have so much. We have each other to come home to for the rest of our lives. What does Michael have? What does Will have?"

Brian slipped out of his pants and Justin put them over a chair. Brian pulled Justin's shirt over his head. Justin had controlled the conversation they'd just had about Will. He realized that Justin was right about Michael. But there was something else about Will that bothered Brian. He knew it was wrong. But he had allowed his lingering self doubt to control his emotions. Justin put his head back and Brian buried his face in Justin's neck and sniffed. Justin pushed him away, "What are you doing?" Justin demanded, "You think I fucked him?"

Brian stood fast and stared at Justin defiantly waiting for an answer to his unasked question, "I can't believe that you think I would do that," was Justin's response.

Brian's doubtful nature had gotten the better of him and once again he had accused Justin of sleeping with another man. Brian braced himself for the lecture or the cold war, whatever tactic Justin would use to punish him.

Justin took Brian's hand and spoke from his heart, "I want you to know something, Brian. You're my lover, my protector, my teacher... and you're my best friend. Ever since you moved to New York you've made me feel happy, safe and secure. If I'm having a bad day at work or at school all I have to do is think about you and I'm happy again. Because I know that I'll always have you to come home to. Nothing else matters. I want you to feel the same. If you don't, then I've failed you."

"Don't say that. It's just my nature to be jealous and insecure. You know that. It's not that I don't trust you. It's everyone else that I don't trust. I'm always going to be jealous when I see you with another man, even when I'm sure you're not doing anything wrong. It's my way of showing you that I love you. Okay?"

Justin kissed him, "Okay."

They went upstairs to their bedroom, and made love.

Afterwards Brian sat up in bed and watched Justin sleep. He thought about Michael and what Justin had said. It was true that he'd never let go. Michael was the one person in his life he could count on to be there for him. He knew that all he had to do was ask and Michael would have jumped at the chance to be his partner. But Brian had never been physically attracted to Michael. All the same, he was always there and always devoted. What kind of life was that for a man? Michael would always be holding out hope of having something that was never going to happen. Brian knew that even if by some horrible turn of events he lost Justin, he would never be satisfied with anything less than a perfect partnership with a man that he truly loved. Justin is his equal in every way. He's a sexual predator with a genius for creating hedonistic methods of foreplay. Sex with Justin is always an adventure.

Brian realized now exactly where he had made his mistake with Justin in the early years of their relationship. He hadn't understood the fact that although he had mastered the art of fucking, he had never made love. He never did believe love existed. But with Justin he knew there was a difference. Brian knew exactly when it was that they had made love for the first time. It was the day that Justin got his memory back. That night emotional commitment combined with physical chemistry had created an unspoken, enduring bond between them. Even now, after spending years together, the depths of emotion Brian felt as he looked at the sleeping boy brought tears to his eyes. The

downstairs room had become their playroom, a place to act out their fantasies and refresh their youth. Upstairs, in their bed, they made love and slept together in complete contentment.

Justin had been right about Michael. Brian was ready to let go. He no longer needed to keep Michael waiting in the wings as a backup plan. In order to be a true friend, Brian was ready to allow Michael to make his own decisions. If Will could provide Michael with everything that Justin was to him, then Brian would do everything in his power to make sure that Michael got what he wanted.

"I hate it when you're right," Brian announced to his sleeping partner as he got up and pulled on his blue jeans.

Justin rolled over and put out his hand toward Brian, "What?" he muttered sleepily.

"I'm going to have a talk with our house guest. If he's going to take over my position as the center of Michael's world, he's going to have to know a few things."

Brian pulled a T-shirt over his head and went out into the hallway. He softly knocked on the door of the bedroom which Will occupied. When there was no answer, pushed forth the door and looked around the room. On the bed was a neatly folded stack of clothing which Justin had given to Will. On top of the stack was a note which was addressed to Justin.

I am sorry if Brian got the wrong idea. I never meant to cause trouble between the two of you. Thanks for everything you've done for me,

Will

"Oh, shit!" Brian muttered under his breath.

"What?" Justin asked from the doorway.

"He must have heard us arguing: he's gone." Brian handed Justin the note.

"Fuck! Michael is going to be devastated! We have to find him, Brian!"

"Where the fuck are we going to look for him? He could be anywhere!"

"I'm sure he'll go back to the park, or at least in the vicinity of that neighborhood... let's go."

"I'll go!" Brian announced, "You stay here in case he changes his mind or calls. Do you know anything else about where he could be? Did he mention any friends or any bars that he might go to?"

"No friends. Once, when Ken was explaining what happened with Adam, Will mentioned that he use to go to that gay bar Adam goes to."

"Justin, I'll fix this. Don't worry. If he calls, tell him that this wasn't his fault," Brian kissed Justin before leaving the penthouse.

Brian took the subway downtown and got off at the stop near the park. It was early and there weren't too many people hanging around. He walked up and down the streets checking alleys and even dumpsters. The last thing Brian wanted to do was to enter the gay bar he had spied on Adam. After several hours of walking Brian decided that

unfortunately the bar was his only hope. If he came home alone he would have to face Justin tonight and eventually, Michael. This blunder on his part just may be the event that would end their friendship forever.

It had been months since Justin had talked Brian into quitting cigarettes. Upon entering the bar he almost vomited at the strong odor of stale cigarette smoke. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness he began to search the crowd for Will. The patrons appeared to be much younger than the crowd he remembered from Babylon. Either that or he was getting older. In his hurry to leave the apartment earlier he had forgotten to put on his leather jacket. He had grabbed his camel's hair coat that he normally wore to work... totally inappropriate for the occasion. No wonder the boys were looking at him like he was a narc. They probably thought he was somebody's father, out looking for his gay son. Suddenly he was feeling very old and very out of place. He stepped out into the alley behind the bar and saw several couples engaged in sex acts. He surveyed the group and spotted Will with a trick.

Brian didn't hesitate. He walked over and grabbed Will by his collar.

"What the fuck is this?" the trick asked, "... a brother act? I'm okay with a threesome but I'm not paying double."

"Not interested," Brian grabbed the money out of Will's coat pocket and handed it back to the disgruntled man, "Come on little brother, you've got some explaining to do."

"Fuck you!" Will yelled to Brian as he pulled him out of the alley, "Let go of me."

Brian let go of his collar and turned the boy toward him, "Are you going to run?"

"Where would I go? This is my home, not yours."

They had reached a park bench and Brian pushed Will down and sat next to him. "What were you doing in there? Haven't you learned anything? You could get killed by some asshole in a place like that."

"What do you know? I've lived out here for two years. I do what I have to do to survive."

"You're right. I don't know what it's like to live on the streets. Why don't you enlighten me?"

"I don't do it just for the money. Some guys are nice. Sometimes it feels good to have some body hold you. Living out here you become invisible. People walk right past you and pretend not to see you. They don't stop to ask 'What happened to you? Why are you living on the street?' They assume that I'm a drug addicted, alcoholic with AIDS. They walk right by like I don't exist... like I'm already dead. Don't pass judgment on me, Brian. You don't have any idea what it's like."

"You're right. I don't. But as Justin so wisely pointed out to me today, it could have happened to me. My parents didn't know I was gay until a few years ago. If they had found out like yours did I would have been thrown out, no question. So I won't pass judgment on you. But if you think that you're going to find what you are looking for in there," Brian pointed to the bar, "You won't. It's just a temporary fix."

Will turned and stared at Brian in the eyes. Brian noticed something about the boy that he hadn't seen before. The trick had asked if they were a brother act, now Brian understood what he meant. He hadn't notice that Will had facial features similar to his own. They probably could pass for brothers.

"Brian, I didn't mean to cause you trouble. Justin's a nice guy. He's helped me out and I wanted to let him know that I was grateful, that's all it was."

"Let me guess. You heard us yelling at each other and you thought it was your fault. Don't flatter yourself. That's how Justin and I communicate. I act like a total asshole and he let's me know it. It really didn't have anything to do with you."

"That's fucked up. What would you do if you didn't have Justin to point out the fact that you're an asshole?" Will smiled.

"I'd probably wreck my life and become a drug addicted, alcoholic with AIDS living on a park bench."

"Then you're lucky that Justin puts up with you."

"I am lucky. And so are you. Michael is a much better person than I am. I think you two may have possibilities."

"Michael is wonderful. He's kind and sweet and funny. But he doesn't want to fuck me. I guess I'm not his type."

"He hasn't fucked you, yet?" Brian was truly shocked.

"No. I'm not good enough for him, anyway. How could I contribute anything to his life? I have nothing to offer."

"That's for Michael to decide. If you want him, go and get him. That's what Justin would do."

"Then it must be right. Justin is always right."

"I hate it when he's right. Come on little brother, let's go home. This park bench is giving me a pain in the ass."

Justin was pacing the floor, talking on the phone when Brian and Will walked in.

Justin covered the mouthpiece, "Thank God! You found him," he exclaimed, "Michael is on the phone. I've been stalling. I didn't know what to tell him."

Justin started to hand the phone to Will but Brian took it out of his hand, "Look, Novotny, do you want this kid or not? Because if you don't, I've had several offers from guys willing to take him off my hands... Michael I don't give a fuck about your fucking comic books. Just get your ass on a plane tomorrow. I'll pick you up at the airport," Brian hung up without allowing Will to talk to Michael.

"Never let him know you're chasing him. Let him think he's doing all the work. Isn't that right, baby?" Brian turned to Justin who had not uttered a word.

"Yeah, I guess," Justin uttered -- playing innocent was too easy for him.

"You give your buddy here some pointers on the fine art of seduction," Brian instructed, "I'll take care of Michael."

Brian left work at four o'clock. He had gone home to change his clothes and get his car to drive to the airport. When he walked in the door, he heard voices coming from the bedroom. He hesitated before opening the door. The voices got louder and then he thought he heard moans. Justin had promised him he would never have to worry about him cheating. In a leap of faith Brian, opened the door.

He breathed an audible sigh of relief when he saw the video tape playing on the T.V. screen. Justin and Will were sitting on the sofa watch a video that he and Justin had made a few weeks before. In the video, Justin was naked and bound to a chair with leather straps. Brian was wearing backless leather pants and was holding a whip in front of Justin's face. In the next scene he threw the whip on the floor and lowered the front of his leather pants exposing his erect cock, which Justin took into his mouth.

"Justin, what the fuck are you doing?"

"Hi, Brian... you told me to give Will some pointers. I'm showing him an instructional video."

Brian was distracted momentarily as he watched himself cum all over Justin's face on the giant plasma T.V. Will applauded the performance and Brian put his arms around Justin from behind, "Nice job, sweetheart -- that was an Oscar-worthy performance," he whispered Justin, as he planted a kiss on the younger man's head.

"Are you going to the airport? Can I go with you?" Will asked.

"Yes, I'm going to the airport, and no, you can't come with me. I need to talk to Michael, alone. You stay here and watch more videos. Ask Justin to show you cabana boy. It's my personal favorite," he said, grinning at his husband.

Brian picked Michael up at the airport. Traffic was heavy going into the city and Brian decided it would be a good time to talk to Michael.

"What do you want out of life, Michael?"

"I don't know. The same as anyone else, I guess."

"You need a partner."

"Is that an invitation?" Michael joked.

"No," Brian flatly answered, "We were never meant to be that to each other Michael. If we were it would have happened a long time ago. Justin is my partner, now and forever. The only thing I want in the world is to be able to come home to him for the rest of my life. I want the same for you, Michael. Do you think this kid might be your 'Justin'?"

"I know he is. I just don't know what to do about it," Michael admitted.

"Fuck him," Brian suggested.

"That's easy for you to say, Brian. This may be the only chance I ever have of finding someone to share my life with. I love the way he looks up to me. I've never had that before from anyone. I don't want to fuck it up. I don't want him to think I'm just some lecherous old man. I have nothing to offer him, Brian. I'm not rich, like you. I live in fucking Pittsburgh, he lives in New York. What's the use, Brian? I don't have a chance," Michael complained.

"Do you think it was easy for me to pack up and leave Pittsburgh? I had my job, my son and my friends; I had to make the same decisions, Michael. I finally asked myself, 'Is my life really worth living, if I don't have Justin to share it with?' That's when I knew I had no choice. There was no going back. As soon as I got here and Justin agreed to move in with me I knew that I'd made the right decision."

"You had known Justin since a few years already. You were sure that the sex was great, that you had this great chemistry. And you were sure that Justin loved you."

"Michael, I was never sure of anything. I'm still insecure sometimes. There are no guarantees in life. The question you have to ask yourself is, are you happy with your life. If you aren't, then fucking do something about it. And for the record Will probably does love you. He's unsure because you haven't even tried to fuck him."

"He told you that?"

"Yeah, he's not a dumb kid. He wants the same things that you want. So why don't you give him a chance. He's got a lot of potential. Justin gave him a job working at his business and he also hooked him up with some modeling connections. He's not a bad looking kid when you clean him up. In fact some people think he looks a little like me."

"In your dreams!"

"Let's leave them alone." Brian suggested to Justin when he and Michael arrived at the apartment, "I'll take you out for a nice dinner and we can get a hotel room."

"I have a better idea. Meet me at this bar in an hour."

"What? Justin, I don't want to spend another minute in one of those smoky hell holes."

"I got the address from Ken. He said it's a much nicer place then the one in which you found Will. Now, get dressed up in your party clothes and meet me there in an hour. I promise you won't regret it."

Justin disappeared into the bedroom and returned carrying an overnight bag. He kissed Brian goodbye and walked out the door. Brian dreaded the thought of spending the evening drinking while he watched a bar full of horny gay men check out Justin's ass. He showered and dressed in a black T-shirt and a pair of jeans. He put on his leather jacket and rode the subway downtown.

Ken had been right about the bar. It was much nicer then the one across from the park. Brian struggled to get through the crowd. He was groped several times by some pretty hot looking guys. 'I guess I haven't lost it after all,' he decided as he searched the bar for his mate. Two men approached him and asked if he wanted to hook up. Regretfully he told them he was with someone. He had been in the bar for an hour and still had not seen Justin. He had been hit on numerous times, 'Fuck him. If he doesn't show up in five minutes I may just take a trip to the back room,' he smiled to himself, knowing full well that he never would. The fact that he still had the possibility to do so was enough to boost his ego. He decided to call Justin on his cell phone and find out where the hell he was. There was no cell reception in the bar so he grabbed his coat and stepped outside. He dialed Justin's number and heard a phone ringing nearby. He turned to the left and saw a figure standing under a street lamp.

"Hey, stud, wanna dance?" Justin whispered into the phone. Brian walked towards him chuckling. Justin was wearing blue jeans, a blue plaid flannel shirt which was much too big and a white T-shirt that peaked out from under the flannel. High topped sneakers and a blue jacket completed the outfit. When Brian got closer he noticed that Justin had his hair exactly the way he wore it the night they met.

"Hey..."

"Hey."

"So what do you think?" Justin grinned at him.

"You look like you should be in home in bed with your teddy bear. It's a school night."

"No. I'm going with you," Justin smiled and held up a key, "I got us a room."

"Don't tell me. It's the same hotel you stayed in when you ran away the first time."

"No. I'm saving that for your birthday. This one is really nice. All the biggest stars stay there. It's on Thompson Street. We can walk there from here," Justin continued, "Did anyone hit on you in the bar?"

"Everyone hit on me. Did you arrange that, too?"

"No! You're the hottest man in town. Why wouldn't they want to fuck you?"

"I see. So, where are you headed tonight?"

"No place special... What about you?"

"Me? I'm coming home to you."

Michael hadn't noticed that Brian and Justin had left the apartment. He was as nervous as he had been on the night of his first sexual encounter. Will had taken Michael's hand and led him into the bedroom he had been occupying.

"How are things in Pittsburgh?" Will began. He shifted his body toward the middle of the bed so that Michael had no choice but to sit very close to him.

"Good. The insurance company is going to cover most of it," Michael's heart was racing. He took a deep breath and put his insecurities aside.

"Will, I want you to know that I did nothing but think about you while I was away. I care for you a lot. NO! That's not what I want to say. I love you. I love the way I feel when you're around. I don't have much to offer. I'm not rich or handsome or sexy..."

"Who says you're not sexy?" Will looked at Michael with a big grin on his face. Michael reached over and caressed the boy's face with his hands. He kissed him, gently over and over. Will moaned and pulled Michael over on top of him. They pulled at each other's clothing and the kissing became more passionate. Michael pulled away from Will and stared at the young man's naked body briefly before he gently turned Will on his side. All of Michael's fears dissolved as he entered the boy.

Brian and Justin arrived home late Sunday night. When they entered the apartment they heard laughter mixed with moaning coming from their bedroom. Brian put his arm around Justin and the two of them entered the room.

Michael and Will looked up from the sofa, "Hey, you're just in time. We're getting to the good part."

Brian and Justin watched themselves having sex on the large plasma screen on the wall.

"Not bad," Brian said to Justin as the Justin on the screen lowered himself onto Brian's dick.

"I didn't know you were so limber Justin," Michael commented, "We only have three or four hundred hours of tape to go. Then we'll go to bed."

Brian pulled Justin toward the spiral staircase which led up to their loft, "What a couple of perverts," he commented to Justin as they climbed the steps.

Justin listened as Brian's breathing slowed to a steady rhythm. Brian had fallen asleep on his side with both arms firmly wrapped around Justin. The pressure of Brian's hand resting across his stomach was getting Justin aroused... again. The playroom downstairs had become still. Michael and Will had returned to their own room shortly after Brian and Justin had gone to bed. Justin loved the loft that Brian had built as a private retreat for the two of them. At first, Justin had been against moving their bedroom to the dimly lit attic-like space. The bare brick walls and wood floor made the area seem cold and dark to Justin. The room had been Brian's secret project, Justin was forbidden to peek. Once it was complete Brian covered Justin's eyes and led him up the narrow spiral staircase. As soon as Justin saw the room he felt completely at home. Brian had left the walls bare brick, but the floor had been covered with thick carpeting. Brian had somehow managed to install a fireplace on the wall which separated the bedroom from Justin's workspace. On either side of the fireplace were shelves which held family photos. The only furniture in the room was their bed, flanked on either side with a night stand.

Justin gently turned and rested his head against Brian's chest. He always loved to sleep with his head close to Brian's heart. In the moonlight which seeped in from the casement window above, Justin could see the outline of Brian's beautiful profile. He loved the man so completely. They had been together for years and yet Justin still felt his pulse race every time Brian entered a room. He hoped that someday Michael and Will would have what he and Brian shared.

Coming Home To You Part VII Payback

The penthouse seemed as empty as the loft had been after Justin had left Pittsburgh. Brian dropped his overnight bag on the floor of their bedroom and began to unpack. He had spent the night at Lindsay's house in New Jersey visiting with his son. Justin had been in Florida for over a week. His grandmother was ill and his mother had phoned to ask if Justin would go with her to help to make arrangements to find a nursing home and clean out his grandmother's house.

After a week of coming home to an empty place and eating his own cooking, Brian decided to call Lindsay and ask if he could see Gus. She invited him to spend the weekend with them in New Jersey. She also said that she had some big news. When he arrived, the "big news" greeted him at the door.

"You must be Brian." A man with dark hair extended his hand. "I'm Tony, Lindsay's fiancé."

Brian stood in the door way and stared at the large man who was smiling down at him. Lindsay appeared from inside and greeted Brian. "This is the surprise I wanted to tell you about. I see you two have met."

Tony put his arm around Lindsay and kissed her on the cheek. "Sorry, but I'll have to leave you two alone for dinner. I just got called back to the hospital, honey."

"Oh, no! That's alright, Tony. It will give me a chance to catch up with Brian."

Gus ran into the room and yelled, "Daddy!" The little boy encircled his arms around Brian's legs. Brian picked him up and kissed him.

"I'll see you tomorrow morning, sport." Tony reached over and rub his hand in Gus's hair. Gus leaned over and kissed him.

"Bye, Tony." Gus struggled out of Brian's arms and grabbed his hand. "Daddy, come and see my room. I've got lots of new dinosaurs. Tony knows all about dinosaurs. He's teaching me all of their names."

"Go ahead, Brian." Lindsay said. "I'll finish making dinner and then we'll talk."

Brian spent half an hour listening to Gus explain to him about dinosaurs. What their names were, what they ate, how they moved. He sounded so much more mature than Brian had remembered from the last time he had seen him three months ago. He felt both guilty and sad that he had allowed his work and Lindsay's busy schedule keep him from being a part of his son's life. And now it seemed that Gus had found a replacement. It was obvious that Tony had been spending a lot of time with Gus teaching him things that the boy was really interested in.

After dinner, Lindsay sent Gus into the den to watch television so she and Brian could talk.

"I know it must seem like I've lost my mind. I'm a lesbian, so what the fuck am I doing with this man in my life?" Lindsay smiled at Brian.

"That was going to be my first question."

"I love him, Brian. I really do. Maybe not as passionately as I loved Mel, or as deeply as I have always loved you. But I do love him."

"Do you love fucking him? Or are you just putting on a show?"

"Believe it or not, I do. He's so passionate and loving. And he understands me. I don't know how to explain it to you, Brian. He's what I've always wanted. I want to have a loving family for Gus to grow up in."

"Don't think for one minute I'm giving Gus up so Tony boy can play daddy."

"I never thought that, Brian. Gus knows that you're his father and he adores you, and Justin. Tony is only one more person in his life who loves him. And he will be able to spend time with him on a daily basis. Everything will work out, Brian. You'll see."

Lindsay's reassurances had been lost on Brian. On his drive back to New York he kept picturing a family portrait: Lindsay and Dr. Tony on one side, Brian and Justin on the other, and Gus in the middle. Shit, what's wrong with this picture?

And that was Brian's mood when he arrived home on Saturday. He had spoken to Justin on the phone earlier and told him Lindsay's news. In typical Justin Taylor fashion, his partner supported Lindsay's decision. "You can't blame her for wanting some cock in her life. Being a lesbian must be really boring." Justin assured him that Gus would always think of him as daddy and nothing was going to change.

"When the fuck are you coming home? I'm running out of clean clothes. And there's no food in the house."

"I think we're almost done here. Gran is settled in the nursing home and she is feeling much better. Another day or two should do it."

Brian never knew how to hang up the phone on Justin. He waited for Justin to take the lead.

"Brian?" Justin whispered into the phone. "Do you miss me?"

"I miss your little blond twink ass. You better get home soon or I will have no choice but to resort to my former evil ways."

Justin laughed. "Fuck him for me."

"Love you." Brian mumbled.

In some ways he felt worse after he talked to Justin. The sound of his voice could make Brian break out in a cold sweat. He longed to touch him, to feel his body pressed up against him as they slept. Brian hated sleeping alone.

Brian knew better then to complain about Justin's trip. After all, he traveled on business frequently, leaving Justin alone for days at a time. They had discussed going on a vacation together. He wanted to bask on a beach in the Caribbean. Justin wanted to take Gus to Disney World. Now he wished that he had gone along with Justin's plan. Gus would have loved dragging his Justin and his daddy all over that idiotic, overcrowded theme park. He would have had a picture of the three of them having dinner with Mickey on his dresser. No Lindsay or Dr. Tony in sight.

A few more days and things would be back to normal. Normal for them, anyway. He still had to deal with this evening. His head had started to pound so he took two painkillers. An hour later, he realized he'd probably gotten the headache because he had not eaten all day. He was starving and he had not lied to Justin about the lack of food in the house. One thing he hated almost as much as sleeping alone was eating alone. Back in Pittsburgh this wouldn't have been a problem. He would have phoned Mikey or one of the boys to go out with him. Brian had not made many friends in New York. Justin had tons of friends. This bothered Brian a little. He was jealous of any time that Justin spent with others. How ridiculous that seemed to him now, considering how he used to spend his nights at the clubs back home.

Michael had been to New York several times a month since he had fallen in love with the homeless boy, Will. Will had moved into an apartment in the basement of Justin's business partner Ken's home. Brian knew full well that Michael had spent the week there, but had left for home in the late afternoon. Still, Brian dialed Will's number and asked to speak to Michael.

"He's gone back to the Pitts." Will sounded a little sad. Good, that would work to Brian's advantage.

"I guess you hate eating alone." Brian suggested.

"Actually, Ken and I were about to go out to get something to eat."

"Great, I know this place down in the village that makes a great burger." Brian gave him the name and address of the restaurant. "I'll meet you there in an hour."

Forty-five minutes later, Brian slipped into a booth at the bar and ordered a beer. Ken and Will arrived a few minutes later. "What took you guys so long? You practically live around the block. Did you stop for a quickie?"

Ken shrugged his shoulders and stared at Brian. "I'm kidding! Didn't Justin tell you what an asshole I am?"

"He didn't have to tell us, Brian," Will teased. Brian and Will had gotten along pretty well since their little talk in the park. Brian and Justin had hung out with Will and Michael a few times when Michael had been in New York. Ken was a different story. Justin was very fond of the shy, quiet young man who had been his business partner for two years. Brian was never quite sure what to make of Ken. He was positive that Ken had never really forgiven him for his part in exposing his ex-partner Adam's lies. Justin had assured Brian that Ken was okay with it. But every time that Brian came in contact with Ken, he felt a cold vibe.

"Michael told me that you finally agreed to meet his family. When are you going?"

"In two weeks. I'm scared to death. I've never met anyone's parents before. I mean, someone I care about."

Brian grinned. "Let me tell you about the first time I met Justin's parents. I was sitting in my office one day, minding my own business, when this crazy woman stormed in and dropped a pile of shit on my desk. She wrote me out a check and gave Justin to me along with her blessings. 'You fucked him, now he's yours.'"

Both Will and Ken burst out laughing at Brian's impression of his mother-in-law. Encouraged, he continued. "Of course his dad was a little harder sell. He was so shy the first time we met, he didn't even bother to get out of his car. He just rammed it into my Jeep. The next time we met he actually made physical contact when he sucker-punched me in an alley and proceeded to dance on my rib cage."

Will shook his head. "That's fucked up. What did Justin do?"

Brian smiled. "He pulled him off of me. Then he told him that he was never coming home again. And he never did," Brian added thoughtfully.

"That sounds like Justin. He's his own man." Ken spoke up. "He would never compromise who he is for anyone."

"After he left home you took him in, right?" Will asked.

"For a while. But then I found a place for him to live where he would be safe and out of my hair. He moved in with Michael's mother, Debbie."

"Michael says she loves Justin more than she loves him." Will joked. "Justin says she is really special."

"She's an original. She'll smother you the moment you walk in the door. Don't let her get away with bossing you around. She means well, but she can be a real pain in the ass. Always trying to get you to admit your 'feelings.'"

"I think I can handle her. What about Vic, Ted and Emmett, tell me about them."

Brian talked of home and his friends and their adventures until midnight. He had not been out drinking in months and the beer was starting to hit him. Will and Ken decided to go home and offered to get Brian a cab. He refused their offer, telling them that he had found his way home in worse condition than he was tonight. They left the restaurant and Brian paid the check. He staggered a little when he got up to leave, but by the time he got to the door the night air hit his face and refreshed him.

The thought of going home to an empty bed depressed the hell out of him. He took out his cell phone and dialed Justin's number. Justin didn't answer and Brian didn't see any point in leaving a message. He started walking and before he knew it he was standing in front of the gay bar where he and Justin had met up one night before spending the weekend in a hotel bed. It was a glorious memory. He could see Justin standing in front of the street lamp looking exactly as he did the night they met. Without thinking, Brian climbed the steps of the bar and walked inside. It was the last thing he remembered doing that night.

Back in Pittsburgh, when the Brian Kinney legend was at its peak, there had been many a time when he had awakened in a strange place not having any clue how he got there. It was the smell that woke him. He was lying flat on his face in an alley next to a dumpster.

He started to push himself up on his elbows when he sensed a presence in the alley.

"Don't move!" A cop yelled. Before Brian could clear his head to talk, he felt cold metal being fastened around his wrists. His eyes started to focus and he noticed a crowd of boys standing around nearby. One of the boys was bleeding. He was leaning on a tall woman with short-cropped, streaked hair. Two police officers escorted him to their waiting squad car and shoved him into the back seat.

The rest of the evening was one very long nightmare. When he arrived at the police station he was arrested for, of all things, sodomy assault on a minor. At the police station he was processed, questioned and then thrown into a holding cell with several other unsavory characters. Brian did not remember anything after leaving the restaurant with Will and Ken. The first person that Brian thought to call to get him out of this mess was his trusty assistant, Cynthia. Once again, she got the job done without asking questions. At his arraignment, bail was set and Cynthia was ready with the cash.

All he wanted to do was go home and take a shower to wash off the stench of the jail cell. The ordeal had left him shaking. It was 8:00 a.m. when he arrived back home. The minute he closed the door, the phone rang.

"Brian! Where have you been? I've been calling all night. Didn't you get my messages?"

Brian looked over at the answering machine and saw the flashing light. "No. I was out last night with Will and your buddy Ken. I got wasted and the boys brought me home, dumped me in bed and took off. I guess I was really out of it. I didn't hear the phone. I just woke up now."

"Oh. That's better than what I was thinking happened."

"You thought I was out tricking. It would serve you right if I did, you've been gone too fucking long."

There was silence on the other end of the phone.

"When are you coming home?"

More silence. . .

"What?" Brian asked. " You've been holding Granny's hand for a week. I miss you."

"She died last night."

"Oh. Shit." Brian momentarily forgot his problems. "How is your Mom taking it?"

"She's still in shock. Gran was getting better. We were making plans to come home. Then we got a call from the hospital, Gran was gone."

"Are you having a funeral?"

"No. Mom wants to ship her home for burial. We have to clean out her house. That will take a few days."

"Are you okay? Do you want me to come down?"

"No. I want to be here for my mother, Brian. She's been pretty low since Molly decided to go away to that fancy boarding school. It's sad to think that her mother's dead now. They were pretty close. I guess for now, I'm all she has left."

"Yeah, sure. She needs you. I'll survive."

"Brian, is anything wrong? What's going on?" Justin questioned him.

"Nothing is going on. Don't be a damn drama princess. I'm fine. Take care of your mom. And tell her I'm sorry, okay?"

"Yeah, I'll be home as soon as I can. Love you."

"Me too." Brian held the telephone close to his face after Justin hung up. He decided that he would take a long hot shower, and go to work. He would not accomplish anything by moping around the apartment, dwelling on his predicament.

When he arrived at the office, he went straight to one of the senior partners to explain what had happened the night before. From experience he knew that it was best to keep things out in the open with the partners. They were very supportive of him in the past and they once again came through. They said they would arrange for him to meet with a criminal attorney in the next few days to straighten out the mess he was in.

Brian worked through lunch, glad to have his mind occupied. At three o'clock, he looked up from his desk and was surprised to see Adam standing in the doorway.

"Can I come in?" Adam asked sheepishly.

"Come to gloat?" Brian flashed his sarcastic smile at Adam. They had not had much contact since Brian exposed the man's dark side.

"No. I came to see if I could help."

Brian laughed. "Help put me in prison until I rot?"

"I know you have no reason to trust that I'm sincere, but I don't hold any grudge against you, Brian. I've been trying to get my life in order. I'm getting help, and I have you to thank for shocking some sense into me. I heard that you were arrested. Is that true?"

"Come in and close the door." Brian still didn't trust Adam. Hell, he didn't even like him. But Adam knew the New York City club scene. Brian decided that someone may have set him up. That someone could be Adam. This was his opportunity to feel him out.

Brian arrived home late after putting in a full day at the office. Adam had promised to contact some of his former associates in the club world and see if he could get any information. Brian still wasn't about to trust the sleaze, but if he did come up with something, at least Brian would know what he was up against.

Brian fixed himself an omelet and ate it in front of the television set. He had tried to call Justin several times that day, but he had no luck reaching him. Justin must be busy helping his mother arrange for her mother's burial in Pittsburgh. Brian figured that it would be a few more days before Justin came home. He missed him terribly, but he also was glad not to have to explain the charges that he had been brought up on.

Exhausted, Brian fell into the bed in the guest room and was asleep almost immediately. He awoke to a familiar sensation of warm bare skin rubbing against his back. At first he thought he was dreaming. Then Justin reached up and put his hands on Brian's face and kissed him.

"Why are you here?"

"Because one day my mother and father. . ."

"Why did you come home now? I thought you were going to stay in Florida to help your mother."

"Brian. I know what happened. After I spoke to you, I knew something was wrong. I called Will this afternoon. He'd overheard Ken talking to Adam on the phone. They said that you'd been arrested for an assault. You should have told me, Brian."

"Your mother needed you. She's your family, Justin."

"You're my family, too. You come first. I wish you had told me yourself. We don't keep secrets."

"There's nothing you could have done. I'm seeing a lawyer tomorrow afternoon."

Justin could see that Brian had been shaken by his experience. "What was it like in jail?"

"It's highly overrated. No shower scene, no hot inmate sex. I was only there a few hours."

"How many hours?"

"I don't know. All night, I guess. I fell asleep for a while. When I woke up, I realized some asshole had stolen my shoes."

Justin ran his hand through Brian's hair and whispered "I'm sorry I wasn't here for you."

Brian looked at him for a long time. "I hate sleeping alone."

"Me too." Justin cuddled closer. The thought occurred to him that if Brian were to go to prison .. "alone" would be how he would spend his life. "Let's not talk about it any more tonight. Tomorrow the lawyer will tell you what to do to make it all go away and then things can go back to normal around here."

"Normal for us."

Brian worked through the morning without a break. At three o'clock he packed up his briefcase and was about to leave for the appointment with the lawyer when there was a knock on his door.

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

"I'm going with you. Don't tell me that I can't, I'm already here. If the lawyer has bad news, you won't tell me."

Brian tried to stare him down, but Justin would not budge. "Alright, but don't open your mouth."

What the criminal attorney had to say was not encouraging. The charges had been upgraded to a hate crime. It seems that while the attack was in progress, several boys who were outside the bar heard Brian shouting racial slurs at the boy.

"That is fucking ridiculous!" Justin blurted out. "Brian's not a violent man. He's being set up." Brian put his hand on Justin's arm to quiet him.

The attorney looked at Brian. "Were you with anyone at the bar that night, Mr. Kinney?"

"I'd had dinner and drinks with two friends at a restaurant near the bar."

"Did you leave together?"

"Yes, but they were going to Brooklyn and I was headed uptown. All I remember is how dizzy I felt as I was walking. I think that I was headed toward Broadway to hail a cab. I remember passing the bar, but I don't remember going inside."

"I'll need your friends' names and addresses. And it would be good for you to have some character witnesses from your home town. You were arrested in Pittsburgh last year for a similar crime. You want to tell me about that?"

Once again Justin interjected. "It was totally bogus! His nephew had ripped him off and was trying to cover his ass. The charges were dropped. They can't use that against him, can they?"

"A hate crime is very serious business. Brian's character will be scrutinized. They will use everything they can get on him. I'm not going to lie to you. It's going to be rough. You could end up serving a prison term of eight years or more."

Brian didn't say a word after leaving the attorney. He and Justin took a cab home and ate dinner in silence. Justin tried to nuzzle next to Brian on the couch, but Brian pushed him away gently. Not even sex could fix this. How the fuck could either of them survive an eight year separation? Brian felt responsible. Justin was convinced that Brian had not attacked that boy, but Brian wasn't so sure. It was not in his nature to be violent or to force a sexual advance, but he remembered his state of mind when he left the house that evening and he did go into that bar. If he hadn't intended to find a trick that night, then why didn't he just get in a cab and go home?

In the morning Justin awoke after a fitful sleep. He walked into the kitchen and found Brian sitting at the table writing. Justin approached him slowly and was relieved when Brian put out his hand.

"I've been working on some figures here. I want to make sure that you're going to be okay once I'm gone. You are going to have to sell the penthouse, but I've listed all of my other assets and I think you're going to be okay for a long time."

"What! You've been sitting up all night worrying about how you're going to support me from prison? Brian, you're giving up! You're innocent. How can you let them railroad you without a fight? We need to find out who set you up and get them to confess."

"Okay, I'll just make a public announcement in the middle of Times Square for the asshole who set me up to reveal himself. Justin, this is New York City. We have to be practical about this. Look, we've had a great life here. But I'm going away for fucking years. The worst part for me is thinking about you being alone."

"You're the one who'll be alone, Brian. You shouldn't worry about me."

"I grew up alone. I survived my childhood, I'll survive prison. You're not cut out to be alone. You need to be with someone. You need to be loved. You're going to have to find someone to..."

"I don't believe this."

"Face facts. In eight years I'll be in my forties. I'll walk out of that prison and you'll see a beaten down old man and you'll wonder why you threw away your life."

"Brian, if you do go away, even if it is for years. I guarantee that when you walk out of that prison I'll see the same beautiful man who danced with me at my prom. I'll always see you that way, Brian. I promise. I'll do whatever it takes to stay close to you. I'll sell the penthouse and move upstate so I can visit you every chance I get. And when you get out I'll be waiting for you." Justin put on his coat and kissed Brian on the cheek. "I don't want to talk about this anymore. I'm going to work. I'm going to ask Ken and Will to help me find out who's responsible. I'm not giving up without a fight."

Brian sat on the edge of the table and watched Justin walk out the door. He was numb. The phone rang, shocking him out of his despair momentarily. Maybe it was good news. Maybe the boy had recanted his story. Brian answered the telephone.

"Hello, Brian, it's Clare." How ironic that he'd thought this would be good news.

"What? Is Mom dead? If not, I really have nothing to say to you."

"Brian, I need your help." Clare sobbed into the phone. "I'm desperate or I wouldn't have called. My deadbeat ex-husband has disappeared. I'm about to lose my house. I can't ask Mom for money. She has none. I wouldn't have called you if there was any other way. I need a loan."

"Get a job," Brian shot back.

"Brian, you know how hard it is for me. You have so much and you never share anything with your family."

"And what have you ever shared with me? The last time I saw you I was accused of molesting your kid."

"Brian, if I move away from Mother, you will have to start taking care of her. Is that what you want?"

"Is this blackmail?"

"No, I really need the money, Brian. I'm your flesh and blood, for God sake."

Brian suddenly had an idea. "How badly do you need this loan?"

"I'm desperate. There's no one else I can ask."

"Okay, I'll loan you the money. In fact I'll give you the money. . . provided you do something for me."

Justin returned home in the afternoon. He was visibly upset.

"What happened?" Brian asked. He had left work early to arrange for the money transfer and make some arrangements for his sister.

"Nothing!" Justin insisted. He through himself down on the sofa. "Everything. I quit my job. I won't work with that asshole Ken any more."

"What did he do?"

"I asked him to help me find out what happened that night. He refused. He said that you probably did whatever it was that you were accused of. Brian, he hates you for what happened with Adam. And that's another thing. He's dating that slime again. I bet Adam is the one who is doing this to you, Brian. Adam and Ken are in this together."

"I spoke to Adam. He said that he's changed. He even offered to help me. I don't trust him, but I don't see any reason for him to destroy me either. He knows what I bring to the business and he benefits from it. It would serve no purpose for me to be in jail."

"I don't care. Ken had no right to talk about you like that."

"Justin, you shouldn't have been so quick to quit. You're going to have to fend for yourself soon. You can't let pride stand in your way. You put a lot into that business, it's something you helped to build."

"Don't worry about me, Brian. I won't starve. My grandmother left me some money. And I'm not completely helpless. I can build my own business. I won't work with someone who hates you. That's like hating me."

"What about Will? He didn't storm out also, did he?"

"He did side with me. But he needs the job so I told him to stay."

"Good. There's a boy with some sense." Brian turned his attention to the brown paper bag that Justin had clutched in his hand. "What's in the bag?" Brian asked.

"Nothing." Justin replied.

"JUSTIN, what's in the fucking bag?"

Reluctantly, Justin brought the bag forward and slowly handed it to Brian. "Plan B," he explained.

Brian opened the bag and spilled the contents out on the counter.

"Phony passports, airline tickets to Tibet, cash, hair dye. Justin you've really lost your mind this time. I'm not running away for the rest of my life. And what about you? Your family, your job. You just graduated from college. You have your whole life ahead of you."

"I don't care about any of that. We're both brilliant. We'll be fine. I can work under a pen name, I'll still have my talent. There is no way I'm going to be separated from you. One day the truth will come out and we can come back."

"We'd get caught. We'd both go to prison then."

"Do you think they'd let us share a cell?" Justin joked half-heartedly "We won't get caught. I bought some brown dye for my hair. We'll change our appearances. It'll work, Brian. It has to work."

Even as he said the words, Justin knew he was grasping at straws. He was terrified. Brian looked down at him and saw the tears start to form. Justin very rarely cried. They both knew once that happened, it meant they were giving up. Brian put his arms around Justin and held him close for a moment. Then he put his hands on Justin shoulders and looked into his eyes.

"I'm not going to let it happen. Someone is responsible for fucking up our lives and I'm going to find out who. And after I kick their ass, they'll admit the whole story is a lie. You stay here and wait for Michael and Will."

"You can't go to that bar alone, Brian."

Brian put his hand on Justin's face. "I have to do this alone. Understand?"

"Yes." Justin said softly.

Brian kissed Justin's forehead and then ran his hand through the boys hair. "And get rid of that dye. I love your blond hair."

Justin smiled at the comment. Brian went to the hall closet and retrieved his camera. It was time for a little surveillance, Brian Kinney style. He put on his black leather jacket and left the apartment. His plan was to watch the front of the bar and see if he recognized anyone. What puzzled him was the fact that his trip to the bar that night had been unplanned. If someone had decided to fuck with his head, it would have to have been on impulse. So he figured it must be someone who frequented the bar often. He still had not ruled out Adam.

Brian sought out a park bench with a view of the entrance to the bar. He thought about the night he'd had his heart-to-heart talk with Will. He was one person that Brian had eliminated from the list of suspects. Even if Will was jealous of his friendship with Michael, he would never betray Justin. Brian took out his camera and started snapping away at anything that moved. When he finished the roll he headed for home.

On his lunch hour the following day, Brian picked up the photos from the photography department where he had dropped them off earlier. He stopped by Adam's office and together they studied the pictures and discussed possible suspects.

When he arrived home, Justin greeted him at the door. "We have company. Michael, Will and Ted are here."

Michael hugged his friend. "Brian, I can't believe the mess you're in."

"And this time you're not even guilty." Ted quipped.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Justin jumped to Brian's defense.

"He means that in the past I've been guilty of everything I've been accused of and more."

"You never molested me!" Justin insisted.

"Never mind that now," Michael said. "Ted and I came to help. Who do you think is responsible for setting you up?"

"There must be a million suspects," Ted remarked. Justin shot him a dirty look.

"What happened when you went to the bar last night?" Michael asked.

Brian took the photos from his pocket and laid them out on the table. "I took pictures of anyone who looked even vaguely familiar. Mostly it was a waste of film."

"Some of these guys are pretty hot. Can I have this one?" Ted picked up one of the photos.

"Fuck off!" Brian grabbed the photo and put it back in order. "There's one here that's interesting. That's the kid who's accused me of rape. Adam pointed him out from the photos. He'd found out who the kid was from some of his old bar buddies."

"That little shit!" Justin exclaimed. "The guy at the door is proofing him. And look, in the next picture he's letting him in the bar. Brian, doesn't that prove that he's not fifteen?"

"It proves that he's got ID. But, so did you when you were underage. . . Vic."

The men studied the photos of the boy. Then Ted said. "He looks familiar, Michael, doesn't he?"

Michael picked up the photo. "Yes he does. Do you think he's from Pittsburgh?"

Before Ted could answer, the doorbell rang. Justin went to get the door. When Brian heard him yell out, "What the fuck are you two doing here?" he went to Justin's side.

Adam stood in the doorway with his arm around a sullen Ken. "Ken has something to say to you both." Brian stood aside and let them in.

Ken sat on the sofa very close to Adam. "Go ahead, Ken. Tell them."

Ken sat forward and shyly turned to Justin. "Justin, I'm sorry. It got out of hand and I didn't know what to do. Adam thinks it will help if I tell you what happened that night." Ken turned toward Brian. "Brian, I put something in your beer that night. I didn't know she was going to do this, Brian. She said it was a joke."

"Who? What the fuck are you talking about?" Justin had moved to Brian's side. Brian put his hand on Justin's arm to keep him from attacking Ken.

"When I went to the men's room, a woman approached me. She asked if you were Brian Kinney and how did I know you. I told her you were a friend of a friend. I think she could tell I was not a big fan. She told me that she knew you in Pittsburgh. She said that you fucked with her life and she had a plan to get even. It was supposed to be a joke. She was going to follow you until you passed out and then she was going to call the cops to arrest you for public drunkenness. I'm sorry, Brian, I really am."

"How could you do something like that to Brian?" Justin said, outraged. "He tried to help you. If it wasn't for Brian, your buddy Adam would still be fucking his way to hell. And you'd have been dragged right down with him."

Brian put his arms tightly around Justin and held him back. "Stop! I want to hear what he has to say. Why don't you go make us some coffee." Justin turned around and glared at Brian for a moment before complying with his request. He realized that Ken might be able to help.

Adam put his arm around Ken, who looked pale. "Brian, I asked Ken to describe the woman and I asked about her in the bar. The bartender remembered her because she came in with an older man. They sat near you at the bar and left shortly after you did."

"Ken, what did she look like?"

"She was short. Her hair was spiked and had heavy blonde streaks. I guess she was about your age. I assumed she was a dyke."

"Doesn't sound like anyone I know." Brian said.

Ken glanced down at the photos on the table. "That's her!" He pointed to one of the photos.

Brian picked it up and studied it. All of a sudden things became perfectly clear. He knew who had set him up and why. "It's Melanie," Brian announced. He had not recognized her because of her new punk look.

"Mel! Let me see that?" Ted took the photo from Brian. "You're right. It's her. But Brian, I can't believe that Melanie would do anything this extreme. She's a lawyer, for Christ's sake, an officer of the court!"

"Melanie has always blamed Brian for everything that's gone wrong in her life," Michael said. "She probably heard that Lindsay was getting married. It must have been a real blow to her ego to have turned the woman straight."

"People are never what they seem to be," Justin said. He had put the coffee out on the table and sat down on the floor next to Brian. His remark was directed at Ken.

Brian massaged his shoulders gently. "Whatever was on her mind, she wasn't working alone. Who the fuck is the old guy she's hanging out with? Maybe he influenced her, or paid her off."

Michael straightened in his chair, "Hey, I just realized where I've seen this kid. Ted, remember the B/B party we went to? Wasn't this the kid that was hanging onto Bellwether all night?"

Ted looked at the picture again. "Could be. Yeah, in fact I saw a picture of Bellwether in the paper recently. He was at a party and the kid was in the picture too. I remember because he looked so young to be hanging out with an old guy like Bellwether.

"Bellwether, it's him, Brian!" Justin exclaimed. "He's the old guy that Mel's been hanging out with. That sack of shit. He's always been jealous of you, Brian. That's why he wrote that book of lies about you. All that time he's the one who's the child molester."

"He's written another book." Ted informed them. "In the article it said that it was supposed to come out at the end of the month. It's about child pornography."

"That's it!" Brian exclaimed. "All this is a marketing ploy. He wants free publicity for his new book. What better way than to have my name hit the papers as a convicted child abuser. Proving that his last book wasn't a work of fiction."

Justin jumped up. "Let's go!"

Brian grabbed Justin's arm. "Not so fast." He turned to the others. "Gentlemen, I think we should go down to the bar and look for Mel. We'll leave the Mrs. at home. Justin, you work things out with Ken. Will, you referee."

"But Brian . . ." Justin pleaded.

"Justin, I'll take care of this. It's going to be okay." Brian kissed him on his blond hair and then left with the others.

Adam went inside the bar first, followed by Brian, Michael and Ted. Adam separated from the boys in order to speak with the bartender. He came back a few minutes later and told them that Melanie was a regular. She'd been seen lately with a tall woman with brown eyes and identical short-cropped, streaked hair. The boys took their positions up on the catwalk that surrounded the dance floor to watch for her to arrive.

Just like old times." Ted observed.

"Only this time we are looking for a woman." Michael quipped.

Brian turned to Michael and glared at him. "Don't even joke about a thing like that."

Adam had gone down to the bar to question the bartender. Brian saw him signal to them and point toward a table in the far corner of the bar. There was a woman with short cropped streaked hair sitting at the table alone. It wasn't Mel, but it could be the woman that she had been seen with that night.

"Let's go," Michael said.

"No." Brian held his arm. "I'll go down first. You keep an eye out for Mel."

As Brian approached the table where the woman was sitting, she started dialing her cell phone. Brian grabbed it out of her hand. "I'm Brian Kinney. I think that we almost met one night in the alley out back." He recognized her as the woman he had seen with the bleeding boy the night of the alleged attack.

Brian handed back the phone and the woman looked nervously toward the door. "Sit down," she said. It was not a request, but a command. Brian complied.

"You don't know all the facts. Don't judge her."

"Oh, did Bellwether fill her pretty little head with lies?" Brian leaned toward the woman and noticed that inside of her denim jacket she had a gun. He backed off slightly.

"I'm a cop," the woman finally said. "My name is Christine White. I'm Mel's lover." And then she confessed. "Look, that asshole Bellwether is a sleaze. It got out of hand and Mel was afraid I would get into trouble. She didn't know what he was going to do to that kid. After you were arrested, he convinced us that the kid and the charges would disappear. He just wanted a little publicity at your expense. Mel went along to get even. She's been having a bad time of it since she lost her family. She's been drinking heavily and not sleeping much. For some reason she blamed you and she had me convinced that you were the devil incarnate. And that a little time in a cell would do both you and society some good."

"That's what all this was about? Free publicity and payback for my former evil ways?"

"Bellwether took off with the kid to an island somewhere." she went on. "The I.D. that the boy had on him that night was his little brother's. He's actually 20 and Bellwether is the one who beat him up and raped him. It seems the boy gets off on pain. Bellwether paid off the mother and he also paid off the gang of so-called 'witnesses to a hate crime.' I'm ashamed to have been a part of it. Mel was so down on you, I wanted you to suffer too. The next morning when she realized that she had been responsible for you being charged with a hate crime, she was mortified. She was terrified to face you and your partner."

Brian listened silently. He thought about Mel and their past and he figured that he had caused her a world of grief. The incident may have been forgiven had she not brought up Justin.

"I fucked up her life, so she fucked up mine. That I get. But does she have any idea what this has done to Justin? He's lost a lot of people from his life. He always considered her a friend. One more of life's lessons to learn, Sunshine. Don't trust dykes with a passion for revenge. They don't care who gets in the way."

"She's just started over here in New York. She's stopped drinking and is getting help to deal with her anger. If you press charges against her, what will that prove?"

Brian thought a moment. The nightmare was over. The details and the apologies didn't interest him. All he wanted to do was go home. He was about to get up and leave when he saw Michael and Ted walking toward him. Michael was

holding on to Melanie's arm. She looked pale and nervous. When they got to the table she sat next to Christine and took her hand.

"Brian, I never intended . . . "

"Forget it. Live your life . . . And be happy. That's what I plan to do." He smiled and walked away from the table.

Coming Home To You Part VIII Fin

Justin put the finishing touches on the table he'd set for himself and Brian. It was a special dinner to celebrate their first night alone together since their trip to Florida with Gus. Upon their return Justin got the flu. Brian had a business trip in the beginning of the week and had arrived home early that morning. Justin had gone to the sex toy shop downtown and purchase some oils and lotions for the evening that he had planned for the two of them. First he'd made a special dinner of salmon and baked potatoes. He'd set the table with the good china and put candles in between their plates. He looked over at the new photo of Gus, Brian and himself with Mickey Mouse and smiled. It shocked the hell out of Justin when Brian insisted on having the picture taken. That man of his was full of surprises.

"I'm home!" Brian called out. "Come here and fuck me!"

Justin grinned, but didn't run to greet him. "I'm saving that for desert."

Brian dropped his briefcase on the hall table and joined Justin in the kitchen. He put his arms around his waist and kissed his neck. Justin pushed him away and announced that dinner was ready. "The quicker we eat, the quicker we get to have desert."

Brian sat at the table obediently and poured the wine. "What did you do today?"

"I went to the office. It was a mess. Will is going crazy trying to keep up with the billing and rescheduling the client meetings that Ken had over booked. Ken looked like he'd lost weight. Will said that Ken hasn't been sleeping well either."

"So you swallowed your pride and took back your business."

"Not exactly. I told Ken I would consider coming back if he'd give me 51% of the business."

"Nice work. Did he fall for it?"

"No, but he did get down on his knees and beg."

"You should have made him suck your dick while he was down there."

Justin laughed. "That's your job. Enough of all this romance shit, let's fuck." Justin grabbed Brian and pulled him to his feet.

They headed for their play room kissing and pulling at each other's clothes. Before they got there the door bell rang. "Go the fuck away!" Brian yelled out.

"Daddy! I have to go to the bathroom!" Gus yelled back from behind the door. Brian opened the door and Gus ran past him. Lindsay laughed, realizing what she and her son had interrupted.

"I'm sorry. I had an appointment in the city. I had to bring Gus. He insisted on coming to see you."

"Great." Justin smiled unenthusiastically. "How are the wedding plans coming along?"

"Better than the last time. Tony hired a wedding planner. I was in the city for the last fitting on my dress."

Gus returned from the bathroom. "Mom. You can go home. I'll stay here with Daddy and Justin."

"Gus! You can't just make plans for yourself without consulting anyone."

"Daddy. Can I stay here?"

"Ah, your mom's right, sonny boy. You have to do what she says."

"Mom, why can't I stay? You said you were going to see the doctor tomorrow and that I couldn't go anyway. So why can't I stay here with Daddy and Justin? There's no school."

"Sure you can stay, Gus." Justin said. "Go pick out a movie for us to watch."

"Are you sure? Lindsay asked. "It looks like you two were ah. . . busy."

"We're always busy." Brian said pulling his shirt back on. "We can get busy later when he's in bed."

Lindsay went to kiss Gus good night. Brian looked at Justin and shrugged. Justin smiled at him and put his arm around his neck and kissed him. "Later," he whispered.

Gus had selected the "Toy Story" movie and was already ensconced on the sofa eating the desert of strawberry shortcake which Justin had bought for Brian. "Want some?" Gus offered a fork full to Brian.

"No, thanks."

Justin sat of the sofa and Gus moved over to sit next to him. "Want some?" Gus offered.

Justin took a big bite of the cake which made Gus laugh out loud.

Brian looked down at the two of them and shook his head. "Gus, move over."

"No! I want to watch the movie with Justin." He slid over closer to Justin, almost dropping the cake on the floor.

Brian took the cake plate and put it on the coffee table. He lifted Gus and moved him over to the other side of the sofa. Gus glared at him as he retrieved his cake from the table. Brian ignored Gus, turned to Justin and kissed him several times. Gus's eyes remained glued to the television. Justin was becoming uncomfortable with Brian's advances in front of the boy. He pushed Brian away gently. "Later." Justin whispered.

Brian looked at him and then looked over at his son. He pulled Justin close to his side and put his arm firmly around him.

When the movie ended Brian turned off the television. "Time for bed, Gus."

"It's too early. I want 'Toy Story II' next."

Justin yawned and stretched his arms over his head. "Gus, remember daddy and I need some private time. Why don't you go in your room and read your dinosaur books until you fall asleep, okay."

Brian grabbed Gus's arm as he got up from the sofa. "Hey, give your dad a kiss good-night."

Gus giggled when Brian tickled him under the arm he jumped up on his lap and kissed him then leaned over and kissed Justin. He slid down from Brian's lap and ran off to his room.

"How fucking long are they making these movies now a days. I thought it would never end." Brian had stripped off his shirt and Justin's and was slipping out of his pants as he dragged Justin to the couch in the play room.

Justin was aware of Gus's footsteps in the hall. Brian was about to cum when he sensed his partner had stopped moving. He plunged deeper into Justin until his body responded giving Brian what he needed to finish.

"I'm sorry." Justin said. "He was outside of our door. I think he was listening."

"So what if he was. Let him get an earful. Maybe he'll learn something."

"Brian, I think that something's bothering him. He didn't act like this when we were in Florida."

"Of course not. He was so tired from all the running around he did in the park he slept like a rock."

"I'm telling you, Brian. He has something on his mind. And why were you pawing me on the sofa? You know we don't make a showing in front of Gus. It makes him uncomfortable."

"He was challenging me," Brian said, "That's what he was doing. He probably wants to fuck you himself."

"You don't mean that, Brian."

"Why not? He has a dick. You're irresistible. Who wouldn't want to fuck you."

"You're really grossing me out now. You're talking about Gus like he's . . .

"What? Like he's gay?"

"Stop. I don't want to talk about this anymore. Let's go to bed."

Brian put an arm out and stopped him. "I'm sorry. I'm acting like a jealous asshole again. Now I'm accusing Gus of . . ."

Justin started to laugh. Brian laughed too. "Let's go to bed."

In the morning Brian went into the great room and found Gus watching cartoons.

"You want me to make you breakfast, Daddy?"

Brian considered his offer. "Sure. I'll have whatever you're having."

"Corn flakes and soda?"

"Ah, maybe I'll wait for Justin to wake up."

"Okay. I'll make him breakfast too."

Brian sat down and stared at the television set. Gus moved close to him and put his elbow on Brian's knee. "Daddy. You said I could ask you anything and you won't get mad, right?"

"Yeah, I did say that. What do you want to know?"

"Are you my real daddy?"

"Of course I'm your father. Why would you ask that?"

"Did you have sex with Mommy?"

Brian was dumbfounded. He expect the question to be asked at one point in Gus's life, but not for ten years or so. Gus was only six. "Ahh . . sort of . . It was like this. Your mom wanted to have a baby and she handed me a cup to. .
."

"Brian!" Justin exclaimed from the hallway. "Don't. . . be gross. Just tell him the truth."

"I was telling him the truth."

Gus looked up at Justin. "Were you there when Mommy asked Daddy for a baby?"

"No. I missed that conversation. I didn't meet your dad until the night you were born."

"Yeah, I remember."

"You remember that?" Brian asked.

"Justin told me that he helped to pick out my name."

"Gus, why are you asking about this?" Justin joined them on the couch. "Are you confused about something?"

"Where I go to school most of the kids have a mommy and a daddy. Some kids have two mommies, some kids have two daddies. I've got three daddies and two mommies. I'm a freak."

"Is Dr. Tony calling himself daddy now?" Brian huffed. "Because he's not."

"He will be when he marries mommy, won't he?"

"No. I'll always be your dad. Understand? Nobody else."

"Gus, you understand that your father and I are both gay, right?" Justin asked.

"Duh!." Gus replied.

Justin chuckled and then continued. "Gay men don't have sex with women. We have sex with other men. And it's the same for women who are lesbians."

Both Gus and Brian listened intently to Justin explanation. Justin picked up a pad which was on the table and began to draw an illustration for Gus.

"In order to make a baby you need an egg, and a seed." He draw a picture of a man and a woman. "The woman has the egg in here." He showed Gus the spot on the drawing. "The man has the seed, understand so far?" Gus nodded.

When Lindsay and Mel decided that they wanted to have a baby they needed a seed. They asked Daddy for a seed and he put it in a cup and gave it them. Mel took the seed and put it inside of Mommy and that's how you started to grow inside of your mother.

"How did Mommy Mel get the seed all the way in there?" Gus asked.

"I don't know Gus. It's not really important. But that's why you have two mommies and why Brian is your father. And you know that Brian and Lindsay love each other, in a special way. And that's why he gave her the seed."

"So I only have one mommy and one daddy, just like every body else."

"Yep."

"Daddy, are you and Justin always going to be gay together?"

"Yes, we're always going to be gay. And we're always going to be together."

"That's good. Mommy isn't a lesbian any more and now Mommy Mel doesn't love me. I would hate it if you and Justin weren't gay together 'cause Justin wouldn't have to love me anymore."

"Gus, you never have to worry about that. I'm always going to love you, no matter what." Justin kissed Gus on the head and went into the kitchen.

Brian put his hand on Gus's arm and looked him in the eye. "That's true, Gus. Once Justin loves you he sticks by you, no matter what stupid, selfish things you do. Remember that."

Justin stood behind Brian and put his hand on his shoulder. "Why do you say things like that? You haven't done anything stupid or selfish in . . . days."

"I wanted Gus to know that he can count on you . . . because that's the kind of man you are."

"Thanks." Justin slid his hand down Brian's chest. "Do you think he understands?"

Brian held the picture Justin had drawn upside down. "I'm not sure I do. How did they get that seed all the way up there?"

Justin made face. "I don't want to think about it."

"You could have made my dick bigger."

"I didn't want to traumatize him."

Brian took Justin's hand and pulled him down on the sofa. "We're pretty good at this parenting stuff."

"WE? You were about to scar him for life with you're jerking off into a cup story."

"It's the truth."

"But you do love Lindsay in a way. A kid should know that he's wanted by both of his parents. So he'll feel secure."

"Another school boy notion." Brian said sarcastically. "If my father hadn't knocked my mother up with my sister there would have been no ME. There was no love between them, ever. And look how great I turned out."

"Ah. . . yeah. You're so well adjusted and secure."

"Maybe it's better if a kid is not all that secure. It'll keep him on his toes so he doesn't get hurt."

"What's wrong with you today? Are you still upset about Lindsay getting married?"

"I don't give a shit about Lindsay getting married. She can do whatever she wants."

"Gus is not going to forget you."

"We hardly ever see him now. They're going to fill up his life with all kinds of shit that kids do on the weekend. I can't compete with that."

"Not everything is a competition. Gus will want to see you."

"It's funny, you know, I never thought I would care about being a father. But, I would miss it."

"Daddy! The toilet won't flush and the water is getting bigger!!" Gus yelled from the bathroom.

Justin laughed. "You see, Gus will always need you for the important things."

Justin arrived at work the next morning and found Will at his desk. "What's wrong with him?" Justin asked. His partner Ken was sitting at a desk on the other side of the room. He was staring into space.

"He's been sitting there like that since I got here. I think that he may have spent the night. Justin, I am really getting worried about him. Since that incident with Brian he's been acting weird."

"He is weird. But, he's talented and has got connections. So we're stuck with him. Let me see if I can make contact."

"Hey." Justin touched Ken on the shoulder.

Ken sat up straight and looked at Justin. "I need to go home."

"Are you sick? I'll call you a cab?"

"No, I need to go home, home. South Carolina. My mother died."

"Oh, Ken, I'm so sorry. Why did you come in here today? Do you need me to do anything?"

"That's what I started to do. I was writing you a memo, but I then I just zoned out."

"Never mind this stuff. You should go. Do you want me to go with you to the airport?"

"Thanks, but Adam is going with me. I'm going to meet him back at my place. I'm sorry to dump all of this stuff on you Justin."

"Don't worry about anything, Ken. What are partners for?" Justin walked with Ken out to the street and flagged down a cab. He put his arms around him and kissed him on the cheek. "I'm really sorry about your Mom."

"Thanks. And I'm sorry for my part in what happened to Brian. Justin, it was really lousy of me to try to mess up your life. I wouldn't blame you if you never forgave me."

"Brian forgave Mel. He said that the whole affair gave him illumination. Whatever that means."

"Sound like Brian. Thanks Justin. I'll call you when I get there."

Brian was as nervous as a cat. He got up and paced the floor in the kitchen as he waited for the water to boil. What he was about to tell Justin was going to change their lives forever. In fact he may have gone so far over the top this time that Justin could decide to leave. He didn't know what he would do if that happened. No, he couldn't think like that. Justin loved him no matter what. He's always saying things like that, isn't he?

He turned off the burner on the stove and sat on the couch. What was he going to say? What was Justin going to say back? His stomach was in a knot by the time he heard Justin's key in the door. Brian took a deep breath and tried to pretend that everything was normal.

"Hey, what are you doing home?" Justin asked as he removed his tie and jacket. "I thought you were coming back tomorrow."

"Yeah, well, I missed you. Come here." Justin sat down next to him and Brian rubbed his neck. "You look tired."

"I am. I used to think that school was work, and work was fun. Now that school is over I realize it's just the opposite. Between doing Ken's projects and my own I'm exhausted. My neck is killing me from working on the computer all day. I guess I'm a grown up now. Complaining about all my aches and pains."

"You are a grown up, aren't you? When did that happen?"

"The night I met you, I think. Someone had to be the grown up in this relationship." Justin smiled and shifted his body so Brian could massage his back. "What did you do today?"

Brian hesitated before he spoke. What he was about to tell Justin was going to change both of their lives permanently. He hoped that Justin would understand his motives. He had really gone out on a limb this time, there was no turning back now. Before he could get the words out, a noise came from a room down the hall. Justin heard it.

"What's that noise? Is Gus here?"

"No, but there is something I need to tell you." The noise got louder and Justin jumped up and went to investigate. He walked down the hall and opened the door to Gus's room. Brian was right behind him. On the bed was a newborn baby strapped into a car seat.

"It's a baby!" Justin turned and looked at Brian curiously. "Where did he come from?"

Justin unhooked the restraints, lifted the newborn and cradled him in his arms. "He's so cute." Justin cooed. The baby stopped crying momentarily to study Justin's face.

"He's hungry." Brian produced a bottle which he had prepared in the kitchen earlier. He handed the bottle to Justin who placed it into the baby's mouth. Justin sat down on the rocker in the corner of the room.

"What's he doing here? Who does he belong to?"

"He belongs to us."

"Seriously, Brian, where did he come from?"

"Pittsburgh?" Brian offered.

Justin looked down at the child and got a chilling feeling. "Brian what did you do?" He stood up and handed the baby to Brian. The child in Brian's arms looked up at him as if waiting for his answer.

"He's your baby." Brian blurted out.

"That's not possible."

"I did it. I took your sperm and . . . used it."

Justin looked down at the child and realized that Brian could be telling the truth. The baby did look like his own baby pictures.

"Why would you do that? How could you make a decision like this without even talking to me?"

"It just happened. I was afraid I would be going to prison for a long time. You were going to throw your life away waiting for me to get out. You would have been alone, maybe for the rest of your life. I couldn't stand the thought of it." Justin took the baby back from Brian and sat down on the bed.

"How are we going to take care of a kid? He'll consume us, Brian. We won't have a moment alone together for years and years."

Justin found himself drawn to the babies face. He watched intently as the child sucked on the nipple and looked up at him. The light blond fuzz on top of the babies head was sticking straight up. Justin gently smoothed it. There was something about the babies eyes that looked familiar. They were darker and rounder than his own. The fair skin, and the seashell ears were definitely features that they shared. But the eyes . . . no it couldn't be.

Brian couldn't take the silence anymore. "You don't want him! Okay, we'll sell him, then. I bet we could get big bucks for a fair haired, healthy baby boy. Here, give him to me. I'll post him on ebay."

Justin couldn't hide the smile that had developed at the corners of his mouth. The baby seemed to smile back at him and Justin was hooked. "I'm someone's dad. I can't believe it."

"So, you want to keep him now?" Brian asked cautiously.

"Of course I want to keep HIM. It's YOU I'm not so sure about."

Brian knew that Justin's anger was temporary. He was in love with the baby already. Brian sat on the floor next to Justin and rested his head in his lap so that he was face to face with their new son.

"He looks just like you. . . beautiful."

"Bullshit. Don't try to charm your way out of this, Brian. You owe me some answers so start talking. Who is his mother? Tell me how you did this."

"The idea came to me when my sister called and asked to borrow money. She was about to lose her house because her deadbeat ex-husband took a powder. So I said okay, provided you so something for me."

"Clair is the baby's mother? Brian that's disturbing."

"Yeah, I know it is. But it was an opportunity to have a kid that belonged to both of us. He's related to me, too. I wanted you to have a part of me with you so you wouldn't forget me.

"Like I could EVER forget you!" Justin shook his head.

"I figured that there's no way my blood sucking sister is ever going to want to claim him. She would die first. Having a baby with her faggot brother's faggot husband would not be something she would ever admit to anyone. She has her money and a few extra stretch marks and we have our family."

"He has your eyes, I think." Justin lifted the baby onto his shoulder and patted his back gently. He was rewarded with a healthy burp.

"And your table manners." Brian watched as Justin finished feeding the baby.

"I can't believe we have a kid." Justin smiled at Brian and put the baby down on the bed. "What are we going to call him?"

"He has a name. I had to give him one for the birth certificate before they would release him from the hospital. You can change it if you want." Brian reached into a baby bag and pulled out the birth certificate.

"Fin Kinney Taylor." Justin read from the paper. "FIN?!! What kind of a name is that for my kid?"

"You hate it. I figured you would. It's Gaelic. It means fair one." Brian shook his head. "Forget it. What do you want to call him? I'll change it."

They both looked down at the sleeping child. "I don't know?" Justin said softly. "I haven't had much time to prepare. A baby's name is important." Justin thought about the night Gus was born. Brian had turned to him and asked him what he would name the baby. He would never forget how happy Brian looked holding his new son. Ever since that night Brian had allowed him to share in Gus's life.

"Fin suits him. We'll call him Fin." Justin watched as Brian's face lit up. The anger he had felt earlier had disappeared. "We have a baby." Justin took Brian's hand and pulled him down next to him on the bed and kissed him then hit him on the shoulder. "You should have fucking told me. Let me be prepared."

"I know it was selfish." Brian admitted. "Doing all of this without telling you. I'm going to be 35 years old soon. I know I'm never going to be a real dad to Gus. Seeing Lindsay with Dr. Tony and Gus, drove me nuts. They look like a fucking Hallmark card together."

"Gus loves you, Brian. He knows that you're his father."

"I know he does. But it's not like I'm going to be there for him all the time. When we had him here for those few months it felt different. I liked being a full time dad. We taught him things that Lindsay and Mel never could. We're a great team. You and I are going to be great dads."

"Yeah, like right now you're going to show our son just how much you love him by changing his dirty diaper."

Brian crinkled up his nose. "But, you always took care of that with Gus."

"That was when you were the dad and I was the Justin. Now It's your turn to be the . . . Brian."

Justin started to leave the room when a thought struck him. "My Mom. Oh my, God. She's a grandmother. How am I going to spring this on her, Brian?"

"You're not. Not yet, Justin. We need to talk about how to handle the questions."

"Like who's the mother? And . . . Justin, why didn't you tell me before this? I'll leave those questions for you to answer. But, I'm not going to keep this from my mother, Brian. Besides, I think it would make her happy to know the family is growing, even though her son is gay."

"Okay, but just your mom, and swear her to secrecy for now." Brian removed the dirty diaper and Justin took it out of his hand. "Hey, he's got your dick." Justin observed.

"And your perfect ass. We have created the worlds first perfect homosexual baby."

"Don't label him yet." Justin said as he left the room to dispose of the soiled diaper.

Brian sat on the bed stared down at the baby who had drifted off to sleep. When Justin returned to the bedroom after preparing dinner he noticed that Brian had not moved. He was still sitting on the bed staring at the baby.

"Have you been sitting there looking at him the whole time?"

"Yeah." Brian admitted. He smiled at Justin. "He's amazing. Come here and look at him."

"He kinda scares me." Justin said.

"You're great with kids. Gus adores you."

"He doesn't know that I almost scalded him to death when he was a baby. I don't really know anything about babies. And now, thanks to you, I've got one. And he's so small. I don't remember Gus being this small."

"He was. And how the fuck do you think I felt the first time I saw him? I was scared to death."

"You didn't look scared at all."

"I was faking it."

"But you got to hand him back to Lindsay and leave. We're stuck with him."

"Justin don't freak out. Remember when Lindsay dumped Gus on us? We handled it."

"We?"

"Okay, mostly you. This time I'm going to do more. I want to be a parent to him. I did a pretty good job raising you, didn't I?"

They had survived three whole months as parents. Justin's mother came to stay for two weeks. Brian had arranged daycare with a woman who lived two floors down. She was a retired nurse and widow whose children were married and living in different parts of the country. No one knew about the baby yet. And hiding the fact was becoming difficult.

"Brian. He's three months old already and no one knows we have a kid."

"What do you want to do?" Brian said as he picked out a tie from his closet.

"We should have a party for him. Let everyone ask all the questions at once. We'll tell them he's ours, that's it. Let them guess the rest."

"What do you think, Fin? Are you ready to come out of the closet." Brian held the baby in the crook of his arm as he selected the suit he would wear to work in the morning. The baby gurgled with glee every time Brian spoke to him.

"You know, he wouldn't break if you put him down once in a while. You're spoiling him."

Brian kissed Justin on the neck. "But, I like spoiling little blond twinks. I have a reputation to uphold."

"Very funny. I'm going to call everyone and invite them for next weekend."

Brian put Fin down for his nap and had started to help Justin fold the wash when the doorbell rang.

"Who could that be?" Justin wondered.

"I don't know. Michael is in Pittsburgh this week."

Brian went to answer the door as Justin watched from the hall. Lindsay and Gus had been to a doctor in the neighborhood and decided to stop by. Brian and Justin exchanged glances and realized there was no way of keeping Fin a secret any longer.

"I just made some coffee, come on in the kitchen." Justin led the way. "How's married life?"

As Justin and Lindsay headed toward the kitchen, Gus made a bee line for his bedroom with Brian following close behind.

"Wonderful," Lindsay gushed. "It's just wonderful." Lindsay and Tony had been married for two months. Brian and Justin had attended the wedding while Jennifer was staying with them. She was more than thrilled to have her grandson to herself for the day.

It had been an elegant social occasion. No expense was spared. It was the kind of wedding that Lindsay had always dreamed of having. . . with Brian. Seeing all of the schmaltz that went with that pretentious affair made Justin glad that he and Brian didn't make a big deal out of their wedding. It was just the two of them, and it was beautiful.

"You look different." Justin tilted his head and gave Lindsay the once over. "Have you gained weight?" He asked innocently.

"Normally I'd slug you for asking. Yes I have gained a few pounds. But, that's expected when you're pregnant."

"You're going to have a baby?" Justin exclaimed.

"Yes, Gus is going to be a big brother. Isn't that fantastic?"

Justin saw Brian standing in the hallway holding Fin. Gus was by his side. "I'm already a big brother, Mommy. Look Daddy has your baby."

"What! Gus, what are you talking about? Who's this?"

"His name is Fin." Brian announced, "he's our son."

"Who? Brian is he really your son?"

"Yes," Justin said. "He's ours."

"Why didn't you tell me you were going to do this?" Lindsay demanded.

"I didn't know I needed your permission." Brian said defensively.

"You didn't ask his." Justin interjected.

Lindsay turned and glared at Justin for a moment before collecting herself. "Congratulations," was all she could think to say. "Gus, we need to leave now. Mommy isn't feeling well."

Gus protested all the way down the hall. Brian and Justin didn't follow them to the door. They couldn't believe what they had just witnessed.

Justin broke the silence. "That went well."

"Hormones! I am so fucking glad I'm gay."

The party was held as planned the following weekend. Lindsay arrived with Gus and her new husband. They dropped off a gift, but didn't stay long. No mention was made of what had happened the week before.

Fin was a big hit. He smiled and gurgled at everyone and then went to sleep in his crib. No one asked any questions about his parentage. It was just accepted that the baby was theirs.

Daphne followed Justin into the nursery when he went to check on the baby. "Justin he's beautiful. And he's so sweet. How come you didn't tell me?"

"I didn't know." Justin closed the door. Daphne had been his closest friend almost all of his life. He knew he could trust her with the truth.

"How could you not know. He looks just like you. He has to be your baby."

"Brian arranged for his sister to get pregnant with my sperm when he thought he was going to prison. He never said a word. I came home from work one day and there was Fin."

Daphne opened her mouth and stared at Justin in disbelief. Then she started to laugh. Justin couldn't help but join her. When the baby stirred they stepped out into the hallway. "Justin that is the most unbelievable story I have ever heard. Unless you know Brian Kinney. So I totally believe it. You two don't do anything the normal way."

"You're right. We're our own men. Unconventionally fucked up. I just hope we don't fuck him up. It's scary to think about the day he starts to ask questions."

"Justin he'll grow up with you two. He won't have to ask questions."

"You're right. He and Brian already have this code that they speak in. It's amazing watching the two of them."

"I'm so jealous."

"Of me?"

"You've got everything a woman wants."

"A dick?" Justin joked. Daphne punched him in the arm playfully.

"You're lucky to have Brian to help you. I have a friend who has two kids and she never gets out of the house, except to go to work at night. Her husband has two jobs. They're barely making it. She worries all the time about leaving her kid with strangers and not having enough money to send them to college. It's a lot of pressure."

"College will cost a lot by the time Fin is ready." Justin said thoughtfully.

"That's why you are so lucky. If you'd had the opportunity to think about it, you'd probably never had a kid. Brian did you a favor."

"Yeah. I guess." Justin was glad to have at least one normal relationship in his life. Daphne always had a way of putting things in perspective for him.

Justin stripped off his tie and threw his jacket on the sofa. Brian was sitting on the floor in front of the TV. Michael was on his back lifting little Fin up and down on his chest as the infant laughed and laughed.

"Hey, boys." Justin mumbled as he headed for the refrigerator.

"Hey, yourself." Brian got to his feet and picked up the baby. Justin opened a bottle of water and drank it down in one gulp. "You look like shit. Don't we get a hello?"

Justin kissed Brian on the cheek as Fin reached out to him. "Hi, baby." He kissed Fin and took him in his arms. "Brian! He's soaking wet." Justin handed him back. "You can't leave him sitting in his own piss while you watch Sponge Bob."

"Hello to you too. I just changed him a little while ago."

"Change him again. And give him a bath. You know he has sensitive skin. He'll get a rash."

"He hates having a bath. You do it."

"So I can be the bad guy? Just do it, Brian." Brian left the room with Fin and Michael sat up on the couch.

"Hi Michael." Justin mumbled.

"Hi. When did you start wearing glasses?"

"Oh, I forgot I had them on. I've needed glasses since Jr. High. I usually wear contacts. My eyes have been bothering me lately because of my allergies."

"They make you look older."

"Just what I needed. I've got carpal tunnel syndrome, failing eyesight, a pinched nerve in my neck and constant fatigue. I feel like I'm . . . 30."

"That's what comes from working on a Saturday. Will told me you've got a slew of new clients. When I was 23 I was stocking shelves at Q-Mart and Brian had just starting his climb up the corporate ladder. I would think you would be thrilled to be so successful at your age. You've got us all beat, Justin. Beside your business you've got a penthouse, a kid and Brian Kinney. What more could you want?"

"A full nights sleep." Justin smiled. "I'm not complaining. I know I'm really lucky. But when I look at Brian and Fin, I feel . . . old."

"Brian looks great."

"That's just it. He looks like a kid. I thought having a baby is supposed to make people mature. But for him it's just the opposite. He sits on the floor watching cartoons all day on Saturday. And he talks to Fin in some kind of private Brian/Fin language that I don't understand. But, Fin does. He laughs all the time. They are having a ball and I feel like I'm falling apart."

"I think that Brian is living the childhood that he would like to have had. He never really got to do that with Gus. He looks great because he's happy."

Brian came into the room carrying Fin. "Here Daddy." He placed the boy on Justin's lap. "All neat and pretty."

"I'm sorry I snapped at you when I came in. But you know if he gets a rash he'll cry all night. Did he give you a hard time with the bath?"

"I figured out what was wrong. He wanted to do it himself, he is your kid after all. So I handed him the soap."

"Looks like he washed you too." Justin notice that Brian's shirt was soaked.

"Hey, look at this." Brian grabbed a piece of paper from the coffee table. It's your sons' first masterpiece."

"You gave him crayons? Isn't he kind of young for that?"

"You started young. He had a great time. He used an entire yellow crayon on that circle."

"No he didn't, Brian." Michael said. "He ate the crayon."

"Okay." Justin put Fin down on the floor and stood up. "I'm going to take a nap. Wake me up when dinner is ready."

"I was going to order in."

"Fine." Justin said as he slowly stretched and made his way to their bedroom.

"You staying for dinner?" Brian asked Michael.

"I'm going to meet Will. He's been staying at the office late to use the computer. He's writing a book."

"About what?"

"I don't know. He refuses to let me see it. I have read some of his short stories and he has got a real gift."

"We go for the talented ones. Justin is on a roll since he graduated from college. For the past few months he's been in overdrive signing clients and putting together projects. His buddy Ken hasn't been much use to him since his mother died. He's on anti-depressants and sleeps all the time."

"Let's hope Justin doesn't burn himself out before he's 30."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"He seems really down, Brian."

"I know. Maybe this baby thing wasn't such a hot idea."

"You're crazy about that kid and you know it. But Justin is kind of young to be a Dad. I think he feels he has to prove himself worthy by putting pressure on himself to succeed. Maybe you need to talk to him."

"When did you start caring about Justin?"

"When I finally figured out that he makes you happy."

Brian heard the shower running when he walked into the bedroom. He stripped off his clothes and lay down on the bed. Justin came out of the shower drying his hair with a towel.

"You are so incredibly sexy." Brian purred.

Justin jumped. "I didn't see you there. Is Fin asleep? Did you put the monitor on?"

"I'm trying to seduce you. Stop talking about the kid. He's fine. It's not like I'd leave him alone out on the roof or something."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean. . . "

"And stop apologizing. You're pissed at me. Have some balls and tell me what's wrong."

Justin put the towel on a chair and got into bed next to Brian. "It's not you. Everything is so different now."

"The baby was a mistake. You're too young to be tied down with a kid. I never should have. . . "

Justin put his hand over Brian's mouth. "Don't say it. I wouldn't change a thing about my life. I want to be the best artist, the best father, and best husband I can be. I'm just afraid I'm not going to be able to do it all. I miss Fin when I'm at work and I feel guilty that I'm not with him. When I come home my mind is still on what has to be done at work. And I miss being just us, like this."

"Starting tonight we are going to be just us on a regular basis. I took Fin downstairs to the baby sitter. She is going to keep him over night. We'll get some sleep and then we are going out clubbing."

"Really? We haven't danced in ages." Justin smiled and put his head on Brian's chest.

"I meant what I said before. You are incredibly hot."

"Even though I nag you about the baby, complain about my job and look like I'm 30."

Brian laughed. "You don't look like you're 30. You look exactly like you did the night we met. Of course if you need proof that you're still hot you can always do some tricks at the club. In fact, I bet you'll have to beat them off with a stick."

"Brian, it's so sweet of you to say that. We better bring two sticks, one for you."

"If we're done talking, would you roll over. I've been dying to fuck you since you walked in the door."

Brian tried to push Justin on his side. "Wait. There is something I wanted to tell you."

Exasperated Brian sat up "What?"

"I don't want to be called Daddy. It makes me feel weird. You're the daddy in this family, okay?"

"Are you sure? You are his father."

"Yes. I'm sure. Now stop talking . . . and you roll over this time, daddy."

"Michael don't you dare take one step closer." Will had spotted Michael sneaking up behind him by his reflection in the monitor.

"You've been writing that story forever. When is it going to be finished?"

"It's not a story, it's a novel . . . or maybe it's a screen play. And it is finished." Will pointed to the printer.

Michael retrieved the pages and leafed through them. "Holy shit. It's hundreds of pages. You could have two books here." Michael kissed him on the mouth. "My very own literary genius. I can't wait to read it."

"I want you to read it, but you have to promise that you'll keep an opened mind. I have patterned my characters after people that I know."

"So it's about your life."

"No. . . it's about yours. Well sort of. You're not the main character, Michael. That would have been too personal for me."

"That's okay. Has it got sex? Do I get to have sex? Are you in the sex part with me?"

"Geez, Michael, I'm not going to spoil the best part. I want you to take it home with you tomorrow and read it. Then you call me and tell me what you think."

"I thought you might want to come home with me this time. My mother is dying to cook up some of her specialties. She thinks you're too thin. And Uncle Vic wants you to meet his new boyfriend. And I still haven't taken you to Babylon yet. You're going to love it."

"Michael, I have a job. It's important to me. I don't know what's up with Ken, but he has been seeing a lot of Adam. I think he is going through some kind of emotional turmoil. And Justin has been really stressed out lately. He's been handling most of the clients and the art projects. He looks really tired. I'm getting worried about him."

"So, Justin needs you more than I do." Michael commented.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I thought we were going to try to work something out between us. I've come to New York at least twice a month since we met. You've been to Pittsburgh three times."

"Michael, I need this job."

"You need Justin."

"Justin? Is that what this is about? You're jealous of Justin. Michael, get a grip. Justin is a great guy. In fact he's an amazing person. But I could never think about him being with anyone but Brian. He's my friend and I care about him. That's all. That's exactly how you feel about Brian, isn't it. Or would you still fuck him if he asked."

"He wouldn't ask. But since you put it that way, you're right. I love Brian as a friend. It wasn't always that way and sometimes it's not easy for me to see him with Justin and Fin and not be jealous of what they have. I want what they have together. I want to have it with you. The whole deal. I want us to be a family. But, there are too many miles between us now for that to be a possibility."

"I don't see how that's going to change, Michael. I can't leave here and start over in Pittsburgh with no job and no friends."

"You'd have me."

"And if you moved to New York you'd have me. And Brian, Justin and Fin."

"And no business. I'd be working in McDonald's."

"So, what. We'd be together."

"I'm so tired of trudging up here to spend every minute arguing with you."

"Well then you better go."

"Great, I'll call you, sometime." Michael picked up his jacket and stormed out.

Justin arrived at the office early. Will was already there doing the mail and processing the checks.

"Hey, how was your weekend?" Justin asked.

"Dismal and depressing. How was yours?"

"Great. What's wrong with you?"

"Michael and I broke up, I think." Will looked up from his work.

"Shit. What happened."

"Nothing. We just both got tired of having the same argument over and over again.

"Should he move to New York, or should you move to Pittsburgh?"

"Right. It's hopeless. I guess it's better that we end it."

"Brian and I went through the same thing. He wanted me to come home. He didn't understand that I had made a life for myself here."

"What did you do to get him to change his mind?"

"Nothing. He just decided on his own. He didn't even tell me that he was going to do it. One Friday he showed up at my place and invited me to lunch. He made me close my eyes and he brought me to the penthouse. I opened my eyes and the first thing I saw was the view of the River. I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. Then he asked me to come and live with him."

"Wow, Brian Kinney is the most romantic man on the planet."

Justin laughed out loud. "Don't let him hear you say that. But, for the record I think he is too . . . in an unconventional way."

"I love Michael, but I don't want to live in Pittsburgh for the rest of my life. What am I going to do, Justin?"

"Nothing. Let him figure it out for himself. You wouldn't be happy in Pittsburgh. If Michael loves you he'll see that"

"But doesn't that work both ways?"

"If you think like that you can make it work. It has to be what makes you both happy."

"We move to Jersey."

"Something like that. Just wait it out, Will. Michael will come around."

"I don't know. He was awfully mad. He accused me of staying in New York because of you.

"Me? Why would he think that?"

"He's jealous of you."

"I thought we were past that. He knows Brian loves me."

"Not Brian, me. He thinks I'm in love with you."

"Oh, Michael. He's not happy unless he's jealous. It's just in his nature. What's that over by the printer? Is that your book?"

"Yes. I finished it."

"That's exciting."

"I wanted Michael to read it first. But he left it. I guess it's back to the drawing board." Will got up and took the pages that were stacked next to the printer and tossed them into the trash. "I'm going to Starbucks to drown my sorrows in caffeine. Do you want anything?"

"Venti Latte. Thanks." Justin went to the trash when Will was out the door and retrieved the discarded pages.

Gus was kneeling on the floor lining up his dinosaurs to get them ready for battle. Fin worked his way around the table by holding on and walking sideways. He was anxious to join Gus on the other side to see what he was up to. It had been the first time they had been together since Gus's mom gave birth to a baby girl a few weeks before. Lindsay had been reluctant to allow Gus to spend time with Brian and Justin since Fin arrived. Each time Gus came to visit Lindsay stayed to supervise.

"He's never going to walk." Brian commented. "Look at him. He's hangs onto the table and crab walks."

"Maybe if you ever let his feet touch the ground he would get the idea."

"Maybe there's something wrong with him. He should be walking by now."

"He's only a year old. Give him a break."

"You were 10 months."

"How do you know that?"

"I called your mother."

"You called my mother to ask how old I was when I learned to walk?"

"Who else was I going to call? My mother? And Lindsay has barely spoken to us since Fin was born."

"Brian, he'll walk when he's ready. When he wants something bad enough, he'll just get up and walk."

"What is Lindsay's problem, anyway? Just because we had a kid before she did she takes it out on Fin."

"Brian, she's still in love with you." Justin ran his hand through his hair and imitated Lindsay's voice. "She had Gus because she thought Gus would tie you together and one day you would marry her."

Brian started to laugh.

"What are you laughing at?"

"Me and Lindsay married. What would I do with you, hide you under the bed?"

Justin laughed at the thought of it. Brian leaned over the counter to kiss him. All of a sudden they heard Gus scream.

"Stop!!! Give it back!!!! . . . " Gus pulled Fin to him and punched him on the back.

Fin sucked in air and held it until he turned blue and passed out. Brian and Justin ran over to the children. Justin picked up Fin and checked his breathing. After a few seconds the color started to come back into the child's face and he opened his eyes.

Brian turned to Gus and shook him by his arms. "You're never to hit him. You could have really hurt him, Gus. Now, go to your room and pack. I'm taking you home."

Gus did not say a word. He just stomped off down the hall. Brian looked over at Fin who was still sniffing in Justin's arm. When Fin saw Brian look at him he put his arms out to be picked up. Brian took him out of Justin's arms.

"Do you think he's okay?" Brian asked as he hugged the child to him. "Gus really must have hit him hard to knock him out. We should take him to the hospital and have him checked out."

"I think he's okay." Justin said. "He's smiling now. Sit down and watch him. I'm going to talk to Gus."

"I meant what I said, Justin. If he is going to be a bully, I don't want him here."

"Brian, he's your son. They have to learn to get along. That's not going to happen if they never see each other."

Justin knocked on the door of Gus's room. They had moved the babies stuff out while Gus was staying over. He was busy packing up all of his toys into a suitcase.

"I'm going home and I'm never coming back here ever again."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Gus. Fin will miss you."

"He'll miss my toys you mean. He ate the tail off my best dinosaur."

Justin sat down on the bed and examined the toy. "Yeah, he did. Babies do things like that. When my sister Molly was a baby she ripped up a painting that I had done for a school project."

"Did you hit her?"

"I wanted to. But when she looked at me with that cute little smile I couldn't be mad at her. I knew that she wanted the painting because it was mine and I was her big brother."

"Well I hate Fin. Mommy said he can't be my brother because she's not his Mom."

"Gus, we're one big mixed up family here. Little Emily is not Brian's but she is your sister. You're just going to have to accept that Fin is a part of our family."

Brian appeared in the doorway with Fin in his arms. The boy was fully recovered and was anxious to be put down so he could examine all the toys Gus had dumped onto the bed.

"I called your mother." Brian announced to Justin. "She said you used to hold your breath and pass out just like he did. It didn't kill you, so I guess he's okay."

Gus ignored Brian and continued to pack up his stuff.

"Gus, you can't hit Fin" Brian said as he allowed Fin to squirm out of his arms. "He's much smaller than you and you could really have hurt him. Do you understand?"

Gus looked down at the floor. "Yes."

"Look at me."

Gus looked up. "Say your sorry to Fin."

"Sorry." Gus said half-heartedly in Fin's direction. The baby had pulled himself up by leaning on the rocker across the room and was standing precariously.

Justin turned to Brian and said. "Gus said he's leaving and never coming back. "

Brian mumbled. "His choice."

"Well I'm going to miss Gus. And Fin is really going to miss him."

Gus stopped what he was doing. "Why?"

"Because you're his big brother. He wants to be like you, Gus. That's why he follows you all over and touches your toys. He finds you a lot more interesting than Brian and me."

"He does?"

"Sure. Look at him. You just bashed him in the back and he's smiling at you now."

Gus turned to look at the boy. Justin was right, he was smiling at him. Gus put out his hand. "Fin, you can have this dinosaur, if you want."

Brian and Justin's jaws dropped simultaneously. Fin had let go of the rocker, walked all the way across the room and fell into Gus's arms.

Gus laughed. "Did you see him? He walked all the way to me. That was good Fin."

Fin took the dinosaur out of Gus' hand, slid to the floor and began to chew on the tail. He looked up at his brother and smiled. "Gush."

Michael looked up from the register when he heard the bell over the front door ring.

"Justin! What are you doing here? Where's Brian?"

"I left him at the diner with Fin and your Mom. Fin is now officially hooked on the world famous Liberty Avenue Diner lemon bars. Brian had business in the area so we decided to take Fin on his first road trip."

"Mom must be in heaven. Having someone around to spoil who can't answer her back."

"You want to make a bet?"

"Let me lock up the store and . . . "

"Wait, Michael. I want to talk to you."

"Don't . . . Justin, there's no point. I have to accept it and move on."

"Michael, I think you're making a mistake. Will really loves you. And when you really love someone you find a way to be together."

"Justin, I'm not you. And I'm not Brian. I don't have the courage, the brains or the education to start over. I love what I'm doing. And there's my mom and Uncle Vic to think of."

"You're not me or Brian. But, there is someone who believes that you have courage and brains and most of all a heart. " Justin took Will's manuscript out of his bag and handed it to Michael. "You owe it to Will. He was counting on you to read it first. Now let's get to the diner before Brian decides to introduce Fin to Babylon."

Justin sat in the back of a cab on his way back to the office. He was fuming. The client meeting had been a bitch. They didn't like the layout and it had to be changed right away. The client was going to Europe in two days and he insisted that Justin come back in the morning with new sketches. He had intended to go home early to see Fin before he went to sleep. Now that was out, he'd probably had to work deep into the night. As soon as he got to his desk Brian called.

"Hey, stud."

"Hey yourself."

"I was thinking of going home early today. Fin needs a hair cut and one of the girls at work recommended a place that caters to kids. What do you think?"

"No! Don't cut his hair Brian."

"He looks like a sheep dog. I don't know how he can see."

"No! He's fine. Leave his hair alone."

"Justin, everyone thinks he's a girl."

"Show them his dick."

"What's wrong with you?"

"Fucking client wants me to redo the drawings and the layout. They aren't detailed enough."

"Fuck him. Do it tomorrow."

"No. I have to deliver them tomorrow because he's going to Europe and I want to make sure we get paid on this project. You never know with some of these people. They take off and you never see them again."

"Welcome to the wonderful world of business."

"I'm sorry for yelling. I miss so much of what goes on with Fin. I don't want to miss his first hair cut."

"Okay. I'll buy him one of those headbands with a big pink bow. We'll have our own little drag queen baby."

"Kiss him for me. Kiss you, too. I'll see you tonight."

Will walked in with a pizza, "Dinner? I figured you'd be hungry."

"Starved, thanks. If it weren't for you I'd probably never eat."

"If it wasn't for you Michael would never have read my book. He called me last night."

"So, are you going to live happily ever after?"

"We're going to try. He told me that spoke to Vic and his new boyfriend about running the store for him. That way if New York doesn't work out, he'll still have the comics. And I'll move to Pittsburgh. I can write anywhere, I guess."

"Shit! Now I really have fucked myself. What am I going to do without you?"

"You'll survive. You always do."

"I guess I do."

"It's all in here." Will handed Justin a copy of his book. "I want you to read it second. I'm thinking it would make a great movie. Or at least a TV series. Let me know what you think?"

Brian arrived home early. He had checked with the babysitter and was told that Justin had picked him up around lunch time. It was unusual for Justin to get home before him. When Brian got to the apartment he called out and heard Justin call back from the patio out on the roof. Brian opened the French door and stepped outside.

Justin was sitting on a beach chair wearing an old T-shirt and a pair of shorts. It reminded Brian of the cabana boy game that Justin had invented the year before. Justin was sketching a picture of Fin who was stretched out on his back in the hammock sound asleep. Brian looked over Justin's shoulder to see the sketch.

"Now, that's art."

Justin reached up toward him and Brian took his hand and kissed it. "It occurred to me today that I had this beautiful son waiting for me at home and so I took off early. I wanted to do some drawings of him while he's still a baby."

"You haven't drawn like this in a long time. I miss it. You always got that cute little wrinkle in your forehead when you were concentrating on drawing my dick."

"My two favorite subjects, our baby and your dick."

"You cut his hair."

"I took him to the barber."

"Did he scream his head off?"

"Yeah. He cried, I cried, the barber cried. But we got through it together."

"Hmmm. Was the barber hot?"

"He was 80, honey." Justin teased.

"Michael called today." Brian said. "He's moving to New York this weekend. I told him that I would help."

"That's great."

"You don't care if I spend the weekend with Michael?"

"No?"

"You'd be stuck here with the baby."

"Yeah."

Brian stared at him curiously. "I may take Mikey out clubbing for old time sake."

"Sure." Justin continued to work on his drawing with a contented smile on his face.

"I may fuck him if I feel like it."

"I think you should."

"After that we could go over and knock up Mel and Christine. I think they owe me that much. Don't you think that Fin needs a baby brother."

"If that's what you want."

"What is wrong with you?"

Justin grinned. "Nothing."

Brian sat on the foot of the chase lounge. "Michael, you're former arch enemy, is moving to New York, I tell you I want to have another baby and all you can say is nothing is wrong? You've been acting like a bear lately. And all of a sudden today you're Pollyanna. Are you taking Prozac?"

"I read Will's book."

"It must have a lot of sex in it to mellow you out. What's it about? His life as a dumpster boy?"

"It's about us. Michael, Mel, Linz and the guys, but mostly it's about us."

"I'll sue the fucker."

"I've been telling him stories about all the stuff that we've been through. The bashing, breaking up, getting back together, me running away to New York and you following me here. About getting stalked first by Ethan and then by Adam. When things got nice and quite Lindsay dumped Gus on us, then you almost went to prison and you made me a baby."

"We did all that? We must be insane."

"It made me think. We've made it through a lot of bad times. The worst time was when we were apart. I guess what I'm trying to say that no matter what shit happens in life, it's not so bad if we stick together."

"Haven't I been telling you that all along."

"When did you tell me that?"

"We're together because we want to be. That's what I meant."

"Is that what you meant? It's all perfectly clear now."

Brian pulled him closed and nuzzled his ear. The baby stirred and Justin touched the hammock with his foot to make it swing.

"You were kidding about having another kid, right?" Justin asked.

Brian grinned.

"Brian?"

Season Four

The Undefined Line

As Justin finished up his shift at the diner, Brian sat in a booth and waited with Michael and Ben. When Justin bent over to clean a nearby table, Brian found himself distracted from the conversation; he had to fight the urge to reach over and grab his lover's ass.

He found it hard to take his eyes off Justin, much less his hands. Brian knew that his feelings for Justin had become much more intense since their reunification, but he sensed that Justin was holding back a little. Possibly Justin was afraid to get too deeply involved after being burned by the fiddler, or maybe he had finally come to the realization that men are not monogamous by nature. Justin seemed to be taking things one day at a time, which was fine with Brian. At least at first he'd thought it was.

On the evening that Stockwell had been defeated with the help of Brian's TV ad, they had gone back to the loft to celebrate. It was the first time Justin had actually spent the entire night in Brian's bed since they had come to an understanding about their undefined relationship.

The day after the election, Brian woke up with an upset stomach. He spent the morning vomiting. Aside from hangovers, he very rarely got sick. At first he fought it. He told Justin to go home before he got sick too. But Justin stayed. But by mid-afternoon, Brian had developed a fever. When it reached 104o , Justin insisted on taking him to the emergency room. By that evening Brian was so out of it that he allowed Justin to call a cab and take him to the hospital. At first they wouldn't let Justin into the examining room. Then Brian saw him standing in the corner. How ironic that just a few short weeks ago Brian was yelling at him to get some balls. Justin had more balls than anyone he knew. If there was a way to get something done, Justin would find it . . . and think about the consequences later. A few hours later they were back at the loft. Justin stayed for three day to take care of him. It wasn't until Michael came over one evening that Justin decided to leave.

In the days that followed, Brian found himself waking up in the middle of the night and reaching across the bed for Justin, only to find that Justin had gone home hours earlier. It was an empty feeling. More than once Brian had hinted that the loft was so empty there would be plenty of room if Justin wanted to move in some of his stuff. His comments fell on deaf ears.

Since the election, Justin had stayed at the loft 3 nights out of 7. Brian was encouraged, but was not about to ask Justin to move back in. He wanted that to be Justin's call, as it was his call to leave in the first place. It had occurred to Brian that Justin might be only staying with him out of pity. Brian had lost everything except, as Justin most accurately pointed out, his prize possession.

"What the fuck is that kid doing?" Michael whined. "We can't be out too late with the foster parent police on patrol every night. Hey, Brian! Did you hear me?"

Brian's attention had wandered over to where Justin was delivering the check to a pair of old queens sitting at a table near the door. One of them reached over and put tip money into the boy's back pocket. Justin smiled sweetly, thanked them and then joined Brian and the boys in their booth.

"That old guy just gave me twenty bucks. He said it was because of the service with a smile that I gave him."

"As long as that's all you give him, blond boy." Brian commented. "What did you say before, Michael?"

"I said that Ben and I can't leave Hunter alone for too long. So let's get going." Michael and Ben slid out of their side of the booth and put on their jackets. Brian leaned over to kiss Justin on the neck.

"Geez, Brian. Don't you get enough of that at home?" Michael gave them a dirty look as Ben grinned at his reaction.

"No. I never get enough," Brian answered. "So let's go to Babylon."

Brian and Justin had been to Babylon many times since they had gotten back together. Mostly they danced with each other and made their way to the back room when things got hot. Then they would go home together for rounds two, three, or more. Brian had been side-tracked a few times by some hot tricks. He still didn't want to lose sight of his lover, so he'd ask him to stay and party. But Justin always had something he had to do. He would leave the club with a smile on his handsome face and catch up with Brian the next day. Maybe he went home to jerk off. Brian figured that whatever Justin did, it was his business.

They had danced together for most of the evening, but then the inevitable happened. Brian was distracted by a new arrival. Tall, dark and handsome with steely blue eyes he stood by the door looking around nervously before stepping up to the bar and ordering a drink. When Justin left the dance floor to go to the bathroom, Brian zoomed in on his prey. He made eye contact at the bar, but it was clear this guy was not interested. Brian was disappointed by the rejection. The guy had a great body, tanned skin, dark brown hair with light brown hi-lites. Looked like a beach boy type. The man disappeared into the crowd and Brian turned to search the room for Justin.

Michael appeared at Brian's side. "Looks like you've lost your touch," he joked. He had been watching Brian's attempt to pick up beach boy man.

"Fuck you, Mikey!" Brian kissed Michael on the mouth and dragged him onto the dance floor. As they danced Brian continued to search the room for Justin.

Ben returned to Michael's side carrying three bottles of beer. Brian had been drinking rather heavily, even for him. He took the beer that Ben offered and downed it quickly, all the time searching the room for the sight of a familiar blond head.

"Where's Justin?" Michael asked him.

"He must have gotten lucky," Brian responded.

At that moment Michael spotted Justin on the dance floor. "I'll say. Isn't that the guy you had your eye on?"

Brian watched Justin and beach boy man gyrate together on the dance floor. It was a slow sexy number and Justin had his body pressed up against the older man. All Brian could do was stare as they moved their bodies in a slow syncopated rhythm. Justin was an excellent dancer with very sensual moves. His partner was equally talented and together they were gathering an audience.

"Looks like we'll have company at the loft tonight." Brian said, his speech slurred by the alcohol. Watching Justin humping this guy in public was getting to him. He felt a knot form in his stomach. It wasn't normal for him to get jealous of a trick. But then he hadn't seen Justin flirt with anyone since they had gotten back together. He was about to turn away when he saw Justin kiss the guy right on the mouth. Brian's first reaction was to run over there and rip the guy's head off. What was Justin doing? It was his rule. . . No kissing anyone on the mouth but me.

"Michael, we better get going," Ben said.

"I guess we better. Are you going to be okay?" Michael started to reach out to touch Brian's arm but Ben grabbed his hand and pulled it back.

"Leave him." Ben whispered under his breath. "He got what he deserves."

Michael was confused. Ben seemed to be upset about something. "We have to leave." Michael tried to yell over the music so Brian would hear. But Brian was still staring intently at the couple on the dance floor.

Justin had put his arms around beach boy man's neck. The two of them were smiling and kissing each other. The sight of them infuriated Brian who had drained his beer and headed to the bar for another drink. He downed two more drinks at the bar, ignoring a trick who was hitting on him. When Brian turned his attention back to the dance floor Justin and beach boy man were gone. He left the bar and staggered toward where he had parked his car. He got in and started the engine. Just up the block he spotted Justin and beach boy man leaning up against a car. They weren't kissing anymore, but Brian did not like the way that man was looking at Justin. Any minute now they would be getting into the expensive convertible and taking off for an evening of fucking. Brian did the only thing he could think of to stop them. He revved his engine and without turning on his lights, he headed straight for the convertible. He came up behind the car and before Justin and the guy realized what was happening, he slammed into the rear end.

"What the fuck . . . ?" Justin turned and realized that Brian was behind the wheel of the offending vehicle. The man with whom he had been dancing had been thrown face first onto the sidewalk. He stood up and Justin saw that he was all bloody.

"Are you okay?" Justin put his hand up to the man's face, but it was pushed away.

"I'm alright. I just cut my lip I think." The man directed his attention toward Brian. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Brian ignored him and directed his attention toward Justin. "Get in the car!" he demanded.

"Fuck off!" Justin responded. Brian grabbed at Justin's sleeve and started pulling him toward the Vette. The other man tried to intervene by grabbing Brian by the arm. Brian pushed him off and staggered backward and fall face down onto the hood of his car.

Justin realized that Brian was very drunk and it was time for him to take control of the situation. He wrote down his name and cell number and handed it to the man. "Call me and let me know what the damage is. He'll pay to get your car fixed and any medical costs."

"You know him? You're not safe getting into a car with this maniac."

"I know him. I'll drive him home. Are you going to make out a police report?"

"No. Forget it happened." Without further comment the man got in his car and drove off. Brian was still lying face down on the hood of his car. Justin grabbed him by the collar and pulled him up. He put Brian's arm around his neck and half dragged him to the passenger side of the car. Opening the door, he shoved Brian down into the seat and fastened the seat belt.

Justin drove to the loft in silence. Brian was passed out cold in the passenger seat. When he got to Brian's building he parked the car and got out. He went to the passenger side of the car and opened the door. Brian opened his eyes and looked up at Justin.

"Do you need help getting upstairs?" Justin asked calmly.

"No. I've put myself to bed on many occasion in a lot worse shape than this. Are you leaving?"

"Yeah." Justin was glad that he had left Daphne's car at Brian's. She rarely used it at night since she had a steady boyfriend so she offered it to Justin.

"When . . . will I see you?" Brian blurted out the words before Justin disappeared. He was afraid the answer would be 'never again, you fucking crazy asshole.'

But Justin said. "I'll call you." and then he got into his car and drove away.

Brian awoke at noon the next day with a splitting headache. Being unemployed had its advantages. At least he wouldn't have to go to the office and pretend to be alive. Once he had some coffee his head started to clear and he remember the events of the previous evening. He had been out of control and he knew it. And he also knew that it might take awhile, but if Justin said he would call, then he would call when he was ready. The only thing for Brian do to now was to get himself busy. He started making calls to set up interviews. By the end of the day he had set up three for the week. Two were with small ad agencies. The third opportunity was the one that interested him the most. He had enjoyed his role as spin doctor to Stockwell. It had given him a feeling of power. When one of his associates from Vanguard called him to let him know that there was a job opening for a P.R. man at a new cable television network, he called and set up an interview for Friday morning.

Keeping his appointments and reaching out to his old contacts had kept him busy. But every time the phone rang he found himself hoping that it would be Justin. Most nights he was unable to sleep. He would wake in the middle of the night and pace the floor. He had lost Justin once; the thought of losing him again was not acceptable. Brian thought of calling Justin, but decided against it. If Justin wanted to be with him, he knew how to find him. Of course, if they should happen to run into each other accidentally, that would be different. Brian went to the diner on Thursday morning. He was disappointed when he found out that neither Justin or Debbie was working that morning. Later on in the day he decided to stop by at Michael's apartment, hoping to catch them at work on the comic.

Ben opened the door and was surprised to find Brian standing there. "Michael's not here. He went to the doctor with Mel."

"Oh, I thought that this was the time of day when the wonder boys created the latest Rage adventure."

"Didn't Justin tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

Ben opened the door wider motion for Brian to come in. "I guess Justin doesn't say much about what goes on between him and Michael. They brainstorm the stories and then Justin goes home and creates the character drawings. He drops them off, usually when Michael isn't at home." Ben sighed and sat down on the arm of a chair. "So far they've been able to make the comic work. A few days ago Justin was here and it didn't sound like there was anything creative going on. Voices got loud and then the door slammed. Michael hasn't said a word, but I think that Rage is history."

"What have they got to fight about?"

Ben shook his head from side to side. "You really are that clueless?"

Brian flung himself down on the couch and looked up at Ben. "Why don't you clue me in, professor?"

"I don't want to get involved between you and Michael."

"Then why don't you just tell me what Justin said to piss him off."

"Why do you assume Justin said anything? It's Justin's very existence that offends Michael. I thought the message was pretty clear at Lindsay's party last summer. At the time I hadn't heard what Michael had said about Justin. But later on, when he admitted that he'd suggested you should have let Justin die, I understood why you'd be angry. In a way I was glad that you finally stood up for Justin. But, I guess when it comes to Michael, it's always forgive and forget. Even when his target is someone that you supposedly care about."

"That's just Michael's way of protecting me."

"Right, from Justin. Like he protected you by telling you all about Ethan."

"Alright, I've heard enough." Brian got up to leave. "Tell Michael to call me."

"Wait a minute." Ben grabbed his arm. "I'm only going to tell you this because I like Justin and I think that most of the time he gets a pretty raw deal. The other night when we were at Babylon, Justin saw you kiss Michael. You didn't notice him standing there, but if you had seen his face you'd think someone had hit him with a two by four. I went over to him at the bar and asked him what was wrong. All he said was that he didn't realize the rules had changed."

Brian was confused. He didn't remember kissing Michael. Why would that upset Justin? He wanted to question Ben more but he wasn't sure it was fair to Michael to be interrogating his boyfriend. "I don't remember kissing anybody."

"Of course you don't. But I'm sure that Michael remembers it. He remembers every kiss, every hug and every word that comes out of your mouth. Since you got back with Justin it drives him crazy to see you two together. Haven't you noticed it?"

"He always gets like that when Justin's around. He thinks that Justin is out to replace him or something. That's just stupid."

"Well I can tell you that this time it's worse. He can barely stand to look at the kid. The night that Justin took you to the hospital Michael insisted on going over there. He had a power of attorney that you'd signed. He shoved it in Justin's face and told him to go home because you and he had planned to take care of each other. He accused Justin of being responsible for you losing your job and getting into debt. I don't like to take sides against Michael. Aside from his obsession with you, he's a decent man. But that night I put my foot down. Of course, that was just one more thing for Michael to hold against Justin. It's really gotten out of hand, Brian. Hasn't Justin told you any of this?"

Brian decided to confide in Ben. "I haven't seen him since the bar that night."

"What happened?"

"I made a fucking fool of myself in front of a trick who he'd picked up. I made Justin get in the car with me. I can't explain why I did what I did. But the last thing he said was that he was going to call. And when he's ready, he will."

"The phone works both ways."

"I don't want to put pressure on him."

"You really are an asshole."

"You don't understand us." Brian shook his head slowly. " We have an unconventional, undefined relationship."

"That explains something else that Justin said. You had crossed the undefined line."

Brian thought a moment. Maybe he had. The kissing thing was important to Justin. It was the one promise that he had made to Justin and he had been able to keep that promise. At least he thought he had. But kissing Michael didn't count.

"What would you do?" Brian asked Ben.

"In my conventional head I would probably try to think what would make Justin happy right now. He must be pretty broken up if he hasn't called. If Michael were upset about something I done, I would probably bring him flowers and take him out to dinner. The most important thing is letting him know that you care about him and that he comes first. Does he come first, Brian?"

"Thanks, professor. I'll see you later." Brian left Ben's question unanswered.

Brian pulled up in front of the building where Justin shared an apartment with Daphne. Once he took Ben's advice about trying to think what it was that Justin needed, the decision was easy. He walked up to the door and rang the bell.

Justin looked confused when he opened the door. "Hey."

"Hey, I brought you something." Brian produced his peace offering, a paper bag and a spoon. He was instantly rewarded with a great big smile from Justin.

"Ben and Jerry's!!!" Justin exclaimed.

"Hot fudge sundae, 'Chunky Monkey' ice cream, whipped cream and a cherry," Brian smiled and added, " . . .hold the nuts?"

"Come in here." Justin grabbed the bag out of his hand and sat down on the sofa. Brian handed him the spoon and Justin dug into his sundae.

"You said you were going to call," Brian reminded him.

"I got sick," Justin explained. "I've had your stupid virus for two days. You could have called me to see if I was dead or alive."

"I thought you were mad at me. And you were right. I shouldn't have embarrassed you like that. I have no right to follow you around." Justin did not respond. He continued to shovel ice cream into his mouth. Brian continued. "What happened with Michael?"

Justin stopped eating and lowered his eyes. "I can't do it, Brian. I just can't work with him. I know that he's your friend, but he hates me and the feeling is mutual."

"Okay."

"Okay? Just like that? You're not going to defend him or tell me I have to put my feelings aside because of the comic?"

"I trust your judgment. If you didn't have a good reason to be angry with Michael, you would never have dropped the comic book."

"I don't really hate Michael. But lately he's been . . . "

"I know. You don't have to explain. I'm not blind. I see how he treats you. You shouldn't have to put up with it. Do you want me to talk to him?"

Justin was shocked. This was the first time that Brian had chosen to support him and not Michael. "No. I can handle it. I wasn't feeling well when I went over there the other day. He just got on my nerves and I said some things that I probably shouldn't have. I'll work it out with him myself."

"You're sure?" Brian asked. "Because you come first. And if you don't know that, then I'm telling you now."

"Thanks, Brian. I like that rule." Justin wiped some whipped cream from his chin with the back of his hand. Brian was reminded of 'ice cream kisses.' He took Justin's hand and licked it. When Brian was recovering from his illness

the kid would spend hours lying next to him on the bed. He had a way of touching Brian's face that gave him goose bumps. If anyone else had ever tried to touch his face he would brush them away. But with Justin it was an expression of affection that Brian completely understood. The feel of Justin's warm hand in his gave him the same feeling of connection that he had felt when he'd been sick and Justin touched his face.

"You should have told me that you were sick. I would have taken care of you."

"Daphne called my mom and she came over to drown me in liquids so I wouldn't get dehydrated. Then Debbie came over with soup from the diner to make sure I didn't starve."

Brian touched Justin's face. He wondered if Justin felt the same connection that he had. He looked into Justin's eyes and he knew that he did. They really did have an unconventional bond that transcended the spoken word. But maybe it was time to define some things.

"Brian, I love that you came to see me. And that you remembered 'Chunky Monkey.' I was going to call you. Even if I get mad at you, I'll always come find you. No matter what stupid, insensitive thing you do. I promise."

"Yeah. Me too. Unspoken rule number two."

Justin smiled at him and it melted Brian's heart.

"Are you going to eat ALL that ice cream?"

Justin loaded the spoon with ice cream and put it into Brian's mouth. Brian pulled Justin toward him for a kiss, but Justin pushed him away. "I have to go to work."

"But I thought you were sick."

"I'm better today. I missed two days already. I can't afford to be sick. I have rent to pay and I have to save up some money so I can get a new place."

"You're moving?" Brian asked.

"I don't want to. But Daphne said that she may be moving in with her boyfriend. Since this is student housing, I'll be out in the street, or living at Debbie's." Justin made a face. "I love Debbie, but I couldn't imagine going back there to live now. She'll never treat me like an adult. But I guess it's better than moving back with my mom."

"You can always come back to the loft."

"Thanks Brian. But, no."

"Why the fuck not? You'd consider living with Debbie or your mother before you'd even think about coming home. I don't get it. I thought we were okay."

"We are okay. I have to get ready for work." Justin stood up and took the empty ice cream container into the kitchen.

Brian remained on the couch lost in thought. "No!" He suddenly got to his feet. "I want to know why!"

Justin stood in the doorway of the kitchen. He considered his response carefully. They had made some advances in their relationship today and he didn't want to spoil it. "The loft is your home. I need to have a home of my own, however humble it may be."

"You won't even stay the night unless I'm dying."

"I'm going to be late." Justin stroked Brian's face.

Brian realized the timing was wrong. Justin was right, it was better to take things slow, not get in each other's way. "When am I going to see you?"

"If you don't have an eleven o'clock, maybe you can squeeze me in." Justin teased.

"I'd rather squeeze into you." Brian nuzzled his neck. "Later."

Justin smiled and opened the door for Brian. "Later."

Justin managed to put in an extra hour at the diner. It was a good tip night, he really needed the money this week. It was after midnight when he finally put on his coat. When he walked outside he saw Brian sleeping in his car across the street.

"Hey. Sorry I'm late. I got to put in some extra hours. I really cleaned up tonight. You wanna go to Babylon?"

Brian rubbed his hand across his face and looked at the clock. "No. I have an interview tomorrow."

"That's a good sign. Is it something interesting?"

"Maybe." Brian yawned as he spoke.

Justin got in the car and took Brian's hand. Brian grinned in his direction. "I'm going to need that to shift the gears. But if you really want to hold onto something. . ."

"Thanks for picking me up. You didn't have to."

"Who said I was picking you up? I was driving past the diner and decided to take a nap out here in my car," Brian teased.

Justin fell asleep right after they had sex. Brian was still wide awake. The next morning he would have his interview with the cable network. He had a very positive feeling about the cable company. He had done some research and found out that they had two gay theme shows in their line up and had plans for more. The parent company, Grey Enterprises, was a family owned California based company which had grown in leaps and bounds since the son William Grey, III had taken over the helm. This was definitely a company that was on the move, and Brian was very anxious to be considered for the job. He went over his presentation in his head as he watched Justin sleep. Whenever Justin stirred, Brian found himself holding his breath, afraid that he would wake up and want to go home. Brian hated the hollow sound of the loft on the nights when Justin wasn't there. It made the night seem endlessly long. Brian knew it was because he was lonely. He wanted Justin to stay with him, all night, every night. Maybe for the rest of their lives.

He'd be damned if he was going to beg, but he wasn't going to give up, either. If Justin could find a way to worm his way back into Brian's life after leaving him for another man, then Brian could find a way to make Justin want to move back into the loft. What he needed was a plan. He decided to follow Ben's suggestion and try to think like Justin. The reason Justin left him in the first place was because he wanted romance. Brian stood his ground . . . they were all about sex . . . there was no such thing as love . . . yadda, yadda. Justin came back because he realized it was all bullshit. There was a connection between them that endured separation, interfering friends and Brian's stubborn refusal to conform.

Eventually, Brian drifted off to sleep

When Brian arrived for the interview the next morning he was told to wait in the lobby for Colleen Cory, the director of personnel. She had called to say that she was running late this morning. He sat down and picked up a magazine which contained a description of the shows which the station was featuring. After about twenty minutes, Ms. Cory arrived, apologizing for the delay.

Brian followed her down the hall to a small office. He was disappointed that his interview was with someone who obviously was not top brass. He was relieved when, after she had explained what they were looking for in a public relations rep, she took him down the hall to a meeting room. There were four men and one woman seated at long table. The atmosphere was friendly and relaxed. As he began his presentation he felt the same kind of exhilaration he always felt when pitching an idea to a client. What better product to sell than the brilliant and talented Brian Kinney? He felt very positive vibes as the panel began to ask him questions. By lunchtime he was confident that he was about to be offered the position.

"Mr. Kinney, we'd like to take you to lunch. We're waiting for one more member of our team to arrive. If we decide you're the best man for the position you will be working closely with him. He was supposed to be in on the interview this morning, but he had oral surgery a few days ago and he had to get the stitches out."

The door to the meeting room opened and Brian felt his high hopes sink like a rock. The person who would be his new boss was none other than 'beach boy man.'

"Bill, this is Brian Kinney. Brian this is William Grey, president of Grey Enterprises. He owns the station."

It was obvious to Brian that "beach boy man" was just as shocked as he was. Brian extended his hand and Bill Grey shook it graciously. "Pleased to meet you, Brian." His speech was slurred due to his recent surgery. Brian realized that he was probably responsible for those oral injuries, as well as the black eye that was partially hidden by dark sunglasses.

"We were just going to take Brian to lunch, Bill. Would you like to join us?"

Brian wasn't surprised by his response. "I can't eat for a few hours so I'll pass. You guys can fill me in. Nice to meet you, Brian." Bill Grey left the room. Brian wondered if there was any way he could get out of going to lunch. The whole morning was a big waste of time and it was no one's fault but his own.

Lunch was not as bad as he had expected. The "team" mostly talked about the network and the new projects they were planning. It was hard to keep up the facade of potential candidate when he was convinced that he was out of the race. When lunch was over, he headed to the gym. Working out always help to clear his head and put things into perspective. He'd fucked up big time the night he let alcohol and his emotions get the better of him. He'd probably lost himself the opportunity of a lifetime. But as Justin had pointed out to him after the election, he hadn't lost everything. He still had what was most important to him.

Brian had accepted his defeat and was ready to move on. He bought a newspaper on his way home and was circling ads when the phone rang. Colleen Cory had called to congratulate him and to tell him to report to work on Monday morning.

The first thing Brian did was dial Justin's number at the diner. "Ready to celebrate, Sunshine?"

"You got the job!" Brian could hear the excitement in Justin's voice.

"Of course I got the job. They're lucky to have me. Their public image is in the toilet. It will take a miracle to get them up and running."

"That's so great, Brian."

"You want to go out?"

"Like dinner?"

"Yes, dinner, dessert, and champagne. Followed by an entire night of sucking and fucking. Is that romantic enough for you?"

"Come and get me."

Brian had decided not to tell Justin about the identity of his new boss. He had no clue as to why Grey had overlooked their previous unfortunate encounter and hired him as the head of his public relations department. Was it possible that the man didn't recognize him? Or maybe his outstanding presentation and cutting edge marketing ideas had been sufficiently impressive to override the fact that Brian had acted like a complete asshole that night.

First thing Monday morning Brian was escorted to Bill Grey's office. Grey got right to the point. "I guess you're wondering what you're doing here. Your resume, high energy presentation and professionalism impressed the team. I try to keep my personal life out of the office. I had no logical explanation for NOT hiring you, aside from the fact that you're probably a homicidal manic with a drinking problem. As far as the team is concerned, you were the best man for the job and judging you solely by your professional reputation I had no choice but to agree. But first, I would like your assurance that you will not make any further attempts on my life since we will be working together."

"Agreed." Brian grinned at his new boss. The subject was dropped and they spent the rest of the morning brainstorming. To his surprise, Brian found he was very comfortable working with Bill Grey. They had a lot of similar ideas. At lunchtime they decided to take a walk to an Italian restaurant that was a favorite of Brian's. After they ordered Brian's cell phone rang. It was Justin, wanting to know how his day was going. Bill grinned as Brian tried to cut the conversation short. Bill was still grinning when Brian hung up the phone promising to call back later.

"Justin . . . 555 643-8890." Bill quoted Justin's cell number.

"He gave you his number?" Brian asked. One of the former rules had been no names or numbers exchanged.

"Only because he thought I'd be calling the police."

"Right. And you memorized it?"

"Can't blame a guy for trying. Justin's pretty special. Are you two involved?"

"Involved in what?"

"With each other, asshole." Bill rolled his eyes at Brian's evasiveness. "You know I don't like to mix my personal and professional life. But since we met more under personal circumstances than professional I think we can be honest with each other. So here's my pathetic life story. I had a guy like Justin once. He was blond, beautiful and crazy about me. I lied to him, cheated and, for the most part, treated him like shit. He always came back to me

because he loved me. Until one day he'd had enough. He left my bed and my life and never came back. That was two years ago.

"I didn't appreciate what I had until I lost it. I moved around a lot after that. When I spotted Justin at the bar I realized that the reason I'd been so restless was because I'd been searching for Jamie. That's my whole story. I admit that personally I am a pathetic loser. Now, you haven't answered my question. Is Justin your boyfriend?"

"Yes," Brian admitted. "But we don't have a conventional relationship. I've always been honest with him about my sexual appetite. Justin had every right to pick you up. I don't know what got into me. I acting like a jealous school boy that night. It won't happen again. If you want to see Justin for a one night stand, I have no objection."

Bill laughed out loud. "You should see the expression on your face right now. You're wishing you had crushed my head instead of my fender."

"I already promised not to kill you. Don't you trust me?"

"You don't trust yourself. Not when it comes to Justin."

Brian hated to admit it, but Bill was right. He didn't like what was happening to him, but he was powerless to control his jealousy. Even thinking about Justin being with another man was making him uncomfortable. He was relieved when Bill dropped the subject and started to discuss planning promotion for the new season.

Justin had gone to Michael's apartment early in the morning to drop off the sketches he'd been working on. He knew that he would have to be the one to find a common ground with Michael so that they could work together. Justin had become a master at concealing his true feelings. Feelings were nothing but trouble. It was better to make up your mind what it was you wanted, and then fight like crazy to keep it. Even if it meant kissing the ass of someone who hated you.

Michael and Ben hadn't been at their apartment in the morning. So in the afternoon Justin dropped by the comic book store to see Michael. There were several young boys searching through the bins for comics. Michael was at the register watching them like a hawk.

"Hi, Michael." Justin tried to sound complacent.

"Hi." Michael didn't take his eye from the boys in his store. "What do you want? I thought working on the comic was a big pain in the ass."

"Not really. It's you that's the pain in the ass." Justin said smugly. He then flashed Michael one of his famous sunshine smiles. "I'm sorry I blew up at you the other day. I was coming down with a virus and I'd been dragging myself around all day."

Michael glanced at Justin briefly to see if he was sincere. "My mom told me you were sick. That's what you get for hanging all over Brian. Let's hope you don't catch anything else from him." The boys who had been browsing left the store and Michael turned his attention toward the drawings. They were able to work for a while and Justin left Michael drafting up a story for a new character they had created.

Justin was anxious to get to the loft so that he could surprise Brian with dinner on the first day of his new job. He had sounded so positive this morning. It was good to see that Brian was recovering from his streak of bad luck. When Justin had called him at lunchtime, he could tell that Brian was with someone and didn't want to talk. Justin wondered if Brian was having a business lunch or if he was using his lunch hour to take care of business with some cute waiter. Justin wished that he could really get over his possessiveness of Brian. It was pointless to have those feelings. Nothing was ever going to change. If he wanted to be with Brian Kinney he would just have to learn live with the fact that the man was not cut out to be monogamous.

Brian was confident that his life would soon be returning to normal. Better than normal, really. His new job was both challenging and rewarding. As he had predicted Grey Enterprises was a rapidly growing business. Bill had already hinted that Brian's talents would be a great help to him in many areas of his company. Despite having met each other under the worst of circumstances, Brian and Bill had developed an instant friendship. There was no need for pretense; they understood each other. Brian felt free to express his opinions without fear of overstepping his bounds.

Expressing himself with Justin was another matter. Brian had turned his professional life around in a few short weeks, but Justin was not so fortunate. P.I.F.A. was unforgiving and so Justin remained under suspension. Working with Michael had become an emotional strain. And to top it off he had to find a new place to live. Justin had started searching for an apartment. If he signed a lease it would be permanent. Justin was being stubborn. Now that Brian had finally broken down and asked him to come home, it seemed his invitation had the opposite effect. He'd barely seen Justin since that night.

He didn't want to pressure Justin any further about moving in with him. But there was one aspect of Justin's life that Brian felt he could impact. He had made an appointment with the Dean of P.I.F.A.

"Mr. Kinney. I'm sorry. There is nothing we can do at this point. Mr. Taylor has refused to comply with the rules."

"So you refuse to allow him to return to class. Okay, that's fine. I'm the one who paid his tuition. If he is not getting the education that I paid for, then I must insist that you give me my money back."

"That's impossible, Mr. Kinney. Mr. Taylor is a very talented young man. But his actions have caused irreparable harm to an upstanding member of our community. Mr. Stockwell has donated funds to our institution for years. It would be inappropriate for us to allow Mr. Taylor to continue to attend classes without, at the very least, apologizing. Really, Mr. Kinney, considering the circumstances I think that it was very generous of Mr. Stockwell not to insist that Mr. Taylor be expelled."

"Oh, I see. You've taken money from Stockwell. And that's what determines who gets an education in this pathetic excuse for a college. Sounds like a bribe. Take it from me, Mr. Dean, that man is a criminal. He covers crimes for his friends and now he pays you off to punish the one person who had the balls to call him on it. In my opinion you it's you who owe Justin an apology."

Brian was in his office working on a project when his secretary buzzed him to tell him there was a Mr. Taylor on line 01. "Hey, stranger. How is the hunt for the perfect apartment going?"

"Fine, if you're a millionaire. But it doesn't matter anymore. The weirdest thing happened. I got a letter from P.I.F.A. They apologized for suspending me and they want me to come back to classes starting Monday."

"Really. I guess they finally realized who the real bad guy was." Brian sat back in his chair and listened as Justin read the letter to him. He never mentioned the fact that he had dictated it before he left the dean's office. Working in the P.R. department of a television network had its perks. He'd suggested that when the story of Stockwell's downfall aired he would make sure that his association with P.I.F.A. was mentioned. It was amazing how snooty private educational facilities that depended heavily on public contributions, feared bad publicity.

"Now that I'm a student again I can stay in Daphne's apartment. I'll have to get a room mate, but at least I won't have to move." Justin sounded happy and relieved. "Are you busy tonight?"

"What did you have in mind?"

They made plans for Justin to come to the loft after his shift at the diner. Brian wondered if there was some way that he could get through to Justin about coming home. He thought about what Ben had said about putting Justin first. That meant to think like Justin would think. It should be easy. He knew Justin as well as he knew himself. There had to be some reason that Justin was reluctant to move back home. It must have something to do with sex. Maybe Justin was afraid to bring tricks to the loft. The last time Brian had seen Justin with another man it drove him crazy. But he had been drunk that night. He had deprived Justin of his freedom to fuck. Maybe Justin felt that if he moved back to the loft the freedom would be one sided. 'That's it!' Brian thought. That's why Justin refuses to come home. He thinks I'll go nuts every time I see him with another man. Now Brian knew exactly what he had to do. His plan for the evening was set the minute his boss walked into his office.

Justin felt that he was finally in a good place now. He was thrilled about being able to continue his education. Since he and Brian had talked about Michael's attitude he felt more confident in his dealings with the man. Brian had told him that he came first and Justin believed him. If Michael caused him grief, Brian would side with Justin. Michael was not a threat.

The only problem that Justin had left to deal with was his own insecurity. Brian clearly wanted them to be together. He wanted Justin to move back into the loft. Brian had changed a lot since they had gotten back together, but Justin was still cautious. He wanted their relationship to work this time. He wanted it to be different. Justin feared that if he moved in with Brian now, he might make the same mistakes that he did last time. He had to keep his distance for the sake of their relationship. Each time he and Brian were together he could feel his resolve weakening.

It had been days since they had been together. Brian grabbed him the minute he walked in the door and kissed him. They undressed each other as they crossed the room to the bed. Brian could barely control himself. He pushed himself into Justin before they got to the bed. Justin fell to his knees and grabbed the edge of the mattress. They were both on their knees at the foot of the bed when they came. When they finished they both laughed. "We didn't make it to the bed this time." Justin dragged himself into the bed and collapsed. Brian joined him.

"That was just an appetizer. Wait till you see the main course." Brian couldn't resist teasing him.

"Big plans?" Justin smiled at him.

"It may take all night. Did you bring your jammies, like I told you."

"I don't do all nighters." Justin stopped smiling. "I have my own bed to sleep in. I'm just here to fuck. Isn't that what it's all about?"

"You used to love sleeping with me."

"I do love sleeping with you. I fucked up last time because I got too close and I wanted more. I know what to expect from you now. But I don't know much I can trust myself. I need to have my own place so when your eleven o'clock shows up at the door I don't have to be a part of that."

"We used to party together. I don't hide anything from you. You don't have to leave at eleven. You could stay. We could share that part of our lives."

"I'd hate it. Maybe there's something wrong with me. I don't get off on watching you fuck other men. I don't like the idea of strangers sharing our bodies and our bed. I want to be with you, when you want to be with me. I don't want to live with you Brian. Stop pressuring me."

The buzzer rang and Brian froze. He knew that Justin would take one look at Bill, figure out his plan and leave . . . maybe never to return. He had really fucked up, but there was no going back now. Justin was already putting on his clothes.

"Wait!" Brian implored him. "Give me a chance to explain." Justin sighed and sat down at the counter.

Brian put on his pants before he went to the door and swung it open. Bill Grey stood before him with a bottle of champagne in his hand. He looked at Brian's expression and then looked over at Justin. He'd been in this position from the other side and he attempted to cover for his friend.

"Hi. I was in the neighborhood and I thought I'd take you up on your invitation for a tour of the loft. Nice place. He handed the bottle to Brian."

Brian rolled his eyes and shook his head at Bill's pathetic attempt to save him. "Justin, meet my new boss, Mr. William Grey."

Justin put on his best sarcastic grin and shook his hand. "We've met. How's your car?"

"Completely healed, thank you." He turned to Brian. "I've come at a bad time. You obviously had plans. I'll leave."

"Oh, he had a plan, alright. But I'm the one who's leaving. Nice meeting you."

Brian looked helplessly at Bill. Bill grabbed Justin's arm. "He wasn't being selfish, Justin. You know him better than anyone. You know that he was trying to give you what you want. He hasn't figured out what that is. Why don't you just come out and tell him."

After Bill left, Brian and Justin stood facing each other without uttering a word. Finally Brian blurted out his feelings about that night.

"You kissed him!!!"

"You kissed Michael!!!"

"You know it's not the same thing! I wasn't going to fuck Michael!"

"And I wasn't going to fuck Bill!"

"You practically fucked him on the dance floor! Don't tell me that you weren't turned on! I know you!"

"NO! You don't know me! You don't know me at all. Brian, I don't care about your tricks. I know that it's a part of your life you will never give up. I understand, it's who you are and I accept that. But, I've had some time to think about it and I know that it's not me. I guess before, I wanted to please you . . . I wanted to be like you. But I'm not Brian Kinney. . . I'm Justin Taylor and I don't need or want any other man in my life right now but you. If you can't accept me for who I am, then there's no point in me moving in here with you. I'd get too involved in your life and eventually I'd have to leave anyway. I don't want to ever have to go through that again. If I stay on the parameter I can still have the part of you that will always belong to me. . . your heart."

Brian looked down at the floor and started across the room to where Justin stood. "What if I don't bring anyone here? I could take care of business in the backroom or somewhere else."

Justin considered his suggestion. "More rules?"

"Rules can be good. If we both agree." Brian put the bottle he was holding down on the counter and placed his arms around Justin's waist. Justin move closer and kissed him tenderly.

"Unspoken rule number three," Justin whispered. "I don't kiss anyone on the lips but you."

"Me too, not even Mikey. I promise."

"He's not going to understand that," Justin warned. "Yet another nail in my coffin. If they ever find my body in a dumpster you don't have to bother with DNA evidence. You'll know who's responsible."

"It's that bad? Why didn't you tell me?"

"You're not blind. You chose not to notice."

For that Brian had no answer.

The bottle of champagne lay empty at the foot of the bed. They were hot and heavy into round three. Brian moaned loudly as Justin tried to catch his breath. As they reached simultaneous climaxes their groans turned to screams of pleasure. Even for them it was loud. They never heard the door to the loft open.

"Briiiiiannnn!!! Are you okay?" Michael had reached the bedroom area just as they both collapsed onto the bed.

"Michael!" Brian yelled "What the fuck . . . ?" Brian reached for his sweat pants and struggled into them. Still breathing heavily he got out of the bed and stormed off toward the kitchen. Justin silently crept across the room to the bathroom gathering his clothing as he went.

Brian stood in front of a flustered Michael and stuck out his hand. "Give me the key!"

"But, Brian. I thought someone was murdering you the way you were yelling!"

Brian didn't back down. "The key!"

Michael produced the key and Brian put it in his pocket. "What the fuck did you think you were doing?" He continued to glare at Michael as he waited for an explanation.

"Melanie lost the baby."

Justin emerged from the bathroom and sat down on the bed to put on his shoes.

Michael continued. "I've been leaving messages on your phone. You never answered. I thought something might be wrong so I came over here. I guess you had something better to do."

"I'm sorry about the baby. Is Melanie okay?"

"Yeah, she'll be fine. No complications. Brian why didn't you call me back? You must have gotten my messages."

"You didn't say what it was about. I thought you wanted to go out or something. I had plans."

"Fucking Justin. I guess being there for your friends isn't a priority anymore."

Brian put his hands on Michael's shoulders and pushed him down into onto a stool at the counter. "Michael, he can hear you." Brian whispered.

"He knows how I feel."

Brian left Michael and went into the bedroom. Michael watched them kiss tenderly. Brian helped Justin button his shirt all the while staring into his eyes. They whispered to each other and then Justin put on his jacket and walked toward the door. "Sorry about your baby, Michael." Justin said quietly.

"Thanks." Michael answered. Justin left for home.

Brian went into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. "Do you want something to drink?"

"Water's fine."

Brian sat down next to Michael at the counter. He knew that Michael was hurting, but he had to put an end to the conflict between him and Justin.

"Michael. Who was with you at the hospital tonight?"

"Mel and Lindsay, Ben, my mom, Vic, Hunter and Emmett."

"You weren't alone, were you? You know there's nothing I could have done."

"We've always been there for each other. Now you don't even care."

"I do care. You're the one who's being selfish."

"How do you figure that?"

"You have it all. You have a family who loves and accepts you, friends who would do anything for you. And you have Ben, who puts up with all of your bullshit. You even have Hunter around to keep you on your toes. Look around, Michael, what have I got?"

"You've always had me."

"When I first moved in here I gave you a key to my place because I lived here alone. It didn't matter if you walked in on me fucking a trick or taking a piss. But I don't want to live here alone anymore."

"Justin's in and I'm out."

"Things have changed for both of us. You've got a life with Ben and your whole family. I'm happy for you. I could never be the man that Ben is. We were never that for each other. It doesn't mean we're not friends anymore. We just have different needs now."

"What is it you need?"

"I need to not be alone all the time. I like having Justin around. I like coming home to the mess in the kitchen and a big smile on his face just because I walked in the door. I like sleeping with him next to me. I like waking up in the middle of the night because he's kissing my ear."

"You just roll over and fuck him. And you don't even have to buy him a drink."

"It's not just about sex anymore. But that is just amazing." Brian reflected on his innermost feelings about his sex life with Justin. He spoke more to himself than to Michael. "I never would believe that having sex with the same person could be exciting every time. Just when I think we know everything about each other's bodies, he surprises me. There's an intimacy I've never experienced with any other man. And it just gets better."

Michael watched his friend's face as he relayed the intimate details of his love life. He'd had similar feelings about Ben. Could it be that they had both fallen in love? Not with each other as Michael had always hoped, but with men who understood them and loved them without making demands. Ben was everything he had ever wanted in a partner. At that moment Michael wanted to be with him.

"I don't even know when it happened, Michael. It drives me crazy when I don't know where he is or who he's with. Even when I know what he's doing it still drives me crazy that he's not coming home every night. When did I become such a pathetic nut case?"

"I know when it happened. It was the day he came into our lives." Michael motioned toward the door.

Brian grinned and nodded. "I fought it, Michael, I really tried. But, if I lost him now I'd spend the rest of my life alone. I don't want to fuck it up. I want him to move back here and stay with me. He's almost ready, I think. Tonight he said he'd think about it."

"What's there to think about? He's crazy about you."

"He's afraid to get too close. I don't blame him. I'm not good at sharing my feelings. I think maybe he wants that."

"You think? Maybe?"

"That's the problem. I don't know for sure what it is he needs, or if I can give it to him. But I do know one thing. The only way it's going to work is if I put him first. Before anyone or anything."

"Where did you learn that?"

"A very wise professor I know told me that."

"Wise professors always give good advice."

"I'm sorry about not being there for you tonight."

"Who said you weren't there for me? Listening to your pathetic life story has taken my mind off of my problems. That's what friends are for."

Michael got up and hugged Brian. He put his lips up to his face but Brian pushed him away.

"I don't kiss anyone on the lips but Justin. And Michael, don't make me have to chose between you. Give him a break and stop being such a pussy."

"You really love him, don't you? I hope you get what you want."

The next morning Brian got what he wanted. He awoke to the sound of pots clanging in the kitchen. He got out of bed and saw Justin in the kitchen preparing omelets. "Hey. Sorry I woke you up . I was going to surprise you with breakfast in bed."

"I'd rather you surprise me with you in my bed."

"You mean our bed. That's my other surprise. I moved my stuff in while you were asleep. That's if you still want me here?"

Brian looked around the room and saw Justin's computer and a few pieces of furniture that had been in his room at Daphne's. It was real. He wasn't dreaming.

Brian came around the counter and hugged him. "Are you sure?"

"I thought about it all night. What you said about not bringing guys home, that was big for you. This place is an important part of your player image. You love to see the expression on their faces when they walk in. You decorated to impress everyone with your success. I realized that you haven't bought one stick of new furniture, even though you're working again."

"I guess I hadn't thought about it."

"Yes you have. You want to know what I think?"

"I guess you're going to tell me anyway."

"I think that you were waiting for me. You've changed, Brian. Maybe this time the loft will really be OUR home."

"No orange! You're not painting anything orange. And no "comfy" furniture."

"More rules? Lighten up, Brian." He took a forkful of omelet and placed it in Brian's mouth. They ate breakfast at the counter. After they finished, Brian announced that he had to get ready for work.

"Don't worry about being late. Your boss called me this morning. We had a talk."

"About what?"

"He tried to tell me that he bribed you to let him come over. I thanked him for his pathetic attempt to cover for you. I told him you might be late this morning. That I was going home. He said he was glad for us, but if you fuck up I could stay at his place indefinitely."

"Nice guy."

"I have great taste in men." Justin cleaned up the kitchen while Brian showered and dressed. They decided to put off celebrating until the evening. Justin sat on the bed and watched Brian pick out a suit. "How is Michael? He was really upset with you for not answering his calls."

"We talked. He's okay."

"I feel bad for him. He was really looking forward to being a dad. Are they going to try again?"

"We didn't talk about it."

"What did you talk about?"

"Changes." Brian found the sweat pants that were on the floor and took the key out of the pocket. He handed the key to Justin. "Here. We're getting the locks changed anyway. I'm going to get three keys. One for each of us and one extra. You can give the extra one to anyone you want."

"Me? How can I pick someone? Michael will be pissed if I don't give it to him. And what about Lindsay? Brian, you pick someone."

"No. You have to do it. Give it to Daphne or your mother, I don't care. We're starting out fresh. My friends tend to be pushy. It's my fault. I've let them ignore you, or in Michael's case insult you. They need to know that we're serious. You come first."

Brian left for work. As Justin hung his shirts in the closet he thought about the key. It was a big deal to him. It was the first time that Brian had ever thought something through and put Justin before his friends' feelings. It made Justin feel important. He smiled as he opened the closet and removed the brand new orange shirt that he had just hung there. It was going back to the store. Rules were rules. He was determined not to break any this time.

Perfect

Lindsay paced the hall nervously as she waited for Brian to come home from work. She was relieved when she heard the elevator moving.

"My key won't work!" Lindsay announced. "You'll have to give me a new one."

"What are you doing here?" Brian asked as he turned his key in the new lock. He punched in the new code into the alarm pad.

When they entered the loft Lindsay gasped. "Oh, my. I can't get over how empty the place looks without all of your beautiful furniture."

"You get used to it. I have everything I need. I have my bed and Justin. . . everything else is excess."

"Justin? He's moving in with you?"

"We're moving in together. Starting from scratch. Just happens this place was available."

"I guess that explains why we haven't seen much of you lately."

"How's Melanie?" Brian asked.

"Physically she's fine. Back to work, in fact."

"Do you want something to drink?"

"She blames me!" Lindsay blurted out. "She blames me for her baby dying!"

"That's fucking ridiculous."

"Ever since she got home from the hospital she's avoided talking about it. She's been cold toward me and Gus. At first I thought she needed time to grieve. That she was just lashing out at me to ease the pain. But last night ,she left me."

"She'll be back. Separation can be good. It's a wake up call." Brian spoke from experience.

"I don't know, Brian. I'm beginning to think that you were right. There is no such thing as love. Relationships based on love don't work."

"Why does everyone listen to me? I don't know shit about love or relationships."

"Aren't you in one?"

"Justin and I have a good thing, as long as we don't try to define it. We have rules and we get along fine. The sex is amazing. And it's cheaper to live in one place. He doesn't put pressure on me to change and I don't pressure him not to. For us, what we have is . . . Perfect."

"Perfect?" Lindsay echoed.

At that moment Justin burst through the door cursing up a storm. "I fucking HATE him!! I don't care if I ever fucking see his face again!" He notice Lindsay's presence. "Hey." He waved a hand in her direction, kissed Brian on the cheek, then stormed up the steps to the bathroom and slammed the door.

"It was perfect." Brian muttered under his breath. He and Lindsay stared in the direction of the bathroom door.

"I should go." Lindsay said. "Before I forget, give me the new key."

Brian hesitated a moment. "I can't give you a key. We have one extra key and Justin is in charge of who gets it."

"Justin has the key! I'm the mother of your child. You don't trust me with a key?"

"It's better if I don't get involved. Justin may give the key to you."

"What about your son? Is your perfect 'thing' with Justin going to change your relationship with him, too?"

"Of course not."

"Then I suggest you to come and see him soon. Before he forgets what you look like." She huffed out the door. As Brian slid the door closed he pondered what had just happened with Lindsay. In the past she had always been one of Justin's biggest supporters. Now she seemed to resent his presence in Brian's life. He shrugged it off, telling himself she was probably just upset about Mel.

Brian knocked on the bathroom door. "Hey, are you naked yet?"

Justin opened the door. "Is Lindsay gone? She must think I'm nuts."

Justin walked out of the bathroom, threw himself down on the bed and curled up around his pillow.

"You wanna talk about it?"

"I went to see my dad."

"Why do you waste your time with him? He's never going to change."

"I only went there because my mother asked me to pick up Molly. His new wife is pregnant."

"New wife?"

"Yeah, he married Chrissy. Nobody even told me."

"Why do you care?"

"They just found out it's a boy. I guess my dad will have his perfect son after all."

"You're being replaced."

"I know I shouldn't care. But, they never even told me. It's like I ceased to exist once he found out I was gay. Well, fuck him! And fuck his new wife and my new baby brother, too. I don't want any part of their perfect life."

"We have our own perfect life."

Justin smiled for the first time since he arrived home. "We do, don't we."

Brian pulled the pillow out of Justin's arms and took its place. Brian's kisses always put Justin into a trance. He was enjoying the attention when he suddenly remembered something.

"SHIT!!!" Justin got up suddenly. "Get up!!! You have to help me before someone rips off all the stuff I have in the car."

Brian pulled himself up and followed Justin who was already out the door. He caught up with him in the hall where Justin was impatiently pushing the button for the elevator.

"What's the emergency?"

"You'll see." Justin was smiling coyly.

When the elevator let them off in the underground parking garage, Brian saw why Justin was in such a hurry. He had left his mother's car in the garage, loaded down with furniture and boxes.

"My mother said I could take anything that I wanted out of her storage place. This stuff was from our house. She didn't have room for it in the condo. Let's take this chair off the roof first. It's heavy, so you grab the other end." Justin instructed. They managed to get the chair from the roof and into the elevator. It took them half an hour to unload everything.

Brian watched as Justin arranged the new furniture in the living room. He looked at the leather rocker recliner that Justin had placed in front of a 27 inch TV set which had also come out of the car. "I guess it's better than sitting on the floor. But once I get some time to shop, we're redecorating. This stuff is all temporary."

Justin sat down in the recliner and stretched. "This was my father's favorite chair. My mother always hated it."

"Your mother has taste."

"Before you make judgments you ought to try it out." Justin got up and pushed Brian into the chair. "Close your eyes." Justin instructed. Brian complied and Justin pulled on the lever which caused the chair to recline. "Keep your eyes closed and relax."

The soft leather and angle of the recline made Brian feel like he was floating. Justin pushed a button and the chair began to gently massage Brian's back. A moment later he felt Justin's hands on his face. Then he felt Justin's naked body slide on top of him. Justin lost no time in stripping off Brian's shirt and pants. They made love in the soft leather chair which had belonged to Justin's father.

"That was awesome!" Brian said. "The chair can stay."

Justin lifted his head from Brian's chest and kissed him one more time. He shifted his body so that he was sitting across Brian's lap.

"What did Lindsay want? Was she upset with me?"

"Mel left her. She blames her for the baby dying."

"That's ridiculous."

"That's what I told her. She may ask you about the key. Don't let her put pressure on you, about Gus."

"Daphne, I am about to bestow upon you a great honor." Justin practiced his speech in front of the mirror in Daphne's bedroom.

Daphne emerged from the bathroom with towel wrapped around her head. "What did you say, Justin? You want me to be your maid of honor?"

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm never going to need a maid of honor or a best man or anything like that. I wouldn't reduce my relationship with Brian to a demeaning display of meaningless ceremony, like a wedding."

Daphne giggled. "If Brian Kinney asked you to marry him, you would crawl down an isle of hot coals on your hands and knees, and you know it."

"I would not. What Brian and I have is real. We don't need a stupid public ceremony to be happy. We have each other on our own terms. And we're really happy."

"Okay, I know that. So what's your big surprise? Tell me fast because I have a surprise for you too."

Justin handed Daphne a key. "Daph. I've decided that you are the only person that I would trust to hold a key to the loft. You can use it anytime you want. But if I were you I would knock first because if Brian and I are inside we are probably fucking."

Daphne handed him back the key. "That's disgusting. Why would I want your stupid key?"

"It's a great honor, Daph. It means that I trust you to be our friend without interfering. Michael and Lindsay used to barge in whenever they had the urge to talk to Brian. It didn't matter what we were in the middle of doing."

"Justin. I'm touched that you trust me. But, giving me this key is pointless. I'm not going to be living here much longer. Nathan and I are getting married and moving to Philadelphia."

"Fuck me!" Justin threw his arms around his friend "Daph, I didn't mean that stuff about marriage for you. It's just something that Brian and I don't need. You'll be a beautiful bride. I'm happy for you. Nathan is a lucky guy."

"I want you both to come to my wedding. It isn't for a few months so we'll have time to talk about it. I'm going to miss you when I move away."

"You probably won't even think about me once you leave the Pitts."

"Justin, you've been my best friend my whole life. I'm not going to forget you."

"What am I going to do for a best friend?"

"Brian is your best friend."

"Yeah, he is. But what am I going to do with this fucking key now?"

"What's the deal with the key? Why don't you just give it to one of Brian's friends?"

"It's a big deal for Brian to give it to me. It means that he puts me first, before anyone else. I have to give the key to someone who accepts both of us. Lindsay is acting weird about me lately. Michael will never really accept me. Ted and Emmett would lose the fucking thing."

"Yeah, I see what you mean. Well good luck with that. Maybe you'll meet some people next semester when you do your new internship."

Saying goodbye to Daphne, Justin headed back home, feeling a little depressed. It had never occurred to him that one day he would lose her to some man. Thinking back, he remembered all of the times she had stood up for him, supported him, told him he was being an asshole when he needed to hear it. She was a true friend and he was going to miss her terribly.

What Daphne had said was true; Brian was his best friend now. They were closer then they had ever been. But still, it would be nice to have more friends just to hang out with. He had been focused on one person for so long that he hadn't made any friends at school. Working at the diner, he only met older gay people who were on their way to party. Michael seemed to be trying to be nice to him; working on the comic together had become a little easier. But

Michael would always be Brian's friend. Everyone he knew was Brian's friend. Aside from Brian, Justin felt his life was empty.

His mood improved a little when he got to the loft and Brian greeted him with a big hug. "Guess what! I got a huge bonus today. We're going to Bill's cabin in the woods to celebrate. I'm going to fuck you all weekend."

"That's great, Brian."

Brian sensed that Justin wasn't his usual exuberant self. "What's the matter?"

"This key is the matter. It made me aware of the fact that that I have no life. Do you realize that I aside from Daphne everyone I know was your friend first?"

"That is pathetic. I don't even like my friends."

"Daphne's getting married and moving to Philadelphia." Justin threw himself face down on the bed.

Brian lay down next to him. "Looks like you're stuck with me."

"You've already got a best friend, Brian. It's not the same thing. I never had any friends in school, I haven't made any friends in college, I even hated Ethan's friends. I'm just not a likeable person, I guess."

"Maybe it's the company you keep. Having your 30 year old boyfriend hanging around all the time is probably not conducive to making new friends."

"You're 31. And it's not you. People like you. You have lots of friends."

"Give the key to your mother and forget this friend thing, Justin. I'll buy you a dog."

"I bet the dog wouldn't like me either."

"Stop being a drama queen. Come over here and suck my dick. That always makes you feel better."

As Brian packed up the presents that he and Justin had purchased for Gus he wondered if he was doing the right thing. His plan had been to put Justin first. It was easy once he realized that he had to think what Justin would do before he acted. So far his plan was working. They had been living together for over a month and everything was perfect. Brian was doing well at his new company. Bill had offered him his lake house for the weekend so that he and Justin could celebrate his success. It worked out perfectly that this Friday marked the second anniversary of

their first night together. They had never talked about the significance of the day, but since it was the same day that Gus was born it was easy to remember.

When Lindsay had asked Brian to come over to celebrate Gus's birthday, he told her that he would come in the afternoon to give Gus his presents but that he had to leave early since he and Justin were going away for the weekend. Lindsay had been acting strangely since Mel left her. She was constantly calling Brian to ask when he would be coming over to see his son. If Justin answered the phone she was short with him and refused to leave a message. It almost seemed like she was jealous of him. Brian was tempted to tell her off. But he knew it could cause all kinds of problems for Gus in the future so he had put up with Lindsay's behavior.

Lindsay had asked him to come alone. Since Justin wanted to finish some sketches for the comic book before they left for the lake, they'd arranged to meet at Michael's store. When Lindsay invited Brian in, Gus was nowhere in sight.

"Where's the birthday boy?" Brian called out, expecting Gus to pop up from behind a chair.

"He's next door playing with the neighbor's son." Lindsay told him.

"Well, go and get him. I told you I can't stay long."

"I wanted to talk to you alone. I have given it a lot of thought, Brian, and I think that the best thing for Gus would be for his parents to get married."

"I thought that his parents were married."

"I mean his natural parents."

Brian laughed out loud.

"I wasn't making a joke. I realize that I can't raise him alone. I have all the responsibility now that Mel is out of my life and I just can't manage it."

"I'll give you more money."

"It's not that. He needs the support of both of his parents. I can't deal with working full time and having to worry about who's going to be here for him."

"What do you want from me?"

"I think we should get married and you should move in here with me."

Brian was speechless. He got up and was about to leave.

"You don't have to sleep with me. But, if you lived here Gus would have two parents. We'd be a conventional family on the surface. You could still have sex with Justin."

"I'm leaving now. Tell Gus to have a happy birthday."

"No, you're not leaving. . . I am. I have an opening at the gallery tonight. You're going to have to take care of Gus."

"I told you that I was going away."

"I'm sure that Gus will enjoy spending the weekend at the lake."

Lindsay called out Gus's name and he came running from the neighbor's front yard.

"Hey, Gus. Daddy's going to take care of you now. Mommy has to go to work." She kissed the boy good bye and handed him to Brian.

Michael was surprised to see Brian enter the store with Gus. "Happy birthday Gus!" Michael said. "What's the deal? I thought you were meeting Justin and leaving from here."

"That was the plan. Unfortunately, Lindsay had her own plan." Brian put Gus down on the floor. The boy ran over to a display of action figures and started pulling them off the shelf.

"I feel bad for her, Brian. She and Mel haven't even spoken in weeks. Believe me, I know how rough it is to lose a kid, but Mel shouldn't have blamed Lindsay."

"Lindsay has decided that Gus needs both of his parents. She wants me to marry her and move into her house. I can still fuck Justin. Wasn't that kind of her?"

Michael laughed out loud.

"That was my reaction. But then she stuck me with the kid. Now I'll have to disappoint Justin, yet again."

"He was really excited about going away. Can't you get a sitter for Gus?"

"Lindsay would probably have me brought up on charges of child abuse. Leaving my son with strangers on his birthday. I hate to disappoint Justin about going to the lake. He probably doesn't remember, but we met on the night Gus was born. "

"He remembers. I don't know how you two do it. You never talk to each other, but you always think alike. Justin mentioned that you probably didn't remember that today is your anniversary. He was so happy that he even talked to me about the trip."

"I remember what happened the last time he got so excited about going away together. It was the beginning of the end." Brian said gloomily.

"He's not going to leave you because Lindsay got a bug up her ass. You mean everything to him. He'll understand."

"I know he will. But he's been so down lately about his father's new kid and Daphne leaving town soon. I wanted him to have a good time and forget about it."

The bell over the front door rang as Justin entered the store. When he saw Brian his face lit up. He put the drawings on the counter and then put his arms around Brian's neck. "You're here early. I thought you were coming at four."

"There's been a change of plans."

"What's Gus doing here?"

"That's the change of plans."

"We're not going." Justin didn't even try to hide his disappointment.

"You're going." Michael announced. "I'm taking Gus home with me. We're all going to my mom's for dinner tonight. We'll make it a party. Lindsay can't say you're leaving him with strangers for his birthday."

"I was hoping you'd say that, Mikey!" Brian reached over the counter, pulled Michael toward him and kissed him on top of the head. "I'll get the stroller and baby shit out of the car."

"Thanks, Michael. You made him really happy." Justin said sincerely. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a key. "Here, I think that you're the best person to hold on to this."

Michael smiled at him. "I'm honored."

"Just make sure you knock first."

Lindsay was not surprised when she spotted Gus with Michael at the diner the next morning. "I see nothing's changed. Brian's off fucking his brains out while Michael covers for him."

"Plenty has changed. I'm not covering for anyone. I'm helping out a friend. Make that a couple of friends." Debbie came over to the table and offered to take Gus for a walk.

"Lindsay, what were you thinking? You're trying to trap Brian into marriage."

"I know it sounds foolish. But, in our own way we love each other. For Gus's sake we could make it work."

"To hell with Justin and everything that the two of them mean to each other. As long as you have your conventional family, everyone's happy. Fuck that!"

"Michael, if you could have found a way to trap Brian into fucking you, you would have done it in a minute."

"And regretted it for the rest of my life. Brian never gave in to me because he puts value on our friendship. I finally had to step back and look at what my obsession with Brian Kinney has cost both of us over the years. He almost lost the only person who's ever touched his heart. I wasn't very nice to Justin because I was jealous. Brian stuck up for me because he's a loyal friend. And I want to finally be a real friend to him, and Justin."

"What about Gus? I know that Brian and Justin appear to be happy now. But it won't last. You know how Brian is. Not even Justin can change him. Gus is going to need his father on a daily basis. It's not fair to Gus to put Brian's needs first."

"Justin isn't trying to change Brian. Brian is changing on his own because he wants to. In the long run Gus will benefit. Unless, it really isn't Gus who needs Brian on a daily basis."

Lindsay turned her head in order to avoid Michael's reproachful stare.

"As far as Gus is concerned, you don't have to raise him alone. You have a whole family to support you. My mom is still missing her almost grandbaby. Ben and I are getting pretty good at this kid thing. Brian loves Gus, and so does Justin."

"Thanks Michael, I appreciate it."

"Just don't interfere with Brian and Justin's relationship. I have a responsibility to protect them from all who try. I have been designated, by Justin, as the keeper of the key."

Lindsay laughed out loud. "Oh, Michael. That may prove to be a dubious honor. Justin chose wisely."

Sunday night Ben and Michael were surprised to see Brian arrive alone at Babylon. "What happened? Did you two finally get sick of each other?"

"Nope. Justin finds it difficult to concentrate on his homework with my tongue up his ass. So he asked me to leave."

"And you came here?"

"Where else would I go to find a substitute ass?"

"How was the weekend at the lake?"

Brian grinned. "What lake?"

Ben shook his head. "I don't know where you get the energy."

"Didn't you know that I have super powers?"

The three men drank and talked for a little over an hour. When Ben and Michael went home Brian looked around the dance floor, but found no one interesting. He decided to make an early night of it. Justin might still be awake so the evening was not a total loss.

Brian was surprised to come home to an empty apartment at midnight. He looked around for a note. Finding none, he dialed Justin's cell phone. Justin answered in a hushed tone. "Hi Brian. I got a call tonight to come to the hospital. My father and his wife were in an accident."

"So they finally called you to tell you something."

"Chrissy had the baby and then she died. My dad's taking it pretty hard. They don't think that the baby is going to live."

"Wow, that's pretty tough. Are you okay? Do you want me to come and get you?"

"My dad is staying here overnight. He said I could take his car. There was hardly any damage to it at all. She wasn't wearing a seat belt and she hit her head on the windshield."

"Be careful. Call me if you need me."

Brian nervously paced the floor for an hour waiting for Justin to come home. The minute Justin walked in, Brian put his arms around him and hugged him. Without a word, Justin took off his jacket and sat down on the leather recliner. Brian shoved him over and sat down next to him.

"He's so small, Brian. Half the size of Gus when he was born. He has all of these tubes and wires sticking out of him. It makes him look like an alien or something. My dad couldn't even look at him. But the nurses let me touch him in incubator. Do you think he knows I was there?"

"If you touched him, he knew."

"If he does survive he may be blind, or deaf, or brain damaged."

"Don't think about it anymore. There's nothing you can do for him."

"I'm going back tomorrow. I want to be there in case he's still around."

Justin went back to the hospital every day for a month. The baby was now breathing on his own and had gained some weight. He didn't focus his eyes on anything or respond when you spoke to him. Still, it was too soon to tell what was wrong with him, if anything. Once they removed some of the tubes and wires the nurses allowed Justin to hold him. He looked down at the child, who to him still looked like an alien, and wondered what his fate would be. Justin decided to call him E.T. Craig never came into the nursery. He would come to the hospital every day and sit out in the hall. Once in a while he would walk over to the window and peer inside.

"You really should go in there and feed him or something." Justin suggested. "The nurses said that he'll be able to leave the hospital in a week or two. You don't want him to think some stranger is taking him home."

Finally, Justin coaxed Craig to hold the infant. He left the room and watched from them from the hall. Craig's face was expressionless. He had barely spoken since the night of the accident. Even with all the bad blood between them Justin still loved his father and was worried about the future.

After a few weeks, Justin's absence from the dinner table every night was starting to get to Brian. He feared that Justin was becoming too attached to Craig's new baby. What hope was there for that kid anyway? What kind of life was he going to have? Not only does he have to worry about being deaf, blind and retarded, he'll have Craig for a father. It was Brian's honest opinion that the boy would be better off dead. But it seemed that was no longer an option.

One night, to Brian's surprise, Justin arrived home early enough to go out to dinner. "I wanted to thank you for not putting pressure on me. I know I've been neglecting you, but now that the baby's going home tomorrow. I promise I won't be disappearing on you." Justin was elated that the baby had gained enough weight to go home. They still had no idea what the future held for him, but so far he was a fighter and that was a good thing.

"I just hope that my father can handle it. He's really depressed. I would feel the same, if something happened to you. I guess it's understandable, but it's been over a month since his wife died. His son needs him now."

"Let's just hope that he doesn't start calling in the middle of the night for moral support."

"I doubt that. He hasn't really spoken to me about the baby or himself. My mom said that he's probably still in shock. Having the baby home will be good for him. It'll give him something to focus on."

The next morning Justin was getting dressed when the phone rang. Brian answered it. "Hello . . . Justin, it's for you. It's your sister."

"Hi Mol. What's up? Calm down and talk slower. I can't understand you." Justin listened to his sister. Whatever she was saying, Brian could tell it was not good news. Justin's face was turning red and he was clenching his teeth together in an effort to control his temper. Finally he hung up, after telling Molly not to worry, that he was going to take care of things.

"What's the matter?"

"I'm going to the hospital. Molly spoke to that prick we call a father this morning. He told her not to come to the hospital. He's planning on giving my brother away. He's meeting with social services this morning to find an appropriate placement."

Brian grabbed his arm. "Wait. I'm going with you."

"Brian, it's not your family. You don't have to get involved."

"How do you think I'd feel if you got into an accident because you're too pissed off to see straight. Let me drive you there, at least. I promise I won't interfere."

"Thanks, Bri." Justin put his arms around Brian's neck and hugged him tightly. It was going to take a miracle for Justin to talk his father into keeping the baby. Brian knew that Justin was strong, but nobody should have to face that kind of battle alone. It wasn't a cause that Brian would have chosen to fight for, but he knew it was important to Justin. Brian's own feeling was that the child would be better off with people equipped to handle his needs, but he knew Justin was young and idealistic. He still believed in family and love. . . and all that bullshit. Who knows, Brian thought, maybe that's what miracles are made of.

When they arrived at the hospital Justin asked Brian to wait for him in the car. Shortly after Justin went inside, Brian spotted Jennifer and Molly hurrying into the building. Craig was in for it, double barrel and Brian didn't want to miss the fireworks. He got out of the car and went inside. At the information desk he was directed to the neonatal ICU. Brian walked down the hallway following the signs, planning what he was going to say and keeping an eye out for Justin. Somehow he ended up in a crowded corridor where fathers and family members were staring into big glass windows at very tiny babies. Across the hallway there was a smaller window. On the other side of the window he spotted a sign on a plastic box that said "baby boy" Taylor.

Brian had been looking for a conference room or empty hospital room full of battling Taylors; he hadn't expected to see the baby. Looking down into the plastic box, he saw that the tiny baby was asleep. There were no tubes or wires as Justin had described, but Brian had never seen a human being so small. He would probably fit into the palm of Brian's hand. Suddenly the baby startled and opened his eyes, squirming as if something was bothering him. His arms were secured in the little white robe that he wore. Brian watched in amazement as Baby Boy Taylor pulled one arm free and stuck it out of the robe. Another few seconds and he had the other arm free. Then he stretched both arms up over his head. Contentedly, the baby sighed and closed his eyes again.

It was comical to see this half-naked creature in a plastic box sleeping with his arms over his head. He looked like he was on the beach trying to get a tan. This was Justin's brother, for sure. Nothing wrong with this kid a few pounds wouldn't fix.

Brian felt someone touch his arm. Jennifer stood beside him. "All this trouble over such a small package. Poor little guy. Who took his arms out of the blanket?"

"He did it. Just now. . . I watched him."

"Justin used to sleep like that. His arms over his head like he didn't have a care in the world."

"That figures. What's going on? I'm just waiting for security to drag Justin out of the building."

"Molly and Justin are talking to Craig. Molly is pleading her case now. Justin is staring out the window waiting his turn."

"And here we are . . . one big happy fucked up family."

Further down the hallway a door opened. A hysterical Molly came running out looking for her mother. Jennifer tried to calm her. "Mommy, daddy and Justin are yelling. I'm so scared for Justin. Daddy is so mean to him."

"I'll take care of it, Molly." Jennifer said.

"NO! It's my turn." Brian walked down the hall and entered the room. It was a large conference room. Craig and Justin were deep in conversation at the other end of the room. They were obviously both very upset.

"How can you just abandon him? Do you think Chrissy would want him to spend his life in an institution? He's the only piece of her left on this earth."

"I can't raise a sick child! Not alone!" Craig put his hand over his face.

Brian watched as Justin took charge of the conversation. "You're not alone. In case you haven't noticed."

"We haven't even spoken in two years." Craig said. "I know it's my doing. But nothing has changed."

"Oh, yes it has. I have a brother I didn't have before. I want to help, not for you, for him. I don't care if he's blind or deaf or whatever, he's still my brother. And even though you're a narrow minded homophobic asshole you're still our father. We're stuck with each other."

"How can you help? You have your own life."

"I'll come over every day after class when you take him home. I'll take him to doctors, or therapists or whatever else he needs. I'll help you find a nanny who is trained to take care of special kids. Any time you need a break you can call me. I'll be there for him."

"Is your boyfriend going to want a sick baby taking up all your time?"

Brian walked over to where they were standing. "Since you brought me into the discussion, I'll answer that. What Justin does with his time is his business. He believes in love and all that crap. We both know what bullshit that is, don't we Craig? Get tired of your wife, dump her for a newer model. Your kid's gay, cut him out of your perfect life. No kid of yours is going to soil the Taylor family name. What about Molly, Craig? What if it turns out she's a lesbian or maybe she'll have a baby out of wedlock. That new kid in there, in my opinion, would be better off being raised by wolves, except for one thing. Justin doesn't give up on people. In fact the more fucked up you are, the more he sticks to you like glue. So why don't you get your head out of your ass and give that baby a break. If you don't want the responsibility, Justin and I will take him."

Justin had been leaning up against the wall listening to Brian's rant. "You'd do that, Brian?"

"Yeah, I would."

Craig sat down in a chair. Brian's word had stung him deeply. Because it was the truth.

Justin put a hand on his father's shoulder. "Dad, give him a chance. If it turns out that we can't handle him, then we can talk about what's the best thing to do. I promise I won't give you a hard time about it anymore. But if you give him away now, we'll never know."

Craig nodded his head. "Okay. I'll try. Ask them to get him ready to go home. Justin, you can have Chrissy's car. You'll need it."

"Damned straight I'll take the car. And another thing. If I'm going to help you, then you should pay my tuition next semester because I won't be able to put in as many hours at work. And you owe Brian for the last two semesters, with interest. Because I'll never be able to pay him back in a million years."

Craig reluctantly agreed to Justin's demands. Brian followed Justin to the desk to ask what they would need to take the baby home. The nurse presented Justin with some paper work. "I've been asking your father for this information, but he's put me off. Before he leaves the hospital your father needs to give him a name."

"A name? Shit, my father didn't name him. What am I going to do?"

"Let's name him Bruce or Lance just to piss off your dad." Brian suggested.

"Molly and I have been calling him E.T."

"Emmett Theodore." Brian joked.

"You're not helping. He needs a really strong name. . . I know. . ." Justin filled in the blank line with a name and showed it to Brian. "What do you think?"

"Perfect." Brian liked the name Lucas.

Jennifer had stayed on the sidelines. She expressed her condolences to Craig, but did not engage in conversation about the baby. She thought he looked relieved. The decision to keep the baby had been made by Justin and not by himself. So if it turned out badly he would have someone to blame. Justin had borrowed a baby car seat from Lindsay and had secured it in the back seat of his new car. He and Molly accompanied Craig and Lucas home. Jennifer offered Brian a ride.

"Justin told me that you offered to take the baby. That was very noble of you."

"Not really. Can you imagine what my life would be like if Justin lost this battle? How much trouble can a baby that small be?"

Jennifer laughed. "You'd be surprised. If you think Justin is stubborn now you should have watched me try to feed him strained spinach."

"Do you think he'll be okay? Aside from being so small he looks pretty normal to me."

"I hope so, for everyone's sake."

Justin was true to his word. Every day he drove to his father's house to help out. His father had hired a retired nurse who was recommended by someone at the hospital. She stayed with the baby on weekday mornings; Justin took over in the afternoons until Craig got home from work. At first he was nervous handling Lucas. He was so much smaller than Gus had been at his age, but he was less fidgety. Lucas ate well and slept most of the time. After a few weeks they decided to hire an au-pair to take over the household work and to care for the baby at other times. Justin was finally able to spend time with Brian.

"What the fuck are you doing here in the middle of the day?" Brian asked. He had just arrived home from work to find Justin in the kitchen making a mess.

"You're early."

"It's a good thing I am. What the fuck are you doing to the kitchen?"

"It's called cooking. I made a chocolate cake, just for you."

"Me, what did I do to deserve that punishment?"

Justin dumped the last of the pots into the sink and threw his arms around Brian. "Thanks for putting up with me. It's been a rough couple of months for you. But after tomorrow, I'll only be seeing Lucas when I want to, and when he goes to a doctor's appointment."

"You mean your indentured servitude is over. What happened?"

"My father hired this terrific au-pair from Switzerland."

"Ah, the future Mrs. Taylor number three."

"I don't think so. It's a guy." Justin explained.

"And he's really hot, suppose."

"Fuck yeah!!!" Justin grinned. "But not as hot as you are, Brian. What are Gus's toys doing all over the floor in the living room?"

"He was here yesterday. I didn't have time to put them away this morning."

"You've been spending time with Gus?"

"Yeah."

"That's nice. Is Lindsay enjoying your company?"

"I pick up Gus. I drop Gus off. I haven't really spoken to Lindsay. She is seeing Mel again, though."

"I don't understand all that lesbian crap. One minute they're pledging their undying love on an altar with about a million dollars worth of flowers. The next minute they're breaking up for no reason. If they get married again, I'm not going."

A few weeks later Justin took Lucas to a specialist in Philadelphia. It was disappointing news. They would still not give a definite diagnosis because Lucas was so young. But soon they would want to take him into a hospital for extensive testing. He was exhibiting some unusual behavior for a infant his age. Justin overheard them talking he thought he'd heard the word autism was mentioned. He'd noticed that Lucas was different, he made no eye contact and did not respond like Gus had when he was a baby. Justin felt a connection with Lucas, but even he realized that Lucas might never be normal. Justin could accept that. After all, he was never going to be considered normal by some people. It was his father's reaction that Justin feared. Instead of taking the baby to his father's house he decided to bring him to the loft. Gus was there visiting and Justin thought it might be good for Lucas to be around him. He decided to call Michael and ask him to come over to work on the comic at the loft.

"Brian, when did you buy the new couch?" Michael asked.

"I ordered it last week."

"It's not really your style, is it?"

"You don't like it?" Justin asked.

"I love it. What I meant is it's kind of out of character for Brian."

"It's fuckable. That's how I decided to decorate. Fuckable furniture."

"Fuckable furniture? Is that a brand name?"

"I got the idea from Justin's father's fuckable recliner. I go into a store and if I can envision fucking Justin on a piece of furniture, I buy it."

Justin laughed. "Why don't I go to the store with you and we can try fucking on all of the furniture."

"We'll fill the loft with fuckable furniture."

"Remind me never to eat dinner here again."

Gus, who had been napping on the futon, awoke. He ran over to Michael and handed him a stuffed animal. Michael took it from Gus and threw it back at him. Gus laughed and threw it back. They repeated this game several times. Then Gus tossed the animal in the air giggling with delight. It landed on Lucas's head, startling him momentarily. Gus went over to the baby to retrieve the toy. Lucas looked right at Gus and laughed for the first time.

"Did you hear that?" Justin asked. "Gus, did Lucas make that noise?"

"Uh-huh. Look, him smiling." Gus said. He tickled the babies nose with the toy and the Lucas laughed again.

"Shit, Brian did you hear him?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Justin he's following Gus with his eyes." Michael announced. "That's good, isn't it?"

"He's never done that before." Justin said. They all gathered around Lucas. Gus handed Justin the stuffed animal and Lucas smiled at his big brother for the first time.

Justin couldn't wait to call his father and tell him the news. He told him that his brother had smiled at him and followed Gus with his eyes. His father thanked him for calling and asked him to bring Lucas home right away.

Justin dressed the baby for the trip home. Lucas had fallen asleep after all of the commotion. It seemed to Justin like he was still smiling.

"He may not be blind or deaf or retarded after all. My father's got to keep him then."

"I guess he will. As long as he's not gay."

Ties That Bind

Ties That Bind - Part One

"A bachelorette party? What the fuck is that?" Brian turned off his computer and stretched out next to Justin on the couch.

"I was talking to some of the kids at school today and they said that since I was Daphne's best friend I should throw her a bachelorette party. At first I thought . . . no fucking way. But then they said that I would have to hire a male stripper."

"Hire one? You used to be a professional. Why don't you just do it yourself?"

"I'm retired. And besides that would be the best part. I'd get to audition a bunch of hot guys. They're probably all gay."

"What do you mean probably? And where are you going to be doing this auditioning? I may drop by to offer my expertise."

"I was thinking we could have the party here."

Brian grimaced at the thought. "A bunch of straight women drooling over some naked guy dancing on our coffee table? I don't know, Justin."

"Daphne's been a good friend to both of us, Brian. From the very beginning she's always been there for me. I want to do something nice for her before she leaves for Philadelphia."

Brian couldn't argue with that. "For Daphne, I will make the great sacrifice and spend the evening at Babylon getting my dick sucked by some stranger. You can have the party here. Just remember the rules: no tricks in our home."

"No kissing on the lips and no orange walls? Thanks, Brian. I promise to clean it all up by the time you get home at 2 a.m."

"You mean 3 a.m."

"New unspoken rule. I can't stay up that late anymore since I went back to school. If you come home late I'll be sleeping."

The amazement on Daphne's face when she walked into the loft and saw everybody there made the effort worth it. Justin was pleased that she was genuinely surprised that he had gone through all of that trouble just for her. The stripper was a big hit. Justin decided maybe Brian was right; he might enjoy doing that type of work. Since there were usually only women at these parties, there would be no threat. The dancer seemed to be having a lot of fun, and he sure did clean up in tips. Everyone was happy. At 1:30 a.m., the last guests went home and Justin hurried to clean up before Brian got home at 2.

Only Brian didn't get home at 2 . . . 3 . . . or 4. Justin frantically called Brian's cell but there was no answer. In sheer exhaustion, he finally fell asleep on the leather recliner some time after 4 a.m. It was 5 a.m. when Brian finally walked in the door. He stood next to the chair and gently touched Justin's soft blond hair.

Instantly, Justin woke up. "Brian!" He shot up out of the chair and threw his arms around Brian's neck. He didn't ask where he'd been or what he had been doing. He just clung to him. Easing himself into the leather chair, Brian pulled Justin down next to him.

"I got a call from my sister last night when I was in my car on the way to Babylon. She said my mother had a heart attack. I told her to fuck off and I hung up. I don't know how I wound up at the hospital; I wasn't going to go. I should have called you."

"I was frantic. I'm so glad to see you. What happened with your mom? Is she alright?"

"She died." Brian's tone was flat.

"Oh, Brian. I'm so sorry." Justin put his hand up to Brian's face.

Brian put his hand over Justin's and closed his eyes.

"I don't know why I went there. She hated me. She called me a devil when John accused me of molesting him."

"Did you get to say goodbye?"

"I hadn't seen her in months. She'd been sick but nobody told me. When she asked for me tonight, Claire freaked."

"She asked for you? That's good, Brian. She drank so much. She didn't mean what she said that day. I'm sure that she loved you, Brian."

"She said that she did. She looked right at me and said, I love you, Brian. And then she took my hand. Her hand was so thin and cold. I stayed there until she died. I should have called you."

"It's okay."

"You must have thought I was with another guy. I never even got to Babylon."

"Stop explaining. I wasn't thinking that you were with some trick. I was worried that you might have gotten into an accident."

Brian fell asleep in the chair and Justin covered him with a blanket.

A few hours later, Justin called Michael and told him that Brian's mother had passed away.

"Poor guy. His parents never appreciated him. I'll come over in a little while."

Thanking him, Justin hung up the phone. A few minutes later, Brian began to stir in the chair. "What the fuck am I doing here? Oh, yeah. I forgot. Help me up." Justin grabbed his hand and pulled him out of the chair. Brian put his arms around Justin and hugged him so tightly that Justin gasped for breath.

"I made coffee," Justin said when he was finally released from Brian's grip. "Come in the kitchen and talk to me while I make you breakfast. Then you can go to bed."

"Why would I go to bed? I have to go to work."

"Brian you can't go to work. Your mother just died. You're in mourning."

"I'm not mourning anything. I haven't had a relationship with that woman in years. Don't think that three little words uttered in the final moments of her life are going to erase years of abuse? Actions speak louder than words, Justin. My parents are dead; I'm alive. I don't feel any different today than I did yesterday." Brian went off to take a shower.

Justin was worried. Brian seemed cold and distant, almost as if he was reverting back to his former self. His protective shell was firmly in place and there was no way that Justin was going to reach him. He was afraid that Brian would go back to square one and start his pain management routine of heavy drinking, drugs and tricking. The door bell rang while Brian was still in the shower. Justin ran to answer it, hoping it was Michael.

"Michael, thanks for coming. He's getting ready to go to work. He's acting really strange and I'm afraid that he's going to regress back into the damaged soul, party boy. Please talk to him."

"I'll try, Justin. He did the same thing when his father died. But in the end, he came to terms with it."

"Just help him, Michael! I don't know what to do."

"Don't underestimate your influence on him, Justin. He respects you." Michael put his arm around Justin's shoulder to reassure him. "He's not going to throw away everything you both have, just because he can't deal with his

mother's death. We have to help him to understand." Brian came out of the bathroom dressed in a red shirt and his black suit pants.

"Michael, what are you doing here? I'm on my way to work. I don't have time to talk."

"Brian, you're not going to work. You're going to help your sister to make the funeral arrangements. Because that's what you do when your parents die."

"Does the world have to stop just because the person who happened to give birth to you drops dead? She's gone, Michael. I don't care what Claire does with the carcass."

"You don't mean that. You're right, she's gone. She can't hurt you anymore. So act like a man and bury your mother."

"Fuck you, Mikey." Brian grabbed his suit jacket and put it on. "Justin, what the fuck did you do with my briefcase? And what are all those glasses doing in the sink?" Brian was becoming agitated.

"Daphne's party last night." Justin reminded him. "I was going to put them in the dishwasher when it was empty."

Brian frantically searched the loft for his briefcase, which was sitting on the computer table, in the same place he always put it when he came home from work. Justin watched helplessly, afraid of incurring Brian's wrath by pointing it out to him.

"What exactly went on here last night anyway? The place is a mess . . . papers all over. I told you never to touch my briefcase, now what the fuck did you do with it?" Brian had put his hands on Justin and was squeezing his arms. Justin stood motionless, afraid to move or speak. Michael walked over the computer table and picked up the briefcase.

"Brian, here. It was right where you always leave it," Michael said softly. Brian didn't move. Michael pulled Brian's hand from one of Justin's arms. "Brian, you're hurting him."

Brian let go of Justin's other arm. He snatched the briefcase from Michael and hurled it across the room. It opened up and all of his papers fell onto the floor. The sound made Justin flinch. Brian wondered why he looked so frightened, then he realized what he had just done. He had become his father, and Justin had become his victim. He crossed the room and collapsed into a chair.

Justin picked up the briefcase and started to put the papers inside. Michael bent to help him. He could see the tears form in Justin's eyes. "Hey, are you alright? I could stay here with him. You could go to my place or my mom's and wait."

"What happened, Michael? It's almost like he was possessed." Justin spoke in a whisper, afraid that Brian might hear them.

"I don't know. He's had temper fits before, but not since the Rage incident."

"He was drunk that night. And he was pissed at us. This is different, Michael."

Brian got up from the chair and walked over to where they were sitting on the floor. "You don't have to whisper." He said calmly. "Justin, stop cleaning up. I'll do it."

Justin stared at him, not knowing what to do next. Brian extended his hands and Justin took them. "Come here," he pulled Justin to his feet and put his arms around him. "Michael, you can go home. I'll call you later."

Michael got up and put his hand on Justin's back. "Are you okay?"

"We'll be okay. Thanks for coming over, Michael."

For a long time after Michael left, they stayed in the middle of the room locked in a tight embrace. Finally, Brian pulled away and looked Justin in the eyes. "I can't believe what I just did. I'll never treat you like that again, I mean it."

"I should have cleaned up last night. I was so worried about you."

"You didn't do anything wrong. I was out of control. Maybe I need to see a shrink."

"You don't need to see a shrink. Your mother died. It's understandable that you'd be upset."

"I don't ever want to see that look on your face again. If I ever start acting like that animal who used to be my father, please shoot me."

"Don't talk about it any more, it's over. Do you want me to call your office for you?"

"No. I'll call. But I'm not helping Claire."

"I'll help her," Justin suggested.

"She would hang up on you."

"Brian, Claire is probably still at the hospital bawling her eyes out," Justin said. "She's completely useless. You know that. You're going to have to take control here. Let me help you."

"No extras, Justin. The woman goes into the ground in a pine box. That's it."

"I'll call the priest. You know that she'd want a service."

"Sure, why not? We can all sit there together and hold hands and sing about loving God and loving each other." Brian undid his tie and took off his suit jacket. He sat down in the living room while Justin made calls in the kitchen.

Justin decided to call Brian's office after all. He let Bill know what happened. Then he called Claire, the priest and the funeral home. When he had things set, he went to tell Brian what he'd arranged. Brian hadn't moved. He was still sitting in the chair staring into space.

"I called your office. They said to take all the time you need. I called the priest and he gave me the name of a funeral home. They're going to pick her up today. We can have a viewing tomorrow and have the service the next morning. Claire said that she would call the relatives. I ordered flowers from you. Is that okay?"

"Sure. Thanks." Brian said quietly. "It's different this time, isn't it? My parents are dead. My sister hates me. My family, however dysfunctional, doesn't exist anymore."

"You're not alone, Brian." Justin sat on the arm of the chair and smoothed Brian's hair. "You're never going to be alone."

"How can a mother, or a father, hate their kid and love him at the same time? Is that even possible?"

"Ask my dad. I know he loves me. But he hates me for being gay."

"How do you know that he loves you? Did he tell you that?"

"No, I just know it."

"He's never said it? Not even before he knew you were gay?"

"No. Some people have trouble with the words. But he was a good dad, before. So he must love me, even though he never says it. My mom makes up for it."

"But if he said it, it would mean more."

"I guess so. Brian, both of your parents drank a lot. You've said a lot of hurtful things to me when you were drunk. You've done some really crazy things, too. You didn't mean it. You get out of control and it just happens. It was probably the same for them. In the end, she wanted you to know that she didn't mean it."

The next day, Brian and Justin walked hand in hand into the funeral home. Claire and her husband were in the hallway talking to the funeral director.

"Brian, you're late. People will be here soon." Claire admonished him.

The funeral director stepped up to them. "The family should go in to view her first."

Claire and her family went into the room. Before Brian got to the door, he heard his sister wailing at the coffin. "Come on, family." He took Justin by the arm. "Let's go say goodbye to Mom."

"Brian, doesn't she look beautiful?" Claire sobbed. "She was a beautiful woman, our mother."

"She looks dead." Brian commented. Justin pulled at Brian's sleeve.

"She does look beautiful." Justin said as he reluctantly looked into the coffin. "They did a nice job."

Claire grabbed Brian's arm and pulled him aside. "You shouldn't have brought your boyfriend here. And please don't hold hands with him. Our aunts will be appalled."

"Claire, don't tell me who I can bring to my mother's wake. The woman is dead. And since I'm paying for this obnoxious little gathering I'll fuck him on the coffin if I feel like it. So why don't you shut up and put on that fascinating little mourning act you were practicing. It should really impress the aunts."

"I hate you, Brian."

"That's the most honest thing you've said today. Keep it up, sis."

Brian found Justin sitting on a couch out in the hall. "These family gatherings are so enlightening. Claire just told me that she hated me. Do they have any food here?"

"No food. Just tissues."

The funeral parlor was soon filled with elderly blue haired women who cried on command. Michael, Ben, Lindsay, Debbie, Vic, Daphne and Bill sat in the back of the room with Brian and Justin.

"Brian who are all these people?" Michael asked.

"I have no fucking idea. I think some of them are related to me. Most of the old ladies are probably from the church."

"Shouldn't you be greeting them?"

"My sister asked me to keep a low profile."

Michael thought that Brian was holding up better than he had at his father's wake. And he hadn't let go of Justin's hand since they'd arrived an hour ago.

After the wake, Justin suggested they go out with the gang to wind down, but Brian wanted to go straight home. Justin could tell he had something on his mind. When they got back to the loft, Brian took off his jacket and tie and sat in what was now his favorite leather recliner chair. After taking off his own suit and changing into sweats, Justin brought him the coffee that he'd asked for when they walked in.

Brian shut his eyes and leaned into Justin's side while Justin gently massaged his shoulders. For a moment it appeared that Brian had fallen sleep. Suddenly he opened his eyes, looked up at Justin and said, "I want to get married!" He jumped up out of the chair and Justin fell sideways into it. Brian pulled him up and hugged him.

"Ahh . . . to me?" Justin stammered. Brian's announcement caught him completely off guard. "You want to get married to me?"

"Do you see anyone else in the room?"

"We don't need to do that, Brian. Everything is perfect the way it is."

"I don't want to take any chances."

"If I was ever going to leave you, I'd be gone already." Justin tried to reason with him. "Your mother just died, Brian. Your emotions are all fucked up. Stop and think about what you're saying." Justin struggled out of his arms.

"I know what you're thinking. You think I'm being irrational. My family is gone so now I want to trap you into staying with me. That's not it."

"Brian, I don't think that. I think you're not yourself right now. Let's drop this."

"I am myself! Finally, I AM myself! I feel like a weight has been lifted. I WANT to belong to you. For the first time in my life, I feel worthy."

Brian grab Justin by the arms and held him, like he had the morning before. At first, Justin was concerned that Brian was having another emotional outburst. But when Brian looked into his eyes, his expression was calm, not angry or upset. Justin relaxed and returned his intense stare. For what seemed like an eternity they stood there gazing deeply into each others eyes. Eventually, Brian broke the silence. "I love you. I always have. You scared the shit out of me at first, but then I got used to having you around. I want you to stay. I want us to belong to each other. I want to marry you, so stop being a pussy and say yes."

"Jesus Christ, Brian!" Justin was on the verge of tears. This was a side of Brian he'd never seen before. "I don't think you know what you're saying."

"You do love me, don't you? I don't think you've ever said it. Even if you did, I would have made fun of you."

"Of course I love you, asshole. Are you kidding? How can you even ask me that?"

"Now we're getting somewhere. I want to do it early tomorrow, before the funeral, so you better get some sleep. I have some calls to make."

"The rules will change, Brian. Marriage means no more tricking. You'll be fucking one man for the rest of your life. I'm not going to marry you just for show. You'll have to change permanently." Justin breathed a sigh of relief. He knew there was no way that Brian was going to agree to the monogamy thing. That would put an end to the marriage talk.

"I know what marriage means. Do you think that I would have suggested it without knowing what I was getting into? Tricking was getting boring anyway. I can give it up, as long as I have you. That's if you still want me."

Justin stood there in amazement. He never thought this day would come. Brian Kinney just told him that he would give up tricking. He had that puppy dog look on his face that Justin couldn't resist. He realized that Brian meant what he said. He wanted them to belong to each other. It didn't take Justin long to decide.

"I want you. Always have, always will. Let's do it."

"I can't believe you beat me to the altar," Daphne said. "You're such a liar, Justin."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Daph." He grinned knowingly at her.

"Isn't anyone surprised that I'm a married man?" Brian asked.

"We've already submitted it to Ripley's," Michael joked

They had gathered together outside of the church. Brian had made the announcement to their friends right before the organ music signaled for the funeral service to begin.

Inside the church Claire sat in the front pew with her family. When she saw Brian walk in with Justin, Claire shot him a warning glance. Justin was about to enter a pew in the back of the church. Brian took him by the arm and led him to the front pew next to the one where his sister and her family were ensconced. He held up his left hand to show her his brand new wedding band.

"Brian, don't make a scene in church." Justin whispered.

"I'm not making a scene. I'm sitting with my family." Brian turned toward Justin and smiled. "I'm proud to be with you. And I don't care who likes it. I'll show you off every chance I get for the rest of our lives."

"We'll have a very interesting life." Justin smiled back at him.

Justin thought that Brian had held up well through the whole ordeal. He hadn't even had a drink since his mother died. The service at the cemetery was painful. Justin could feel Brian start to tremble when they lowered the coffin into the ground. He put his hand on Brian's arm to steady him. After the cemetery, they went to Woody's instead of going with Claire and the rest of the family to the restaurant. Once the coffin was in the ground the family ties were broken. Claire could go to hell for all Brian cared.

Several days later, Claire called and spoke to Justin. She told him that the house, which was the only asset of their mother's estate, was going to be sold and the proceeds would be split between them equally. Justin responded quickly. "You mean after Brian is reimbursed for the funeral expenses."

"Of course." Claire snapped. "Just tell my brother he has to come to the house on Saturday to help me clean it up."

Brian walked in the door as Justin was hanging up the phone. "Hey, that was your ex-sister. She asked if you would please go to your mother's house on Saturday. She is going to sell the house and give you half, plus the all money you laid out for the funeral expenses."

"Claire said that? Don't lie to me, Justin."

"She demanded that you help her clean up on Saturday and you'd have to sue her for the money."

"Now that's more like it."

"She is a miserable excuse for a sister. Was she always like that?"

"Only from the day I was born."

"It makes me appreciate Molly and Lucas. They can be a pain in the ass sometimes, but I wouldn't trade them. Hey, my dad said that Lucas has two teeth now. I should go over there and see him soon."

"Why don't you go on Saturday when I'll be battling it out with Sister Dearest."

"No way are you going into battle alone."

Brian stalled all Saturday morning. At noon his sister called, in hysterics because their aunts were looting their mother's possessions.

"Shit! Justin, I'm not going. Let the vultures take it all. There is nothing in that house that means a Goddamned thing to me. Let's go back to bed and forget about it."

"No fucking way. I want to fuck you on your childhood bed."

Brian laughed at the thought of them fucking upstairs, while his sister and his aunts pillaged and plundered the remains of the estate.

"You make a party out of every occasion. Okay, let's get it over with."

When they got to the house, Brian was appalled to see the pile of debris on the living room floor. His mother had always been an immaculate housekeeper. She was spinning in her newly dug grave, for sure.

"Claire, what the fuck is going on?"

"Brian, they're stealing everything!" Claire wailed.

"Why don't you throw them out?"

"They're my family. I couldn't do that. What would our parents say?"

"Who gives a shit?" Brian headed for the kitchen where his aunt had gathered to rummage through the cabinets for loot.

"Hello, ladies!" He said loud enough to make them jump. "The road show is over. We're giving everything to the church. So if you take anything, you'll be stealing from the Lord. I hope he can forgive you."

A few minutes later the aunts were all gone. Justin sorted out the pile in the living room, separating the good stuff from the stuff to donate. Claire spent the afternoon wandering around the house picking up pieces of memorabilia and crying. Her sons ran wild until Justin threatened to stick their heads in the toilet. John had nightmares about his experience with his Uncle Brian. He wasn't about to take a chance that Justin would behave the same. Once the boys had gone to work cleaning out the basement, Justin went upstairs to look for Brian. He found him taking clothing out of the closet in his old bedroom and throwing it into a big box.

"Hey, did you find anything interesting?"

"No, just a bunch of crap. Could you take that box downstairs and bring me another one? I want to take that stuff over to the church."

Brian didn't notice that Justin had come up behind him as he was reaching into the closet. When Justin grabbed his ass, he jumped. "Christ, did you have to sneak up on me like that?"

"Since when do you object to me grabbing your ass?"

Brian stopped what he was doing and turned around to look at Justin. "Sorry. I get a little edgy when I'm in this house. Especially this room. This closet was my hiding place when my father would come home drunk. I got a little claustrophobic."

Justin gently rubbed his back. "I'm sorry, I didn't think about the things that happened to you here. Why don't you let me finish up the closet. You can take the box downstairs. Claire put some cold cuts out in the kitchen."

Brian left the room without further comment. When he returned after having a sandwich, Justin was nowhere in sight. He called out his name. "Justin!"

"In here," Justin responded from the closet. Brian found him sitting on the floor in the far corner of the empty closet. There was a crawl space which continued under the eaves of the house.

"What the fuck are you doing in there?"

"It's neat in here , , , like a cave. I found these pictures." He showed Brian a box full of photographs. "You were so adorable."

"Come out of the closet."

"I did that a long time ago. Why don't you come in here and join me." Justin smiled coyly at Brian who reluctantly crawled in next to him.

"It's not so nice in here when your parents are battling it out in the next room. I could hear every word. They never let up. Then I would hear him smack her and then she would cry." Justin didn't interrupt. Brian had never spoken to him about his childhood before. He thought it might be good for Brian to talk it out here in the place where it happened.

"Some nights I would hear him open my bedroom door. He would come in here and look through my drawers for money. If he didn't find any he would wake me up and ask me what I did with my birthday money, or milk money or whatever the fuck he thought I had. If I didn't answer him he would beat the shit out of me. I used to steal money from my mother and sometimes from my sister, who always had plenty. I don't know where she got it. I would hide it in my drawer so he would find it and leave me alone."

"How old were you?"

"I guess about eight, maybe younger. When he was really out of control, I would come in here and hide. Sometimes I would have to stay in here for hours. Now you know why I hate walls and closets and small places."

They heard Claire enter the room. "Brian, I need help with Mom's closet." She came into the bedroom and looked around. Justin held onto Brian's arm and began to giggle under his breath. Brian grinned remembering the days that he would hide from his mother when she wanted him to go to church.

Claire left the room and walked next door to her mother's room. They heard her sliding the hangers in the closet on the other side of the wall. Justin pushed Brian up against the wall and began to remove his pants. Brian figured out what Justin had on his mind. He closed his eyes and the demons of the closet all disappeared when Justin's lips latched around his cock.

"That was hot." Brian admitted when they had finished. He loved the thought of shooting his load into Justin's mouth while his clueless sister worked on the other side of the wall.

"Being in the closet's not so bad, is it?" Justin crawled out of the space carrying the box of photos. He sat on the bed and took some pictures out to look at. Brian took the box that Justin had in his lap. He then grabbed at the photo that Justin held in his hand.

"NO!" Justin protested. "I want to keep them, Brian."

"What for? I don't want any reminders of my so called childhood cluttering up our place. They're going in the dumpster."

Justin looked down at the photo of Brian he still held in his hand. "That's the way I see you, Brian. Just like him." He handed the photo to Brian. "He's handsome, smart, shy, and serious."

"He's a nerdy eight year old with more problems than you will ever know."

"I've always known him. That's why I stuck it out. I love him. I want to keep these pictures."

Brian sighed. "Alright, but if I see you hanging collages all over the walls they're going in the furnace."

Justin picked up the box and smiled at him. "More rules? No kissing, no orange, no collages."

"And no tricks, right." Brian couldn't help himself. He grabbed Justin and kissed him. Now get the fuck out of here before I throw you down on the bed and . . . " Brian looked up to see his sister staring at them. Justin took the box and went out of the room.

"You can't keep your hands off of him, can you?"

"Are you jealous?"

For the first time in years he saw his sister crack a smile. "Yes. I wish that Peter would pay that much attention to me."

"Maybe he would if you'd stop bitching at him constantly. You haven't let up on him since he walked in the door. 'Peter clean up the garage, Peter, get the kids some food, blah, blah, blah.' I'm amazed he even showed up here after the scene you made at the funeral."

"He yawned during the minister's blessing. I was mortified. What would people think if they see my husband yawning at the burial? Brian, my mother just died."

"So did mine. You don't see me blaming Justin. All I'm saying is that you should lighten up once in a while."

Justin came back into the room with another box. "Look at these pictures." He handed a few to Brian. "They're from Halloween. Look how cute you were in your Snoopy costume."

"Let me see." Claire took the picture out of Brian's hand. "Oh, I remember this. You couldn't see through the mask and you kept falling on everyone's steps. I had to practically carry you all over the neighborhood. You were only four years old."

"Were you dressed as a witch? You wouldn't need a costume for that."

"She was dressed as a princess." Justin said. "Here's a another picture of the two of you. You looked pretty, Claire."

"I was pretty, wasn't I?" She showed the picture to Brian.

"Yeah, until you porked up."

"Brian!!" Justin hit him on the arm. "That was NOT nice."

"Justin, he was never nice!"

"He's nice to me, most of the time."

"That's because you do everything for him. You arranged the funeral. You did more to help today than Brian did. You shouldn't let him get away with taking advantage of you."

"I'd do anything for Brian. I put him first. You should try it some time." Justin carried the other box out to the car.

"Wow, that won't last." Claire said after Justin had left the room.

"Don't say that." Brian snapped at her.

"I just mean that he'll get tired of waiting on you hand and foot." Claire tried to soften her remark. She had forgotten how sensitive her brother could be. "It's not like he's going to be trapped with a bunch of babies to care for. Too, bad though, he's got such beautiful skin. And hair to die for."

"Having a baby so that you'll stay together is just stupid."

"That's how you got born."

"That little trick sure backfired on her, didn't it?"

"She loved you Brian. Lately she'd been very sad. I think it bothered her to think of you alone, with no family."

"I'm not alone."

"No, you're not. But family is still family. No matter what's happened between us you'll always be the little brat in the Snoopy suit who needed his big sister. We're never going to be close, but don't forget the good times, Brian."

"You're lucky, being older, I don't remember any good times."

"Look at the pictures again. You were loved."

Justin fell asleep in the car on the way home. Claire was right, Justin did more work than anyone. "Are you hungry?" Brian asked when they got near home.

"Starving." Justin said sleepily.

"How about a steak dinner?"

"You read my mind." They pulled into the parking lot of their favorite steakhouse. The place was packed but they got a table near the bar.

"I don't think that Claire and I would have spoken anymore, if it hadn't been for you."

"Me?"

"You reminded us that we were young once."

"As long as you're happy now, that's what's important."

"I don't think I could have gotten through this without you."

"What are husbands for? So, do you still have a sister?"

"I guess I'm stuck with her. Maybe we'll call each other every other holiday to find out who died in the family."

"That'll be a nice Kinney family tradition."

Ties That Bind - Part Two

Justin had arranged to meet with Daphne at the mall on Sunday. He wanted to spend as much time with her as possible before she left town. It was hard to imagine life in Pittsburgh without his best friend.

"Justin, I'm not wearing that!" Daphne protested.

"Why not? You look great in red." Justin held up a skimpy negligee. He had suggested Frederick's of Hollywood to shop for Daphne's trousseau.

"Nathan would freak out. But it's not me, Justin."

"I don't see anything in plaid flannel in here. So I guess we better have lunch and then find another store." They went to the food court and bought a pizza. They had eaten lunch together every day when they were in school. It had been a long time since they were able to just sit and talk. Daphne had hated Ethan, which had caused some friction between them for awhile. But Daphne was the one he turned to when things went bad. After he left Ethan, she was also the catalyst that made him realize it was Brian he had loved all along.

"Have you and Nathan found a place to live yet?"

"Yeah, his company found us a place. I even got a part time job at a bank. It's close to my school so I can work in the morning and take afternoon classes."

"I bet you can't wait to leave Pittsburgh. But I don't know if I could move to a place where I didn't know anyone."

"You're right, I can't wait. But it's not like I won't know anyone. I'll have my husband. God, I can't believe how strange that sounds."

"I know. It takes some getting used to."

"Are things any different between you and Brian now? I mean in bed. Does it get boring or uncomfortable sleeping with the same man every night? Nathan and I have slept together, of course, but not every night. Do you miss having your privacy once in a while?"

"Things are different. Sex has always been incredible, I think I've told you that before. But since we got married Brian's been so affectionate. Sometimes it scares me how he always wants me near him. When we first started seeing each other he used to sleep all the way over on the other side of the bed, as far as he could get. Now when I wake up he's wrapped around me like a blanket. I have to pry him off me to go to the bathroom."

"That's nice, though, the affection part. I always thought Brian was like that. I've noticed the way he looks at you when you're not aware, he adores you."

Justin smiled shyly. "I know he does. Marriage is great. I hope you're as happy as Brian and I are."

Halfway through lunch Justin spotted his mother walking in the mall. She was pushing a baby carriage. He called out to her and motioned for her to join them.

"Well, this is a lovely surprise." Jennifer kissed her son on the cheek. "How are you Daphne? You must be getting excited about the big day."

"Yeah, it's getting close. I have to hit the ladies room, Justin. I'll be right back. "

"Mom, what are you doing with Lucas?" The baby was sound asleep in the stroller.

"Well, he was a bit fussy today, so I decided a to come to the mall and walk him. It worked like a charm. He fell asleep in the car, just like you used to do."

"What I mean is, why are you babysitting? Isn't that kind of weird? He's your ex-husband's baby with another woman."

"Molly was bugging your dad to let her take him overnight. When he had to go out of town on a business trip, he decided to take her up on the offer. She jumped at the chance. Of course, it happened to be the weekend when Molly had a birthday party to attend. So I offered to watch him this afternoon."

"That was nice of you. And very inconsiderate of Molly. You work all day on Saturday. You look exhausted. The last thing you need is to take care of a baby. Do you want me to take him home with me?"

"Molly would kill me. She has all kinds of plans for him. It's only for a few hours, Justin. I really don't mind."

"Dad shouldn't leave him alone. He's too young. What about the au-pair?"

"He went home to visit with his family in Sweden. Bad timing, but like I said, Justin, it's only for a few hours."

"He still wakes up in the night. Make sure that Molly feeds him and cleans him up. He has very sensitive skin and he gets a rash easily. Tell Molly to change him often."

"Justin, you forget. I raised his big brother who had sensitive skin. He's fine."

"He looks so cute in that little hat."

"You love him very much, don't you? I think it's nice that you've taken such an interest in him."

"We've been through some tough times together, that's for sure. I do love having him around. Brian likes it too. We take Lucas to the park with Gus sometimes. People are always complimenting us on our beautiful children. They look just like their daddies."

"He does look a lot like you."

"I always thought that I looked more like you than dad."

Daphne returned and Jennifer said that she had to go pick up Molly. "Mom, if you need me, call me on my cell phone."

"Thanks, sweetheart. We'll be fine."

Justin and Daphne watched her walk away.

"Justin, your mom looks beat."

"I thought so too. Molly shouldn't have left Lucas with her. It's not fair. Can you imagine what it would be like to have to take care of the kid of a woman who broke up your marriage?"

"No, but I'm not your mother. She is one strong lady. I admire her so much. I'm sure she wouldn't put any blame on an innocent baby."

"I admire her too. But I am going to have a talk with Molly about this. Even if she likes the baby, it has to hurt my mother to have him around."

Justin found that he looked at Brian differently now that they were married. The little boy in the photos in that old cardboard box had begun to emerge. Justin loved to tease him about what a nerd he was whenever he caught him stretched out in the leather recliner, reading a book. Brian was an very intelligent man, but that aspect of his personality had been masked by his former party boy facade.

Once Brian had told him that they were all about sex, that there was no such thing as love. But now when they lay together after making love, they talked in soft whispers about their dreams for the future. Surprisingly, Brian was the one who had started it, and he insisted that they talk every night. Justin had always craved that kind of attention, but had given up on Brian ever changing. In the past, the late night hours belonged to the tricks; now Justin had it all. But that was about to change.

Bill Grey dropped by the loft one evening when Justin was out shopping with his mother. Brian offered Bill a beer and the two men settled down to talk.

"Brian, exciting things are happening with the network. I believe it's all due to your brilliant marketing campaign. We're ready to move onward and upward."

"What do you mean?" Brian asked.

"We're ready to expand our horizons. I'm talking big time. L.A., New York City and a two other big cities I haven't decided on yet. I want you to set up offices in the new markets. Are you ready to do some traveling? I think we should start with L.A. I have connections there, so I'll contact some of my old cronies at the beach club. We'll need to hire a staff and get them started. What do you think?"

"I think you think BIG. I like that in a boss. But I can't be in four cities at one time! What are your plans?"

"I just need you to set things up. My dream has always been to have a New York base."

"New York is a highly competitive market."

"That's why I've decided to make that your baby."

"You want me to move to New York? I never considered that. I'll have to think about it."

Bill's face fell, until he realized that Brian was being sarcastic.

"You'd sell your soul to the devil for the abundance of opportunities available in New York, that is if the devil doesn't already have possession."

"I'll need some time. Justin will have to finish the semester and get set up in art school in New York. Not to mention I'd have to sell the loft, and find a new apartment."

"Justin will love New York. What better place to be an artist than in New York City?"

Bill had a point. Brian smiled to himself, anticipating Justin's excited reaction to the news.

When Justin came home an hour later, Brian was in the kitchen making coffee. "Hi. How was shopping?" He leaned across the counter and kissed Justin on the cheek. Justin didn't respond.

"We didn't shop. We ate dinner out and then went back to her place."

"Sounds like fun."

Justin put his coat away and came back to the counter. "What did you do today?"

"Let's see, I went to the market and bought coffee. That's about it." He grinned.

"Sounds like fun."

"You're in a pissy mood."

"I'm just tired. Who was here?"

"What makes you think someone was here?"

Justin picked up a pair of sunglasses from the coffee table. "These aren't yours."

"Are you accusing me of something?" Brian became defensive.

"Yes . . . No. . . I don't care." Justin turned and started to walk toward the bedroom.

"Bill was here. We talked business. That's all. You can call him yourself and ask him."

Justin shook off his dark mood momentarily. "I'm sorry. What did you talk about?"

Brian thought that his big news might cheer Justin up so he came right out with it. "I'm being transferred to New York. I have to set up some other cities first. Then it's the 'Big Apple' for good. This company is really on the move. Bill's a bright guy with a gift for making smart decisions, like hiring me."

"New York?! You're moving to New York?!" Justin looked like someone had just kicked him in the head.

Brian realized why. "WE are moving to New York. You can go to a real art school."

"Brian, I can't go to New York. I'm never leaving Pittsburgh. Have a nice life."

Justin went into the bedroom and sat down on the bed. Brian followed him. "Hey, talk to me."

Justin lay down on his back and looked up at the ceiling. Brian laid beside him. "My mother has breast cancer. She's being operated on in a few days. After that she'll need chemotherapy. I have to stay in Pittsburgh to take care of my mother, Brian."

"Is she going to be okay?"

"It's already spread. There are all kinds of statistics. It all depends on how she reacts to the chemo."

Brian stroked Justin's hair. "She's a strong woman, Justin. She's going to beat this."

"I know she will. But I can't leave her. If you're going to New York, I guess this is it for us."

"Don't say that. We'll find a way to deal with things. We're staying together and that's it."

"Brian, this is what you've always dreamed about. The big fish in the big pond. I'm never going to make it to the big pond."

"If this hadn't happened with your mother, you'd be happy, right?"

"I'd be packed already. I'm sorry I messed up your good news."

"Justin, your mother would want you to be happy."

"How can I be happy? I could never leave her to face this alone, Brian. She's always been there for me. I'm probably the reason she and my dad broke up. I haven't been the most attentive son. I only go see her when she calls or when I need something."

"She knows you're busy with going school and living your life."

"You mean fucking my brains out. Maybe you could leave if it was your mother, but I'm not leaving."

"I have to go to L.A. next week. When is her surgery?"

"I'm not sure, they want to do it as soon as possible. Probably in the next week or two. After she recovers from that she'll have to have chemo. Then there's the reconstructive surgery. It's a long road."

"You'd better get some sleep. You've had a long day."

"I won't be able to sleep. My mind is going a mile a minute right now."

"Roll over."

"Brian! I couldn't . . .!"

"I was going to rub your back."

"Maybe that would help. Thanks." Justin rolled over and closed his eyes. The stress of the day, combined with the long hours he had put in at work and school, had finally taken its toll. Brian stopped rubbing when he saw that Justin had mercifully fallen asleep.

Brian lay silently by Justin's side thinking. The more he thought about their situation the more depressed he got. Jennifer Taylor was a decent woman and a good mother. She didn't deserve to be sick and she certainly deserved the support of her son during her recovery.

Brian got out of bed, careful not to disturb Justin. Going into the kitchen, he poured himself another cup of coffee and sat down at the computer. He researched breast cancer and what to expect from the surgery and the treatment. Bill called around 10:00 pm to tell Brian that his plans were set. They would leave for L.A. next Friday. The phone woke Justin. He heard Brian talking to someone, probably Bill, and realized they were making arrangements for their trip. Poor Brian had finally gotten a break and Justin felt awful to be causing him angst.

Justin got out of bed and crept up behind Brian, who was still at the computer. "Hey, what are you doing?"

"I was researching hospitals in New York. You know, Sloan-Kettering is in New York. They have the best cancer specialists in the world. Maybe your mom could go there and stay with us for a while. If you have to have cancer, New York's the place to be."

"Brian, I'm sorry what I said to you about your mother. I know you'd do what you could for her. You went to see her when she had her heart attack. You were a good son. If she needed you, you would have been there for her."

"What about New York? Do you want me to make some calls? You and your mom could stay at a hotel until you find an apartment."

"That will never work, Brian. What about Molly? And I have to finish school."

"There are art schools in New York. Molly would love it there."

"My father would never allow Molly to move to New York to stay with us. He would probably start a custody suit. That's the last thing my mother needs. Brian, thanks for trying, but I think it's best if my mother stays where she is."

They stared at each other in silence. There was too much to say and nothing to say at the same time.

On the morning of Brian's trip to L.A., Justin came out of the shower to find him already packed. Brian planned to go into the office in the morning, then leave for the airport with Bill for the evening flight. He did not want a big scene at the airport. Justin had been unusually quiet. His mother would be operated on this morning. Brian knew the timing was bad, but the planning was completely out of his hands.

"Call me?" Was all Brian could think of to say.

Justin nodded. The sad look on his face said more than words ever could. Brian picked up his bag and walked toward the door, but halfway across the room, he put the bag down and turned back. He walked over to Justin and put his arms around him. Choking back tears, he said, "If you need me, call. I'll turn around and come right home. I love you."

"Me too." Justin said softly. "Later."

"Yeah, later." Brian quickly turned and left. At the office, he busied himself preparing for the trip. He called Justin every hour to check on Jennifer's progress. By the time he left for the airport, the operation was over and as far as Justin knew, it had gone well. Michael and Debbie had been with him earlier. Debbie volunteered to take Molly home for dinner. Justin said that he was going to wait to see his mother. Brian pictured Justin sitting alone in the hallway where he had ensconced himself after the prom incident. He wished more than anything that he could have been there with him.

When they landed in L.A. it was still light. They checked into their suite at the hotel and proceeded to lay out their game plan for the next few days. Working so closely with Bill on this project gave Brian some insight into the reasons why Bill had been so anxious to hire him in the first place, despite the unfortunate circumstances of their first meeting. Bill was bright and very personable in a laid-back California type way. Brian was amazed at the man's gift for coming up with innovative business ideas. The problem was that he had no organizational skills. Brian was a wizard at organizing and executing his plans for a project. He enjoyed the work and Bill enjoyed seeing his ideas come to fruition through Brian's masterful tactics. They constantly challenged each other both professionally and personally.

"Let's go out." Bill suggested. "This is my turf. We can hit 5 or 6 clubs before the streets fold up. What do you say, partner?" There were three empty wine bottles on the coffee table.

"I'm not done with this report." Brian said. He was sitting in front of his computer staring at the screen. "We'll need it first thing tomorrow. You go ahead, fuck someone for me."

"God, you're boring! I don't think you've cracked a smile since we landed in L.A. You never seem to sleep. What's with you?"

"I came here to work. I'm working." Brian said.

"Yeah, you typed the same word twelve times since I've been standing here."

Brian looked at the screen and shook his head slowly.

"You miss your blond boy. I don't blame you. I kinda miss him, too. I think I'll call him. 555 643 . . ."

"Don't, he's asleep by now. I talked to him a few hours ago."

"You don't want to go out, you won't let me call Justin, there's only one thing left to do. . . I'm going to let you suck my dick. Now, don't get all excited. This is a one time offer only, you're really not my type. But you are painfully in need of some kind of tension relief." Bill began to unzip his pants.

Brian laughed for the first time since he'd arrived in L.A. "Don't flatter yourself. You're not my type either." Brian walked across the room and poured two glasses of fine California wine. He handed one to Bill and sat down on the sofa.

"There's just no pleasing you. All work and no sex makes Brian really cranky."

"I'm a married man. I don't cheat."

"I've been meaning to ask you about that. You seem to be at odds with yourself over the past few weeks. Do you really think that marriage and monogamy is the best choice for you?"

"Yes. I have absolutely no doubt about that. I love being married to Justin."

"Ah, ha, now we're getting somewhere. Justin isn't here. Why don't you just send him a plane ticket. He'd love California. I can just see him lying on the beach naked." Bill closed his eyes and grinned.

Brian kicked Bill's foot. "Stop dreaming. Justin would never sunbathe in the nude."

"That's no reason for him to wallow in misery in Pittsburgh. I'm going to call him and tell him to get his sweet little blond boy ass on a plane."

"He can't do that. His mother just had surgery. He's taking care of her."

"Oh, sorry. Anything serious?"

"Breast cancer."

"My mom had breast cancer two years ago. She had the same operation. I think that she lost a few points off her tennis game, but aside from that, she's fine. Justin's mom must be younger than her. I bet she's already back at work."

"She probably would be, but Justin's feeling a little guilty. He gave her a hard time when he came out. With a little help from me. He feels responsible for breaking up his parents' marriage."

"That's ridiculous. Everyone makes their own pain."

"That's what I told him. But Justin isn't like us. He has a conscience."

"What else is he like? Tell me more about your blond boy."

The potent wine was having an effect on Brian. He struggled to come up with the words that would best describe Justin.

"He's brilliant, talented, sweet, innocent, devoted, bossy, stubborn and the best fucking sex partner on the planet. He gives new meaning to the expression giving head."

"That's very high praise, coming from the master of sexuality himself."

"Justin thinks that I taught him everything he knows, but that's not true. Some of the things he's come up with caught me completely by surprise. Don't ever tell him I said that."

"You must really miss him."

"I can't even describe how I feel now. Business trips never bothered me before. I'd find myself a trick for tension relief, as you put it, and that would be it. I would go home and Justin would be there. Now I can't get through the day, make that the hour, without thinking about him. What's he doing? Is he thinking about me? Is he as lonely as I am? I feel like I left half of me in Pittsburgh. Especially since his mother is sick. I want to be there for him. He's my family."

"I bet he does miss you."

"This is fucked up. I'm 31 years old and I can't get my mind off my 19 year old baby-faced husband. I really am losing it. Have you ever felt like this?"

"Only every day of my life for the past two years." Bill finished his wine and went to his room. Brian remembered that Bill had told him about his former boyfriend who left him. He'll probably never see him again, Brian thought. He poured himself another glass of wine and put his feet up on the coffee table. He didn't know why there were tears rolling down his face, but he didn't bother to wipe them away.

The second week in L.A. was tougher than the first. Brian found the best way to get his mind off Justin was to bury himself in work. He had just plugged in his laptop and started to work on a report when he heard the door to the suite open. "You can straighten the bathroom, but don't bother with the bed," he called out without turning around, assuming it was the maid. It was a little before ten a.m. which was usually when she would arrive to make up the room.

"I don't do bathrooms. And the bed is the reason I came."

Brian did turn around then, getting up so suddenly that he knocked over his chair. For a moment, he thought he must be dreaming. Justin was standing there right in his room.

"Are you just going to stand there with your mouth open?" Justin said with a big grin on his handsome face. "Come here and fuck me!"

Brian didn't bother to ask how or where or when. He reached out for Justin, who flew across the room into his open arms.

Kisses never felt so good, skin never felt so good. All Brian could think of was getting Justin into bed as fast as humanly possible. Justin unbuttoned Brian's shirt and unzipped his pants, letting them fall on the floor. Brian tugged off Justin's shirt and sweat pants. In moments they were naked on the bed, hungrily devouring each other. Sex never felt so good.

When they were finished, Brian collapsed onto his back and Justin rolled onto his side to rest his head on Brian's chest. Once Brian had a chance to catch his breath, he noticed a foul odor. "I only have two questions. One, what the fuck are you doing here? And, two, what is that God awful smell?"

"I came all the way across the whole fucking country to see you and that's how you greet me?"

"You reek. I think it's your clothes."

"I can explain. This morning I was sleeping on my mom's sofa. It was about 8 am when Debbie rang the doorbell. My mom opened the door and before Debbie could come in, a limo pulled up in front of the house. The driver got out, walked up to my Mom and asked for me. I was half asleep. He handed me an envelope with an airline ticket. He said we had an hour to catch the plane, so I went with him."

"Where did the ticket come from? I didn't send it."

"I'm getting to that. I got on the plane and when it landed there was another limo with another envelope. Inside there was a card key for your room and a note from Bill. He thought you might want some company this weekend. He said you should consider me an incentive bonus."

"Remind me to give him a kidney or something someday. Where's your suitcase?"

"Suitcase! Brian, you got me . . . that's it. I got up off the sofa, and got into the limo. If it wasn't for my mother and Debbie I'd be barefoot. I didn't even stop to pee. The reason I stink is because I've been sleeping in my sweats for 4 days. I was going to go to the loft to get fresh clothes today. I'm sorry if I gross you out. I'll just call my limo and go back home." Justin teased, pretending to get up and leave.

"Get back here!" Brian pulled him back down on the bed. "You . . . are not going anywhere. I'll take you in the bathroom and scrub you down. And then we'll go shopping."

"I was hoping you'd say that. I need a tooth brush, shampoo, deodorant, and conditioner. And I'll need some shorts and tanks. It's freakin' hot in California. It was 40o when I woke up in Pittsburgh. It must be at least 100o here. Can we go to the beach? Are we near the Pacific Ocean?"

"Ocean? I haven't seen one. But if you want, we can rent a car and check out the coast."

"And I need some sunblock too. I don't want to get a burn. Last time I went to the beach I got a sunburn on my ass. I couldn't sit down for days." Justin's endless chatter was music to Brian's ears.

"Will you shut up? It's hard for me to kiss you with your mouth moving constantly. But first tell me how your mother is doing."

"Better. I was amazed at how fast she's recovering. Of course, that'll change once she starts the chemo. But she was up cooking breakfast when I left. Debbie said she would keep an eye on things while I'm gone. Maybe I better call, though. Let her know I got here."

"I'll fill up the tub. You can wear something of mine, till we get to the store."

"Are we near Rodeo Drive?"

"No, but I think I saw a K-Mart down the block."

Justin called his mother. She reassured him that she was feeling fine. Debbie was going to bring dinner for her and Molly later. "Are you having a good time, sweetheart? I was so worried about you leaving the house with nothing but the clothes on your back. Do you have enough money? You didn't even get to eat breakfast."

"Mom. It was a first class ticket. I ate like a pig on the plane. They kept coming over to ask if I needed anything. I finally had to pretend to be asleep, so they would leave me alone."

"Was Brian surprised?"

"Yeah. He missed me. I can tell."

"You missed him, too. I can tell."

After repeated warnings about his sensitive skin and the sun, Jennifer said good-bye. Justin went into the bathroom and was very impressed. "Wow, a Jacuzzi tub!" He grinned at Brian who was waiting for him in the tub. He lowered himself into the warm water. Brian took a loofah soaked with fragrant soap and began to slowly rub it all over his body.

"We've got to get one of these tubs, Brian."

"When we move to New York, we'll make it a requirement."

The mention of New York put a momentary damper on their happiness. "When are you moving?"

"I am not moving until you are ready to come with me. I barely made it through the past two weeks. When you walked in I was about to slit my wrists."

"I know, when I wasn't helping my Mom all I could do is think about you and what you were doing. I missed you a lot."

"So it's decided. We stay in Pittsburgh until your mother is better. That's it."

"Bill won't be able to wait for you, Brian."

"I'll quit. It's only a job. I can get another one easy. The other advertising firms in Pittsburgh have been calling me."

"But Brian, you love this job. It's your dream job. I won't let you give it up!"

"Let's not waste the weekend arguing about my job. I'll call the desk and ask them to get me a car. But first you need something to wear. You can't walk around naked . . . or maybe you can in California."

Brian rummaged through his suit case for something that might fit Justin. He took out his gym shorts and a T-shirt. Justin put them on and dried his hair.

Brian had ordered a convertible. When he saw how hot Justin looked with the wind blowing through his sunshine-colored hair he found himself driving right past K-Mart to Rodeo Drive. "We'll put your clothes on the company tab. Bill should have given you time to pack."

They went from store to store, adding to Justin's wardrobe. At Calvin Klein, they bought cologne, shampoo and conditioner. "Don't forget the sunblock," Brian reminded him. "I have plans for your ass later, we don't want you to burn it."

They drove to the beach and walked hand and hand on the sand. "You look so natural in this place." Brian said. "Like you belong here in the sunshine."

"I don't think I'd want to live in California. It's a nice place to visit, though." Justin thought that Brian looked tired when he arrived this morning. But walking on the beach, Brian looked young and handsome. Justin was proud to be with him. "You look great, Brian. I feel like we've been separated for months. I miss you coming home and telling me about your day. What are your days like here?"

"Productive. Bill and I have been working on setting up offices here. We've been interviewing potential executives. There's a lot of talent out here, but they are different from the people back east. They're so laid back they put me to sleep. What have your days been like?"

"I've been sleeping on the sofa at my mother's house. She was in a lot of pain at first and that was hard. But now she's healing. I took her back to the surgeon yesterday. He said she was coming along. Debbie's been great. She comes when I have class. She insisted on changing the schedule around at the diner so she would be available. I do the shopping and errands while I'm out and when I get back home, Vic is there. A couple of nights he stayed so that I could work a few hours. So I guess my days have been productive, too."

"You don't need to work, Justin. No wonder you look so tired. If you need money write yourself a check on my account."

"You're sweet. I may take you up on that once the chemo starts."

"When's that?"

"Tuesday."

"Pretty scary stuff. How is your mother dealing with everything?"

"She's amazing. She keeps insisting that she's going to be fine. She wanted me to join you in California for the rest of the week. I told her I would only be gone until Monday night. I want to take her in for the treatment myself."

"You're a good son."

"I wish I was a better husband. I'm so proud of you. Bill must be impressed with you to go to all the expense of bringing me here."

"I'd rather be home with you. You know that, right?"

"Yeah, I know it."

They ate dinner at a restaurant in Malibu Beach. For the next two days, they both tried to forget about their problems and just enjoy their time together. They went to all the tourist traps that Justin found in the guide book he bought. The days flew by. On Monday morning, Justin packed up the suitcase that they had bought to accommodate his new clothes. When he went into the bathroom to retrieve his Calvin Klein deodorant, Brian quickly opened the suitcase and removed the soiled T-shirt that Justin had been wearing the day he arrived in. He hastily shoved it under his pillow when Justin came out of the bathroom.

"I'll drive you to the airport."

"No. It's better to say good-bye here. It would be too hard to get on the plane with you standing there watching." They held each other for a long time. When the phone rang, Justin answered it. "The limo is here," he announced.

He shut the suitcase and wheeled it to the door. "Later." He said.

"Later." Brian answered.

Bill knocked on Brian's door a few hours later. "Did my bonus arrive?"

"Where the fuck were you all weekend? I tried to call you."

"I went to visit my parents in Palm Beach. I didn't want to intrude on the big reunion. Was Justin everything you remembered?"

"Remind me to give you my first-born son. That is, if you can pry him away from his lesbian mommies. Seeing Justin was the best bonus I've ever gotten. Sex never felt so good. We spent most of the weekend right there where you're sitting.

"Spare me the carnal details. I'll watch the video I made with the camera I planted in the ceiling."

"You may have to sell copies of it to pay for Justin's wardrobe. He got on the plane in his 'jammies. You should have given him some notice."

"I didn't want to give him time to think about it. Now that you are tension-free, we can get back to work."

Justin went directly to the loft from the airport. He was a little jet-lagged, but he decided to go to see his mother anyway. When he pulled into the driveway, Molly was outside. She was so excited to see him, she started talking a mile a minute. "Justin! You're so lucky! Did you see the Pacific Ocean? Did Brian miss you? Did you bring me anything?"

"Yes, yes and yes." He handed her a bag from a well known designer. Inside was a small leather pocket book. Molly, screeched. "Prada! Is it real? Oh, Justin thank you, thank you, thank you!" She threw her arms around his neck as she jumped up and down.

"Don't thank me, thank Brian. I was going to buy you a T-shirt."

"I will thank him. Oh, wait till Mommy sees my new bag. She'll freak."

"We got her one too, so wait till I give it to her."

"I'm going up to my room to call all my friends." Molly ran into the house and up the stairs. Justin walked into the living room and was surprised to see Lucas sitting in a playpen in the livingroom.

"Mom! Mom?" Justin called up the stairs.

"We're out here Justin." She called from the outside deck.

Justin went to the back door and saw his mother sitting at the table reading. His father was at the barbecue cooking a steak.

"Dad?"

"Hello Justin, I hope you're hungry."

"I'm always hungry, but what are you . . . ?"

"Justin how was your trip?" Jennifer looked up and smiled at him.

"It was fine." He remembered the gift he and Brian had bought. "Here, Brian and I went shopping on Rodeo Drive. We thought of you." He handed her a leather pocket book larger than the one he had given to Molly.

"Oh, Justin, It's lovely. You shouldn't have spent so much money."

"It was Brian's idea."

"Jen this is almost ready. I'm going to wake up Lucas."

"He's awake. I'll get him." Justin volunteered.

"Thanks, son." Justin almost gagged when his dad called him son. He had never called him anything but Justin.

Justin helped Craig move the playpen out to the deck and Molly came downstairs to join them. "Look, Mom, we're twins." She held up her bag.

"Well, we'll have to go out somewhere to show off."

"I'll be happy to accompany two such lovely ladies to a show. Molly, you pick something and I'll get us tickets." He kissed Molly on the head.

Justin picked up Lucas and then joined his mother and sister at the table. Having his entire family together was a little weird. But holding Lucas always had a way of making Justin feel good.

"We should wait until Justin moves to New York." said Molly. "Then we can go visit him."

"Justin, are you moving to New York?" his mother asked.

Justin gave Molly a dirty look. "No I'm not moving. Brian may be transferred there. But I'm going to stay here and finish school."

"Justin you can't just . . ." Jennifer began.

"The steak is ready!" Craig announced a little too loudly. For once, Justin was grateful for his father's interference.

After dinner, Justin helped Molly clear off the table. When Craig announced he was leaving, Molly ran to say good-bye to Lucas. Jennifer found Justin in the kitchen loading the dishwasher.

"I know what you're doing. You think that you have to stay here to take care of me. It's very sweet that you want to do that, but it isn't necessary. Your place is with the man you've chosen to spend your life with. You made a commitment to him, Justin."

"Brian understands, Mom."

"I'm going to be fine, honey. I have Debbie and Vic and Molly."

"You don't know how you're going to react to the chemo, Mom. I want to be here for you. I need to be here. Debbie and Vic aren't family and Molly is too young. You've done everything for me, Mom. You stuck by me when I came out. Other parents throw their kids in the street when they find out they're gay. You took care of me when I was in a coma. And then, against your own judgment, you took me to the only person on the earth that could have helped me get better. You've always been there for me. What kind of son would I be if I took off on you now? Things will work out for me and Brian. They always do."

"I love you, Justin." Jennifer hugged her beautiful son.

"I love you too, Mom."

Brian called Justin every night at midnight. Justin couldn't wait to tell him about his evening with his parents "I thought I'd fallen asleep on the plane and found myself in some kind of Twilight Zone episode. I asked my mother what he was doing there and she said he'd just dropped by. He stayed for two fucking days! Brian, what do you think is going on?"

"Fuck if I know. Did he give you a hard time?"

"No. We ate dinner out on the deck. I played with Lucas for awhile and then Dad went home. He was so nice to Mom and Molly I wanted to puke."

"Maybe the man finally got a conscience. He wants to make it up to your mother for fucking up her life. What's the big deal anyway? If your mother doesn't mind having him around, why should you care?"

"I know my dad. He doesn't do anything nice without a motive. Maybe he thinks that Lucas needs a mother."

"What if they do get together? It won't affect us. How is your mother doing?"

"Fine so far. She starts chemo on Tuesday. They said she might get pretty sick for a few days afterwards, but everyone reacts differently."

Brian finally came home after spending three and a half weeks in L.A. The flight was long and turbulent. He was never so glad to see the lights of Pittsburgh greet him as the plane circled the runway before landing. He had lived in what he considered to be this backwater town for his entire life. His main goal had always been to build up his career and leave his birthplace for greener pastures. He never considered the place as warm and comforting, home sweet home . . . not until he saw Justin standing at the baggage claim.

They hugged tightly for a long time, oblivious to the stares of Brian's fellow passengers. Then Justin spotted his luggage on the carousel and grabbed it. They walked to where Justin had parked his car without much discussion. Once they were in the car, Justin turned to Brian and gave him a mischievous grin. Moments later Brian was moaning, head thrown back in ecstasy as he surrendered to the pleasure of Justin's luscious lips wrapped around his throbbing, rock hard dick.

"I can't wait to get you home." Justin murmured seductively after he was finished. Brian didn't even bother to zip up his pants. He was overwhelmed at the prospect of spending the night with Justin wrapped tightly in his arms.

The next morning Brian awoke when he felt Justin struggling to get out from under him. "Where are you going?" he asked groggily reaching out for Justin.

"My Mom's. She was pretty sick yesterday when I left her with Debbie. I want to make sure she's okay. Will you miss me?"

"Fuck no. I'm going with you." Brian sat up on the bed.

"You don't have to, Brian. You must be exhausted."

"I know I don't have to, I want to. I'm not planning on letting you out of my sight for at least a week. You never know when I'm going to get a craving for blond boy ass."

Jennifer was sitting up in bed watching the gardening network when Justin knocked on her door. "Justin, I wasn't expecting to see you today."

"Why's that?" Justin asked.

"Because you went to pick up Brian at the airport last night. I thought you'd be spending time together."

Brian had waited in the hall for Justin to check his mom's condition before entering the room. "We are spending time together. Right here."

"Brian, how sweet of you to come and see me."

Brian bent down and kissed her cheek. "That's me, sweet all over."

"I want to thank you for the lovely handbags. It was very generous of you. Molly was so thrilled. How was your trip? Justin was so excited about seeing California for the first time."

"When I travel for business, I don't usually get to spend much time sight-seeing."

The doorbell rang. Reaching for her purse, Jennifer told Justin that it was probably the delivery man from the drugstore. Justin took the money and ran downstairs, leaving Brian and Jennifer alone.

"How's it going?" Brian asked.

"Not as bad as I expected. I still have my hair so far."

"You'd look hot as a redhead. You ought to talk to Deb about getting a wig made."

"I can't picture it," Jennifer laughed. "Brian, I wanted to talk to you alone, about New York. I know that Justin is insisting that he's needed here. But I don't want to be a burden to you both. You have to talk him into going with you. You have to convince him that I'll be fine."

"But you're sick. What could I say to him that would convince him to leave you? Justin's not like that. He's as stubborn as you are. Oh, sorry. I guess that was rude."

"No, you're right. I am stubborn. I intend to set a record for recovery from breast cancer."

"That's what I like, a positive attitude. Don't worry about Justin and me. We'll work it out."

Justin returned to the room, carrying a small white bag.

"How's your appetite?" Brian asked Jennifer.

"Much better today. In fact, I was going to ask Justin to make me some oatmeal."

"I can't, I finished it two days ago. I'll run to the market. Do you need anything else?"

"Are you sure you don't mind?"

"That's why I'm here." When Justin opened the front door, he remembered that they had taken two cars, and Brian's car was blocking his in the driveway. Brian was right behind him with his keys in his hand.

"Are you forgetting something, Sunshine?"

"I promise to drive carefully," Justin said as they switched keys.

"It's parking you seem to have a problem with. Don't take too long. I might miss you."

Brian put his hands on Justin's face and kissed him. Smiling, Justin returned the kiss. Brian went back inside and closed the door. When Justin turned to get into the 'vette he saw his father sitting across the street in his car staring at him. It was the same look of disgust that he had on his face the first time he'd seen Brian and Justin kissing. Justin decided to ignore him and go do his errands. When he returned a short while later, his car was no longer in the driveway. Molly was sitting on the steps waiting for him.

"Mol, where did Brian go?"

"He left a few minutes ago. I think Daddy made him uncomfortable."

"Did Dad say something to Brian?"

"Not a word. He can be so rude sometimes. Justin, I think that Brian is really nice. I would like him even if he didn't buy me presents."

"Brian is really nice. I'm glad you can see that."

Molly went upstairs and Justin went out onto the deck where his father was reading the newspaper.

"Dad, what are you doing?"

"Reading the sports section. Did you want a section of the paper?"

"I mean, what are you doing here with Mom?"

Craig folded the paper and looked at Justin. "Your mother and I spent a good portion of our lives together. I still care about her. I want to let her know that she can count on me."

"Meaning you intend to be a permanent part of her life, like a family? Is that your plan?"

"Justin, your mother and my relationship is really none of your business."

"None of my business! I'm a member of this family, even though I'm gay. I'm not dead, although you'd probably prefer it that way."

"Justin, I never said any such thing."

"What did you say to Brian to make him leave?"

"Not a word."

"A look, then? I saw your face when Brian kissed me."

"Justin, maybe if you weren't always making a public display of . . . "

" . . . My disgusting lifestyle?"

"What you do in the privacy of your bedroom is your business, I guess. But why do you have to force the issue? That man kissing you in public is like a slap in the face."

"Like you leaving Mom for a woman 20 years younger was a slap in face to her. Or is that okay because you're straight?"

"There were a lot of other issues that you don't know anything about."

"So why are you here? And why is Mom wheeling another woman's child around the mall? You just want your perfect family back. Mom, Molly and your now perfect son Lucas."

"I won't discuss this with you, Justin."

"You think you're better than Brian and me?"

"The man cheats on you every night of the week. He puts you at risk for all kinds of diseases. Yes, I am better than him!"

"Brian never cheated on me. He never lied to me or misled me. And he took care of me when you didn't want me around. When Brian was ready, he quit tricking because he wanted something more. We love each other. Brian kisses me all the time because he's proud to be with me. I don't ever remember seeing you kiss Mom."

"When we were first married, we had feelings like you do. But over time, real life takes over and things change. Especially after having children. You grow apart. It happens to every couple."

"That won't happen to Brian and me."

"Don't be so sure, Justin. You're a very young man. You haven't experienced life yet. Things have a way of happening and you find that your needs will change."

"That's the problem with you, Dad. Your needs come first. Brian was right when he said that you give up on people when you can't change them to suit your needs. It happened with Mom and me. It almost happened with Lucas. One day Molly might test you. I hope by then you've learned something. Being with Brian, I learned that you can't expect to change people. And the only way you can expect a relationship to last is if you put the other person's needs first. If you can't find a way to do that, Dad, I feel sorry for you. Because you'll always be alone."

Justin was about to leave when he remembered why he came out here in the first place. "One more thing. This is not your family anymore. You're not in charge here. If you want to come by and spend time with Molly and with my mother, that's up to them. But Brian is just as much a part of this family now as you are. You'll treat him with respect, or you better stay the fuck out of my way!"

When Justin got home, he found Brian sitting at the computer. He came up behind him and kissed him softly on the cheek. "Are you on line?"

"No, I'm updating my resume."

"Why? You've got the best job in the whole world. You don't need a resume."

"First thing Monday morning, I'm going to quit."

"Why would you do a stupid thing like that?"

"Because I just spent three miserable weeks sleeping alone. I've had enough of 'being alone' to last a lifetime. There's no way Bill can keep his corporate offices in Pittsburgh. He's going to have to find another miracle worker who can move to New York with him."

"You're serious. You'd quit a job you love, for me?"

"Not for you. There is no more you, or me . . . there's just us. I'm doing it for us. Justin, you were right, your mother is as stubborn as you are. Even if she needed help, she'd never ask. She's family, we'll stay here for her, both of us."

"Well, if you want to stay here, fine. But I'm moving to New York. So put away the resume and get online to check out apartments. I think I'll probably want to live in the Village or Tribeca. What do you think?"

"Let me guess: your father kicked your ass out of your mother's condo and you landed on your head. I thought you were never leaving Pittsburgh."

"No, he didn't kick my ass out of anywhere. I kicked his ass for being rude to you, though. While I was yelling at him I realized something. I was making a decision based on my needs and my family's needs. I didn't consider you. I broke the first rule: we put each other first. After I remembered that, the decision to move to New York was easy."

"What about your mom?"

"I'll find a way to deal with whatever happens with my mom. She seems to be handling things okay for now. I'm sure Debbie and Vic would help out. And Molly is getting older. If my dad sticks around he can help out too. And if

a time comes when Mom does need me, I'll go back and forth from New York to Pittsburgh as much as I can. And if things get worse, then we can take your suggestion and move her and Molly to New York."

"Sounds like a plan."

"My plan. . . is to find a really awesome apartment, with a Jacuzzi. And to share it with my husband, best friend, partner, mentor and lover for the rest of my life."

"It's going to get pretty crowded in that hot tub with all those guys. I'll make sure we get a place with a really big bathroom."

"While you do that, I'll go and pick up my tux"

"You're getting a tux? What for?"

"Daphne's wedding is Saturday."

"I know, but why a tux? Didn't you fit into the hot pink chiffon maid of honor number? "

"Very funny. Her sister is her maid of honor. Daphne has asked me to do the reading at the service. You should wear your tux too, so that we match. She said she wanted to remember us dancing at the prom."

"Justin, this is an all-straight affair. We won't be dancing or kissing or anything else. I know that Daphne is cool, but we don't know who's going to be there. We'll keep a low profile. I don't want a repeat of what happened that night."

"I don't think she invited Chris Hobbs. I thought we were going to spend our lives out of the closet. Remember at your mother's funeral you said you were proud to be with me and you didn't care what anyone thought."

"I am proud of you. But maybe your father's right, we don't need to make a point every where we go. This is Daphne's day. You don't want to ruin it for her, do you?"

"Alright, Mr. Kinney. I'll try to remember not to grab your ass when I get up to give the reading. But it's pretty disturbing to find out you agree with my father about something."

On Saturday Justin ran some errands and stopped by his mother's condo. Jennifer said she was feeling well enough to attend Daphne's wedding.

"We'll pick you up about three. Daphne told me to get there early because she wants me in the pictures."

"There's no need for you to pick me up. I have a date."

"A what? Who? Dad?"

"Justin you know I love you very much. You've been a very good son, helping me out since the operation. But it's time for you to butt out of my personal life. I'm going on a date with a man I used to be married to. It's really none of your business."

"None of my business! Did you forget what he did to you? What he did to us? I don't trust that man!"

"Justin, don't make the same mistake that I did. I felt the same ways about Brian, and, then I tried to impose my feelings on you. Fortunately, you had the good sense not to listen to me. People can change, Justin. You, of all people, should know that."

"If Dad had changed, don't you think I would have noticed? He's never going to accept me for who I am. How could you buy into his lies?"

"You're right, Justin. He probably will never accept your sexuality. But he has changed his feelings toward you. He's told me how much he respects and admires man that you've become. He's aware of the fact that if it wasn't for you, he may have given up on Lucas. He's not proud of his behavior, but he is trying to change. He's always had trouble expressing his feelings. The reason he came to see me in the first place was because he wanted me to help him talk to you. He wants to let you know that no matter what, he still loves you. I felt he was sincere."

"If all this is true, then why hasn't he said anything to me? Every time we talk, we end up in a fight."

"Justin, you have to admit that you're partly to blame for that. You're understandably defensive when he's around. He senses it and he reacts. Maybe before you leave for New York, you'll make a point of speaking with him."

"Who told you I was moving to New York?"

"Brian called. He said that he would quit his job if I didn't make him a promise. I asked him what it was that I could possibly promise him. He told me that you had agreed to move to New York because you put him first. But the only way he was going, was if I promised to let him know if I needed my family. He said if he found out that I was alone or sick and didn't call him that he would drag your ass back to Pittsburgh and buy the condo next door."

Justin laughed. "Brian said all that?"

"He also went on to describe his plans to install a hot tub on the deck in the back yard. And something about several other men. . . I don't know. I just agreed to call. And I will. I promise."

"I guess I'll try one more time with Dad. As long as he doesn't start up with Brian at the wedding."

When Justin arrived at home a few hours later he found Brian napping. He showered and dressed in his tuxedo. When he came out of the bathroom Brian was taking his own tux out of the closet. "You got your hair cut!" Brian said.

"A little, it was my mother's request."

"You look hot. Even with shorter hair. But, grow it back, okay?" Brian loved Justin's long hair.

"Thanks. Don't worry, it'll grow back fast." Justin helped Brian with his tie. "You look hot, too. We're a hot looking couple."

They arrived at the church at 4 o'clock. Justin went to find Daphne for the photos. Brian sat in a pew near the front of the church. A few minutes later Jennifer, Craig and Molly walked in. They came over and sat with Brian. Justin joined them right before the music began.

As Justin had predicted, Daphne was a beautiful bride. During the ceremony Brian noticed Justin choking back tears. "Allergies?" he said, handing him his handkerchief.

"Must be all the flowers." Justin was ready when they called for him to do the reading. Brian was so proud of him that at the end, he started to applaud. Jennifer caught his arm and politely shook her head. Craig held back a snicker.

At the reception, Brian and Justin found that they weren't the only gay couple. Nathan's older brother and his boyfriend danced every dance. When Daphne made a request for "Save the Last Dance for Me," Brian and Justin couldn't help but comply.

Nathan also had a cousin who was a real estate attorney in Manhattan. He and Brian had a lengthy discussion on renting vs. buying. While the two men were talking, Daphne pulled Justin aside and asked him to take a walk with her.

"You were great today. Thanks so much for being a part of my wedding."

"I loved doing it, Daph. It was a beautiful day."

"I wish I had been there when you and Brian got married. What was your wedding like?"

Justin smiled. "You're not going to believe this, but Brian and I got married in a church, too. It was such a last minute thing we didn't have time to invite anyone. Brian called Michael and Lindsay and told them to come. He said that he wanted to make sure they knew that he was no longer available. I'd asked the minister at Brian's mother's church to marry us. He's gay and so he understood, but he said it really wasn't a legal marriage. Brian said it didn't matter, that we just wanted to make some promises to each other in front of witnesses. And so we got married at the church with his mother's coffin sitting on the altar. It was right before the service. He insisted that the funeral director bring the coffin into the church early in the morning."

"Only Brian Kinney would do something like that. I hope that Nathan and I are as happy as you two are."

"If you want a word of advice from an old married man, just make sure that you always put each other first. Things always have a way of working out when you do that."

They embraced and Daphne went back inside. Brian found Justin sitting in the garden staring into space. "Are you ready to go?"

Justin sniffed into the handkerchief Brian had offered him earlier. "You're not still bawling, are you? I feel like I'm with Emmett."

"Fuck off, Brian. I'm going to miss her. I bet you'll want this back the day we leave for New York. You and Michael are going to miss each other."

"No, I won't miss Michael. I'll tell you why. All the things that Michael and I shared are in here." He pointed to his heart. "He's a part of me just like Daphne is a part of you. He'll always be right there. And I don't suppose that you considered the fact that Philadelphia is only a couple of hours drive from New York City."

"I didn't think of that. We're practically neighbors. Thanks, Brian. I'm ready to go if you are."

They said good-bye to the newlyweds and then with their arms around each other, they walked toward the parking lot. When they passed the rose garden they saw a couple kissing in the moonlight.

"Look at that disgusting public display, Justin. What do you two think you're doing?"

Craig and Jennifer turned to look at them. "It's called kissing," Craig responded.

"Doesn't that gross you out, Brian?" Justin teased.

"I'm fucking traumatized. Straight people should never kiss in public. It's just not right."

Two months later, Brian and Justin sat on the steps which led to the bedroom. The loft was completely empty. The furniture had been put into storage and the loft had been put up for sale. They had said their good-byes to their friends and family members. Justin had made an attempt to connect with his father. They would never be close, but they would always be family.

They sat silently waiting for the limo which was to take them to the airport. Each was lost in thought at they remembered all the time they had spent at the loft.

Brian had moved there after completing his first year at the ad agency. He looked around the empty room and heard the ghosts of the hundreds of men who had visited for one night of pleasure. He turned to Justin and thought of the

trick who came and stayed. That night his life changed forever. The images of sex and love and ice cream kisses lingered in his mind. That's how he would remember his former home.

Justin looked around and remembered the night that he got his memory back. Brian had worn the blood stained scarf close to his heart. The symbol of devotion touched Justin. He remembered that night of lovemaking most of all.

The car horn sounded in the street. It was time to leave. As they exited the sliding door for the last time, Justin asked. "Brian, are you going to miss this place?"

"Nope. I have everything I need here . . . " he pointed to his heart. " . . . and here," he kissed Justin tenderly.

A Friend in Need

A Friend in Need - Part One

Brian and Justin adapted well to their new environment. Bill had found a newly renovated hotel in the downtown area. He had the penthouse suite and Brian and Justin's rooms were on the floor below.

"I was born to live in this city!" Justin announced. He had just returned from an all day shopping trip with an arm full of shopping bags and a big smile on his handsome face.

"Brian, check out these leather pants!" Justin held them up in front of him. "They're skin tight."

Brian turned off the computer and looked at Justin. "Very nice. Are you going to wear them to class?"

"I could. Everyone in my new school dresses funky. But I was hoping that we could go out one night. Bill's found just about every gay club in New York."

"I'll bet he has. I haven't seen him in about a week. The office has been on auto pilot. I assume he still lives upstairs."

"I saw him today. He rode down in the elevator with me this afternoon. There were two really hot tricks with him."

"That explains his absence from the office. All play and no work makes Bill the boss . . . and me his bitch." Brian said sarcastically.

"You know you don't mean that. You love being in charge. You're doing a great job and Bill is letting you run the place. You should be proud of yourself. It's a big responsibility."

"The office is one thing, it's the homework that's killing me. I haven't had one night off since we moved to New York. I've barely seen the outside of this hotel suite."

"What are you working on? Maybe I can help."

"You can help me by putting on those leather pants and sucking my dick." Brian stuck his hand down the front of Justin's pants.

"Later." Justin looked over Brian's shoulder at grids on the computer screen. "Is that the network lineup?"

"Basically. I don't know shit about television."

"The only thing you ever watch is gay porn and old movies."

"I hate having to rely solely on the new program director's judgment. His resume was impressive, but I want to do more research before I give him the go ahead on the new shows. Especially the ones that will cost a bundle to produce."

Justin chuckled under his breath as he read the lineup.

"What are you laughing at?"

"A lesbian drama? Who's going to watch that?"

"Other lesbians and straight men who will watch with the sound off."

"What percentage of the population are lesbians?"

"I have no idea. But the gay series in the Pittsburgh lineup did very well."

"That's because the actors were really hot together. I bet the audience is made up of mostly straight woman who are too embarrassed to admit that watching men fuck turns them on. They wouldn't rent a gay porn movie but they can watch that show on cable."

"So, what's the problem here? Why wouldn't a show about lesbian's have the same ratings?"

"Because of the time slot. Sunday night at 10 pm the pervs who might watch for the sex are all watching the Comedy Channel for 'The Guy Show.'"

"Good point. I wonder why our new program director didn't think of that."

"Because he's gay and he doesn't think like a straight male."

"Since you're the resident television expert in the family, what do you think would fly?"

"You know I'm partial to cartoons. I like the artwork. They can be funny or serious and they probably would be cheaper to produce."

"Everything this guy came up with costs a fucking fortune to make. It'd be nice to save some money using animation. I guess you've been spending a lot of time watching television."

"Lately, yeah, I guess I have."

"Because I don't spend time with you at night."

"You're building our future. Don't feel guilty. If anyone should feel guilty it's me. I want to get a job. I could get a waiter job or something. It wouldn't interfere with my school work. I can handle full time school and a job. I had school, the job at the diner and I did the comic with Michael when we lived in Pittsburgh."

"And then we'd never see each other. I want you around when I get home from work. I need to kiss you when I walk in the door. The only job you're getting is a blow job, from me, in about two minutes." Brian pulled him forward and kissed him."

Justin pulled away. "No, wait. Let me change. I want you to get the full impact." Justin headed for the bedroom and Brian turned off the computer and sat on the couch. The hotel suite they inhabited was large enough and the service was adequate, but the furniture left a lot to be desired. Brian stretched out his long legs as best he could under the heavy, ornate coffee table. His feet were now stuck under the wrought iron bar. He sighed and removed his shoes. Justin returned a few minutes later wearing the skin-tight leather pants and black silk shirt that he'd tied loosely at the waist, revealing his tight, smooth belly. He put a CD in the player and got up on the coffee table in front of Brian.

As the throbbing beat of the CD filled the room Justin's pelvis began gyrating. The hot young blond's natural talent for dancing was well utilized as he turned the coffee table into a platform for seduction. Brian sat mesmerized as his lover's leather-clad crotch rocked back and forth near his face. Justin moved in time to the music, getting more and more carried away with every note. Brian was licking his lips in anticipation, so anxious was he to get his mouth around his lover boy's juicy shaft that pressed against the tight leather pants.

Justin was really getting off on teasing Brian and turning him on. He felt a surge of power having such a strong hold on the older man's emotions. Slowly he reached down and untied the black silk shirt from around his waist, giving Brian a glimpse of his smooth, creamy white belly. Justin allowed his hands to glide up his chest revealing his pinkish-brown nipples. He touched them gently and deliberately as he stared intently into Brian's dark hazel eyes.

It was all Brian could do to restrain himself from grabbing his blond baby right then and there and ravaging every inch of his luscious body. Justin knew he was pushing Brian closer and closer to the edge. He could tell by the way Brian was looking at him, piercing through him with his eyes, that as soon as the song ended, he was going to get his brains fucked out.

The intensity of the beat increased, as did Justin's rhythm. He unzipped the tight leather pants giving Brian a tempting glimpse of the top of his dark blond pubes. Unable to control himself any longer, Brian reached to grab Justin's ass but the young man raised one foot and gave his tortured lover a push back onto the sofa, while flashing him a devilish sunshine grin. As his pelvis rocked and swayed Justin slid the leather pants down his hips. Freed from the confines of the black leather, his hard cock sprang outward, swinging from left to right baiting Brian like a worm on a hook. Turning quickly, Justin arched his back giving his lover a full-on view of his scrumptious bubble butt. He reached around and spread both cheeks wide exposing his smooth ass-crack and tight pink hole, never missing a beat of the music.

Justin knew the track was about to end and as the music began to fade, Brian finally lost what little control he had, grabbing his baby off the table and onto his lap. Not that Justin put up any more resistance. He practically jumped on top of Brian, reaching down and grabbing his erect cock which the older man had already pulled out from his fly during the table top performance. Both of them were so far gone by now that they were like two jungle animals in heat. Justin couldn't get Brian's hard cock inside his ass fast enough. Reaching for a condom on the coffee table he quickly slipped it onto his lover's shaft, then raised his hips and slammed down on it. His mouth dropped open as he felt the thick cock fill his insides. Brian's expression was one of ecstasy as he savored the blissful sensation of Justin's tightness around his throbbing dick. Justin rode his lover hard, impaling himself on Brian's cock, pumping up and down as Brian thrust up to meet him. Their frenzied rhythm was so intense and brutal that it was as if his cock was punishing Justin's ass for the prolonged tease. No words were spoken. Only primitive grunts and moans came from their throats. Finally neither man could hold back any longer and they shot simultaneously. Justin's spunk splattered Brian's shirt and face while the older man filled the condom as he pumped a few last, deep thrusts into Justin's now-tender hole. Drenched in sweat and cum, Justin slowly rose up, allowing Brian's cock to ease out of his throbbing ass.

"That was so hot!" Brian blurted out as he gasped for breath.

"Do you think I could get a job as a lap dancer? I bet I could really clean up."

"You'd have to clean up. . . a lot. You'd need a mop to get all the jizz off your leather pants."

Justin chuckled. "You know I love to dance. And I love to tease."

"You do both very well, young man. But no job. Not now, okay? If you were out working, you wouldn't be here."

"Do you think we could go one night, Brian? Just to dance, that's all. We haven't danced with each other since Daphne's wedding."

"Maybe this weekend."

"Are you positive you can't go tonight? There's a new band that everyone is talking about. They're playing in a club in the village. It's only for one night."

"Sorry, sunshine boy. You're the one who kept telling me that I had to act like an adult. Now you pay the price. You're married to a grown-up."

"It's okay, I'm sure they'll be playing around town somewhere else. The lead singer is supposed to be really hot."

"You can go out if you want to."

"No, I don't want to go alone. I'll wait till you can go, too."

There was a knock at the door. While Brian went into the bathroom to wash up and change his jizz-soaked shirt, Justin struggled back into his leather pants and went to answer the door.

"Hi, Bill. Brian's been looking for you. He's been working really hard all evening."

Bill eyed Justin's new leather outfit, "I'll bet he's been working hard. It must be tough humping his way through all that tight leather."

"The reward is worth the effort." Striding back into the room, Brian settled down on the couch and attempt to pry his shoes loose from the man-eating coffee table.

"Hey stranger. I hear if I'm not careful you'll be stealing my business right out from under me." Bill sat down next to Brian on the couch.

"You hear right, Billy boy. Mummy and Daddy have already written you out of the will. Where the fuck have you been, anyway?"

"I've been establishing my stomping grounds. Brian, you should turn off that computer and take your hot blond boy out for a night on the town. You don't want him getting bored."

"I'm not bored," Justin protested. "Brian and I will go out this weekend. Right, Brian?"

"Right. If I can finish these budget plans that you're supposed to be doing," Brian handed the drafts to Bill.

"Fine. I'll get to it first thing tomorrow."

"First thing tomorrow you have a meeting with the new staff. Or did you forget about that, too? Did you think this fucking station was going to run itself?"

"No. I thought you'd do it. Come on Brian, lighten up. You don't need to do all of that in one night."

"This is how I work, Bill. A business needs organization and leadership. You were supposed to be the leadership, only half the time I can't even find you."

"I'll do better, I promise. But I don't think we should neglect the blond boy. He needs attention."

"I just gave him all the attention he needs. Justin, if you want to go see that band tonight why don't you just go?"

"What band?" Bill asked.

"It's just a local group that some people at school have been talking about." Justin explained. "They're playing in the Village tonight."

"Sounds good. I'll go change and meet you in the lobby."

"NO! I don't want to leave Brian here alone. Shouldn't you be helping him with the budgets?"

Brian grabbed the papers out of Bill's hand. "No. I think it's a great idea for Bill to go out tonight, get drunk, get laid and ease the tension. But you'd better have your ass in the office early tomorrow morning, so we can discuss some things. If you don't show up, I may just sell the station out from under you."

"Deal . . . Come on Justin." Bill held Justin by the arm and started to drag him toward the door.

"Wait! I can't go like this. Let me change."

"You look perfect."

"I know I do. But I bought this outfit to go out with Brian. I'll wait till he's with me to wear it."

"Good boy." Brian smiled and kissed Justin on the forehead. "Go put on your baggy sweat pants."

"To go out? No fucking way!" Justin left the room and came back wearing jeans and a light blue top. He kissed Brian good bye and left for the bar with Bill.

Justin felt a little guilty leaving Brian at home to work. But Brian seemed to really enjoy putting the station together from the ground up. The fact that Bill was allowing him to run things alone was a testament to the faith that his boss had in him.

When they arrived at the bar, the band was already playing. Bill went to get them some drinks while Justin looked for an open table. As he inched his way around the room in the dark, Justin found it hard to keep his eyes from straying toward the lead singer. The kids at school had been right. The guy was hot. His hair was as blond as Justin's and appeared to be natural. His skin was evenly tanned and Justin wondered if it was even all over. Justin was especially attracted to the singer's soulful brown eyes. As he stared in the direction of the stage he stumbled upon a table which had just been vacated by a group of girls. He sat down and waited for Bill to find him.

"There you are, sweetheart." Bill sat down and handed Justin a bottle of beer. "You are 21, aren't you?" He teased. "I don't want to be accused of corrupting a minor."

"I'm whatever age you want me to be. Do you like the music?"

"It's very loud. I like loud music. The louder the better."

Justin laughed. "Now you're showing your age. You haven't looked up at the stage yet. Check out that hot singer."

But when Bill turned toward the stage their fun evening suddenly took a very disturbing and dangerous turn.

* * *

At midnight Brian got a call from Justin. "Brian, you have to come and get us. Bill won't leave and things are getting out of hand."

"What? Where are you?"

Justin gave him the address.

"Justin, what happened?" Brian searched for his wallet. "Is Bill drunk?"

"No! He didn't have a chance to get drunk. He sat down at the table with me and when he looked at the singer he recognized him. Brian, it's his ex-boyfriend. After the set the kid came down and started arguing with Bill. He thought we were together. Bill let him think that we were. Now they're really going at it. I want to leave, but Bill just ignored me."

"I'll get a cab and be right there."

Brian arrived at the address and asked the cab driver to wait. As he approached the front door of the bar he heard a loud crash. Two men had come flying out of the plate glass window of the bar landing on the sidewalk in front of him. One of them was his boss Bill Grey. Brian spotted Justin standing in the doorway. They both reached Bill at the same time and pulled the younger man off him. Bill's face was covered with blood. Brian held the younger man back as Justin help Bill to his feet.

"Fuck you!" The singer yelled as Bill put his arm around Justin.

"Your hand is bleeding," Bill said, with a hint of concern in his voice. Both Brian and Justin looked at the open wound on the boy's hand. It was a very deep cut probably caused by the broken glass. Bill asked Justin to get something from the bar to wrap it up. Justin pushed through the crowd that had gathered at the door to get some help.

Brian tried to pull Bill away from the scene just as one of the other band members took a swing at Bill catching him square on the jaw. Justin appeared at Brian's side at that moment.

He was holding a roll of paper towels the bartender had given him. Justin began to wrap the towels around the singer's hand.

"Fuck him, let's get Bill to a hospital." Brian insisted. "You've got a cut over your eye that looks like it's going to leave a scar. He tried to guide Bill to the waiting cab.

"Brian, we can't just leave him here to bleed to death," Justin pleaded.

"Alright, get him in the cab. Justin, be careful with the blood. You don't know anything about him."

They piled into the cab and Brian directed the driver to take them to the nearest emergency room. When they got to the hospital, Justin went into the men's room to wash his hands. He thought that Brian's comment about the singer's blood seemed harsh. He was making judgments about someone he didn't even know. But Justin breathed a sigh of relief when he saw that there was no blood on his hands or on his clothing.

Meanwhile, Brian had gone into the emergency room cubicle where Bill's forehead was being stitched up. Brian winced at every stitch. Bill didn't bat an eye. "You're pretty brave. That must have hurt like hell. I'll get Justin and we'll go home."

"What about Jamie? Did they stitch him up? He can't stand hospitals. I better see how he's doing."

Brian tried to stop him. "He put your face through a plate glass window and you're worried about his feelings? I would have left him on the sidewalk to die."

"You don't know him, Brian. I pushed his buttons tonight. He reacted, that's all." Bill brushed past Brian and walked down the hallway of treatment rooms looking for Jamie.

Justin had found Jamie first. He was sitting on a chair next to the table where Jamie was being worked on by a doctor. "I had stitches to close up the place where they had to drill a hole in my skull."

"Why would you want to drill a hole in your skull?" Jamie asked. He was grateful for the distraction of Justin's story. He'd always hated hospitals.

"My brain was swelling. They didn't want my head to explode so they drilled a hole."

"Your head still looks pretty swollen to me. Are you sure that hole was big enough?"

Justin smiled and Jamie couldn't help smiling back. . There was something very amiable about the young man who had caused him a whole lot of trouble tonight.

Justin went on to explain. "On the night of my prom this homophobic asshole, Chris Hobbes, smashed my head in with a baseball bat right here." Justin pointed to the spot on his forehead.

"Why did he do it?"

"He got mad because Brian showed up at my prom and danced with me."

"And he only hit you once. That's a miracle."

The doctor who had been working on Jamie's wound chuckled softly. "Sorry. Please don't move. Only a few more stitches to go."

"I was in a coma for three weeks. Then I couldn't move my right hand, which really sucked because I'd just gotten accepted into art school."

"That does suck. Did you ever find that Hobbes guy? Get even?"

"No. The court just gave him community service."

"You or that Brian guy should have found him and beat him senseless."

"That would make me just like Hobbes, wouldn't it. That's the last thing I'd want to be."

When the doctor finished, Justin asked Jamie if he wanted to call his family on his cell phone.

"There's nobody. I'll just pay the bill and get a cab."

"Nobody already paid." Bill stood in the doorway with a hangdog look on his face. Justin looked at Bill and then at Jamie, unsure of what would happen next. Bill didn't move until Jamie held out his hand. The next thing Justin knew they were in each other's arms whispering apologies and kissing. When Justin was confident that it was safe to leave them alone in the same room he went to look for Brian. He found him outside of the building smoking a cigarette.

"I thought you quit."

"I cut back. I only smoke outside now."

"I guess that's an improvement."

"Where's Bill?"

"The last I saw him, he was kissing Jamie's bandaged hand. It was so sweet the way they looked at each other. It reminded me of us."

"I never hit you, Justin."

"Don't get defensive. I know you're not a violent man. I meant that I think it's true love. They really connect."

"They connect alright. With their fists. That's not love, Justin."

Justin knew that Brian was tired and irritated at having to play nursemaid to Bill. Justin rubbed his back and kissed him on the neck. As they waited for Bill, Justin noticed some of the band members going into the hospital. He was glad that Jamie wasn't really alone. A few minutes later Bill came out and announced he was ready to go home.

Justin had been unusually quiet on the trip home in the cab. Brian wondered if he was having a flashback to the bashing. He would make sure to be especially gentle with him in bed. To his surprise Justin took the lead that night. When they walked in the door Justin grabbed Brian around the neck and pulled him down on the sofa. Within minutes their clothing was lying on a heap on the floor. Brian had to gasp for air when Justin pushed his throbbing cock into him. All he could do was to close his eyes and allow Justin to take them to a place where only the two of them existed.

Later on that night they moved into the bedroom. Brian commented, "You got off on two men fighting over you tonight? Didn't you, you little perv?"

Justin grinned slyly. "Yeah, it was kinda hot having things get physical over little old me."

"And I thought I knew all of your carnal desires. Now it turns out you're developing a passion for pain."

"Hey, you started it. Remember that night you choked me into submission. You said that danger is what makes anonymous sex hot."

"I was making a point. I'd never hurt you, Justin."

"I know that, Brian, stop making a big fucking deal. It was hot, I got off on it. End of story."

"If you wanted to fuck Jamie you could have."

"What? NO! Why are we having this conversation?"

"Justin, you're 20 years old. You may have sexual needs that you don't even know about yet. You're too young to be tied down to one man."

"I'm married."

"Maybe you made a mistake. I've been working all day and night. You're alone all the time. I wouldn't get mad if you wanted to have a good time."

"Now you're really pissing me off. I know what marriage means, Brian. If I thought I wasn't ready I wouldn't have agreed to it."

"I pressured you."

"Nobody pressures Justin Taylor into doing anything he doesn't want to do. Not even Brian Kinney." Justin turned around and faced him. "Look, Brian. If I get turned on because some guy wants to dance with me or flirt with me there's nothing wrong with that. When I want sex, there's one only one man who can satisfy me. Why would I waste my time with some asshole I met in a bar when I know the master is home waiting for me?"

"That sounds good. You're full of shit, but it sounds good."

"Think about all the time you wasted at Babylon with all of those backroom blow jobs. Did anyone of them come close to the ecstasy you feel when I suck your dick?"

"You're right, I wasted 16 years of my life on substandard blow jobs. I should have stolen you out of your crib."

"Some people say that you did. I was lucky enough to get the right man the first time out. So I don't have to waste time with losers in backrooms."

"So you go out to clubs, drive losers crazy while they lust after you. Then you come home and lust after me."

"Yeah, that's right. Is that okay?"

"I don't know how the losers will feel about it, but it's fine with me. Sounds like a real time saver."

"Good. As long as you understand. You're my man, Brian. Now and forever."

"Yeah, lucky me." Brian teased. He turned to Justin and ruffled his hair. "Just be careful. I don't like sitting in hospital waiting rooms in the middle of the night."

"I'll be careful."

When the alarm went off at 7 the next morning, Justin reached over to shut it off. When he opened his eyes, he saw that Brian was sitting up in bed staring down at him.

"What are you doing up so early?"

"I was waiting for you to wake up. I've got a brilliant plan that will solve both of our problems."

"What problems?"

"You want to get a job so you can be out in the grown up world meeting people. I need someone I can trust to help me at the office. Someone brilliant, talented and fuckable. I'm going to hire you to be my assistant. You can make your own hours."

Justin laughed. "I don't know anything about the entertainment business."

"Neither do I. Maybe that's what this station needs, a fresh outlook. What do you say?"

"We'll be together. And I'll learn a lot about your work. I like helping you. But do you think it would be a problem seeing each other all the time?"

"When you interned at Vanguard, it worked out fine. Except for the part where I got fired."

"Well, if you really think I could help you out..."

"Good, it's settled then. You can start on Monday."

When Brian arrived at the office he was surprised to see that Bill was already sitting at his desk. "How's your head?"

"Inside or out?"

"Either, or."

"I'm sorry that I got Justin involved. I should have left the bar the minute I saw Jamie."

"Justin's seen a lot worse, believe me. I remember one night when I ran some guy down with my car. . . oh, wait, that was you, wasn't it? Trouble just seems to find you."

"Yeah, it's my middle name. Look I know I've been dumping everything on you. The party is over for me. I'll be in the office every day from now on. Let's get this show on the road, shall we?"

Brian knew Bill was a quick study. Even so, he was amazed at how fast Bill caught up to speed. The man was truly brilliant, when he chose to be. By mid-morning they had met with the staff and put together a workable budget. After the meeting, Brian went to his office to start working on a plan for promoting new shows. A couple of hours later, he got up to stretch his legs. As he walked past Bill's office, he noticed that his boss was just sitting behind his desk staring into space.

"Why are you still here? You performed your magic act on the budget, you can go home and rest."

Bill just looked at him.

"Did you eat lunch?" Brian asked.

"No." Bill answered. "My life is a mess. I want to fix it, but where do I start?"

"You start by eating lunch. Let's get some Chinese. You always feel better when you're sucking on an egg roll."

They went to a small restaurant near the office. After they had placed their orders, Bill began to speak. "It was really weird seeing him like that. For two years I've had this picture in my mind of this sweet, perfect, angel."

"And last night you saw a twisted devil."

"I was going to say he hasn't changed a bit. Why would you describe him like that?"

"Have you looked in the mirror today?"

"I deserved it. I taunted him with Justin. You should have seen his face. It drove him crazy when I sucked on Justin's ear."

"That's sadistic, cruel even. He was trying to work. Justin let you suck his ear?"

"Sorry, was that a rule I broke? No ear sucking. I'll remember."

"Fuck you. It doesn't matter what you did. Nobody deserves to be beaten. That's not love, man."

"What do you know about it?"

"My old man used to beat the shit out of me all the time for no reason. It made me feel worthless."

"At least he noticed you. I would have given anything if my dad had taken the time to beat me up. My parents dumped me in one private school after another. I hardly knew them. Try growing up with NO parental involvement. Talk about feeling worthless. Here we are a couple of worthless fags running a multi-million dollar business. I want what you have, Brian. I want a home. I want a Justin. Tell me how to get it."

Brian laughed. "I have no fucking idea how I got where I am today."

"Your bad boy reputation is legendary. How did you know it was time to change?"

"It was the night he came along. I don't mean that I was instantly transformed, it was a long and painful process."

"I don't mind pain."

"He didn't hit me with a two by four. Although you'd probably enjoy that."

"There must have been a turning point."

"There were a few. When he got hurt at the prom. I knew that he wasn't just some fuck buddy. When he left me for another man, that hurt. But I thought, what the fuck, I'm never going to fit into his perfect little family plan. Why shouldn't he be happy with someone who can give him what he wants? It turned out that what Justin wanted was me."

"Sounds like he did all the work."

"Maybe you should be talking to him."

"I guess. But how did he get you to marry him?"

"Probably by telling me no. Remember when you and I met? I was trying to get him to move in with me. But I had learn to put him first and think about what it was he needed. Then everything else just fell into place."

"How do I find out what Jamie needs?"

"Jamie is NOT Justin. That kid is fucked up."

"We understand each other."

"People like that never change. You'll be spending every weekend in the emergency room. Until one of you kills the other. No, that situation is hopeless. You have to move on."

Bill respected Brian's opinion. In his heart he knew that he and Jamie would never share their lives, but somehow that didn't stop the feelings that had been reawakened last night. He knew that he would have to see Jamie again, even if it was only to say good bye.

Justin hated having to lie to Brian. He had told him that he had research to do and that he was going to the school library. It was a pretty lame excuse and Justin sensed that Brian didn't really believe him, but he let it pass.

He walked down to the bar that had been the scene of the brawl the night before. The window had been repaired already and it looked pretty much as it had when he and Bill had arrived the night before. Justin tried to keep a low profile when he walked in. He prayed that the bartender wouldn't recognize him.

"Can I help you?" A muscular man with a few days' growth of beard approached him.

"I was looking for a friend of mine. I heard that his band played here once in a while. His name is Jamie."

"They played here last night. They won't be back. A friend of his busted the place up pretty good."

"Yeah, I heard. Do you know where I can find him?"

"Fuck, no. But that chick playing pool over there might know him. She was hanging with the bass player all night."

"Thanks." Justin approached the girl who was poised to take a shot on the pool table. He waited for her to finish.

"Hi," he said a little sheepishly.

"Fuck you!" the girl spat. "You're the asshole who started up with Jamie last night. Didn't your boyfriend tell you he already paid?"

"What? Bill did?"

"Yeah, he was here a little while ago. He gave the owner money for the window. He wanted to find Jamie, but no one was talking."

"That's kinda why I'm here. I wanted to explain what happened. Is Jamie around?"

"No fuckin' way am I telling you anything. You're the reason they got thrown out of here last night."

"I know. I'm really sorry. It was my fault. That's why I want to apologize to him. Do you know where I can find him?"

"Maybe."

Justin used his best method of persuasion on the girl. He smiled his most sincere sunshine smile. "You're a friend of his, aren't you? I don't blame you for not helping me. Look, could you give him my number?" Justin wrote down his cell number on a napkin and handed it to her. "I stayed with him at the hospital last night. He seems like a pretty nice guy. I just wanted to see how he was doing."

"You're Justin?" She scrutinized the paper then looked intently at his face. "Yeah, he said you were funny. Jamie's okay. We took him back to my place. They were over there practicing this afternoon. They don't like to have an audience at practice so I decided to come here to shoot some pool."

"Will you tell him that I'm sorry for letting Bill fuck with his head?"

"Let's go." She pulled a tight black leather jacket on over her short black wool skirt. Justin tried not to laugh at the black and white horizontal striped stockings that were fastened with garter belts just below her hemline. She was an original, alright. "He's probably getting ready for tonight. You can tell him yourself."

Justin followed the girl outside. She walked so fast in her high heeled boots that he practically had to run to keep up with her. "I'm Maura. The bass player, Donny, is my boyfriend. Jamie's a great singer. He also writes music. But it's hard to get gigs in New York. They're trying to get enough money together to burn a demo. You got any money?"

"Me? No. I don't even have a job yet."

"Is that guy your sugar daddy?"

"No. He's just a friend. My husband, Brian, works for Bill."

"You're married? To another guy? Fuck me, I didn't think they let boys marry boys."

"They don't. But we're just as married as any other couple. More married than some."

"You should see the look on your face. You're blushing. You must be totally in love."

"Yeah."

"It looks good on you. The blush color. You've got the most incredible skin. I'd love to give you a facial. I need the practice for my cosmetology course."

"Is that what you do?"

"Not yet, I have to get a cosmetology license first. Actually what I really want to do is to work on a movie set or something like that. I love costumes and makeup and all that stage crap. Right now, I work at a gym."

Justin burst out laughing. "Sorry. You don't look like the gym type."

"Fuck you. This is my casual wear. When I go to work I'm perfectly respectable."

Justin was beginning to like this oddly dressed young woman. He'd missed hanging out with Daphne. Not that Maura was anything like Daphne. She was crass, funny and had the thickest Brooklyn accent he'd ever heard. But something about her made him feel very comfortable.

"I'm sorry. I'm not used to hanging out with people my own age. Brian's 31 and we mostly hung out with his friends when we lived in Pittsburgh. I guess I've lost touch my own generation."

"How old are you?"

"20."

"Geez, you're a baby."

When they reached her apartment on the east side, they were greeted by an enthusiastic brown and white dog. Justin was disappointed to find that the band members had already left. There was a note on the table for Maura. It was from her boyfriend Donny.

"He said the neighbors complained so they left. If they get a gig tonight he'll call."

"I thought that last night was the only New York appearance."

"That's how you advertise. You make 'em think that if they don't come and see you right away, they'll miss something. It's just a gimmick. Believe me they'd sell their souls for a steady gig here. The owner of that bar liked 'em well enough, but he was afraid of lawsuits. That was fucked up. Jamie's never struck me as the violent type. He's kinda sweet and innocent." Maura smiled. "Kinda like you. Sit, blonde!"

Justin obeyed. Maura disappeared into the bathroom and came back with a bowl. As Justin watched curiously she stirred the contents. When she began to brush the stuff on his face he had to protest.

"What are you doing? What is that stuff?"

"It's just a mask. You'll love it. Close your eyes and shut the fuck up. This would cost you a fortune at a spa."

"My skin is really sensitive. What if I break out in a rash? How am I going to explain that to Brian?"

"Don't worry. It's hypo-allergenic. I tried it out on Lance and he was fine. Right baby?" The dog wagged his tail.

Justin had to admit that the mask felt good. After a while she wash the mask off and began to apply makeup to his face.

"God, you're pushy," Justin complained as she put blush on his cheeks.

"Hey I have to learn on somebody. You volunteered when you walked in here. Now don't move, I want to put on some mascara and then you're done." Once the mascara was applied Maura handed him a mirror. He had to admit that she did have talent.

"Great. Now all I need is a dress."

"Oh man, you're terrific. I didn't want to ask on your first visit. Let me look in my closet
and . . ."

"I was kidding! NO dress! NO make-up! I'm a gay man, not a girl. Brian would leave me if he saw me made up like this. You've got to clean it off so I can go home."

"Alright, fun time's over. Just let me take a picture first."

"NO WAY!" Justin covered his face. "Are you going to blackmail me?"

"Justin," she said sweetly, "would I do a thing like that to my new friend? I just want to put your picture in my book. Look, all the guys let me make them up."

Justin reluctantly allowed her to take a picture. He looked at the album and saw the band members with makeup. Jamie was the only one that was smiling.

"What about Jamie? Will you tell him to call me?"

"Yeah. If they play somewhere tonight, I'll call you."

"Thanks." Justin petted Lance on the head before he opened the door. "Hey, it was nice to meet you."

"Yeah, me too. I'll call you, okay? Maybe we can get coffee sometime."

"Sure. Bye."

When Justin got home, Brian was sitting on a chair in the living room, his legs stretched out in front of him. He was staring gloomily down at the floor. "I hate this fucking furniture. My shoes keep getting stuck under this hideous coffee table. I miss my chair."

"Your chair?"

"My fuckable recliner. I'm not comfortable in this furniture, it makes me feel too long. I'm going to stretch out in the bathtub."

"Want some company?" Justin asked. Brian put his arm around Justin's waist and led him into the bathroom. They filled the tub and stripped off their clothes. "How was work today?"

"Alright. I told them to put a hold on that lesbian series. They balked a little but I told them I have an expert coming in on Monday. It freaked them out."

"Thanks, you've made me some new friends already." Justin got into the tub.

Brian slid down into the tub and pulled Justin toward him. "What the fuck is this on your neck?"

Justin took a wash cloth and rubbed it on his neck. "Nothing."

"That was makeup. I thought you were at the library."

"I wasn't. I lied to you, Brian. I went to the bar to see if I could find Jamie."

"Why?"

"Just to see how he was. And I thought maybe I could see how he really felt about Bill."

"Stay out of it, Justin! That's the last thing that Bill needs. Do you realize that he could have been killed last night? I know it sounds cold, but we'd be back to square one. No more New York, no more Grey Enterprises. We'd be fucked. That kid is bad news."

Brian had a point. Justin decided to drop the subject. . His obligation was to put Brian first.

"I didn't think of that. You're right, Brian, I'll stay out of it." He kissed Brian and slid down into his arms.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Brian pressed.

"What?"

"The makeup. I don't want to wake up one morning and find out I'm married to Emmett."

"I met a girl today. Her name is Maura. She's the girlfriend of the bass player. I went back to her place because the band had been there practicing. They were gone, but she talked me into a makeover. She's learning cosmetology."

"It's a good thing you're starting work on Monday. You have too much time on your hands."

"I liked her. She's funny. Would you mind if I saw her sometime?"

"A Daphne substitute?"

"Hardly. But I like her enough, and she's probably not much older than me."

"Sure, have your fun. But if you come home in a dress, I'm leaving you."

Justin chuckled. "That's what I told her. Do I know my man or what?"

For the rest of the week, Bill went into the office every day. Brian was relieved that he could count on his boss to make the major personnel decisions and handle the budgeting. Brian's forte was advertising. The task of promoting the network was his baby and he was happy not to have to deal with the nasty end of running the business.

On Saturday night, Brian told Justin that they could go to a club to dance. Justin suggested they ask Bill to go with them. It might cheer him up. But Bill did not have a good time at the club. He sat on the sidelines, nursing a beer and watching the crowd. Men asked him to dance, but he declined. He was definitely not his usual party boy self. Justin wore his new leather outfit. He and Brian danced every dance clinging to each other as they had done at Babylon.

"Maybe you should ask Bill to dance." Justin suggested. "He looks so pathetic standing there staring at his beer bottle all night."

"I'm sure he'd much rather dance with the pretty blond boy. Why don't you ask him?"

"Not in these pants. Every time you brush up against me I get hard."

"I noticed. I thought it was my irresistible charm," Brian kidded.

Justin smiled at him. "Add leather to my list of turn ons. I don't want to give Bill any ideas."

A song with a slow, sexy Latin beat began to play and Brian was reluctant to release his lover. They swayed together, staring into each other's eyes until an intruder disturbed the moment.

Justin felt a tug on his sleeve. "I gotta talk to you. . . NOW!"

Startled, Justin turned to look at the stranger who was still holding onto his arm. "What? Who the fuck . . .?" he recognized a pair of dark brown eyes peeking out from under the wide brim of a baseball cap.

"It's me . . . Maura." she hissed.

"What the fuck are you doing in a gay club? You look like a guy."

She wore baggy parachute pants and a loose T-shirt. The cap covered what appeared to be a short blond wig.

"Do you think I'd be here if it wasn't important?" She tugged harder at his sleeve. "Dance with me!" she commanded.

Brian watched Justin's abduction in amusement. Justin looked him helplessly. "I'll be right back. Brian, ask Bill to dance."

Maura pulled Justin close to her and began to sway with the music. "Hey, for a little guy you got a pretty big package," she commented

Justin pulled away and held her around the waist at arm's length. "You've got a pretty big set of balls coming in here dressed like that."

"It's a free country. I paid the cover charge. This ain't no private boys' club."

"Okay, what do you want? This is the first time Brian and I have been out since we got to New York. The last thing I want to do is spend time dancing with you."

"He's pretty hot. But something awful happened and I didn't know who I could call. You told me the name of this club on my answering machine. So here I am."

"Maura. . . What's the emergency?"

"Jamie got arrested for drugs. I know he's innocent. He never uses . . . not even pot. I think my asshole neighbor set him up to get even for the loud music. You gotta help him Justin. He's such a pussy. He'll get killed in jail."

"What do you want me to do?"

"We gotta bail him out. I have \$500 but we need \$500 more."

"I don't have any money."

"But you can get it. Don't tell me that your hubby keeps it all in a Swiss bank account. He's gotta have a cash card."

"He's dancing with Bill. I can't very well go over there and ask him for his cash card."

"Distract him. Rub your cock against him. Then take his wallet."

"I'll ask him. But first I have to get him away from Bill. He'd kill me if Bill found out that Jamie was in trouble."

"Do what you gotta do. I'll hang out and wait for you here."

Justin reluctantly left the girl near the front door. "Can I cut in?" He wiggled his way between Brian and Bill. Brian looked at him with curiosity, but Bill didn't leave. Instead Justin felt him tighten his grip. They swayed together as a threesome until Justin got an idea.

"Fuck me, Brian!" Justin commanded. "Let's go to the bathroom." He pulled loose from Bill's grip and led Brian by the hand down a hallway. Brian pushed him against the wall and kissed him.

"Later!" Justin pushed him away. "Jamie's been arrested."

"Did he kill someone?"

"No, he got arrested for drugs. But Maura swears he was set up by her neighbor to get even for the noise. Brian, I don't think he deserves to sit in jail for that. Can we help him? I promise not to get Bill involved."

"How much?"

"A thousand for bail. She has \$500 already. I could go with Maura to a cash machine."

"And do what, hand over \$500 bucks? How do you know she won't hit you over the head and clean out my account."

"Okay. You go, then."

"So she can hit me over the head?"

"Brian, I trust her. Do you think she would have come here dressed like that if she wasn't desperate?"

"Where did she go?"

"She's over there." Justin pointed toward the door bar where he had left Maura. "Oh, shit!"

Bill was walking toward the young blonde with the baggy pants and baseball cap. Brian grabbed Justin's arm and dragged him across the room. Before they could get to Maura Bill had gotten her attention. They reached the couple just as Bill realized his prey was not what he appeared to be.

"Bill, meet Maura. She's a friend of mine. A transvestite. This is her first time in a gay bar."

Bill looked from Justin to Maura and back to Justin. "Jamie's in trouble, isn't he?"

"We need \$500 bucks," Maura blurted out. "He got arrested for drugs, but it's a frame-up."

"Jamie never did drugs. Both of his parents were users. Where is he?"

Brian took charge of the situation. "How much have you got on you, Bill?" Between the two of them they came up with \$500. Maura put out her hand for the money, but Bill took her arm and led her out the door. Brian and Justin followed.

Several hours later, Jamie was released. Bill and Maura hugged him while Brian and Justin looked on. "Thanks for rescuing me. This jail has to be the closest place to hell on earth. Can we just get out of here?"

"Where are you staying?" Bill asked. Brian glared at him. "He owes me money, Brian."

"He's staying with me." Maura volunteered. "The whole band does. The rest of them were out looking for work. Jamie was the only one home when the cops came. When I get my hands of that fucking neighbor of mine I'm going to kick him in the balls."

"You must have a pretty big place to have four guys staying there," Brian commented.

"My roommate just moved out so I have an extra bedroom. Besides, they sleep in the daytime, so it works out."

"You're coming home with me tonight," Bill said.

Brian tried to protest. "He has a place to stay."

"If Justin had been in jail, you wouldn't let him out of your sight. Brian, stop trying to run my life." Bill took Jamie's hand and left for home.

Brian had no choice but to back off. He and Justin took a cab with Maura. They dropped her at her place and then went back to the hotel. Brian didn't speak for the entire trip.

"I'm sorry, Brian. I didn't mean for Bill to find out. This is fuck up."

"You didn't do anything wrong. He's right, I have to butt out. But having that little blond beach twink living upstairs makes me nervous. If you hear any glass breaking or furniture being turned over, call the police right away."

"Brian, you saw him tonight. Maura said he's a real pussy. Maybe it'll be okay. As long as Bill doesn't fuck up."

"Let's not talk about them. You looked really hot tonight."

"I know. But next time I wear these pants I better put on underwear. I think I've got a rash on my dick."

For the first time since Maura walked into the bar that night, Brian smiled. "Let me kiss it and make it better."

Justin began work on Monday morning. Brian introduced him to the staff as his new assistant. Bill walked into the office at 10 am with Jamie in tow. He told Brian that he'd hired Jamie as his assistant.

Justin thought Brian would explode, but instead he shook Jamie's hand and welcomed him. Justin decided that he and Jamie should share an office.

"What exactly does an assistant do?" Jamie asked.

"Anything the boss asks you to do." Justin said with a smile. "Actually I think that we're on our own, at least for now. Brian's been working on promoting the station with commercials. He's in his own little world today. When he needs something, he'll come get me."

"Yeah, to suck his dick."

"Whatever it takes. He's been telling me about the shows that are scheduled. I had an idea about adding something with animation. What do you think?"

"Cartoons?"

"Not silly, Saturday morning cartoons. Artistic animations. I'm going to art school. I've always been interested in animation. When I couldn't use my hand to draw Brian bought me a special computer program to work with. I've been able to create some amazing art. I bet I could work up some stories and make some short animated features."

"That sounds like a good idea."

"Maybe we could work on a project together."

"I can't draw."

"Can you write a story? I used to do a comic book with Brian's friend Michael. We thought up stories together."

"I write music. I could probably help you write a story. What was your comic about?"

"It was called Rage." The boys decided that an artistic animated feature would be a worthwhile project.

Over the next several weeks, they collaborated every chance they got. Justin had decided to keep the project a secret from Brian and Bill. They would put together a knock-out presentation and impress the hell out of them.

"How did you come up with the idea for Rage?" Jamie asked as he watched Justin work. "Initially it was Michael's idea. His childhood hero, 'Captain Astro,' was killed off. Michael was devastated."

"I thought you said he was Brian's friend. How the hell old is this guy?"

"He's a little older than Brian. But he's not the cynic that Brian was then. He's kind of childlike."

"I never enjoyed being a child. I guess he liked you because you were a kid."

"Michael never liked me. He'd had a crush on Brian since he was 14 years old. My very existence annoyed the crap out of him. Until he found a use for me. One night he came up with the idea of making his own gay super hero. And for that he needed me."

"And you wanted to kiss up to Brian's best friend so you agreed."

"No! Michael's idea was for the character of Rage to save J.T., that would be me, from a bashing. I did the comic because I had still had bad feelings about what happened to me at the prom. Brian never wanted to talk about it. So Rage started out as an outlet for my rage."

"It really is amazing to watch it come to life with the animation. We need to give him a voice."

"How about your voice? I'll be J.T. of course."

"What about Zepher?"

Justin grinned mischievously. "We'll ask Maura. She's always wanted to be in show business."

One Wednesday evening, Brian came home a little early. Justin had class all day on Wednesdays so he did not come into the office. Since Justin was not home, so Brian decided to strip down and relax in the tub. As soon as he got into the bath the ceiling began to vibrate. "What the fuck?" It sounded like someone was playing the drums right over his head. More instruments were added to the mix and the result was deafening.

Brian got out of the tub and threw on his sweat pants. He went up the stairs to the floor above and banged loudly on Bill's door.

He was only slightly surprised when Justin answered. "Hey, you're home early."

"What's going on up here?"

"The band's practicing. They couldn't practice at Maura's anymore because of her asshole neighbor."

"Well, Bill's asshole neighbor is not amused. Justin, this is not music."

"To each his own, Mr. Kinney." Maura had walked into the foyer and was standing at Justin's side. "This is music to our ears, right blondie?"

"Yeah, I don't mind it."

At that moment Bill came up behind Brian in the doorway. "Do you like my new sound system? Ain't it cool?"

"Et tu brute?"

"Brian, lighten up. Come on in and join the fun. Justin has a surprise for us, right, sweetheart?"

"Well, I guess now is as good a time as any. Come into the living room and take a seat. Jamie and I have been working on a project together."

Bill had purchased professional audio and video equipment for his living room. Justin went to the computer and loaded the program. "Brian, remember when we were talking about the line-up and how it could use something different and exciting?"

"God help me, yes."

"Here's what I had in mind." Justin pushed some buttons and music started to play. A familiar picture appeared on Bill's plasma TV which was mounted on the wall. Rage and J.T. had come to life through the magic of Justin's computer program. He and Jamie had come up with a 10 minute short animation that was both exciting and different.

"That was fuckin' amazing, guys," Maura enthused.

"It's not bad," Brian said, but Justin could tell by the look on his face that he was impressed. "What do you think, boss?"

"How fast can you make more? We could use Rage and J.T. shorts in between the hour long series and the movies. They could be the station symbols. Gay Power! Right on, boys. You're both brilliant."

"Michael helped, Brian. I called him when I got the idea to use Rage. Isn't it cool to see them on the T.V. screen? That's our Rage and J.T. right up there on the wall."

Brian could see that Justin was bursting with pride to see his artwork come to life.

"Jamie wrote the background music. I think it goes well with the theme of the show. We can do anything we want with the shorts. I've written one that's funny and one that defines J.T. and Rage's relationship. Most of them should send a message, I think."

"Well, Brian, what do you think of our assistants?"

"I think we better watch our backs."

The ratings had come in for the first few weeks and so far everything was going smoothly. Rage was a big hit and the rest of the line-up was getting favorable reviews. The station had gotten off to a good start.

Brian called Justin into his office the week before Thanksgiving. "Bill wants me to make a trip to L.A. to fine-tune some things at the network there."

"I guess I could go home for Thanksgiving. I told you my mom invited us."

"I don't have to go right now. You get a few weeks off in December and January, I thought we could go out there together."

"You mean for Christmas?" Justin couldn't imagine not spending Christmas with his mother and sister.

"Of course not for Christmas. After Christmas. I was thinking we could make a stop in Pittsburgh before we go out west. You can see your family and I could bring Gus his presents in person."

"That's a great idea. Maybe I could get together with Michael and talk about Rage. He's come up with some great ideas."

"Perfect. We'll have Thanksgiving dinner in New York. You can invite anyone you want for dinner. Then we'll go to Pittsburgh for Christmas and spend about a month in L.A."

"More than perfect."

Justin was excited about the holidays. He had invited Maura, Bill and Jamie to have Thanksgiving dinner at their place. Maura arrived early to help Justin set up.

"Justin, how come there's nothing on the stove or in the oven? It takes a fucking day and a half to cook a turkey."

"I know that. I'm sure they know that at the restaurant I ordered the food from."

"Turkey dinner from a restaurant? I never would have thought of that, Justin. You're a genius."

Bill and Brian were in the living room watching a black and white movie. Justin, Jamie and Maura were setting the table when the door bell rang.

"That must be the food. Brian get your wallet." Justin called out.

Justin opened the door just as Brian reached for his wallet. Their jaws dropped when they saw who their uninvited visitor was.

Friend in Need - Part Two

"Are you just going to stare at me, or can your only living relative come inside?"

"Claire! What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Brian, don't start with me." Claire sniffled. "Don't ask me any questions. Where's your bathroom?" Justin pointed her in the direction of the bathroom and Claire disappeared down the hallway. From behind the closed bathroom door they could hear her crying hysterically.

Before they had a chance to close the front door, the food delivery arrived. Brian directed the man to put the packages down on the counter. He paid the bill and gave him a generous tip.

"Food's here. Let's eat," Brian announced.

"Ah, Brian, what about . . . ?" Justin pointed in the direction of the bathroom.

"Justin, this is like old times for me. Every holiday Claire would perform her drama queen act in our one and only bathroom. I had to pee in the bushes like some homeless person. Just ignore her and she'll get bored. Then we can send her the fuck home."

Brian and Justin got the food set out on the table and the group sat down to eat. . Once in a while there would be a break in Claire's wailing. Everyone at the table except for Brian would hold their breath until she started up again. Brian ate his meal, completely oblivious to his sister's outbursts.

Finally, Justin took pity on her. "I'm going to see if she'll eat something." He put some food on a plate and headed for the bathroom.

"Just leave it outside the door and run. You don't want to get sucked into Claire-world. You'd never survive."

"You're fuckin' heartless." Maura admonished her host. "That woman is your sister and she obviously needs you. Go and talk to her."

"She doesn't need me. After she's chased everyone from the room with her antics, she'll come out and devour every morsel of food left on the table. Then she'll clean out the refrigerator. She'll pass out on the bed and sleep till noon tomorrow. If you ask her what she was crying about, she'll pretend it never happened."

"All this family drama reminds me of the good old days," Jamie said. "My dad crashing on the sofa and my mother in the bathroom giving the neighbor a blow job for cash."

"At least they were in the same country. My parents made it a point never to be around for a holiday."

"And poor little Ebenezer spent Christmas alone by the fire at the private all boys' school. Fuck you both. After my sister pissed off all the relatives, my dad would get drunk and beat the crap out of me."

Maura leaned forward and looked around the table. "When I was ten years old, my family sat down at the dining room table to eat Thanksgiving dinner. My grandfather was sitting next to me at the head of the table. He was old and sometimes he would fall asleep in the middle of a meal. So nobody thought anything about it when he nodded off at the table. When I took his hand for the blessing, it was freezing. I told my grandmother that grandpa was cold. She went to the closet, took out a hat and put it on his bald head. My dad took family pictures with everyone gathered around Grandpa at the head of the table. We ate the whole meal with him sitting there with his fucking hat on his head, sound asleep. Only it turned out he wasn't sleeping. He was dead."

Jamie, Bill and Brian stared at her in silence for a moment. "You win," Bill declared.

Justin returned to the table with the untouched plate of food. "She told me to fuck off."

"Told you so."

"But Brian, I have to pee."

"Use the sink."

"Gross!!!" Maura exclaimed.

Claire walked into the room sniffing. "Go ahead, Justin. I'm sorry I ruined your party." Justin rushed past her toward the bathroom.

"Just like old times, Claire. Get yourself a fork and gear up for act two."

Claire slunk down into a chair at the table. "Brian, I've left Peter."

"Why?"

"He had an affair. He cheated on me. After all of the years I spent sleeping in the same bed with that man. I'm so humiliated." She began to weep loudly.

Maura tried to comfort Claire. "Men are pigs."

"Who are you?" Claire asked.

Justin returned from the bathroom and introduced Claire to his friend. "This is my friend Maura."

Brian started to gather the dirty plates. "Men are pigs, Justin. Let's go lick the plates clean and pee in the sink."

Justin cleared the rest of the plates from the table. Maura put her arm around Claire and tried to get her to talk.

"What'd I miss?" Justin whispered to Brian while they cleaned up.

Brian told him what Claire had said. "Why'd she have to come here?"

"Where else does she have to go, Brian? I bet she doesn't have too many friends, not with that personality."

"You'd be right. For as long as I can remember she's been a carbon copy of my mother."

"They were really close. I feel kind of bad for her, Brian."

"That makes one of you. There are things I find a little hard to forget, Justin. Like being mistakenly thrown in jail for molesting her kid. She never apologized for the things she said to me."

"Maybe Maura can get her to talk." Brian put both of his arms around Justin. Reluctantly, he let Justin pull him back to the table.

"She's exhausted," Maura told them. "Where's she going to sleep, guys?"

"On the train home," Brian suggested.

"I think that sofa pulls out into a bed,." Justin said. "She can sleep there." Maura helped Justin make up the bed. Claire lay down on it and fell asleep almost immediately.

"I guess I better go," said Maura. Thanks for an interesting Thanksgiving. Call me if you need me." She kissed them both on the cheek and left. Brian put his arms around Justin and hugged him. They kissed once and Claire started to snore.

"How is Brian's sister?" Maura asked when she phoned Justin the next day.

"She woke up at noon just like he said. And she's eaten about a gallon of ice cream. She hasn't said a word to either one of us."

"I'm coming over, on my way to work. Eating ice cream all day is the worst thing she can do. She'll gain a ton and then she'll be even more depressed."

When Maura arrived, Brian answered the door. He stared at her for a moment before he realized who she was. "Are you some kind of spy or something? You look different every time I see you."

"Fuck off. This is my business attire." Her long brown hair was pulled back in a tight braid. She wore a white workout suit which was very flattering on her firm young body.

"You look hot!" Justin exclaimed. "Is this the real you?"

"I told you that I work in a gym. What did you think I'd wear to work?"

"Hello Laura." Claire yawned as she breezed passed Maura. She was wearing a baggy T-shirt and sweat pants.

"Oh, no, honey. Put that ice cream down. You're coming with me."

"I'm taking a nap, girly. I'm not up to jogging."

"If you don't get up off your fat ass and come with me now, you'll be shopping for plus sizes. You've got a beautiful face and gorgeous eyes. If you come with me to the gym, I'll give you a free facial. Then we can write up a diet and exercise routine."

"Who are you again?"

"Maura, I'm a personal trainer and a friend of Justin's. Come on, I'm going to be late for work."

Brian and Justin watched in astonishment as Claire followed Maura out the door. "Fuck me! My sister's going to a gym. I never thought I live to see this day, Justin. Maura must have magical powers."

"I think it was the facial that got her. Nobody can resist a free facial. Hey, maybe I should make Maura a new Rage character."

Claire had been staying with them for more than two weeks and still had not spoken a word about her husband or her children. Peter had called several times but she had refused to speak with him. Finally, Brian asked her what her plans were. "Claire, it's almost Christmas. Justin and I are flying to Pittsburgh in a few days. After that, we're going to California for a month. Should I get you a plane ticket back to Pittsburgh?"

"I'm never going back to Pittsburgh."

"What about your kids? It's Christmas."

"My kids don't even notice that I'm gone. They haven't called me once."

"The phone works both ways. You're the one that left. Do they know why? Maybe they think you're mad at them."

"What am I going to say? I left because your father can't keep his dick in his pants?"

"Jesus Christ, Claire! I talked to him. He said it was one time. He got drunk one night with his friends and he found himself in a woman's bed. It's not like he planned it or anything."

"Stop it, Brian. Sex means nothing to you. You put your dick up some stranger's ass then come home and fuck Justin. I bet you don't even wash it first. How can you compare what you have to a real marriage?"

Her comments had made him angry. "What do you know about me, Claire? Yes, I fucked around a lot when I was younger. But I never promised Justin anything then. Once I asked him to marry me, all of that changed. I know what marriage is, sis. And I'm not a pig!"

"I guess you're right. I don't even know my own brother." Claire put her hand on Brian's hand. "I remember the day you were born. I didn't hate you at first. Sometimes I would go in your room and talk to you, and you'd smile at me."

Everyone noticed how beautiful you were. 'He should have been a girl with those eye lashes, blah, blah, blah.' After awhile I saw it too. I was the ugly duckling, and you were the handsome prince. Mom adored you and daddy was so proud to have a son. You were perfect. I was the whiny little brat that got them trapped into marriage in the first place. I took it out on you all of your life. I missed a lot, not having my brother around."

"I never thought you were ugly. In fact, I always thought we looked alike."

"It works for you. But not for me. Brian. I'm fat, ugly and not too pleasant to be with. I've never been with another man besides my husband and nobody will ever love me."

"If Peter didn't love you, he wouldn't be calling here every day."

"He probably wants to know how to work the washing machine."

"He did mention that. But he also wanted to know when you were coming home. And I'd like to know too. I think it's best if you go back to Pittsburgh with me and Justin. You can try to fix your marriage. If that doesn't work, you can always come back here."

Justin and Maura came in the door carrying bags from the food store. "Hey, Claire, they had that mandarin orange sparkling water on sale at the Q-Mart. We got you a six pack."

"Great," Claire said unenthusiastically.

"Claire, you've lost almost ten pounds in two weeks," Maura tried to encourage her. "You're doing great. I decided it's time for a treat."

"Häagen-Dazs?"

"Shopping!"

"Do you really think so?" Claire asked.

"Yeah, I bet you're down a whole size. Come on, we'll go to Macy's."

"Wait a minute," Brian interjected. "Claire, I need an answer now. Justin and I are leaving. So you can't stay here."

"Is that a threat?"

"It's a reality check, Claire. You need to get your act together."

"I'm not ready, Brian."

"She's not ready, Mr. Kinney," Maura repeated.

"Shut the fuck up," Brian glared at Maura.

"Don't tell my friend to shut up," Claire chimed in.

"She can crash at my place," Maura offered.

"Oh, fuck!" Brian threw his hands in the air.

"Fine. Let's go shopping, Maura. Have a Merry Christmas, little brother."

Justin hadn't said a word during the confrontation between Brian and his sister. He continued to put away the groceries. Brian would talk to him when he was ready, he knew. It was best for him to stay out of it.

Brian went to the kitchen area to help Justin. "If I let her stay here indefinitely, she'd never leave. I had to draw the line."

"You did the right thing. If she's going to stay here, she'll have to find a job. It won't be easy. She'll realize what she had in Pittsburgh wasn't so bad. And I do think that she'll miss her kids. I bet she goes back home before Christmas."

A few days before Christmas, Brian and Justin started packing. Claire still had not contacted Peter or her children. The day before they were scheduled to leave, Justin went to see Maura. Claire was not at the apartment, and Maura told him that she was actually out looking for a job.

"I guess she's really serious."

"She's serious. And stubborn as hell."

"That must be a genetic trait," Justin said. "Maura, why are you doing this? Claire is nothing to you."

"It's just my nature. I see someone as pathetic as Claire and I want to fix her. She's not so bad. Give her some time, Justin. Once she gets her act together she'll be able to make a decision about her life. And remember that it's HER life. Brian can't tell her what's best for her. There are things that men, even gay men, don't know about women."

The next day their flight landed in Pittsburgh. They were greeted at the airport by Justin's family. He was a little surprised that his father was there with his mother, Molly and Lucas. They all piled into Craig's new van for the trip into town.

"Mom you look terrific. I love your new hairdo."

"It's a wig. I wanted to try a different color. Brian had suggested red, but I thought strawberry blonde would suit me better."

"Did your hair fall out?" Justin asked. He had kept up with the progress his mother had made with her treatments over the telephone. She had never mentioned the hair loss. It took him a little by surprise.

"Not all of it. But I feel more comfortable wearing the wig in public. The main thing is that I'm feeling fine right now. I'm making a traditional turkey dinner for Christmas."

Later that night, Craig dropped Brian and Justin off at their motel. They planned to meet up with Michael and the guys at Babylon.

"Brian, she looks thin, doesn't she? And her hair. . . "

"Yeah, but you knew that. She said that she's feeling okay."

"It's one thing hearing it on the phone, but another actually seeing her. Brian, maybe she's sicker than she's letting on."

Brian put his arms around Justin. "You're just not used to seeing her like this. Give her some time. If you're not convinced she's doing okay, I'll cancel my trip and we can stay here."

"You're right. Maybe I'm overreacting. But to listen to her talk on the phone, I never thought I would see that big of a difference in her appearance."

"Do you want me to ask her? She'll just lie to you."

"Yeah, you do have a way with her."

"Even if the chemo is rough on her, she seems happy. It looks like maybe your dad has been taking good care of her."

"He better be!" Justin smiled at his own reaction. "Maybe he's changed. For her sake, I hope so."

Babylon never changed. It was fun to revisit their playground from the past. Brian and Justin danced together as they always had, bodies pressed together, gazing lovingly into each others' eyes.

On Christmas morning, they went to Lindsay and Mel's for breakfast. Gus was overwhelmed by the gifts and spent the morning playing with the wrapping paper and boxes.

Lindsay dropped them off at Justin's mother's house in the afternoon. Justin was pleased that his family was together for Christmas. Craig was amiable, even to Brian. Molly chattered on a mile a minute about school. She had decided against going to St. James, and instead attended public school. When her father protested her decision, she reminded him that her brother was almost killed because of the attitude of the bigoted teachers and administration at St. James. She could never go to a school where they allowed creeps like Chris Hobbs to terrorize other students because they were different.

Craig brought Lucas up to Molly's room to put him down for a nap. Molly and Justin cleared the table, leaving Brian and Jennifer alone in the living room.

"I told Justin I would ask you this. Are you sure you're okay? He'd ask you himself, but if you weren't okay, you'd lie to him."

"The truth . . . chemo sucks. Some days I'm so tired I don't even want to get out of bed. I have no appetite, and most foods have lost their taste. But the doctors are pleased with my progress. I am going to beat this thing."

"Is 'Dad' behaving himself?"

Jennifer smiled shyly. "Craig's a different man, Brian. He still would rather that Justin was going to Dartmouth and dating women instead of going to art school and living with you in New York. But he is proud of him."

"Justin's happy."

"I can see that Justin's happy. I can also see that he's worried about me. So Brian this time I want you to do me a favor. I want you to convince him that everything is going to work out. Can you do that for me?"

"I will, but only because I believe it."

"If you'll excuse me, I think I'm going to go upstairs and lie down for a while. Molly has something special planned for dessert, so don't you dare leave."

Brian picked up the remote and switched on the TV. "We're not going anywhere, Mom."

Justin came in from the kitchen and sat down next to Brian on the couch. "Did you ask her?" he whispered to Brian.

"Yeah, everything is going to work out." Brian ran his hand through Justin's hair and kissed him tenderly. "I promise."

As Justin kissed Brian back, he noticed out of the corner of his eye that his father had come down the stairs and was watching them. Justin instinctively pushed Brian away.

"Sorry," Craig said sheepishly. "I was going to turn on the game. If that's okay with Brian."

"Knock yourself out." Brian handed him the remote and stood up. "I'm going to take a walk."

"I'll go with you." Justin took Brian's hand and looked at his father defiantly. "What are you looking at?"

Craig merely said, "You're standing in front of the television, son. Either go for your walk, or sit down."

"Oh, sorry." They left Craig alone, watching TV. Both Brian and Justin were glad to get out of the house for a little while. They strolled around the neighborhood for about an hour. When they returned, the house was quiet. Justin went upstairs and saw Molly in her room playing with Lucas. "What's going on? Where's Mom and Dad?"

"Mom wasn't feeling well. She had to throw up. It's okay, Justin, she gets sick sometimes. Daddy's with her."

Justin walked slowly down the hall to his mother's bedroom. The door was ajar. He could see his father sitting on the edge of the bed holding her hand. Justin never remembered a time when his father had been affectionate toward his mother. As he smoothed her thinning hair he kissed her forehead. They spoke in soft whispers to each other. Feeling he was intruding on a private moment, Justin slowly backed away and went downstairs. He found Brian outside, smoking.

"Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, you were right. Everything will work out. " Justin slipped under Brian's arm. "I love you, Brian."

"Me too, baby."

Jennifer came downstairs leaning heavily on Craig's arm. "Molly, why don't you serve dessert?"

Justin and Brian were sitting on the floor playing with Lucas and his new toy trucks. Jennifer managed to eat a few bites of Molly's carrot cake. "Honey, this is very good."

"This cake is awesome," Brian agreed. "Justin, get the recipe."

"It's about a million calories a bite, Brian."

"You have your very own personal trainer, Justin, what are you worried about?"

"You have a trainer, Justin?" Craig asked.

"Not, really. She's a friend of mine. She's helping Brian's sister to lose some weight."

"Your sister's in New York, Brian? I thought she and her family lived in Pittsburgh."

"She separated from her husband and showed up on our doorstep on Thanksgiving day," Justin blurted out.

"It's temporary. She's probably gone home already." Brian changed the subject. "Justin, we have an early flight tomorrow. I have some calls to make when we get back to the motel."

"Bill's in charge of the New York office while Brian's in L.A. It makes him nervous."

"The man does tend to let things slide."

Brian went outside for another cigarette while Justin packed up the gifts they had gotten from his parents. He kissed his mother good night and she went up to bed. The phone rang and Molly kissed Justin on the cheek before she went to answer it. Craig was playing on the floor with Lucas.

"Dad, Can you drive us back to the motel?"

"Sure. Let me bring Lucas up to Molly."

"Dad, thanks."

"It's no trouble, Justin."

"I mean for what you're doing for Mom. You really care about her, don't you?"

"I always have. I just never realized how much."

"We're still kind of a family. That makes me feel good."

"Me too."

"I'll get Brian."

"I'll bring Lucas upstairs and meet you outside."

Justin looked at Lucas and the baby reached out his arms. Justin kissed Lucas on the cheek. Then impulsively he did the same to Craig. "I love you, Dad."

"Me too, son."

The next few weeks flew by. It was nice to spend time in California soaking up the sunshine while New York suffered snowstorms and cold weather. When his business in L.A. was completed, Brian decided to take a week off, just for fun. They spent long lazy days on the beach relaxing, and warm California evenings eating, shopping and fucking. It was the perfect vacation. Their passion for each other was renewed with every moment they spent together.

The day they arrived back in New York, it snowed. The taxi ride from the airport was slow and nerve-wracking. Cars were sliding into each other at every turn. Brian tipped the driver generously when they arrived at their hotel in one piece. The only thing on his mind now was getting Justin into bed. He wanted Justin so badly he almost stopped the elevator between floors. Justin laughed and pushed him away. "Can't you wait two minutes?"

"No!" Brian insisted. "I can't." Luckily the elevator doors opened at that moment. They gathered the luggage and Brian opened the door to their suite with his key. He took both their suitcases and put them inside. Justin started to walk forward, but Brian stopped him. "No, wait a minute." He lifted Justin into his arms and carried him inside. Justin giggled like a little boy.

The time they had spent together in California had brought them even closer than they had been before they left. Brian never thought it possible to fall in love with the same man over and over again. But every day he loved Justin more. And he wanted to make sure that Justin knew what he was feeling. He kissed him passionately and headed for the bedroom with Justin still in his arms. He kicked the bedroom door with his knee and it opened wide, giving them both a shock.

Claire was in their bed having sex with a strange man. When she saw them, she screamed and covered herself with the quilt. The man jumped up and grabbed his clothing from a chair by the bed. He muttered apologies on his way out the door. Justin squirmed out of Brian's arms and managed to get out of the line of fire before Brian exploded at Claire.

"Claire, what the fuck are you doing?" he yelled.

"Getting even!" she screamed back. "Getting what I missed out on!" .

"And you call me a pig! Wouldn't Mother be proud?" Brian paced back and forth at the foot of the bed, avoiding looking at his sister.

"You couldn't possibly understand what I'm going through, Brian. Don't you dare judge me."

"I'll leave that to your husband. You're going home, Claire."

"No! I have a right to live my life, Brian."

"Is this what you want? A different man in your bed every night? Was he good? Did you even know his name?"

"He told me, I forgot. I don't know if he was good. He was better than the guy last night."

"There were more?! What about Peter? How do you think it would make him feel if he knew his wife was fucking her brains out with different men every night?"

"He wouldn't care. I'm just a fixture in that house. Do you know that he's never once said that he loved me? He just fucks me."

"You're a married woman, Claire. You're acting like a slut. What about protection?"

"I know what a condom is, Brian."

"And what if it breaks? What if you get pregnant or pick up some nasty disease? Not even Peter would want you then."

"Brian, you fucked every gay man in Pittsburgh. What about you? Did you ever think about condoms breaking?"

"I had nothing to lose."

"What about Justin? You could have gotten him sick, or worse. What if you'd lost him?"

"I'm not having this conversation. Get dressed and get the hell out of my life." Brian stormed out of the room leaving Justin, who had been cowering in the corner, alone with Claire.

"You shouldn't have said that to him." Justin moved toward the bed. He handed Claire the articles of clothing that were strewn on the floor. "Brian was always careful with me . . . always. And he taught me how to take care of myself."

"Justin, do you know what you sound like? A Stepford Wife. 'My Brian is perfect, my Brian can do no wrong, my Brian loves me.' What if one day you wake up and see that you've wasted your life?."

"You're the one wasting your life. I never said Brian was perfect, but I know that he loves me."

"You're lucky, then." Claire softened her tone with Justin. She struggled to put on her bra while still covered by the quilt. "A woman always lives with the possibility that the man she shares her life with is cheating on her."

"I'd know if Brian was cheating on me."

"How? Would you smell it on him?"

"He'd tell me. Brian has never lied to me. We talk about things and we have rules that we live by."

"Peter never talks to me about anything that doesn't involve the kids or money."

"Do you talk to him? You should tell him how you feel. I bet he'd at least listen."

Claire began to cry again. "I miss him. I know it's stupid, but he was my partner for 15 years."

"Then why don't you call him?"

"It's been over two months. I ran out on our children, I made such a mess of his life and mine."

"I think you know what you have to do. I bet he'll be really glad to talk to you. He can't be such a bad guy. He stuck by you when you got pregnant. He married you. A lot of guys would have disappeared. I bet he does love you. It's not his fault he can't say it. Some people have a hard time finding the words."

Justin left the room to let Claire finish dressing. Brian was sitting on the couch with his legs stretched out under the coffee table. He had a glass of Jim Beam in his hand. Justin sat next to him and stroked his hair. "I think she's going to call Peter. Maybe they'll work things out."

"My feet are stuck again. Justin, I hate this coffee table. I hate this hotel room. First thing tomorrow I'm going to call a realtor and get us our own place. Then we can send for our fuckable furniture."

"That's a great idea, Brian."

Brian reached over and put his arm around Justin. "Justin, how am I doing?"

"You've built up an empire in a few short months. You've achieved all of your goals. I'm really proud of you." Justin took the glass out Brian's hand and took a sip.

"I meant how am I doing as a husband? Are you getting what you need?"

"About five times a day."

"Marriage is more than just sex. Do you know how I feel about you? I know I don't talk about it. I find it awkward. Saying I love you isn't enough for me. How do I know I'm getting the message across?"

Justin put the glass down and grabbed Brian's face with both hands. "Look at me, Brian. Can you see how I feel about you by the look on my face?"

Brian smiled shyly. "You adore me."

"That's what I see when I look at you."

They kissed tenderly for a long time. Claire silently walked through the room and out the front door.

Early Monday morning Justin went to his first class of the new semester and Brian went to the office to meet with Bill. As they went over budgets and their marketing plan Brian noticed that Bill seemed a bit distracted.

"You're right on top of things, boss man. You must have actually shown up at the office a few times since I left for L.A."

"Fucking boring job, but someone's got to do it. You left things very organized. I just went through the motions and followed your notes."

"How are things at beach boy central? I haven't noticed any ear-splitting music coming from your place. Is your angel boy still in residence?"

"So far. But I don't think he'll stay."

"I don't see any battle scars."

"We're not fighting. Something's not right. I don't know what it is. He seems distant. The other day he caught me checking out the room service waiter. He didn't even flinch."

"That new waiter is hot."

"Would you trade Justin for him?"

"Of course not. That waiter might be cute and I'd fuck him in a minute. But no piece of boy ass is worth risking what I have with Justin."

"I'm starting to feel the same way. Only I don't think Jamie is interested in spending his young life in New York with an aging ex-playboy."

Bill was sad and that made Brian worry. He knew what would happen once the kid took off. Bill would go into pain management mode. This was not good for the business and that was not good for Brian Kinney.

Justin arrived at the network offices around one o'clock. He looked around for Brian but found out that he was in a lunch meeting with Bill and some of the other executives. Jamie was sitting at his desk with a blank expression on his face.

"Hey, stranger," Jamie greeted him. "How was L.A.?"

"Amazing. We got to take a vacation, finally. What did you and Bill do for the holidays?"

"Nothing much. On Christmas day we went uptown to ice skate. Bill was great at it, but I twisted my ankle and fell on my ass."

"You seem down. Is something wrong?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to tell me what it is or do I have to wait for Brian to drag it out of Bill?"

"Does Bill talk to Brian about me?"

"Sometimes. He told us all about you before you showed up. I think that he doesn't have too many friends. He bottles things up like Brian used to. It's not a bad thing for Bill to have Brian for a friend."

"You're right. Bill and Brian have a lot in common. But I don't think that Brian likes me very much."

"Don't take it personally. It takes a lot for Brian to trust someone. He feels threatened by the influence you have over Bill."

"Ha! Me having power over Bill! Now, that's priceless. Bill does what he wants when he wants. He always has and always will."

"Has he done something . . . wrong?"

"Like cheating? Nope. But, it's coming."

"Don't you think that Bill's changed at all? He seems to really love you a lot."

"He does love me, he always has. But that didn't stop him before, why should now be any different?"

"He had to live without you for years. He never got over you leaving him, you know."

"I had no choice. Did he ever tell you how we met?"

"No."

"I was fifteen and living on the streets. I could tell that he wasn't the kind of guy who had to pay for it. In fact I don't think he really knew I was a hustler until it was all over and I asked him for the money."

"Did he pay you?"

"He asked me to move in with him. Just like that. I could have been a psycho killer for all he knew. I guess that's what Brian thinks of me. And he may be right. I never wanted to hurt Bill. But when you love someone so much it's hard to see them with another man. I couldn't help myself."

"People have different ways of showing love."

"I think Bill understood why I was violent. He seemed to like it. But I hated treating him like that. I was afraid I would really hurt him. I hated myself. I had to get away from him."

"Do you think it could happen again?"

"No, it won't. Because I'm not going to let myself love him. It's been great seeing him. But now I'm falling in love all over again. So I have to leave. It's for the best."

"You're not being fair to Bill. You should talk to him."

"And tell him what, that I'm leaving him to save his life? He'd fucking laugh at me. Or he make promises that he could never keep. No, it's an impossible situation, Justin."

Justin was troubled by Jamie's revelation . He knew that Bill would be devastated if Jamie left. And that would affect Brian. He and Jamie managed to get some work done on their latest Rage project. When Brian and Bill returned to the office, it was almost five. When Bill and Jamie left for the day, Justin went right to Brian's office.

"You're not going to like this, Brian."

"I know . . . the empire's about to crumble."

"Did Bill say anything to you?"

"He'll get over it, Justin."

"No, he won't. He still hasn't gotten over the last time Jamie left."

"Is he definitely leaving?"

"He said he was. He's afraid he's getting too close."

"Isn't that what you told me when I asked you to move in with me?"

"I wasn't going to leave you. I was just waiting for you to grow up. And you did."

"And Bill hasn't? It seems to me like he's trying. He didn't fuck the waiter, there's nothing wrong with looking."

"What waiter?"

"Never mind. So when's he going?"

"He didn't say."

"We can't interfere, Justin. You know they have to work it out for themselves. . And live with the consequences."

"Not even a little?"

"No. They'll have to be the ones to decide if what they have is worth fighting for."

"I guess you're right. Let's go home. I think you need some special treatment tonight. Your first day back at work must have been very stressful."

The next day Justin stopped by at the gym where Maura worked. She had talked him into signing up for a trial membership.

"Justin, I don't understand it. You eat like a truck driver, make that ten truck drivers, but you never gain an ounce."

"I have a gifted metabolism."

"That's not going to last forever. One day your perfect ass is going to pork up and you're going to be the size of a Sumo wrestler. What would Brian do then?"

"Those Sumo wrestlers wear thongs, right? Brian would love it."

"Well, what kind of a friend would I be if I let you outgrow your chicken appeal? At the very least, we can start to tone your body."

"What's wrong with my body?"

"No pecs, no abs. You're pathetic! I bet Brian would love it if you beefed up a little."

"I don't know."

"Come on, baby. Do it for Brian." As Maura began the task of whipping Justin into shape, Claire arrived at the gym.

"Hi Claire. What's up?" Justin asked.

"Peter is coming to town to talk. He's coming here to New York City just to see me. And I have to tell him what I did. I'm a nervous wreck. I need the treadmill."

Claire found an empty treadmill and started running. Justin turned to Maura. "How do you think he'll react to the new Claire?"

"She looks fantastic, doesn't she? She's lost almost 25 lbs. And she's hooked on the gym. He's got to want her back."

"You know what I think? I think that he loved her the way she was and probably won't even notice that she's skinny. Because if you love someone, you only see them as beautiful."

"Justin, forget about it. You're not getting off the hook with that bullshit line. Now get on that weight machine and let's work on your legs."

"I have to go back to class soon."

"I know. Now keep pumping."

Brian arrived home and found Justin passed out in front of the television. He switched off the cartoon and kissed Justin on the forehead. "Wake up sleeping beauty."

"What time is it?" Justin asked as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

Brian tried to pull him up so he could sit next to him. "Ouch! Brian, don't pull on my arm like that!"

"Did it fall asleep?"

"No. I spent an hour at the gym with my very own personal torturer."

"Oh, really? Sounds hot."

"Maura decided that you're not happy with my body. She wants me to build up pecs and abs." Justin raised his shirt up to expose his tummy. "What do you think? Do I really need abs?"

"I think you're perfect. But abs would be hot underneath that leather outfit."

"Hmmm. Maybe you're right. I'll get some then. How was your day?"

"Busy. Bill's useless. He just sits at his desk and stares into space."

"I bet he's really depressed. Maura said the band is moving to Miami. Donny's uncle has a recording studio there. They're going to burn a CD."

"When are they leaving?"

"At the end of the week."

"Maybe we should make some plans to take Bill out on the weekend."

"Good idea. Oh, I almost forgot, I saw Claire at the gym. Peter is coming to New York to see her."

"Thank God. Maybe life will go back to normal once she's gone."

"Do you think he'll forgive her?"

"She's forgiven him."

"They should make rules, like we have. And they need to talk about stuff other than kids and money."

"What are you, a public service announcement?"

Justin chuckled. "You remember that?"

"I remember everything about you."

"Even the bad stuff?"

"Especially the bad stuff. Because we don't ever want to repeat OUR mistakes, right?"

"Right. That's a good rule."

Brian checked his email before leaving for work on Friday morning. He noticed the date, it was Friday the thirteenth. Jamie had left for Miami the night before. Brian figured it was the beginning of the end. Bill would sink into his deep hole of depression and let the business go to ruin. Brian would be powerless to stop it. He was not looking forward to going into the office that day.

Justin got out of the shower and wrapped a towel around his waist. Today would be tough. He had one class in the morning and then he would go to the office to try to help Brian deal with Bill.

"Hey," Justin dropped the towel from his waist. "Do you see anything?"

Brian laughed. "Don't worry, honey. It must have been the cold water."

"I'm not talking about that. My abs, do you see anything? I'm been to the gym everyday this week."

Brian got closer and pretended to study Justin's tummy. "My God, it's alive!" He began to tickle him. Justin tried to push him away but he wound up falling over the arm of the sofa. Brian straddled Justin's nude body and began to kiss him passionately. Just then, the door bell rang.

"Who the fuck?" Brian uttered. "It must be Bill."

Before Justin could get his towel from the floor, Brian opened the door. Claire stood in the doorway.

"Brian!" Claire exclaimed. "Justin's naked!"

"Oh, sorry. I thought you were Bill. What do you want?" They hadn't spoken since the night he discovered Claire in his bed with her lover.

Justin covered himself up with the towel and went into the bedroom to get dressed.

Claire came into the room and sat on the sofa. "I'm going back home with Peter. I thought you'd want to know."

Brian sat down on a chair opposite the sofa. "Did you tell him everything?"

"Yes, everything. I told him what I did. He wasn't happy about it. But he said he understood why I did it. I told him all the things that had been building up inside of me over the years. He was very sweet. We made love after that."

"Spare me the details."

"I never realized how much he really does love me. Having the kids around all the time does put a damper on your sex life. We never even take off all of our clothes."

"Again, too many details."

"I took Justin's advice. We made up some rules. And we promised each other we would talk, every day."

"Justin's a genius at relationships."

Justin had finished dressing and had come over to sit with them. "That's me, genius."

"I wanted to thank you, Brian. You too, Justin."

"I didn't do anything," Brian squirmed in his chair. Justin sat on the arm of the chair and put his arm around Brian.

"You forced me to look at what I had, instead of what I didn't have. You were there when I needed you."

"What are brothers for?"

"I guess I finally found out." Claire got up to leave. Justin and Brian walked her to the door.

"So you'll call me if someone in the family dies."

"Sure, once a year or so I'll call." Claire kissed them both on the cheek. Before she left she turned to Justin. "Nice ah, . . . abs, Justin."

He smiled on of his sunshine smiles, "Thanks."

When Brian arrived at the office he went directly to Bill's office. He was surprised to see Bill at his desk going through the drawers. "You're here?"

"Not for long."

"You're taking a week off to mourn. I wouldn't blame you. I can take care of things for awhile."

Bill laughed. "No fucking way! Brian Kinney, come over here."

Brian walked over to the desk and faced him. "Let's see," Bill said. How can I put this? I've made a decision. I'm moving to Miami, permanently."

"What! You can't run this business from Miami! What about your dream? New York City! What about me? You uprooted me and Justin to come here. What am I supposed to do?"

"You are going to run the business. You're the boss man now."

"You're giving it all up? Your business? Your dreams?"

"Sometimes you have to give up everything for what you believe in. I believe I can be happy with Jamie. None of this means anything without him, Brian. Surely you, of all people, can understand that concept."

"I don't know what to say!"

"Wish me luck."

"Good luck."

When Justin arrived at the office, he went directly to Brian's office. Except for the furniture it was empty. Confused, he went off in search of his husband. He found him in the executive suite sitting in Bill's leather chair with his feet up on the huge mahogany executive desk.

"What are you doing?"

"Fantasizing about fucking you on my new desk."

"Bill gave you his desk?"

"Bill gave me his job. He's gone to Miami to fight for his man."

"And he left you in charge, of everything?"

"Yup! All of it! I'm scared to death. I don't have a clue what to do first."

"Fucking me on the desk sounds like a good place to start." Justin came around to the other side of the desk and sat on Brian's lap. "I'm so proud of you."

"I didn't do anything. I got lucky. Which is really ironic because I've always hated Friday the thirteenth."

"If it wasn't for you Bill wouldn't have been able to just leave. You're an amazing man, Brian Kinney. I so love you."

"I don't understand it. I used to be the one always fucking things up. Now, I'm the dependable one. First my sister goes back to her husband and now Bill goes off in search of what I have. With no angst in our perfect life, am I going to get boring?"

"You could never be boring. I bet within five minutes of you fucking me on this desk we get some new angst to deal with."

"Like what, splinters?"

"Anything could happen. There'll be another knock on the door or a phone call and maybe life will be a little less than perfect for a while. But it doesn't matter as long as we have each other."

They christened Bill's desk and within five minutes, Justin's cell phone rang. He picked it up. "Hello."

"Justin, I've got to talk to you," Daphne said excitedly. "You're never going to believe this."

The Thespian

Justin could tell that Daphne was not herself. In fact, he thought that she might be crying. "What's wrong?"

"I can't tell you over the phone. Can you come and get me?"

"Get you? What about Nathan?" Justin inquired.

"It's over." Daphne's response was barely audible.

"I'm on my way, Daphne." Justin didn't press for further explanations. After getting directions, he hung up the phone and turned to Brian.

"I'm going to get Daphne and bring her back here. Can I use your car?"

"You mean OUR car. Sure, you can take it. But what about Norman?"

"Nathan. Something happened, Brian. She wouldn't go into detail but it must have been something really bad for Daphne to give up on her marriage."

"They probably just had a lover's spat and she needs a shoulder to cry on. Be careful driving in the rain," Brian kissed him lovingly and then turned back to the pile of work he'd brought home from the office.

Daphne answered the door with her coat on and a suitcase in her hand. "Hi. Let's go."

"But aren't you going to tell me what hap - - - -."

"In the car. I want to get out of here, Justin. NOW!"

Knowing it was useless to argue, Justin took her suitcase and carried it to the car. They rode in silence for what seemed like ages. Justin didn't want to push her. When she was ready, she'd talk. Finally, Daphne blurted out, "Nathan is gay!"

Justin nearly lost control of the car. "What! How do you . . . ?"

"I just found out I never saw it coming. I can't believe I was so stupid. I was his beard. He needed a wife to get a promotion at his company ."

"But why did he . . . ?"

"Tell me? . . . Because I caught him, that's why."

"Daph, are you ever going to let me finish a sentence?" He glanced over at his friend who was staring out the window.

"Sorry." She gripped his upper arm. "Let's get something to eat and I'll tell you everything."

They pulled off the highway and into the parking lot of a roadside diner. Putting a protective arm around Daphne, Justin led her to a booth near the door.

"Justin, you were so right. When you left Ethan and went back to Brian, you said that what Brian gave you was worth a million times more than anything that Ethan had to offer. Brian always told the truth. There's nothing worse than finding out that your entire life is built on a lie Justin, you've known all your life that you were gay, right?"

"Yes."

"So he must have known from the beginning that he would never be able to be a real husband to me. Why did he lie?"

"Maybe he was lying to himself, too. I'm sure he didn't plan on hurting you. He probably thought he could change. What did he say when he told you?"

"What you just said. He wanted to be a good husband to me. But then his brother started to visit and he would go out to bars with him. I guess I should have known what goes on in gay bars."

"How did you catch him?"

For the first time, Daphne smiled. "I went to that fucking gay dance club. I found him on the dance floor kissing some trick. I stomped on his foot and threw my ring in his face."

Justin tried not to laugh. "That sounds like something I would have done."

"I learned from the master."

"Tough lesson. But it will only make you stronger."

"I don't feel strong. I feel stupid, sad and scared to death. Justin, I lost everything! I have no money, no job, no husband and no prospects. I don't know what I'm going to do!"

"You haven't lost everything. You still have me . . . and Brian, too."

"Thanks. That means a lot to me, it really does. But I don't think sleeping on your sofa is a realistic life plan."

"Let's just say it's your plan for tonight. We'll figure something out tomorrow."

After they ate their meal, Daphne appeared to be in better spirits. The remainder of the trip was uneventful. When they arrived at the hotel, it was nearly midnight and Brian was dozing on the sofa. Justin kissed him on the forehead to wake him.

Brian sat up and put his arm around Justin who had sat down next to him.

"Hey, Daphne. How was your trip? I guess I'm sleeping on your bed."

Daphne dropped her bag on a chair and blurted out, "Nathan is gay. I'm single again. Justin, where's your bathroom?"

Justin pointed her in the direction of the bathroom. While she was gone he quickly filled Brian in on the details as he knew them.

"That's rough. He never should have caved to the pressures at his job. He should have told them to fuck off."

"It's not lying if they make you lie." Justin quoted Brian's mantra.

"He never should have gotten Daphne involved."

"A lot of people do it, Brian. They pretend to be something they're not in order to protect their jobs."

"I don't know how they live with themselves. Don't they have any pride?"

"No, what they have is shame and fear. Not everyone is as lucky as we are. Nathan's company was run by a bunch of homophobes. No one at the company got promoted unless they were respectably married."

"There ought to be a law."

"There ought to be, but until there is one there will always be gays in the closet."

"What's Daphne going to do?"

Daphne returned to the room and answered Brian's question. "I was hoping to crash on your couch till I can get a job."

"Fine by me." Brian crinkled his brow. "One problem, we only have this place for a few more days. The realtor called today. Our condo will be ready by the weekend."

Justin smiled and hugged him. "That's great, Brian. Where is it?"

"Tribeca. It cost a fortune, but the area is really nice and the building is brand new."

"We'll make room for Daphne, won't we, Brian? Where would I have been if she hadn't been around after the Ethan disaster?"

"You would have been living at the loft a few months sooner."

"Hey, we needed that time apart and you know it."

Brian stood up and stretched. He turned to Daphne. "You're welcome to stay with us for as long as you want. It's going to be a little sparse in the furniture area. I bought us a new bed, but I can't get our stuff shipped for another few weeks ." He went into the bedroom to let Justin and Daphne have some time alone.

"It'll work out, Daph." Justin put a reassuring arm around his friend's shoulder. "I bet I can borrow some stuff from Maura."

"Who's Maura?"

"She's a friend of mine. You're going to love her. Maybe tomorrow you can meet her. I have an appointment at the gym."

Daphne grinned. "You . . . at a gym? Somehow that doesn't sound right."

"Yeah, I decided to tone up my body. I have to keep my man interested, don't I?"

"Maybe I should have tried that."

"Trust me, Daph. There's nothing you could have done differently. You're not the one who fucked up." After making up the sofa, Justin went to join Brian in the bedroom.

The next morning Daphne made breakfast for her hosts and then went into the bathroom to get dressed. When she came out of the bathroom Brian had already left for work. Justin was ready to leave for the gym.

"Grab some sweats and let's go."

"I don't know, Justin. I'm not feeling up to a workout."

"Remember how depressed I was when I crashed at your place? You dragged my ass out of bed and talked some sense into me. If it wasn't for you, I probably never would have gotten back with Brian."

"Justin, you are so full of shit. Nothing on the face of the earth could keep you away from Brian Kinney for long. You would have found your way back to him eventually."

"True. But you've always been there for me, Daph. Let me help you now."

Daphne grabbed some gym clothes and the two of them headed to the gym for Justin's training session with Maura. Daphne and Maura hit it off immediately. Daphne giggled as Maura put Justin through his paces on the weight machine.

"Fuck off, Daph. Why don't you go work out your frustrations on the punching bag over there?"

Daphne took his advice. It took a few minutes to get the hang of it, but once she pictured Nathan's face on the bag, she was unstoppable.

"Hey, leave some leather for the rest of us!" Maura had left Justin running on the treadmill.

Daphne chuckled. "I was picturing my ex's face on the bag."

"Everyone does that. Justin said you were looking for a job."

"Yeah, I'm scared to death. I'm never going to be able to afford an apartment in New York. Justin and Brian are great, but the sounds that come from that bedroom . . ."

"I can imagine. They're looking for a receptionist here at the gym. I'll introduce you to the manager. And don't worry about finding a place to stay. I've been looking for a roommate. It's not fancy, but it's clean and in a safe neighborhood."

Daphne was amazed. In one day she had gotten a new job, found an apartment in New York City and made a new friend. Things were looking up.

On Friday night Justin and Brian met up with Maura and Daphne at a neighborhood bar. After they ordered, Justin dragged Brian out on the small dance floor.

"Will you look at those two," Maura said with amusement. "They are so lucky. I don't know too many married people who paw each other on the dance floor the way they do. They are the perfect couple."

"They've had some rough times. They deserve to be happy."

"I want to hear it all. I love angst."

"Brian Kinney was such an asshole when Justin first hooked up with him. I hated him. He treated Justin like shit. He'd hang out in dance clubs all night long picking up tricks. Then he'd bring guys home for the two of them to fuck. It was disgusting."

"So what happened?"

"I guess Justin told you what happened at our prom."

"Yeah the poor kid got his skull cracked open by some asshole. You must have been so upset. I bet that Brian freaked out. He must have been devastated."

"If he was, he didn't show it. He never even came to visit Justin in the hospital. But we found out later that he was there, every night. He just never had the nerve to go into the room."

"I can see him doing that kind of thing. He's a strange man. But he's so devoted to Justin now. It's sweet, really."

"I know. It took Justin years to finally make Brian see the truth. They love each other."

Justin joined them at the table. "You guys want another beer?" When they told him yes, he signaled to Brian who was at the bar.

"What are you two talking about?"

"You and Brian and your perfect romance."

Justin nearly choked on a nacho he had stuffed in his mouth. "It wasn't always perfect, was it, Daph?"

"It wasn't perfect, but it was based on truth. That's the most important thing."

"Actually it was based on amazing sex. But truth is important, too."

Daphne punched his arm. "Why can't everyone be as honest as Brian Kinney?"

Brian returned from the bar carrying their drinks. "If you can't be honest, what's the point? You only fuck yourself."

"It's not so easy for some people." Maura said as she took a beer from the tray. "I went to high school with this gay guy. He got a job acting on a soap opera. The next thing I know I'm reading articles about all the girls he is dating. Some of my friends who knew him said that they make him drag woman out to parties for show. But aside from that he never leaves the house. I think if he ever got caught with a guy they would fire him."

"They can't fire him just for being gay, can they?" Justin asked thoughtfully.

"Maybe they wouldn't fire him for that, but you can bet that his character would be in a horrible accident shortly after. And his career would be over."

"That sucks." Justin was indignant.

"That's life in the real world, sonny boy." Brian responded.

"The powers that be in show business try to control everything," Maura explained. "Most actors have non-fraternization clauses in their contracts. That means they can't see their coworkers off the set."

"What if they become friends? They can't even hang out together? That borders on unconstitutional!"

"The actors read the contracts before they sign them." Brian defended. "It's not like anyone forces it on them. If they want to work, they sign. End of story."

"Do the actors on your cable shows have those clauses in their contracts?" Justin asked.

"I guess they do. I don't get involved with contracts."

"I heard a rumor about a hot actor on the detective show that's on your channel." Maura announced.

Daphne's curiosity was aroused. "What did you hear, Maura?"

"That he and one of his male co-stars are seen together constantly."

"It's just gossip," Brian interjected.

"So what if they're in love and want to be together?" Justin protested. "How is that anyone's business?"

"You're right, it's none of our business," Brian admonished him. "So why the fuck are we discussing it?"

"Hey, you do know something, don't you Brian?" Maura asked as she leaned forward in her chair.

"He's straight, okay?" Brian tried to put an end to the conversation. "Who knows? Maybe they're just friends. They signed a contract and they want to work. Passing gossip around could ruin their careers. So just drop it."

"You sure changed your tune fast, Mr. Kinney. One minute you detest liars and the next minute you're forcing one of your own to be one."

Brian squirmed in his seat. "Justin, don't you have school tomorrow? We better go."

Justin ignored him. "Maura has a point. The man should be free to make his own decisions about who he dates. Why should it make a difference to his fans or to anyone else?"

"It does. It's been researched. Once an actor reveals he's gay, people can't accept him in straight roles."

"Who did this research? Nobody ever asked me." Maura said. "An actor is always portraying something he's not. That's why they call it acting."

"It's bad for business. If the guy is gay and decides to come out publically the ratings would tank. We'd be forced to drop the show from the lineup. It's our highest rated show. What would YOU do?"

"His character would be the same. It's not like he killed someone or did something bad."

"The show must go on."

"Fuck the show!" Justin exclaimed. "If someone told me I couldn't be with you and do my job, I'd quit."

"And do what?" Brian asked.

"I don't know. Something where I wouldn't have to pretend to be something I'm not.."

"Forget it," Maura said suddenly. "Brian's right. It's none of our business. Let's go home, Daphne."

Brian was in a foul mood after Daphne and Maura left. Justin suspected he knew more about the situation with that actor than he let on. But it obviously wasn't something he could talk about so Justin decided it was time to change the subject. "We have a lot of packing to do tomorrow. I can't wait to see our new place."

"I can't wait to fuck you on our new bed."

"Let's go home and say a proper goodbye to our old bed."

Justin hadn't realized how much "stuff" he and Brian had accumulated while living in the hotel suite. Moving was going to be an ordeal. It would take them several trips with the car. Justin had never seen the building that Brian had picked out to be their new home. He was truly impressed when they pulled up in front of what appeared to be a townhouse.

"I feel like we're in the suburbs. This block is so different then the rest of the city. It reminds me of the street where my mother lives."

"I liked it the first time I saw it. We can be in the city but not live with the masses. It's a very quiet neighborhood."

"That's because we haven't moved in yet."

They spent the day unpacking. The furniture would not arrive from Pittsburgh until next week. Justin went out and shopped for dinner. He found a very nice market a few blocks away. He bought cold cuts, bread, coffee and a bottle of wine. When he got back home he found Brian sitting on the floor in living room. He had lit a fire in the fireplace.

"Our very own fireplace." Justin smiled as he started to prepared sandwiches. "This is really our very first home, isn't it?"

"What about the loft?"

"That was your home first. It was all decorated when I moved in. This place will reflect both of our tastes."

"You do what you want with the place. I bought the bed, that's the only thing I care about."

"What about your fuckable furniture?"

Brian smiled at the thought of fucking Justin in every conceivable position on their comfortable furniture. "That goes without saying." He pulled Justin to the floor and kissed him on the back of the neck. "I love your neck."

Justin giggled. "I love your neck, too. And a few other body parts are nice."

"There's something about kissing you on the neck that I love. Maybe it's the way your hair smells. It makes me horny."

"Breathing makes you horny, Brian." Justin grinned at him.

"Lucky for me you showed up. I've been sitting here breathing and thinking about kissing your neck. Come over here." Brian pushed Justin gently down onto the soft new carpet. They made love for the first time in their new home. The next day, they'd probably both have carpetburn, but it was worth it.

Daphne enjoyed her new job, which consisted mainly of greeting the members, collecting dues and answering the phones. It wasn't intellectually challenging, but it was enjoyable and besides, she needed the money. It definitely

wasn't what she had envisioned for herself when she graduated from St. James. She had been an English major in college and what she really wanted was to be a writer. For the time being, though, her dreams were on hold. Working at the gym with the public kept her busy and took her mind off her problems.

She discovered that she and Maura had a lot in common. They liked the same movies, had crushes on the same actors, and shared a passion for the theater. There were many small theaters downtown and they planned to hit them all. If you were resourceful, you could get discount tickets to many of the shows. Life in New York was exciting.

Maura joined Daphne at her desk at lunch time. "Let's take a walk. We can pick up a salad at the deli and eat it at the park."

Daphne was happy to be out in the fresh air with her new friend. They walked to the park and found an empty bench. "It's starting to get chilly," she commented.

"I don't mind the cold. I'd rather be outside than stuck in that stuffy, smelly gym at lunchtime."

"I don't mind it. In fact, I really like working there."

"So do I, I guess. But it's not really my life's dream."

Daphne asked, "What is your life's dream, Maura?"

"Theater. I want to work with the actors, make them look good. What about you? What's your life's dream?"

"A few weeks ago I would have told you being married to the man of my dreams. But what happened with Nathan made me think about what I really want for myself. I want to be a writer."

"Like books and stuff?"

"Maybe I could write a play. Then we could work together."

"I have an idea. I got word that they are having auditions for a new off, off Broadway play tonight. I have to go to a client's apartment for a personal session, so I won't be able to make it. Maybe you could go there and check it out. Get our foot in the door."

"You mean audition for a part in the play?"

"Why not? If you don't get the part maybe you could make some connections. I bet you could meet the producer or something and get us in. We can do makeup. I'll teach you."

"But I can't act!"

"You can read, can't you? And you are incredibly cute, in case you haven't noticed."

Daphne smiled. "I don't know if I can do this."

"What's the worst that can happen? You make a fool of yourself and they laugh you off the stage. You still have your day job."

Laughing, Daphne gave in. "Okay, I'll do it."

Justin's cellphone rang just as he was leaving his last class for the day. "Hey, Daph," he had recognized her number on his caller ID.

"Hey, what are you doing tonight?"

"Nothing. Brian had to fly to L.A. for a few days so I'm on my own. Do you want to come over and have dinner with me?"

"Sure, but there is something I want to do after that."

"Like what?"

"Like an adventure."

"Just like the good old days. I'll drop by the gym and pick you up on the way home."

Daphne was grateful that Justin was free. She didn't want to let on to Maura just how frightened she was. It was going to take her some time to get used to living in the city. The subway scared her to death. Justin arrived at the gym and together they traveled across town to his new apartment.

"Oh, Justin this is incredible. I love the cathedral ceiling and the fire place. That's so romantic."

"It'll be even nicer with furniture. We'll have to eat on the floor tonight."

"That's fine." Daphne took off her coat and hung it in the closet by the door.

"I've only got frozen dinners. I haven't had time to buy any kitchenware. Turkey or pasta?"

"Pasta. I have a whole bunch of kitchenware that I never even got to unpack."

"Have you spoken to Nathan?"

"Yes, the prick called. He wants me to come home. He said that he's sorry and that he wants to start over."

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him to fuck off. I'm getting an annulment."

"What did your parents say?"

Daphne diverted her eyes and said nothing.

"You didn't tell them, did you?"

"I can't, Justin! You know how they are."

"They can't blame you for what happened."

"I can't face them, Justin. The whole thing is so humiliating. They'll want me to come home. And I don't want to go home."

"I know what you mean. But, Daphne you can't lie to them forever. Call them and tell them the truth."

"I guess you're right."

Daphne went into the bedroom for some privacy while she spoke to her mother. Justin put the dinners in the oven and set up a box on the floor in front of the fire place. When the buzzer rang on the microwave Daphne emerged from the bedroom. She hugged Justin and then sat down on the floor without saying a word.

"Dinner's ready."

"You were right. I feel much better."

"What did she say?"

"Exactly what I thought she'd say. She wanted me to come home. I told her that I had found a job and that I was happy here in New York for now. I promised her that if things didn't work out here I would be on the first bus home."

"That wasn't so bad, was it?"

"Justin, my father wasn't home. When she tells him what happened he may just drive up here and drag my ass back to Pittsburgh."

"We'll worry about that when the time comes. You did nothing wrong. And you told them the truth. You should be proud of yourself."

"I am. Thanks to my friends. You, Brian and Maura. She's great, Justin. How did you ever hook up with her?"

Justin told her the story about Bill, Jamie and Maura while they ate their dinner. "The first thing she did was give me a facial. I swear she almost had me talked into putting on a dress. She's a little pushy, but I like her ."

Daphne burst out laughing. "Oh, Justin you always have a way of making me laugh. Maura is a little pushy, but she has a good heart. She's always coming up with exciting things to do."

She told Justin about the audition. "At first I wasn't sure I could do it. But as Maura pointed out, I've got nothing to lose. Will you go with me?"

"Sure. I'll try not to laugh. It'll be fun watching you sweat."

They took the subway for three stops and then walked a few blocks to the theater. There was a sign on the door to sign up on the sheet and to take a seat in the back of the theater. Daphne signed her name and they walked inside. They took a seat in the last row and watched at the other actor hopeful's auditioned. When it was Daphne's turn Justin grabbed her hand and told her to break a leg

"That would be just my luck." Daphne took a deep breath and approached the stage. She was handed a sheet of paper. After she answered some questions they asked her to begin. Justin was surprised at how good she was. As far as he knew Daphne had never had any training . They had been in a couple of plays together back in high school, but Justin had been too busy flirting with the stage crew to notice Daphne's talent.

When she was finished. Daphne was asked to read with another actor. Again she held her own. Justin was very proud of her.

The crowd had thinned and the auditions were almost over. Daphne still sat in the front of the theater talking to a man who Justin assumed was the director or producer. It was clear that Daphne had made some connection tonight and that was their goal. He noticed that the man was pointing at him and then Daphne waved her hand at him to join them.

"Is that guy in the back your boyfriend?" The producer had asked Daphne.

"No, he's my friend. He's just came along for moral support. Why?"

"He has a look. I just wondered if he was going to audition. We still need to cast the part of the youngest brother. Do you think he might want to try out?"

Justin made his way to the front of the theater. Daphne introduced him to Eddie. "Justin, this is the producer, Eddie Gatto. He wants to know if you'd read for them."

"Me?" Justin laughed. "I've never acted in my life."

"Yes, you have. You were in a couple of plays with me in high school."

"I was a bit player, Daphne. You were the star."

"Here, read this with Daphne. I promise not to laugh." Eddie smiled and handed them both a script. "Read from here."

They got up on the stage and began to read. Justin was a natural. When they were done Eddie had a short conversation with his director. He nodded to Justin and Daphne then told the people who remained in the theater that the auditions were over for tonight.

"I think we got the parts, Justin. Isn't this exciting!" Daphne gushed.

Justin was less enthusiastic. "I'm not sure, Daph. I've never even thought about acting."

"Justin, you've always been a drama queen. It's quite natural for you!"

"What's Brian going to say?" Justin was still unsure about the possibility of taking the part.

"Justin, please! I really want to do this. It's only going to run for six weeks. Please say yes! I think that guy Eddie has the hots for you. If you don't take the part he might not want me."

"Daphne! Don't be ridiculous. That guy's not even gay. If he has the hots for anyone, it's you. He had you sit up next to him the whole time."

Eddie came over to talk to them. "Justin you have the role of Clifford. Daphne, you have the part of Elizabeth, his sister-in-law. We're not sure about who we are going to cast as your husband, John. Can you both come back on Tuesday and read with the call backs?"

They agreed to return on Tuesday. They would have only two weeks to rehearse and then the show would open. Justin was still worried about how Brian would take the news. "Daphne, you know how Brian is. He's going to think I'll leave him for a career in Hollywood. And he's not going to like the fact that I'll have to work late almost every night of the week. He likes me to be there when he gets home from work."

"Justin, you got a lead fucking role in a play in New York City! Brian is going to be proud of you. It's only going to run a few weeks. Then you can go back to being Mrs. Brian Kinney, homemaker."

"Fuck you, Daph."

The next day Justin was still unsure about the play. Brian was due back from LA that morning, but Justin decided not to spring the news on him immediately. After class, he dropped by the office to see Brian before heading back home to wait for the furniture to be delivered.

He greeted Brian with a kiss on the cheek and immediately he could tell that something was wrong. Brian grabbed him by the arm and pulled him into his office.

"Where have you been?" Brian asked with that sarcastic grin that Justin hated.

Justin became defensive. "Is that all you have to say to me? I was at school, just like every day."

"I mean last night. Who's Eddie?"

"How do you know about Eddie?" Justin asked dumbfounded.

"I stopped by the apartment before coming to the office. There's a message on the answering machine. It seems that Eddie was very impressed with your performance last night. He's looking forward to seeing you perform with the other guys on Tuesday."

Justin chuckled. "Brian, trust me. When I tell you who Eddie is and what the message was about you are going to feel very foolish. If you didn't have sex your mind all the time you might be able to figure it out. But for now, I'm going to let you think about it. I'll see you at home." He left the room before Brian could respond.

Justin sensed that the trip to L.A. had not gone well. He figured that the message from Eddie just touched a nerve and gave Brian a focus for his frustration.

The truck delivering their furniture from Pittsburgh arrived at 3:00 pm. Justin spent the rest of the afternoon directing the movers and unpacking boxes. He was surprised at how well the style complemented their new place. Brian's favorite piece of furniture was his fuckable recliner. Justin positioned it in front of the fireplace.

When Brian came home from the office, he was amazed at the what a difference the furniture made. Their new apartment had been transformed into a home. The stereo was blasting and Brian found Justin in the kitchen dancing. Grabbing him by the waist, Brian spun him around for a kiss. They were interrupted when the buzzer on the oven sounded. Justin squirmed out of Brian's arms to turn it off. "Dinner is served," he announced grandly, pulling a roast out of the oven. For the first time since leaving Pittsburgh, they ate dinner at their dinning room table.

"Sorry I was such an asshole at the office," Brian mumbled sheepishly.

"I accept your apology," Justin said, not offering any further explanation about Eddie's message. "What happened in L.A.?"

Brian's response was curt. "Nothing."

Justin persisted. "Something happened and it's upsetting you. Did the actor do something that is going to affect the show?"

"He asked to be let out of his contract."

"Did he say why?"

"No, he didn't. But he's clearly upset about something. He's a mess. Fans follow everywhere spying on him. Some people just can't take the price of fame."

"Brian, what did you do?"

"I said I'd think about it. Then I had a meeting with the producers. They may just kill the character off for a few episodes. Then he'll come back to life with a new face."

"T.V. shows do that all the time."

"Does it ever work?"

"Sometimes, if the new actor is hot."

"The guy they have in mind is hot alright. And he's definitely straight. So there won't be any second guessing."

"Did they pick the guy just because he's not gay? That doesn't seem fair."

"It may not be fair, but it's safe. And a good business decision."

Justin decided to let the subject drop. Brian was in a difficult position. Once again he had to put his business sense before his own principles of fairness. No wonder he was in such a sour mood.

After dinner Justin took his hand and pulled him over to the recliner. He pushed Brian down and squeezed in next to him. "Eddie is a producer. Last night Daphne talked me into going to an audition with her. She was terrific and she landed a part in the play. Then Eddie asked me to read with her. I didn't think anything would come of it. But then he offered me a part. What do you think?"

Brian tried to conceal his relief. "Your performance was on a stage and not in a bed? Why didn't you tell me that before?"

"Brian, you're supposed to trust me. If you didn't have your mind in the gutter all the time, you would have given me the benefit of the doubt before accusing me of cheating on you."

"My mind is not in the gutter. My mind is on you all the time. I hate not being able to come home to you."

"Me too. So what do you think about the play?"

Brian crinkled up his forehead. "I guess you can't get into too much trouble with all those people watching. Are you playing a teacup or something?"

"No! I'm playing the lead."

"The lead? I learn something new about you every day. When did you learn out how to act?"

"I didn't. Daphne said that I'm a natural. She said I've always been a drama queen."

"That's the truth. I guess it would be okay."

"It's only for six weeks. But I would be out every night."

"Six weeks! I'll just have to find something else to do at night. I'll call Bill and get the addresses of all the hot dance clubs in the city. I'll revert to my evil ways and you'll have to spend the rest of your life trying to rehabilitate me all over again."

"Now who's being a drama queen?" Justin put his hand on Brian's face. "Seriously, Brian, if you don't want me to do it I can call Eddie and tell him. I haven't signed anything yet."

"If you want to do it Justin, then do it. I was teasing you. I'm sure I'll be up to my eyeballs in work after our highest rated show takes a nosedive."

"Maybe that won't happen. I feel bad for that guy. I guess his career is over now."

"That's for sure. No one is going to hire an actor who breaks his contract. It affects a lot of people. Something you should think about before you sign on the dotted line. Read it carefully and make sure you're ready for stardom. Who knows, you may attract hundreds of adoring fans who will want to know EVERYTHING about you."

"I hardly think so. It's an Off-Off-Broadway play. The theater is about the size of our living room. Don't worry, Brian. I'm never going to be a real actor. I'd never want to be."

Daphne was a little nervous about telling Maura what had happened. All of this was her idea in the first place and now she had to tell her that not only did she get a significant part in the play, but Justin had gotten the lead.

"Fuck me! You and Justin got parts! You're gonna put in a good word for your personal makeup artist, right?"

"I'll try. I don't think they have a very big budget, though. Maura, I'm sorry you didn't get to try out. I'm sure you would have gotten the part instead of me if you'd been there."

"I don't want to be an actor. Way too much pressure involved. I want to work behind the scenes. I don't care if they pay me or not. I know we'll make connections and then there's no stopping us. Broadway here we come!" Excitedly, Maura hugged her friend. "Justin got the lead, huh? He must be psyched."

"Not really. He didn't even want to try out. The producer spotted that gorgeous face and begged him to take the part. I am beginning to think that gay men rule the world, Maura."

"Is Justin going to do it?"

"I think so. Unless Brian has a problem with him working late at night."

"Does Brian keep him on a short leash?"

"No, I didn't mean it like that. They'll work it out, I'm sure. If Justin wants something, Brian isn't going to say no."

Brian hated coming home to an empty apartment every night. When Justin wasn't at the theater, he was with Daphne going over their lines. Six weeks was going to seem like an eternity. Justin had asked Brian to come to the theater on opening night.

"It's not really perfect yet. They say that you need an audience for that. I want you there for the first night, okay?"

Brian sighed dramatically. "At least I'll get to see you, if only from a distance."

"Only one drama queen per family, Brian. I want you to come because you'll let me know if I really suck."

"You bet. If you suck, I'll be the first one to tell you."

"Thanks, you're a pal."

But Justin didn't suck. The minute he walked onto the stage Brian knew why the producer wanted him. On that stage he wasn't Justin, he wasn't the boy who owned his heart, he wasn't even gay. He was Clifford Thomas and Justin portrayed him perfectly. The character was the youngest brother in a large family. He had spent some time in a mental hospital. The premise was that the family members were dropping like flies. First the father died of a mysterious illness. An elderly Aunt and one brother also died of the same mysterious illness. As the play progressed there were two more deaths. The prime suspect is the crazy little brother, Clifford, until the audience finds out that Clifford is not crazy. In fact he is working with the police to solve the crimes. It was a thrill to watch Justin on the stage. He showed a lot of range portraying this particular character. Daphne had been right, Justin was a natural. Brian was proud of him. But as he looked around the theater he started to feel uneasy. Everyone in the audience seemed to be focused on Justin. Brian pictured Justin being hauled off to Hollywood for his shot at stardom.

Daphne watched as Maura applied the finishing touches to Justin's make-up. "Hey, guess what! My parents are coming to see the play this weekend."

"Mine too. Maybe we should all have dinner." Justin suggested.

"That would be great. I'd have you and your parents as buffers in case the conversation turns to 'when are you going to give up this dream and return to Pittsburgh?'"

"When they see you on stage, they'll know you're in the right place."

Maura chimed in. "That's for sure. She's fantastic as your bitchy sister-in-law. Hey, Daphne, I saw you talking to Eddie last night. It seemed intense. What's the deal?"

"Oh, that. He asked me out." Daphne blushed.

Justin turned to face Daphne, causing Maura to smear lipstick across his cheek. "He asked you out?! That's great, Daph! It's about time you got back into circulation."

Taking a tissue, Maura removed the lipstick streak from Justin's face. "Sit still or you'll look like Sideshow Bob on stage," she threatened. Then she turned back to Daphne. "Isn't Eddie kind of old for you? He must be almost 30."

"It doesn't matter anyway. I turned him down."

Justin piped in, "Thirty's not so old."

"Thirty's not old when you're Brian Kinney," Maura said.

Daphne explained, "Eddie's only 27."

Justin gazed in the mirror at the finished product. "Daph, why did you turn him down? He seems like a nice guy. And if he's producing plays at 27, he's got money."

"He is nice. And the play is being financed by his older brother. Justin, I'm not ready to trust another man right now. I don't really know anything about him. He's in show business, maybe he's looking for a beard too."

"You trust me, don't you? I've seen him watching you at the rehearsals. He seems interested. If he was gay he'd be looking at me, not you. He barely notices me, so he can't be gay."

"I agree, Daphne. I think he's pretty hot. I love the long dark hair and brooding look. And he's tall, too. I say go for it."

"Maybe you guys are right. But it doesn't matter. I already turned him down. He's not going to ask me out again."

"Ask HIM!" Justin suggested. "Haven't you learned anything after hanging out with me all these years? You pick your man and you go for it."

"Yeah," Maura smiled. "Go for it."

Daphne shook her head and grinned.

Justin felt that Saturday's evening's performance was the best yet. The play had been running for three weeks but the extra excitement of having his parents in the audience had made him shine on the stage. After the show Daphne and her parents joined Justin and his family for dinner at a cozy Italian restaurant near the theater.

"Justin I have to say that you are full of surprises. You were wonderful in the play. When did you learn how to act?" Jennifer asked.

"I didn't. Daphne said I'm a natural. I'm glad you liked it, Mom."

"The play was very good, son. You were very good in that part. " Craig said as he poured himself a glass of wine from the carafe. "Are you going to pursue a career in the theater?"

"Of course not. I just did it for fun."

"You might consider it. When I was in college I was in the drama department. You must have inherited your talent from me."

Justin chuckled. "Must have." Brian rolled his eyes.

Daphne and her parents were quiet during dinner. When they left for their hotel they asked Daphne to join them for a talk. Reluctantly Daphne left the party.

The next morning, Justin called Daphne to find out what had transpired. "You're still here?"

"Of course I'm still here. And I plan to stay. My parents were very supportive. They wanted to tell me that they think I should attend college in New York and they would pay for it."

"That's great Daph. Weirdness over?"

"Yeah. And you will be happy to know that I asked Eddie out on a date and he accepted."

"That's great. I think he's a nice guy. And he's very hot, for a straight man. He could use some help in the wardrobe department, though."

"If any thing comes of this, I'll take him shopping."

"Good idea. Just remember that older guys are kind of set in their ways. You'll need to guide him."

The play's run was extended for two weeks and then for another month. As much as Brian wanted Justin to be happy, he was getting tired of coming home to an empty house. He was also concerned that Justin was becoming a bit of a celebrity. The crowds were getting larger and more demanding. But Justin seemed to handle it well.

Brian was thrilled to be attending the final performance. After the play was over he watched from a distance as Justin signed autographs. An odd looking couple lingered near Justin and when the last group of adoring fans took their leave they approached him. Brian didn't think that they were the run of the mill fans. Justin looked uncomfortable and Brian was about to move closer when he saw Justin cut the conversation short and walk away.

"What was that about?" Brian asked.

"Let's just walk for a while." Justin said. They walked next to each other with their hands in their coat pockets, not touching or talking. Justin broke the silence when they turned onto Broadway. "Those people were agents or something. They wanted me to go to dinner with them and talk about my future. They said that they were sure they could get me work if I followed their advice."

"And what was their advice?"

"I told them that I'd love to go to dinner with them as soon as my husband joined us. They freaked a little. They said it was okay for me to be gay, but that it would be bad business to flaunt it."

"Let me guess. You told them to fuck off."

"You must be psychic."

"I know you. And I also know that sometimes you don't always think things through." Brian stopped walking. He grabbed Justin's arm turned him around. "You were great up there on that stage. You were more than that, you were amazing. You know I wouldn't say it if it weren't true."

"Thanks Brian."

"Should you just throw away your chance to have a career? Sure, you're happy going to school and working on your art projects right now. But you have a talent that could really make you a lot of money doing something that you obviously love. In ten years you might regret just tossing it away like that."

"You're right. I do love being up on that stage. I love playing to the audience. I love the attention from the fans. But I also love being an openly gay man. I love my life with you. Brian, if I want to act, I'll go out on auditions. If I work I work, if I don't, who cares. I don't need any sleazy show biz types telling me to be ashamed of who I am."

Brian was struck silent for a moment. Then he put his hands on both sides of Justin's face. "I love you, Justin Taylor."

"Well you should love me. Because I'm fabulous." Justin started walking again. "Did you see all of the fans who waited outside just to meet me? That was so cool."

"You are going to be impossible to live with. In ten years. . . "

"Will you fucking stop with the 'in ten years' lecture, I already know what I'm going to be doing ten years from now." Justin grinned mischievously as he checked the sidewalk for passers by.

"What's that, blond boy?"

"You!" Justin grabbed Brian by his belt buckle and dragged him into a dark secluded alley.

Season Five

Fly Away

"Well, what do you say? Should I make room in my drawers for your drawers?"

Justin sat pensively considering his next move.

Brian walked to the bedroom. When he turned around he realized that Justin hadn't moved. "You didn't answer my question."

Justin slowly walked to the bedroom where Brian was waiting. Brian reached out his arms but Justin took his hands instead. "Will you answer one for me first?"

"What?" Brian asked cautiously.

"Brian, do you love me?"

The silence in the room was deafening. Justin had his answer and so did Brian.

"I'm gonna go," Justin said as he stroked Brian's face gently. "I'll see you later." He kissed him softly on the lips and then walked to the door and put on his coat.

"Wait," Brian called out. He reached for Justin's arm. "What . . . ?"

Justin smiled. "Everything's fine. Nothing's changed."

Only everything HAD changed. The next morning Justin got on a plane and flew to California. He didn't tell Brian he was going. The next evening he called to explain.

"This is something I need to do. I am sure if you knew about it you'd have told me to go. But I wanted it to be my own decision."

"We don't have to tell each other anything," Brian said. "You were right to go. It's your future."

Brian sat on the bed smoking. He knew that he had no right to expect Justin to stay with him forever. Justin was young and his life was full of promise. This was a good thing, and he was happy for him. So why did Brian feel so empty inside? He wondered what would have happened if he had answered Justin's question that night.

There was nothing left to do but party. Brian had decided that he'd been tied down to one man for far too long. It was not fair to the hundreds of other men he could be servicing at Babylon. It was time to shed the doldrums and carry on with life as if Justin Taylor had never happened.

"What's all this crap?" Brian asked Michael as he maneuvered his way through piles of baby toys, bicycles and books.

Michael turned his back on Brian when he heard the baby's cries. "What's the matter, Jenny Rebecca? Don't cry, Daddy is here." He picked the baby up out of the portable crib in the living room. The baby cooed at the sound of her father's voice and Michael beamed.

"It's not crap, Brian. Babies come with a lot of accessories."

Brian removed a skateboard from the sofa and sat down. "Where's Ben?"

"He's at the gym with Hunter. Why?"

"Because when he gets home I am going to take you away from all of this clutter. We're going to Babylon tonight."

"Brian, I can't. This is my night to spend with my daughter."

"You can put her to bed when Ben gets home. She'll never know you're gone. We could pick up Teddy and Em on the way. It'll be just like old times."

"Ted and Emmett went to Boston this weekend. Some friend of Ted's is getting married. I get my daughter three nights a week. I WANT to stay home with her. I want to spend as much time as I can with her now, when she is small. She changes so much every day. I don't want to miss a minute of our time together."

"You would rather sit home and watch your kid sleep then go to King of Babylon night? Michael, you've turned into a lesbian."

Before Michael could respond, Ben and Hunter came through the door. "Hey, Brian. How's Justin doing in Hollywood?" Ben asked.

"Fine I guess." Brian stood up and watched as Ben took the baby from Michael. The two of them beamed as they admired the small bundle. Brian thought that they looked like a fucking gay Hallmark card. The phone rang and Hunter answered it. It was Mel. She missed her little darling so much she had to call. The three of them huddled around the phone and tried to get little Jenny Rebecca to "talk" to her mommy. It was cute enough to make Brian hurl. He slipped out the door unnoticed.

Thank God Babylon never changes, Brian thought. He had been at the club for about an hour watching the entertainment. It was the same old crowd. Most of the faces looked familiar. If the face didn't look familiar the ass did. Brian had fucked every man in the place. This left him with a decision to make. If Justin was really out of his life for good, then the rules didn't count any more. Brian was free to fuck anyone he wanted, even if it was a repeat performance. Shit, he could bring home a crowd and have a orgy and not have to answer to anyone. And he could kiss any man in the place right on the lips.

But was Justin really out of his life for good? They had never discussed the status of their arrangement. Were they still partners if Justin was all the way on the other side of the country? No, Justin was the one to leave. It was over and Brian was a free man. He looked down from his perch on the cat walk. The man on the stage was humping a pole. Brian had a flash back of Justin's performance on that stage and it made him feel sad. He made his way through the crowd to the back room. No one noticed him as he watched the action. All he could think of was that night and how he had felt when he saw Justin topping that kid. Everything about Babylon reminded Brian of Justin.

It was just past midnight when he arrived home. He poured himself a drink, sat on the sofa and stared at the wall. The loft felt like a tomb. Brian had never felt so old. His body had healed from his bout with cancer. But tonight he felt tired and miserable. He thought about how happy Michael looked tonight. He had a brand new family and a new life. Brian was not a part of it. Babylon had lost its appeal. Brian did not fit in there anymore either. As he reached for the telephone he wondered what time it was in California.

Two months had gone by. Brian and Justin spoke on the phone every night. Justin was full of excitement about the project. He was working with the set designer and loving every minute of it. Brian spoke in the same upbeat manner about how well the agency was doing and how busy his life was. But by the end of every phone call they were both trying to hide the fact that they were close to tears. Brian never realized just how much he would miss the little blond twink who had stolen his heart.

Then one day the phone calls stopped suddenly. Brian had left several messages on Justin's cell phone but the calls were never answered. He had no luck with the other numbers that Justin had given him. He was beginning to worry. His fears were well founded. At the end of the week he stopped by at the comic book store hoping that Michael would have some news of Justin. Michael was on the phone with Keller when Brian entered the store. Michael was livid, yelling into the phone. "How the fuck could you let this happen! We trusted you, you bastard!" Michael slammed down the phone.

Brian waited for an explanation from Michael. "What happened?"

"I called Keller to find out where Justin was. That prick told me that last week they cast the part of J.T. Brian, they cast a woman!! Justin went nuts. He ran off and left the studio without even taking his stuff. Keller said he figure Justin needed time to cool off. He thought he would come back to the house that night. But he never did. He left with nothing, Brian, not even his wallet. Keller had some people out looking for him but they've had no luck. He said that he figured that Justin had contacted one of us and he'd gone back to Pittsburgh."

"Fuck!" Brian slammed his hand down on the counter. "That asshole Keller waits a week to tell us this! I'm going out there."

"What if Justin does try to call?"

"I'll check my messages. I need to go out there, Michael. That fucking comic book! It's taken over his life. Our lives."

"You don't know how important Rage is to Justin, do you?"

"It's a fucking comic book, Michael!"

"Not to Justin. Rage is how Justin copes with life."

"What are you talking about?"

"Justin feels in control when he draws Rage. It's how he deals with all the crap you dish out. Justin draws pictures of Rage when he's upset. It's his way of controlling your relationship. Look, this is a book that he was using when you threw him out. He takes out his Rage on you in his drawings." Brian took the book from Michael and left the store.

Brian contacted a private detective in L.A. before he left. He knew it would do no good for him to try to find Justin alone in a strange city. He went to the airport and got the first flight out to L.A. It was a red eye flight but Brian never closed his eyes once. He thought of what Justin must be going through, alone, hurt, angry. Anything could have happened to him. Brian opened the notebook that Michael had given him and began to leaf through the pages. It was all there. Every rotten thing he had done was laid out in front of him. Rage telling J.T. that he didn't love him. Rage lying to J.T. about being sick. Rage throwing J.T. out of the lair. But J.T. didn't sit back and take it. J.T.fought back. It was pretty violent on some pages. J.T. had a lot of anger inside of him.

When he arrived in L.A. he rented a car and drove directly to Keller's home.

"Brian, it's good to see you." Keller reached out his hand.

"Fuck you! Tell me everything you know about Justin. Where'd he hang out while he was here? Who'd he talk to? Who'd he fuck? Write it all down now Mr. Producer man."

Keller started writing down the names and numbers of people that Justin had become friends with. He handed it to Brian. "I've already called them, Brian. They haven't seen him. I wish I could tell you how sorry I am."

Brian grabbed the list and glared at the man. "Sorry! You fucking crushed the kid and that's all you can say! This is what I think of your sorry!" Brian hauled off and hit Keller square in the jaw. He picked up the bag with Justin's belongings and left.

He drove aimlessly. He had no clue where to begin. The detective he had hired was supposed to meet with him in the morning. Finally Brian drove to the hotel and checked in. He lay down on the bed and closed his eyes.

He awoke to the sound of his cell phone ringing. He glanced at the clock and saw that it was 5 a.m. He prayed that the call was from Justin.

"Mr. Kinney?" A male voice came over the phone. "We spoke yesterday about your friend Justin Taylor."

Brian realized that it was the private detective that he had hired. "Have you got anything?" It had occurred to him that the man would not be calling at 5 a.m. unless he had.

Yeah, a buddy of mine at the L.A.P.D. tipped me off. They have a John Doe over at Mercy hospital. Kid fits your description. No. I.D."

"Is he hurt?" Dumb question.

"He's in a coma. They said he got hit by a car."

Brian got directions and drove to the hospital. It took him almost an hour to get there. The sun was just coming up when he arrived. There was an eerie silence in the hallway. He approached the nurses' desk

"The police said that you have a John Doe here. He was hit by a car. I think he may be someone that I know."

"You know Angel?"

"Angel?" For a moment Brian's heart sank he thought that maybe someone had already claimed this boy. "His name is Justin. Justin Taylor."

"We call him Angel. He reminds us of an angel, such a sweet face. Do you have any I.D.?"

"Brian pulled out his driver's licence. He also showed her Justin's."

"That's him. Beautiful smile."

"Is he okay?"

"You better wait and talk to the doctor."

Brian paced the hallway while he waited. The doctor came over and asked him to sit down. "He has a broken wrist and a few cuts and a bad bruise on his leg. But he hasn't regained consciousness. We're going to be doing an MRI in the morning if he hasn't shown any progress."

"He was in a coma for three weeks two years ago."

"I'll put that down on his chart. It didn't seem that he had a head injury. He may just be in shock. We'll know more in the morning."

"Did they get the guy who did it?" Brian asked as the doctor got up to leave.

"It wasn't a hit and run, Mr. Kinney. The man who hit him wasn't charged. There were several witness who saw Mr. Taylor jump out in front of the car. He was lucky the man wasn't speeding or he would have been killed."

A nurse lead Brian to Justin's bedside. Brian saw what the first nurse was talking about. Justin looked like an angel lying on the bed of crisp white sheets. His skin was pale, almost as white as the pillow. Brian thought of the times he found himself watching Justin as he slept next him in their bed.

He sat down and took Justin's hand. It was limp and cold. Holding Justin's hand had always brought him such comfort. There was nothing else he could do. He put his head on Justin's chest and sighed.

It wasn't long, maybe ten minutes or so. Brian felt Justin's hand squeeze his. "Justin." Brian whispered. Justin opened his eyes. Brian kissed him on the forehead. "You're going to be okay."

Justin didn't respond. He just stared at Brian. Brian continued to pet his head. "Can you talk?"

Justin responded softly. "I fucked up, Brian. Rage is dead."

"That's not important now."

"It was important to me, Brian. Very important." Justin turned on his side and winced in pain. Brian tried to comfort him but Justin pushed his hand away.

The nurse came in and Brian told her that Justin had been up and talking. She said she would get the doctor. Brian waited in the hallway while the doctor examined Justin. He took the opportunity to call Jennifer.

"Justin is okay. He has a broken wrist and some cuts and bruises."

"I'll get on a plane in the morning."

"No. I can bring him home. But he's pretty upset about the movie falling through. I want to take some time with him before we come home."

After some protest Jennifer agreed to Brian's plan. She knew her son was only happy when he was with the man he loved.

Brian fell asleep in the chair next to Justin's bed. When he awoke he was surprised to see the bed was empty. Justin had gotten up to use the bathroom.

"You're not supposed to get out of bed alone."

"I had to pee. I'm not a fucking invalid. The only thing that hurts is my leg." Justin sat on the edge of the bed. Brian went over and sat down next to him.

"Justin, do you remember what happened when you got hit? Where were you going?"

"Nowhere. I was just wandering around."

"You left your wallet at Keller's. You had no money. What did you do for food for a week?"

"You don't want to know." Justin stared at the floor.

"I guess not. But I do want to know if you decided to end it all when that car came along."

Justin didn't look up.

"Answer me." Brian put his hand on the back of Justin's neck.

When he finally spoke Justin had tears in his eyes. "Why not, Brian? I've made a mess of my life. I fucked up art school, I drink way too much and take drugs you can't buy at a pharmacy. I'm all the things I never wanted to be. And now Rage is gone, Brian. They turned him into something he was never intended to be. Fucking Keller! Rage is gone and I can't ever get him back."

"You don't need Rage. You can start a new comic."

"You don't know anything, Brian!" Justin raised his voice. " You don't know anything about me!"

"Why don't you show me?" Brian took the notebook that Michael had given him out of Justin's bag.

"You read them?" Justin was horrified.

"Yeah. And may I say I deserved every ass-kicking that you gave him. Looking at myself through your eyes has been . . . eye opening."

"Don't take it personally. It was just my way of . . . "

"Being in control. I understand. I think it was very creative of you."

"But now it's over."

"You don't need Rage anymore. You can kick my ass in person if you think I need it. It's kind of weird to think you've had this secret death wish for me in comic book form."

"I never wanted to kick you, Brian. Not really. Shake you up once in a while, maybe."

"I think that this little adventure gave me a good shaking."

Justin grinned for the first time since Brian arrived at the hospital.

"The doctor said you can leave in the morning after they check your head."

"I hate the thought of facing everyone. Especially Michael."

"Nobody blames you, Justin. But I was thinking, I haven't had a vacation since the White Party. If you're up to it, maybe we could drive up the coast for a few days. Just to unwind before we go back. Do you think you're up to it?"

"I guess it would be better than Pittsburgh. Yeah, okay."

"Good, now get some sleep and I'll get my stuff together and come back in the morning." Brian kissed him gently.

Justin put his hand to Brian's face. "Thanks, Brian. For saving me again."

"Just call me Rage. Good night, Angel."

The next morning, Brian arrived at the hospital in a rental car. He had called Keller to let him know that Justin was alive and that he was going to be sending him Justin's hospital bill. Brian had decided not to question Justin any further about the accident or what had happened before that. He was grateful that Justin was okay and that they were finally going to be enjoying a much needed vacation.

"We better make sure to buy some sunblock. You look as pale as ghost."

"Thanks. Maybe we should keep the top up."

Brian grinned. "We'll be driving up the coast highway. How cool would we look in a convertible with the top up? We'll buy you a hat."

"Whatever." Justin seemed distracted.

They drove for a few hours at a time, stopping whenever there was something interesting to see. The Coast Highway had an incredible view of the Pacific Ocean. They took their time, and wandered up the coast.

"Guess where we are going tomorrow," Brian said as he lay on the bed thumbing through a California guide book.

"Let's see, so far we have been to just about every art gallery between here and kingdom come. At the Hearst Mansion you pointed out every piece of art on the walls. So, let me guess. Maybe tomorrow we will get on a plane and fly to Europe where you can drag me through the Louvre."

"I'm just trying to cheer you up," Brian sulked.

Justin sat down next him and stroked his hair. "I know that, Brian. But if you don't mind I'd just like to relax and enjoy the scenery. Where do you want to go tomorrow?" Justin got up and started to pack.

"I was thinking we could go to San Francisco."

"I guess," Justin muttered as he folded his clothes into his suitcase.

"Can you try to muster up some enthusiasm? San Francisco! It's the motherland for all queers."

"I bet there are a record number of gay bars and hot guys," Justin said unenthusiastically.

"That wasn't my plan."

"You have a plan?"

"I was thinking that maybe we should get married," Brian said nonchalantly.

"Huh?" Justin stopped packing and sat down on the bed.

"We could do it in San Francisco tomorrow."

Justin shook his head from side to side. "What are you talking about? You hate the very idea of marriage, especially gay marriage."

"I've been thinking about it while you were away. If that's what you want I guess we could give it a try. Besides, I hate sleeping in an empty bed."

"That shouldn't be a problem for you, Brian. I am sure you can find any number of men to fill your bed if you wanted."

"I don't want anyone else in my bed!" Brian snapped. This was not going as he had planned. Justin was supposed to be jumping into his arms with joy. Instead, his proposal seemed to have made things worse. He'd never seen Justin look so sad. Brian continued. "Look, we've practically lived together on and off for a few years now. We haven't killed each other yet. If it's what you want, maybe being married wouldn't be so bad."

"Who said I wanted to get married? I never said that."

"Then you don't want to be married? Or you just don't want to be married to me?"

"I never said that either. I don't know what I want, Brian. I don't know that I ever did. If you had asked me a year ago, or even two months ago, I would have jumped at the chance. You know I love being with you. The truth is that I don't even understand myself anymore. How could I possibly marry anyone now?"

Brian got up from the bed and stood staring down at Justin. "So all the times you said 'I love you', that was all bullshit?"

Justin stood and faced him. There was anger in his eyes now "That's not fair."

"What isn't fair? Is it fair that you can say you love someone and when things in your life get fucked up you all of a sudden change your mind?"

"Yes, Brian I said I love you. And I meant it. But you have never fucking said it back!"

"So that's what this is about. It's not enough that I've taken care of you for four years, that I've changed almost everything about my lifestyle to keep you happy, that I've left my fledgling business in the hands of Ted Schmidt, of all people, just to bring you home? All of that means nothing. Words are more important."

Justin folded his arms across his chest and looked at the floor again. Brian slowly walked over and touched his shoulders. "I DO love you," he said softly. He put his hands on Justin's face. Slowly Justin looked up at him. Brian saw that he was smiling coyly.

"You fucking tricked me into saying that, didn't you? You little shit!" Justin kept grinning up at him. "Well I take it back. I don't love you. I never did. You're nothing to me."

"It's too late. You DO love me. You said it. You can't take it back."

"Then neither can you. Tomorrow we'll make it official."

"Why? Why do you all of a sudden need to get all official?"

Brian sat on a chair and lit up a cigarette. "After you left I tried to go back to the life I was living before I met you. But it just didn't work for me anymore. I missed coming home and finding you making a mess in the kitchen. It seems like you've always been there, making up rules, changing everything, driving me crazy. Then I realized that in a way I like having rules. I like the way you've changed my life. I like having someone to drive me crazy. I'm still not happy about the mess in the kitchen, but we can get a maid to clean up after you. All I know is that if I'm ever going to do this marriage thing it would have to be with you. So why not do it now?"

"I don't know if I can be the same person I was two months ago. It's not you, Brian. I just feel so empty."

"Look, I don't like the way that you just up and took off for L.A. like you did. I know it's my fault. All my bullshit about not having to tell each other anything. I admit that I was wrong. I didn't like the way it felt when you left."

"That's how I felt when you left for Ibiza. . . you should have told me what was happening, Brian."

"You're right. That's why I think that getting married will be a good thing. That way neither of us leaves the ground without the other knowing."

"We don't have to be married to be honest with each other. Brian, it's just not the right time for me to think about my future."

"Look, I'm not giving up. So what if you're in a slump right now. We'll work it out together when we get home. I'm not taking no for an answer."

"But what if I never get my act together? Do you want to be stuck with a bitter, insecure, worthless shell of a man for the rest of your life?"

"Why not? You've been stuck with one for four years."

Justin finally smiled. Brian hugged him. "We're already stuck with each other. So let's make it official."

The next morning they drove to San Francisco. They went directly to City Hall, filled out the proper paperwork and by that afternoon they were married. They checked into the Hilton at Fisherman's Wharf. Justin found a quiet seafood restaurant where they ate dinner. He seemed to be enjoying the laid-back atmosphere of the wharf area. After dinner they walked toward the Golden Gate Bridge and watched the sunset. When they got back to the room they undressed and got into bed. They had been lovers for over four years. It had occurred to both of them that this was the first time they would be making love as a married couple. This night was different and Brian wanted Justin to know that it was special.

Brian's emotions shifted into overdrive. He hesitated for a moment to look down into Justin's eyes. He saw his life partner, the only man he could ever truly love. Brian knew he was finally home. Justin would heal and they would have a happy life, Brian was sure of it. They resumed their familiar rhythm. As their emotions drove them, their pace accelerated. Justin called out his name as he climaxed and his mind went blank. He pumped his juices into his lover and felt Justin's hot cum spurting between their bellies as he spasmed over and over. They clung to each other for a long time. This night was special. Each night after that their love grew deeper and stronger. Their bond was sealed.

Brian rolled on to his back and pulled Justin over to rest his head on Brian's chest. "That was spectacular. You really are a master when it comes to sex."

"I had a pretty good teacher." Justin smiled up at Brian then nuzzled his head on Brian's chest. "What do you think they will say?"

"What will who say?"

"The guys . . . Michael. He must be so mad at me Brian."

"Michael already knows what happened. He isn't mad at you."

"He'd never say it to you. But Rage was just as much his as it was mine. More so, because he came up with the idea. I came out here to protect our interest. I failed him."

"If he was so fucking concerned about his interest he should have come out here himself."

"But he wasn't here. I was. And now it's over. Brian, I wish we never had to go home. I wish we could stay on vacation forever, just the two of us." Justin rolled off Brian's chest and turned his back. He was in a dark mood again and Brian knew better than to try to reason with him.

They stayed in San Francisco for four days. Justin still seemed distant and sad. It was only when they made love at night that he truly came to life. That was fine with Brian. They needed this time together to make up for all the things that had gone wrong in their lives over the past few months. One night Brian came to realize that his bout

with cancer had affected Justin more than he had ever let on. As they quietly lay in each other's arms, Justin ran his finger across the scar on Brian's abdomen. Justin then looked up at him and Brian was struck by how young and vulnerable he looked at that moment.

"Brian, promise you'll never leave me," Justin pleaded in a soft voice.

It was a rare moment for Justin to let his guard down and show this intensity of emotion. When Brian was undergoing radiation, Justin moved in and took charge. He had given Brian hell for shutting him out and that was it. They never talked about it after that. Now it was clear to Brian that Justin had been hiding his fears.

Justin had always been so strong and clear headed. With all the heartache they had been through over the years Justin would never allow Brian to see how much he was hurting. He never allowed Brian to comfort him. It was important to Justin to be in charge of his emotions. But now Justin was pleading with Brian not to leave him. Not to die on him. How could anyone make a promise like that? But looking into that sweet innocent face Brian gave in. "I promise," he said, wrapping his arms around Justin's waist. "I won't ever leave you." Brian decided that it was time to go home.

Michael looked up from the register and saw Justin and Brian walk through the door. He walked toward them, put his arms tightly around Justin and hugged him for a long time.

Justin pulled away and faced him. "I'm sorry, Michael."

"No, Justin, I'm the one who's responsible for this. I put my pride before common sense. I should have listened to Ben. He tried to warn us. I should have been more careful."

"Rage is gone, Michael," Justin said softly. Michael could see tears form in the boy's eyes.

"Rage is not gone. He's standing right next to you." Michael smiled at Brian. "You two look tan and well rested. How was your vacation?"

"Life-affirming," Brian responded with a wink in Justin's direction.

"Next time you lose your boyfriend, I may just join you in the hunt."

"There isn't going to be a next time. And Justin is not my boyfriend."

Michael rolled his eyes. "Are we back to that again?"

"He's right, I'm not his boyfriend," Justin said.

Brian held up his left hand for Michael to see. "Justin's my husband. We got married in San Francisco."

"YOU got married?"

"Yes, why the fuck not? No more trolling the bottom of the barrel at Babylon. I have snagged first prize."

"We have to celebrate. I bet your mother is planning a big party."

"Not exactly. We haven't told her yet."

"Well you know what a big mouth I have. You better get it over with because once I tell my mom it will be all over town."

"We'd better go see her, Brian. She'd never forgive me if we didn't tell her ourselves."

"Wait, Justin." Michael took a note book out from under the counter. "I've been working up some characters and storylines for a new comic. I want us to get back to work right away."

Justin's smile faded. He backed away from Michael and took Brian's hand. "Justin, why don't you take the car and go see your mother," Brian suggested. "I want to catch up with Michael."

Justin left without a word. Michael was confused. "What's wrong with him? Just because Rage is gone doesn't mean we can't still work on a new comic."

"Michael, don't pressure him. Justin's got some problems. More than what you see on the surface. His wrist will heal, but inside he's still pretty torn up. So leave him alone for now, please."

"Brian, he has to move past this and get on with his life. It was disappointing, sure. But it's not the end of the world."

"For Justin it was. He just needs some time to find himself again. So don't mention anything about Rage, okay?"

"Okay, but it would be the best thing for him."

"You don't know that. He has a lot of doubts about himself right now. I don't want to see him hurt again."

"Do you think it was smart for you two to get married now? Justin seems sad."

"It was time. I know he's depressed now, but it will pass. When we're in bed he's fine. In fact he's wonderful."

"Is Brian Kinney blushing?"

"Fuck no! Why didn't you tell me that marriage would make sex hotter?"

"I didn't want to spoil the surprise. I can't believe we are both married men."

"And fathers."

"Do you remember the night that Gus was born?"

"Barely."

"We stood out on the roof and you wanted to fly away."

"I guess I'm glad we stuck around. There is life after 30. Who'd have thought . . . ?"

A month passed before Brian decided it was time to ask Justin what he was planning to do with his life. Justin's mood had not improved as Brian had hoped it would. If anything, Justin had become more sullen and withdrawn.

"What did you do today?" Brian asked cheerfully.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Justin replied.

"Just that we have been home for over a month and to my knowledge you haven't left the loft on your own once."

"You're wrong. For your information, I went out today. I went to the bank."

"Why would you go to the bank? You know where I keep the cash. I just went to the ATM yesterday."

"I didn't take money out. I put money into your account. I had money left over from what Keller had paid me for Rage and for working out in L.A. I put it all into your account."

"Why did you do that?"

"I know it's not much. But it's all I have. I want to pull my own weight around here. It's been hard for me to think about my future. I appreciate the fact that you haven't pressured me. And now I've made up my mind. I am going back to work at the diner full time. Then next semester I'll go to school at night and get a teaching degree."

"Teaching? You hated school and you hate kids. I can't picture you teaching art to a bunch of third graders."

"Not art. I am going to teach math. It's probably the only other thing I'm good at beside giving you blow jobs."

"I'd rather you make a living giving blow jobs then torture yourself in front of a classroom for the rest of your life. You'd be miserable."

"I'm already miserable."

"You don't have to be."

Justin sighed and without another word went back to the task of preparing dinner.

Brian was becoming frustrated. He wanted to help, but didn't know what he could do to shake Justin out of his depression. He asked himself what Justin would do if things were reversed. It was time to take off the kid gloves. No more dancing around the subject. Brian was going to attack the problem head on. He formulated a plan. The next day was Saturday, Brian was going to do some house-cleaning.

"Brian, what are you doing with my drawings?" Justin asked as he looked up from the computer.

"I was thinking we could get them framed and hang them up."

"NO! I don't want them."

"Well, I do."

"Then you can have them. Burn them, toss them in the trash, hang them in the men's room at Kinnetik. Just keep them out of my face."

Justin had played right into his hand. Brian smiled to himself as he carried his new artwork out the door.

A few weeks later, Brian arrived home from work early. Justin was in the kitchen cooking dinner. Brian took his hand and pulled him out from behind the counter. "I have a surprise for you."

"A surprise? It's not my birthday."

"I know it's not your birthday. I don't need a reason to give you something, do I?"

"I guess not. It's not a puppy or a kitten, is it? Because I'm not cleaning up after an animal."

"It's not a puppy, although that's not a bad idea."

"What's in the bag?" Justin asked as he pulled at the plastic.

"Open it." Brian handed the bag to him and Justin ripped it open.

"Holy shit! It's an Armani suit. Brian what I am supposed to do with an Armani suit? I barely leave the house."

"You are going to put it on and wear it when we go out tonight."

"Where?"

Brian took a deep breath and braced himself for the fall out. "The art gallery. I had your work framed and Lindsay is showing it starting tonight."

"You had NO right, Brian!" Justin screamed at him.

"Oh, yes I did. You gave them to me, remember? Now go get ready."

"Fuck NO!" Justin threw the suit back at Brian.

"Fuck YES! Justin you've been moping around the loft for three months now. It doesn't matter how many mood altering drugs you take. You're not getting any better. You need to get out and do what you do best, impress people with your brilliance."

"Brian, don't you see how much that would hurt me? I'd have to watch people looking at my work knowing that's all there is. All there will ever be. I'd rather be dead than to have to face everyone."

"Don't say that!" Brian got angry. He grabbed Justin by his arms and pulled toward himself until they were eye to eye. "I don't want you ever to say that again!"

"I thought I was supposed to tell you how I feel! That's how I feel, Brian, like I'm already dead."

Justin pulled away and sat down on the sofa. "I'm sorry. We never should have gotten married. You should divorce me."

Brian's anger ebbed. He sat down and put his arm around Justin. "There is no such thing as gay divorce."

"I wish I could find something to make this go away, Brian. I don't want to be such a drag to you."

"You can't deny who you are, Justin. That's the problem. You're an artist."

"I can't do it any more, Brian. I've lost my inspiration to create art. And I don't know what else I'd be good at."

"Rage was one project. You didn't fuck it up, Keller did."

"It hurts too much."

"Life hurts."

"Not your life. Your life is perfect. You've got your own business, lots of money and a really cool place to live."

"You know I've always been a little jealous of you," Brian admitted.

"Me, why?"

"I don't have any special talent. I'm a salesman. A damned good salesman. I create concepts but I don't have the ability to really follow up on them. That's why I need an art department. But you have the ability to create images on paper that really touch people. You create beauty. I want to show you something." Brian got up from the sofa and went to his closet. He came back with the first drawing that Justin had ever done of him.

"Where did you get that?" Justin was astonished. "I thought it was sold at the art show."

"I bought it. It was the first time anyone had ever drawn a picture of me. I take it out and look at it every once in a while. I see me through your eyes and it makes me feel young and desirable. You captured that in me, and in this picture I will remain that way forever. I think it's pretty amazing. You're amazing. You haven't lost your talent. The only thing that keeps you from drawing is your stubborn need to punish yourself."

Justin was thoughtful. Brian decided to leave him alone. "I'm going to take a shower."

Brian stripped off his clothes and got into the shower. A few minute later Justin joined him.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," Brian said as Justin rubbed the soap on his partner's back.

"You're right. I'll go with you tonight. But I'm not sure how I am going to feel about it. I may just freak out."

"If you freak out, I'll take you home. At least you'll have tried."

"Justin, you're digging your nails into my flesh. Let go of my hand."

Justin squeezed Brian's hand harder. "This was your idea, Brian. If I'm going to suffer, then so are you."

"There's Lindsay. Let's go say hello."

"I have to go to the bathroom." Justin tried to pull away.

"You went about 10 times before we left." Brian dragged Justin over to see Lindsay.

"Here's the man of the hour," said Lindsay when she saw them. "Justin, you look so handsome."

"Thanks. But we can't stay long."

Lindsay grabbed his arm and pried him away from Brian. "Honey, I don't think you're going to Babylon in your new Armani suit. Now you come with me. There are mobs of people who are dying to meet the artist."

Brian watched as Lindsay steered Justin through the crowd. They stopped to talk with a group who were admiring one of Justin's drawings. Justin looked over his shoulder at Brian and Brian waved to him. At first he thought Justin was going to break away and run. But his new fans started to ask him questions. Slowly Justin came to life. Brian watched as Justin's former self-assured personality begin to emerge. He breathed a sigh of relief.

As the night progressed, Brian was sure that his plan had worked. Justin had not come to look for him once. That meant that he was happily soaking up the praise of his new-found admirers.

Ben and Michael found Brian standing alone near the door. "Hey, Brian, how's it going?"

"We're still here, if that's what you mean."

"Your plan worked?" Ben asked.

"I believe it did. Justin seems to have forgotten all the doom and gloom he's been wallowing in since the demise of Rage. He's over there schmoozing with some prospective buyers."

"I hope it lasts. He's sure been a drag these last few months."

"So what if he's been down? Not everyone can be happy all the time like you two."

"That reminds me. Ben and I want you and the rest of the gang to join us at Woody's later. We have an announcement to make."

"Don't tell me you're pregnant already. And so soon after the last one. I hope it doesn't ruin your girlish figure."

"Shut the fuck up, Brian."

Justin walked up behind Brian and waited to get his attention. When Brian turned around he could not read Justin's expression. He hoped that nothing had happened to dampen his spirits again. Justin stood staring at him for a few minutes. Then he ran up to him and threw his arms around Brian's neck almost knocking him to the floor. "They love me! All of the drawings are sold. Lindsay said that I can have another show as soon as I can get some stuff together."

"You better get to work. Are you sure you'll have your inspiration?"

Justin stopped smiling for a moment and became serious. He looked Brian in the eyes and said, "My inspiration's never really left me And he promised me that he never would. Thanks for sticking by me, Brian."

Brian choked back tears. "What are husbands for?"

The gang congregated at Woody's after the show. Justin was his old self and everyone congratulated him on his first official show. As the evening wound down Michael stood up and clinked a fork on his glass. "Everyone, Ben and I have an announcement to make. Today we went to closing on our very first home. We bought the house next door to Melanie."

The rest of the evening was spent looking at photographs of Michael and Ben's house and of Jenny Rebecca.

"Look, Brian. It's even got a white picket fence. Who'd have thought that one day I'd own a house with a white picket fence?"

Brian and Justin exchanged glances. Brian spoke up. "Michael, somehow I always knew you would."

It had been a long evening of celebrations. Brian and Justin were happy to finally be home.

"Brian, tell me the truth. Did you want to get married because you were jealous of Michael and Ben?"

"Fuck NO!"

"Good! Because there is no fucking way that I could see us ever living in a house with a white picket fence."

"If we want to live in a house with a 10 foot iron fence and a moat around the property that's what we will do. And if we want to hold an orgy every Friday night that lasts into Sunday morning then who's to say we can't? It's our marriage and we can make anything we want of it. That is exactly why I married YOU and NOT Michael. You're queer, like me."

"Is that the only reason?"

"Well, that and the blow job thing you do."

"Oh, I was hoping you would bring that up."

"I was just about to bring that up."

"Hey, in honor of our free-style marriage, why don't we do it on the roof?"

Brian smiled and put his arm around Justin as they walked toward the door.

"The roof's different. Let's just make sure we don't get careless and fall over the edge. It's a long way down and I don't think that Rage ever learned how to fly."

"As long as we fly away together, it's okay with me."

Season Six

Part One - New York City

It had been almost a month since Justin had left Pittsburgh to pursue his career as an artist in New York City. Brian held off making his first visit to give Justin a chance to get settled. This was his first trip to New York. One of the few concessions that he and Justin had allowed was for Brian to pay for Justin's cell phone bills. Justin had only agreed to that when Brian told him that he was able to write it off as a business expense. "I'll call it entertainment. You can supply me with phone sex."

As the plane made its final decent, he looked down to admire the outline of the City as the sun set. His palms were sweaty and he realized that his hands had a death grip on the armrests. Logic told him it was normal to be nervous during landing. He'd never had a fear of flying, but lately the smallest thing could throw him into a panic attack. He blamed it on overwork and lack of sleep. But deep down he knew they were all symptoms of something he was not yet ready to accept.

Since the bombing of Babylon, the merits of love and commitment had been on his mind. He was ready to allow someone to love him. Asking Justin to marry him was not a mistake. If they had gone through with the wedding, Brian would have been happy with his decision. He knew that Justin was the one person he could share his life with. Justin was so young and anxious to make something of himself. What was time anyway? Their relationship was solid.

The first days after Justin left were hell for Brian. Rebuilding the club had been a distraction. When they spoke on the phone Justin's voice was full of excitement and enthusiasm as he filled Brian in on his adventures. Justin had gotten a job as a waiter for the evenings and weekends. He had found a place to live and to paint which, as Justin had described it, was not as elegant as his former studio in Pittsburgh, but functional and affordable. Brian shuttered to think of the squalor he would encounter when he arrived.

Brian leaned on the door frame and held out a bouquet of red roses that he had picked up at the airport. "Hey, stud."

Justin beamed as he pulled him in through the door. "Get in here, you!" He kissed him hard on the lips. The roses fell to the floor as Brian grabbed the back of Justin's head. He could never get enough of Justin's lips. The taste lingered as he forced himself to pull away. Justin bent over and picked up the roses.

"You got me flowers? You're not turning 'Stepford' on me again are you?" Justin joked.

"A moment of weakness. The Hari Krishna who sold them to me at the airport had a really hot ass."

"I love them." Justin said sweetly. " Thank you." He kissed Brian on the cheek. "What do you think of my place?"

"It's . . . you!"

"I don't know how to take that."

"It's your place. It's not important what I think. Where's the bed?"

"On the floor over there." Justin pointed to a dark corner of the room.

"That's not a bed. That's a cot. And, as much as I am dying to fuck you, I am NOT that desperate. We'll check into my hotel, let's go."

"I can't. I have to finish this. I promised my boss at the restaurant that I would have this ready for the opening of the new dinning room. Sit down over there, and talk to me while I work."

Brian reluctantly obeyed. "What was the point of my coming here if you're too busy to fuck me?"

"New York is expensive, Brian. This is a lot harder than I thought it would be. I used all of my L.A. money on this place. Daphne's friend had to move back in with her parents so I moved a cot in here about a week ago. I can't afford another place, and I haven't had time to make any friends who need a roommate. I took an extra night at the restaurant just so I could buy paint. But as soon as I finish here, I'm all yours until Monday."

"I have to go to Denver on Monday."

"We'll have the weekend together at least."

"Yeah, at least."

"Brian, I'm really sorry I wasn't able to make it home for Michael and Ben's farewell party."

"It is ironic, isn't? Michael being the first one to go. Everyone thought it would be me."

"Don't say that, Brian. It creeps me out when you talk like that. Besides they're not dead, they just moved to Canada so Michael could be in his daughter's life."

As Brian watched Justin work, he realized that no matter how dismal the surroundings, there is no place on earth he would rather be. Unable to control his impulse to touch him, Brian came up behind Justin and nuzzled the nap of his neck. "That cot is not looking so bad."

Justin turned around to face him. "I miss you so much. Are you doing okay? You feel thin. Are you eating?"

"I'm eating." Brian said defensively. He started to push Justin away, but then he hesitated pulling him back into his arms. Brian searched for the right words as Justin looked up at him curiously. "I never thought I'd say this out loud, but I do miss you. I wake up at night and grab the pillow where your ass used to be." He chuckled nervously and then got serious. "I guess I'm in love." Brian's eyes teared up.

"You're not going to ask me to cuddle are you?" said Justin attempting to lighten the moment. His comment had the opposite affect.

Brian became agitated. "If say I want to cuddle, that's what I want to do. I wouldn't say it just to make you happy, or because of Michael or Gus or for any other fucking reason. If I say it, it's because I want it. You got a problem with that?"

"But you've always said . . . "

"I say a lot of fucking things, don't I? Do you have them all written down?"

"I don't need to write them down. They're all here in my head." Justin pointed to his forehead. "And, I want to point out that your dire prediction that we may never see each other again was bullshit. How could you say something like that right before a person gets on a plane? It was a mean thing to do. I was nervous for the entire flight."

"All I meant was that no matter what, I'll always feel the same way about you."

"As long as you know that you and I are married in our hearts. I will always come home to you, no matter what. Okay?"

"Okay?"

"Do you want to cuddle?" Justin asked with a seductive smile on his face.

"No! Now I want to fuck you. But I may just want to cuddle after that, before I fuck you again."

"Let's get out of here." Justin grabbed his coat and pulled Brian the door.

The hotel was uptown. The taxi ride seemed to take forever. They got into the elevator and kissed all the way to the 20th floor. Brian closed his eyes when Justin kissed him. He felt a tingle at the nape of his neck as Justin's hand

reached up to caress him. Justin Taylor was the best kisser on the planet. Before Justin, Brian had kissed a lot of men. But he could never get enough of the taste of Justin's mouth on his. The sensation of Justin's tongue sliding over his teeth made Brian's dick come to life instantly. They undressed with the urgency of lovers who had not seen each other for weeks. The next few hours were spent making up for lost time.

"Ouch!" Justin yelled as he rolled over in the bed.

"What is that?" Brian lifted up his partner's foot to exam his leg. There was a nasty red mark just above his ankle.

"It's nothing." Justin tried to pull away. Brian turned on the light to get a better look. "It looks like a bite mark. Who bit you?"

"Nobody bit me. Not a person, anyway. If you must know it happened one night when I first moved into my studio. I was sleeping on the floor, and this animal came up and bit me."

"Animal? Was it a bear or a lion?"

"It was a rat, okay. A great big mother fucking rat. The next day, I got a trap and caught it. I smashed its brains in with a brick, and threw it in the dumpster. I got a cot, so I'm not on the floor, and I sleep with a brick next to my head. It hasn't happened since."

Brian bit his lip in order not to say something he would regret. "Let's get something to eat."

"We can go to the restaurant where I work. I get free food."

"What kind of food?"

"Italian?"

"I hate Italian food."

"I can't afford to eat anywhere else."

"I don't suppose it would do any good for me to offer to pay."

"NO! It won't. I am my own man. No more hand outs."

"What if I ask you out on a date?"

Justin shook his head and grinned. "Go ahead, ask me."

"What?"

"Ask me out. I want to hear you say it."

"Isn't it enough that I asked you to marry me?"

Justin shook his head and smiled. "Say it."

"Mr. Taylor, would you do me the honor of allowing me to buy you dinner, before I fuck your brains out again."

"Yes." Justin answered emphatically.

"Yes, what?" Brian teased.

"Yes I will have dinner with you before I fuck you all night long."

"Close enough."

"This place is so expensive, Brian. They don't even have prices on the menu."

"I'm trying to impress my date."

"Like the time you bought me a mansion?"

"My plan worked, didn't it? It was the best investment I ever made." Brian looked up from the menu and saw that Justin was no longer smiling. "You're not having second thoughts are you? I can take you back to Pittsburgh tonight if you want to live in that mansion."

"No second thoughts. Marriage isn't right for us. At least not right now. I don't have anything to call my own. I have to work for a happy ending, or it won't last."

"You must be working your ass off. You look exhausted. Getting your work noticed must be more difficult than getting me to notice you."

"That was a labor of love. And as exhausting and frustrating as the path was, the end result is well worth it." Justin smiled as Brian poured the champagne he had ordered.

Before they could raise their glasses they were interrupted when an older man appeared at their table. "Justin, what a surprise running into you here. I thought you were busy working on your restaurant project tonight. Change of plans?"

"I'm almost finished with that project. I took a dinner break." Justin explained. "Richard, this is Brian Kinney."

Richard studied Brian intently before he commented. "Brian . . . Justin's ex-boyfriend?"

Brian chuckled and turned to Justin.

"Brian, this is Richard Daniels, the art critic who wrote all those nice things about me."

Brian rose and shook hands with the critic. "You're very intuitive. Justin is a brilliant artist."

"He has promise. But he has a long road ahead." Richard turned to Justin, "Justin, you didn't answer my call today. I am anxious to know your answer about our trip."

"I am not sure now is the right time to . . . " Justin began, but Brian interrupted.

"Trip?" Brian asked.

"Richard has invited me to go to Paris with him. I'm not sure it would be a good idea to leave New York just yet."

"It's the opportunity of a life time for a young artist." Richard reminded him. "You would learn more in Paris, than working by yourself in that hovel you call home. I would think you would be more excited about my offer."

"I don't want to appear ungrateful, but I don't know how I can manage the apartment without working. I can't really take time off."

"I'll worked that out. You'll be my assistant."

"That's very generous of you, but I . . . "

"I'm interrupting your dinner." Richard cut him short. "I'll call you in the morning Justin. I'll need your answer soon." He stared at Brian for a moment before taking his leave. "I have some people waiting for me. It's nice meeting your Mr. Kelly."

Richard hurried away and Brian and Justin stared at each other in silence.

"Ex? Funny, I don't remember the divorce. But I don't remember the wedding either. Well, I guess it's only time."

"Brian, I didn't tell him about my personal life. It's not relevant. I didn't think you'd want him to be writing about how we put our relationship on hold, so I could get established. I'd never called you my ex, that's just what he wants to think."

"And you'll allow him to think what he wants to keep him interested in your ass."

"It's not like that Brian. He's a friend."

"Then you haven't fucked him."

"No! I'm not even sure if he's gay. He has a reputation as a ladies man. But I do get vibes from him. Maybe he's bi. I'll let you know." Justin smiled coyly.

Brian grinned. "Good boy! He should be able to help you a great deal. So when are you leaving for Paris? I don't want to make any unnecessary trips to the 'rat hole' I mean your place."

"I'm not going to Paris with him. And stop making fun of me. I'm doing the best I can with what I've got. Even if I do fuck him, it's just sex."

"To you, maybe. But he seemed quite smitten."

"He knows a lot of people. We went to a party on Sunday and he introduced me to a gallery owner who is interested in my work. Her name is Maureen Sutton. She offered me a job at her gallery. Richard said that she helps a lot of young artists."

Brian felt a tinge of resentment. Justin was making some headway with his career. But the presence of the critic in his life was unsettling. Richard's possessive demeanor with Justin made Brian suspicious of his motives. He was also suspicious of the fact that he left the restaurant without going into the dining room. There were no people waiting for him. Was he stalking Justin? Brian made a mental note to have the critic checked out when he got back to Pittsburgh.

Their limited time together was precious, so Brian did not mention his concerns to Justin. All he wanted to do while he was in New York was to make Justin happy. He picked up his champagne glass and lifted it to toast. "To my prince of the art world."

Justin smiled. "To our future together."

Richard Daniels stood in front of the mirror in his bed room. He was both anxious and excited at the prospect of the evening he had planned. The new young artist he had been courting was on his way over. Richard knew the boy was gay. Since the moment he'd met him in Pittsburgh Richard's carnal imagination had been on over drive. This boy was his sexual fantasy come to life. Of course that was not the only reason that Justin Taylor had captured his interest. The young man's artistic talent was extraordinary. He was the find that Richard had been looking for since he moved to New York after that unfortunate incident in Chicago. The door bell rang and Richard smiled at his reflection in the mirror. The game had begun.

"Can I get you something to drink? I have your favorite wine in the fridge."

"Maybe just one glass." Justin plopped down in a welcoming leather recliner. "I'm so tired that I just may fall asleep in this chair."

"Justin you're welcome to come and stay here, I've told you that before."

Justin took the glass that Richard offered. "I know and I am grateful for the offer. But the whole point of my leaving Pittsburgh was to become my own man."

"That's admirable, Justin. Is your exile from Pittsburgh your ex's idea? He is very attractive, by the way."

"Yes he is. But I don't know where you got the idea that Brian and I broke up."

"You called off the wedding and moved to New York. I assumed . . ."

"You assumed wrong. We're very much in love. We both realized it wasn't the right time for us to settle down. He knows that I wouldn't be happy in the long run if I never had the opportunity to have my own career."

"So he sent you off to New York City to seek your fortune, with no money, no job and no place to live. Interesting. He must really love you." Richard couldn't hide a sarcastic smile.

Justin leaned forward in his chair. "Richard, I'm sure you didn't ask me over to talk about my love life."

"You're right. Come over here." Richard patted the seat next to him on the sofa. "I have some pictures to show you."

Justin stumbled forward as he stood up. "Woah, I guess I was more tired than I thought. One glass of wine and I'm really feeling it."

Richard took Justin's arm and guided him to the sofa. "Lie down here and rest. I'll get the pictures." Justin laid his head on a pillow Richard offered. He felt Richard pull his legs up and place them on the sofa as he removed Justin's shoes and socks. "There, now you just get comfy. I'll be right back."

Justin realized that the wine had been laced with some kind of drug. It wasn't his first experience being drugged without his knowledge. Sex was one thing, he was willing to have sex with Richard. There was no reason for the man to drug him. But if he did have sex with Richard it would be consensual, not rape. Justin forced himself to sit up. He started to pull on his socks. Richard came back into the room with an album. "I see you're feeling better. These are from my last trip to Paris."

Richard's casual manner and the fact that his head was starting to clear made Justin think that he must have been wrong about the drugs. He stopped what he was doing and smiled up at Richard. "I am feeling better. I'd love to see your photos."

As Justin leafed through the pages, Richard picked up the wine glass from the table where Justin had left it. "You didn't finish it."

"No thanks. I've had enough. I didn't eat anything today. So that's probably why I got dizzy."

"I'll fix you something to eat."

"No, I have work to do and I'll be going past the restaurant on my way back. I'll get something there." While Justin continued to leaf through the album, Richard started to move uncomfortably close to him.

"These pictures are amazing. You're a great photographer."

"I have an eye for beauty." Justin looked up and saw that Richard was staring at him and not at the book. The next page he turned was rather shocking. The photos were of Richard having sex with a woman while a room full of naked people watched. Justin couldn't help but let out a chuckle. "What's this?"

"Like I said. I have an eye for beauty. I think that sex is very beautiful, don't you?" Justin felt Richard's hand touched his thigh. Justin closed the book and moved away from him.

"Yes. I think sex is beautiful. But I don't have pictures of it in my vacation album."

"Sorry I shocked you."

"You didn't shock me. I've seen it all before, believe me. If you want to fuck let's do it."

"I don't want to fuck you. I want to teach you about the finer things in life."

"Everything I need or want to know about sex I learned from the master. Brian and I have participated in every form of perverted sex."

"With men."

"Of course with men. We're gay, not bi."

"How do you know? You might enjoy the challenge. I've been with both and find it refreshing to switch off now and then."

"I've tried it. I'm not into sex with women. I'm gay. I only have sex with men."

"Justin calm down. I didn't mean anything by this. I thought you'd get a kick out of seeing the pictures. I want you to get excited about our trip."

"I don't think I should go to Paris at this time. I have to work to stay alive in NY. And I have things I am working on now. I don't want to lose my momentum."

"You can't afford not to go to Paris.. I will pay you more than enough to keep your work space. What are you working on now?"

"It's rather dark. Much darker than anything I've done before. I told you about the explosion at Babylon. That's the subject of my next painting."

"Your passion needs to be a dark expression. It needs to reflect the inner pain and frustration every gay man feels."

"I don't know about every gay man. I only know about me and how I felt being bashed and blown up."

"Your work will be important Justin. Very soon you will be the talk of Paris, New York and the world."

"I hope it's soon. Once I get established I can go home to paint."

"Pittsburgh! Most people with drive and ambition thrive in New York City."

"I do love New York. But Pittsburgh is my home." Justin ached for Brian at that moment.

"Paris is waiting. But it won't wait forever Justin. I must say that your unusual talent has captivated me. But your attitude has me wondering if I have been wasting my time. There are so many hopeful young artists that would jump at the opportunity I have offered you. Art is a business. And like any other business it must be taken seriously if you want to succeed."

Justin weighed his options. He knew that without Richard's support it would take him years to achieve his goals. Paris was waiting and so was Brian. If going to Paris would secure their future together the choice was clear.

"If I you think it will further my career, then I accept your offer, Richard. I will go to Paris with you."

Justin left in a positive mood. Richard picked up the wine glass and threw the liquid into the sink. Pity Justin didn't drink it all. He would have enjoyed the special evening that had been planned. No matter, Paris is waiting. Richard dialed the phone.

"It's all set. I'll be bringing you a new protégée in a few weeks. You'll enjoy this boy. He will put up a good fight, but in the end he will be the best we've ever had." Richard was grinning from ear to ear.

Brian found himself humming as the cab darted in and out of traffic on the way downtown. 'You are my sunshine,' the song had been stuck in Brian's head since he got on the plane that morning. When Justin opened the door Brian kissed him quickly and directed him to get his coat. "I want to show you something."

"The last time you wanted to show me something it was in West Virginia." Justin tried to hug Brian without getting paint all over the man's suit. "What are you doing here? I thought you were coming on Saturday. It's only Thursday."

"Today's a special day. Do you want me to go home and come back in two days?"

"Of course not. I love that you surprised me. I want to tell you something and I was waiting to see you in person."

"Sounds ominous."

"It can wait. What do you want to show me?"

"You have to get your coat first."

Justin hailed a cab and they road uptown. The got out in front of an apartment building near Central Park. Brian took Justin to the 10th floor and opened the door to an apartment.

"What is this?" Justin asked.

"I sublet it. What do you think?"

"What are you doing, Brian? I thought we agreed. I can't live under your roof until I am ready to pay my own way. I am not moving in here with you."

"I never asked you to."

"You got an apartment in New York so you can use it when you come to visit every other weekend? Brian, that's outrageous, even for you." Brian just sat there staring at him. Justin softened his tone. "I know you miss me. I miss you too. More than you can imagine." He stroked Brian's face. "It's only time, remember? You said it did matter."

"It doesn't. I'll always love you the same as I do now. It's not the time, but the distance that's killing me."

"What do you mean killing you? You look tired. You're not sick, are you?"

"I'm fine. In fact I am taking some time off. I'm planning on staying a week or two."

"Shit."

"Shit?"

"I'm going to Paris on Monday? "Richard offered me a enough money so that I could keep my work space while I am gone. He is covering an art show there. I won't ever have the chance to do this on my own, Brian. It's a great opportunity. I have to go."

"What's in it for him? "

"The satisfaction of discovering a new talent."

"God only knows what he has planned for you once he gets you out of the country."

"He's a friend, Brian, that's all. You said yourself that it wouldn't hurt his reputation to discover the next Andy Warhol."

"You're on the phone with him ten times a day. He takes you out, buys you clothes, introduces you to all the important people. Trust me, sweetheart , he is not your friend, he's your stalker."

"You don't know him!"

"And I don't want to. You came here because you wanted to make your own way in the world. It's one thing to let that critic guy help you make connections. But he's way too involved in your personal life. You refuse to take cab fare from me, but you'll go to Paris with him because it's good for your career. I thought we were sacrificing our happiness now for a future together. Or did you leave just to get away from me?"

"You weren't ready . . . "

"I lied . . . I tricked you. I wanted the house, the vows and the rings. When Lindsay told me about the review and New York I couldn't tie you down without having the chance to prove yourself. And now you're here and there's another man in your life. New York isn't big enough for all three of us. So I'm leaving YOU this time. Look me up if you ever get back to the Pitts."

Brian went into the bedroom and came out carrying a suitcase. Justin was deep in thought. When he saw the suitcase he grabbed Brian's arm. "Don't leave!"

"There's nothing for me here."

"I'm here! You're right. New York was a bad idea."

"You're an artist. It's where you belong. Pittsburgh just isn't good enough for you. It was a stupid idea for me to come here and try to run your life. I'm going home."

"You're not going anywhere."

"Watch me."

Justin decided not to follow Brian. He went back to his studio and got to work on his latest project.

In the morning Justin tried to call Brian on his cell phone. He left three messages but there was no call back. The fight had been his fault and he wanted to apologize. Brian had made the trip to New York just to be with him and Justin realized that his new life was conflicting with his old life. He had to make some changes.

Justin waited until late afternoon to call Kenetic. He was put through to Brian right away.

"What's up?" Brian asked as if nothing had happened.

"I'm sorry you made the trip all the way to New York and we didn't get to spend time together. I was rude to you. Are you mad?"

"I'm not mad. I acted on impulse and you had other plans."

"You're more important to me than Paris, or any other city in the world. I'm touched that you wanted to surprise me on my birthday. I'd forgotten about it until my mother called me last night. I'm really losing my mind. "

"It must be the paint fumes."

"Must be." Justin chuckled. "'I called Richard to tell him I wasn't going to Paris."

"How did he take it?"

"Not very well."

"Good. Now maybe he'll leave you alone."

"Not likely."

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind. He's not important. Brian, what's happening to us? We were supposed to love each other forever. A few months ago we were so sure that nothing could ever come between us. Now we're fighting like lesbians. I'm a whore and you're living out of a suitcase."

"You're not a whore. And I would live in a tent on the roof if it meant I could be close to you."

"You really love me, don't you? I don't know why, all I've ever done is cause you trouble."

"I like trouble. I think it's hot."

Justin smiled to himself. "Brian, do you ever think about the house and all that stuff and wonder what it would have been like?"

"No, I don't. We made the right decision. It wasn't the right time for either of us to settle down in the country. We have things to do. I have my business to run and you will make your mark in the art world."

Justin ran up the subway steps like a man with a purpose. When he got to Richard's apartment door he knocked loudly.

"Justin, sorry but I'm a little busy now packing for my trip."

"I just want an explanation. You said on the phone that you'd fuck me one way or another. What did you mean?"

"I thought you were smarter than that Justin. Your art is good, but there are plenty of good artists that aren't afraid of having a little fun now and then.

"Maybe we can make a deal." Justin smiled seductively as he entered the apartment.

Brian spent the evening at Babylon with Ted. As he stared down at the sea of half naked dancing men he thought of Justin and the events of the day before. He felt bad about his behavior in New York. Justin's birthday surprise had not gone as Brian had planned. Nothing seemed to go right since Justin's departure. And Justin's departure was all his idea.

When he saw the rat bite and the general living conditions that Justin was forced to endure it tore him up inside. His instinct was to rush in and drag Justin back to Pittsburgh kicking and screaming if need be. Above all Brian wanted to keep Justin safe. The apartment was intended as a birthday gift. He thought he could coax Justin into taking it to make up for all the birthdays that went by that Brian did not acknowledge. But once Justin rebuked him for buying it for weekend trips and rejected the idea of moving there Brian realized he had to back off. He was caught between his growing love for Justin and his own ego.

When Justin announced that he was taking the trip to Paris with Richard, Brian could not hide his anger. He had to leave that night or risk exposing his real feelings. The truth being that Brian Kinney was scared to death of losing the only man he would ever love. He had to keep his cool and remain aloof for now. But he would keep an sharp eye on Mr. Richard Daniels.

Justin sat alone in the dark. The thought of what he'd done that evening with Richard and his friends sickened him. But it was over. No use dwelling on it. He couldn't afford to lose his one link to success for one dehumanizing, humiliating fuck. Justin picked up his cell phone pushed speed dial 1.

"Hey, what's up?" Brian's voice sounded horse.

"What are you doing, fucking an trick? You sound funny."

"If you must know I was asleep."

"It's ten o'clock. Brian Kinney is just planning his evening at ten o'clock"

"Not when he has a plane to catch at 7am."

"Where are you going?" Justin asked hopefully.

"Chicago."

"I was hoping for another surprise visit."

"The last one was such a disaster I think I'll stick with the plan. Every other weekend."

"I could sell a kidney and buy a plane ticket home."

"NO!! You can't come here!" Brian exclaimed excitedly.

"Brian, what . . ."

Brian took a deep breath to calm down. Then he said softly into the phone. "You need to keep working."

"I hate to sound like a broken record, but are you feeling okay? You sound jittery."

"I'm just tired. Look, I'll catch a flight to New York from Chicago on Friday night."

"Thanks, Bri."

"I love you, Justin."

"Me too."

Justin put down the phone. The conversation was unsettling. Brian never said I love you first. Ever since Brian lost his testicle to cancer Justin worried every time the man acted out of character. Lately it was getting hard to tell what was in character for Brian. He had changed so much since the bombing.

The events of the evening had left Justin depressed and tired. He picked up a new canvas and began work.

In the morning Justin was awakened by a knock at his door. His first thought was that Brian had changed his plans. Justin quickly opened the door. "Richard! What are you doing here?"

"I thought you might like to go to breakfast. And I brought you these. They're from all of us. Richard presented Justin with a bouquet of roses. You were so sweet last night. Just like I imagined."

The thought of Richard imagining things about him was disturbing. But Justin was determined not to offend the man. "Thanks. I don't really have time for breakfast. I have to go to the gallery today to unpack some of my work that my mother sent from home."

"Call in sick. I'd like us to spend some time together."

"But I'm not sick. And I thought I made it clear that last night was a one time thing. I don't do encore performances."

"I thought you might have a change of heart when you saw this." Richard thrust a newspaper into Justin's hand. There was a half page ad for his show at the gallery.

"What's this?"

"You need to advertise. What do you think?"

"It's nice, it's great, in fact. I don't know what to say."

"If you can't do breakfast, say you'll have lunch with me. I'll pick you up at the studio at 11. I have an early afternoon meeting."

"I guess that would be enough time to unpack my stuff."

"What's this?" Richard pulled at the sheet which covered a large canvass. Justin's Babylon bombing painting was revealed. Richard turned to Justin and whispered, "Magnificent!"

The tone of his voice made Justin's skin crawl.

Cathy looked up from her computer when she saw Justin walk in the door. She had admired Justin's talent and liked him since the day Maureen hired him to be her assistant.

"You look you could use a Starbucks, my treat," Cathy said cheerfully.

"Thanks Cath, but an ocean of caffeine wouldn't help me today."

"I hope she was worth it."

"She?" Justin mumbled absentmindedly as he unpacked his latest canvass.

"The woman you spent the night with . . . I hope that's why you look like you crawled out from under a rock this morning."

Justin grinned. "I'm gay."

"I'm so glad."

"You're glad I'm gay?"

"I'm glad you got laid. You've been so focused on your art I thought that you practice one of those weird religions that promote celibacy. That's not healthy for someone your age. I don't think I've ever seen you smile."

"Just because I'm 21 doesn't mean I need to party all the time. Getting my artwork noticed is the most important thing in my life right now. That's what I was working on last night."

"21!! You're only 21!! Christ, you act like a 40 year old." Cathy was distracted by the canvass Justin had unpacked. "That . . . is disturbing."

"What are you talking about?"

"That . . . the canvass you just dragged in here like Jesus dragged his cross. It's disturbing."

"It's supposed to be disturbing. It depicts the bombing of Babylon. That's a dance club I used to go to in Pittsburgh. It expresses the horror I saw that night."

Cathy studied the canvass. "I can understand that. It's good. I didn't mean to offend you. But for someone so young your work is very . . . dark."

"Richard tells me that my work is dramatic."

"That old perv should know from drama."

"He is a well-respected critic. There must be some truth to what he says."

Cathy took Justin by the hand. "Come with me."

"What for?" Justin pulled back a little. He was not in the mood for criticism, however well intentioned.

"I have been cataloging the pieces that you had sent from Pittsburgh. Everything you have done since you have been living in New York has been very intense. So when I pulled these out of the crate I had to check to make sure it was the same artist. Yes, it says right here. Justin Taylor."

Justin took one of the sketches from her hand. "Idealistic memorabilia." He handed the drawing back.

Cathy studied the picture for a moment then wiped a tear from her eye. "I love it. She is so sweet and innocent. It's amazing how you captured her expression while she was sleeping."

Justin thought that Cathy's reaction was a bit extreme. He looked at the sketch of Molly sleeping on the sofa in their parents' den. His mother had kept most of his early work at her place. Justin had not seen the drawing in years. Looking at it now it seemed like he had lived a lifetime since he felt such closeness with his little sister. For the first time he felt regret that he wouldn't be around for her as she was growing up.

"Now here is a real work of art." Cathy's mood lightened as she held up the first sketch Justin had done of Brian.

Justin felt his face blush. "That's Brian Kinney."

"An ex."

"Brian is my NOW and forever. We almost got married a few months ago. But we called it off."

Cathy picked up another sketch. This one was of Brian and Justin in each other's arms. "You make the perfect couple. You must miss him a lot."

"I miss him, yeah. But we're okay. He's coming to see me this weekend."

"Long distance love affairs are tough."

"When you really love each other it can work. We'll make it work." Justin said firmly as if he was trying to convince himself it would.

Cathy put the sketches down and turned to Justin. "I hope you consider me a friend Justin. I am not as talented as you but I have been working in the art business in one form or another most of my life. I've seen a lot of Warhol

wannabe's come and go. You're not like them. You paint from the heart and your new work is compelling. But when I look at these sketches I see more than your life experiences expressed on canvas. I see what is in your soul. At least what used to be in your soul. You love the people in these sketches. I can feel it when I look at them. They touch me. And I am not easily . . . touched. I hope that you haven't lost that part of your self so early in life."

"They're immature and childish. I did them in high school. I am surprised that my mother sent them."

"Well I'm glad that she did. Not everyone is captivated by angst and horror." Cathy nodded at the canvass Justin had propped up against the wall.

"I'm not the Red Cross catering to everyone's needs." Justin said in defense of his recent work. "I have to paint what I feel."

"If I felt like that all the time I'd . . . " Cathy stopped short. "I'm sorry Justin. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. Truce?"

"I'm sorry I snapped at you. I'm just tired and I think I'm getting a cold. I'm glad you enjoy my early drawings. But I have to make my mark in the world now. And this stuff is never going to get me recognized as a serious artist."

"Don't pay any attention to me. I'm just a sentimental fool, not an art critic. But I do know what moves me. The picture of the little girl is special. She reminds me of my daughter."

"I didn't know you had a daughter."

"Her name was Abby. She died five years ago of a brain tumor."

"I'm sorry, Cath. Was she your only child?"

"She was my only baby. My husband and I broke up shortly after she died."

"It must have been an awful time for you."

"Losing a child is about as dark as life gets. But I can still be touched by a lovely little girl like the one in your picture. I still find beauty in life."

Justin understood what she was saying. He picked up the sketch and handed it to Cathy. "It's yours. Her name is Molly, she's my sister. You're right, she is beautiful."

"Justin, I didn't mean for you to give me the picture. You could sell this at your show."

"I want you to have it. Molly would want you to have it too." He kissed her on the cheek. "And, I'll think about what you said."

"Your face feels warm. You must be getting sick. That's not good. You don't have time to be sick."

"Tell me about it. I've been sleeping at the studio space. There was no heat last night. Maybe I will take you up on that coffee, if the offer still stands."

"I'll get your coffee."

Justin studied each drawing as he pulled it from the crate. 'Was I ever that young and innocent?' He studied the self portrait he had drawn the year that he'd met Brian. Life had not been easy, but there were a lot of good feelings associated with those years. He picked up one of the many drawings he had done of Brian. The emotions he had experienced at that time flooded back and his eyes filled with tears. He had been so desperately in love with Brian since the day they met. How could he have forgotten that new love feeling? Justin was grateful for Cathy's honest observations.

For the next few hours he concentrated on cataloging his work and performing the menial tasks assigned to him at the studio. Cathy worked by his side.

"Hey, you want to take an early lunch?" Cathy asked. "Maybe you could take a nap at my place. I only live a few blocks away."

"Thanks but I can't. Hand me that poster board please. I want to back this."

"Brian." Cathy admired the picture. "So why did you call off the wedding? Someone get cold feet.?"

"Not exactly. We decided not to get married because we don't need ceremonies and rings to prove we love each other. Brian has a new business he is building up in Pittsburgh. At an art show in Pittsburgh Richard suggested that I come to New York to make the proper connections and get my work noticed."

"I know I wouldn't that brave. You're one tough kid."

"Brian and I have been through a lot together. The reason I am so driven to succeed is so I can get back to Pittsburgh and be with Brian."

"Justin, how much do you know about Richard?"

"He knows enough not to gossip." Richard appeared in the doorway. "Are you ready Justin?"

"I have to go Cath. I'll be back in an hour or so. We'll finish this then."

Richard noticed the sketch that was lying on the table in front of Justin. "What's this? You're not thinking of displaying this over romanticized, frivolous waste of paper at your show. I forbid it, Justin."

"You forbid . . . " Justin cut himself short. He would deal with Richard after the show. He had no intention of displaying the picture of Brian at the gallery anyway. Richard stood there glaring at him. "Of course I was not going to display it. I was mounting it to send it to Brian. He's ridiculously romantic. Let's go to lunch."

Cathy shook her head as Justin left with Richard. She turned her attention to Brian's portrait. "I hope you know what you're doing, Brian. Leaving a boy like Justin in the big bad city with the big bad wolf is a dangerous move."

Brian arrived late Friday night. When Justin heard footsteps on the stairs he hurriedly covered the canvass he had been working on and ran to the door. They clung to each other for a long time before either of them spoke.

"You look like shit." Justin observed.

"So do you."

"Brian, really. You're white as a ghost and I can feel your ribs when I touch you."

"I had the flu last week so I skipped a few meals. I went to the doctor. Everything is fine. What about you. Your face is warm and this place is freezing."

Justin smiled. "You're here and everything is fine. Let's go to your place where it's warm and cozy and fuck for the entire weekend."

"Great idea."

"I'll get my stuff."

Brian glanced toward the canvass Justin had covered. "Getting shy about your work all of a sudden?"

"It's not dry. I don't want anything to fall out of the ceiling and mess it up."

Brian looked up at the ceiling then down to the floor. He bent down and picked up a rose.

"What's this?"

"Nothing!" Justin grabbed the flower out of Brian's hand and threw it in the trash.

"A present from Richard?"

"Yeah, he gave me roses. I fucked him and he was grateful."

"Really. And what's this?" Brian pulled at the shirt that Justin was wearing. "Designer shirts on a starving artist budget?"

Justin sighed before he answered. "Richard's is getting pushy. He insists on controlling what I show at the gallery. I don't want to tell him to fuck off until after the show. He would trash my work and ruin all the progress that I've made here. What's the difference if I let him buy me lunch or clothes?"

"That guy is bad news."

"I can handle it."

Brian let the subject drop. "That's what I love about you. You can handle it. Let's get the fuck out of this rat hole."

The weekends always ended too quickly. Before they knew it the time had past and Monday morning had come too soon. Brian kissed Justin good-bye and got into a cab. His destination was not the airport. It was 7:15 am. A little early for a social call, but Brian wasn't concerned about the inconvenience. He knew the apartment number and he also knew that slipping a few bucks to the night doorman would get him access to the elevator.

Richard awoke with a start. Someone was making a racket in the hallway. He looked through the peep hole and found Brian Kinney smiling back at him.

"It's 7am." Richard announced through the door.

"Actually, it's 7:15 but I don't fucking care, open the door or your neighbors will know ALL your dirty secrets."

Richard slowly opened the door and Brian brushed past him into the apartment. Brian picked up a packet of photographs from the hall table. "Are these for your family album?"

As he sorted through the pictures his anger grew. "Woah, Justin! I never saw you in that position before. And who's this? Mommy gets fucked by baby Justin while Daddy Richard jerks off for the crowd of on lookers. You sick fuck, you!"

"That's the pot calling the kettle black."

"I never blackmailed anyone to have sex with me. I don't fuck with people's heads and their careers. Justin has real talent and you know it. I want you to back off."

"I don't have to listen to this. You're boyfriend was not forced to do anything. You should go back to Pittsburgh and let Justin live his own life."

"Oh I'm going back to Pittsburgh alright. But not before I set you straight, you sick fucking perv. You're going to leave Justin alone to do his show. You'll write a fair review of his work and you will NEVER contact him again for any reason."

"I'll trash his work and send him packing."

"You do that and I'll make sure all your fancy gallery owners know about your hobby. "

"They wouldn't believe you."

"They'll believe me. I have proof. I did a little research and found out your little secret in Chicago. It seems you were a bad, bad boy. So bad you had to change your name and leave town."

"That boy . . . that young man had problems. He over dosed at my home but no charges were ever brought."

"You fucking drugged the kid and he died. By the time the other boys came forward and told their stories you were in the wind. If you hurt Justin I'll make sure you never write another word about art or any fucking thing. You'll be in prison getting your ass reamed every night by your new best buds, DICK!"

"You wouldn't do that."

"I would anything to protect what's mine. Stay the fuck away from Justin!"

The show was only one week away. In one week Justin would either be a successful upcoming artist with a growing bank account and critical acclaim, or he would be on his way back to Pittsburgh in defeat for the second time in one year.

Brian had promised to come to New York by mid-week to help him prepare. They hadn't spoken much as things had been hectic. Richard Daniels had not called him in a week. It was a relief at first not having to deal with the drama. But with the show so close Justin was a bit concerned about the lack of interest of his most important supporter. He had left several messages which had not been answered. When Richard walked into the gallery that morning Justin

expected more than the brief cold greeting that he received. Nothing was more important to Justin at this moment than having the show be a success. Richard was key to that success.

"Hey, Richard, can I speak to you please."

Richard turned and reluctantly followed Justin to the back of the gallery. "What is it Justin?"

"The show opens Friday and you haven't called me in a week. Is something wrong? You won't go back on your word, will you?"

"My word?" Richard asked coldly as he studied the art that hung on the wall behind Justin's head.

"You promised to be fair. You've been grooming me for months and now you drop me like a rock. Is it something I've done?"

"I see you've gone against my advice. Where's the grit? Where's the inner turmoil in this piece? In the beginning I saw potential for your work to become an important statement for the gay community. You have excellent skills, I'll give you that. But you have to ask yourself what is it about your work that will set you apart."

"I have to paint what I feel."

"Art is a business. If you want to make money you'll paint what sells. Nobody cares what you feel."

Justin could not believe what just happened. When he left the gallery he spotted Richard in deep conversation with a young man who would apparently be his next victim. Upon returning to the squaller he called his studio Justin took out his cell phone and called Brian.

"Hey, It's me."

"It's been a while."

"I know, don't be mad but they turned off the electricity on me the other day and I couldn't charge the cell. I charged it at the gallery today."

"Can I help?"

"No, I took care of it."

"As always. How are things shaping up for the show?"

"Okay I guess. At least I thought so until today. Richard hadn't called all week. I ran into him today at the gallery and got the cold shoulder. I just hope he doesn't write a bad review out of spite."

"He won't." Brian insisted. "Your work is good. He would look like a fool if he trashed it."

"I really was counting on his support. I've worked so hard."

"You don't need that fucking perverted piece of shit telling you what to do."

The intensity of Brian's response made Justin suspicious. "What did you say?" Justin asked.

"He tells you what to wear, what to paint, and who to fuck. You don't need him Justin. Your work speaks for itself."

Justin was silent on the other end of the phone.

"Are you still there?" Brian asked.

"You did something . . . didn't you?" Justin accused Brian. "You got Richard to back off. Why did you interfere? After the show I would have told him to fuck off. I was handling it."

"Like you handled things with Sap."

"It was just sex, Brian."

"I saw the pictures. That wasn't sex. It was a fucking freak show."

"Like you haven't used your dick and your sex appeal to get ahead."

"The whole point of you going to New York was so you could build a career that you could be proud of. If you were going there to be a sex slave you could have stayed in Pittsburgh."

"To be your sex slave!"

"That's not what I meant. I could have given you the same help that he did. I could have made connections, gotten you a show and made you a star. If all you can do is go from one man's bed to another . . ." Brian hesitated. His voice cracked. " . . . this isn't going to work. We're not going to make it." He said softly.

"Maybe not. If that's what you think of me." Justin hung up the phone. A small stream of light bathed the dismal room. It was just enough light for Justin to work. He picked up a new canvass and started to paint. Creating art had

always been his salvation from despair. This time it didn't work. He felt hot tears stream down his cheeks. Justin cried in the dark, cold work space until he had no more tears left to shed.

The next morning Justin awoke to sunlight bathing the room. It was a new day. All he had left in the world was his art. He picked up a brush and continued where he left off the night before. In his mind he reflected on the conversation he'd had with Brian. Something about the intensity of Brian's words and the sound of his voice disturbed Justin. He had been hurt by Brian's words but in fact he knew that he was right.

Justin attempted several times to call Brian. He left several voice messages to call him. The next day he found out that Brian had discontinued service on the number. He had cut Justin out of his life. Did he really want to end it? Had Justin so bitterly disappointed him that he never wanted to see him again?

Brian studied his face in the mirror as he prepared to get dressed for his first night out as a free man. Cutting all ties to Justin was the right thing for him to do. This time it was not for Justin's sake, but for his own sanity. Yet it still hurt him deep down to his core. Brian knew that there was no way to cure a broken heart. He conceded to himself that he did have a heart and that the events of the past few months had taken its toll. Justin had been right about his weight. He had lost at least 10 pounds, probably more. His skin had a sallow look and his eyes were sunken in their sockets. Was this his future? To awaken every morning and see a new wrinkle or bald spot and worry if he had the stamina to keep up with all the new studs on Liberty Avenue?

He hadn't realized how much his relationship with Justin had affected every aspect of his life. Justin had been the student and he the mentor. It had been foolish of Brian to consider it anything more. Justin would always have a mentor in his life. Brian was replaceable. First there was Ethan, then Keller in Hollywood, and now Dick Daniels. Well fuck the little twat. Brian had had enough. It was back to Babylon and the life he knew before Justin. The thought struck him that now he was completely alone. Justin, Gus and Lindsay were gone. Even Michael had deserted him. Brian splashed his face with cold water glanced in the mirror once more. His eyes reflected the despair and fear he held in his heart.

He grabbed a towel from the rack and began to dry his face, leaving the room as he did so that he would not have to look in the mirror again. Brian was startled when he tossed the towel on a chair and looked up. Justin was standing right in front of him.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Brian asked as he fought to maintain control of his emotions.

"I might ask you the same thing." Justin responded defiantly. He was clearly in charge of the conversation. "I went to Babylon and Ted told me that you were here. In fact he said that you very rarely show up at Babylon and that you'd been sleeping here. He gave me the key."

"I should fire him."

"For what? Caring about you?"

"I have a lot of work to catch up on so I moved into an empty office. It saves time."

"You moved in here because you sold the loft to buy that apartment in New York. You never sublet it. I spoke to Cynthia three days ago."

"It's a conspiracy. I should fire them all."

"Brian, why don't you say what you really mean. It's me you want to fire?"

"Good idea, then maybe you'd leave me alone."

"Is that what you want? To be left alone? Because it looks to me like you got your wish. First Lindsay and Gus left the country, and then Michael. You managed to ship me off all the way to New York."

"Apparently it wasn't far enough . . . you're here. " All of a sudden it dawned on Brian that Justin had left New York on the eve of the most important event of his career. "Your show is tomorrow! What are you doing here?"

"I canceled it." Justin said firmly. "You're more important."

"But all your work . . . !" Brian couldn't hide his shock.

"I worked hard to get ahead so I could come back home . . . to you! I figured out what you meant when you said you thought we wouldn't make it. You weren't talking about us. You meant that you wouldn't make it."

"That's bullshit. Look around. I fucking own this company and Babylon. And I've done it all on my own. I don't need anyone. I'm the best homosexual I can be."

"You're sleeping on a couch in your office. Your son and your best friends left the country. And I'm a big disappointment to you. No one would blame you if you got just a little depressed about that."

"I'm not depressed."

"Then why are you taking antidepressants?" Justin held up a prescription bottle he'd found on the desk.

Brian didn't answer. He felt nauseous and light headed. When his knees buckled out from under him he sat on the edge of his desk.

Justin sensed Brian's uneasiness. But he was determined to get to the bottom of things. He gently rubbed Brian's arms and looked him in the eyes. "Brian please, talk to me."

"I don't know what to say." Brian answered honestly. "I used to know. I could handle any situation. I could fuck any trick that caught my eye. Now I can't even tell you what's wrong with me because I don't know." He picked up the bottle from the desk. "These pills let me sleep. That's why I take them. Because when I'm asleep I don't have to think up an answer to the question 'Brian, what's wrong?'"

"Brian, everything has changed in your life. You're just confused."

"I'm not confused. And nothing's changed."

"EVERYTHING has changed Brian! I'm worried about you." Justin continued . "Are you sick again?"

"I'm not sick! No cancer, no HIV, no brain lesions."

"You're not eating. You're too thin and I bet you haven't been to the gym in weeks."

"I've been busy." Brian gently pushed Justin away and walked across the room. He slouched down into a chair. Justin sat on the floor and rested his head on Brian's lap. Brian absentmindedly played with Justin's soft blond hair.

"No, you haven't been busy. Ted told me that you haven't been going after new clients at all."

"It's my business, not yours."

"This is all my fault. I never should have gone to New York."

"You had to. That's what you've been saying since you got home from L.A. You want to handle your own career. I understand that need. I'll always be a self centered, private person. I'm not into sharing my feelings and all that shit. You shouldn't tie yourself to someone who doesn't have that to offer you."

Justin took Brian's face in his hands. "Do you remember the night I came to the loft and I told you I needed you? You freaked out and told me that I all I have is myself, and that's all I'll ever need. Ever since then I've been trying to prove myself so that you would be proud of me."

"Do you remember everything I say to you?"

"I respect what you say. I want to be the best homosexual I can be. But not if it means I can't be with you. Because there is nothing more important to me than you. I will ALWAYS come home to you. Why can't you believe that?"

"Because that's life, Justin. Everyone leaves. Everything changes. Except for Babylon."

"So why aren't you there?" Justin studied Brian's face. "Is this about Gus and Michael being in Canada? They didn't leave you on purpose. Lindsay and Mel were afraid they would lose their kids. And Michael wants to be a father to his daughter. They still love you."

Brian got up suddenly, accidentally knocking Justin onto the floor. Justin had touched a nerve. Brian turned away from Justin before he spoke softly. "You almost died. Just when I was starting to . . . "

" . . . love me?" Justin said softly.

"You're finishing my sentences again."

"You never got over it the bashing, did you Brian?"

Brian walked to the desk and shuffled through the drawers. He found something in the top draw. Justin couldn't see what it was but Brian turned it over and over in his hand before he spoke. "You got over it. You got over your fear and you turned into a gun carrying vigilante. Then you waged war on Stockwell. If that wasn't enough, you went to a rally for gay marriage at Babylon and practically got yourself killed. You scare the living shit out of me. I think about you in that hell hole in New York with rats gnawing at your ankles knowing that you refuse to let me help you because you think you have to prove something. All I have to offer is sex and money. You can get either of those things elsewhere. You don't need an aging, emotionally crippled party boy cramping your style!" He shut the desk draw and stared at Justin.

Justin walked around the desk and took Brian's hands in his, they were shaking. "You're the kindest, smartest, most honest man I've ever known. You've been my inspiration for as long as I can remember. In my art and in my life you've been there to encourage me to be the best that I can be. All I've ever wanted was to be with you." Justin put his arms around Brian's neck and pulled him close. He felt Brian's tears on his cheek and he knew that he had made a dent in Brian's armor.

Justin pulled away first. "If you're proud of me that makes me happy. It's all I ever wanted to hear. We need to build a life together, not apart. I'm going to stay here and get a regular job. I'll work at Kennetic with you if the offer still stands. New York was a dream. It wasn't even my dream. I can paint anywhere. I don't need to be rich or famous. And I promise not to die on you."

"You can't promise that."

"If I could, I would. When I left Pittsburgh I always intended to come home. You ARE my home. And I'll do anything to prove that to you. I sold my Rolex in New York to buy a ticket on a fucking Greyhound bus because I thought you needed me. If that's not devotion, I don't know what is. Have you ever been on a Greyhound bus? It made my rat infested room in New York seem like a palace. I had to sit next to the bathroom."

Brian found himself grinning. "You took a Greyhound? Christ, I guess you really do love me."

"Well it's about time you noticed." Justin grabbed Brian in his arms and held him tight.

Justin awoke to find Brian staring at him. They had made love on the couch in Brian's office and fallen asleep. Justin turned on his side and smiled. "Do you realize that we're both homeless?"

"I hadn't noticed."

"I'll call my mother and start looking for an apartment for us this afternoon. When can I start work?"

"Change of plans. You're getting on a plane this afternoon and going back to New York."

"I'm staying here!" Justin protested.

"I don't care whose dream it was for you to go to New York. It was a good plan. We just went about it the wrong way. What you said last night about building a life together was right. We need to work together to accomplish our goals. For that reason you're going to New York alone. Like we planned from the beginning."

"I don't want to go back to New York. I belong with you."

"And you will be with me . . . in three months. That should be enough time to put it all together." Brian explained. "I've outgrown Pittsburgh. I've always wanted to move to New York. I almost did a few years ago, remember?"

"Of course I remember. But if you wanted to live in New York you could have done that a long time ago?"

"There was one thing that Pittsburgh had that New York didn't."

"Me?" Justin grinned.

". . . of course you."

"I don't want you to leave your home because of me, Brian."

"When you first met me, what was I doing? I was working for some asshole who would fire me in a heart beat if I didn't live up to his expectations."

"You made a lot of money for him."

"Now I make a lot of money for myself. And who's idea was it for me to go out on my own? Who inspired and encouraged me when I needed it?"

" . . . me again?" Justin grinned.

"Because of you I've set the bar higher for myself. You keep me on my toes. And you keep life from stagnating. Leaving Pittsburgh is not a sacrifice for me. It's a reward. New York is exciting. I'm getting hard just thinking about it."

"New York is expensive and scary."

"You're right. When you are alone any place can be scary. But if we can succeed in New York then we'll be the best homosexuals we can be . . . together. Now, here is the plan. You're never going to accomplish anything with me there in your way. I'm going stay in Pittsburgh and set things up here. I'll have to hire someone to run the artistic end of it. Ted will oversee the financial. I'll spend time recruiting people to set up a new office in New York. Once I get things going in Pittsburgh I'll be traveling for a while. I have some potential clients I am going to try to lure using the New York appeal."

"And how do I fit into your plan?"

"Without the distraction of having to work to feed yourself you should be able to get established in New York using your artistic talent instead of your ass. No more mentors like the 'DICK.' You're on your own, but only when it comes to your art. I want you to live at the apartment uptown."

"Brian, I can't . . . "

"You just promised me you'd live forever. It's not safe where you were living. It's cold, damp and depressing. Work there in the daytime, if you have to. Stay uptown at night. And it's not a gift. You're going to help me set up Kinnetic in New York. In between creating your art work and making contacts you'll find us a place to set up business. As soon as you find a building contact Ted about the financing. You'll also be in charge of construction and decorating. Nothing fancy. Kennetic is about stark reality. I want to keep the edgy feel to the new place."

Justin hesitated, but only for a moment. Brian's plan would bring them together, which was all that was important to Justin. "It's brilliant. Overwhelming, but brilliant. I'm exhausted already."

"Don't be a drama queen, get dressed and go catch a plane. Our future is in your hands."

"Why didn't we think of this before?"

"Because we're both as stubborn as shit."

"Working together we're invincible. I can hardly wait to get started."

"Before you leave . . ." Brian walked over to the desk and opened the top drawer. He took out the box that held the rings they had planned to use at their wedding. Brian held out the ring for Justin. Justin started to protest but saw that Brian was determined. He held out his hand and Brian placed the ring on his finger. Justin took the other ring out of the box and gestured for Brian to hold out his hand. He placed the ring on Brian's finger as they stared into each other's eyes.

"There's no going back now. I love you, Brian."

Brian walked out from behind the desk and pulled Justin into his arms. "Who said I would ever want to go back. Now, go work that Taylor magic in New York and I'll see you in three months."

Justin left Brian standing in his office holding the empty ring box. Brian whispered. "I love you too, Sunshine."

As Brian drove the Corvette across the Brooklyn Bridge it dawned on him that the city that lay before him was now his home. He had lived all his life in Pittsburgh and yet when he got in his car that morning the fact that Pittsburgh was no longer his home never crossed his mind. All he could think of was the one thing that New York had that Pittsburgh didn't . . . Justin.

Justin had never let a day go by without complete assurance from Brian that he was eating and getting enough sleep. Brian was made aware of each and every detail of the building of "Kinnetic NYC" and yet seeing it for the first time was a real awakening. He had finally arrived. Brian Kinney was about to make his mark in the "big pond."

He pulled the car into the loading dock behind the building. His heart skipped a beat when he saw Justin. He was giving instructions to two men Brian assumed were working on the exterior of the building. Justin's back was to him and Brian gripped the steering wheel and starred at Justin for a moment before getting out of the car. He knew the moment Justin saw him there would be chaos. Justin would probably jump on him and drag him into the janitor's closet for a quick blow job. A guided tour would be next with Justin talking a mile a minute describing everything in detail.

Brian beeped the horn and Justin turned to face him. For a moment Brian thought Justin hadn't seen him. The expression on his face was not what Brian had expected. It was dark and angry. Justin turned around and dismissed the workers. When he turned back, Brian was relieved to see the smile he had anticipated all the way from Pittsburgh. He got out of the car and felt Justin reach around his neck and hug him.

"For a minute I thought I'd have to turn around and drive back to Pittsburgh. What's wrong? Is the title 'construction boss' not something you want to put on your resume?"

"What are you talking about?" Justin still held Brian, but the smile had faded.

"You look pissed. Are they giving you a hard time?"

Justin pulled away and took Brian's hand. "Everything's fine. Let me show you around."

Brian followed Justin into the building. "I've kept it real, but New York real. I wanted you to feel at home so I thought . . . bath house. So far I finished the conference room, and most of the offices on this floor. Upstairs the art room and photography studio are getting started today."

"The place smells like snatch." Brian crinkled his nose. "What was it before, a brothel?"

"The smell is from the fish market. I know it's gross, but the building is huge and within your budget. Maybe you can upgrade your cologne a notch. What do you think, really?"

"I think . . . we're in business. Now let's get to the important stuff, where's the janitor's closet. Brian put his arms around Justin's waist and grinned. "It's been three months."

"But you haven't seen your office yet?" Justin said as he pulled Brian into the hallway. "Close your eyes." He instructed. They walked down a short corridor and then Justin announced "Open 'em."

Brian did as he was commanded. "Holy shit!" The room was decorated in black and white and chrome. Stark but not cold . . . New York real. On the far wall there was a circular stair case. Justin had already mounted the steps and beckoned seductively for Brian to join him. Without a word Justin opened a door at the top of the stairs and disappeared inside. Brian followed. He fumbled his way into a dark room using the walls to guide him.

Suddenly disco music filled the room and dim lights went on. A glittering disco ball hung over a circular bed on which lay a naked Justin. "It's your home away from home. When you get tired of working you can come up here and host an orgy."

Brian was not sure how he felt about the decor or the implication of Justin's comment. All he could think of at that moment was that Justin was laying naked in front of him. He stripped off his clothes and joined Justin on the bed. Their passionate need for each other was mutual. They didn't stop until several hours later when they heard the outer door of the building slam shut with a resounding crash. "What the fuck was that?" Brian demanded.

"The workers. They have to slam the door shut so it locks."

"Fuck. Does that mean I'm locked in here with you for the night? What if we run out of condoms?"

"I have a key." Justin got up and began to dress. " Don't worry you won't be locked in here with me."

Brian again sensed a change in Justin's demeanor. He reached out and touched Justin's hand. "I was kidding. I'd love to be locked away with you forever." He said sincerely.

Justin continued to dress. "I can't stay here forever. In fact you're on your own for a few hours. The show at the gallery is in two weeks. I have a lot work to do."

"I just got here."

"Brian, I'll be back. Why don't you take a nap? When I come back, we'll get something to eat and then go to a club or something." Justin kissed his cheek and was gone without further discussion. Brian sat up and looked around the dimly light room. Justin had created a backroom from hell and Brian realized that he felt sleazy and cheap. He got dressed and went downstairs to his new office.

When Justin came back two hours later, he carried with him two bags of take out. "You hungry?" He asked.

Brian was sitting at the desk. In his hand he held a framed photo. He put it down on the desk so it faced Justin. "Do you remember this?"

"It's a picture of us that was taken at the rehearsal dinner."

"Come here." Brian coaxed gently.

Justin put down the bags on the desk. He raised his arms to put them around Brian's neck but Brian stopped him. "I want to get something straight with you right now."

"That was my plan too," Justin smiled coyly.

"You're mad at me, aren't you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." Justin tried to move away but Brian pulled him back. The dark look that Brian noticed earlier has swept quickly across Justin's face. He turned away from Brian.

Brian dropped his grip on Justin's arm. He didn't say another word. Justin stared to unpack the food as Brian watched. He could see Justin's hand start to shake. A container of hot and sour soup dropped to the floor. "Fuck!" Justin called out as the hot liquid burned his leg. "Fuck, fuck, fuck . . . !"

Brian stood up as Justin lost control. "Fuck you, Brian Kinney!! Why did you fucking make me move to New York alone? This was so hard Brian!! It's been almost a year we haven't been together and I needed you!! Does that make me less of a man?"

"You need to know that your capable of being your own man."

"I've always been my own man. When you asked me to marry you I agreed to be YOUR man."

"Then why did you call off the wedding?"

"I didn't call off the wedding. We agreed."

"As I remember it you said you didn't want me to change. You want me to be the man who'd be planning orgies in that cheaply decorated imitation backroom you created upstairs."

"I fell in love with that man. I want you to be happy and enjoy your life the way you see fit to live it."

"If you love that man, you don't want me. I'm not that man any more. And I don't have any idea what more I can do to prove it to you."

Justin cross his arms and started pacing back and forth. He stopped in front of Brian with his arms still crossed he asked, "Are you doing this for me?"

"Justin, I'm not doing anything. It just happened. After you left I went back to Babylon. It wasn't the same. I kept thinking about how sexy you looked in that white shirt. Or how good it feels to come home and find you there. I guess I need you too." Brian attempted to smile but felt tears form in the corners of his eyes. "Do you think you could learn to love someone so pathetic?"

"Brian." Justin put his arms around Brian's neck and held him close. "I'm sorry I was shitty to you. This was the worst three months of my life. Not because of the work, but because I missed you SO much. Do you think we can work on our lives together from now on? Stop trying to push me away to save me or to make me a better homosexual. Okay?"

"No more miles between us." Brian assured him.

"No more nothing between us. We stay together no matter what."

"No matter what."

"Let's go home and make love."

"Meaningfully?"

"It's always meaningful for me, Brian. It always has been."

"Me too."

"I didn't know that".

"You have a lot to learn about the new Brian Kinney."

"Welcome home, Brian Kinney."

At the art show Brian noticed that the large crowd was studying a portrait of himself. "What is that?" Brian pulled at Justin's sleeve and pointed across the room. The oil painting was of a very sexy, handsome Brian Kinney dancing on the cat walk at Babylon.

"That is the focal point of my exhibit."

"I look fucking pathetic dancing alone like a freakin' loser."

"You didn't see the other side of the wall." Justin grabbed Brian's hand and dragged him to the other side. "This is our story."

Hanging on the wall were a dozen or so framed sketches. A few Brian recognized from years ago when they first met. Justin had included some of his work from the Rage comic also. On the far wall Justin had placed two dark paintings depicting the bashing and the bombing at Babylon. The last painting hung by itself on the back wall. It was a portrait of the two of them together. In the painting Justin is sitting at a desk working on a drawing. Brian is standing behind Justin with his arms around him. Justin's hand is reaching up to touch Brian's face revealing their matching rings.

"Our heros are together in Gayopolis and all is right with the world. Justin, what is all this? What happened to the dark, brooding gay statement you want to make with your art?"

"Just because I happen to be gay doesn't mean I have to be dark and brooding all the time. I don't want to be a gay crusader righting all the wrongs done to my people. I am Justin Taylor, human being, first. I happen to be gay and because of that fact life is never going to be simple. But that doesn't mean I can't fall in love and be happy."

"What does Dick the critic have to say about you're new exhibit?" Brian gestured toward Richard.

"He hates it. He said I'm finished in the art world." Justin smiled and waved at Richard. The man nodded his head and turned his attention toward a young female art student he had taken an interest in.

"You're career is over and that doesn't bother you?"

"He's just a critic, what does he know? Look at the crowd, Brian. They're the really important people and they love my work. They have the money to buy it and put it up on their walls in their mansions and galleries. Fuck the critics!"

I have a following already. I sold almost everything in my collection tonight and they are already asking if I have more."

"Too bad. I was hoping purchase a gritty Justin Taylor original for my new office."

"The portrait of you dancing at Babylon is yours. And this one too."

Justin pointed to a self portrait done in shades of gray. The figure stood alone in a foreboding dark room. His face was lifeless and cold as he worked fervently on a dark canvass.

"It's how I felt when I was alone in New York. I can still paint dark morbid images, Brian. Our lives are not going to be happy all the time. I want my work to reflect what I feel at a particular moment. I haven't sold out or gone 'Stepford' on you. We'll hang it near your portrait so we will always be grateful that we don't have to be alone anymore."

Brian found the portrait disturbing at first. But he understood what Justin was saying. "Even in black and white you're still hot."

"Thanks." Justin saw Cathy and motioned for her to join them.

"Brian this is Cathy. She's the one who made me realize there's more to life than bitterness and pain."

"Cathy this is . . . "

"No need for an introduction. Brian, I feel like we're good friends. I've had many a long conversation with your portrait over there. It's about time you got your head out of your ass and moved to New York. What were you thinking leaving this precious thing alone in the jungle for so long?"

"Actually it was Justin who left me alone in Pittsburgh. Do you always talk to the art work?"

"Only the hot gay studs. They're interesting."

"I've always said that."

"Cathy have you seen Maureen?"

"She's over there with Richard and his latest victim. Justin glanced over to see Richard with Maureen and a very young, blond man."

"This should be interesting." Brian took Justin by the arm and practically dragged him across the room.

"I don't think we've met. I'm Brian Kinney. Justin's . . . Justin what are you?"

"I'm fucked." Justin murmured under his breath. "Brian this is Maureen. She owns the gallery."

"Charmed." Brian kissed her hand. "Justin adores you."

"And you know Richard." Justin muttered under his breath.

"Dick, nice to see you're on your feet again. Syphilis can be such a drain." without a word the blond artist disappeared into the crowd. "Pity, I didn't get to give him my card." Brian produced business cards from his pocket and passed them to a shocked Maureen and Richard. "I was hoping we could get together and talk about Justin's future. Have you ever thought of launching an advertising campaign for your lovely gallery?" Brian smiled sweetly at Maureen who was struck speechless by Brian's charm. Richard huffed noisily at Justin and left the gallery.

"That was a happy ending." Cathy handed Justin a glass of wine.

"I like to think of it as a happy beginning." He smiled brightly and clinked his glass with hers.

"I'll drink to that."

"I love New York art shows." Brian announced as Justin undressed and put away his suit in the closet. "There are so many rich, needy people who are desperate for a good no nonsense advertising firm. I've booked appointments thru the end of the month. Kenetic NYC is off and running."

"And I made more money tonight than I've made the entire time I was in L.A. Maureen wants to plan another show as soon as I have enough pieces." Brian pulled back the covers and Justin crawled into the bed.

"We should have done something like this a long time ago, you and I." Brian said.

"Done what?"

"Team up. Do things together instead of miles away from each other."

Justin grabbed his pillow and hit Brian on the head. "Now you think of this?"

"Now that we are both successful business men in the greatest city in the world what do you want to conquer next? Europe, the Far East, Down Under?" Brian lifted up his arm and Justin snuggled down on his chest.

"There is something I want to do."

"What's that, my prince of the art world?"

"Go on our honeymoon. That's the one thing I regret about calling off the wedding. Maybe one day . . . "

"Where do you want to go? I'll make the travel plans."

"We can't go now. You just got here. We both have a lot of work and responsibilities."

"We'll make the time. Our first responsibility is to enjoy ourselves and have fun. Where do you want to go?"

"How about Toronto?"

"Toronto, not exactly the honeymoon capital of the world."

"I miss the guys. I miss Gus and I want to see little Jennifer."

"A family reunion honeymoon. If that's what you want, Sweetheart, Toronto it is. "

"Brian, look what we're doing. We're cuddling and talking. We've been in bed naked for what, ten whole minutes and you haven't even fondled my balls yet."

"That word . . . cuddle, has me fucking traumatized. You're not going to jump out of bed and tell me this is all a dream and I belong back at Babylon are you?"

"Of course not. Brian Kinney can cuddle me any time he wants."

"I've proven my worth. You're satisfied?"

"Completely satisfied." Justin melted into his arms

Part Two – Honeymoon

"Don't they have real planes that fly to Toronto?" Justin asked as he fastened his seat belt. "This is as bad as riding on a Greyhound bus."

"Maybe Kinnetic should look into buying it's own jet." Brian joked.

Justin laughed. "It will be a long, long time before Kinnetic reaches the Fortune 500, Bri. For now we're stuck with commercial transportation."

The flight was short and before they knew it they were on the ground in Canada. Michael picked them up at the airport and drove them to Mel and Lindsay's house. After hugs and kisses and play time with the children Justin volunteered to help Lindsay in the kitchen. Brian opted to accompany Michael to pick up Ben at the local college where he was teaching.

"Mikey you haven't changed a bit. You can't fucking drive to save your life."

"You're still pissed about the time that I swerved when that doggy ran in front of your jeep."

"You bashed my head into the door on purpose at a very crucial moment. I was about to teach Justin about the fine art of cock sucking."

"Like he'd need lessons in that?"

"He's a quick learner."

"Are you loving New York . . . and Justin?" Michael said as he grinned ear to ear.

"Fuck yes!" Brian grinned sheepishly. "Who would have thought a year ago that I'd be living in New York."

"Who'd have thought you'd be so in love." Michael teased.

Brian crinkled up his nose then smiled at Michael. "Does it show that much?"

"You're glowing." Michael smiled back as he pulled over to the curb to wait for Ben.

"Fuck you Michael."

"I miss you, Brian."

"Me too."

"Gus is a great kid. Ben and I have been spending a lot of time with him and Jenny Rose. He's getting plenty of masculine influence in his life so don't worry about that."

"It's clear that he loves Uncle Mikey, Uncle Ben and even Uncle Hunter. I wasn't sure that he'd remember me at all. But then he called me 'Uncle Daddy' so I guess I'm still in the game."

"He will always remember you. I'll make sure of it."

"Thanks, Michael. I'm glad that he has you around." Brian turned to face Michael. "Pittsburgh wasn't the same without you guys. I had a tough time for a while. Justin said I was confused."

"That's understandable, Brian. Your whole life changed in the course of a few months. One minute you're on your way to an orgy in Sidney, the next you're getting married. . . and then you're not getting married. You're not the only one was confused."

"Mickey, I consider you my oldest and dearest imitation hetero friend. This 'relationship' shit is tricky. I need some answers."

"I'm no expert on love, Brian. But Justin looks as happy as I've ever seen him."

"This is where it gets weird. I swear, Michael, if you open your big mouth about this to Justin I'll fucking tie your balls in a knot."

"Geez, Brian you are acting weird. Are you sick again?"

"NO!! I want to know if something is . . . normal."

"Normal for who?"

"For couples, asshole." Brian shifted in his seat again. "Let me just say this without joking around, okay?"

"Okay."

"I love Justin. I've loved him for a long time. . . probably right from the beginning."

"I know."

"We've been together, sort of, for five years, right?"

"You could say that."

"We've slept in the same bed, showered together, ate meals together and fucked about a million times."

"Really?"

"So why, after all these years, am I turning into a love sick fag? The closer I get to him, the more I want him. There's so much I don't know about him. If I hadn't been such an asshole I would have paid more attention to him. Justin can read me like a book. He knows every detail of my life. He's been studying me for five years. Michael, is this normal or are all the drugs I've taken finally destroyed what's left of my brain?"

"Usually that kind of thing happens at the beginning of a relationship when everything is new and mysterious. For you this is new. So yeah, it's normal. If things went on like they had been over the last five years you wouldn't be in love. You would be 'fuck buddies.' I'm glad you're finally joining the rest of us mere mortals. You, are love sick."

"Oh fuck! Is there a cure? Shock therapy, surgery, drugs? I can't take being normal, Mikey. I'll go insane."

"You need to talk to Justin."

"No fucking way! He'd have me committed."

"For five years you two have communicated in some kind of 'queer code'. But a lot is missing in the translation. You need to spend time alone with Justin. Away from distractions like the office and his art world. Concentrate on each other for a while. That's the reason most people take real honeymoons. To get to know each other on a whole different level."

At that moment Brian spotted Ben walking toward the car. "Remember, Michael, we never had this conversation."

Justin sat on a stool at the counter peeling potatoes while Lindsay checked the roast in the oven. "That smells great. Will you give me the recipe? I need all the help I can get in the kitchen. We've been living together in New York for two months and I'm running out of ideas."

"I thought you were a gourmet cook, Justin."

"I do love to cook for Brian. But with work and everything it's hard to get inspiration at dinner time."

"You must be doing something right. Both you and Brian look wonderful."

"Thanks."

"I was worried that he would feel abandoned when Michael came to Canada."

"He was pretty down. It was a rough time for us. I don't know what I was thinking, moving to New York without him. When we finally realized that we needed to be together Brian decided to make the move. I'm so proud of the way that he expanded Kinnetic. And when he finally did move to New York, I made him promise that we'd never spend that much time apart again."

"The two of you belong in New York City. It's such an exciting place. You must find inspiration for your art everywhere you look."

"I did, at first. The show was a big success and Maureen keeps asking when I am going to schedule another show. But the truth is I haven't painted anything but the bathroom in our apartment since the day of the show. My mind is frozen."

"That's not unusual, Justin. You have been distracted with your personal life. Stop putting so much pressure on yourself. Things will come together for you."

"I hope you're right. Linds, please don't tell Brian. He's been acting so weird lately I don't want to upset him."

"Of course I won't tell Brian. I hope nothing's wrong."

"I don't know what's wrong, or right with him anymore. I love him more every day, but he has changed so much since the bombing it's hard for me to know what is in his head."

"You should talk to him about it."

"No way!" Justin declared. "He never liked it when I put pressure on him to express his feelings. I've learned to read his moods pretty well. But lately he's been so . . . sweet. And I don't know what to make of that."

"Sounds to me like he's in love. The two of you are going to have to learn to communicate. You can't continue to try to read each others minds. It will only cause misunderstandings. Talk to him!"

Justin put away his brushes at noon. He'd hoped that the few days they had spent in Toronto would lift him out of his creative slump. But today he couldn't concentrate on his work at all. When he was alone in New York Justin's only solace was his art. Before he completed one canvass his mind was mapping out a vision for the next. Now he sat in front of a blank canvass and his mind wandered to menial things, like what Brian might want to have for dinner. Was it possible that the theory about artists needing to suffer in order to create was true? It worried him that domestic bliss had dried up his creative juices.

After the building which housed Kinnetic NYC was completed Justin picked out a space on the second floor to use as his studio. He wondered if this had been a mistake. Every time he got stuck on a project or got bored he would go and find Brian. They usually ended up taking a sex break in the middle of the day. It was wonderful to have Brian so accessible. But now Justin was having second thoughts. When he painted in his stark nasty smelling work space he was able to work for hours on end without any distractions.

On his way home Justin stopped at the grocery store and picked up some things he needed to prepare dinner. Before he left Kinnetic he looked for Brian but was told that he had gone out on appointments and was not expected back to the office. It was early afternoon and Justin assumed that he would have the apartment to himself. He planned on taking a nap before making dinner. When he opened the door he was surprised to hear the sound of the television. He put the groceries down on the table and then went to the sofa where Brian sat with a beer in his hand. He was watching a video tape of a three year old Justin learning how to swim. His dad held him tightly as he kicked and splashed in the family pool. Craig lifted up the boy and kissed him lovingly.

"Turn it the fuck off!" Justin yelled. He tried to get the remote out of Brian's hand.

Brian pushed him away. "You're not embarrassed about being naked are you? Little naked Justin . . . he's adorable."

Justin grabbed the remote and turned off the tape. "Where did you get this Brian?"

"Your mother sent it. What are you getting so pissed about?"

"The 'daddy' routine is bullshit. It's easy to love a cute little baby. But when that baby didn't meet his expectations it was just as easy for him to show much he hates me. So all of this stuff is bullshit."

"I wasn't watching it for the father/son bonding experience. I wanted to see baby Justin naked."

"You had no right to open my mail."

"It wasn't addressed to you, it was addressed to me."

"My mother sent you this?" Justin checked the address on the envelope which was lying on the coffee table. "Why would she do that?"

"Maybe she thought I would get a kick out of seeing you as kid. And she was right. So sit down here next to me and watch."

"I'm not sure how I feel about you and my mother conspiring."

"I know your father is an ass. But he's was a big part of your life back then and there's nothing you can do to change that. Unless I take the tape to the graphics department tomorrow and have him edited out. We could recast the part. Who would you like to play your father Justin?"

Justin rolled his eyes and sat down next to Brian. "I don't care about him. It's just that you know everything there is to know about me from day one. If there's anything you missed you could ask my mother. But I don't know one thing about your childhood."

"I thought Michael filled you in. The two of you conspired all the time."

"I mean before Michael, when you were little. You tell me something I don't know about you first. Then I'll watch the tape with you."

Brian sighed. "My childhood was a long time ago. There was nothing I want to remember, anyway."

"I don't believe that. You just don't want to share it with me." Justin pouted.

"Alright, what do you want to know?"

"Anything. Just one thing that no one else knows, not even Michael."

Brian thought for a moment and then he got up from the couch and went into the bedroom. He was gone so long that Justin thought he was not coming back.

"Hey, what are you doing in there, jerking off? Need some help?"

"Later," Brian called from the other room. He returned to the living room with a shoe box and put it down on Justin's lap without an explanation. Justin opened it and began to pull out picture after picture.

"Your baby pictures! How come I haven't seen these before?" Justin asked.

"You mean how come you never found them when you were snooping in my closet at home. I had them in the storage room. When I sold the loft I found them. I was going to chuck them but I thought that Gus might want to see what his old man looked like when he was a kid."

"All he would have to do is look in the mirror. He looks just like you, Brian." Justin grinned as he studied the pictures. "You were an alter boy?"

"Of course. In fact I thought about becoming a priest."

"What happened?"

"I found out what the word celibacy meant."

"I'm glad you changed your mind." Justin put the box aside and gave Brian a big hug. "Thanks for sharing them with me."

Brian picked up the remote and asked. "Can I roll the tape?" Justin nodded.

The both laughed as they watched a naked little three year old run around the pool edge while his father pretended to chase him. "I was cute." Justin proclaimed.

"You're still cute."

"Thanks"

Craig took over the camera at one point and Jennifer came into the picture.

"Your mother was fat?" Brian asked.

"She was pregnant."

"Your sister?"

"No, Molly's eight years younger than me. My mom had a miscarriage not long after this was taken. Twin boys. One died in the womb and the other lived just a few hours."

"That's rough. No wonder she loves you so much."

"I guess if my father had his wish, one of them would have lived in place of me."

"I am very glad that didn't happen."

"Me too" Justin agreed. "I can't believe we are sitting here watching home movies. If I had asked you to do this a year ago you'd have made fun of me for suggesting such an idea. The old Brian Kinney would have tossed the tape in the trash and thrown me out the door."

"You're right. The old Brian Kinney would have done just that. But what you don't know is that the minute you were out the door he would have taken the tape out of the trash and watched it alone in the dark."

"You mean the Brian Kinney 'I don't care about anything but fucking' persona was a fraud?"

"Only when it came to one cute little blond trick."

"Damn, Brian. That's another thing I never knew about you. Tell me more."

"I wouldn't want to ruin the illusion."

"I fell in love with an illusion?"

"Lucky for me."

Brian stirred when he heard Justin quietly slipped into the bedroom that night. He sat up in bed and turned on the light. Justin was sitting on a chair in the corner of the room rubbing his hands over his face. Brian pulled up the covers and patted the mattress next to him. "Are you coming to bed?" He asked sweetly.

Justin stripped off his clothes and got into the bed. "Sorry I took so long. I was looking for some aspirin. I have a headache." Justin kissed Brian passionately and began to fondle his balls.

Brian grasped Justin's hand and entwined their fingers. "We don't have to do this now if you're not feeling well."

"Sex is important, Brian. You're important."

"I am important." Brian said glibly.

Justin chuckled. "You are."

Brian smiled and gently ran the back of his hand over Justin's face. "I love the way you laugh."

"Really, you never told me that before."

"I never told you a lot of things."

"It's not too late."

"You tell me something first." Brian leaned back on his elbows. "I want to know what it was like for you, in the beginning when everything was new and mysterious."

"What?" Justin chuckled again. He looked up and Brian realized he was serious.

"Humor me." Brian said. Justin laid his head on Brian's chest and thought back to that moment in time when he first fell in love with Brian Kinney.

"All I ever wanted was just to be with you. Not just for the sex, which was great by the way. When you came into a room my heart would beat fast. My face would get warm . . . my whole body would get warm. When you weren't looking I would stare at you so I could memorize every inch of your face and your body. When I wasn't with you I would have conversations with you in my head. Of course when I actually saw you I got tongue tied and nothing came out right. But I loved talking with you, eating with you, sleeping next to you."

"I don't know why. I wasn't very nice to you. I'm surprised you stuck around. I didn't think you would."

"That's probably why I stuck around. If there was any chance that one day you'd feel half of what I felt for you it was worth it."

"It must have hurt."

"What?"

"All the times I put you down, pushed you away, shut you out. If someone did that to me I'd hate them."

"I could never hate you, Brian. You're a part of me." Justin asserted. "I'll always love you."

Brian silently considered the importance of what Justin has said. "Justin." Said softly. He noticed that Justin had closed his eyes and wondered if he had fallen asleep.

"Yeah," Justin mumbled sleepily.

"Why are you so sure you will always love me? I'm not complaining or baiting you. I know I'll always feel the same about you too. But it doesn't really make sense does it. After a while you would think we'd get tired of each other. I'm twelve years older and one day you just might wake up and find out that I'm not quite as hot as I was when you met me."

Justin rolled over on to his back and laughed out loud. "I keep wondering when you're going to realize that you'll be stuck fucking the same trick every night for the rest of your life. If anyone is going to get bored it should be you."

"Bored with you? You get hotter every day. Just looking at you gets me hard."

"What if I get fat?" Justin teased.

"I'll drag your flabby ass to a gym."

Brian kissed Justin gently and passionately. Justin closed his eyes and let Brian take the lead. In his mind he went back to their first night together. Their first kiss, the pain, the joy, all of it was indelibly etched in his memory. Brian was his first love and the only man that he could ever love. Justin felt Brian enter him and his body spasmed like it always did out of pain and joy. They took their time making love that night. They gently touched for a long time before falling asleep in each others arms.

When Justin awoke the next morning Brian was getting dressed. "Where are you going?"

Brian kissed him on the top of his head. "I've got some calls to make. Go back to sleep."

"No, I'm awake. I'll make you breakfast." Justin attempted to pull the covers off.

"No, I'll make you breakfast. You deserve it. You were incredible last night."

Justin grinned. "I was incredible. But so were you. And you really can't cook sweetheart. I'll make breakfast."

Brian sighed. "I was going to wait till I made the arrangements to tell you this."

"A surprise for me!"

"We are going on a real honeymoon to Europe. I want to take you to Paris."

"Brian! We can't go away now." Justin protested. "You have so much responsibility at Kinnetic. It's not practical to go on a vacation with your business growing every day. I don't need a trip to Europe."

"It's not a vacation. And it's not for you, it's for me."

"What do you mean?"

"I want what you described that you felt in the beginning. You had your chance to get to know me from the inside out. I never paid attention to you that way and I feel like I missed something."

"We have our whole lives ahead of us Brian. I think you know me very well. A little too well sometimes. "

"It's not the same. I want to be closer to you and I can't do that with all the distractions of work. I want to be alone with you for a while. It's important to me."

"I never knew you had these feelings."

"I didn't until you called off the wedding. I felt it all slipping away just when I was getting used to the thought of having you as my husband for the rest of my life."

"I didn't call off the wedding, Brian. We agreed that it wasn't the time."

"That's how much you know. WE didn't agree. I didn't want to keep you from having your own career. I always did want to marry you. I still do."

Justin pulled back the covers and got out of bed. He put his arms around Brian and hugged him tightly. "What do they wear in Paris this time of year?"

Brian sat in his office at Kinnetic waiting for the next candidate to arrive. He had hired a head hunter to seek out someone with extensive experience in the advertising business to assist him. He intended to have Cynthia come to New York while he was away in Europe to oversee things and to make sure the new person wouldn't get out of hand. Ted would take care of things in Pittsburgh but he still needed someone in charge to keep the clients happy. Pittsburgh would have to wait. Kinnetic NYC was his home base now and finding the right people was extremely important. He had been interviewing all week and he was beginning to get nervous. Their trip was only two weeks away and Brian wanted everything in place as soon as possible.

The candidate he was seeing this morning had come highly recommended by a firm in Chicago. Brian was about to go over the resume when his secretary buzzed him to say that the candidate had arrived. Since his time was limited today he buzzed her back to say that the candidate was to come right to his office. When the door opened Brian looked up and almost dropped his coffee cup. Kip was standing in front of him.

"What the fuck are YOU doing here?"

"Brian, it's been a long time. I see you already have my resume. And you are familiar with my work. So we're ahead of the game." Kip took a seat opposite Brian's desk.

Brian put down the resume and grabbed him by the shoulders. "You sued me you little bastard. You almost ruined my career five years ago. Why the fuck do you think I would give you a job?"

"Brian," Kip grinned as he removed Brian's hand from his shoulder. "You won. I had you by the balls and you defeated me. That's exactly why I'd be an asset to you. You know my work. I'm good. So I tried a little dirty trick. I conceded to your brilliance. You out smarted me. I know my place and you know where you stand with me. I have to say that I have always admired you."

Brian was astonished at the gaul of the man. But he was also confused. He never did know why Kip dropped the suit. Apparently it was something he had done that had convinced him. This was his chance to find out more.

"How do I know what else you're capable of. I must say it took real balls for you to show your face here after what you did."

"Look, I didn't know how old he was. He was one hot little piece of ass. You really got me with that blackmail scheme. He had me convinced that I'd spend the next ten years in jail once his father found out I was into kids. Where did you ever find that kid?"

"I don't remember, in an alley somewhere."

"You paid him to blackmail me, very clever. I respect your intelligence. I know I am no match for you in any way professionally or personally. I hope you can put our former issues aside and consider me for the job."

Brian almost burst out laughing. But then he began to think of a reason not to hire Kip. He was a brilliant, creative ad man. Brian knew he could do the job. He knew that Kip was not to be trusted, but then if he hired a stranger he wouldn't know if he could trust him or not. With Kip his guard would be up. Brian made his decision.

"You're hired. On a temporary basis. I'm going out of the country and I need work done on some campaigns. Come in early tomorrow. And know this. I don't like you, I don't trust you, and on a personal level I don't want you here. But this is a business and as a businessman I know you have the potential to do the job I need done. If you fuck up, you're fired. If you fuck with me or my clients I'll have you killed. Cynthia will watch you like a hawk. Now get the fuck out of my sight."

Kip got up to leave. "You won't be sorry Brian."

After Kip left Brian went directly up to Justin's studio. Justin had his back to the door when Brian came in. Brian took him by the shoulders and turned him around. "You've been keeping something from me, haven't you?"

"Brian what are you talking about?" Justin tried to break free but Brian held him tighter.

"One night a few years back when you were still in high school, in an alley with my enemy. You fucked him."

"Fucked who?" Justin pretended not to know what Brian was talking about.

"KIP! You fucked him and then blackmailed him to drop the suit."

"Who told you that?"

"The fucker himself. Kip was in my office not five minutes ago. What do you have to say for yourself young man?"

Justin looked up at Brian defiantly "I did fuck him. I told him that the last man I fucked went to jail because my father found out. And if he didn't want my father to find out, he had to drop the suit." Justin smiled coyly. Brian cracked up laughing and Justin joined in.

"How did you ever think of that? And why didn't you tell me about it?"

"No one else was doing anything to help you. They were all blaming you for acting like a pig all your life. They were glad that you were finally going to have to pay. So I had to help you. If you had known back then that I'd interfered you would have been pissed at me. So I didn't tell you"

"You're right. I would have told you off and thrown you out."

"You'd already thrown me out. I was living with Debbie."

"What the hell was wrong with me? I must have been insane not to see what I had with you."

"You caught on eventually."

"Marry me, asshole!"

"Let's see how the honeymoon goes."

"I'm serious." Brian pressed.

"So am I. I want things to stay just as they are now. Marriage might fuck us up."

"One day."

"Maybe, one day."

"I've got to get back to work."

"Brian what was Kip doing here?"

"He came in for a job. Can you believe the nerve of that guy?"

"Fuck no! What did you tell him?"

"I hired him."

"What!"

"I'll explain later. I have some calls to make to Pittsburgh. I need to make sure everything can run smoothly for a few weeks, especially since I asked Cynthia to come to New York while we're gone. Ted is great, but he's no ad man."

Over the next few days Brian filled Kip in on the jobs he wanted done. He kept it simple and only gave Kip the clients that he was sure would be loyal to him should he try to pull anything. A few calls to his staff in Pittsburgh and his mind was at ease. For the next three weeks Kinnetic and the art world would have to do without them. He and Justin were going to Europe to rediscover each other.

"This was a great idea, Brian. Traveling by train we get to see the whole country side. It's so beautiful." Justin had been staring out the window since the train pulled out of the station in Paris. They were headed south to Naples, Italy. Justin found the colors outside the window fascinating.

"I've gone through life with my head in the clouds. The only thing I remember about my last trip to Paris was the lousy blow job from the bell hop and the crappy weather. It's about time I slowed down and enjoyed the sunshine. No chance of suffering through a substandard blow job with you as a traveling companion."

"I learned from the master." Justin grinned and winked at Brian.

"No winking, remember we don't want to stand out in the crowd. We're not out to make a statement for gay rights. I just want get to where we're going in one piece."

"I want you to know that I don't agree with taking off our rings and leaving them at home. If we want to wear rings it's no one's business but ours."

Brian had put on his headphones and pretended not to hear. Leaving the rings at home was what was best for both of them. Travel can be dangerous when you're not drawing attention to yourself. He had to admit that he had gotten used to wearing the ring on his left hand.

Justin noticed that the train had slowed and then come to a stop. He looked out the window and saw what appeared to be police vehicles surrounding the train.

"Brian, wake up!" Justin pulled on Brian's sleeve. "I think there's something . . ."

Before Justin could finish his sentence an angry looking man in a blue uniform entered the car.

"Tutto deve rimuovere immediatamente il treno!" The man shouted.

The other passengers quickly got up and began to exit the car. Brian and Justin looked at each other as they got up and followed the crowd.

Brian leaned toward Justin and whispered. "We're traveling on business. You work for me . . . understand?"

"Not really."

"This could be serious shit. We don't want to call attention to ourselves. Put on your jacket and try not to look so gay."

If the situation had not been so urgent Justin would have been offended by Brian's comment. He did what Brian told him and put his jacket on. Once they were outside of the train there were more angry looking men in blue uniforms yelling at the crowd in Italian. Brian and Justin did as the other passengers and lined up along side of the car. Each person was asked to produce and I.D. Brian and Justin showed their passports.

More emergency vehicles arrived with sirens blaring. At least 50 more men in blue uniforms emerged from their vehicles and entered the train. The frightened passengers stood along side the tracks.

"What do you think is going on, Brian?"

"Damned if I know."

A young woman with dark hair who was standing next to Brian spoke. "They are the international security task force. Someone must have reported a threat." She had a slight Italian accent. "My name is Francesca."

"Do you think we should be talking?" Brian asked. He was aware that she was flirting with him. His suspicions were confirmed when two uniformed men approached and she grabbed Brian's arm.

She produced her documentation and spoke to them in Italian. "Ciò è il mio fiancé." She clung tightly to Brian's arm. He was about to pull away when one of the officers pointed a gun at Justin and commanded. "Venuto con me!"

Brian stood by helplessly as Justin was dragged back onto the train. He turned to the woman who was still holding on to his arm. "Where are they taking him? What did they say?"

"They will search him."

"Why?"

"They are suspicious. He could be a terrorist."

"He's not a fucking terrorist. He's a tourist. They have no right to put a gun to his head."

"If they don't find anything they will release him. You should not worry about your friend."

The woman was beginning to annoy him. "Maybe I should worry about you. What did you tell that cop?"

Francesca smiled coyly. "Not to worry. They are not looking for a handsome young couple traveling together. You are safe with me."

"I am not WITH you."

"Let's take a walk." She took his arm.

"Fuck off!" Brian pulled away and began walking in the direction they had taken Justin. He walked along the train straining to see inside the windows. Most of the officers had boarded the train. He could see them moving around in the cars searching for something. The ones that remained outside did not appear to be a threat to the passengers. It was almost an hour later when he saw Justin jump down from the one of the cars. He ran over and grabbed Justin by the arm. "What happened?"

"What do you think happened? They asked a bunch of questions and then I got searched." Justin said calmly.

"Did they say anything?" Brian heard the fear reflected in his own voice.

"Nothing I could understand. They took a bunch of us to the dining car and made us strip down. One guy who spoke Italian said that there was a bomb scare and they suspected it was college students. That's why they searched me, because I'm young and look like a student."

"Did they hurt you?" Brian asked anxiously.

"No worse than my first time." Justin joked.

"You think this is funny?"

"No, but being stripped search in public does have it's perks. See that guy over there? He's huge! And that guy in the blue sweater shaves his balls."

"Great. I'm out here planning how to explain to your mother why I had to return from Italy without you and you're checking out the scenery."

"Come on Brian, they let me go. What am I supposed to do, freak out? Let's get out of here." Justin picked up his carry on and started walking.

"Where are you going?"

"They said we could leave. They're going to load our luggage onto a bus and bring it to the next station when they are done searching it."

"We have to walk to Naples?"

"Of course not. The next town is about five or six miles south. Unless you want to wait here a day for the next train, we walk."

"Great, just great." Brian picked up his bag and started walking. Justin sensed that Brian was angry about something more than the inconvenience.

"Hey," Justin called after him. "Wait up." Justin had to practically run to keep up with his partner's long legged stride. Brian's silence was starting to piss him off.

"Aren't you forgetting your fiancé?" Justin asked sarcastically.

Brian stopped in his tracks and turned to face Justin. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"That girl with the dark hair you were talking to. I heard her tell the police officer that she was your fiancée."

"I know what she said. I can hear." Brian snapped. "I let them think what ever the hell they wanted to think so they'd leave me the fuck alone. Would you rather I make a scene?"

"No. I can understand that you were trying to blend in. Gays attract attention, right. So if you are with a girl you don't stand out. But did you ask your self why she said that? What was SHE hiding? And now she's disappeared. Maybe she was using you to blend in. Brian, she could be the terrorist."

As they continued on their walk Brian considered what Justin had suggested. They were not alone on the road as several other passengers had joined them. Brian turned to Justin and spoke softly so not to be overheard. "I'd do it again. I don't care if she blows up the fucking train as long as you and I are far, far away. If I protested there would have been a scene and then you'd be the one explaining the details of my fate to your mother."

"You're right. If looking straight gets you off the hook, who am I to question you?"

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"What the fuck did you mean when you said I looked gay?"

"Forget what I said! It's over!"

"Okay, fine by me."

After about an hour Brian started to slow his pace. "Shit! Gucci's are not made for walking."

"Your black flip flops are in your carry on. Maybe you should change. Oh, wait, you don't want to look too gay."

"Shut the fuck up! How much further is this fucking town, anyway? It's getting dark."

"I think I see lights up ahead. It can't be too far."

One half hour later they arrived at the town. It was already dark when they dropped their bags on the bed of a small hotel room they were able to get for the night. They had not spoken a word to each other since they arrived. Brian sat on the bed and removed his shoes and rubbed his aching feet. Justin stripped off his shirt and went into the bathroom to wash his face.

Justin broke the silence when he came back into the room. "Brian, do you really think I look gay?"

"I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

"Be honest." Justin pressed for an answer.

"Sometimes. It depends."

"On what?"

"What's the difference. I love the way you look. I think you're hot and that's all that matters."

"When you said it on the train you meant it. I know you were trying to protect me. But I don't understand what you think I could do to NOT look gay. So tell me one thing."

"The way you walk. And don't say 'what's wrong with the way I walk,'" Brian said in a mocking tone. "I don't think there is anything wrong with it. It's cute and I love to watch you move, but you walk gay."

"So I walk gayer than, say . . . you."

"I don't walk gay."

"You think you look straight?"

"If I had to compare me to you, yes. I look straighter."

Justin grinned and turned to walk back into the bathroom scratching his butt. "How's this?" he asked as he farted.

"Much better."

Brian was relieved that the tension between them seemed to be over. They ate dinner at a bar two blocks from the hotel. Exhausted from the walk they went to bed early. Justin snuggled his head on Brian's chest.

Brian hesitated a moment before he spoke. "I want to ask you something."

"Ask me what?"

"Back in Pittsburgh, when you felt threatened by someone you fought back. You've never been afraid to say what's on your mind, even if it gets you into trouble. Today you were violently dragged into that train and strip searched with out any explanation. But when you came out you shrugged it off. You didn't act outraged or scared. You acted like you enjoyed it. I want to know why."

"I was outraged and scared. But I realized that I had no control over the situation. Being my normal pushy obnoxious self would have gotten me nothing but trouble. I decided to stop thinking with my brain and start thinking with my dick. It made the situation a lot less stressful."

"Instead of acting like yourself you acted like I would have."

"I guess I did. Now I know why you're always so calm. Thinking with your dick makes life so much more enjoyable."

"What is your dick thinking now?"

"It's thinking how good it would feel if you would kiss it."

"What a coincidence, my dick is thinking the same thing."

Brian awoke the next day to Justin's bright smiling face. "Good morning, Sunshine." He managed to mumble. The excitement of the day before had taken its toll. Every muscle in his body ached.

Justin grinned at him. "I'm starving. I was waiting for you to wake up."

"Keep waiting." Brian tried to roll over but Justin pulled him back.

"We have to get to the next train stop before noon. I had the desk call the railroad. Come on Brian, get up." Justin pulled at the covers. Brian obeyed. He slowly rose and staggered off to the bathroom while Justin got his clothes ready.

"Sorry we don't have our luggage." Justin said when Brian came back into the room. "You have to wear the same clothes."

Brian shrugged and started getting dressed.

They decided to eat at a café across the street from the hotel. While Brian studied the menu Justin studied the waiters. "You must be tired." Justin teased. "You haven't even noticed that cute waiter staring at you."

Brian turned to look and the waiter nodded at him. Brian nodded back. "I must have fucked him in a former life."

"You don't remember him?"

"Of course not. There's only one trick I care to remember."

"Apparently he remembers you."

"Maybe I fucked him the last time I was here."

"You were here before, in this town?"

"I've been to Italy before. I don't remember the towns, the bars or the tricks."

"Oh." Justin

"What?" Brian sensed there was more.

"You've been just about everywhere. I was hoping that there would be one place that we were seeing for the first time together."

"You've been to Europe before also."

"When I was a kid. I don't remember much, except maybe the art museums."

Brian put down the menu and gave Justin his full attention. "I'm sorry that yesterday ruined our trip."

"It didn't ruin our trip. It made it more exciting."

"Having a gun put to your head is exciting for you?"

"It will make an interesting travel story."

On the way back to the hotel Justin happen to notice a picture in a newspaper. "Holy shit! I was right Brian. There's a picture of that girl, Francesca. The police have arrested her. She must have been involved in that bomb threat."

Brian grabbed the paper out of Justin's hand. From what little Italian he could read he realized that Justin was right. He opened the newspaper and inside there were more pictures that were taken outside of the train. In one of the photos Francesca was holding him by the arm.

"Of fuck! That's why that waiter was staring at me. He thinks I'm a terrorist."

"Brian, if the police were suspicious of you they never would have let you leave."

"But the locals will get a big thrill out of turning me in just in case. I wish the fuck we had flown to Naples. Better yet, flown to Hawaii."

"Forget the picture Brian. We have to get a move on if we are going to catch that train."

"Fuck the train. Get our stuff!" Brian told him. "I'm not getting on that train again." He left Justin in the lobby of the hotel.

One hour later they were in a car on their way to the nearest airport. "You never cease to amaze me." Justin mused. "One minute we're on our way to Naples by train, the next we're on our way to the airport to destinations unknown. When are you going to tell me where we're going?"

"We are going to a place I've never been. My bet is you haven't been there either. For now and forever it will be OUR place."

Justin threw his arms around Brian and kissed him on the cheek. Brian reluctantly pushed him away. "We're not out of this God forsaken country yet. Let's not press our luck."

"Please tell me where we're going! Justin begged. "I promise not to have been there before, even if I have."

Brian laughed. "We are about to board a plane to glorious Monte Carlo."

Justin grinned from ear to ear. "Perfect."

Monte Carlo was perfect. The beautiful scenery and the excitement of the casinos suited them. They spent the entire first day of their visit making love in their room. The room had a spectacular view of a marina. Justin stood in the window looking out over the harbor when he felt Brian come up behind him and enfold his arms around him.

"I love it when you do that. It makes me feel surrounded by you." Justin turned around and kissed Brian tenderly.

"That's how I want you to feel . . . always." Brian smiled down at him. "Let's go back to bed and fuck some more."

Justin grinned mischievously. "Later." Still grinning he went into the bathroom. Brian got back under the covers and reached for the room service menu.

"Do you want to order something in?" Brian called out to Justin. There was no response from behind the bathroom door. Ten minutes later Brian got out of bed, went to the bathroom door and knocked. "Hey, are you jerking off in there? What the fuck are you doing?" Still no answer. Brian waited another five minutes. He was beginning to worry. "Justin, are you okay? If you don't answer me I'll break the fucking door down."

Finally Justin called out "I'm not ready."

Brian was relieved to hear Justin's voice but was confused. "Ready for what? What are you doing in there young man?"

"Okay, I'm ready. Back away from the door. I want to make an entrance."

Brian did as he was told. A minute later Justin emerged from the bathroom. Brian gasped at his appearance. "Where the fuck did you get that?"

"I bought it downstairs in the lobby while you were checking in. How do I look?" Justin asked grinning from ear to ear.

Brian wasn't sure what to say, "Justin what kind of game is this? You look hot. Amazingly hot. But there's something way off here. You look straight. Where are you going dressed like that?"

Justin was dressed all in black. The black shirt that he wore was opened at the neck revealing a gold chain. He had moussed his hair and put on a heavy dose of cologne.

"That's the look I was going for. I am going down to the casino to pick up a woman."

Brian was shocked. "Why? What are you going to do with a woman?"

"I don't know, talk to her I guess. I want to see if I can pass. Like you did. In fact if you're interested maybe we can play a little game."

"What game?" Brian asked.

"You get dressed in your most fabulous straight man suit and come down to the casino. The first one who picks up a woman wins."

"What do I get when I win?"

"What you always get. Me! On the bottom. But if I win, I get to top you all night."

"If that's what you want there's no need for this demeaning charade. I'll let you top me right now."

"Let me! You'll let me! " Justin put both his hands on Brian's chest and pushed him playfully.

"Calm down. I'll play your little game. But we up the stakes. When I win we get married as soon as we get back home."

"Why is that so important to you all of a sudden? I told you we don't need to get married . . . ever. We're together because we want to be together."

"Here we are in beautiful Monte Carlo. We spent the whole day in bed devouring each other. Then you get dressed up like a miniature mafia hit man and tell me you're going to pick up a woman to prove a point. I never know what you're going to do next. How long before you get bored with me?"

"That's not ever going to happen. I don't want you to get bored with me. I just wanted to have a little fun and see if I could do it. Forget it, let's order in."

"No. You want to prove your manhood. I can understand that. I treat you like a pet, not like an equal partner. Is that what this is all about?"

"Yes. I guess it is. You're always going to be older, but that doesn't mean you have to protect me from the world. I want to see how other people perceive me, Justin Taylor . . . not Justin Taylor, gay boy."

"Justin Taylor, gay man, is someone that I am very proud of. Don't knock him."

"I am proud to be gay. But I don't want that to be the first thing people know when they meet me."

"You're an artist. Actors, artists it's always the same, even if you look straight people will assume that you're gay."

"I want to see if I can do it. You can stay here if you want."

"No, the bet is on. In fact I'll give you a head start while I get dressed."

Justin smiled and started toward the door. Brian started to laugh. "Maybe you better work on that walk first."

"Fuck you, Brian. I'll meet you at the first roulette table to the right of the bar with a really hot chick on my arm. May the straightest man win."

Brian took great care getting dressed. He checked the mirror and decided to put on a blue shirt instead of the black he had picked out. Justin had a 20 minute lead on him but he knew that he would have no trouble picking up a woman at the bar. In fact women hit on him as much as men do. On the other hand Justin did have a certain teddy bear appeal that some women might be attracted to.

He took the elevator to the casino and found the bar right away. Within 15 minutes he had struck up a conversation with a tall exotic looking black woman. He bought her a drink and made the suggestion to hit the roulette table. It was early in the evening and the casino was not too crowded. He found a spot at the table that he and Justin agreed

upon. Brian looked around for Justin but he was nowhere in sight. The woman that had followed him to the table had a tight hold on his right arm. He gently pulled free and put down his bet. Another few minutes went by and there was still no sign of Justin.

The woman next to him was becoming impatient. "I have a room at this hotel. You're not doing very well at the table. Maybe you will get lucky in my room." She cooed in his ear.

Brian smile sweetly and called to the waitress to bring them another round of drinks. "Not yet. I have a feeling I'm ready to hit big." He again looked around for Justin and finally spotted his blond head at a table near the bar. Justin saw him and waved. Brian pointed to the woman that he'd picked up. Justin nodded his head but kept on talking to the blonde woman who sat at the table with him. They were engrossed in conversation and Brian noticed that he was holding her hand. He continued to bet at the roulette table until he realized that the woman he'd picked up was now talking to a bald man at the next table.

Justin was still at the table by the bar laughing and holding hands with the blonde. Brian was confused. If Justin has merely picked up this woman to play a game why didn't he make it all the way to the roulette table to win the bet. The game was over as far as Brian was concerned. He walked over to the bar to claim his partner.

Justin saw him approach the table. He stood up, grabbed his arm and turned him toward the woman that he had been talking to. "This is Brian Kinney. The man I told you about." The woman smiled sweetly and said hello. Brian smiled back then look questioningly at Justin. "Brian this is Rome Astor. She is here on vacation with her family. They own this hotel."

"Really?" Brian pushed Justin down in the booth, shoved him over and sat down next to him.

"I was telling her about Kinnetic. She's moving to New York in a few months to start a cosmetic company. I gave her your card. Brian will put your company on the map in no time."

"Justin tells me you're brilliant, Mr. Kinney."

"Not as brilliant as he is." Brian beamed at Justin. "I hope you gave her your card too." He turned to Rome and smiled sweetly, "Justin is an artist. He has a gift for capturing beauty such as yours."

"In fact, that's what we were talking about." Rome explained. "I had seen an article written about him recently. When I saw him sitting here I got up the courage to introduce myself. We've had an interesting talk." At that moment a man and woman came into the bar and Rome waved to them. "My parents and I are going to dinner. I hope to see you again before you leave. It was a pleasure meeting you both."

Justin turned to Brian after Rome was out of earshot. "What do you think? She's got big bucks. Her family has more money and influence than the Hiltons. She likes me and she is moving to New York." Justin couldn't stop smiling.

"You're my little advertising genius. You're brilliant! I hope she calls you to do a portrait."

"Brian, she is going to do a portrait. I made an appointment with her to come to Kinnetic in a month. I have her phone number and address in New York. Park Avenue of course."

"She came to your table and picked you up. You didn't even have to buy her a drink and she's your new best buddy."

"Of course I bought her a drink. She's sweet."

"I saw how attached you became . . . to her hand."

"So, she grabbed my hand when we were talking. It didn't mean anything. I told her I was gay and she kept holding it. I think she's just affectionate like that."

"Right."

"You won the bet, Brian. I saw you at the table with that woman. She was a woman, wasn't she? From here it was hard to tell."

"She was gorgeous, I think she was real. I'm not so sure I won the bet. You had your woman first. Why didn't you drag her over there first thing. You could have won easily."

"I forgot all about the bet when we started talking. All I could think about was how great it would be to hook you up with her business."

"Let's call it a draw. We both win."

"Do you want to get married in N.Y. or Pittsburgh?"

"I'm not going to marry you."

"Why not?"

"Too easy. We have to both want it. Until then we'll live in sin."

"You want to go upstairs?"

"Let's take a walk. Two hot guys like us shouldn't be shut up behind closed doors all the time. There must be an alley with our names on it somewhere in this burgh."

The next morning Justin got up early and went out to the pool with his sketch pad. Since their adventure on the train he had not had the opportunity to draw. He had not been so inspired in a long, long time. What went through his

mind were the colors of the countryside they saw on the train and the beautiful scenery that surrounded him at the pool. His concentration was broken when a shadow came across the pad he was using. He looked up and saw Rome smiling down at him.

"Hi. I saw you out here and I got curious. Do you mind if I see what you're working on?"

Justin handed her the pad. "They're just rough sketches of the marina. I never really did landscapes but I have to admit that this scenery just blows me away. The colors are so intense."

"These are beautiful. You are very talented."

"They're just drafts. I might put them on canvas when I get home."

"If I could draw like this I'd never be without a pencil in my hand. It must be very rewarding for you."

"Art has always been my passion. But to be honest lately I haven't been inspired. That was one of the reasons we took this trip. It feels good to be able to put my vision on paper."

"Are you married?" Rome sat down on the corner of the chaise lounge Justin occupied.

"No." He shrugged shyly. "I told you that I was gay."

"Brian is the love of your life. I can see that from just looking at the two of you together."

"Brian is the love of my life. We almost got married but we weren't ready then. Now I am not so sure I need that kind of public declaration. We're perfectly happy the way we are now. Why fuck it up?"

"I know what you mean. My parents are very anxious for me to get married to the right kind of man. They would love you."

"Hello, I'm gay, remember." Justin joked.

"That wouldn't bother them. You're an upcoming artist. Handsome and well bred. You'd be the perfect accessory at parties."

"Thanks, I think. But Brian wouldn't appreciate sharing our bed."

Rome threw her head back and laughed. Justin noticed Brian walking toward them. Brian bent down and kissed Justin on the head. "Good morning, Sunshine. What's for breakfast?"

"Good morning, Brian." Rome said. "I was just telling Justin how much I like his work. As soon as I get back to New York I want a personal tour of your studio."

"Anytime. We're always open at Kinnetic NYC." Brian said cheerfully. "Would you like to join us for breakfast?"

"No thank you. I have a date." Rome got up to leave " I'll see you both in a few weeks."

Brian sat on the chaise where Rome had been sitting. He rubbed Justin's foot. "I missed waking up next to you."

Justin sat up straight in the chair. "I was drawing. It seems I have somehow morphed into a landscapist."

Brian took the pad from Justin and leafed through the pages. "Very nice. I can't wait to see how you put them on canvas. You truly are a genius."

"Thanks. Let's get that breakfast now."

One week later Justin again stood in the widow that over looked the marine with Brian's arms embracing him.

"Are you sad?" Brian asked.

"Why would I be sad? I get to go home with you."

"True. Still, it's back to the old grind on Monday."

"I can't wait. I'm so full of ideas. Brian thank you for this trip. I'm revitalized."

"You've accomplished your goal on this trip. You needed to reinvent yourself and awaken your creative juices. I wish I could say the same."

"What do you mean, Brian? Was the trip disappointing for you?"

"To be honest my purpose in taking this trip was to unravel the mystery that is Justin Taylor."

"Mystery?"

"You constantly amaze me. There are so many facets of Justin Taylor that I'm afraid I'll never keep up. I'll never know you the way you know me."

"Maybe that's a good thing. To tell you the truth I'm learning things about myself that I never knew. Like that I could find inspiration in trees, flowers and blue skies where my inspiration had always come from the human form."

"You're growing up. I'm growing old."

"Will you cut that out. You will always be young and beautiful to me. And you've made a few changes yourself in the past year. I'm not so sure I have you figured out completely either."

"Then we will just have to keep unraveling each other's mysteries."

Justin grinned. "Why don't we start unraveling each other's robes. Who knows we may find some clues " Justin undid Brian's robe, put his hand on Brian's face and kissed him. He felt his own robe fall to the floor as Brian lifted him in his arms and laid him gently on the bed.

Epilogue:

The cab pulled up in front of their apartment building and Brian paid the driver while Justin collected the bags. It had been an exciting time for both of them. But sleeping on the plane was not the same as sleeping in their bed. They were both exhausted and ready to settle in at home. When they got to the door Justin pulled out his key and then realized that the door had been forced opened. They entered the apartment and saw that they had been robbed. When they turned on the lights they saw the word "Die Faggots" scrawled on the wall in red paint. Justin felt the anger rise within him. When he looked over at Brian and saw the hurt in the man's eyes he stopped himself. He dropped the bag he was carrying and went to the bedroom. When he came back he took Brian's hand.

"They didn't get our most valuable possessions." Justin put Brian's ring on his finger. Brian grabbed Justin and held him as tightly as he could. It had been a cold welcome home from a perfect honeymoon.

Part Three - Baby Steps

Brian yawned as the plane taxied into the Pittsburgh airport. The constant balancing act of managing both offices plus keeping tabs on Babylon was draining. Pittsburgh no longer seemed like home to him. If not for his business connections and his few remaining friends all ties had been broken. New York had become his home and Justin had become his family.

Ted greeted him at the airport and gave him a list of concerns that he thought should be addressed on this trip. Brian kept up with the financial reports and personnel issues via email with the office. He'd made the trip here mostly for client contact. He knew it was necessary for him to make an appearance now and then but for the most part Kinnetic was running itself. His long range plan was to convince the clients from the Pittsburgh location that the New York office had more to offer and perhaps he could move the accounts to that location.

It took two days to complete meetings with his clients and with his staff. He was anxiously anticipating whatever welcome home plans Justin had for him. The night before he left Brian, Ted and Emmett had gone out for a night of partying which of course ended at Babylon. Standing up on the cat walk he found himself searching for the perfect blond head who he realized now made Babylon the most exiting place on earth. Now it just seemed dull. He was not a participant but an observer.

Before he left for the airport Brian had two stops to make. He dreaded the thought of seeing his mother. It had been over a year since their last run in at his office. Standing on the porch of his childhood home made him uncomfortable. But he was on a mission. Brian took a deep breath, then rang the door bell. Joan acted as if nothing had happened between them which was just fine with Brian.

Lunch with his mother was not as painful as he thought it would be. After suffering through her rambling complaints about Clair, the grandsons and various other relatives Brian was able to get what he'd come for.

"Would you happen to have some old family photos I could borrow?" Brian tried to sound nonchalant when he asked her.

"Brian, you surprise me. You've never shown an interest in the family history."

"I meant the immediate family, pictures of me as a kid, that kind of thing. I'd copy them and mail them back to you."

"Actually, I have extra copies of some family photos. When your grandmother died I took them from her apartment."

"Grandma died?"

"Ten years ago." Joan said flatly.

"Oh right, her funeral was the same weekend as the white party so I missed it." Brian couldn't resist an attempt to get a rise out of his mother.

Joan stared at him disapprovingly. "Why the sudden interest in the family, Brian?"

Brian considered telling her that it wasn't for him, but thought it would be easier to play on her sympathy. "Since my recent illness I've been thinking about . . . "

"You've been taking stock of you life. I understand, dear. I'll get them."

An hour later Brian was back in his rental car on his way to his last stop before leaving Pittsburgh. He had tried unsuccessfully to contact Jennifer Taylor since he'd arrived. When he called her office that morning he'd been told that she was out sick. He decided to stop by her condo on the way to the airport knowing that Justin would expect him to check on his mother.

Over the years Brian had come to respect and admire Jennifer. He genuinely liked the woman whom he now considered family. He pulled into the driveway and went to the front door. He noticed the shades were down, which seemed odd. Even if Jennifer was resting he knew he had to ring the bell. He would not feel right leaving Pittsburgh without making sure she was okay. It took several minutes for the door to open. Brian almost gasped at her appearance.

"Hi. I know you're sick. But Justin wanted me to check in with you."

"Hello Brian. Come in." She opened the door and Brian followed her into the room.

Jennifer's hair was loosely held back in a black and white band. She had no make on and was wearing lose fitting sweat pants and a T-shirt. "Sorry I didn't answer your calls. I haven't been feeling well. I have the flu." She explained.

Brian wasn't buying it. There was something about her appearance that bothered him. "You look different." He said.

"I'm sorry. I haven't been out of bed in two days. You've never seen me without make up." Jennifer's voice began to shake.

Brian noticed that her eyes were red and puffy. There was something about her that was not right. "It's not the make up. You look okay. There's something else." Brian continued to press.

Jennifer took a deep breath blurted out, "I'm pregnant!"

Almost at the same moment Brian declared. "You're barefoot!"

The impact of Jennifer's statement hit him. There was a moment of uncomfortable silence then Brian stuttered "Ahh . . . I've never seen your feet. They're pretty."

Jennifer began to laugh, the laughter turning to tears and in a moment she was crying uncontrollably. Brian put his arms around her and led her over to the couch. They sat in silence while Jennifer recovered from her outburst.

"I'm pregnant. You're the first person that I've told."

"Are you sure?"

"Don't look so surprised, Brian. I'm only 43 years old. It happens."

"Are you okay?"

"Yes. I've been to a doctor. I'm just having a rough first trimester. I was sick like this when I was pregnant with Justin, too."

"Thanks for having him anyway." Brian joked.

"You're welcome."

"I suppose you know who the father is. Have you told him?"

"No! I broke it off with Tucker before I found out."

"Why?"

"It was not working out."

"What are you going to do?"

"Have a baby, I guess."

"You don't sound too enthusiastic about it. You don't have to go through with it."

"Abortion is not an option."

"Are you too far along?"

"It's not an option for me to kill my child." Jennifer said vehemently. Tears began to flow again.

"I didn't mean to upset you. I'll go."

"No, don't. I'm glad you came. You're the one person who will be perfectly honest with me. No holds barred. I appreciate it, Brian. Abortion is out of the question for me because I aborted my first pregnancy. It hasn't been easy for me to live with that decision. Especially after what happened with the twins."

"Justin told me about them."

"Brian, please don't tell Justin about the baby. I need some time to get my act together. And I want to tell him in person."

"I'm not very good at keeping secrets from Justin. But it would be better if this particular news came from you."

"It's a relief to finally talk about it." Jennifer got up from the couch. "I'm even feeling a little hungry right now. Have you had lunch?"

"No." Brian lied.

"I'll fix us a salad. Do you have time?" Jennifer asked hopefully.

"Sure." Brian answered. "Before I forget, these are the reason I dropped by." He handed her a large envelope. "They're pictures from our vacation. Don't worry Justin edited out the more graphic sexual poses."

"Thank him for me. And you too, Brian. Thanks for listening."

"That's what family's for, I guess."

The flight home was bumpy due to bad weather conditions but Brian barely noticed. He attempted to read a report that Ted had given him but his mind kept wandering. Jennifer's secret was going to have a great impact on his life. He wasn't sure what Justin's reaction was going to be to the news. Keeping Jennifer's confidence was not going to be easy. Brian was already having regrets about promising her not to tell Justin about the baby. It seemed like the right thing to do at the time. But now that he was on his way home it occurred to him that he would have to look Justin in the eyes and tell him that everything was fine. Lying to Justin could have serious consequence. He thought about telling Justin the truth but he knew he would never be able to find the right words. It was Jennifer's secret and it was

her problem. She would have to tell her son that he was about to be a big brother again. Brian decided to stay out of it.

Justin was excited to see Brian at the door. "Hey, guess what! They found the stuff that was stolen when we were on vacation. I told the police about that asshole on the floor below who'd been harassing us since we moved in. They questioned him and he finally admitted that he'd done it to scare us out of the building. The asshole actually had all of our things in his storage locker in the basement. They arrested him."

"Well finally a little justice for the gay boys." Brian took off his coat and Justin hung it in the closet.

"Are you hungry?" Justin asked. "I can make you a sandwich or I can get take out. I haven't had time to food shop. I've been at Kinnetic working on my canvasses the whole time you were gone."

Brian sat on a chair in the living room and Justin sat on his lap. Justin had a way of curling his body up into a ball that melted Brian's heart. He kissed him several times then Justin laid his head on Brian's chest. "I missed you." Justin whispered.

"Me too." Brian whispered into Justin's hair.

"Hey, what did my mom think of the pictures? I tried to call her but I just keep getting the machine."

"She loved the pictures. She's had the flu and was in bed for a couple of days."

"I'm going to call to check on her. Maybe I should have gone with you."

"Justin, I'm sure she's asleep by now. She looked fine, really. Don't worry."

"Okay, if you say she's alright. I'll call her tomorrow. Sometimes I feel guilty about leaving her alone." Justin pulled himself up from Brian's embrace. "Hey, you're staring into space. You didn't catch the flu from her, did you?"

"What?" Brian shook his head. "No, I'm not sick, just tired."

"I'll make dinner and then we can get to bed early." He started to head toward the kitchen then turned to Brian. "Thanks for checking on my mom, Bri. I was worried."

"No problem, honey. Now, get in there and cook because looking at your ass is giving me ideas."

Two days later Brian was on the phone in his office when Justin came in. Justin paced the floor in front of Brian's desk until he hung up.

"What the fuck is the matter with you? You're wearing a hole in my rug."

"I'm going home."

"Are you sick?"

"Not our home, I'm going home to Pittsburgh. Brian I've been trying to call my mother for days. Today I called her job and they said she'll be out all week. I must have left a million messages on her answering machine and her cell phone is turned off. I don't want to call Molly because she is with my father this week and I don't want her to worry. Can I borrow money for the plane?"

"Calm down, Justin. You can use the credit card any time you want. But I think you're rushing things. You're mom was fine two days ago. Maybe she took a road trip or is visiting someone."

"Or maybe she's shacked up with what's his name."

"She's not. Trust me."

"She talked to you about him? What did she say?"

"I don't remember. But she's not with him now, okay. Maybe you should go to see her if that's what you need to do. I won't stop you. But just wait till tonight. I'll drive you to the airport."

"Why do I get the feeling you know something that I don't?" Justin eyed Brian suspiciously.

"If you don't mind I have a business to run." Brian picked up the phone and dialed Ted's number. He asked Ted to check on Jennifer's at her condo. "If you see her tell her to call her son right away."

Justin was able to finish the landscape he had been working on. When he got home he put a few things in a bag and called the airline. There was a flight at 9:00pm. Brian got home at 6:00pm.

"Brian, I'm sorry I snapped at you today. I'm just worried."

"Are you ready to go? We'll get something to eat then I'll take you to the airport."

Justin put on his coat and opened the door. His mother stood in the hallway in front of him, she just about to knock.

"Mom!" Justin put his arms around her. "I was going to Pittsburgh. I was so worried about you. Didn't you get my messages?"

"Yes, I got ALL of your messages. I spent a few days with my head in the toilet if you must know. I feel fine now. Since I had some time off from work I decided to surprise you." Jennifer turned to Brian. "Hello, dear."

"Hello Mom." Brian smiled at her. "Justin, I'll go get some take out while you have a visit with your mom."

"Why don't we all just go out?" Justin suggested.

"It's probably better if you stay here and talk. I'll get Chinese food."

"Don't you want to see the city, Mom?"

"Maybe tomorrow, Justin. Thank you, Brian. Chinese would be fine. Nothing too hot for me, please."

Before Justin could protest again Brian was out the door. "Why didn't you tell me you were coming, Mom? I could have been making plans to show you around."

"It was a last minute decision. Honestly Justin, I came for a reason. Please sit down. I have something to tell you."

Brian walked ten blocks out of his way to get to the restaurant. He placed his order and sat on the bench near the window. He prayed that by the time he got back with the food Jennifer would have told Justin about the baby and that Justin would take it well.

Fuck if that would ever happen. He was pretty sure that the shit was hitting the fan about now and that if he had stayed, he would have been put in the middle. Jennifer was calmly telling her 22 year old son that the condom had broken and he was about to become a big brother. If it weren't so scary Brian could almost laugh. Poor Justin. Poor Jennifer. Poor Brian, walking ten fucking blocks out of the way for take out.

Upon his return to the apartment he decided to knock on the door instead of using his key. He didn't want to walk into a battlefield. Justin opened the door and took the bag out of his hand without a comment. Jennifer, who had been looking out the window, came to the table.

They ate in silence for a few minutes until Justin blurted out "My mother is pregnant."

Brian almost choked on his egg roll. He grabbed a glass of water and drank it down.

"Congratulations?"

"She's going to keep it." Justin glared across the table at his mother.

When Jennifer didn't respond Brian piped in "Would you like an egg roll?"

Justin got up from the table and walked away. "Justin that's rude." His mother turned toward her son.

"I'm sorry," he said from across the room. "I'm not very hungry. You go ahead. You're eating for two."

Jennifer got up from the table and went to talk to Justin. "You're acting like a child."

Brian stuck a steamed dumpling on his fork and shoved it into his mouth whole. If his mouth was full he wouldn't be expected to join in the conversation.

"I'm sorry. It's kind of shocking to find out I'm going to have a brother or sister who's young enough to be my kid."

"Maybe I better come back tomorrow, when you've had a chance to get used to the idea."

"I don't think that I'll be any more used to the idea tomorrow. But maybe that would be better. Where are you staying?"

"Just a few blocks from here. I'll get a cab."

"I'll go downstairs with you."

Brian waved from the table and Jennifer waved back. He picked up the water glass again and washed down the dumpling. Justin returned a few minutes later. "I'll clean up." He offered.

"I'll do it." Brian said. "Are you sure you're not still hungry? You didn't eat very much. I got you butterfly shrimp."

Justin slumped down in the chair and picked up his fork. He managed to finish his meal while Brian cleared the rest of the table.

"Well, that was a shocker. Who the fuck would think your mother would get knocked up."

Justin shot him a warning glance.

"I'm sorry. She's your mom and you're in shock. I'm going to bed. Are you coming?"

"Not yet. I want to stay up and think for a while."

A few minutes later Justin came into the bedroom while Brian was getting undressed.

"Do you think she should have this baby?" Justin asked.

"I think it's her decision."

"She has no husband, no family to help, except for Molly. She should sue the bastard for child support, don't you think?"

"I think it's her decision. She didn't want Tucker around and that's her business too. Are you coming to bed?"

"No, I'm too upset to sleep." Justin returned to the living room.

Five minutes later he came back into the room. He folded his arms across his chest and glared at Brian. "You knew, didn't you?"

Brian braced himself for an argument. "Knew what?"

"You knew about the baby! You left the apartment the minute she got here. You knew what she was going to tell me. You even knew who the father was and that she was keeping the baby. She told you all of this a week ago and you've been keeping it from me!"

"You're right. I knew. Now will you calm down and come to bed?" Brian knew the answer before he asked the question.

"We're supposed to be partners, Brian! The minute someone asks you to, you lie to me. You and my mother treat me like a child."

Under his breath Brian muttered "If the shoe fits . . ." Justin left the room slamming the door behind him.

In an hour or so Brian heard Justin stir in the living room where he'd retreated after the argument. A few minutes later Justin came into the bedroom again.

"The living room is freezing I can't sleep in there." Justin crawled in the bed and curled himself into the corner of the mattress as far away from Brian and he could get. "I'm still mad at you."

"Okay." Brian said calmly. "You want to blow me?"

"Of course I don't want to blow you! Didn't you hear what I said, I'm still mad at you."

"You're mad at me? That's bullshit. I should be mad at you."

"What are you talking about? You're the one who's keeping secrets."

Brian turned on the lamp next to the bed. He sat up and rubbed his hands over his face before he spoke. "I get that you're mad at me. Are you going to leave me because I promised your mother not to tell you she was pregnant?"

"Of course not." Justin stated clearly. "But I'm still . . ."

".. . mad at me." Brian finished his sentence. "Let's deal with that later. I want to talk about what makes me mad."

"What?"

"Sleeping in our bed alone while you sulk in the living room. I didn't move to New York to sleep alone. I changed my entire life for you and the first time I fuck up you act like a woman and deny me sex."

Justin started to protest, but Brian cut him short. "Let me finish! You're always talking about feelings so let me express mine. As you pointed out a few weeks ago I have always thought with my dick. I love sex. I live for sex. Of all the hundreds, NO . . . make that thousands of men I have fucked, you're the one man I chose to be with. The sex just gets hotter, we never get stale. It's not the only reason I love you, but it is very important to me. When we're together we're like sex magnets. We want each other all the time. In fact I would bet that you're hard right now." He looked down as Justin quickly covered his crotch with his hand. Brian pulled his hand away to prove his point.

"You're right." Justin conceded. "It's just a physical reaction. You're my "hard on" trigger . . . you always have been. There is more to a relationship . . ."

Brian cut him off again. "I said we'll talk about that later. Right now we are talking about my feelings. Where was I?" He looked over at Justin's crotch again. "Oh, yeah. Sex is important. What do you hope to accomplish by denying me sex? You know we'll work out what's bothering you in a day or two. So tonight when we could be enjoying our physical attraction you get all caught up with acting like a martyr. You're as frustrated and miserable as I am because you want me too. By punishing me you're also punishing yourself. Am I right?"

Justin stared at the ceiling for a moment then answered softly. "Yes."

"So tonight think with your dick and I'll think with mine. Tomorrow we'll talk about your ...feelings."

"Okay," Justin agreed. "But I am still mad at you. This is just meaningless sex. I am not even going to kiss you."

"We'll see about that." Brian grabbed him and kissed him passionately over and over. Justin responded. Within minutes they were caught up in their passion for one another.

When they were done Justin rested his head on Brian's chest. "Meaningless sex isn't so bad." he joked.

"No more retreating to the couch like some pre-menstrual female because you're pissed at me. In this room we are all about sex."

"And love."

"Love of sex?" Brian teased.

"You know what I mean." The tension between them had passed. But Justin was not about to let Brian off the hook. "I'm still mad at you."

"Yes, dear."

"I am going to be mad at you tomorrow."

"Yes, dear."

"Good night, Brian." Justin turned on his side and pulled the covers up to his chest.

After a moment Brian broke the silence in the room. "Justin, remind me to turn the radiator in the living room back on in the morning."

On most days Brian would leave for work by eight o'clock. It was almost nine when Justin opened his eyes. Their apartment in New York was a lot smaller than Brian's loft in Pittsburgh. Justin secretly hated the place. It was a lot nicer than the loft space he had rented downtown. But he never felt at home here. He wondered if Brian felt the same. After the break in Justin had almost made the suggestion that they move. But since Brian was the one who picked the place he must have had a reason and he didn't want to hurt his feelings. Besides that rents in New York were extreme. He wanted to earn some real money of his own before suggesting a move.

Justin heard footsteps coming from the other side of the room and realized that Brian was still at home. He quickly got out of bed, threw on a T-shirt and sweat pants and joined Brian at the small table in the kitchen. "I thought you'd be gone by now."

"One of the perks about being the boss is you don't have to punch in. I didn't have anything pressing this morning so I've been sitting here thinking about things."

"What things?" Justin had almost forgotten that he was mad at Brian.

"I wrote you a note." Brian shoved the paper into Justin's hand and got up from the table.

"Do you want some coffee?"

"Yeah, sure." Justin said as he began to read. The note was brief and to the point.

I have no right to keep secrets from you. It won't happen again.

I love you, love you love you.

XOXOXO

Brian.'

Brian came back to the table with two cups of coffee. He sat down and looked at Justin who still held the note in his hand. "Well . . . ?"

"Three love you's?"

"One didn't seem like enough." Brian smiled sweetly. "I owe you a few."

"You bet you do. I accept your apology." Justin sat at the table and sipped at his coffee. "I don't like you keeping things from me, Brian. Especially since it concerned my mother. The two of you have conspired to 'protect me' in the past. It makes me feel like you still consider me a child."

"I knew that keeping the news from you was wrong. It felt wrong. But your mother wanted to tell you herself. I have a lot of respect for her and

she's going through a rough time. I'm sure she knew how you'd take the news."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Come on Justin, the look on your face told her how you felt. You want her to get rid of it."

"She's my mother, Brian. I'm concerned about her health."

"Pregnancy is not a disease."

"You said yourself she is going through a rough time. I can see it on her face. She's not young, Brian. This could get complicated."

"There is something else I need to tell you. Remember, I've already paid my dues. You said you forgive me for keeping secrets. I didn't get the chance to tell you this last night because you ran out of the room."

"What is it?"

"Your mother is NOT going to have an abortion. She told me that she could never kill another child."

"She didn't kill the twins. They died because they were premature."

"Not the twins. She said that she aborted her first pregnancy."

It took a moment for the news to sink in. Justin slumped in his chair like someone had hit him in the chest. "Fuck." He said softly. He got up from the table and started to walk toward the bedroom.

Brian quickly followed him. He wrapped his arms around him and held him tightly. "I'm sorry. This is why I couldn't tell you before. I hate delivering bad news. Are you okay?"

Justin gently pulled away. "I don't know what to say. I guess you never know a person, not even your parents. I thought we were so close."

"She's human, Justin. Remember that she wasn't your mother yet back then. You don't know why she did it, but I am sure she had a good reason. It must be hard for her to think about it."

"I'm glad you told me, Brian. I don't know how I would have reacted if she told me this today. I'm meeting her at her hotel in about an hour. I was going to take her to the gallery and show her my work."

"Good. Don't be too judgmental, Justin. She hasn't judged us . . . much. Remember this is HER kid. And you know how protective she can be of her kids."

"I'm not going to try to talk her into anything. But if she asks my opinion I'm going to tell her."

"Fair enough." Brian said. He grabbed his suit jacket from the back of the chair. "I better get to the office. Be good."

"You too." Justin kissed Brian good bye and went into the bedroom to get dressed.

Justin tried to remain calm as he waited for his mother to come down from her hotel room. He'd called her on her cell phone to let her know that he was in the lobby because he did not want a confrontation in her room. He thought it was best to spend some time together getting to know each other again before they talked about the baby. His life had changed so much in the past year. He was no longer a boy. Brian had mentioned the respect that he had for Justin's mother. As an adult Justin respected his mother's judgment. But as her son he was still upset about her situation.

"Good morning Sweetheart." Jennifer kissed Justin on the cheek.

"You look rested. How is the hotel?"

"Very nice. There's a whirlpool tub in the room. I felt like I'd died and gone to heaven."

"Don't say that!" Justin blurted out.

"I'm sorry, honey. It's just an expression."

"Mom, let's clear the air right now. I'm sorry I acted like a child last night. You have every right to do whatever you want to do with your life. You just took me by surprise. But you're still my mother and I love you very much. I don't want anything to happen to you."

"Justin, I was going to wait until lunch to discuss this with you but maybe we should sit down right here in the lobby and talk."

"Don't worry about me throwing a fit in public. I did that last night. Brian took the brunt of it. I figured out that he knew and didn't tell me."

"I asked him not to. That was wrong of me. I'm sorry that I put Brian in the position of having to lie to you."

"He has a way of putting things in perspective for me. I'll respect your decision about how you want to live your life. But you're very important to me and I won't ever stop caring about you. Having a baby at your age can't be easy. Especially with no father in the picture. You can't blame me for being concerned."

"The doctor said I'm fine. It's still early, but everything checks out. The morning sickness has abated. I'll take care of myself, honey, I promise. I do have a concern about the future and that's where I need your help. I'm just going to come right out with it."

"Mom, don't worry about money. My artwork is selling and I am also have some portrait work lined up. I can help you out." Justin anticipated his mother's request.

"The real estate business is booming in Pittsburgh. I'm doing very well financially. It's not money, Justin. You and Molly are the only family that I have left. If something should happen to me now, or in the future, Molly will have Craig. The baby will have only you and Molly. Would you and Brian be willing to be this child's guardians? It would really put my mind at ease if you would agree. You don't have to give me an answer now. Discuss it with Brian, of course, and let me know."

"I don't have to discuss it with Brian mom. I'm pretty sure I know what he would say. My brother or sister will always have a home and a family with us."

"Thank you, Justin. But please talk to Brian about it before you promise. I don't want to cause the two of you any trouble."

"You'll see. We'll talk to him at dinner tonight."

"Brian was very sweet when he came to see me. He really has changed so much from the self centered man who stole my baby boy's innocence."

Justin smiled coyly. "He didn't steal anything, Mom. I gave him my innocence willingly. I don't think that he has changed all that much. He's always been kind and loving deep down. He just never let it show much. I always knew he was a good man."

"You're very lucky to find each other. Love like that is rare."

"Mom, what happened with Tucker? Do you really think you're doing the right thing by shutting him out of his kid's life before he's even born."

"I thought about it a lot Justin. Tucker is young. It was one thing to go out and have fun together. But when it was over it was over we were both ready to move on. He's already got a new young girlfriend. She's a teacher, like himself. If I told him about the baby he would probably think that I'm only having it to tie him down. He'd expect me to get rid of it, which is out of the question."

Justin considered telling her that he knew about the abortion she'd had. But now was not the time. "Let's go to the gallery. Then we can go to my studio at Kinnetic. I can't wait to show you my new stuff. I've done a bunch of landscapes that are pretty cool."

"Landscapes?"

"Europe was inspiring. I'll tell you about it on the way."

Spending the day with his mother felt good. He hadn't realized how much he missed her company. Brian had been the focus of his life for five years. Since he'd moved to New York he hadn't had much time to think about his family in Pittsburgh. Now he felt a little guilty. He promised himself that from now on he would keep in closer touch with his mother, his little sister and the new baby his mother was carrying.

By mid afternoon Jennifer decided that she needed a nap. Justin left her at her hotel and went directly to Kinnetic. Brian was just finishing a staff meeting when Justin arrived. They went to Brian's office to talk.

"What happened to your mom? Did you scare her off?"

"She got tired. We'll pick her up at her hotel for dinner. I wanted to talk to you about something. She's concerned about the baby's future if something should happen to her. Since he has no other family she asked if you and I would be his guardians. I wanted to know how you felt about it."

"In the first place nothing is going to happen to you mother. She's not that much older than me, Justin. But if anything did happen of course we would take care of her kid."

"I told her you'd say that. Thanks, Brian. It'll mean a lot to her. She puts up a brave front but I can tell she's a little frightened."

"I can't say I blame her. Having a kid will change her whole life."

"I better go upstairs and get some work done." Justin said.

Brian absentmindedly ran his fingers through Justin's soft blond hair. He almost suggested a mid day break but then realized the time. "Shit I have a 3:00 p. m. meeting uptown." He kissed Justin softly on the top of the head. "Get out of here and let me work. I'll see you tonight."

Justin spent the rest of the afternoon working on the canvasses he had started upon their return from vacation. Traveling in Europe had renewed his passion for art. It felt wonderful to be inspired again. Before long he would have enough for another show. Maureen at the gallery had been asking him when he would be ready. The last show had been successful and it gave Justin a feeling of satisfaction that he would be contributing to their living expenses. Brian never complained but New York was expensive. Kinnetic was doing well for a new business, but Brian had to work long hours to keep it all together. Justin often wondered how he managed it.

At dinner it was decided that Brian and Justin would be the baby's guardians. Jennifer told them that she would have her attorney draw up her new will to make it official. The rest of the evening was spent discussing their recent trip and Justin's next gallery show. The following morning Jennifer flew back to Pittsburgh. Her visit had allayed some of the concern that Justin felt for her health. But Brian sensed that Justin was dreading the next few months.

Rome Astor was a natural model. Justin was pleased with how the portrait was progressing. When he felt that she was getting uncomfortable from posing Justin suggested they take a break.

"Thank you Justin. My neck is a little stiff." She rubbed her neck as she went to look at Justin's progress. "You don't mind if I look, do you? Some artists are sensitive about their unfinished work."

"Not me. I want to make it just right. It is your portrait. What do you think?"

"Oh, Justin it really is remarkable. My parents will adore it. My father is already making plans to hang it in the lobby of one of our hotels."

"Wow, free advertising."

Rome laughed. "For you or for me?"

"What would you be advertising for?"

"A husband of course. My father will probably attach my resume to the canvas."

"I don't see why that would be necessary. You're a beautiful woman. I bet you've had a lot of offers."

"None that interest me."

"What interests you?"

"You and Brian interest me. Anyone can see just by looking at you that you adore each other. I was beginning to question whether that kind of fairy tale love(pardon the pun) really existed. I've had a few men in my life that I considered settling down with but they never seemed to click completely. There was always something about them that made me push them away. I was holding out for my perfect life partner. It is real, Justin, isn't it? I'm going to be 34 years old next month and I'm beginning to get nervous."

"I can only speak for my self. I met Brian when I was 17. From that moment on all I ever wanted was to be with him. Don't get me wrong, it's been a very rocky road. He's pushed me out of his life a few times. And I've left him on more than one occasion. But we always found our way back to each other. Don't give up hope. But don't settle either. It would really suck if you got married to Mr. Almost and then Mr. Right showed up."

"Do you want to get some coffee?" She reached for her coat and handed Justin his.

"Sure, but let me see what Brian is doing. He usually looks for me about this time of day."

"I can only imagine what he does when he finds you."

"I'd say you're imagination wouldn't even come close." Justin laughed out loud.

"You have the greatest laugh."

"Thanks." He opened the door and they took the stairway down to the lower floor where Brian's office was. "You have the greatest eyes. They're hypnotic. I just spent the better part of an hour trying to get the color just right."

"If I didn't know better I would think that you were hitting on me."

"Just telling the truth. I always tell the truth," he said holding the door for her as they entered Brian's office. "Isn't that right, Brian."

" Yes, dear." Brian looked up from his work and smiled graciously at Rome." What are you two up to?"

"We're going out for coffee. Would you like to join us."

"I can't. I have a meeting in about 5 minutes. But why don't we all hook up for an early dinner."

"Two gorgeous men on my arm for dinner? It's tempting but I also have a meeting late this afternoon. Hey, I have a great idea. Tomorrow night my parents are throwing a party at their home in Westchester. Why don't the two of you join us? It's an informal gathering but all of my parents' friends are art lovers. And many of them own very successful businesses."

"It's always nice to make new friends who buy both advertising and art."

"Great, I'll email Justin the particulars tonight. It's nice to see you again, Brian."

Justin couldn't resist a sideways glance at Brian before leaving the office. He could see the wheels turning in Brian's head. Score one for Kinnetic NYC.

"What the fuck am I going to wear?" Justin pondered over his coffee. "And I don't have any shoes, just sneakers. I don't have time to shop."

Rome shook her head and smiled. Justin was so young and enthusiastic. She adored him and she knew that her parents and their friends would also. "Justin, it's only a dinner party, not a cotillion. I bet that your parents had parties like this all the time. Just be yourself."

"I am being myself. I'm a drama queen when it comes to the deficiencies in my wardrobe."

"Surely you must be doing well selling your art."

"I'm just starting out. Don't let the fancy car, uptown address and Kinnetic fool you. It all belongs to Brian. Before he got here I was sleeping on a cot in the work space I rented. I did make money when I had my show, but I haven't really sold much since then. Until we went to Europe I'd been blocked. But that's over now. I'm planning another show soon."

"Bring cards for the studio with you. And lock in a date if you can. Our friends social calendars are booked months in advance. Once they meet you they are going to be interested in seeing your work."

"I'll call Maureen in the morning and firm up the date with her. I can't wait for tomorrow night. Are you sure . . ."

"Justin relax. If I didn't think you'd enjoy yourself I wouldn't have invited you."

Just as the waitress came to refill coffees Justin's cell phone rang. "Excuse me. I have to take this." Rome nodded her head and turned her attention to her coffee.

"Hello. How did it go? Is it a boy or a girl?" Justin asked. A big smile came to his face when he got his answer. "I'm having lunch with friend. I'll call you later. I love you."

"Girlfriend on the side?" Rome teased.

"No, my mom. She's just found out that she's having a baby boy."

"Wow, that's big news. Congratulations big brother."

"I know it's weird. My mom is a very special person."

"I'm jealous. I always wanted a baby boy. Do you have other brothers or sisters?"

"One sister, she's 15 already."

"Is your dad excited?"

"It's not his kid. They're divorced."

"I'm sorry, Justin. You must think I'm so rude. I hardly know you and here I am asking you all kinds of personal questions."

"You can ask me anything you want. If I don't want to answer I'll tell you to fuck off. Is that okay with you?"

"Fuck yes. I'll do the same."

"What are you going to wear tomorrow? Do you think Brian and I should dress the same? I don't mean the same outfit, but designer casual?"

"You're impossible! I have a few hours before my meeting. As soon as we finish our coffee we are going shopping."

"Really, you'd go shopping with me?"

"If only to shut you up."

Justin found himself surrounded by women of all ages at Rome's party. They had heard of his skills and were anxious to talk to him about his art show. He had even set up appointments for portraits. It was almost midnight when he spotted Brian on the other side of the pool. He was deep in conversation with a group of men, most of them Asian. The party had proved to be a windfall for both of them. Justin tried to get Brian's attention but another one of Rome's friends had approached him. They talked for a while and Justin gave her his card. Rome caught his eye and waved for him to come into the house.

"Hey, you look great. Nice choice, Justin." She dragged him into a quiet room off the living room. She was a little tipsy, as was Justin. They both plopped down on the sofa.

"I had expert guidance. This party is amazing. I think I recognize some of these people."

"Actors. Yes we do tend to draw a beautiful crowd. Where is Brian?"

"He's over there by the pool." Justin pointed to the window.

Rome looked outside, "Ah, yes, the Asian business men. They're friends of my dad. Between them they own at least half the world."

"Looks like Brian's going to own 10% of half the world."

Rome laughed. "I wouldn't be surprised. My dad is very impressed with Brian and with you, of course. You're both so brilliant."

"You've done so much for us. I don't know how I'm ever going to repay you."

"Have my baby." Rome joked. She reached for a bottle of wine that was on the table and poured Justin a glass.

"What?" Justin asked after he took a sip.

"If I am not married with children at the end of five years I want to have your baby."

"You're not going to be that desperate to have a kid. But if you want one, it's the least I can do."

"Well that takes the pressure off. How about you? Have you and Brian ever thought of expanding your family?"

"Brian has a son with a lesbian. They live in Canada."

"Really, that's interesting. But what about the two of you? I think you'd make great dads."

"Maybe one day. We're both too busy now."

"After tonight I think you'll both be very, very busy."

Around 2 am Brian went to look for Justin. He found him sound asleep on a sofa in the den with his head resting in Rome's lap. Brian gently pulled on Justin's arm. "Wake up. You're missing a great party."

Justin rubbed his eyes and yawned. "Lot's of hot guys?"

"Better than hot guys."

"What's better than hot guys?" Justin slumped back down but Brian grabbed him before he hit Rome's lap.

"Come on. She looks pretty out of it. We better get going." Brian pulled him up from the sofa and put his arm around him to support him.

"Brian, fancy meeting you here." The wine was having an aphrodisiac affect on Justin. "Wanna fuck?"

"Not here sunshine. This is a classy party. Wait till we get to the car." Justin giggled. Brian put his hand over Justin's mouth and warned, "Don't fuck around. We have to go find her parents to thank them. I don't want them to think you're a lush. So don't open your mouth, okay?"

Justin pretended to zip up his mouth. Brian laughed out loud. "You're adorable when you're drunk. Now shut the fuck up. We find them and say good night. You just put that beautiful smile in gear and say nothing. Can you do that?"

Justin nodded his head and it made him dizzy. He fell against the sofa, which woke up Rome. "Oh, are you guys leaving?" She asked groggily.

Brian held Justin tightly against him. "We're going to find your parents to say good night."

"They're probably in the dining room. I saw them there earlier."

With Rome leading the way they found the dining room. Her parents were chatting with another couple. "Mom, Dad . . . Brian and Justin are leaving."

"We had a great time. Thanks for inviting us." Brian said. He shook Mr. Astor's hand and kissed Mrs Astor on the cheek.

"It was very nice to meet you Brian." Mrs. Astor said. "Justin, you're all Rome talks about lately."

"I'm going to have her baby." Justin blurted out. Brian pulled him closer and Rome grabbed him by the other side.

"He's had a little too much wine," Rome explained. It was all she could do to keep from laughing out loud. Her parents nodded their heads in unison as they left the room.

Brian and Rome helped Justin walk out to the car. Brian put Justin in the passenger seat, then got behind the wheel. "Nice work, asshole."

Justin smiled at him sweetly. "Hey, you promised when we got to the car . . . '

"There are too many people around. Justin this isn't the alley at Babylon. These folks are going to make us millionaires." Justin ignored Brian's warning and unzipped his pants. Brian quickly looked around and then sunk his head down into Justin's lap.

The next morning Justin's head felt like a jack hammer was boring a hole in his skull. Brian was sitting on the bed next to him with aspirin and a glass of water. "Good morning Sunshine." he said cheerfully.

"Fuck off." Justin grabbed the aspirin and the glass of water and downed them both. He put his feet on the floor and steadied himself on the table next to the bed. He found his way to the bathroom and threw up. A few minutes later he came back into the room. Brian was still sitting on the bed grinning at him. "What's so funny?" Justin collapsed on the bed next to him.

"You're funny."

"I've seen you in a lot worse shape if you remember. And I didn't make fun of you."

"I'm not making fun. Do you want anything to eat?"

Justin glared at him.

"I'm going to the office. Will you be okay for a while?"

"It's Saturday. It's our day together." Justin protested.

"I know it's Saturday. But you're in no shape to do what we usually do on our day together."

"Remind me next time we go out that I can't drink wine. My head hurts so much," He bent his head toward Brian and Brian pulled him to his chest. "Go back to sleep. Maybe the aspirin will kick in and you can get some rest. And don't forget to drink a lot of water. I promise I'll only be a few hours."

"Brian, what happened last night? Did I do anything I need to apologize for?"

"Well, you did tell Rome's parents that you're going to have her baby. But they didn't take you seriously. Were you serious?"

"Shit! Rome and I were joking around about that before we drank the wine. I'm sorry, Brian. I feel like such a jerk."

"You're an adorable drunk and everyone loved you. We'll talk about it later, okay."

Justin slept most of the afternoon until his hang over had abated. Brian had left the apartment early that day and when he didn't return for dinner Justin decided to go to the office to see what he was up to.

Brian was on the phone when Justin walked in. He sat down on Brian's desk and fumbled with the telephone cord until Brian acknowledged his presence with a wink. The call lasted ten more minutes. By this time Justin had gone over to the couch and laid down.

"What are you doing here?" Brian pushed Justin's legs off the couch and sat down next to him.

"The question is, what are you still doing here? I left a message on your cell phone. I was worried when you didn't come home for dinner."

"Dinner! Is it that late? We didn't get to talk about last night. I made connections at that party that could potentially put Kinnetic on the map. Things are going to get very, very busy around here."

"I'm glad you got some new business last night. So did I. But I hope you're not planning on working 24/7."

"If that's what it takes. Kinnetic is growing like a mother fucker. I would think you'd be happy. It means we can get ourselves a bigger place."

"Why would we need a bigger place if I'm going to be alone all the time?"

"We've made it, Justin. We are soon to be big fish in the big pond."

"You've made it in the big pond. I'm still a struggling artist. New York rents are outrageous, Brian. I can barely pay half of our expenses now."

"This isn't a contest, Justin. We're in this together. I thought we'd already worked out the money issue. I know you aren't earning as much as I am. I have a big head start on you, don't forget. You'll catch up."

"What if I never catch up?"

"If you don't, what does it matter? It's only money."

"Brian you know how I feel about this. I have to be able to pay my own way."

"Or you won't feel like a man?" Brian took Justin's hand and held it. He stared into his eyes. "Justin, not everyone makes the same amount of money. What you do is creative and necessary but it doesn't necessarily pay big bucks, at least not while you're alive. The business I'm in can be very lucrative if you put your best effort into it. Before I met you I didn't have enough balls to go out on my own. Without you I never would have. Hey, without you sticking up for me, Kip would be MY boss. I'd say you've paid your dues."

"Brian I know you're anxious to move. Maybe after my next show we can start looking."

"It's a deal. Let's get out of here and get something to eat."

Brian was both exhilarated and overwhelmed with the prospect of expanding his fledgling business. Brian had written down all of their names and had one of the Asian interns help him with pronunciation. The deal they were working on was big. Brian wasn't really sure of the particulars but it involved casino gambling and computer programs. The way he understood the program would allow Mr. John Q. Public in Nebraska, or anywhere else on the planet, to sign onto a website and be able to gamble away the farm in a casino half way around the world. It would be Brian's job to get the word out to Mr. Public and his neighbors.

When the clients came to Kinnetic Brian was ready. He laid out his basic plan for the campaign. Mistery Lin, Dong, Wang and Lo were impressed. The contracts were signed. Kinnetic NYC was about to become Kinnetic International.

Along with the excitement came the pressure. The firm was too small to handle a world wide campaign without hiring a new staff of experts. Brian wanted only experienced super star ad men. Hiring the wrong person could be a fatal mistake for Kinnetic. There would be a lot of pressure on him over the next few months. Justin would understand. But the pressure of long separations due to the business could cause them problems.

Brian thought about the conversation he'd had with Justin about money. He understood Justin's determination to pay his own way. Justin needed to feel like Brian's equal. This issue was on going and, as Brian could see it, had no resolution. They would have to live at a level that Justin could afford indefinitely.

With that in mind Brian began to think about Justin's future. He'd contacted an attorney in New York because he wanted to find a way to provide Justin with a means of support if something should happen to him. He'd heard horror stories from Mel about gay partners being cheated out of legitimate inheritances because of relatives who chose to contest it. Brian could not be sure that his will would be respected by his mother and his sister. He had provided for Gus with a life insurance policy. It was important to him to provide for Justin. After much consideration he believed he had found a way. Now he would just have to convince Justin to accept his gift.

Brian had working lunches all week. On Friday he showed up in Justin's studio at Kinnetic a little after 11:00. Justin was just finishing up with a new client. Brian smiled sweetly as Justin introduced him to an unusually homely young woman. After she'd gone Brian took a peak at the portrait. "You are a genius. She looks almost doable in your portrait."

"Beauty is in the eye of the artist." Justin started to wash his brushes.

Brian came up behind Justin and wrapped his arms around him. "Wanna do it in the sink?"

Justin grinned. "I'd get a ass full of paint. What are you doing up here so early? It's not even lunch time yet."

"I missed you."

"I was in your bathroom downstairs giving you a blow job not an hour ago."

"Was that you?"

"I have a client coming in at noon."

"This was a brilliant plan, having your studio in such close proximity to my office."

"I like it too. It can be a distraction, though."

"I have something for you."

"A surprise?"

"Let's call it a bonus."

"For doing what?"

"Just hear me out, okay?"

Brian had Justin's full attention and proceeded to make his pitch.

"If Cynthia brought a friend who needed to advertise his product into the office and I signed him as a client, I would give Cynthia a bonus. Are you following me so far?"

"Cynthia gets a bonus. Sounds fair."

"That's right. She went out of her way to provide me with business. I'd want her to be rewarded so that each time she meets someone who needed an ad man she'd bring him to me."

"You're a nice guy, Brian. But what has that got to do with me?"

"You invited me to a party where I signed the biggest advertizing account I've ever had in my life. You are personally responsible for giving me the opportunity to make Kinnetic into an international company."

"I didn't invite you. Rome did. You did the work that got you the account. All I did was get drunk and embarrass you.'

"You introduced me to Rome just like Cynthia introduced me to her friend. Getting accounts into the office is a big part of the business. Without you I'd never have had the opportunity to have access to those men."

"I don't want your money, Brian."

"Are you going to be the one to tell Cynthia?"

"Tell her what?"

"How would it look if she got a bonus and you didn't. Nope, if you won't take my bonus, I couldn't give one to Cynthia. And she is going to be really pissed at you."

"That's stupid. How can I take money just for bringing you to a party?"

"What if your bonus isn't money? What if it's something sexy and hot?"

"That's more like it. Whip it out."

"You'll take it?"

"As much as you've got." Justin pulled at Brian's tie.

"Good." Brian smiled, pulled out a legal document and handed it to Justin.

"What's this?"

"You're bonus."

"You're suing me?"

"Read it."

"It's a deed to Babylon with my name on it. Why are you giving me Babylon?"

"First promise to hear me out before you say anything."

"You're scaring me."

"Babylon has been a gold mine since we reopened. It practically runs itself, with a little help from Ted. I want you to have financial security in case something happens to me. I made out a will and left you everything, but I was afraid that someone would try to take it away. Mel said that it happens to gay couples all the time. This way Babylon is yours and no one can dispute it."

"I can't take it." Justin handed it back.

"It's in your name, there's no going back." Brian insisted.

"But owning Babylon meant a lot to you. What about your promise to keep it as a legacy to those who follow us?"

"It's still there, making money. What's the difference whose name is on the deed? I have two businesses to run now and I don't need the extra work. You're doing me a favor. I want you to have it."

Justin thought for a moment. "It's mine? I can do what I want with it?"

"Of course. It's legally yours. You're not going to burn it to the ground for the insurance, are you?"

"I don't know what to say."

"Accept it, you earned it." Brian scrunched up his face.

"You're pathetic. Okay I'll take it." Justin mumbled grudgingly.

"Okay." Brian said. He tried to read Justin's mood but couldn't.

"I'll see you later." Justin turned back to his work.

"Later."

Justin was sitting in front of his easel staring into space when Rome came into the studio.

"Deep in thought are we?" Rome said, startling Justin.

"Hi, did we have an appointment? I'm sorry, I must have forgotten." Justin straightened up and put the deed on a table.

"I'm not here for a sitting. I lost my sneakers. I had them in a bag when I was here the other day."

"Those were yours? I put them in the closet. I'll get them."

"Thanks. I hope I'm not keeping you from anything. You seem distracted."

Justin found the bag and handed it to Rome. "I had an appointment but they called to reschedule a few minutes ago. I'm glad to see you."

"What's in the envelope?"

"It's the deed to a dance club in Pittsburgh."

"Real estate. A very wise investment."

"It's not an investment. This is the deed to the club where I met Brian. He just had it transferred into my name and I was just sitting here trying to figure out what to do."

"It was a gift. You say thank you."

"It's more than that. Brian has always been so generous with me. I owe him so much. He paid my college tuition when my Dad gave up on me. He's pretty much supported me since high school. When I came to New York I supported myself. It was hard but I was doing it. Then Brian came here and we decided that we would share expenses down the middle 50/50.

"He came in here today and handed me this. He said it was a bonus because without me he wouldn't have gotten that new account. But he also said that he was giving it to me to make sure that I'd have money in case something happen to him. He still wants to take care of me, even after he's dead."

"He must really love you."

"You don't understand. I need to know that I can be my own man and support myself. Even if I'm half starved and living in a hovel. It would be my hovel. I can't let Brian take care of me for the rest of eternity."

"I have no creative talent like you or Brian, but I will always have more money because of who my parents are. Does that make you and Brian less important? The world needs artists. You were born with that talent and it's your

destiny to create great works of beauty for talentless people like myself to appreciate. You make my life richer in ways that money never could.

Rome continued. "Brian is brilliant. He was put on this earth to challenge the rest of us to keep up. The reason he has money is because he thrives on his ability to make money. He thinks of money as an extension of his dick. And he wants to share it with you. Let me ask you this, Justin. If you were a famous artist making lots of money, and Brian were fixing motorcycles for a living, would you love him any less?"

"Of course not. He'd still be Brian Kinney."

"But you couldn't share your lives because he would never make the kind of money that you make. How would you feel then?"

"Horrible. I get your point. I know that Brian means well when he does these things. But I still feel like a kid."

"Justin you are NOT a kid. You are a beautiful young artist with a gift for making everyone around you smile. So don't put yourself down because the man you love makes more money than you. That's just stupid. No one who knows you would ever think that you weren't capable of taking care of yourself."

"Brian's friends do. They always tease me about it."

"They're jealous. Who needs friends like that anyway? Justin, every serious relationship that I've had has ended because men feel threatened by my financial status. No couple makes exactly the same amount of money. You love each other. Share your lives and enjoy what you have while you have it and don't let anyone make you feel unworthy."

"I know what you're saying. But I want to be able to contribute more than my smile and my ass."

"Put yourself in Brian's shoes. It must have been hard for him to approach you with that deed. He knows how you feel and probably knows what you're thinking right now. I've been there, Justin. Brian needs to be able to take care of you. He's probably worried that your pride will win out and you'll leave him."

"I'd never do that!" Justin insisted.

"You and Brian have had so many major changes in your lives in the past few months. Lighten up on each other and take baby steps. Figure out what is more important right this minute, your pride or Brian's needs." Rome put her arms around Justin and hugged him. "I have to go. Call me and let me know what you decide."

"I've already decided what to do." Justin declared enthusiastically. "But I'm going to need your help."

Brian returned to his office late in the afternoon. Justin usually left Kinnetic by 5:00 so that he would have time to shop for dinner. Brian sorted through the mail on his desk and let his mind wander. What he'd done today had insulted Justin. He was sure of it. Even though Justin agreed to take the deed he didn't look happy. It was a mistake that he couldn't take back. He knew how important making his own way in the world was to Justin. But how did he fit into that world. It was time to go home and face his fate.

Brian was packing up his brief case when Justin walked in. "Hey, I thought you'd gone home." Brian said.

"I waited for you. I have to tell you something."

Brian braced himself for a lecture or worse. But Justin came around the desk and gently took Brian's hand. "Let's take a walk."

"Why?." Brian asked cautiously.

"I am going to take you out to dinner, if that's okay with you."

"Sure."

"Let's go." Justin smiled and pulled Brian toward the door.

When they got outside Brian asked, "Are you going to let go of my hand?"

"I like holding your hand."

"We're out in public."

"We used to hold hands all the time in Pittsburgh."

"That was on Liberty Avenue. Everyone was holding hands on Liberty Avenue."

"Don't you like holding my hand?"

"I love holding your hand." They continued to walk toward the seaport.

"I'm trying to be romantic." Justin explained. "Shut the fuck up and hold my hand. I thought we'd go to that restaurant at the Seaport, the one with the view of the Brooklyn Bridge. After dinner we'll take a cab up to our place. When we get there I'll show you how happy I am that you care about me so much you'd risk battling with my ego for

my own good." Justin stopped walking and faced Brian. "Thank you for giving me Babylon, Brian. I love you for it."

"I don't want to hurt your pride." Brian squeezed Justin's hand.

"I'm over that." They started walking again. "Rome helped me realize that the size of your bank account is not what's important. It's the size of your dick."

"No deficiencies in that department." Brian grinned.

Justin laughed to himself.

"What's so funny?" Brian asked.

"You . . . fixing motorcycles for a living."

Part Four - The Best Part

At 3:00 p.m. Justin cleaned his brushes and put away the tubes of paint he had been using that day. He grabbed the gym bag he had thrown together that morning. Brian was in a meeting so Justin decided to go to the gym alone. Since he had been putting in so many hours sitting in front of the canvasses he was working on, his neck and back had become stiff. He was actually looking forward to his work out. He started on the tread mill and then did weight machines. When Brian arrived almost an hour later, Justin was on the stationary bike.

Brian seemed to be in a bad mood. He changed into his gym clothes and got on the bike next to Justin without saying a word. There had always been days when Brian got moody or thoughtful. Justin always tried to stay under the radar when he sensed Brian was grumpy. From what Justin could tell, Kinnetic was very busy. Brian liked to put a personal touch on every project. There were many nights when he didn't get to bed until after midnight. Justin felt guilty because he was not able to help more with the business. The last thing he wanted was for Brian to burn himself out working to keep a roof over their heads.

Justin decided to go to the market and then work on his computer at home. Brian barely acknowledged Justin's departure from the gym. He had on headphones and was listening to music. Justin waved and headed for the door. While he had been working out, Justin noticed a group of men had been checking him out. They all smiled and waved to Justin as he was leaving. Justin smiled back. 'I guess I still have it,' Justin thought to himself. It was nice to be noticed.

Brian began to relax as he increased the speed on the bike. The morning had been stressful. One problem after another had to be resolved. Kip was in Chicago pitching a campaign to an established client. It did not go well and Brian had to spend an hour smoothing things over. By the time he was finished the client was on board. Then there was another crisis at the photo shoot on Broadway. When he got back to the office he was late for the staff meeting that he had set up. He had forgotten that Justin was going to meet him at the gym at 3:00. Brian found that he did his best thinking while he was working out. He was lost in thought when he noticed Justin leaving. But the exchange between Justin and the men near the door caught his attention. He felt a twinge of jealousy when Justin gave them one of his cute flirty smiles.

Brian finished with the bike and went over to the weights where the men who were eyeing Justin were sitting. They were laughing and punching each other on the arm playfully.

"Did you see that ass and that perfect mouth. I'm in love. I've gotta find out where that new boy lives. Did you see him smile at me?"

"You! He was smiling at me asshole." The second man said. "If anyone gets his number it'll be me."

"That smile was all encompassing." The third man piped in.. "It included ALL of us!. You can take your shot if you want, but I have first dibs. He's my type."

"He's everyone's type. Did anyone see which direction he went? Is he a downtown boy or an uptown boy? Did he talk to anyone while he was here? Maybe we'll see him at the club tonight."

Brian was not amused. He went to shower and change before going back to work. When he got back to his office he went to his private bathroom to look in the mirror. It was still there. . . the gray hair he'd found that morning. Had it multiplied yet? He'd heard that plucking them out caused them to grow back stronger.

The afternoon went more smoothly than the morning had. At five o'clock he went upstairs to Justin's studio but Justin had already gone home. Brian took a cab uptown to their apartment. Justin was at the table working on the computer when Brian walked in. He reached up his arms to stretch. Brian grabbed his hands and pulled him up. Without saying a word he stripped off Justin's clothes and bent him over the table. Justin didn't protest as Brian dropped his pants and entered him roughly. He thrust his hips against Justin's perfect ass. They were finished in minutes. Brian pulled up his pants and left Justin sprawled on the table naked.

"That was hot." Justin said when he caught his breath.

"Was it?" Brian muttered under his breath as he shuffled through the mail.

Justin was puzzled by Brian's behavior. "Are you mad at me for something?"

"Why would I be mad at you?" Brian had no intention of letting Justin know what was bothering him. "What's for dinner?"

"Pasta Prima Vera. I made it this afternoon after I left the gym."

"I'm going to check my email. Call me when it's ready." Brian went into the living room and opened his lap top.

Justin pulled up his pants and put his shirt back on. Things had been going so well lately that he had forgotten how moody and stressed out Brian could get. As much as he enjoyed sex, he didn't appreciate being treated like a piece of meat. Kinnetic was a new business and it was important for Brian to stay focused on keeping it going. Moving to New York was a big change in Brian's life and he no longer had the outlet that Babylon offered him so the only person he had to take out his mood on was Justin. It was okay as long as it didn't happen too often. Justin decided to go back to what he was doing before Brian interrupted. Concentrating on his art always consumed his thoughts.

Brian peered over the top of the sofa and stared at Justin. He was appalled by what he'd done. The stress of the day and the conversations he'd overheard at the gym had stressed him out. Justin had been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"You are really beautiful." Brian uttered.

Justin had almost forgotten that Brian was in the room when he heard him say something.

"What?"

"I said you're really beautiful. Guys look at you and their tongues hang out of their mouths. And you know it, don't you?"

"Sure . . . I'm hot." Justin smiled at his own words.

"Come over here." Brian looked at him with puppy dog eyes. Justin obeyed and sat on the sofa next to him. Brian put his head in Justin's lap. "I was in a nasty mood when I got home. I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"Nope. Did something happen at work?" Brian curled up in Justin's arms.

"Lots of things happen at work. Every day is a new crisis. But that's normal." Brian sat up and put his finger on his head where he'd seen the gray hair. "Look! It's started. See it? The one gray hair that sprung up over night thereby signaling my passage from youth to middle age. Do you see it?"

"Yes, I see it." Justin admitted. Brian put his head back in Justin's lap. "I'm old."

Justin rolled his eyes. "You're not old. Do you want me to pull it out?"

"NO! If you pull them out they come in stronger and grayer. I read up on this."

"Geez, Brian." Justin groaned.

"It's not just the hair. It was that crew at the gym that you left drooling all over the floor today. They have plans for you, sonny boy."

Justin laughed, "So what! Guys have been drooling over me for as long as I can remember. Since when are you the jealous type?"

"I'm not jealous." Brian protested.

"Then get off my lap and let me make dinner."

" I guess maybe that's what I felt. I did get jealous. I hate it!"

"Wow, I never anticipated that. Brian Kinney is jealous. Are you jealous of ME? Did you want those guys to follow YOU to the shower? Be honest, Brian."

Brian thought for a moment before answering. "No, I'm not jealous of you. I know I'm hot and in my time attracted more guys than I can count. That part of my life is over. I don't miss it. But I feel guilty cheating you of what it rightfully yours. The ability to fuck as many guys as you can, while you can."

"That's your thing, Brian. My goal is to fuck YOU as many times as I can. But that doesn't stop me from being flattered when I get some unexpected attention."

"What's scaring me is that I am morphing into a pathetic, old fart. If those guys knew you were with me they would probably wonder why. What could he possibly see in that old fossil with the gray hair?"

"This is turning into a pity party. Why don't we go to a club tonight. We haven't been out dancing since we came here."

"No, I don't think so. At home I was the King of Liberty Avenue. Clubs in New York are out of my league now. Maybe a few years ago, but . . . "

"Will you fucking cut it out!" Justin pulled Brian off the couch by his arm. "We are going to a club. We'll dance, take in some eye candy and after that I will drag your ass to the back room and you'll show them how it's done. You are the King, Brian. You always will be. No matter how many of these . . . " Justin pulled out the gray hair with a single tug, " . . . you get."

"You little shit! I told you now it will get worse. Someday soon I'll go to wash my face and see my father in the mirror."

"No you won't. You'll see me in the mirror sucking your cock. Now get dressed, party boy."

The night out dancing had rejuvenated Brian. He felt like his old self, before the gray hair invasion. They spent the entire Saturday in bed fucking in every position they could think of. Sunday morning Justin announced that he had to go to the gallery to set up a private showing.

"Why Sunday? I thought the gallery is closed on Sunday."

"This is a special client. It's a celebrity who's a friend of Rome. She said opening up on a Sunday would be worth my while. This guy is loaded and loves to spend money."

"I may as well go into the office. I have a stack of resumes on my desk I have to go through. I want to make sure the staff is set to go when we get back from the Philippines."

"When are you going to the Philippines?"

"In about two or three months. That reminds me, you have to renew your passport."

"I can't go with you. I can't leave the country, my mother is due about that time."

"Shit, I forgot."

"Well I can't forget. She's been on my mind a lot lately."

"Maybe the dates will work out. I don't look forward to spending a couple of weeks in a foreign country without you."

"It'll be okay. We'll both be busy."

"Yeah, busy. I'll see you later."

"Bye," Justin hurried out the door.

Brian realized that they hadn't kissed goodbye.

Justin ran from the subway stop to the address that Rome had given him. He saw her standing in front of the building in a jogging suit.

"Hey, nice pink sneakers." Justin teased.

"Do you want me to buy you a pair?" she joked back.

"Is this the building? It's huge"

"It's a good size. There are three apartments and the first floor is for store fronts. The store fronts are not rented at the moment. Two apartments on the second floor are rented but the top floor is completely vacant. The owner is my decorator. She just completed my apartment on Park Avenue. I imagine her own place must be spectacular. They opened up the top floor and used it as one large loft. She and her husband are moving out to Colorado to retire."

"I like the neighborhood. It is kind of quiet though."

"Justin, it's Sunday morning. You can shoot a cannon down any street and not hit anyone. During the week this place is jumping. The owners are going to list it this week and it'll be snapped up in a New York minute."

"Can we get upstairs?"

"Yes, I got the key from her brother last night. She's out west right now and she would be thrilled if the sale went quickly."

There was an elevator similar to the one in their building in Pittsburgh. When they got out of the elevator on the top floor Justin gasped. "Wow! It's amazing. It's completely decorated. We could move in tomorrow."

"I am impressed. She did a fantastic job with the place."

"Do you think I can afford it?"

"This is income property, Justin. It's a great investment. I don't think you'll have a problem getting a mortgage. Your rents will more than cover the payments. And you won't have to pay rent on an apartment anymore."

"I love it! What's next?"

"We call the owners and make a deal."

For three weeks Justin buried himself in his work while he waited for an answer from the bank. Once again his art saved him from going crazy. Brian was almost never home. He was busy traveling the country recruiting for Kinnetic. Justin felt that Brian was becoming more distant with each separation. Their physical connection was as strong as ever. But when Justin questioned Brian about his trip or his business Brian claimed it was uneventful or boring. The pressure of managing his growing business was causing Brian to be cranky and uncommunicative.

Justin had been sketching out a floor plan for the new loft apartment when he heard Brian's key in the door. He quickly cleared the table and put the plans in a book on the bookshelf. That morning Justin had gotten a call from his attorney. The bank had approved the mortgage and the closing date was set. Tonight he had to tell Brian what he'd done.

When the door opened Justin tried to act surprised. "Hey, how was your trip?" Justin kissed Brian and took his coat.

"It was a business trip, it was boring. Three nights in a boring motel room in Motherfuck Kansas. I fucking hate sleeping alone. Get over here." Brian roughly pulled Justin to him pressed their bodies together. When Justin gasped for breath Brian loosened his grip. "Sorry."

Justin took a deep breath. Without a word he took Brian's hand and started dragging him toward the bedroom. Brian pulled Justin's arm toward him he picked Justin up and carried him the rest of the way to the bedroom. His recent business trips had reminded him how important sex was to him. Three days was far too long for him to hold out. He longed for Justin every minute of every night he spent in that hotel room alone. The thought of traveling without Justin for weeks at a time scared him to death. What if he reverted to his evil ways? What if Justin found out? All of this angst was stressing him out.

"I missed you." Justin whispered in his ear.

Justin's naked body lay under him and all was right with the world. At least for the moment. They had been wrapped in each others arms for an hour and Brian still clung to Justin like a security blanket. Justin sensed that something was on Brian's mind.

"Did something happen on this trip, Brian? You're acting kind of weird."

"Nothing happened." Brian insisted. "You are going to have to go to the Philippines with me. I know your mother needs you, but I need you too. It's really important to me."

"Brian we already talked about this. I have responsibilities and I can't get away now. I know what you're thinking."

"What am I thinking?"

"No sex for three weeks. That's like a death sentence for you. It's not physically possible and you're worried I'll be upset if you find someone to relieve the tension."

"You are scary. How do you know what I'm thinking?"

"You're Brian Kinney. You have needs."

"I need you."

"I know. But if you need to take care of business while you're taking care of business I promise I won't get mad at you."

"You won't?"

"I can't be there for you. What difference could a few weeks worth of tricking make in the grand scheme of things. You won't be cheating on me because I won't be there. We're together because we want to be. We're not married."

"No, we are NOT married." Brian growled. He pulled up the covers and got out of bed. "I'm going to take a shower." While he was in the shower Brian thought about what Justin had said. Justin had given him permission to cheat. What could be better than that? But was it cheating if you weren't married? Justin had thought this out. That's why he answered so quickly. He either really didn't care or he was taking care of his own needs while Brian was gone.

When he finished his shower Brian wrapped a towel around him and returned to the bedroom. He was surprised to see that Justin was completely dressed. "Where are you going?"

"We're going out. I put your jeans on the bed. Get dressed please."

"I don't want to go anywhere. I'm tired. Why don't you order some food and we can go to bed early."

"WE have to talk! Now put your clothes on and come in the living room." Justin commanded.

Brian reluctantly obeyed. He put on the jeans and T-shirt Justin had laid out and went to join him in the living room. Justin occupied the chair opposite the sofa, leaving Brian no option but to sit down and accept his fate. "This feels familiar."

Justin leaned forward in the chair to speak. "What are you talking about?"

"The last time you insisted on talking you had your suit case packed."

"How can you still be convinced that I am going to leave you?"

"You have left me, at least a half a dozen times."

"How many of those times did you push me out the door?"

"Once . . . maybe twice, but it was for your own good."

"It didn't feel good at the time. Especially the time at the loft when you pushed me away because you were sick. It was selfish of you."

"I'm selfish? You left me for another man!"

"And I lived to regret it. But being with Ethan opened my eyes to how the other half lives, having someone shower you with affection and proclamations of love, only to find out it was all bullshit. I was young and love . . . with you. I tried to transfer my feelings for you to another man. But it blew up in my face. When I lived with you I felt loved, until I started to analyze it and compare US to other people. I realize now that what we have is unique. You are irreplaceable in my life. Ethan is the reason you can be confident that I would never leave you for another man."

"Remind me to drop Ian a line to thank him for being a bigger asshole than me."

"You're not an asshole. You have to stop thinking of yourself that way."

"Does this lecture have a point?"

"I'm getting to that. But since we're talking, there is something else I regret. I never should have given you a hard time about Vermont. Your career is very important to you. Just recently Rome gave me her theory about that. It really made sense. Do you want to hear it?"

"Okay let me have it, what is Princess Rome's theory?"

"She said that you are driven to succeed because you relate money to the size of your dick. She also said that's why you are always giving me money, you want to share your dick with me."

Brian burst out laughing. Justin laughed too and joined him on the sofa. "I love to hear you laugh. Lately you're been so grumpy."

"You have some funny friends."

"I never should have gone on that trip without you. I had a miserable time and I made you feel abandoned. If you hadn't been so selfish you would have told me what was going on with your business. If I had know how stressed out you were I would have gone with you to Chicago."

"I hate when people bitch about their jobs to me. That's bullshit."

"You are not just people, Brian. You're my partner. What affects you, affects me. And that is what I want to talk to you about."

"I'm listening."

"You've been pretty grouchy lately. You come home late, fuck me and then go to sleep. I don't want to have to bug you every day to get you to talk to me. You know what happens when we don't talk. We jump to conclusions and we both get hurt. If there is something bothering you this is your chance to tell me."

"What you said before about tricking while I'm away. . . that bothered me."

"Why?"

"I don't know why. It makes perfect sense. It's just fucking and it's not like it has anything to do with you if I am miles away. Maybe you said it too quickly, like you've thought about it or maybe want the same rules again."

"Of course I thought about it. I can sense when you're unhappy and there is nothing that makes you more frustrated than lack of sex. I understand your needs and I don't want you to end up resenting me for not being there. I want you to be happy and successful and add to the size of your dick."

"It just scares me that I could lose control and end up back where I was before. I don't want to risk hurting you."

"Like an addict taking just one more hit and getting hooked again?"

"Maybe."

Justin thought for a minute before he answered. "I don't know what to say about that, Brian. I'll stand by you, no matter what. As long as you don't end up resenting me."

"Can we go back to bed now?"

"Nope. I'm just getting started."

"I am in deep shit trouble."

"We've both been very busy lately and we don't get to spend a lot of time together. When we are together I want something from you."

"I give you something every time I walk in the door."

"Sex. I love that part. But I want more."

"Where is your suit case? Is it in the bedroom? I'll carry it to the curb when you're ready." Brian joked.

"My suit case IS packed Brian."

Brian felt his heart sink. "I was joking."

"I'm not joking. My suit case is packed. And so is yours."

"We're both leaving me?"

"Nobody is leaving anybody. I'll explain if you'll just shut the fuck up. I don't want us to turn into fuck buddy room mates. Here are my new rules. When you walk in the door, no matter what shitty thing happened to you at work, you talk to me. And I want some romance. I want hand holding, making out, hugging, whispering in my ear, etc. And we never go to sleep without telling each other how we feel, even if it's bad. The rules about sex are the same."

"What rules about sex?"

"The rule is when it comes to sex there are NO rules. Anything goes."

"I can live with that."

"We're both building our careers. In the next few months, maybe the next few years, things will get out of control for one or both of us as times. I want you to know what I expect of you. Any questions?"

"This is so lame."

"It's what I want."

"Agreed. To all of it. Now can we go to bed?"

"Don't you want to know about the suit cases?"

"This better be good."

"We're moving. I found us a new place."

"Moving! Tonight?"

"Not just yet. But soon. I've been packing because I was so nervous about telling you what I've done."

"Sounds great to me. You know I wanted to move. But you said you couldn't afford it."

"I'll explain when we get there."

"Wait one minute. I have a rule too. Whenever you leave home you kiss me. A real kiss, not just a quicky."

"I do kiss you when I leave the apartment."

"Sometimes you forget."

"Okay I can live with that rule. Let's go see our new place."

It was early evening and Justin insisted on taking the subway rather than a cab. He knew that Brian would feel at home in the new neighborhood and walking from the subway he would get the feel of it. Justin anxiously studied Brian's face as they walked up the block where the building was located. He couldn't tell what was on the man's mind. Justin was extremely nervous when he opened the door to the elevator.

"Close your eyes. We don't really have all the papers signed yet but the owner's brother gave me the key."

Brian closed his eyes and allowed Justin to lead him into the apartment. Justin took a deep breath and crossed his fingers that Brian would be as impressed as he had been the first time he saw it. It might soften the blow for what he was about to tell him.

"You can open your eyes now." Brian opened his eyes. The place was about three times the size of his loft back home. It was professionally decorated complete with all stainless steel appliances, hard wood floors and a fire place. And this was just one room. Justin held his breath as he waited for Brian's response.

"It's not bad."

Justin grinned at him. "Not bad. It's fucking amazing!"

"Okay it is fucking amazing. This place has to be at least ten times the size of our apartment. How can you afford this? I don't think I can afford the rent on this place."

"There's no rent."

"There has to be rent."

"Not rent, a mortgage payment. I'm buying the whole building."

"Did you rob a bank?"

"I sold Babylon." Justin braced himself for the fall out. He gave Brian a moment to react but the man said nothing. He just stared at him. "Please don't be mad at me."

"Mad at you? I gave you my club to secure your future. And you sold it?"

"You gave me Babylon for a future without you. That's what you said, isn't it? If anything happened to you Brian I wouldn't care where I lived or how much money I had in the bank. All I would need is some paints and a canvass. I'll be a lonely old artist living in squalor until the day I could join you again. Owning Babylon made me think of living without you. So I sold it. I want to enjoy every minute that I have with you on this earth. After that I can take care of myself. I wanted you to have this place. We'll live here together because that's the only future I care to think about."

"How much did you get?" Justin could see a smile start to form on Brian's lips.

"Enough to put a down payment on the building. We'll own it jointly. It's an investment for OUR future. There are two rental units on the second floor and the store fronts on the first floor. As soon as we close on the place I'll get them rented too. That should cover the mortgage payments with something left over."

"Who did you sell Babylon to?"

"It's in good hands. Ted and Emmett and a few of their friends invested in it for them selves. Babylon will live on, just without us. You said it was mine and that I could do what I wanted. This is what I want."

"I see." Brian walked around and looked into each of the rooms. Justin stood in the doorway praying that he hadn't made a mistake. "You're a genius. This is a brilliant investment."

"You're not mad?"

"Just for a minute. Hardwood floors in the living room and dinning room, imported porcelain tile in the bathroom, windows bigger than Macy's Department store and all for the price of a dance club in Pittsburgh. How do you do it?"

"I had help. Rome found me the building and cosigned on the mortgage." Justin pulled Brian over to the window enthusiastically. "Look, there's a gym on the second floor of the building across the street. We can watch the guys lift weights from here."

"You think of everything. When do we move?"

"The closing is next week."

"Come here." Brian pulled Justin to him and kissed him. "I love you."

Justin laughed and dragged Brian toward the bathroom. "If you think you love me now wait until you see the Jacuzzi."

Two weeks later Brian stood in the living room of his new home admiring the view. He figured out that if he stood on his toes and leaned all the way to the right he could see into the men's showers. "Awesome." he uttered under his breath.

"Who's awesome?" Justin came in from the bedroom.

"Ah, you are dear." Brian started rubbing the glass with a cloth.

"You've spent more time staring out that window than you've spent washing it. Now get to work. I'm not going to clean this whole place all by myself."

"It's your fault. You picked the location. I'm just enjoying the view."

"You're impossible." Justin put on his coat and kissed Brian good bye. "I'm going out to get some tile cleaner. Please stop fogging up the windows."

On his way down the stairs Justin ran into one of the tenants. "Hey, how's it going?"

"I was just at the bank to get the rent money. You want it now?" Seth was tall and muscular. He had tattoos on both arms and was dressed like a biker. He wasn't bad looking for an older guy, Justin figured him to be Brian's age. Justin had taken a dislike to him the first time they met. He sensed the feeling was mutual.

"I'll drop by your place later to pick it up." Justin said. "I'm on my way to the store."

"Suit yourself. I'll be here."

Michael called a few minutes after Justin left. Brian hadn't spoken to him in a few weeks.

"Hey, how are things in the great gay north?"

"Super, how's New York."

"Fucking amazing. We just moved into our new digs."

"You moved? I thought Justin wasn't ready."

"It was his idea. He invested in an entire building. The loft we're in is three times the size of my place in the Pitts."

"It must be nice to be rich." Brian thought he sensed resentment in Michael's voice.

"We both fucking work like dogs."

"Brian you don't have any idea how it feels to really be a working dog. Ted told me you sold Babylon."

"Justin sold it. That's how he bought this place. Ted and Emmett will carry on as always."

"You gave Justin Babylon. That's very generous."

"It's all in the family. Why are you being such a cunt? I thought you and Justin were buds."

"We are. I love Justin. I'm just a little down. Jennifer Rebecca needs special shoes. Raising a kid is expensive."

"How much do you need?"

"I didn't call to ask you for money Brian, really. I just wanted to check in with you. I'm glad your life is perfect."

"Michael . . ."

"I have to go Brian. I'll see you soon."

"Sure . . . later."

As Brian hung up the phone there was a knock at the door. "Did you forget your key?"

He charged across the room thinking it was Justin. But it was Seth who greeted him. "Hey, that blond kid here?"

"No, he's out. Who are you? I'll tell him you're looking for him."

Brian leaned on the door but the visitor brushed past him into the room. "Nice, I've never been up here. The former owner was a real cunt."

"You're a tenant?" Brian asked he sensed that the man was checking him out. It felt good to have someone looking at him like that again.

"Yeah, I'm 2B . . . Seth." He put out his hand and Brian took it. Seth held it a little too long. Brian was beginning to get uncomfortable. He pulled away.

"I'm Brian. Justin handles the tenant stuff. I'll tell him you were here."

"I brought the rent." Seth held out the envelope.

Brian took it and put it on the counter. "Thanks."

"That blond kid lives here with you?"

"Actually I live here with him."

Seth grunted. "I don't see you as a bottom."

Brian was getting the picture. Seth was looking for action. As much as he enjoyed the attention, Brian wanted him out of the loft before Justin returned.

"I'll tell him you dropped by." Brian leaned on the door jam again.

Seth made no move to leave. "You married?"

"No, why?"

"Maybe we could hook up one night while little blondy is at his high school play."

"I don't hook up. We're together."

"Oh, he seems young. Some guys are into that. Not me. I'm into studs, like you. But if blondy is a part of the deal I'm cool with that. He has a tight little ass."

"Look, if your toilet is back up, call a plumber and send me the bill. Don't come up here again."

"I'm just trying to be friendly."

"Get out."

Seth grinned at Brian as he went out the door. "If you change your mind I'm in 2B."

"2B or not 2B. I don't really give a fuck." Brian closed the door behind him.

Justin opened the door and saw that Brian had fallen asleep on the sofa. "Hey, are you sleeping on the job?"

"I finished the job. All the windows are sparking, can't you tell?"

"It's dark now. I can't see anything."

"You'll just have to take my word. Where have you been?"

"Shopping. I got us some dinner from the restaurant across the street."

"I'll go wash up."

Brian went in to the bathroom and Justin put the food on the counter where he saw the envelope. When Brian came back into the room Justin asked him about it.

"Bri, what's this envelope?"

"The rent from 2B. He dropped it off."

"I told him I'd get it later. What did he say?"

Brian hesitated but decided to tell the truth. "He said he wanted to fuck me."

"Why doesn't that surprise me? What did you tell him?"

"I told him no."

"Good, he gives me the creeps."

"He's not so bad."

"So you do want to fuck him?"

"I used to BE him, remember. I know where he's coming from. He sees a hot guy and his dick leads him up the stairs."

"Oh, I get it. You like the idea that he was attracted to you."

"Just like those boys in the gym. There's no harm in that."

"Nope. We are both irresistible. He still gives me the creeps. And the former owner warned me he has some nasty parties. The people in 2A complained all the time."

"Why don't you get rid of him?"

"They both have leases. And we need the money to pay the bills. As long as he stays out of my way who am I to object to his God given right to party?"

"What's for dinner?" Brian thought it best to change the subject.

Justin found that walking to and from Kinnetic was a great way to exercise without a treadmill. Going to the gym was boring, especially without Brian. Since the move Justin had been very busy putting his own special touches on their new place. Brian had been away for two days but he was expected back today. Justin had purchased new bath towels on Canal Street and was anxious to see how they looked in the bathroom. When he got to the building he decided to take the stairs rather than the elevator. On the way up he ran into a nervous looking young man who was pacing up and down the hallway on the second floor. It startled Justin to see someone there in the middle of the day.

"Can I help you?" Justin asked.

"I'm looking for the guy in 2B. You know him?"

"He's not usually around in the day time. How did you get in building?"

"He gave me a key, told me to meet him." The young man held up a key.

"Really," Justin pulled the key out of his hand, "I'll return it for you. I'm his landlord."

"Tell him Tommy from the club was here. He's got my number."

"I'll bet he does." Justin muttered under his breath as he continued up the stairs.

To his surprise Brian was in the kitchen making coffee. "Hey, when did you get home?" When he kissed him the key in his hand dropped to the floor. Brian bent down to pick it up.

"What happened to your key chain?" Brian asked.

"This isn't my key. That asshole in 2B has been given them out like candy. The other night I came home and two guys were fucking in the hall."

"You have to get rid of that guy. Him giving out keys is dangerous. That's cause to break his lease."

"He's a gay man doing what gay men do. We moved from a place where we didn't fit in. This is a gay neighborhood, Brian. No one is going to give us dirty looks if we kiss in the elevator or write FAGGOTS on our wall. You can't have it both ways."

"What if one of his tricks decides to have your little blond ass for dessert one night. You could come home and get jumped in the hallway of your own building."

"I can take care of myself Brian."

"What about me?"

"I can take care of you too." Justin reached for the coffee pot. "I don't know what your problem is. We lived at your loft for years and you never worried about some asshole jumping me."

"That's because I was the resident asshole. This place is turning into Babylon East with a built in backroom on the second floor. What if I get tempted?"

"If you think that's a possibility why don't you go down and fuck him and get it out of your system." Justin yelled.

"Is that what you want?" Brian yelled back. "You just don't give a shit about US do you?"

"How can you say that?"

"Because you think that I'm still that man. You think that the minute you're out of my sight I jump the nearest warm body."

"I don't think that about you, Brian. But that's what you think about yourself. That's why you're threatened by Seth's lifestyle."

"Do you really think that's what I want?" Brian took the cup he was drinking out of and smashed it down on the counter. The cup shattered into pieces.

The noise made Justin jump. "I can't believe we're talking to each other like this. Brian, I didn't mean what I said, I'll have a talk with him about the keys." Justin took Brian's hand and saw that it was cut from the cup. He reached up

and put his arms around Brian's neck. "I miss you so much when you're away. I don't want to fight when you're here. I'll take care of things for us. I promise." Justin turned on the faucet and let the water run on Brian's hand.

Brian pulled his hand back and wrapped it in a paper towel. "The situation makes me nervous. I don't like the thought of you being here alone. This isn't Pittsburgh."

"I'm sorry I yelled at you. I'm getting really nervous about my mom. She was having contractions the other day but they stopped. I was all ready to fly out there but she said she'd rather I wait for the real thing."

"Call me selfish but I am so damned glad you're here." Brian wrapped his arms around Justin and held him tightly. The sound of the telephone startled them both. "Let the machine get it." Brian suggested.

"It could be Molly or my mother." Justin pulled away and grabbed the telephone. The caller was Justin's sister Molly. Brian heard Justin tell her to hang on and he would be there as fast as he could.

"They're at the hospital but the doctor thinks she'll be a few hours. I may have time to get there if I can get on a flight right away. Can you call the airlines while I get my stuff together."

"Sure." Brian said. "I'll drive you to the airport."

Justin phoned early the next morning to tell Brian that Jennifer had delivered a healthy baby boy ten minutes after he arrived at the hospital. The labor had been long and his mother was exhausted. She stayed in the hospital for two days. Justin brought Jennifer and his little brother home and insisted on staying a few days to help out. For once his mother didn't argue.

It was Saturday and since Justin wasn't around Brian decided to do some work at home and then go to the gym. It was early evening and he had just finished showering when he heard the door bell. He'd ordered food from the deli but he thought it would have taken more time. Put a towel around his waist and grabbed his wallet before going to the door.

Seth greeted him with a seductive smile on his face and a bottle of wine. He was completely naked. Over the years Brian had opened his door to hundreds of horny men. For the first time it shocked him. His conscience told him to slam the door in Seth's face. But his dick had other ideas.

"Pretty boy go on a trip?" Seth asked. "You ain't on a leash are you? I think it's about time the resident studs got to know each other." Seth handed Brian the wine with his left hand and pulled off Brian's towel with his right. "You want to open that now or after?"

As Brian stood naked in front of Seth he felt as if he were looking in a mirror. This was the man he had been up until a year ago. This is the way he was perceived by his tricks. He was a predator and they provided him with a feeling

of power. His body reacted to the situation. It had been over a week since he and Justin had sex. A naked man stood in front of him ready willing and, apparently, more than able.

Seth grabbed his hand and started to pull him toward the bedroom. Brian followed him willingly. His excitement growing with every step. Seth pushed his body up against Brian with force. Brian closed his eyes and allowed his body to take charge. He felt Seth's erection rubbing on his stomach. His own was at full attention and ready for action. One more step and there would be no going back.

Seth pressed his lips into Brian's chest. Brian rolled his head back and groaned. He was naked in the bedroom with a strange man and there was nothing to stop him from acting on the impulse to fuck him. Brian pulled Seth's head back and looked him in the eyes. The throbbing in his groin slowed. His mind was beginning to focus on what was happening. Justin had given permission. They weren't married, he wasn't cheating, there was nothing to stop him from fucking the man who now lay on his bed ready for action. And that was all it took. It was there right in front of him and he didn't want it. Brian's body relaxed and the feelings of excitement turned to repulsion.

Brian abruptly pulled away from Seth "Party's over, get the fuck out!" Brian pulled on his arm to get him off the bed.

"I should have figured your boy toy takes your balls with him when he leaves."

Brian grinned and handed him the bottle of wine. "What can I say, you're just not my type, I prefer someone from the human race."

"Fuck you!"

"Not in your life time asshole!"

Seth swaggered toward the door with Brian right behind him. Before they reached the middle of the room the door opened and Justin walked in. His mouth dropped open and the suitcase in his hand fell to the floor.

Seth grinned as he paraded past Justin in the nude. He winked back at Brian before he walked out door. Brian slammed it shut behind him. Justin hadn't said a word. He picked up the case and started toward the bedroom. Brian grabbed the towel from the sofa and wrapped it around his waist.

"Stop!" He caught up with Justin in the middle of the living room. "Listen to me!"

Justin turned and faced him. "I'm going to take a shower. Leave me alone for a while, please." His tone was calm but Brian could see the hurt look on his face. Justin tried to get past but Brian ran in front of him and blocked his path. "YOU LISTEN TO ME!" He said firmly. "Nothing happened!"

"You don't have to lie, Brian. And I'm not stupid. Two naked gay men and a bottle of wine, what the fuck else would you be doing? I don't want to talk about it."

"What about the rules? You want me to talk to you. I know what it looks like. But I learned something tonight about myself and it affects you!"

"Do you have syphilis again?"

"You're not going to give me a chance to explain."

"I gave you permission. I wasn't here. It's just sex, right? I guess I just forgot how much it hurt to see you with another man."

"It should hurt. It's supposed to hurt when someone you love cheats."

"I wasn't around so it wasn't cheating."

"Will you shut up and listen to me for a change. Yeah, he came up here for sex. I was taking a shower and the door bell rang. I thought it was the food I'd ordered. I opened the door and there he was. . . bearing gifts. I thought, if Justin doesn't care what I do when he isn't around . . . what the fuck!

"I let him touch me. I closed my eyes and pretended to be back at Babylon. I'd let my dick do my thinking and it would be over in a minute. I'd be satisfied and so would he. Justin would never have to know. But guess what. My dick wanted no part of that man's ass. My dick refused it, turned him down. All this time I was worried that I would go out of control. But I never had to worry about that because my dick is committed to your ass."

"Really? Are you sure your dick was just not in the mood? Or maybe that particular man's ass didn't appeal to him."

"I was horny as hell before he got here. I worked all day on a men's underwear campaign. Then I went to the gym where there were tons of half naked sweaty men pumping iron. I haven't been with you in over a week. If the wind blew, my dick would stand up and salute. But when tested, he was willing to wait for the real thing. WE are in control." Brian grinned with satisfaction.

Justin let Brian touch his face with the back of his hand. "I don't ever want to see that look on your face again." Brian said softly.

He pulled Justin into his arms and pressed his body against him. "You see, there's nothing wrong with my dick that the right man can't cure."

Justin really wasn't sure what had happened that night. Brian seemed to have had an epiphany about himself and that was a good thing. He'd never seen him in a better mood.

They took a shower together and then got into bed. Brian rolled on his side and took Justin's hand. "How is your mother?"

"She's tired. Little bro has a healthy set of lungs."

"Little bro, that's a catchy name."

"His name is William Robert Taylor."

"Billy Bob. That's cool."

"I've got pictures."

"Get them. I want to see what our Godson looks like."

Justin got the bag that he'd taken to Pittsburgh. He pulled out the contents, found the envelope with the picture and handed them to Brian. "Here, I got a little carried away. There are two rolls."

Justin watched Brian's face as he looked at the photographs. "What do you think?"

"He looks exactly like you."

"I thought he did too. So did my mom. Of course Molly insisted she didn't see the resemblance. She said he looked like Tucker. I wanted to slug her."

"He is the kid's father. That was pretty harsh for her to say that in front of your mother."

"They fight all the time. Molly liked Tucker. She wanted my mom to marry him. I think she had a crush on him and wanted to keep him around."

"Has your mom ever contacted him?"

"Nope, but he found out. He showed up at the house the day before I left. Molly called him."

"No shit? How come you didn't tell me this on the phone?"

"I figured you had enough on your mind without getting involved in the Taylor family drama."

"You're a Taylor and you're my family, doesn't that count?"

"Yes, of course it does. I'm sorry."

"What happened? Did your mom freak out?"

"I thought she would. Molly let him in. The baby was in the living room. He went over and picked him up and that's what my mother saw when she walked in the room. I think she felt guilty then."

"Wow, that must have been uncomfortable for you."

"I volunteered to put William to bed to let them talk. I had to drag Molly out of the room with me. They got along okay. My mother said that he's more hurt than angry and that he wanted to help with the baby. He wants to be a part of his life."

"That's a good thing."

"Maybe."

"The kid is half his."

"I know. But all that week I got to take care of him. My mother slept a lot and Molly's a little nervous because he's so small. So we got to bond. I stayed up with him at night and held him. When I talked to him he seemed to listen and I think he maybe smiled at me once. I know it's selfish but I liked being the man in his life. I liked that he depended on me for everything."

"You'll always be in his life."

"I wonder if he'll even remember me when I see him again." Justin saw a tear roll down Brian's cheek. He took his finger and wiped it away. "I'm sorry, Bri, that must be how you feel about Gus. Only he really is your son."

Brian brushed his hand away. "He's my son. But he belongs to Lindsay and Mel. I gave him up."

Justin rubbed his back. "You gave me up too. But here I am. When he gets older you'll have a relationship with him. It's not so easy to forget about Brian Kinney."

"I'd like to forget him sometimes."

"Don't say that. I cherish every minute of every day I've been with you."

"Even the minutes where I tear your heart out in your own living room."

"That was Seth's fault. And I love that your dick is true to me."

"It takes the pressure off when you can trust your dick to do the right thing."

"So you're not freaking out anymore about the trip next month?"

"Not on my part. But I am still concerned about you being alone here for weeks with Dr. Evil downstairs."

"Don't worry about that. I'll take care of him. I have a plan."

"Vigilante Justin will save the day. No guns please, at least not near our hard wood floors. You can kill him in the alley and put him in the trash."

"Revenge is sweet."

Justin called his mother every day for news. It thrilled him to hear the baby cry in the back ground. He couldn't wait to see him again. Jennifer scheduled the Christening early so that both Brian and Justin could attend. Justin's show was six weeks away, but this time he was not rushed or pressured. He had more than enough new paintings for a show in his studio. The publicity was being handled by Kinnetic. He even had the idea to hire interns to help him set up.

Brian looked up and smiled when Justin came into his office. Since that night in the loft Brian had been upbeat and happy. Justin was pleased that he'd had some kind of personal breakthrough that allowed him to release his demons. Whatever it was that went on in the man's head that night it obviously allowed him to look at himself in a more positive light.

"Hey, I have an idea." Justin leaned across Brian's desk and planted a kiss on his forehead.

"I like that idea. I have an idea too, but you'd have to get naked for it."

"Later. Just hear me out about this before you say no."

"I hate it when you start out like that."

"In a few weeks you'll be going overseas. You hired a bunch of new people and you're a little nervous about leaving your company in the hands of strangers."

"They're top notch people. I spent weeks hand picking each one. But, I'd be crazy to trust any of them as far as I could throw them. You're right but what choice have I got?"

"Here's my plan. While you're away, I'm going to run Kinnetic." Justin announced.

Brian pushed his chair back from the desk and stood up. "You, an artist who has no experience in the field, are going to run my company for a month? It makes perfect sense."

"I'm glad you agree."

"I was being sarcastic. Justin, I believe that you are capable of doing anything that you put your mind to. But running this place is not something you can learn overnight. I appreciate the offer."

"I don't mean that I'm actually going to run the business. What I propose is that I sit at your desk to give the staff the feeling that there is still a Kinney at the helm. I know that Cynthia is perfectly capable. But I think my presence would keep the new guys from getting out of hand. Sometimes it takes a man to do a man's job."

"You mean you'd be a figure head."

"Right, I could sit at your desk, talk on your phone, work on your computer. Just to give the illusion of continuity in leadership."

"You want to sit at my desk?" Brian said thoughtfully. "I guess we could get a booster seat." he joked.

Justin came around to the other side of the desk and pulled on Brian's chair. "Get up and I'll show you how authoritative I can look."

Brian obeyed and Justin sat in his chair. "I guess I could move it up a notch or two." Justin admitted. "I think it's a perfect idea."

"You do look adorable, I mean authoritative, but you have a show coming up. You don't have time to office sit."

"I want to do it, Brian. My show practically set it self up this time. I want to do whatever menial thing I can so that you can concentrate on your big deal."

"I guess it couldn't hurt. Just don't make a mess in my bathroom like you do at home. And don't fuck with my computer."

"Can I check my email?"

"I have to go up to art department before I leave. You can use the computer until I get back."

Justin grinned and waved at Brian as he walked toward the door. Brian turned around quickly and said "Will I still have a job when I get back?"

"Don't you trust me?"

"Not for a minute." Brian winked at him and left the office.

Justin sat back in Brian's chair and surveyed the room. He felt like he did when his father took him to work with him. Curiosity got the better of him and he opened a few drawers. He found nothing out of the ordinary. Then he remembered that when he had bought the desk the sales man told him about a secret compartment in the top right drawer. Justin wondered if Brian had ever found it. He pulled out the top drawer and felt around for the latch. After he released the latch the top part of the draw slid back revealing the secret compartment. Brian had indeed found the spot. Justin felt a little guilty. He hadn't expected to find anything there.

When he lived at Brian's loft one of his greatest joys was to find some secret keepsake that Brian had hidden. He couldn't help himself. He pulled out the contents of the drawer. On top was a picture of himself and his baby brother that was taken a few days after he was born. Justin hadn't realized that it was missing from the envelope. There was a picture of Brian with Gus, one with Brian and Michael and another with Brian, Ted and Emmett.

Underneath the pictures was an envelope. Justin pulled it out and opened it. There was a picture of the two of them together. Justin didn't remember seeing it before but it was from a long time ago when they first met. There was another picture of them that Daphne had taken at the prom. Also inside the envelope was another smaller envelope. Justin recognized the cream colored linen paper. He opened the envelope and saw that it was an invitation to their wedding that never happened.

Brian had kept the rings and now Justin realized how much that day had meant to the man. All of a sudden he felt guilty for snooping. He gathered the pictures and put them back into the draw in the same order that he had found them. It took him a minute to collect himself. He realized that tears were rolling down his cheeks. He wiped his sleeve and across his face and went upstairs to find Brian.

Jennifer had insisted that Brian and Justin stay at her condo when they came to town for the Christening. They arrived on Friday night and rented a car at the airport. When they got to the house the baby was asleep in a bassinet in the living room. Justin had made arrangements for Emmett to cater a party for the Christening. After putting their bags in his old room Justin asked Brian if he would mind staying with the baby while he and his mother went to meet with Emmett. Brian sat on the couch and switched on the television. A few minutes later he heard the baby stir. Jennifer had left him instructions about feeding the baby. Brian went to the kitchen to heat the formula. Before it was ready little Billy was screaming at the top of his lungs. Brian rushed to the living room and picked him up. This was the first time he had seen the baby up close. His resemblance to Justin was striking.

"You sure know how to get a man's attention. Just like your brother." The baby stopped crying and stared at him. "I'm Brian, your soon to be godfather." With the baby in his arms he went to the kitchen to get the bottle. He tested it on his arm and when he was satisfied the temperature was right he went back to the living room and sat back down.

in front of the television. It had been a long time since Gus was this small. Brian couldn't take his eyes off of Billy. His skin was so fair and soft. As the baby drank, Brian studied his facial features. There was no mistaking who he resembled. He had Justin's mouth, eyes and cute button nose. Holding this little warm bundle in his arms felt good.

When Justin and Jennifer came home they heard Brian talking to someone. Justin realized that Brian was explaining to Billy what was happening in the movie that was on the television. Billy seemed to be enjoying the attention.

"You're not trading me in for younger man, are you?" Justin joined them on the couch.

"It's tempting, but I think I'll stick with the original."

"Thanks."

Jennifer went to the kitchen to make coffee. When she came back into the room Brian, Justin and Billy were all cuddled on the couch staring at the television. She put down the tray, picked up her camera from the dining room table and took a picture of the three of them. "You boys look comfortable." She poured the coffee and then took Billy upstairs to put him to bed.

"Your mom looks thin. Is she feeling okay?"

"She is feeling fine. She's also seeing Tucker again. That's why she lost the weight so fast. She's been working out and walking the neighborhood with the baby carriage."

"Whatever makes her happy." Brian put his arm around Justin and pulled him close. "Wanna make out?"

"Make out?"

"Yeah, it's exciting to make out in your parent's living room while they're upstairs asleep."

"How would you know?"

"That's the point. I never got to do it because if my father ever came into the living room and caught me with a boy he would have killed me on the spot."

"Mine too." Justin leaned toward Brian and planted a long lingering kiss on his lips. "That's enough, let's go upstairs and fuck."

"So much for romance."

Justin had suggested that Brian go to the gym early in the morning on the day of the Christening to work out. His membership had not expired and the rest of the day would be hectic so Brian agreed. Justin also suggested that Brian shower at the gym then meet him in the church vestry where they would get dressed.

Brian protested at first. It seemed an odd request but Justin explained that they were staying at his mother's condo where there was only one bathroom, two women and one baby. "You have no idea what it's like. When we all lived at home we had two bathrooms and I never got out of the house on time."

"I see your point. Life would be so much easier if everyone showered together like we do. Why don't you come to the gym with me? Then we could shower together with an audience."

"I still have a lot to do, Brian. It'll be much easier this way. Trust me."

"You're the boss. But if I didn't know better I would swear you were trying to get rid of me."

"Never. Now just go, please." Justin practically pushed him out the door.

Brian got to the gym a little after 7:00 a.m. he had never seen the gym at this hour when he lived in Pittsburgh. He had probably never seen Pittsburgh at this hour. He had to admit that it was a good idea. The gym was empty and he was able to get on the machines without the wait. When he was finished he showered quickly and left for the church. Justin was being dropped off by his mother when Brian pulled up. He was carrying two garment bags over his shoulder.

"Where is your mother going?" Brian asked.

"She had to run out for some formula so she gave me a ride. How was your workout?"

"It was alright. What have you got in there?" Brian asked when they got inside.

"I had these sent from home. I didn't think you'd want to carry our tuxes on the plane."

"What the fuck kind of religion requires godfathers to wear matching Hugo Boss tuxedos?" Brian asked as he struggled with his cufflink.

"They're not a requirement. Brian, The tuxes were my idea. And since when do you complain about getting dressed up?"

Justin stood in front of the mirror next to him and smoothed down his hair. Brian was reminded of a moment from their past. "We would make an awesome ad for Boss."

"Always the ad man." Justin quipped.

Brian reached for his jacket and realized his ring was missing. He was sure that he had put it in the pocket of his coat before going to the gym as he always did. "Justin have you seen my ring? It was in my pocket and now it's gone." He realized that Justin had left the room. "Hey, where did you go?" When Justin didn't answer Brian turned and noticed that the door that led to the church alter was opened. Cautiously he entered and found Justin standing on the alter waiting for him.

"I can't find my ring. Come back and help me look, it must have dropped out of my pocket."

"I have it." Justin announced.

"Well give it to me."

"I will. I wanted to ask you something first."

"Am I being punished?"

"Do you know what day this is?"

"Saturday."

"But it's a special Saturday."

"Is it your birthday?"

"No, but it is Gus's birthday."

"I didn't forget. I sent him a check."

"Don't you remember what else happened on this day?" Justin goaded.

"Vaguely, I got high and went to Babylon. I was so high that night when I was getting in my car I thought I'd seen an angel walking toward me out of the fog. "

"Six years we've been together."

"On and off." Brian reminded him.

"We were never really apart. Since the night we met you've been the most constant relationship in my life. I know you think that I'm too young to know my own mind but you're wrong. I knew my mind back then as well as I know it now. What we have is permanent. All the things that have happened to us over the past six years have made us stronger. When we called off the wedding it was okay because I knew that we were destined to be together always, no matter what. And that's what you've been trying to tell me all along. Whatever it is that drew us to each other in the first place is bigger than both of us. It's always drawn me back to you and always will, no matter what. Till death do us part."

"Death better think twice before he tries."

"I think he already has a few times. We've been through it all together. For richer for poorer, in sickness and in health . . ."

"This is all very sweet. But what the fuck are you trying to pull here Justin? It's almost 10:00 o'clock and there's no one here for the 'Royal Christening'?"

"They'll be here in 15 minutes."

"Why are we here so early?"

"We are early for the Christening . . . it's tomorrow."

"What is this? A rehearsal baptism? Justin you better explain before I take off my cummerbund and beat you with it."

Justin smiled and took both of Brian's hands in his. "Today I want to celebrate our love in front of our friends and family. I want to show them that nothing in this world is stronger than the bond that we have. I want to set an example for my sister, my new brother and even my mother and Tucker. Love does exist once you learn to trust someone enough to open your heart completely. I trust you with my heart, my life, my love. On this day, on this altar in front God and everyone, I want to take our vows and officially call you my husband for the rest of our lives."

Justin opened his hand and held out Brian's ring. "Brian Kinney . . . will you marry me?"

Part Five - Married or Not

Justin heard the answering machine message come on as he was attempting to insert the key in the lock. He opened the door and quickly ran to the phone when he heard Michael's voice. "Hey, Michael. What's up?"

"Hey, Justin. Hunter's sick."

"I'm sorry, Michael. What's going on? Is he in the hospital?"

"Uh, yeah, he was but he's out now. Is Brian around Justin? I really need to talk to him about something."

Justin sensed that Michael was nervous and upset. He guessed it was because of Hunter's illness. It had to be hard living with two HIV positive men. Justin wanted to do what he could to help. "Sorry Michael, but Brian is in the Philippines on business. He's been gone two and a half weeks and he called today and he said he'd need at least two more weeks to finish up. Is there something I could do?"

"I don't know, Justin. Can you give me Brian's number, maybe I could call him?"

"His cell phone is off. I tried before. It's not a very good connection when I do get him. I think it's the middle of the night over there, but he may call tomorrow again. I'll tell him to call you."

"But I need something right away. Justin I hate to ask you and I wouldn't if I wasn't in such a bind. I need to borrow some money. Between Hunter and Ben's medications and the baby's stuff it's really difficult. I've been working at the mall, but it doesn't pay much."

"No problem, Michael. I can lend you some money. How much do you need?"

"A lot, Justin. Do you have access to Brian's account?"

"I wouldn't feel right taking his money with him away. I would need to ask him. So you could wait until I hear from him, or take the money from me."

"Do you have \$ 5,000?" Michael sounded desperate.

"Shit, Michael. That's a lot of cash."

"I'll pay it back Justin. I'm getting a second job and . . . "

"I trust that you'll pay it back. I'll wire it to you when the bank opens tomorrow."

"Thanks Justin. You're a good friend. You saved my life."

"I'll call you tomorrow, okay."

"Great."

Justin had an uneasy feeling when he hung up the phone. Five thousand dollars was a lot of money. He trusted Michael to pay him back. It just seemed odd that he needed so much money so quickly because Hunter was sick. Justin decided to find out for himself what was bothering Michael. The next morning he went to the bank and withdrew the money in the form of traveler's checks and then he made a reservation on a flight to Toronto.

Justin didn't care much for the city of Toronto in the best of conditions. Today it was cold and nasty with the hint of snow in the air. He sat in the back of the cab on the way from the airport shivering. He wasn't sure if it was the weather or the fact that he missed Brian more than anything that had him on edge. The cab pulled up to the apartment building where Michael and Ben lived. He was very surprised to see Hunter riding his bike down the street. Hunter stopped when he saw Justin get out of the cab.

"What are you doing here?" He asked Justin.

"I might ask you the same thing, weren't you just in the hospital?"

"Fuck no! I was just on my way home from swim practice. What gave you the idea I was in the hospital?"

"Maybe I misunderstood Michael. Is Ben okay?"

"Yeah, he's in Montreal today, though."

"Where is Michael?"

"He's working at the mall. Hey, get back in the cab and I'll go with you to find him."

Hunter parked his bike in the alley and joined Justin in the cab. On the way to the mall, Justin decided not to tell Hunter why he was there. Michael must have had a really good reason for lying. Telling Hunter would only get Justin more involved in their family affairs than he wanted. "I was bored in New York since Brian went off to the Philippines on business. I decided to come up for a visit with the kids."

"How does someone get bored in New York? The two of you just got married? How come you didn't go with him?"

"I have a show coming up. I needed to stay in New York to put things together."

"Oh." Hunter was clearly bored with the conversation. When the cab pulled up to the mall Hunter saw two of his friends from school. "Michael works in the book store. Tell him I'll be home for dinner." Hunter took off with his friends and Justin let out a sigh of relief.

When Michael caught sight of Justin waving to him from outside of the window he dropped the magazines he had been putting on the shelves. He quickly scooped them up and put them on a cart. Justin watched from outside as Michael talked to the man behind the register. He hoped that Michael could get a break. Michael came outside and hugged Justin briefly. "What the fuck are you doing here? You didn't carry the cash, did you?"

"No. I have traveler's checks."

"Okay, yeah, that'll be fine." He hugged Justin again and took the envelope. "I will pay you back, every penny, with interest, don't worry."

"I'm not worried. Michael, what's going on?"

"It's just that Hunter's sick and . . ."

"If that's your only problem I wouldn't worry. He's made a miraculous recovery. I just saw him coming home from swim practice. He looks great. In fact he came to the mall with me."

"You didn't tell him about the money, did you?"

"No, I don't want to get involved. If you wanted to tell him the truth you would have."

"Let's sit down over there by the coffee shop." Michael suggested. "Do you want some coffee?"

"Sure." Justin said. He sat at a table and took off his coat while Michael got the coffee.

Michael returned to the table and sat down opposite Justin. "Ben left me."

"What? We saw you only a few weeks ago at the wedding. You seemed fine. What happened?"

"The truth is moving to Toronto was probably a mistake. It's just as expensive here as Pittsburgh. And it's difficult to get work. I got a little behind and Ben found out. We had a fight and he left."

"But you're married! Isn't that supposed to be for better or worse? When Brian lost everything I didn't blame him."

"It's different, Justin."

"I don't want to take sides. I don't live your life, but Brian and I would never split up over something as superficial as money."

"Easy to say when you're rich."

"I'm not rich. And Brian works his ass off for everything he has."

"Look, Justin. I appreciate you bringing the money but I don't want to talk about this anymore. I have to get back to work. Are you staying with Mel and Lindsay?"

"I guess so. I want to see the kids. Maybe we'll talk later."

"I don't have anything else to say." Michael turned his back on Justin and returned to the book store. Justin stared after him in disbelief. He was sitting at the table finishing his coffee and thinking about his next move when his cell phone rang. It was Brian.

"Where have you been? I've been calling all over town for you. I left messages on your phone. Didn't you get them?"

"I'm sorry Brian, I left in a hurry and I couldn't get through to tell you. I'm in Toronto."

"What happened? Is Gus okay?"

"Yeah, I guess. I didn't come because of Gus, but I am probably going over there to see him soon. I'll give him your love."

"Why is it so hard to get an answer out of you? You're making me nervous."

"I came here to see Michael. Nothing I want to discuss over the phone. He's not sick or dead or anything. Brian, I'll tell you everything when you get home. Don't worry, please."

"I miss you."

"Me too. I'll call you later when I get to Lindsay's, okay?"

"Later."

Brian hung up and started to dial Michael's number but stopped midway through. Justin was dealing with whatever the crisis was and he had not asked for Brian's help. There was nothing he could do and he didn't want Michael to be mad at Justin. He would allow Justin to deal with the problem and trust that he would be filled in when he got home.

Justin dialed Lindsey's cell phone number and prayed he would not get a recording. She picked up on the second ring.

"Justin, what a coincidence! I was just thinking about you. I saw your picture in a magazine article about Rome Astor. The portrait you did of her is fantastic. What a boast for your career to run into her on your vacation."

"Yes, it sure was, for both me and Brian. The deal he is working on now is from the connections he made at one of her parties."

"That's right, he's away now, isn't he? What a pity he had to leave so shortly after the wedding."

"It's a big deal for him. If he gets this account Kinnetic will be an international company."

"Impressive! Brian has come a long way. You must be lonely in New York by yourself. Why don't you come up for a visit?"

"Is 15 minutes too soon?"

"You're in Toronto?"

"Yes I'm at the mall where Michael works."

"I'll come pick you up. We can go right to Gus's school. He'll be so surprised to see you."

Lindsay and Justin spent the afternoon taking Gus and Jenny to the park. Justin was relieved that Lindsay had not asked the reason for his trip. She never mentioned Michael or Ben once. Justin spent two nights at Mel and Lindsay's. As it turned out, they were in need of a baby sitter that Friday night and Justin's visit was well timed. He left for home on Saturday morning.

When he arrived in New York, he had the cab driver drop him off at Kinnetic where he worked for several hours on a newly commissioned portrait. In the late afternoon he made his way over to the gallery to help Cathy unpack and catalog a new collection that had arrived that day. They ordered in Chinese food and worked until nearly eleven. Justin was exhausted when he finally fell into bed around midnight.

Brian arrived home at 6:00 a.m. All he wanted to do was find Justin and hold him in his arms. He went to the bedroom and saw Justin lying on his side with his arms firmly wrapped around Brian's pillow. Brian undressed and slipped into the bed as quietly as he could. He propped himself up on one elbow and stared at Justin's beautiful face. Justin stirred and rolled over onto his back. He opened his eyes and saw Brian. "Hey," he mumbled sleepily. "What time did you get home? How long have you been staring at me like that?"

"Hours." Brian smiled at down at him. "You look like an angel sleeping there all curled up with my pillow."

Justin reached up and put his arms around Brian's neck. "Too much talking." He pulled Brian down on top of him.

Several hours later, Justin pulled the covers quietly to get out of bed.

Brian reached up and pulled him back. "Where are you going?"

"I thought you were asleep." Justin got back into bed and snuggled up to him.

"I am asleep. But I want you here next to me."

"I was just going to the bathroom."

"Oh, okay go then. But come right back."

Justin answered the call of nature in record time and ran back to the bed. He slid under the covers and snuggled up to Brian again. "You never told me why you came home so early."

"I did what I had to do there. I know what it is they need and now I have to put it all together." Brian rubbed the bridge of his nose with his fingers. He felt the beginnings of a headache coming on. "I came home because I have to hire more staff and start work on the ads right away."

"Oh, that's great. But I thought you came home because you missed me?"

"You know I hate sleeping alone. Now, are you going to tell me why you made that mysterious visit to Canada?"

"It was really weird, Brian. I'm not telling tales about Michael, but you and I don't keep things from each other so I'm going to tell you exactly what happened. Michael called and said he needed to talk to you. He sounded upset so I asked if I could help. He told me that Hunter had been in the hospital and that he needed money right away. He asked to borrow \$ 5,000. I went to the bank the next day and took it out of my account. I decided to fly to Toronto because I was worried about Michael. When I got there Hunter was out front of their place riding his bike. He hadn't been in the hospital, in fact he wasn't even sick."

"Michael lied to you?"

"Apparently he did. I went to the mall where Michael was working. He wasn't happy to see me but he took the money. I told him I ran into Hunter. Then he told me that he had gotten into debt and he and Ben had a fight and Ben left him. That's all I know."

"I guess the honeymoon is over. Why did you give him your money? You should have written a check out of my account."

"Michael is my friend, too. He said he will pay me back. And I don't have authority to take money out of your account, Brian. I have my own."

"We're going to fix that. Tomorrow we're going to the bank and open a joint account."

"Brian . . ." Justin began to protest.

"You're my husband, not some casual boyfriend. If we are going to spend the rest of our lives together then start acting like you're married to me. "

Justin started to giggle. "You said husband."

"That's funny to you? It was your idea, remember. You sprung that surprise wedding on me."

"The look on your face was priceless. I'll never forget it."

"And I'll never forget our wedding night. We stayed in your old room at your mother's condo taking turns walking the floor with your little brother."

"He had a tummy ache and my mom was out with Tucker."

"Your mom got more action on our wedding night than we did."

"After William fell asleep it was beautiful."

Brian smiled warmly remembering that night. They'd held hands and talked for hours about their lives in the past and plans for their future together. Marriage had brought them closer than they had ever been. Brian never believed it was possible to feel that kind of bond with another human being. That night had been as special to him as if they had spent it on an exotic island.

"Hey, are you alright?" Justin put his hand on Brian's forehead. "Your eyes look puffy and you're very warm."

Brian didn't want to admit that his eyes had filled with tears. But he also realized that he was feeling a little weak and feverish. "I don't know, maybe I caught a bug on the plane. Get me an aspirin and leave me alone. I don't want you getting sick, too."

Justin went to get the aspirin. Brian turned on his side and closed his eyes. When Justin returned he was surprised that Brian had already fallen asleep. He gently shook his arm and Brian opened his eyes and sat up. "I brought you the aspirin." Justin handed him the aspirin and a bottle of water.

Brian pulled himself up and took the pills. His head was pounding so much his eyes hurt. "Justin get out of here. I just need to sleep for a while. Go see a movie or something."

"I'll be in the den. If you need me just yell."

"I'll call Michael later. I don't like him lying to you."

"He's our friend, Brian. Whatever his problem is he'll work it out."

"Tomorrow I want you to go to the bank and get the papers signed to put you on my accounts."

"Fine."

"That was too easy."

"I'm done competing with you. I'm the best homosexual artist I can be and you are the best homosexual ad man you can be. We are the best homosexual couple we can be. Now get some rest."

Justin tried to concentrate on the image he was drawing on the computer screen but Brian's coughing had his attention. Justin went to the kitchen and put some water in a kettle to make tea. While he waited for it to boil he went into the bed room. Brian was lying on his side facing the window. Justin sat on the bed and put his hand on Brian's head. "Shit, you're burning up." Brian turned to look at him. He started to say something but the cough took hold. Justin rubbed his back until the coughing subsided. When he heard the kettle whistle he went to the kitchen. Justin made the tea and brought it into the bedroom.

Brian had pulled himself to a sitting position. He took the tea without a word and started to sip it. Justin went to the bathroom and came back with a thermometer. "Open your mouth." He was surprised when Brian obeyed his command without protest. They waited the appropriate amount of time and Justin took the thermometer and read it out loud. "103." Justin announced firmly. "I'm calling a doctor."

Brian put his hand on Justin's wrist. "No, don't." Brian said, in barely a whisper.

Justin geared up for a battle. He was relieved when Brian said, "Help me get dressed and call a cab. I think we better go to the nearest emergency room."

Justin got Brian to the hospital as fast as he could. He held his hand while they waited for the doctor to come back with the test results. As they suspected Brian had pneumonia. The doctor admitted him to the hospital and told them that they would start him on antibiotics immediately. Justin waited until Brian was settled in his room and sleeping for the night before he left the hospital.

Brian's condition improved but the cough lingered for weeks. Justin brought him home from the hospital and insisted that he get into bed and stay there until the doctor gave the okay for him to return to work. When he wasn't

coughing uncontrollably or sleeping Brian was listless and silent. Justin hated to see him in this condition but in some way he enjoyed having the opportunity to take care of him.

"I want to talk to you about Kinnetic."

"I dropped the ball." Brian said sadly. "The biggest deal of my life and I've fucked it up."

"What makes you think that? Everything is going along as you planned it."

"How is that possible? I don't have the staff I need and I was just getting started on the advertising strategy. It's over Justin. They're ready to move ahead now, and I'm just not up to it."

"Will you listen to me? I've been to the office every day. Yes, they are calling asking for you, but Cynthia and I have been able to stall them. It seems the more illusive you are, the more interested they are in your plans. They are expecting your presentation to be spectacular."

"I'll knock them out with my well developed coughing expertise. There is no way I'm going to be ready when they arrive next week."

"You underestimate your ability to put together a highly motivated, talented staff. They are all aware of how important this account is to the company. If Kinnetic fails, their jobs are on the line. You're the icing on the cake, of course. If you're feeling up to it you can look at their progress on your lap top. I loaded it in this morning."

"Justin, you have your own work to do."

"And I'm doing that too. I've been working with Cynthia for a few days. To tell you the truth, I've learned a lot about Kinnetic. In fact, I think it's time we talked about my place there."

"Your place is in your studio creating masterpieces for the masses. Kinnetic is my world."

"I want you to put me in an official management position. It'll give me credibility when I have to deal with clients when you're away or out of commission."

"You know nothing about the advertising business and you want me to put you in charge while I'm gone?"

"I know all I need to know to keep it going when you need help. The question is do you trust me?"

"I do."

"Good."

"Are you sure you can handle all of this? You have your own clients and your job at the gallery."

"You've always been there for me when I needed you. I'm just paying you back. And since you mentioned about us acting like a married couple I decided that when I sign my work it will be Justin Kinney-Taylor."

"It's your work. I have nothing to do with it."

"I would have been at Dartmouth studying finance if it wasn't for you. I would have given up on art as a career when my hand started shaking if you hadn't encouraged me. I am Justin Kinney-Taylor, husband and artist."

Brian started another coughing fit and Justin went to get him some water. He drank it down and then pulled Justin onto the bed next to him. "Come here Mr. Kinney-Taylor."

Justin grinned at him. "I see you're feeling better." He reached down and grabbed Brian's growing erection.

"With you around to take care of me, was there ever any question I'd recover?"

"We are closer now that we're married, aren't we? When you had cancer you fought me tooth and nail to swallow every pill."

"In sickness and health . . . isn't that what we signed on for?"

"The wedding vows are important to you, aren't they?"

"I don't make promises that I don't intend to keep. We took those vows together. That's why you have to share the wealth . . . For richer or poorer."

"I brought home the papers from the bank. You can look them over but you and I will have to go there together to change the accounts."

"Let's do it then. I think tomorrow I'll be able to spend a few hours at the office. If that's okay with my keeper."

"You've been a very good patient. I think you deserve a reward." Justin lowered his head down to Brian's lap and began to suck on his dick. Brian closed his eyes and rubbed the top of Justin's head lovingly.

In no time Brian was up to speed and ready to kick off the big campaign. Justin had been right about the staff. They had been working day and night to make up for his absence. He made a mental note to reward them all with a bonus. He was confident that Kinnetic's future was secure. The morning of the big meeting he called Justin to his office.

Justin arrived with paint on his clothes and in his hair. "What's up? I was in the middle of something."

"A paint ball match?" Brian guessed.

"I am working on a special secret project, if that's okay with you." He allowed Brian to smooth down his hair. It was then that Justin noticed they weren't alone.

Brian introduced Justin to his attorney and asked them both to sit down. "I asked you both here today because I want to make a change in the business. The name will remain the same but from now on Kinnetic will be an equal partnership."

Justin stood up. "Brian, no! I only want to be an official manager. There's no need to put my name on your business."

"You put my name on yours. That's the way I want to handle it, Justin. Now let's get this done officially." He nodded at his lawyer, who opened his brief case and got out the partnership papers he had prepared.

Brian was fully recovered from his bout with pneumonia and couldn't be in a better mood. The wheels were set in motion and the campaign appeared to be an all out success. Business for the internet casino connection was booming. That morning Justin had received a check from Michael. Payment in full for his loan plus interest. There was a note in the envelope thanking Justin, but no further explanation. Brian decided it was time to have a chat with Michael.

On Friday Brian brought up the subject to Justin. "Do we have plans this weekend?"

"Not a thing. Why?"

"I thought we might take a short trip to Toronto."

"If you're feeling up to it, I guess we could do that."

Brian made a reservation in the best hotel in town. They hadn't had a real honeymoon since their wedding and in fact until his recent illness they had not spent much time together. Aside from connecting with his friends and his son Brian wanted to make the weekend special for Justin.

They spent Saturday with Gus. Lindsay was working and Mel had taken Jenny to visit some friends. Justin loved to watch Brian interact with his son. It had always bothered him that Lindsay had taken Gus so far away. It did not give Brian the chance that he deserved to be a father. Justin was convinced that Brian would be a great dad and one day when Gus was older they would have a close relationship.

At the park Gus had fallen asleep with his head on Justin's lap. Brian took a picture of his boys. They looked so sweet together. Brian had always found Justin's devotion to Gus endearing. "Can you take Gus home while I go to pick up Michael at the mall?" Brian asked

"Sure, you need to spend some time with your best friend. Gus and I will stop at the ice cream shop on the way home."

"You're my best friend. But I do need some time with Michael. Don't eat too much. I plan on taking you out for a romantic dinner tonight."

Michael was waiting for Brian by the fountain in the mall. "Where's Justin?" Michael asked after he and Brian had hugged hello.

"He's with Gus pigging out on ice cream." Brian had something on his mind and he came right out and told Michael what it was. "Why did you lie to him, Michael? You didn't need to lie. You know that Justin loves you and would give you anything you needed. What's the story?"

"I didn't want Justin to know I was broke."

"Why not?"

"I love Justin, too. But for the longest time he was the competition, Brian. It may sound stupid to you but I didn't want to appear like a failure to him."

"Justin doesn't judge people by how much money they have in the bank."

"How would you know? The two of you are rolling in cash. You have no idea what it's like for us working stiffs."

"You're jealous . . . of Justin?"

"Not the way you think but maybe I am, a little. You're both brilliant and successful. You gave him Babylon as a gift for God sake."

"For your information that \$5,000 was half of what he had in the bank. He gave you half of everything he had."

"I didn't realize that"

"Justin works hard, Michael. Until recently he insisted on paying for half of everything. He's been painting portraits, working at the art gallery and he took over Kinnetic when I was sick, not to mention that he had to take care of me too."

"When were you sick?"

"I was in the hospital a few weeks ago. Pneumonia."

"Oh God, Brian, you're not positive are you?"

"No. I got run down and it took its toll. I'm fine now."

"Justin took care of you. That must have been hard for you."

"Not anymore. He doesn't make a big deal out of it. In fact I think he enjoys having control over me while I cough my guts up."

"And you don't mind this?"

"No, I don't mind it anymore. He's my family. I'd gladly do the same for him."

"Easy to say when it's not a part of your daily life."

"Is Ben sick again?"

"I wouldn't know. He left Canada and took Hunter with him."

"WHAT!! Why didn't you say something?"

"I'm trying to get my act together and make a good life for my daughter. We fought over money all the time."

"Mel and Lindsay are Jenny's parents. Between the three of you what's the big deal?"

"It is a big deal when you're working in retail, raising a teenager and . . . , never mind."

"Michael where did you get the money to pay Justin back?"

"Funny you should bring that up. It's all because of you. I won big on that casino website."

"Shit, Michael. You know that's a dangerous way to earn money. You could lose your shirt. . . or your family." Suddenly the truth dawned on Brian, "Ben left because you have a gambling problem, didn't he?"

"It's not a problem now. I'm getting good at it."

"Michael it's all an illusion. You know that, don't you? The only ones who come out ahead are the casinos."

"What about the firms who do the advertising? They make money too. From the way your business is growing I would say it's all about money." Michael retorted "All I know is that I was able to pay back Justin and I have enough left over to take my best friend to dinner. What do you say?"

"Not tonight. I'm taking Justin out."

"Don't you spend enough time with him? You only get up here once every six months."

"The truth is I haven't spent much time with Justin since the wedding. First I was away and then I got sick. I'm trying to make up for it a little this weekend."

"A weekend in beautiful, exotic Toronto. How romantic."

"If you're not happy here, Michael, then why don't you go back to Pittsburgh?"

"My daughter is here, Brian. She's all the family I have left. Ben and Hunter don't need me around and my mother moved out west with Horvath."

"You can always come to New York to live. We always need creative people at Kinnetic."

"I don't need your charity, Brian. Or your pity." Michael insisted. "My daughter needs me. I'm not leaving her."

"Okay, whatever you need to do. Let's get together again before we leave on Sunday. Maybe the three of us can check out the clubs on Church Street. For old times sake."

"I'm working this weekend." Michael said abruptly. His mood changed suddenly and he hugged Brian. "I'll call you next week. Say hi to Justin."

Brian watched as his best friend crossed the street and boarded a bus. Michael's behavior had been unsettling to Brian. All the years he had known Michael he could pretty much read his moods. But Michael was not himself. Brian assumed that it was because of Ben and Hunter leaving him. It seemed that they had switched roles. Brian was happy, successful and deeply in love. Michael seemed lost and disconnected. He wished that he could help, but it didn't appear that his efforts were appreciated. Brian got into the rental car and went to pick up Justin for dinner.

When Brian got back to the hotel room he saw Justin lying on the bed fully dressed in his suit, tie and all. The remote was in his hand and one of the casino commercials was blaring on the television set. Justin was sound asleep.

Brian took off his jacket and lay down next to him on the bed. He turned off the television with the remote and Justin opened his eyes and smiled. "Hey, I was waiting for you."

"I see that. You look beautiful." He planted several kisses on Justin face.

"How was your visit with Michael?"

"Disturbing."

"What's wrong?" Justin turned on his side to face Brian.

"He was playing with fire and got burnt. Michael was in debt and decided that gambling would be a quick fix. He lost his shirt and Ben took Hunter back to Pittsburgh."

"What?" Justin sat up straight on the bed. "He must be devastated. Why didn't you bring him back with you?"

"Because I'm having dinner with you."

"I wouldn't have minded if you invited him. He must be really upset."

"I would have minded. I want to be with you. The last thing we need is Michael tagging along whining about his problems. The next thing you know he will find a way to blame me."

"How can he blame you?"

"It seems my casino advertisements are the root of all evil."

"He is just upset. Ben was his whole world."

"Stop defending him" Brian snapped. He was annoyed that he had allowed Michael to darken his mood. He wanted to reconnect with Justin and show him how much he loved him. He pulled Justin to him and rubbed his back. "Let's not talk about Michael's problems tonight. It's our big night out. Maybe after dinner we could change and go to Church Street to get in the mood."

"You're always in the mood." Justin jumped out of the bed and pulled Brian up by the arm. "Let's party!"

Four weeks later, Brian was gone once again. This time the venue was Brussels. Justin had already arranged for another show at the gallery so he was not able to leave town. Brian called him almost every night. Justin really looked forward to talking to Brian on the phone. His voice was so sexy that Justin could feel himself getting aroused at the sound of it. Their conversations at night were intimate and flirtatious and he really enjoyed having Brian all to himself, even it was only his voice that came through the wire.

"What time is it there?" Justin asked. He had checked the computer earlier and figured that the time must be very early morning.

"It's three a.m. Do you know where you're husband is?"

"It's so late for you. You really need to get your sleep when you travel."

"I was up anyway reading some literature the contact over here gave me at the meeting this afternoon."

"And you got bored and decided you need to hear my voice."

"I miss you. I miss you a lot."

"Me too. It's only for a week or two, right?"

"I'm hoping to finish sooner. What have you been up to?"

"Maureen told me that someone from an art magazine called from Paris to ask about my show. She thought that he may ask me for an interview."

"Paris. . . I'm impressed. You're on your way, my prince of the art world." Brian grinned on the other end of the telephone line.

"Don't tease me." Justin pouted.

"I'm not teasing you. I'm counting on you getting famous so I can retire."

"You . . . retire? What would you do with yourself now that your favorite hobby is prohibited by our marriage vows?"

"That's true. But there is my other hobby."

"What's that?" Justin asked.

"Shopping."

Justin laughed out loud.

"Don't laugh. I'm good at it."

"You are a master shopper. I hate shopping."

"When I get home I am going to take you shopping. You need a make over if you're going to get famous."

"I thought I was perfect to you."

"You are perfect. But who doesn't look hot in new clothes? I'm going to take you somewhere really expensive. I'll pick out an entire wardrobe for you. Then I'm going to take you into the dressing room and rip off all of your clothes and . . . "

"Brian, that is NOT shopping, it's fucking."

"Shopping and fucking. They ought to write a play about it. I'm getting hard just thinking about it. How about you? Brian's voice got deeper and Justin knew where the conversation was heading."

"I got hard when the phone rang."

"What do you want me to do to you tonight, sexy boy?"

"I want you to suck me off. Right now!" Justin closed his eyes and began to moan. In a low monotone voice Brian described how he tasted. If phone sex was all they had Justin wanted to savor every moment. He whispered deep throaty commands to Brian as he created a fantasy moment for the two of them that only he and his lover could comprehend. Brian felt his partner's urgency and increased the rhythm of his passionate moans until Justin gasped for breath which made Brian cum all over his own naked chest. Justin followed a second later.

"That was hot. Really hot." Brian exclaimed.

"Not as hot as being together but it was amazing. I love you, Brian."

"Sweet dreams Sunshine."

Part Six – Monte

While Brian was away Justin had found tenants for the two stores on the street level floor of their building. Thomas the computer geek moved in first. His repair shop was cluttered with computers and computer parts. Justin had a working knowledge of computers but he was not into the technological lingo and most of the time he hadn't a clue as to what Thomas was talking about. When he ran into him Justin would smile and nod his head in agreement until he could find a polite way to leave.

The other tenant was a lot more interesting. The larger store was leased to a man who sold designer baby clothes and accessories. A young Mexican girl named Maria was the manager of the store. She was sweet and friendly and Justin enjoyed talking to her about his baby brother. Maria had a one year old daughter and another baby on the way. Often she would bring her baby Gina with her to the store. Gina's eyes were so dark they appeared black under her very long black eye lashes. Her skin was a shade lighter than her mother's. Justin loved to play with her. She was a happy baby who smiled all the time. When he had time he would go downstairs and, with her mother's permission, did a lovely portrait using Gina as a model.

"You make her look like an angel." Maria said as she admired the painting.

"She is an angel." Justin said as he put the finishing touches on the canvas. "If you don't mind I'd like to display this at my art show. If I sell it I'll give you the money for Gina."

"My daughter will be famous. You'll be an important artist one day, very soon."

"I hope so. It's been a long road." Justin left the painting on the easel to dry. Gina had fallen asleep and Justin decided to buy a gift for his little brother. "William is only six months old, but he's almost as big as Gina. I want to get him something. Can you help me pick out the right size?"

Maria help him find a cute little jean outfit with a trains on the front. "I'm going to see him in a few weeks. I wish they lived closer. He's going to grow up and not really know me very well."

"Same for my family. They've only seen Gina once, when she was just born."

"That's a shame. Maybe they'll come to visit when the new baby is born."

Maria looked sad. "No they can't. Oscar won't allow it."

"Your husband and your family don't get along?"

"We are not married yet. But he promised when this little one is born we will get married."

"He's a lucky man."

"Are you married?" Maria asked looking down at his ring.

"Yes, for almost three months." Justin felt his face blush.

"A newlywed. Congratulations. I haven't met your wife yet. Please bring her in one day."

"I don't have a wife!" Justin corrected her. "I have a husband. Brian is away on business. He travels a lot."

"Oh, you're with a man. That explains why you don't have a baby of your own yet. You seem to really like children."

"I love kids. Other people's kids." Justin laughed. "One day maybe, when our busy lives settle down a bit we might think about it. Brian has a son with an old friend of his."

"He has a child with a woman?" Maria looked shocked.

"They didn't have sex. Lindsay is a lesbian. She and her partner Mel wanted to have a baby so they asked Brian for some sperm. His son's name is Gus. They live in Canada now."

It was Maria's turn to blush. "He made a baby with a woman and let her take him out the country to live! What kind of a father would give away his child?"

"Brian's a good dad. We see Gus sometimes. When he gets older he'll be a bigger part of Gus's life. But right now it's best for Gus to live in Canada with Mel and Lindsay and his new baby sister."

"He has two babies with this woman?"

"The baby isn't Brian's. Her father is his best friend Michael." Justin could see that Maria was having a hard time comprehending the family connections. It had always seemed perfectly normal to him, but telling the story to someone who doesn't know them, Justin could see how it could be a little shocking. He decided to change the subject.

"So where does Gina's father work?"

Maria seemed relieved to talk about something else. "He works in a fancy hotel uptown. And he goes to hotel management school at night. I almost never see him he works so hard."

"I know how that can be. Brian has been away more than he's been home since we got married." When a customer came into the store Justin said good bye to Maria and took the wet canvas upstairs to the apartment. He was glad to have another finished painting of his show. Working at Kinnetik while Brian was away was taking up so much time he would barely have enough material to make the show worth while.

Justin paced the floor nervously. The gallery was about to open and there was no one around that he knew. His face lit up when he saw Rome and her mother arrive. Justin kissed them both and thanked them for coming. A few minutes after they arrived, Mrs. Astor saw someone she knew and went to join them. Justin gave Rome a personal tour of the exhibit. "Oh, Justin you never cease to amaze me. Look, my mother has her check book out already. It looks like there may be a bidding war going on over that piece."

"That's my first attempt at an animal portrait. It's not my best work. I did it from a dog I saw on television."

"The eyes are so expressive. I think it's great. My mother is fond of dogs."

"Me too. Brian doesn't want to get a puppy. He says it wouldn't be fair since we travel so much. And I guess he's right. We wouldn't have time to train it."

"Dogs are adaptable. I am thinking of buying a Yorkie. They're so cute and cuddly."

"I have Brian for that."

""Where is your husband?"

"He's in Brussels." Justin explained. "More gambling ads."

"Very interesting. It's a shame he had to miss your show."

"There'll be others."

"But this one is so special. I want to buy something. I think my mother snapped up the doggy. I love the portrait of the little girl."

"That's Gina. She belongs to the manager of a store in our building. Her mother couldn't believe that Gina stayed still long enough for me to paint her picture."

"She's so adorable. Her dark eyes and hair are intense for someone so young."

"She's from Mexico. Her mother works two jobs and she brings Gina to the store once in a while."

"You love kids, don't you?"

"Kids and dogs. How pathetic are we?"

"Hey, what are you doing tomorrow?"

"Not a thing. The show is over tonight and the gallery is closed until Tuesday."

"Good. Tonight you'll come up to Westchester with me to spend the rest of the weekend. I have appointments to see two new litters of Yorkie puppies tomorrow morning. You can help me pick one."

"I've been so busy putting the show together and keeping an eye on Kinnetik I haven't seen the sunshine in weeks. I'd love to go."

"It's settled then. When the gallery closes you'll go pack a bag and we'll drive up together." Now I'm going to grab up a Kinney-Taylor original before they're all gone."

The next morning Justin and Rome went to see the new litter of Yorkies. Justin really enjoyed watching them all play together. Rome fell in love instantly with the smallest female in the second litter. Since the puppies were too young to be taken from their mother, Rome put down a deposit on the female. Justin had to bribe her to leave by offering to paint the dog's portrait once she got her home. The weekend passed by too quickly. They played tennis, went swimming in the Astor's Olympic sized pool and spent many hours lying pool side with a cool drink.

"Justin, why don't you get a puppy too? I would love it if you got that frisky little male pup from the first litter we saw. We could mate them when they get older."

"Brian is not a dog person. He hates the mess and the smell."

"He's hardly ever home. Why would he object to you having some companionship?"

"You don't want to know Brian's idea of companionship. If you can't fuck it, it's not worth knowing. He would rather I have a night out clubbing than to tie us down with a puppy."

"Is that what you're worried about? Not being able to travel if you own a dog?"

"It's not like I have family in New York who would take the dog when we go on a trip. Aside from you I don't really have any close friends either. I'd never want to leave a dog in a kennel for any length of time. It wouldn't be fair."

"I have to admit I'd thought of that. Most of the time my parents are around in the summer so if I travel I'd bring Pinky here."

"Pinky?"

"I decided to name her after my favorite color."

"Good thing you're getting a female."

"I know what you mean about kennels. I've had dogs in the past. When I traveled my parents would take care of them. But when they weren't available I took them to a woman who boards dogs in her home. She's very good with them and I never had a problem. If you really want a dog, Justin, there are ways to manage it."

"If I got a puppy I would feel guilty if I had to leave it. And Brian would never be happy with poop and hair all over the loft."

"There are dogs that don't shed. And if it's the puppy part that's a problem, why don't you adopt an older dog."

"It does get lonely at the loft when Brian's out of town. Which seems to be the story of my life right now."

"It must be hard for you. Being a newlywed and having to spend all your time alone."

"We're not exactly your typical newlyweds. We've been together for six years. Most of that time we lived together. And we both had to travel out of town on occasion for business. I don't really get why it's so hard this time. It's just stupid."

"No, it's not stupid. You are a newlywed and you should feel lonely when he's not home. Justin, you moved to New York without knowing a soul. It was a very brave thing to do. But without your family and friends you are more alone here than you were in Pittsburgh. How much time have you and Brian spent together since you got married?"

"Two days after the wedding he left for the Philippines. When he got home we had a weekend in Toronto. A month after that he left for Brussels. His business is growing so fast. He deserves every bit of success and I'm not going to put a damper on that by acting like a spoiled child. I'll have to devote more time to art."

"You spend enough time painting. A young healthy boy should spend time outside in the sun. And what could be a better reason for getting a dog?"

Justin smiled and shook his head. "You're impossible. Once you get something on your mind you don't let go."

"I'm a Scorpio. It's my nature."

"I'll think about it. And I'll have to discuss it with Brian."

"Being single does have it's advantages." Rome got up from her chaise lounge and dove into the pool with Justin following her.

Brian arrived home early Monday morning. He had been calling Justin for two days but Justin had not answered his messages. The loft looked deserted. Brian started to call out for Justin but he found a note on the counter which instructed him to get naked and follow the trail. Brian stripped off his clothes as he followed the trail of Justin's discarded garments. Justin's underwear was hanging on the door knob to the bathroom. Brian charged through the doorway and jumped into the Jacuzzi where Justin was waiting with a bottle of champagne.

Every homecoming had been special. This one was no exception. Brian kissed Justin's face over and over while Justin giggled. Justin poured Brian a glass of champagne and held up his own glass. "I want to make a toast. To US! We've been married for 1/4 of a year. Three months to the day. And they said it wouldn't last."

"Make that one whole month together and two on different continents." Brian clinked glasses with Justin and sipped the champagne. "I missed you a lot. Leaving you behind when I travel is getting harder and harder."

"Staying behind is getting harder too. But you're here now, that's what's important." Justin slid his body over Brian until he straddled him.

Brian never took his eyes from Justin's face. Being away from him for so long had been almost unbearable. It was the thought of this moment when they would come together again that got him through the endless nights alone. "I love you so much." Brian whispered in Justin's ear after they both had climaxed.

"You just showed me how much." Justin pulled himself out of the tub and put his hand out to help Brian. They wrapped themselves in towels and went to the bedroom to get dressed. On the way back from Westchester Justin had picked up some fresh fruit at a farm stand. He cut up strawberries and put them in a bowl. He then made scrambled eggs and toast and served Brian breakfast.

"Room service." He joked as he brought the food to the table.

"Don't even joke about that. I've had enough room service to last a life time. Thanks for cooking for me."

"You're welcome." Justin ate his eggs and poured himself a cup of coffee. He had decided that if he was ever going to bring up the subject of getting a pet it would have to be when Brian was in a good mood. Brian was always in a good mood after sex and a home cooked meal. "It sure is quiet around here when you're away. Three weeks is a long time to go without talking to anyone."

"If you'd ever remember to charge your cell phone you could talk to me."

"It's not the same. Talking on the phone is not like having a someone in the room to talk to."

"I get the feeling this is one of those conversations where I have no clue what you're really asking until the end. Like 'will you marry me Brian Kinney?'"

Justin laughed. "I love that Kinnetik is growing. I love that you are making your mark in the world. I am very proud of you Brian."

"And . . . "

"During the day I've been helping out at Kinnetik and seeing my own clients at the studio. But since you've been gone I've eaten almost every meal alone. I don't have any family here or any friends except for Rome. And she's away almost as much as you are."

"Are you asking permission . . . "

"You know me better than that. This is NOT about sex."

"Before you finish another one of my sentences why don't you get to the point."

"I was thinking of getting a pet." Justin blurted out. He sat back and watched Brian's face.

"Go buy a goldfish or a hamster or something. As long as it lives in a cage or a tank and doesn't shit on our hard wood floors, knock yourself out."

"You can't talk to a fish. And hamsters creep me out ever since my rat bite experience."

"What then?"

"A dog."

Brian reacted as Justin expected he would. "Justin, a dog is a big responsibility. I know you're lonely. But if you get a dog it would be impossible for you to travel with me."

"We could work that out. Rome is getting a Yorkie. We talked about pet sitting for each other."

"She travels more than I do. That means there would be two hairy smelly beasts running around here all the time."

"We could pretend it's Babylon. There were lots of hairy smelly beasts in the backroom."

"Look, Justin our lives are almost out of control as it is. Why add to the responsibilities we already have? It just not time to consider a life changing move like getting a dog. We'll talk about it again when we come back from Japan."

"When are you going to Japan?"

"It's not definite. And I won't know for a few weeks. But this time I'm not taking no for an answer. You're coming with me. No family emergencies, no gallery showings and NO dogs!"

Justin felt discouraged. Married life was becoming more lonely and difficult then being single. He started clearing the table without responding to Brian's declaration.

Brian knew he was being harsh. Justin had been spending too much time alone. He had also spent too much time working. At Justin's age all Brian had to think about was which club to grace with his presence. He had just graduated college and the last thing on his mind was sacrificing everything for man who had a hard time showing his appreciation. Brian got up from the table and went to the sink where Justin was rinsing the dishes. He wrapped his arms around him and held him. Brian happened to notice an invitation on the counter. It was for Justin's last show.

"Oh shit!! I didn't even ask you about your show. Fuck, it was Friday and I never even called."

"It went well. I sold every piece."

"How could I forget about something that's so important to you?"

"It's not important to you. That's why you forgot."

Brian had no response for what Justin had said. It was not said with malice or to assign guilt. It was a statement of fact. Justin had accepted Brian's neglectfulness because it was what he'd come to expect. The last few weeks away all Brian had to concentrate on was making the client happy and getting back home. Justin had to deal with the every day drudgery of running of Kinnetik, his own career and their home.

When Justin had finished cleaning up the kitchen he went to the bedroom to get ready to go to the studio. Brian poured a second cup of coffee and sorted through the mail. He was surprised to see an enveloped addressed to him in his sister's handwriting. The note was brief and to the point.

"Mother's had a stroke. The doctor said that she will need a long term care facility. You need to come home to help us."

Brian stared at the note for a long time. He never expected that his mother would need him for anything except cash. Justin came up behind Brian's chair startling him momentarily. "I wondered who that was from." Justin said.

"It's from my sister. My mother had a stroke."

"Oh God, Brian. I'm so sorry. I should have opened it, but I thought it might be something personal. It only arrived in the mail on Friday. Is your mom okay?"

"All Clair said is that she needs long term care. That's a nursing home, right?"

"I guess so. What are you going to do?"

"I'll send a check and let Clair take care of it."

"You should go and see her, Brian."

"What for?"

"I don't know. But if it were my mother I'd be on the next plane."

"If it was your mother I'd be on the next plane too. But there's nothing I can do that Clair can't. It doesn't matter if I'm there or not. The hospital will put her someplace."

"A state hospital? Brian, nobody deserves that."

"I'll send Clair money."

"I'm going to Kinnetik. Call Clair and let me know what you decide." Justin kissed him good bye and left. It was clear that Justin was not about to make the decision for him. He had to make it for himself. He picked up the phone and dialed his sister's number.

Brian arrived at Kinnetik midway through the morning. He was surprised to see that his desk was so clean. Then he remembered that Justin had been using it while he was away. He opened the top drawer and pulled out the secret compartment. He placed a picture of himself and his mother at his first birthday party into the drawer and shut it quickly. The rest of the morning he spent catching up with work.

Justin had two appointments that morning. The second woman was fat and ugly and Justin found her difficult to deal with. Most of his clients were pleased with his work but this woman expected to look like Paris Hilton. In a way he was grateful for the distraction. He put an extra effort into his work and by the time the client left she was satisfied with the result.

It was almost lunch time and Justin was starting to feel guilty about the way he treated Brian that morning. He knew that Brian expected him to insist that he go to Pittsburgh to see his mother. Brian would have put up a fight but then would have gone because of the guilt trip Justin had laid on him. For once Justin wasn't going to be Brian's conscience.

Justin did feel bad about not letting Brian off the hook about missing his show on Friday. Since he had started getting involved with the inner workings of Kinnetik he realized what an amazing salesman Brian was. He had to be one step ahead of the competition at all times. It had to be difficult for Brian to maintain his edge while competing in foreign markets. To expect him to focus on something as insignificant as an art show while he was under such tremendous pressure was selfish. The last show was a success for him. In fact he had been interviewed by a critic who liked his work. Justin had been excited about it especially once he found out that Rome had nothing to do with it.

Brian had intended to order a sandwich to eat at his desk when he saw Justin walk into his office. "Hey, how about I take you to lunch?"

"Hey, how about you take me to the airport."

"Your Mom?"

"Clair is more of an incompetent imbecile than I remembered. I have to go, Justin. Why don't you come with me. You can visit with your family while I deal with mine."

"I'm seeing my mother soon. She's going to a seminar in Scranton and I get to baby sit."

"That's nice."

"Brian, we can't both leave Kinnetik with all that's going on here. I'll stay and take care of our business while you take care of your mom."

"Are you sure? We hardly got to spend 5 minutes together since I got back."

"I'm sure. I'd only be in the way in Pittsburgh. Your family isn't exactly going to welcome me with open arms. So you do what you have to do, and I'll be here when you get back."

"You're my family. These people are only relatives. I shouldn't be gone more than a day or two. I am expecting some important calls and I want you to take them. Let's order lunch and I can fill you in on what I need for you to do."

One week later Justin sat at Brian's desk at Kinnetik wishing that he'd never made the promise to Brian. He had been on the phone for almost an hour trying to talk one of Brian's old accounts not to end their relationship with Kinnetik. The man had been trying to make an appointment with Brian for weeks with no response. Justin explained that Brian had been out of the country and that at the moment he had a family matter to take care of. Justin knew that Brian would kill him for sharing that information with a client. He never wanted to get personal or appear anything but superhuman with his clients. But Justin understood how frustrated the man was and at least now he had an explanation. Justin also took down some information that would help the staff get started on a presentation for the commercials the man was ordering.

Justin had worked full time at Kinnetik since Brian left. Brian had stepped into a hornets nest by traveling to Pittsburgh. His sister was helpless and before Brian got to the hospital she had signed papers releasing her mother. Without contacting Brian, Clair had taken her mother to her own home and was attempting to care for her there without any professional assistance. The hospital would not take her back because she had been treated and now was in need of a rehabilitation facility. Brian spent his time driving from nursing home to nursing home trying to find an appropriate placement for his mother. His sister bitched and moaned about having to take care of her and when Brian did find a placement Clair would find something wrong with it.

After a week of going back and forth over their options Brian was about to lose his mind. At one point he threatened to put Clair in a home for the incredibly hopeless and bury his mother alive in the yard.

During the day he was frustrated and angry. He wanted to be at home with Justin. He hadn't even tried to communicate with his mother. When Clair needed help lifting her Brian would do so with his eyes closed. But at night after Clair went to bed he would sit by his mother's bedside and keep watch.

Justin was his life line. He called him several times a day and Justin filled him in on what was happening at the office. Brian suspected that Justin was leaving out a few disturbing details. Everything was fine. And with Justin in charge Brian was sure everything was fine. Yet there was something in Justin's manner that did not feel right to Brian. He sensed that Justin was not connecting with him the way he always had. His tone at times seemed cold. Brian started to worry that his constant absence was putting a wall between them. He vowed that when he got back to New York Justin would be his first priority.

Justin sat on a bench in a small park near Kinnetik's offices. He listened to Brian on the telephone explaining why he needed to stay in Pittsburgh for just a few more days. Justin rolled his eyes but when it was his turn to talk he told Brian not to worry about Kinnetik and to take care of his mother. Justin hung up and dialed Rome's number. He got her voice mail which announced that she would be out of town until the 12th. Justin decided not to go back to Kinnetik that afternoon. For once he was going to do what he wanted to do. Now all he had to do is figure out what that was.

As he walked down the path that led out of the park he began wonder if marriage had been a mistake. He loved Brian with all his heart. But since they had gotten married, Brian had been in a world of his own. Justin realized that it was because he wanted to make a success of Kinnetik. But their relationship had been put on hold too many times.

It occurred to him that during their phone conversation Brian had asked about Kinnetik but never once asked Justin how he was doing. It made Justin feel like hired help. He was sick of feeling sorry for himself. Brian needed to take care of family things and he could totally understand that. Justin wandered the city streets aimlessly, thinking if there was anything he could do to make his life fun again.

All of a sudden Justin found himself standing in front of the city animal shelter. It was fate and it was exactly what Justin wanted to do. He went inside and asked to see the adult dogs who were in need of a home. The clerk asked him a few questions and then led him back to where the dogs were kept. Justin was startled by a pit bull who barked loudly and jumped on the cage. "I'm not the pit bull type. Have you got anything smaller, like a Yorkie?"

"Yorkie's don't end up here. We get mostly dogs who've been abused or neglected. Some of them are pretty nasty."

Justin saw a big brown and grey dog sitting patiently, waiting his turn to be noticed. He went over to the cage and the dog wagged his tail hopefully. Justin looked him in the eye and instantly sensed a connection. "What's his story?" Justin asked.

"Charlie? He's been here a while. In fact he was due to be disposed of this morning but the guy who does that called in sick."

"You were going to kill him?"

"Look at him. He's one ugly mutt. Kids come in here expecting cute little puppies. Not much chance of him getting adopted. We have too many younger dogs that might get lucky. He's just taking up space."

"Don't say that in front of him." Justin's looked at the dog again and he made a decision. "He's coming with me! What do I have to do?"

"If you're interested I'll get the paperwork on him. Don't put your hand in the cages while I'm gone."

Justin knelt down and put his hand on Charlie's head. "Don't be sad, boy. You're going home with me. We're going to be best buds from now on. Unless Brian throws me out. But don't worry, if that happens I'm not going to let them kill you. I'll find you a really good home."

The clerk returned with the card. "It says he's about 3 years old. His owner died. Sad story."

"But it has a happy ending."

Justin walked all the way back downtown with the Charlie. He talked to the dog the entire way and the animal seemed to enjoy the attention. When they got to the loft Justin let go of the leash and got a salad bowl out of the cabinet to give the dog water. While Justin sat at the kitchen table watching the animal drink he realized what he had done. He had brought home a dog without consulting Brian.

"Shit, Charlie, Brian is going to kill us both."

Charlie put his head on Justin's lap and closed his eyes. "Hey, you don't get to sleep now. I don't want you to howl all night. Justin went over to the couch in the den and turned on the T.V. Charlie put one paw on the couch and looked at Justin as if to ask permission.

"Sorry, Charlie. Brian would kill me if he found dog hair on the couch. We're going to have to have a plan for when he comes home. You're going to have to be on your best behavior for a while. And we have to do something about that name. Charlie is so boring."

Charlie perked up his ears as if he was listening to Justin's words.

"Well, finally someone who really listens to me. Now, getting back to your name. You make me feel happy, but Happy is a stupid name. The last time I remember being really happy was on our honeymoon. Honey is a girl's name. Wait a minute. I have the perfect name for you. . . Monte, short for Monte Carlo."

The dog wagged his tail and barked twice.

Justin smiled and petted his head. "Monte, welcome home."

Brian called Justin from the airport on Monday. He asked Justin to drive out to the airport to pick him up. Justin had days to plan how he would break the news about Monte to Brian. But when he actually saw Brian in person he panicked. Brian looked exhausted both physically and mentally. He got into the car and kissed Justin hello. "I thought this week would never end."

"It's been two weeks Brian. You were gone two weeks."

"Right. Two weeks. Is everything set for next week?" He asked in reference to Kinnetik business.

"I was finally able to get confirmation from the client this afternoon. He'll be at your office on Friday morning at 10:00 am."

"Good, that will give me time to catch up."

"Everything is on the computer at home. I set up staff meetings for tomorrow afternoon is that's okay with you."

"Yeah, sure. I'm so tired I could sleep for a week." Brian lay his head back against the seat and closed his eyes.

Justin was approaching their street when Brian opened his eyes. "Justin there's a parking spot on the other side of the street. That's about as close as we'll get."

"Nope. Not close enough." He turned down the street that ran along the side of their building. It was dark and narrow with alternate side of the street parking.

"You see, you'll never get a spot on this street. It's always a bitch to park here."

"Not anymore" He pulled the car over and got out leaving the engine running. Then he walked to a door on the side of the building that Brian hadn't notice before. Justin pulled the door up and got back into the car. "We have an underground garage." He announced.

Brian was amazed. He knew there was a loading dock for the stores at this side of the building but he never saw a garage door. "How the fuck did you find this?"

"The real estate agent brought me back here when I listed the stores. The wall on the street side was boarded up but I got the idea we could use this space to park your car. I had the wall torn down and put in a door, now we have a garage. And there's still plenty of room for storage."

"You never cease to amaze me." Brian got out of the car and grabbed Justin's hand. "Any more surprises?"

"Yeah, ahhh, there is one more." Justin stopped walking and put his hand on Brian's arm. Brian turned toward him and tipped his head inquisitively.

"Just promise me you'll keep an open mind. Don't start freaking out before you hear what I have to say."

"What did you do?" Brian had never seen Justin so nervous.

"Just promise, okay!"

"Okay. Can we go upstairs now?"

They took the stairs from the garage to the main floor then got on the elevator. When they got out of the elevator, Justin unlocked the door and took a deep breath. He opened the door and they both went inside. Justin was surprised that Monte had not come to greet them or at least bark at them. "What?" Brian asked.

"Just a minute." He went to the den where Monte sometimes slept. But Monte was nowhere to be seen.

Brian stood in the doorway of their bed room and said "Guess who's sleeping in my bed with his smelly hairy head on my pillow?" Monte lifted his head from Brian's pillow. The moment he saw Justin he began to wag his tail.

"Get down from there!" Justin ordered. The dog immediately obeyed and went to sniff Brian's pant leg.

"Justin, please tell me that you got a temporary job as a dog walker."

"Brian you said you'd let me explain."

"Right after you take that mangy canine back where you found it." Brian stormed out of the room.

Justin found him in the kitchen searching the cabinets for coffee. "It's in the fridge. I'll make you a pot."

Brian sat down at the table and glared at Monte. "I thought we discussed this. We decided that we're not in a position to keep a pet right now."

"We didn't decide anything. You decided you didn't want a dog. I decided the opposite."

"So you go out and find the ugliest fucking dog I've ever seen and plant him in my bed to make your point."

"Please listen to me."

"I just spent two weeks in nursing home hell. I'm tired and hungry for food and for sex in that order. I'm not in the mood to listen to you whine about how empty your life is." Brian pushed back his chair.

"Fine. I'll get rid of him if that's what you want." Justin said sadly. Brian hadn't even allowed him to argue his case. Justin resigned himself to the fact that tomorrow he would have to take Monte back to the shelter where they would most likely put him to sleep.

Brian got up from the table and went to the den to check his email and read the reports that Justin had prepared. The weeks that he had spend in Pittsburgh had been stressful. His mother's condition was grim. Brian was starting to get a knot in his stomach. He hated arguing with Justin, especially after coming home from a long trip. As he read the reports he realized that Justin had arranged his entire week for him. Everything was in order as if Brian had never left town. Justin must have spent hours on each account getting things ready for him. All he had to do was show up at the office tomorrow and take it from there. Brian realized how mean he had been about the dog. He had not changed his mind about keeping the dog but now he felt bad that he hadn't let Justin talk.

As Brian clicked on the icon for his email account he felt pressure on his knee. Justin's dog was staring up at him in a peculiar manner. "What do you want? Look at all the trouble you caused with your stupid furry face and big brown eyes."

Brian's hand brushed the top of the dog's head. The dog continued to stare at him intensely. "I know I was mean. And I did promise to listen to him. But . . . Fuck it. He knew how I felt about it and he brought you home anyway. Will you stop fucking staring at me! I know it's not just MY home anymore. It's OUR home. I never gave him a chance."

Monte looked up at Brian, barked once and then left the room. Brian turned off the computer and went to find Justin. The coffee was sitting out on the counter. Justin was sitting on the sofa in the living room with his back to Brian. The dog was now lying at Justin's feet. Brian went over to the couch and saw that Justin was staring into space. Tears were streaming down his cheeks. Brian couldn't remember the last time he had seen Justin cry. He sat down next to him and put his hand on his shoulder.

Justin wiped the tears away with the back of his hand. "They were going to kill him. That's why I took him home. Nobody wanted him because he's not a puppy and he's funny looking. His owner died and he had nobody. When I saw him in the cage he looked so brave and hopeful. They were going to kill him Brian. I couldn't leave him there." Justin rested his head on Brian's chest. "I'm sorry I didn't ask you first."

"You shouldn't have to ask my permission. It's your home as much as it is mine. But there are a lot of reasons why getting a pet isn't a good idea right now. Still, you're entitled to a say in the decisions around here."

"No, were right. I'll take him back to the shelter tomorrow."

"Where they will most likely put him to death. Justin, don't play me. You know I'd never make you take the dog off to the gas chambers. Find a home for him."

"Maybe I can talk my mother into taking him. William should have a dog to play with"

"By the time the kid is old enough to run around with him this mutt will have died of old age."

"Molly would like him. She got to keep my cat when I left home."

"You had a cat?"

"Fluffy. He died two years ago."

"That's another thing I never knew about you. You're a cat person."

"I'm not really. I wanted a dog then too, but my father wouldn't let me have one."

"And now it's my turn to be the bad guy."

"You're not bad, Brian. You just don't understand what it's like for me when you're away. I go days on end with no one to talk to but Cynthia and the rich women who come to have their portraits done. Cynthia is nice but all she talks about is men and shopping."

"Which is why we always got along."

"I'm glad you're home." Justin kissed Brian on the chest. Brian rubbed the back of his head.

"I'm glad I'm home too." Brian said. "I just read your reports. You did an awesome job for me while I was gone. If I didn't have you around to cover for me, my clients would have all bailed on me already. Thanks."

"You're welcome." Monte looked up at Justin and sighed. "It's going to be hard to find him a good home." Justin said mournfully. "I really liked having him around. I took him everywhere with me."

"Remind me to check under my desk at Kinnetik for doggy surprises."

"He's too well mannered to poop in the house."

"But not too well mannered to sleep on my pillow."

"That was my fault. I let him sleep there while you were away. I was going to change the pillow case."

"You better. And while you're at it change the sheets and flip the mattress. The last thing I need is a case of fleas."

"He doesn't have fleas. I took him in the shower and washed him."

"With what? My expensive new soap?" Brian demanded. "You shower with him, sleep with him, talk with him . . . this dog isn't a pet, he's my replacement. I'm surprised you didn't name him Brian."

"I wanted to, but he didn't care for it. I named him after our place."

"The loft"

"His name is Monte. Short for Monte Carlo." Monte recognized his name and sat up straight. He pushed at Justin's hand with his snout. Justin rubbed his ears playfully.

"You really like having him around for company."

"Yeah, we're buds."

"I know I'm going to regret this, you can keep him for now. But I want you with me in Japan. By that time you should be able to find him a place to live. Don't get too attached to him!"

"Thanks for the reprieve." Justin sat forward and faced Brian. He grinned playfully. "Why don't we go into the bedroom and take care of that nagging sex craving of yours while dinner is cooking."

After dinner Brian turned on the television and put his feet up on the coffee table. Justin cuddled up next to him and Monte lay at Justin's feet. "I love this." Justin said during the commercial break. "You, me and Monte just watching television."

"I would think you'd be ready for some excitement. You've been at home alone for weeks."

"This IS exciting for me. I love having you all to myself tonight. It seems like lately all we do is work. When we come home we talk about work."

"There's a lot to discuss. You're my partner, don't forget."

"And your husband, don't forget."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Don't take this the wrong way, but do you think we made a mistake getting married?"

Brian turned off the television and sat up straight. "Do you?"

Justin pulled him back and put his head on his chest. "I just mean that since we actually took the vows in the church, things have been different between us. I'm just not sure how, but I feel changed."

"Kinnetik is growing rapidly. It's a lot of work and stress for both of us. Don't make this personal, Justin."

"I worry that all the time we spend apart we are missing something. There are days that go by when we don't even talk. And when we do it's all about the latest Kinnetik crisis. I know you are working when you're away but I don't know what you're feeling. I don't know what your day is like and what you think about when you're away."

"I have to learn customs, shmooze clients, and get the cultural awareness to know how to reach the masses and sell them on our product. But when I wake up in the morning I reach for you. Then I realize where I am. I get in the shower and think of how great it would be if you were there to rub my back. I get dressed, go to a restaurant for breakfast and pretend to read a report at the table all the time wishing you were there to talk to. I have meetings all day. I eat dinner with strangers who don't speak English. I go to my hotel room and stare at the bed wishing you would appear out of thin air, put your arms around my neck and hug me. I get into bed and stare at the ceiling for hours until I finally fall asleep. I dream about you, reach for you . . . and it starts all over again."

"You do miss me."

"You should know that."

"You should tell me all this stuff on the phone when we talk instead of talking about work all the time."

"I don't want to think about what a pathetic love sick asshole I've turned into. Not while I'm so far away from home. If all I do it think about how miserable I am without you, I'd never get anything done. I have to put my feelings on a back burner or I'll lose my mind."

"I think I can understand that. But it's made me feel like we've lost something. We've gotten so close since you moved to New York. I want to be able to stay close even when you're a million miles away. It scares me when I hang up the phone and realize that we haven't said, I love you in weeks."

"We went five years without saying it. That didn't mean it wasn't true."

"I just don't want us to get so caught with succeeding in business that we forget that marriage takes work too. I don't want to screw it up."

"We won't screw it up!" Brian shouted. His reaction came as a total surprise to Justin and to Monte, who jumped up and put his paw on Brian's knee. Brian pushed the dog away and got up from the sofa. When he spoke again his tone softened. "I don't want to have to defend myself every time I walk in the door."

"I wasn't attacking you. If I don't say what I'm thinking when you walk in the door I may not get to say it at all. I don't want to have hide my feelings from you and pretend that everything is fine when it isn't. I did that for way too long."

"Can we talk about this tomorrow. I'll take you out for a long romantic lunch." He smiled sweetly. "Now, let's go to bed."

Justin smiled and put out his hand. Brian pulled him up from the couch and they kissed. Monte jumped on them and barked once. "Shit," Justin exclaimed. "I have to walk Monte before we go to bed. I'll be right back."

"Yet another reason a dog is a bad idea. Now you have to be out wandering the street late at night."

"It's not that late. You must have jet lag. There's a little park a few blocks away where everyone takes their dog. It's safe, don't worry."

Justin got the dog's leash and prepared to leave. When he got to the door Brian surprised him by grabbing the leash out of his hand. "What are you doing?" Justin asked.

"I heard about that park. It's a gay man's hang out at night. You can blow me in the bushes while your funny looking dog stands guard."

It was a warm spring night and as they walked Monte to the park, they held hands and talked about how much they enjoyed the neighborhood they had moved into. The park was well lit and there were several people sitting on the benches. Monte was a very well mannered dog who seemed to be more at home with his "human" family than the other dogs they encountered on their walk. Brian held the leash and was surprised when the dog seemed to recognize a man sitting on a bench. The man had a small furry dog on his lap. Monte pulled Brian over to the man who had his hand out to pet Monte.

"Charlie!" The man greeted the dog who in turn wagged his tail and put his paw on the man's knee. "I never thought I'd see you again."

"You two know each other?" Justin asked. He sat on the bench next to the man and Brian sat down next to him.

"Yeah, Charlie belonged to a friend of mine. I knew that he died and I wondered what happened to Charlie."

"He has a new home and a new name." Justin informed him. "His name is Monte now."

"I'm glad. I worried they would kill him. I would have taken him, but my landlord barely tolerates Daisy. He's a hero, that boy."

"Hero? Why would you call him that?" Justin asked.

"He tried to save Eddie, his master. When Eddie passed out Charlie barked and howled so much the neighbors called the police. But Eddie couldn't hold out. I got there as they were trying to drag Charlie away from him. It was really sad." Charlie nudged the man's hand with his nose. "So you got yourself a new home, good for you."

Brian nudged Justin in the ribs. "We better go."

"Yeah, thanks for telling us his story. Don't worry we'll take good care of him."

Justin was busy in his studio all morning. As usual when he was creating art, he lost track of time. It was almost two o'clock when he realized he was late for lunch with Brian. He quickly rinsed off his brushes and ran down the stairs to Brian's office. Brian was no where in sight. Justin went out to Cynthia's desk. "Where's Brian? Was he looking for me?"

"An old friend Pittsburgh showed up about an hour ago and he took her out to lunch."

"Oh, do you know who it was?"

"It wasn't Gus's mother, but the other woman."

"Melanie? I wonder why he didn't call me down."

"I got the impression she had something on her mind. Sorry Justin."

Justin shrugged. "That's okay. I'm going out for a sandwich. You want anything?"

"How about a diet soda." Cynthia smiled at him and went back to her work.

It was late afternoon before Brian returned to the office. He stopped at Cynthia's for his messages. "Justin was down here looking for you before. I told him that you went out with your friend."

"Shit, we were supposed to go out." Brian started to go up the stairway that led to Justin's studio but Cynthia stopped him. "He's got a client upstairs and another one is waiting down here."

Brian stood at her desk and thought for a moment. Then he handed her the messages back. "Would you return these calls please. There's something I need to do. Don't let Justin leave before I get back." Brian left the building.

Justin was finishing up for the day when he heard Cynthia's voice on the intercom. "Justin, I'm leaving for the day. I didn't get the chance to tell you that Brian asked you to wait for him."

"Okay Cynthia, thanks." Justin turned to Monte who had been snoozing in the corner of the room. "Brian is being mysterious again." Monte slowly wagged his tail but made no attempt to get up.

Justin brought out a special project he had been working on to pass the time until Brian came back. He was so engrossed in his work that he jumped when his cell phone rang. He saw on the caller ID that it was Rome. "Hi Rome. Did you get your puppy?"

"Did I ever, don't you hear her whining in the background? What a bitch!"

Justin laughed. "She's just a baby. You have to be patient with her."

"So how are you, darling boy? Is your gorgeous husband in town? Did you talk to him about getting a dog?"

"Actually I did get a dog, but Brian said I have to get rid of him."

"What!! The bastard, Brian I mean not the puppy."

"It's not a puppy. And it was a mistake. I never should have taken on the responsibility of a pet without at least talking to Brian first. It's his home too. And he is not really too fond of animals."

"That's sad Justin. What are you going to do?"

"He's a really sweet dog. His name is Monte. Brian is giving me some time to find him a home. He wants me to go with him the next time he travels so I have to do it before then or Monte will have to go back to the pound." Monte lifted up his head at the sound of his name. He walked slowly over to Justin and put his head on Justin's lap. Justin petted him as he listened to Rome talk about her puppy. It broke his heart to think about Monte's fate.

"Justin, are you listening to me? I said I called to invite you to a party at my parent's house this weekend."

Justin's ears perked up. "A party! I could really use a party. Thanks for inviting us."

"It wouldn't be a party without my best buddy. I have something to tell you, Justin. I met someone. I think I'm in love. In fact I know I'm in love."

"Really, that's great. Tell me about him."

"Not yet, but soon. I promise."

"Okay, I'm happy for you."

"Love is grand." Rome laughed. "Justin, bring Monte with you on Saturday. I want to meet him. He can keep Pinky company. And who knows, maybe someone will want to give him a home."

Justin hung up the phone. "A party at the Astor's, Monte! And you are invited." Even though he knew it was inevitable the thought of giving up Monte to a stranger depressed him. He had become very attached to the dog and he knew that Monte felt the same.

Justin heard Brian's footsteps on the staircase. He quickly covered the canvas he'd been working on and got Monte's leash. Brian came in and hugged him. "You stood me up." Justin said. "What was that all about?"

"I'll tell you about that later, okay?"

"Yeah, let's go home." Justin put the leash on Monte.

"Do you have to drag that mutt to the office with you?"

"I didn't want to leave him alone. I'm not going to get to have him that long and I want to spend as much time as I can with him. Besides my clients like having him here. He makes them more relaxed."

"Just keep him up here and out of my hair."

"He's perfectly well behaved. I'll keep him out of your way."

"Good, now let's go home. You can drive."

"I forgot you had your car here. I'll walk home with Monte."

"No, you're driving your car home."

"Brian is all this jet lag affecting your brain. I don't have a car."

Brian handed him a key. "You have one now."

"What's this about?" Justin stared at the key curiously.

"I bought you a car this afternoon. It's a jeep like the one I had." Brian took his hand and dragged him to the window. Monte followed putting his paws up on the window sill, staring out curiously. "See, it's that black Jeep right there."

Justin was bewildered. "Brian, why did you buy me a gift? It's not my birthday or anything."

"I came in today expecting to be overwhelmed with clients, phone calls, employee issues, etc. When I got here my desk was clean. You organized everything so well it feels like I never went away. I wanted to thank you so I bought you a car."

"You didn't have to buy me anything. I'm a partner here, in case you forgot. Besides I love helping you out when you're gone."

"You're alone so much, I figured if you had a car you could go visit your friend Rome upstate, or go to see your mother. Now that you have that hairy beast attached to your hip you won't be able to go anywhere unless you have a car. There's enough space in the garage for two cars. Parking won't be a problem and you can use it whenever you want."

"I don't know what to say."

"For now you can say thanks. After that you can drive us home, drop off the puppy, and let me take you out to dinner."

Justin smiled and hugged Brian. "Thanks. Let's go Monte."

When they got to the parking lot Justin opened the hatch and Monte jumped in. "Hey, you got him a little bed. He likes it."

"I got him a gate to keep him back here too. I don't want him sitting in the front seat with his head out the window getting hair all over the place. It's safer if you keep him back here." Monte seemed fine with the arrangements. Justin drove to their building and pulled the car into their underground garage.

"I never would have thought about getting a car. This is going to work out great. When my mother goes to Scranton for that seminar, I'll be able to pick up William and bring him here for a few days." Justin got out of the car and opened the hatch for Monte to get out.

As they walked up the stairs Brian put his arm around Justin. "I wasn't trying to get out of talking at lunch today. Melanie came into my office like a house on fire and I wanted to get her out of there."

"Melanie? What's wrong."

"What else . . . Michael. She wants me to go up there and talk him into coming home. He's out of control. One minute he's loaded with cash and he comes over with toys for his kid. The next time they see him he's down on his luck again. They let him sleep on the sofa for a while but he was driving them nuts so they threw him out."

"Poor Michael."

"He's a grown man. I'm not his keeper any more."

When they got upstairs Justin fed Monte while Brian checked the answering machine. There were three messages, one from Mel, one from Michael and one from Rome. Brian deleted the messages from Mel and Michael without comment. "Rome wants you to call her." He called out to Justin.

Justin returned to the room with Monte's leash in his hand. "I talked to her this afternoon. She invited us to another party this weekend."

"Great, I love her parties. The last one is still paying off."

"She asked if we would bring Monte to keep Pinky company. Pinky gets into all kinds of mischief when she's left alone."

"Our first road trip in your new car."

Justin put a leash on Monte. "I'm going to walk him before we go out. I'll be right back." He started toward the door but, turned around and came back to kiss Brian good bye. Brian grinned as he sorted through the mail.

When Justin returned he saw that Brian was lying on the sofa sound asleep. He considered waking him up but changed his mind. It was still early and Brian did deserve a nap. Being in a perpetual state of jet lag couldn't be good for your health. Monte curled up on his mat in the corner. Justin petted him for a while and then decided to watch television in the den until Brian woke up. He stopped to look at his sleeping partner. Justin smiled at the way Brian's long body just fit from head to toe on the sofa. He was still wearing his suit and tie. Justin decided to try to slip off his shoes without waking him. He sat on the coffee table and gently slipped them off and placed them under the table. Brian hadn't stirred. For a moment Justin sat there and stared at the man he had been devoted to since the day they met.

Brian was an extraordinarily handsome man. Justin always appreciated the way he dressed and kept his body fit. All of a sudden Justin was overcome with a feeling that he hadn't experienced in a while. He touched Brian's hand gently and ran his fingers across Brian's wedding ring. A tear formed in the corner of Justin's eye. He had been on an emotional roller coaster with Brian Kinney for six years. And yet he felt such an overwhelming feeling of love at this moment he thought he would die if he ever lost Brian for any reason. Justin slipped off his own shoes and slid his body down next to Brian, resting his head on the pillow.

Brian opened his eyes and found Justin staring at him. "Sorry, I must have fallen asleep. Where do you want to go for dinner?"

Brian made a half hearted attempt to lift himself up, but Justin pushed him gently back against the pillow. "Let's stay home."

"I thought you wanted to talk."

Justin smiled at him in a peculiar way. "I was sitting here watching you sleep and I got all mushy inside, like I would die if a time came when you didn't love me anymore and wanted to be with someone else. I wouldn't blame you. I've been a real cunt lately. And you are still the hottest man on the planet. I love the way you've changed your life for me. I love the way you work so hard to make a wonderful new life for us. I don't really mean to cause you trouble. All these things pop into my head and I want to tell you everything. Sometimes I can't believe that you really belong to me." Justin lifted up Brian's hand and twisted the ring. "And I love that you feel close enough to me now to let me see you cry."

Brian wiped a tear from his eye. "Fucking allergies."

"Liar," Justin started to tickle him and Brian pushed him away.

"Hey, don't start what you don't intend to finish."

"Oh, I intend to finish. Several times over the next few hours. First . . .," he playfully undid Brian's zipper. "I'm going to suck your dick until you scream for mercy. Next . . . I'm going to take off all of my clothes and get up on

that table over there where you will fuck me senseless. After that we order Chinese food and eat off each other's plates. Then we go to bed and start all over again."

Justin was true to his word. Brian closed his eyes and let Justin suck his dick until he almost passed out with pleasure.

Part Seven - If Looks Could Kill

Brian took a sponge and wiped the cum off of the dining room table while Justin answered the door for the delivery man. They each grinned to themselves as they worked. Justin put out the plates on the table as Brian nuzzled his neck. "I love the way you do the table, and I'm not talking about the dishes."

Justin put his hand to Brian's cheek. "I learned from the master."

Brian spun Justin around to face him. "We'll spend more time together soon. I promise. I love coming home to you. I love the way you keep my world from spinning off its axis. I love you more than anything else in my life."

"I know it, Brian. I don't know what's gotten into me lately. I spend too much time alone in my own head."

"You wouldn't be alone if you would come with me."

"I shouldn't have to cling to you every minute of the day in order to be happy. You have important things to do and I'd only be in the way. I'll keep the home fires burning for you. Speaking of our home, I didn't get the chance to tell you the news about the building."

"What's that, my little real estate genius?"

"I rented both stores downstairs. The bigger one on the corner is a baby clothing store. Which is cool because I get a discount for anything I buy for William. The manager is really nice. Her name is Maria. The other store does computer repair. So we are all set for a few years."

"Good for you. Now if you could only get rid of Babylon East on the second floor . . ."

"Brian, he's been gone for a month."

"Really? And how did you manage that? Did you kill him?"

"No, because that would be against the law. I blackmailed him."

"Which is perfectly legal?"

"I remember you said that he wasn't into fresh meat, that he liked older more mature partners, like yourself. I got to thinking about that guy who was waiting for him that day, the one he gave the key to. I figured he was probably in high school. So I pulled a bluff on Seth. I told him that kid Tommy gave him up as a drug dealer and that he said Seth sold to kids in high school. I told him I wanted him out of the building or I was going to call the cops. He totally freaked. It turns out that Mr. Superstud is a custodian at the high school near here. If he ever got caught dealing drugs he'd be history. He was out of here in a flash."

"Wow, I'm impressed. But doesn't that leave you one tenant short for the month."

"Hell no. I rented that place in no time. This time I checked out all the applicants and found the safest one. I rented 2B to a cop."

"A cop in the building. I'm not sure how I feel about that. Every cop I've ever known has been a total homophob."

"Not this cop. She's a lesbian."

"A pussy with a pistol, excellent. Just make sure we have adequate locks on our doors. Lesbians never feel the need to knock, for some reason."

"We probably won't see her much. She works at night and comes home early in the morning."

Brian and Justin arrived at the Astor's home in Westchester at 8:00 pm. They were greeted by her mother who couldn't wait to meet Monte. The dog sat on the tailgate and licked her face obligingly.

"I'm so glad you brought him. I was wondering how I was going to keep Pinky quiet." Mrs. Astor said. Monte jumped down from the tailgate and Justin clipped on his leash.

"Where's Rome?" Justin asked.

"She is going to be a little late. We are so excited that she is bringing her new boyfriend to introduce to everyone. He must be someone really special to her."

Mrs. Astor took Monte into the house and Brian and Justin went to sit by the pool. They were acquainted with some of the guests that were gathered there from the last party. The party was in full swing when Rome made her grand entrance. When Justin looked up and saw her ascend the staircase by the pool on the arm of her new boyfriend, he gasped out loud. Brian noticed the look on Justin's face and turned to see what was disturbing him. "Holy fucking shit! KIP!" he murmured under his breath. He turned to Justin with a questioning look. "Did you know about this?"

"No, I had no idea." Justin shrugged. "Brian, what are we going to do?"

Rome made the rounds at the party introducing Kip to all of her friends and family. Brian smiled graciously when she approached him. "Kip, I had no idea you two knew even knew each other." He grasped Kip's hand firmly and held it a little too long while he stared Kip down. Kip squirmed under Brian's gaze. "We met a few weeks ago. She saw me in the lobby at Kinnetik and asked me out, the rest is history."

Justin had distracted Rome from Brian and Kip's conversation. Brian pulled on Kip's arm until Kip was within whispering distance. "History is what you're going to be shortly." He released Kip's hand and turned to say hello to Rome. The rest of the evening was tense. At dinner it was clear that Rome's parents were totally taken in by Kip's charm. Rome seemed to be enjoying herself in his company. Brian glared as they held hands and mingled with the other guests. He wandered into the den where he engaged one of his clients in a game of pool. Justin tried to get Rome alone to see what the story was with Kip, but he could see it was not going to happen. Kip was a fixture at her side all evening. Around one o'clock Brian asked him to go and get the dog. They said their goodbyes and left for the city.

"Brian what are we going to do? We can't let Rome get mixed up with that asshole."

"Tomorrow I'm going to rip him a new one. He has a contract with me that forbids him from fraternizing with MY clients. I'm going to ship his conniving ass back to the Pitts."

"Wait, Brian! You can't do that. What if Rome gets pissed off at you, or worse, at us. Do you realize that every fucking connection we've made since we got to New York has been due to her?"

"What do you suggest? I don't think he's going to buy your "Daddy" story again."

"I'll talk to Rome. . . gently, with tact. I'll break the news to her because I love her and I don't want her to get hurt."

Justin tried to reach Rome on the telephone for days. She apparently was out of town. Brian confirmed that Kip had suddenly taken some unpaid vacation time.

"Great, what if they elope." Brian tapped his pen on his shoe while Justin paced in front of his desk. "Kip might just end up being MY boss."

"Let's not panic. Rome's not stupid. She's going to check him out before she does anything drastic."

"I'm not so sure. A woman like that, itching to get married and have kids before her biological clock gives out is likely to do anything."

"All we can do is wait."

"All I can do is make sure he has no access to my clients until I straighten this out." Brian buzzed for Cynthia and Justin went up to his studio to work.

Rome returned Justin's call a few days later. "What's up, sweetie? You left me a million urgent messages."

"I need to see you. Can you meet me for lunch?"

"I have some time today, I'll come downtown."

"No! I'll come to you. I'll see you at noon."

Justin sat across from Rome at one of her favorite Italian restaurants. Not being one to mince words Justin decided the best thing to do was to tell her the whole story. "How much do you know about Kip?" He began.

"He's handsome, sweet and really good in bed."

"That's what I thought the last time I fucked him." Justin blurted out. "Brian fucked him two, twice I think. He's gay, Rome. Not straight, not bi, he's gay."

Justin sat back in his chair and waited for Rome's reaction. There was none. "I just told you that the love of your life is gay. Aren't you going to comment?"

Rome smiled coyly. "Do you think I was born yesterday? I know that he's gay. I threw in the bed comment to see if you'd have the balls to challenge my judgment."

"You'd be surprised at the size of my balls." Justin joked. He was relieved that Rome was on to Kip. "So, what's the story? What are you doing with Kip?"

"I guess I'm using him." She said without emotion. "I met him at Kinnetik one day. He asked me to lunch and since you weren't available and I was in need of a male companion that day I agreed. I took him to a gathering of a few of my closest friends, whom I hate, and their boring old, rich husbands. Kip was a big hit. So I decided to keep him. At least through the party season at the Hamptons. He looks really hot in a bathing suit."

Justin chuckled. "You're too much. No wonder we get along so well."

"He keeps my parents off my back. And it keeps them from finding out about the real true love of my life."

"Who would that be? And don't say me because I'm taken."

"He makes me feel the way you described your first meeting with Brian. I know I could be really happy with him. He's the first man who's been able to satisfy me in bed. The only problem is he's not exactly someone I can drag to parties and introduce to my parents. The fact is he works at my father's hotel."

"What's wrong with that? Remember what you said about me and Brian. You made me realize that it wouldn't matter to me if Brian fixed motorcycles for a living, I'd still love him just as much."

"My life is more complicated than that, Justin. I will tell them eventually. He has plans for his future. It's not easy since he has to support his mother and siblings. I want to help him but he refused."

"There are things you need to know about Kip, Rome. If he catches on to your game, you could find yourself in deep shit."

When Justin returned to Kinnetik he went right to Brian's office. "Interesting development, Brian. Rome knew Kip was gay all along. She was using him to as a foil to hide the affair she's having with someone not socially acceptable. I told her what Kip had tried to pull in Pittsburgh. I also told her what I had to do to get him to drop the suit. After she stopped laughing she agreed that having Kip around could be disastrous. The last thing she needed was for him to catch on to her plan and blackmail her next."

"How'd she take it? Are we still in with the in crowd?"

"Oh, we are. But there was a sticky moment when Kip showed up at the restaurant and Rome read him the riot act right there in the middle of the high profile lunch crowd. She accused him of hiding the fact that he was gay. If looks could kill you'd be a widower right now."

"I imagine that his plan was to snag the princess and worm his way into her father's good graces. He'd be set for life. I have to hand it to him, he is consistent."

"He's a creep. I'm glad that Rome is rid of him."

Brian walked around to the front of his desk and grabbed Justin by the arm. Pulling him close he kissed him passionately on the lips and hugged him tightly. "I'll have a little talk with Kip and make sure he doesn't give you any grief."

"I can handle Kip."

"You can handle anything."

"How about I take you in your bathroom over there and handle you?"

"You read my mind." Brian dragged Justin across the room by the hand.

Justin pulled himself up until he was sitting on the edge of the sink. Sometimes he wished that he was taller so that he wouldn't have to stand on his toes when Brian kissed him. But he did love the fact that he was still small enough to cuddle up on Brian's lap when he had a mind to. He could feel Brian's urgency through his jeans. Brian had already undone his zipper and Justin grabbed his cock. He felt his own erection pressing against his thigh begging for release. Sensing his partner's need, Brian reached down and unzipped Justin's jeans. As they kissed with growing passion Justin felt Brian's hand cup his balls. Justin almost cried out with pleasure but then he remembered where they were. Brian suddenly dropped to his knees and took Justin's cock in his mouth. Justin held out as long as he could but within a few moments he was ready to cum. He put his hands on the back of Brian's head as a signal. When he was done Brian dropped his suit pants to the floor and leaned against the wall. Brian let out a low moan which encouraged Justin to suck harder and faster. When Brian released his load it was Justin's turn to moan. They laughed and kissed some more while they washed up from their lunchtime tryst.

Brian emerged from his private bathroom tucking his shirt into his pants. Cynthia and a very angry looking Kip stood at his office door staring at him. Justin emerged behind Brian, still grinning as he zipped up his jeans.

Cynthia recovered her composure first, "Don't you two ever get enough?" She asked.

Brian and Justin looked at each other then back at Cynthia. "No!" They said in unison.

Cynthia shook her head as she left the room. Kip regarded Justin with a malicious stare. Justin glared back at him. Brian put his arm around Justin. "Why don't you go upstairs and get some work done, I want to talk to Kip."

Justin started to protest but thought better of it. He kissed Brian sweetly and gave Kip a dirty look before leaving the room.

"You can't protect him forever." Kip warned Brian. "One day he's going to fuck with the wrong man and get his ass kicked. That kid is a demon."

Brian resisted the urge to get physical. He'd learned his lesson in dealing with Kip. No use in flying off the handle and getting involved in another law suit. Brian kept his calm. He gestured for Kip to sit down.

"I'd rather stand." Kip said defiantly.

"You've been a bad boy, Kip . . . A very bad boy. We have a contract. You broke that contract by contacting one of my clients outside of the parameters of your duties with the firm."

"I didn't contact her, Brian. She approached me, right here in the lobby when she was leaving the building after one of her sessions with your boyfriend. She asked me out to lunch. I had no idea that she was one of your clients. I didn't work on her campaign."

"You want me to believe that you had no idea of her connection with the firm? Are you sure that's your position because I can make a call to her right now and get the truth."

"That won't hold up in court. Your boyfriend poisoned her against me. I was in love with the woman and he slandered me to her."

Brian laughed out loud. "You are pathetic. I almost feel sorry for you."

"If you fire me I'll sue that little prick for damages."

"You're a sneaky conniving asshole. I knew that when I hired you. You're good at what I hired you to do. And right now I don't have the time or the patience to replace you. But know this . . . if I catch you playing one of your little scams on my clients again I'll not only fire you but I will make sure that no other reputable advertising agency would touch you with a ten foot pole. Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal." Kip exclaimed.

"One more thing." Brian grabbed Kip's arm as he turned to leave. "Justin is not some smart ass trick. He's not only my husband, he's a partner in this firm. Don't even think about fucking with him!" Brian released Kip who glared at him one more time before storming out of the office.

Brian stared after him. What he'd said about Kip's work was true. There was no time to replace him at the moment. But if Kip made any move at retribution toward Justin he would have him escorted out the door by force. Brian dictated a memo to Cynthia to keep a sharp eye out for Kip and to report anything out of the ordinary immediately.

The night they had gone to the Astor's party Justin had a conversation with Rome's dad. He was so pleased with the paintings that his wife and daughter had purchased he wanted to commission Justin to do paintings of his hotels. For Justin this was a big honor. His work would be displayed in the lobby of some of the fanciest hotels in the world. He gratefully accepted and made an appointment to see Mr. Astor at his hotel in New York.

Justin arrived at the hotel well before the appointed time of his meeting with Mr. Astor. When he saw the portrait that he had done of Rome hanging in its place of honor he stopped to admire his work. One of the desk clerks approached him. "She attracts a lot of attention here in the lobby. Aren't you the artist who painted the portrait?"

"Yes, I am. And she is beautiful."

"I was here when you brought it. We get many comments on the fine job you did capturing her expression. Is there something I can help you with today?"

Before Justin could answer, Mr. Astor came into the lobby.

"We do get a lot of compliments on your masterpiece." Mr. Astor nodded in the direction of Rome's portrait. "Let's go to my office."

As he followed Mr. Astor toward the elevator Justin glanced back at the desk clerk who had spoken to him. There was something familiar about him that Justin couldn't place. Something about his eyes that looks familiar. He glanced down at the man's name plate on his jacket which read 'Oscar.' Justin thought he'd heard the name recently, but he couldn't remember where.

Mr. Astor explained to him that he wanted to have a landscape of each of his hotels by the soon to be famous artist Justin Taylor Kinney hanging in each lobby. Justin was amazed when he was shown the number of hotels here in the states and in foreign countries.

"It may take me a life time to complete the assignment. There are so many."

Mr. Astor laughed. "You don't have to actually travel to each one. I'll get you photographs and anything else you might need. You'll be our very own resident artist."

Justin thought of the significance of having his work displayed in hotels all over the world and it thrilled him. He agreed to take on the assignment.

As he was leaving the hotel he saw Rome enter the lobby. Before he could get her attention she glanced at the desk clerk, Oscar, and he followed her to the elevator. Justin wondered if Oscar was her new boyfriend. He tried to remember if Rome had mentioned his name at lunch that day. That would explain why the name stuck his head, but not why he looked like someone that he knew. The mystery would be cleared up the next time he spoke to Rome. He was excited about his new assignment and couldn't wait to tell Brian about it. Justin hailed a cab and headed downtown to Kinnetik.

Brian was out of the office on some photo shoot emergency. Justin was disappointed but he decided that he would make a special dinner that night to celebrate and would tell Brian then. He went upstairs to his studio to make plans for his upcoming projects.

Justin left the office early to shop for dinner. He figured for a special occasion like this he would splurge and buy the best piece of fillet minion he could find. It was easy to cook and something they never would ordinarily have at home. When he got home he prepared a salad and put some potatoes in the oven to bake. After he took a shower, he put candles out and set the table. He would wait for Brian to come home to cook the meat as he planned to cut it into small stakes and broil it. At 7:30 he began to call Brian's cell phone.

By 10:00 he realized that Brian must have been involved with some crisis or another. Justin wrapped the steaks, put the candles away and made himself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. By midnight he was sound asleep on the sofa. He was awakened to the sound of Brian cursing.

"Fucking dog! Why does he always have to be right under my feet?"

Monte jumped out of the way as Brian made his way to the kitchen.

"Where have you been?" Justin asked.

Brian was in a sour mood. "Sweating my balls off in a God damned film studio all fucking day! Why the fuck can't actors just do what you pay them to do and leave their God damned egos out of it? I had to recast the commercial we were shooting right on the spot."

Brian pulled beer out of the fridge and slammed the door. "What's for dinner?"

"Are you asking what I had planned for dinner, or what I actually ate when I finally realized you weren't coming home?"

Brian glared at him a moment before answering. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

Justin had been the brunt of Brian's temper before. He knew it wasn't really aimed at him. The pressures at Kinnetik were growing and Brian had a hard time delegating jobs to his staff. He felt he had to handle all the difficult details himself. Justin didn't plan to stick around for the fallout. "I'll make you a sandwich if you want, before I go to bed."

"Never mind, I'll eat tomorrow." He took the beer he was drinking into the living room and sat on the sofa. Justin got the leash and took Monte for a walk. When he got home Brian was sprawled out on the sofa sound asleep. Justin decided to leave him there and go to bed.

Usually when Brian got into one of his moods he would soften by morning. When Justin got up, Brian was already at the kitchen table eating corn flakes. Justin kissed him on the top of the head and poured himself a cup of coffee. "Sorry," Brian muttered softly.

"Me too."

"What are you sorry for?" Brian asked.

"I don't know, whatever I did to piss you off."

"You didn't do anything to piss me off. I was already pissed off when I walked in the door."

"Okay, then I'm not sorry." Justin was too sleepy to argue. He had not slept well without Brian in the bed. It always made him nervous when Brian was in one of his moods. Justin never knew what would set him off. He decided to hold off on his news until things had calmed down.

They finished breakfast in silence. Brian showered and left for work early. Justin kissed him good bye and went into the kitchen to clean up. After taking Monte for a walk Justin got on the computer and looked up the hotels on the list that Mr. Astor had given him. Since he had no appointments that day, he decided to go to the gallery for a few hours.

"Well that's every young painters dream isn't it?" Cathy said as she munched on a cookie. "Your work will be displayed in four star hotels all over the world. I would say that you've made it, Mr. Taylor-Kinney."

"It's a lot of work. I was on line this morning checking them out. But Mr. Astor said that I should just concentrate on one at a time and that's what I am going to do."

"You'll have to travel a lot I guess. Maybe you and Brian can coordinate your schedules and travel together."

"That would be great. I haven't told him about this yet. I guess I should go home and see if I can get dinner ready before he gets in. Last night he was in a bitch of a mood."

"From what you say it sounds like he has a high pressure job. But don't let him take it out on you."

"He doesn't really. I just happen to be in the line of fire. I usually just get out of his way."

"Why don't you go then, Justin. Cook a nice meal, get into your sexiest nighty and charm the bad mood away."

"Sounds like a plan. Oh, I don't remember if I told you but I am not going to be around for a few days. Tomorrow I am going to Scranton to meet my mother and bring my baby brother back home for a visit."

"That's exciting. Bring him by so we can check him out."

"I'll do that. Bye now." Justin walked the ten blocks back home. He was surprised to see that Brian was already home.

Brian kissed Justin at the door and dragged him by the hand to the bedroom. Justin tried to catch his breath but Brian already had him down on the bed and was pulling at his zipper. Justin helped him and then wiggled out of his pants. It was a hot and heavy brief fuck. When it was over Brian kissed him on the forehead and got up off the bed.

"Hello to you too."

"Sorry I'm pressed for time." Brian pulled on his shirt. To Justin's surprise he pulled his suit case out of the closet and put it on the bed.

"Are you going somewhere?"

"Florida. A client I picked up at the Astor's party last week called this morning. He wants a meeting right away and I need to get this done before I leave for Japan. I have to go tonight."

Justin didn't try to hide his disappointment. "I thought we'd spend the week together."

"Get your suit case. We can spend time together in Florida."

"I can't do that Brian."

Brian stopped packing and gave Justin one of those warning looks. "Why the fuck not?" His dark mood had returned and Justin felt his own anger surface.

"I told you that I'm going to Scranton to meet my mother and to pick up William. I'm bringing him back here for a few days and then driving to Scranton on the weekend."

"Cancel it. She'll get a baby sitter or bring your sister to watch the kid. Now get packed."

"I don't want to cancel it. I was looking forward to having the baby here. It'll be fun for me."

"More fun than being with me you mean."

"Look, you can rant and rave and think whatever you like. I don't make plans then disappoint people. I have a life too."

Brian finished packing and closed the case. "What about Japan? Are you too busy to fit me into your schedule or are you going to spend the rest of your life holding me back?"

"Have a nice trip." Justin spat out angrily.

Brian took the suit case and headed out the front door without looking back.

After he left, Justin considered going after him. But he didn't have the strength. Brian's words had cut him to the core. Had he really meant them? Was he holding Brian back? Justin sat down at the kitchen table and rested his head in his hand. Monte came over and sat next to him, putting his face on Justin's lap. Justin put his head down on the table and began to sob.

It was late Thursday afternoon and Brian sat on the bed in the stifling Miami motel room smoking a cigarette and taking slugs from a bottle of bourbon. The client meeting had taken only two hours, yet he'd been sitting on the bed staring into space almost twice that long. He picked up the cell phone from the night stand and checked his messages

for the third time in an hour. No message from Justin. No messages for two days. Justin's cell phone was shut off and he didn't answer the phone at home. Brian called Kinnetik and spoke to Cynthia. She reminded him that Justin had gone to Scranton.

In his head he went over the events of the past few days. What the fuck had he done? What had driven him to push Justin away? Justin was his husband and yet the nagging fear was always there. It had never really gone away. Justin had become more important to him than his own life. Something deep inside him warns him to be careful. 'You're not worthy, Sonny boy. You think you can change, but you can't be something you're not. You are far too insecure to be a real man. Justin is on to you. If not today than someday. Push him away. The longer you hold on the more it will hurt.' Brian's hand started to shake.

That night Brian dreamed of his life before he'd met Justin. The endless nights alone. The endless nights of tricking at Babylon. It was cold and dark in the backroom. Brian began to sweat in his sleep. He was awakened by the ring of his cell phone. Thinking it was Justin, he reached over too quickly and knocked over the half empty bottle of bourbon. He picked up the phone and looked at the caller's number. It wasn't Justin, it was Lindsay.

"Brian, it's Lindsay. I know it's early but I need to talk to you about Michael."

"Now what?"

"He's out of control Brian. He needs you. We need you to come to Toronto."

Brian thought for a moment. He knew that what he needed to do was to find Justin. He should go to New York and face the music. The thought of Justin finally ending it between them for good sent him into a panic. But Justin wasn't even home. So the side trip to Toronto might be a good diversion. "Okay. I'll take a flight up tomorrow."

Justin arrived in Scranton on Thursday afternoon. He hadn't realized how much he had missed William. He had grown so much he hardly recognized him. "He has so much more hair." He said to his mother.

"Blond like his brother. He really does resemble you, Justin. But unlike you, he doesn't cry all night and spit strained peas at me."

Justin kissed his mother's cheek. "Sorry. I couldn't help myself."

"Justin are you sure you want to travel with an infant? He can be a handful. Why don't you stay here with me and watch him while I go to the seminar."

"Nice try. We'd be bored to death. Scranton is deader than Pittsburgh. Besides, I want to take him all over New York and show him off to my friends. We'll be fine in the car. It's only a little over an hour away and if he throws a fit I'll pull over and settle him down. Don't you trust me?"

"I do trust you, honey. I haven't been away from him since he was born. I'm going to miss him." She added. "And you."

"Well we have plenty of room at the new place. You can come visit any time. I could use the company when Brian travels." Justin had a pained look on his face and Jennifer sensed something was wrong.

"Is everything okay? Where is Brian now? I thought he was home."

"I thought he would be, but he had to meet a client in Florida." Justin said. "We had a fight before he left. He can be so mean sometimes. I try to understand but he travels so much and works so hard it's difficult to be close."

"I know the feeling. Your dad used to travel. Everything seems huge when you're a newlywed. Even though you've lived together before, marriage can be a strain. Brian is set in his ways and you're just a little stubborn too. It will work out over time."

"I know. I'm not going to think about it this weekend because William and I are going to have fun. Aren't we?" The baby gurgled at his brother. Justin put him in the car seat and strapped it in.

"Who's this? Jennifer asked when she saw Monte in the back of the Jeep."

"That's Monte."

Monte wagged his tail when his name was mentioned. Justin took him out of the Jeep and Jennifer petted his head. "He's sweet. Where did you get him?"

"At the pound. They were going to kill him."

"Brian agreed to keeping a dog?"

"No, that's just the tip of the ice berg. Don't worry Mom. He's caged in the back so he won't be able to slobber all over William."

"I'm not worried Justin. Have a good time."

"I'll call you when I get home." Justin walked Monte to the bushes and let him pee. Then he loaded him back into the Jeep and they were on their way.

Justin had bought a portable crib from the store downstairs. He'd set it up in the extra bed room that he and Brian had not had time to decorate. When he got home the first thing he did was to call his mother and leave a message on her cell phone that everything was fine. William slept for two hours. When he woke up Justin was sitting next to the crib. He warmed the bottle and fed William. It felt so good to hold this warm little bundle in his arms. He was grateful for the diversion. If he had to think about what happened with Brian he'd have driven himself crazy. He had not checked the answering machine or his cell phone messages because he didn't want to hear from Brian yet. He was really mad at him and he wanted to stay that way, at least for a little while.

On Friday morning Justin took William and Monte to the gallery. Babies were a lot of work. But Justin found it was fun work. He loved showing him off and walking him in his stroller. People would look at him and smile and Justin would smile back like a proud father. The thought struck him suddenly that people must be thinking that he was William's father. He was old enough, but he wasn't sure how he felt about being someone's dad. Most likely he would never know. Having William just for a little while was a joy. He played with him all the next day and slept in the room with him at night. Monte lay by his side. When it got dark Justin could not help but think about Brian. What was he feeling? Was he ever coming home?

Saturday morning he took William downstairs to meet Maria. She was in the back of the store waiting on a customer when he walked in. He browsed the rack as William sucked on a stuffed monkey that Justin had bought. He named it Mikey, which made the baby laugh for some reason. When the customer left Maria came over and greeted them. "Oh my, he is so beautiful. His eyes are the color of the sky and his hair, well it's just like yours. Justin looked at her face and noticed a bruise. She seemed to be on edge.

"What happened to your face?"

"Nothing, a silly accident." She tried to change the subject but Justin could tell something was wrong.

"It looks like someone hit you."

She took a deep breath and told Justin the truth. "It was Oscar. We had a fight."

"You're pregnant and he hit you! You should call the police."

"No! It's over. I threw him out. He was cheating on me with some rich woman from the neighbor hood where he works. He got very angry when I accused him of cheating. He said it was true. That I was trash and he was moving up in the world. He wants to marry that woman and take Gina and my baby away from me. Can he do that Justin?" Maria's bottom lip started to tremble.

Justin put his arm around her. "Of course not. They don't take babies away from their mothers for no reason in this country."

"If you have money you can do anything you want. That's what he said."

"Maria if you're afraid of him you can stay at my place for a while. Brian is out of town."

"No, I'll be fine. I am staying with my brother and his wife. My mother and sister are moving to New York. We'll get a new place together. "

"Is she moving here from Mexico?"

"No, she lives in Newark, New Jersey. My brother is coming here soon to keep me company in a little while. He's a police officer."

"I'm really sorry for you Maria, but you're lucky to get away from a man who abuses you."

"He always made me feel like I was trash. He gets so angry and violent when he drinks that I was afraid to leave."

"I have to take William back to my mother today. I'm coming back on Sunday morning and I need a favor. I'm having a painting sent from the gallery and it may come before I get back. Can you keep it here for me?"

"Sure. I'll keep it in the back room so nothing happens to it. Thanks for being so kind to me."

Justin was about to leave when he noticed a man standing near the front of the store. It was Oscar from the hotel. Justin was sure it was the same man. When he approached Maria, Justin stepped forward in his path. "She doesn't want to talk to you." The man glared at him.

Maria pushed Justin's arm away. "Justin, it's okay. I'll be fine. I see my brother outside in his van."

Justin reluctantly left Maria alone with Oscar. They were talking and he didn't sense that Oscar was about to hurt her. Justin nodded to the man parked across the street who he figured was Maria's watchful brother. The man nodded back. Justin went upstairs and got ready to take William back to Scranton.

Justin knew he had a decision to make. Oscar was bad news and Justin was almost positive that he was the same man that Rome was seeing. She was head over heels for him and now Justin was about to burst her bubble. He called Rome and asked if he could drop by with William before he left for Scranton. Justin recalled how nervous he had been before telling her about Kip, but this was different. He was meddling in her life big time and if he was wrong or if she took out her anger on him, it could mean the end of his career. It also could mean the end of Kinnetik.

When Brian arrived in Toronto on Friday he rented a car at the airport and drove to Lindsay's home. She and Gus greeted him at the door. Lindsay explained that Mel was on a business trip and Jenny had already been put to bed for the night. Brian was exhausted and stressed to the breaking point. He had taken three connecting flights to get to his destination. He asked Lindsay to give him the evening with his son before she filled him in on Michael's situation.

Lindsay was glad to see Gus and Brian enjoying each other's company. She went to the kitchen to make them a snack. When she came back into the living room Brian was sound asleep on the sofa. Gus turned to her and said "Shhh, Daddy's sleeping." Lindsay smiled as she watched Gus cover his father with his own small blanket.

On Saturday Lindsay sat Brian down at the kitchen table and began to explain the why she had called him. "Michael's behavior has become so erratic we're desperate. His gambling problem is now compounded by his drinking and drug use. He came here a month ago begging to see Jenny. We let him stay on the sofa for a few days but he was driving us all crazy with his obsessive behavior. For a while he had been driving a bus from Toronto to Montreal for gamblers to visit the casinos. I don't need to tell you how that worked out. Some days he would appear at the door bearing gifts for everyone. The next time we would see him he'd want to borrow money."

"So this is all about cash?"

"No, he lost that job and I believe he's homeless. I've seen him sleeping in the park across the street on more than one occasion."

"What is it you think I can do for him?"

"We want you to talk him into going back to Pittsburgh. We want him away from our daughter."

"She's his daughter too."

"So he points out, every time he comes over. Mel is afraid that he might try to take her."

"What? No fucking way. He'd never hurt a kid, much less his own kid."

"Brian, I never thought I'd be having this conversation with you. I loved Michael like a brother. We chose him to father our child. And he's a good father. He was a good father. But he's changed so much it frightens me."

"You want me to beat him up or kill him?"

"This is no joking matter, Brian. He's threatened us. He blames you for all of his problems."

"What else is new?"

"Most of all, he hates Justin for taking his place in your life."

"I'm not going to listen to this." Brian stood up and Lindsay grabbed his arm.

"The man that Michael has become is capable of anything. Your son lives in this house in case you've forgotten. We don't feel safe."

"Where is the 'New Michael' now?"

"I'm not sure. But he usually shows up in that park across the street eventually. Why don't I fix you something to eat and we can wait."

"I'm not hungry."

"Brian you look tired. Is anything wrong?"

Brian didn't answer.

"Is it Justin?"

"No, it's me. I'm an asshole."

"You had a fight."

"I had a fight. He just got to watch me make a fool of myself for the millionth time."

"He'll get over it."

"I said some really stupid things."

"You've thrown him out on his ass for no reason and he forgave you."

"I don't want to talk about it. I'm going to take a walk through the park and see if I can find Michael. I have a flight home tomorrow morning. That is if I still have a home."

"He'll throw his arms around you and tell you that he missed you." Lindsay saw the pain in Brian's eyes. She wished there was something she could do to reassure him. "Trust Justin, he loves you."

"I know." Brian said as he walked out the door. He decided to take the rental car instead of walking. He circled the park slowly. Some time later he spotted Michael sitting on a bench looking in the direction of Lindsay's home. Brian got out of the car and walked toward him. Michael jumped up when he saw Brian. Lindsay and Mel were right to be afraid. This man was nothing like the Michael that Brian knew and loved.

"They called you didn't they? Those bitches think they can keep me from my daughter! I won't let them have her Brian. I will fucking kill them in their sleep if they try!" Michael's eyes were blood shot and Brian knew he was on something. Ironically it was probably a drug that Brian had introduced him to.

Brian grabbed him by the arm and threw him into the car. He drove to a near by motel where he rented a room for the night. "Where's Justin?" Michael asked as Brian dragged him to the room by his arm. Brian opened the door and threw Michael inside.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Brian demanded.

Michael stared at him with a blank look. "I don't know. I don't know how my life turned around so fast Brian. I'm scared."

Brian saw a glimpse of his old friend. Brian sat down on the bed and put his arms around him. "You can't mean that you'd hurt Lindsay and Mel or the kids to get your way."

"I need my daughter Brian. I'm a good father."

"A good father provides for his kid and doesn't make demands on them. She's happy living with the munchers. You gambled away your whole life and what did it get you?"

"I don't know how to fix it Brian."

"First you're going to get a good nights sleep. Then you're going to buy a plane ticket back to the Pitts. You'll get help for your addictions and then you'll work your ass off day and night to put your own life back together." Brian threw some money on the dresser for the bus ticket and started for the door.

"Brian! I can't do this without you! Help me!"

"I am helping you."

"You fucking piece of shit!" Michael turned on him, grabbing Brian's shirt and pulling him toward the bed. Brian pushed him away. "You promised me we'd always be together. But instead you married that blond piece of boy ass. It should be me living with you in New York, Brian. Not him. You give him everything and you throw me a few bucks to catch a bus out of town. That little gold digger should have died in that parking garage. That little prick ruined my life!" Michael's rage was real. He reached up and kissed Brian on the lips rubbing his body against him. "Fuck me, Brian. You owe me that much."

"I don't owe you that. I'm a married man and I don't fuck around anymore." Brian pushed him away and headed for the door.

"Brian Kinney married? That's a laugh. Does that mean you only fuck tricks on the weekend. Justin is using you. We were always meant to end up together. He ruined both our lives."

It frightened Brian to think that this man he had loved as a friend had turned into a monster. "I don't know who you are any more and I can't say that I care. It doesn't matter how many drugs you've taken, there's no excuse. If you feel that way about the man I love I don't want you in my life anymore. Take the money and get yourself the fuck back to Pittsburgh. Don't ever try to contact me or Justin again." Brian pushed Michael to the floor and ran out the door to the car.

He was still shaking when he got back to Lindsay's and Mel's home. Mel had returned from her trip and was anxious to hear what had happened. They were not surprised when Brian described Michael's condition and what had transpired between them. He told them he'd given Michael money to go back to Pittsburgh. They decided that it was best if they get an order of protection, just to be safe. Brian spent the evening playing with Gus. He slept on the sofa for the second night and in the morning he left for the airport.

Brian's early morning flight on Sunday was delayed. As he sat in the airport he went over in his mind what he would say to Justin when he got home. They had not spoken for five days. Brian felt empty and alone. He reached for his telephone to see if there were any messages. His cell phone was not in his pocket. He searched through his carry on bag, no phone. It was gone.

Justin left Scranton at the crack of dawn on Sunday . He wanted to get into the city before traffic built up. He had spent Saturday night in his mother's hotel room. Jennifer had noticed that Justin was upset about something but he didn't want to discuss it. Aside from his rift with Brian, he had lost his friend Rome when he had given her the news about Oscar. He had waited until he was about to leave before he broke the news to her. He told her about Maria, Gina and the baby on the way. He also told her what Maria had said about his violent temper. Rome was furious and she took it out on Justin. She slapped him and said that he enjoyed causing her pain. She pushed him toward his car and told him that she didn't want to see him ever again. Justin felt like he didn't have a friend in the world, except for Monte. He was grateful for Monte's company for the trip home but the dog seemed restless. He kept sitting up and leaning on the gate trying to get to Justin.

"Sorry boy. You have to stay back there. I'll turn up the air conditioning for you." He adjusted the air conditioning and the dog settled down. Justin continued to talk to him. "I almost want to turn the car around and go home to Pittsburgh. What a mess I've made of things. Brian's mad at me, Rome hates me. You're my only friend Monte. And in a few weeks Brian wants me to kill you." Justin confided in Monte. "Don't worry, I'm not going to let it happen. I can tell my mother likes you. And I bet I can talk her into giving you a home with her. I may be jumping the gun, though, because who knows if Brian will even come home this time. If he doesn't come home and if Rome gets everyone to take their work away from me we may both end up living with my mother."

As he hoped, the traffic was light going into the city. Justin was glad that he'd left Scranton early. He pulled into the garage under their building before 9:30 am. He got out of the drivers seat and went to the back to open the tailgate for Monte to get out of the car. As he reached for the handle, someone grabbed him from behind and put a knife to his throat.

The man who held him reeked of alcohol. Justin reacted by ramming his elbow into the man's side as hard as he could. This bought him some time to push his attacker's arm away from his throat, but not enough to escape completely. He felt the blade enter the right side of his body. He fell to the ground but was able to turn to see the door to the street open and his attacker escape.

Monte was barking furiously. Justin realized that the dog was trapped in the car. He pulled himself up by leaning on the bumper. The latch opened easily, Monte pushed the door open and jumped out, knocking Justin back down to the floor. He felt the dog lick his face. Everything had happened so fast. It was early Sunday morning. Justin realized that the chances of anyone finding him were slim. He tried to stand by pulling himself up next to the car. He took one step and collapsed to the floor again. This time he did not get up.

Part Eight - The Dangers of Being Justin

Brian had parked his car at the airport when he left for Florida five days before. As he drove back to the city he thought about Michael and his problems. Even if he was able to put his life back together, Brian would never again think of him as a friend. The things he said about Justin were unforgivable. Brian felt guilty for allowing Michael to have false hope for so many years. It must have done something to his brain.

In a few minutes he would be home. He prayed that Justin would give him one more chance. All he wanted was to get past this crisis and spend what was left of the weekend with Justin. Hopefully they could talk and work out their problems. He tried turn down the street where he normally pulled into the garage, but it was blocked by a police car. He found a parking spot on the street and walked back to the garage entrance. When he saw that it was covered with crime scene tape. . . fear gripped his heart.

Brian approached a policeman who was standing near the door. "I own this building. What's going on?"

"You'll have to speak to the detectives inside." He escorted Brian into the garage. Justin's car was parked in its normal spot. The rear hatch was wide open. A team of people from the crime scene unit were examining something on the floor. Brian tried to see what it was they were looking at, but was stopped by a detective.

"Are you Brian Kinney?" The detective asked.

"Yes. I own the building. What happened?"

"A young man was stabbed."

Brian felt his knees go weak. He thought he might collapse. At that moment Rome came through the door of the garage leading Monte on a leash. "Brian!" She ran over and hugged him. "Justin's been hurt. They took him to the hospital."

Brian looked from Rome to the detective in disbelief. This can't be happening again, he thought to himself. He can't lose Justin now!

The detective explained what had happened. "All we know so far is that someone jumped him when he got out of the car, and stabbed him in the side. The cop who lives in the building was coming home from work. She said the dog was in the lobby barking and pacing in front of the stairs to the garage. She followed him and he led her to where the young man was lying unconscious on the floor."

Rome took Brian's hand. "I was trying to call Justin and the police answered the phone, she explained. "I got here when they were putting him in the ambulance. Brian, I'm going to bring Monte back to my place and meet you at the hospital. Detective, perhaps one of your officers would be kind enough to take Mr. Taylor's husband to the hospital."

Brian was dropped off at the hospital by the police. He sat alone on a bench in the hallway. A little while later Rome arrived and joined him on the bench. Rome attempted to console the distraught Brian. "Justin will get the best care possible in this hospital. My father's family donated the money that built this wing."

"How did he look when you saw him?" Brian asked.

Rome hesitated, but realized that Brian needed the truth. "He looked so pale and small lying there. I don't know why someone would do this." She began to cry. Brian felt his own tears cascade down his face. It was just like the last time. He remembered the prom, and waiting in the hallway weeping helplessly while Justin fought for his life.

"Don't give up on him," Brian said as he took Rome's hand.

"I was awful to him the last time we spoke." She confessed. "I yelled at him for interfering with my life."

"You too?" He attempted to smile.

"No! You don't understand. Justin saved me from making the biggest mistake of my life. The man I was about to elope with turned out to be a bastard. Justin found out, somehow, and he warned me. I slapped him, and told him I didn't want to see him again. He's never going to forgive me."

"When Justin loves someone he loves them all the way. He can't sit by and watch you suffer even if you push him away again and again. He's a stubborn little shit." Brian began to cry deep heaving sobs. Rome put her hand to his shoulder to comfort him. They sat in silence waiting for the doctor.

An hour later a doctor came to the waiting room to give them the news. "He lost a lot of blood, but it doesn't appear the knife blade damaged any major organs. He's conscious, but groggy. You can go in and sit with him for a while. If he starts to get agitated call the nurse immediately. We don't want him moving around and disturbing the stitches."

When Brian and Rome entered the room Justin was asleep. Brian reached to take his hand but pulled back. "Where's his ring?" he demanded. "Where the fuck is his ring?" Brian grabbed Rome by the shoulders and looked at her with pleading eyes.

"They must have taken it off when they were examining him." Rome attempted to calm Brian. "I'll go and get it Brian. You sit here with him. I'll be right back." Rome went out into the hall to look for a nurse. At the moment she wasn't sure which one of her friends she was more concerned about. It was clear that if anything happened to Justin, Brian would fall apart.

Brian slowly approached the bed where Justin lay. Rome had been right about his color. He looked as white as the sheet that covered his small body. Brian sat down and took Justin's hand. It frightened him to see Justin's ring was missing. Could it mean that Justin had removed it on the night Brian left? He wished there was a way they could go back in time to that night. Brian would have canceled his trip and stayed with Justin. If only there was a way to take

back harsh words, spoken in anger. The look on Justin's face when he left broke his heart. It could have been their last moment together.

"You better fucking open your eyes Sunshine. Your husband needs you."

Justin groaned loudly, then opened his eyes and spoke. "Brian, what happened to me?"

Brian squeezed his hand. "You're going to be okay. You were stabbed in the garage."

Justin looked confused. "Why?"

"I don't know, sweetheart. Please don't talk. If you get too excited they'll throw me out."

"You came to see me. . . " Justin whimpered like a child. "Brian don't leave me!"

"Calm down. I'm not going anywhere." Justin closed his eyes again and in moments he was breathing steadily in sleep.

Rome returned with a small bag and two cups. "His ring his in the bag with his personal belongings." Brian found the ring in the bag and put it on Justin's finger. It seemed to calm Brian to touch it.

"I brought you some coffee." Rome put a cup on the table next to the bed.

"Thanks." Brian said without taking his eyes off Justin's face.

"He looks so peaceful. I bet he knows you're here now."

"He knows."

Justin started to stir again. He mumbled phrases that Rome didn't understand. "Bat . . . Brian watch out! "

"Bat? Did they guy have a bat too?"

"He's not talking about now. He was hit with a bat at his prom. He was in a coma for three weeks."

"How awful. Why would someone try to kill him?"

"Because he's gay. Because I came to the prom and danced with him."

"God, that is so awful."

"I've gotten careless. I should have made sure the garage was safe. I leave him alone too much."

"Brian, the police will find whoever did this."

"The police won't do shit. They'll blame him for being gay."

"That's not going to happen this time. I called my father and he spoke to the police commissioner. The detectives don't think this is a random crime."

"Has someone been stalking him? How would he know about the garage?"

"I don't know, Brian. Let's give the cops a chance."

Justin opened his eyes again. "Will you two stop talking about me like I'm not here."

"Lie still." Brian ordered.

"Fuck off." Justin replied.

Rome giggled at the exchange.

Brian picked up the coffee and took a sip. "I guess he's gonna make it."

"I think we better tell the police officer outside that Justin's awake." Rome suggested.

"Police? What'd I do?" Justin asked.

"What's the last thing you remember?" Rome asked.

"I came back from Scranton with Monte." Justin opened his eyes wide. "MONTE! He's stuck in the car, he'll die from the heat!"

"No, honey, he's at my apartment, sleeping on my futon." Rome explained.

"He was barking and barking. I couldn't move." Justin was getting agitated.

Brian stood up and put his hand on Justin's face. "Stop! It's over now. You're going to be okay. I'm going to get the nurse."

"No, Brian. I remember what happened. I was going back to let the dog out of the car and someone grabbed me from behind. I felt something sharp on my throat. I elbowed him in the ribs and he stabbed me."

"Did you recognize him?" Brian asked.

"I didn't see him. It was dark and my back was to him. I only saw his shadow when he ran out. I remember that he smelled like alcohol."

Brian leaned up against the wall and crossed his arms across his chest. "Some tried to kill you. I almost lost you . . . again." The reality of the situation struck him hard.

"Rome will you go and get that cop?" Justin asked. "I want to talk to him."

Rome left the room. Justin put his left arm out and Brian walked over to the bed. He gently took Justin's hand in his and kissed him on the forehead. "What I said when I left the other day, I . . . "

"Not now, Brian. Just stay close, okay?"

Brian was relieved. He had so much to say but couldn't find the words. Justin had given him a reprieve. "I'm not going anywhere." He assured him.

Rome returned with the detectives. They agreed to let Brian and Rome stay in the room while they questioned Justin. He relayed the same information that he had told Brian and Rome. The detectives listened and took notes, asking questions now and then.

"This man was waiting for you in the garage. Did anyone know you'd be coming home at that time?"

"I mentioned it to the manager of the store on the first floor. I was expecting a delivery from the gallery where I work. I asked her to hold on to it for me. I told her I'd be back on Sunday."

"If you could give me her name it would be helpful."

"Her name is Maria, I don't know her last name. I'm getting a headache now. Will this take much longer?"

"I'm sorry, but it's best to get as much information as we can while it's still fresh in your mind. You mentioned that he smelled like alcohol. Is there anything else you can recall? Did he say anything?"

Justin thought for a minute and then something came back to him. "Yes he did, he said "'you ruined my life' or something like that."

"Is there anyone you can think of that might have had a grudge against you?"

"Not since high school."

"It could be something small that happened. Did you have words with anyone?"

"I guess things might have gotten a little hot with a former tenant. I asked him to leave about six weeks ago."

"What about Kip, Justin?" Rome reminded him. "He was pretty mad at you."

"Maybe. I'm really starting to zone out. Do you mind if we do this later?"

"Yeah, I'll come back tomorrow. In the mean time your husband can give me information about the tenant and that Kip guy and I'll check them out."

Brian was surprised that the cop had actually acknowledged his relationship to Justin. He wondered if it was because of Rome. "Why don't we go out in the hall and I'll give you their names and cell numbers."

"Thanks."

Rome sat on the bed petting Justin's hair. "I am so sorry about how I treated you the other day. You were right. I confronted Oscar and he admitted everything."

"What a jerk. I'm glad you told him off."

"It wasn't easy. I really did love him."

"But he didn't love you. That man wouldn't know what love was if it came up and bit him in the ass."

"You are so lucky, Justin. You went out and found your perfect soul mate the first time out. Brian loves you so much. He was a basket case until he found out you'd be okay."

"I hate putting him through this. He'll find a way to blame himself for what happened."

"He already does blame himself. He said you two hadn't been speaking and it was all his fault."

"It wasn't ALL his fault. As soon as I get out of here I'm going to straighten things out. We've let too many things get between us."

"I want to straighten something out with us, Justin. I had no right to hit you yesterday. Can you ever forgive me for the way I acted?"

"You hit like a girly girl," he teased. "It didn't hurt a bit."

"It hurt, I saw it in your eyes. You were trying to be a good friend and I turned on you. Something Brian said before made me realize how much you do care about me. You thought that by telling me the truth about Oscar that I would ruin your careers. Both you and Brian have made connections through me. But you impressed the hell out of these people with your brilliance. I can't take that away no matter how hard I try. As for my father, I never said a word to him about your artwork. He has never shown the least interest in art of any kind, until he saw the portrait that you'd done of me. Now he's obsessed. If he had to choose between having me for a daughter or having one of your paintings to hang in the lobby I wouldn't stand a chance."

"Really? Your Dad loves me?"

"Everyone adores you, Justin. Especially me. You saved me from fucking up my life royally. I'll never forget it."

"Not everyone adores me. Someone really hates me."

"Well he is going to have to deal with me. And with Brian. I'm going to let you get some sleep." Rome kissed his cheek and left the room.

Brian gave the detective the information he needed. When he was alone in the hall he looked through the door and saw that Justin had fallen asleep. He went to the nurse's station and told them that he was stepping outside for a cigarette in case Justin woke up. He realized that he'd lost his cell phone. He used his phone card on the pay phone in the hall to dial Ben's number. Ben answered but when he heard who it was he was less than cordial.

"Look, I'm done with the Brian and Michael show. Please don't call me anymore."

"Wait. I'm not calling about Michael. Justin was stabbed this morning."

"Oh God, is he okay?"

"He will be."

"Was it another gay bashing?"

"No this time it was personal. That's why I called. I saw Michael in Canada yesterday. He was out of control."

"Not my problem anymore."

"Wait! He said something about Justin that made me wonder if he had been the one who hurt him."

"I can't believe he would hurt Justin. But he hasn't been himself since we moved to Canada."

"I gave him some money yesterday to buy a ticket home. He was drunk and I left him alone. He was ranting about how Justin ruined his life. I need to know where he was yesterday. If you see him, please call me."

"For Justin, I will. Tell him I hope he gets better soon."

"Thanks." Brian hung up and called all of their mutual friends. He didn't reveal the reason he needed to know where Michael had gone. No one had seen him.

Three days later Justin had recovered sufficiently to be sent home. Rome had arranged for a private room and made sure that Brian was able to stay with Justin at night. He had not left Justin's side. They took a cab home after Justin was released. It was a warm summer day but Justin was shivering in the air conditioning. Brian helped him out of the car when they got to their building. They took the elevator to their loft. Brian made a comfortable bed on the sofa for Justin, then he made lunch while Justin watched television.

"Thanks for not calling my mother, Brian. She would have wanted to jump on a plane right away."

"I kept her secret about the baby. I can keep yours. But you better call her and tell her what happened now that we know you're okay."

"I'll call her later. I'm a little tired."

There was a knock at the door and Brian went to answer it. Rome had come to deliver Monte. The dog ran directly to Justin and began licking his face.

"Hey, Monte. You saved my life, didn't you? You're my best buddy." Justin looked up at Brian.

Brian sat on the edge of the coffee table and got Monte's attention by tapping his knee. Monte turned and looked at Brian. "Sit," Brian ordered. Monte obeyed and instinctively gave Brian his paw. Brian took the paw in his hand and looked Monte in the eyes. "Welcome to the family, Monte."

"You hear that Monte?" Justin said excitedly "You get to stay!"

Rome helped herself to coffee and perched on a chair in the living room. "Have you heard anything new from the police?"

"They checked out our prime suspect, Seth. Ironically he was in jail that morning. And Kip had spent the weekend in the Hamptons."

"Don't get discouraged. They're still investigating."

Brian had a thought. "Justin, I never saw the package that you were expecting from the gallery."

"I wonder what happened." Justin said. "I'll call the gallery."

"You're going to rest." Brian insisted. "The gallery is probably closed already. I'll take care of it tomorrow. What was it?"

"It was a portrait that I was going to give to someone." Justin said evasively.

Rome stood up and put her hand on Brian's arm. "Brian, I'll find out what happened to the missing canvas." She grabbed her coat and kissed Justin goodbye. "You two should just take care of each other. I'll call you tomorrow."

After Rome left Brian decided to make an early dinner. He noticed that Justin was picking at his plate. "Is my cooking that bad?"

Justin smiled. "It's not your cooking. I was just thinking about what happened. Brian, what if this happened while I had the baby in the car? He might have been hurt too. I hate not feeling safe in my own building."

Brian gently took his hand. "You didn't do anything wrong, Justin."

"We don't know that. What if I did something to piss someone off? Or what if it's some nut case who read about me in an art magazine and got some crazy plan to kill me?"

"It might be something that I am responsible for."

"Why would you think that?"

"I don't want to upset you, but I need to tell you what happened in Toronto."

"You're scaring me."

"Michael is pretty fucked up. When I went to see him he was drunk and high on drugs. He went ballistic. He blames me for his addiction to gambling because of the ad campaign. He accused me of leading him on and making him believe that one day he and I would be together.

"Then he went off on you. It was your fault that I turned away from him. He said you took his place in my life and it should be HIM living in New York. It got pretty ugly.

"Michael hates you, Justin. I'm sorry to tell you this. I gave him money for a plane ticket back to Pittsburgh. I am afraid that he might have found his way to New York instead. Maybe he really has lost his mind completely?"

"NO! Brian I can't believe that you would think that Michael would try to kill me."

"He said that you ruined his life and that he wished I had left you to die in that parking garage on the night of the prom."

Justin shrugged. "He's said that to my face. We've had it out a few times. I know he loves you Brian. But I know that you don't love him, the same way you love me."

"He wished you dead, and you didn't tell me?"

"Brian I would have to be an idiot to put myself between you and Michael. My problems with him were MY problems. If I made you choose between me and your friendship with him, I might be living in New York alone. I couldn't take that chance. Michael was always a part of the Brian Kinney package. I learned to use it to my advantage."

"Very wise boy. But all of that is history now. You are the one and only man in my life. If you hear from him you tell me, understood?"

"Yes, sir. But I still don't think that Michael is the violent type."

Brian cleared the table and put the dishes in the dish washer. Justin had gone into the bathroom right after dinner. Brian began to wonder what was taking him so long. He was not allowed to shower yet. The door was ajar and Brian could see Justin standing in front of the mirror. His shirt was off and Justin was about to take off the bandage.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Brian charged into the bathroom to stop him.

"It's my body, Brian. I want to see the scar."

Justin had started to peel off the tape. Brian knew that he would have probably done the same thing. He brushed Justin's hand away and gently peeled the remaining tape from Justin's skin.

"God, Brian! It's such an ugly, long scar." Justin said sadly. "I'm not perfect anymore."

Brian got some fresh tape and reapplied the bandage. "You're perfect to me. You always were, always will be."

"That's what's important I guess."

Brian took his hand and led him into the bedroom. "This is important." They sat on the bed and Brian kissed him gently. "I love you so much. I don't say that enough."

"Since the first day I met you all I ever wanted was for you to love me."

"Stop talking like you're planning on doing this again."

"I didn't plan on doing it now. It just happened. I thought about you when I was lying there on the floor. I thought that I'd never get to tell you that I wasn't really mad at you."

"But I wasn't there."

"You're here now."

"After the fact." Brian put his head down and stared at the floor. "I didn't mean what I said before I left. I don't think you're holding me back. I don't know why I said that."

"Maybe I am holding you back."

"You have a right to live your own life. You should do the things you want to do. It's selfish of me to make demands on you all the time ." Brian put his head on the bed, Justin rubbed Brian's hair. "I need for Kinnetik to succeed. I can't leave anything to chance. I have to make sure everything has my mark on it. I can't let go." Brian looked up into Justin's eyes. "I'm frustrated because I don't know how to fix this."

"You're a control freak. You always have been."

"I don't mean to hurt you."

"If I thought you meant to hurt me, I never would have dragged your ass here from Pittsburgh. I forced you to rebuild your fledgling business because I wanted you here. I'm the reason there's so much pressure on you now. I have no right to complain about it."

"I want to do things right. This marriage has to last forever, Justin."

"What happened to me wasn't your fault."

"My not being here IS my fault. The trip was not that important. Anyone could have gone down there. The fucking client left me hanging in a crappy motel room for two fucking days, putting me off until he made a decision. It was a waste of my time. I hurt your feelings for no God damned reason at all. I should have come right home. But when Lindsay called, I saw a way to get out of facing you. I was afraid to come home to find out you'd left me. So I went to Toronto to fuck with Mikey's head. If I find out that he did this to you, it WILL be my fault."

"If you want to blame yourself, go ahead. You're going to blame yourself for everything bad that happens to us anyway, so who am I to stop you? I'm not going to try to change you. But I refuse to blame you for this. And since this is my scar, I have a say in who gets blamed."

"Let's get some sleep." Brian pulled the covers down and they both got into the bed.

"Brian, did you really think that I would leave you?"

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

"You are one fucking stubborn, Irish son of a bitch. Where the fuck do you think I would go?"

Brian pretended to think. "Paris."

"You think I would leave you to go to Paris?"

"I can see you in Paris wearing one of those little berets on your head. You'd look really cute in one of those."

"Go to sleep Brian."

"I'd rather stay awake and stare at you all night if that's okay." Brian gently smoothed the hair away from Justin's eyes and kissed his forehead.

"How am I going to get to sleep with you staring at me?"

"Drugs?" Brian looked down and saw that Justin had already fallen asleep.

The next morning Justin was feeling better. He worked on the computer for a little while, then phoned his mother and spent the better part of an hour explaining that it wasn't necessary for her to make the trip to New York. She only agreed to stay in Pittsburgh when Justin promised to visit her as soon as he was feeling up to traveling. Brian

hovered over him like a hawk. Justin was grateful for the attention, but having Brian stare at him all morning was getting to be a bit much.

"Brian, we need to go food shopping. There's nothing here to eat for lunch."

"You are not going out of the house. Tell me what you need and I'll go on line and order it."

"They won't deliver until tomorrow. I'm hungry now."

"I'll call for take out. What do you want?"

"Chinese." Brian placed the order. Justin noticed that Monte was pacing in front of the door, and looking at his leash. "Ah, Brian did you take Monte out this morning?"

"Shit! I guess I forgot. But I don't want to leave you alone here. Maybe he can wait for the delivery guy. I'll slip him a few bucks to walk the dog."

"Brian!!!" Monte is a hero. He's part of the family. We don't ask strangers to walk him. You take him out. Now please."

Brian got his shoes and put them on. "Don't open the door to anyone."

"What about the food?"

"I'll leave the money on the counter. Make sure you look out the peep hole before you open the door."

"Will you stop! I'll be fine. I can take care of myself."

"Where have I heard that before?"

"Just go!" Justin commanded from the sofa.

Brian was only gone a few minutes when the door bell rang. Justin opened the door and was caught completely by surprise when he saw Michael standing in the hallway.

Michael spoke first. "Justin, don't be afraid! I'm not the one who hurt you. I'd never do that."

Justin had been startled when he first saw Michael, but in all the time that they had spent together, Justin had never gotten the impression that Michael was capable of hurting anyone. "Come in, Michael."

"Thanks, Justin. Thanks for believing me."

"I never thought it was you that stabbed me, Michael. But Brian would freak out if he knew you were here."

"I'm not here to see Brian. I came here to talk to you. I got sober and I took a bus to Pittsburgh on Sunday morning. When I found out that someone tried to kill you and I was the number one suspect, it freaked me out. Ted loaned me the money to get to New York. I've been so stressed out over the past year. I made a lot of stupid mistakes. I lost my family and my best friend. I take 100 percent of the blame for that. I know that I need to get help dealing with my problems. But I can't take one step forward without making amends to you."

"Ever since the night he met you I've been jealous. I see now that I had no right to be. Brian Kinney is your man, not mine. You're the one who won his heart. You're the one who has made it possible for him to grow up and get out in the real world. You're the man he's built a wonderful life with. No real friend of Brian's would want you dead. Can you forgive me for saying that?"

"If you were with Brian and I was the other man, I would want you dead too."

"Okay, that's healthy. Justin, you and I have been through a lot together. I don't hate you. In fact, in a way, I kind of love you. You're a part of Brian. You're the man that I never could be."

"You don't really want to be me, Michael. It's pretty dangerous."

"Yeah, that's scary stuff. Do they have any idea who could have done this to you, aside from me?"

"Not yet. But my friend Rome has connections in high places. She is getting things done"

" I'm glad you're okay."

"What are you going to do now?"

"I'm going back to Pittsburgh and try to salvage what's left of my life. It's over with Ben, but at least he is talking to me. I'm going to take it one step at a time. Ted and Emmett gave me a job at Babylon. And I'm going to get a day job too. Ben said he will help me pay for therapy."

"Sounds like you have a plan. I'm glad you're getting your life back together. After what happened to me, I've learned that money is not all that important. I want to be successful as an artist because I love it. But there is only one thing in life that's important to me. That's my husband and our life together."

"Brian Kinney is a very lucky man."

"Yeah, he is. Thanks for coming here, Michael. You better leave now because Brian is coming home any minute. Good luck."

Justin opened the door. Brian was standing in the hall with his key in his hand. If looks could kill, Michael would have been dead on the spot. Monte pulled at the leash and bolted past Brian to stand at Justin's side. "What the fuck are you doing here?" Brian demanded.

Justin intervened. "Brian he didn't stab me. He was in Pittsburgh on Sunday. He came to tell me that he wouldn't hurt me."

Brian put his arm around Justin and held him tightly to his side. "I want you to leave."

Michael nodded his head and turned to leave. "Wait," Michael pulled something out of his pocket. "You dropped this." He handed Brian his cell phone. "Good bye, Brian." Michael hung his head and walked out to the hall. He turned, nodded to Justin and left.

"Why did you let him in here?" Brian demanded.

"Brian calm down, please. My headache is coming back." Justin sat down on the sofa, picked up a pillow and hugged it to his chest.

"Do you want some aspirin or something?" Brian asked.

"Some tea would be nice."

Brian prepared a cup of tea for Justin and poured a cup of coffee for himself. He brought them both to the living room and put them on the coffee table.

"Brian, if Michael didn't stab me, we're out of suspects."

"Maybe the police will come up with something."

"They haven't called with any news. I bet they aren't going to do a thing. It'll be just like last time. If a gay man is the victim, they don't consider it a crime."

"I'm not going to argue. The only thing we can do is protect ourselves."

"How could I have protected myself?"

"If this is just some asshole who was walking around with a knife, it was most likely a robbery. He panicked when you fought back."

"So what should I do, not fight back? He never asked me for money."

"I'm getting an alarm system installed in the garage. State of the art shit with cameras and panic buttons. I'm having new lighting installed so you'll see if anyone is lurking around."

"Thanks, Brian."

"We'll take care of each other and hope for the best."

"If this was just a random act, then there's no reason for me to stay home. I want to go back to work."

"The doctor said a week. You'll stay in this house for a week. Next week we'll see how you feel."

"What about you? You haven't even called the office in days. I want you to go back to work tomorrow."

"I'm not leaving you here alone."

"I'm not alone. I have Monte. And Rome said she was coming by in the morning."

"Well maybe I'll go in for a little while."

Justin finished his tea and Brian took the cups into the kitchen. He straightened the living room while Justin dozed off in front of the television. After Brian finished up a few chores he went back to the living room and sat down. He remembered the cell phone that Michael had returned. He picked it up and checked his messages. There were 18. Brian had called the office on Sunday and left a message for Cynthia telling her what had happened to Justin. He instructed her to send any urgent messages to his cell phone. 'Good move, asshole.' He made a list of the clients who had left messages. He would call them in the morning and try to make amends. There was only one phone call that meant anything to him. Justin had left a message on Sunday before he left Scranton.

"Hey, I miss you. I'm on my way home now. I hope we can spend some time together today and work things out. We WILL work it out Brian. I promise. I love you. Bye." Brian felt the tears well up in his eyes. If Justin hadn't made it, Brian would have had this message in his head for the rest of his life. No matter what stupid thing Brian said or did, Justin still loved him.

The bombing at Babyon had been a turning point for Brian. It had shaken him so badly that he was willing to do anything to make Justin happy. Was Justin happy? He said he was, but Brian wasn't sure. Had he failed to keep his promise? The stabbing had been another wake up call. He'd fucked up and he had to find a way to fix what was wrong. Justin deserved to be happy. How many more wake up calls was Justin going to have to survive?

Brian had been deep in thought when Justin woke up. "What are you thinking about?" Justin asked.

Brian smiled at him lovingly. "You called me from Scranton."

"That's right. I did call you before I left."

"I should have called you first."

"Yes, you should have. And I was pissed at you. I still am."

"And yet, you came home to me."

"I'll always come home to you. You're my husband."

"When I was in that hotel room in Florida I got myself blind drunk. I wondered what my life would be like if you left me. Nothing came to mind. I couldn't go back to being the man I used to be. And I don't see any future without you."

"I don't want to fight anymore." Justin declared. "I could have died last Sunday morning. If the dog hadn't barked and if the cop on the second floor hadn't heard him, I would most likely have bled to death. I keep thinking that Sunday might have been my last day on earth, and I didn't get to spend it with you."

Brian looked away for fear he would reveal the impact Justin's words had on him. He went to the refrigerator to get some water then he told Justin what was on his mind that day. "When I got to the garage and saw the crime tape, that's what I was thinking too. If anything had happened to you, I never would have forgiven myself for not being there for you. All my life I've only had to be responsible for me. I did what I wanted, when I wanted to do it. I want to put you first. Maybe I'm just not capable of thinking like that. I'm sorry I let you down."

"We've both been selfish. I wanted to be a famous artist overnight. I thought I would have to be as financially successful as you are by the time I was 25 in order to be your equal. I never gave a thought to my art or how much money I had in the bank when I was falling to the floor that day. Until then I was willing to give up everything in order to be the best homosexual I could be. But now I see how stupid I was. My only thought was what a fool I'd been for not spending every minute of the day being the best husband I could be."

"You're the best husband I've ever had."

"I'm the only husband you'll ever have."

"What's the answer then? How are we going to make it work?"

"For me, I need to slow down. I'm only 22. I don't need to rule the art world right now. I'm going to quit the gallery job. I'll still paint what I feel. But I don't need to force myself to produce quantities of canvases just to fill the walls."

I love doing the portraits and making my clients happy with the finished product. Working for Mr. Astor might allow us to see the world together if we plan it right. I also need to grow in other areas. I want to go back and finish school."

"I always wanted that for you."

"There's more."

"There always is."

"I want to work at Kinnetik with you. I want to learn more about your business. You're an amazing man. There is so much I can learn just by being with you. I want to be a part of your world outside of our marriage. And when you need to travel I want to go with you."

"Are you sure that you won't regret giving up your shot at fame and fortune? You've worked hard to get where you are. You have your foot in the door now. If you back off, it may just slap you in the ass."

"My work speaks for itself. There may be less of it for a while. It might add a bit of mystery to my persona and they'll want to see more and more of my stuff. I'll just make them wait because right now being with you is more important."

"You may regret this Justin. You could own the world with the talent you have."

"I don't want the world. I never did. I want you."

"You've got me. Count on it. But, I don't want to be the reason you gave up on your dream."

"I'm not giving up anything. One day I may decide that I want to concentrate on my art full time. We have our whole lives ahead of us. Things change, we'll grow together and do what's best for us at the time. Right now Kinnetik needs your attention. One day it may be right for you to slow down. Then you can travel with me and inspire me to create great works of art."

"If you're going to travel with me, what will you do with him?" Brian pointed at Monte.

"We'll work it out. Rome's dog Pinky loves Monte. If Rome's around while we're away she'll take him and when she's away we'll keep Pinky."

"So you think we're going to be okay?"

"I know we are." Justin said. "Do you think you could come over here and cuddle for a while without busting my stitches?"

"I'll be gentle." Brian moved over to the sofa and put his arm around Justin.

"Like the first time." Justin said, remembering a time long ago.

Brian went to the office the next morning. Justin didn't see any reason why he had to rest. He was feeling fine. Every morning he spent several hours going over photos of the hotels that Rome's father had sent. Mr. Astor had sent a huge gift basket and an expensive camera for Justin to use at the hotels when he went to visit them in person. Justin day dreamed about taking trips to far away places with Brian at his side.

When Brian came home at night he was not stressed out or distant. Justin wondered what was happening at Kinnetik. He hoped that what had happened to him had not caused Brian to lose clients. If that were the case, he would make sure to contact them when he returned to work to let them know it wasn't Brian's fault he had not been available when they needed him.

At the end of the week Brian came home a bottle of champagne. He wanted to surprise Justin so he did not call out. Instead he walked through the apartment silently. He found Justin in the small bedroom where he had put the portable crib. Justin was spinning the mobile and staring into the crib. Monte was watching intently.

"What's this? Did I knock you up?" He joked.

Justin turned around and smiled. "No, asshole. I was just thinking about William. I miss him."

"Invite your mom for a visit."

"Maybe I will." Justin saw the bottle in Brian's hand. "What's that for?"

"For no reason. I just felt like celebrating."

"That's an awfully expensive bottle of champagne for celebrating nothing."

"I had a great week at work."

"Tell me about it."

"I will. I want to open this first." Brian went to the kitchen and opened the bottle. He handed Justin a glass and poured one for himself. They sat down in the living room to celebrate.

"What happened at work this week?" Justin asked.

"An amazing thing. I went to the office the first day back expecting to be overwhelmed. There were a million memos on my desk and a shit load of phone messages. I started to panic. But then I thought about what you said about your business. If your art was less available, people would have more respect for what you did put out. Cynthia had handled the clients for a week. I answered the most urgent calls and they were grateful, not angry. I decided that I had to learn to delegate. When I hired my staff, I hired only the best. So why am I doing all the work? Because like you said, I'm a control freak.

"All this week I delegated every possible task I could to the staff. I only handled the difficult clients, and of course the major ones like the casino boys. It wasn't easy at first. But I stuck it out. Do you want to know what I did today?"

"What did you do today?" Justin asked, grinning ear to ear.

"I made 10 phone calls."

"Brian, you made 10 phone calls to me."

"That's right. In between talking on the phone to the man I love, I played online poker and I won \$150 bucks. Then I watched some internet porn. All this time Kinnetik was running smoothly. We are raking in the money and the staff is beside itself to have something worthwhile to do all day."

"The more I put clients off, the more grateful they are when I give them my full attention. If they wanted me to travel to see them, I gave them a date months from now. Then I told them if they needed someone sooner, I would send one of my highly trained staff members to meet with them within a week. I gave them the Kinney satisfaction guarantee of quality work. So far they're buying it."

"That's great, Brian. Now you really are a successful business man. What else did you do today?"

"I went shopping. I bought a corporate jet and this bottle of champagne."

"Brian, you bought a plane?!!!"

"The company leased it."

"I am fucking impressed! Can we go try it out?"

"Yes, very soon." Brian got down on one knee and took Justin's hand. "Honey, if you have time in your busy schedule, would you care to accompany me to Japan?"

"Yes, yes, yes!!! Justin kissed him passionately. "I guess this means I'll be joining the mile high club."

"By the end of this trip you'll be the president of the mile high club."

"Our new life plan is working."

"If it doesn't, we'll come up with a new plan. Cutting back on the time we have to spend apart is the key."

"I'm feeling good about this."

"I have some other news. I decided to shut down Kinnetik in Pittsburgh. I'm bringing the staff who want to relocate, here to New York. It'll cut the stress level a bit more. Ted's staying in Pittsburgh for now. Babylon is thriving and he doesn't want to leave his friends. I told him if he ever changed his mind to call."

"It's kind of sad. Aside from our mothers and sisters we've cut all ties with our past."

"As it should be. We have a kick ass future planned. There's only one thing that I need to know. Are you happy? Don't say you are, if you're really not. I want to know the truth. It's important to me that you are truly happy."

Before Justin could answer the door bell rang. "Fuck!" Brian exclaimed. "Are you sure you didn't rent one of the apartments to lesbians?"

"Just answer the door please."

Brian opened the door and Rome came strutting in with a two large packages in one hand and a bottle of champagne in the other. "Hey, did you start the party without me?"

"It wouldn't be a party without you?" Brian said as he took the champagne bottle from her hand and poured her a glass from the opened bottle.

"I have big news." Rome announced. "The police made an arrest."

"Who?"

"It was Oscar, Justin. He's the one who attacked you in the garage."

"Who the hell is Oscar?" Brian asked.

"I'll tell you," Rome said. "First let me put down the package that the gallery sent. Maria had it downstairs. She was afraid to come up here and face you Justin. She's blaming herself for what happened." Brian took the package and sat on a chair the corner of the room to listen to Rome's explanation.

"That's stupid. I wouldn't blame her." Justin declared. " How did the police catch Oscar?"

"We should start from the beginning for Brian, honey." Rome turned to Brian. "Oscar was the man I thought I was in love with. When Justin figured out that Oscar was living with the mother of his children he felt compelled to knock some sense into my head. I freaked out on him and told him to get out of my life." Rome turned back to Justin. "I didn't mean for you to get out of my life so permanently, Justin. For future reference, that just means for you to leave me alone for a while until I come to my senses."

"I'll remember that for next time."

"I went to see Maria. I noticed the bruises on her face, and I know why you were so desperate for me to know about Oscar. The man is a monster. You don't know how close I came to marrying him. The day you saw us at the hotel he talked me into eloping. We had made plans to go away last weekend to find a justice of the peace.

"Maria said that when he came to the store that day he threatened to kill her. He was afraid that she would try to contact me and interfere with his plans. He has a record in Mexico for physically abusing her. Maria's brother came into the store and told him to leave her alone.

"Oscar was very agitated when I saw him that afternoon. After you told me your story, I went to the hotel to confront him. He demanded to know who was it that told me about Maria. I didn't tell him Justin, honest. He must have remembered seeing you at the store."

"I spoke to him at the hotel when I went to see your dad. He asked me if I was the one who had done your portrait. I didn't think that he remembered me, but I guess he did."

"I saw a glimpse of his anger when I fired him and threw him out of the hotel. The look on his face was frightening. I had no idea he would connect you with me, Justin. He must have gotten drunk and decided someone had to pay for ruining his plan. Maria was his first choice but he couldn't get to her because of her brother. He knew about the garage because he'd helped Maria move into the store. Maria said that he'd overheard you telling her that you were coming home on Sunday morning."

"Once we put it all together we went to the police to tell them our theory. They told us that the forensic team had found a knife in the dumpster behind your building. The knife had the initials of our hotel and it had your blood on it. It was wrapped in one of Gina's soiled diapers. The police were still processing the prints so they were holding off on telling you about it Justin. Maria gave them some personal articles that belong to Oscar so they could match the prints. Once they did, they went to the apartment he had shared with Maria and arrested him."

"What will happen to him?" Justin asked.

"They'll charge him with assault at the very least. I am going to make sure that he pays for what he did to you. Trust me, he won't get a slap on the wrist. The police will contact you in the morning."

"What about Maria? She has a baby to take care of and another on the way. Now they don't have a father."

"She'll be fine. Her mother is moving in with her. And I'll make sure her children don't suffer from their father's mistake. For as long as she needs it, I'll keep her on my payroll. I was thinking about starting a new baby clothing line. I'll need her expertise."

"I don't know what to say, Rome. I'll talk to Maria tomorrow. I want her to know that I don't blame her."

"That reminds me. I brought back the portrait of Gina. Having it hanging on my wall just seemed wrong. I guess I fell in love with it because she has Oscar's eyes. I want you to give it to Maria. She can save it for Gina so she will know what a beautiful baby she was."

"That's nice of you, Rome."

"Hey, I remembered to get you the number of that plastic surgeon you asked about."

"Why do you need a plastic surgeon?" Brian asked.

"This guy fixes scars." Justin explained. "I'm going to have him fix me up as good as new."

"You don't need to fix the scar. No one will see it."

"I'll see it. I wanna be perfect again."

Brian had been sitting in the corner of the room. The package that Rome had brought over had him curious. He had been trying to sneak a peek at the contents. "Justin shouldn't you take the wrapping off of this? Is the paint still wet?"

"No, it's fine Brian."

"It must be a very important piece for you to have it sent here. Are you sure you it's okay? We don't know what Oscar might have done to it."

"Brian, would you like to open it?" Justin was amused by Brian's curiosity.

Rome played along. "I think you should keep it under wraps. You could unveil it at a big party and sell it for millions."

"It's not for sale." Justin announced.

"If it's not for sale why did you . . . ?" Brian began.

Justin interrupted him. "Brian take the paper off. That painting is a gift I made for you."

"What for?" Brian asked. "I already have several Taylor Kinney originals. You didn't need to give me a gift."

"Who says I need a reason? Now open it. I want Rome to see it too."

Brian took off the paper and gasped. "It's me . . . us on the altar."

"That's what your face looked like when I said 'Brian Kinney . . . will you marry me?'. I'll never forget that look. It occurred to me that you never saw your face, so I painted this portrait of us on the most important day of our lives."

"Thanks." Brian continued to stare at the portrait.

Rome was touched. "I think I better go." While Rome and Justin said their good byes, Brian wandered into the den still staring at the portrait which he carried with him.

"You see why I stick around." Justin nodded in Brian's direction. "That's the man I love."

"If I ever get lucky enough to have a love like yours, will you paint one for me too?"

"I'd be happy too."

Justin kissed Rome good bye at the door then he joined Brian in the den.

Brian had propped the portrait up on the mantel over the fireplace. He was sitting on the couch staring at it. Justin sat down next to him and curled himself up against Brian's side. "You really like it."

"I love it. Can we keep it up there over the fire place?"

"That's what I had in mind."

"Do you want to go to bed?"

"In a little while. I'm still trying to understand what happened. Do you think that telling Rome about Oscar was wrong?"

"She's your friend. That guy was about to fuck up her life. You did the right thing."

"How do you know when doing the right thing is going to get you in trouble?"

"You don't, no one could. Use your common sense and hope for the best."

"At least this time I got bashed for something I did, and not for just being who I am."

"You didn't deserve it either way."

"It did teach me something."

"What's that?"

"I know now what's important in life and what isn't."

"Make that one life lesson for both of us."

"I'm excited about our trip. I asked Rome to take care of Monte for a few weeks. She said she would."

"Good. But we won't be gone that long."

"Why not. That's how long the other trips took."

"Because my plan is to delegate, remember? I'll get things started, then the grunt team will come in and do the work. I figure that Kip wouldn't mind a trip out of the country for a few weeks, or longer."

"I'll make an appointment with the surgeon when we get back."

"Justin you don't need to have surgery. You look fine."

"Brian, I don't want to see the guilt on your face when you look at me. I hate it when my hand acts up and you get all protective. This chapter in our lives is closed. We're closer than we've ever been."

"That reminds me. You never answered my question. Are you happy?"

"That depends."

"On what?" Brian raised one eye brow.

"When you can tell me that you are 100 percent convinced that I am never going to leave you, then I'll be happy. I am not going to be happy until you say you know that I love you without any reservations.

"I am convinced. We can fight and make up like any other married couple. I am not an unlovable asshole who doesn't deserve to be happy. I am Justin Taylor's devoted husband now and forever. How's that? Now are you happy?"

"Yes, I'm deliriously happy. Fighting with you sucks. But making up is so worth it."

"Now we should go to bed and fuck before all this relationship bullshit kills the mood."

"One more thing. I am going to work at Kinnetik on Monday . . . and I am bringing Monte with me whether you like it or not."

"Monte can come to Kinnetik anytime. He can have his own office if he wants. He can have my office. I don't plan to spend that much time in it."

Monte perked up his ears and ran over to Brian with a ball in his mouth. Brian pushed him away playfully. Monte nudged Brian's hand with his nose and Brian laughed out loud.

"You do like dogs." Justin observed.

"Of course I like dogs. I'm not completely inhuman. I had a dog when I was a kid."

"I didn't know that. What was his name?"

"Buddy. He slept in my room, and I took care of him. My sister hated him. One day she opened the door when the garbage men were coming down the street. Buddy always barked at the garbage men. He saw his chance to get at them and he tore off out the door. The truck ran him over. Clair laughed. I cried for weeks. My mother never let me have another dog after that. She said I got too attached."

"Clair is a bitch." Justin rubbed Brian's back. "Your mother should have gotten you another dog."

"No, she was right. I learned that getting attached is painful. Why risk it? Nothing lasts forever."

"How would Buddy feel if he knew that you thought loving him wasn't worth the risk?"

"I guess it would piss him off."

"It would piss me off. Remember that Brian. If something should happen to me one day I wouldn't want you to go around thinking I wasn't worth the risk."

"I hate it when you talk like that. You promised not to die on me, remember. And here you go and get yourself stabbed. I've thought about what would have happened if Monte had given up on you. I would have driven into the garage that day and found you in a pool of blood on the floor. Just like at the prom. I don't want for us ever to have to go through something like that again."

"I didn't die then and I didn't die this time. God must have a reason for me to stick around."

"For once, God and I agree on something."