

Limitations, Push and One

by Ardra

Set after 215, Justin and Brian start down a new road in their relationship

Limitations – Part One

Springtime at the Loft

“No.”

Justin’s head whipped around, unsure of what he’d just heard.

“I’m not asking for much. A couple of minutes?”

“Forget it, Justin, I have work to do. You know, work, pay the bills. This place doesn’t pay for itself.” Brian raked his fingers through his hair, shot a disapproving glare at Justin, and turned back to the laptop.

Justin briefly considered his options. It was Saturday afternoon, the spring flowers were finally coming up, and if you closed your eyes a little bit, Pittsburgh almost looked pretty. There was a tiny bit of a park down the street, and he wanted a sketch of Brian sitting on the grass, his heat and vitality contrasting with harsh concrete all around the park. It would be good. It would be better than that, it would be hot. He decided to change tactics.

“Briiiiiannnn,” he whispered, sidling up beside the older man. He could see Brian’s forehead creasing in concentration, and then relaxing again with effort. Justin sighed. Brian worked so hard to avoid all visible signs of aging, so much so that he often forced his face into a blank, unreadable mask. People thought he was angry or distant most of the time, when he was really just worried about crow’s feet and having to pay for Botox every six months. Did he know what he was missing, not letting people in? Justin shook his head. Why did this always happen to him? Five quiet minutes always turned him into a psychoanalyst. Maybe he should be taking psych instead.

“Brian, please come outside. Just for half an hour. Hell, bring your laptop if you want. I just need the light.” Justin hovered behind Brian, wanting to touch his hair, and read over his shoulder, but that was a mistake he’d only made once. Brian always said he worked on “sensitive materials” and “confidential information”, and that if Justin couldn’t learn to mind his own fucking business, he’d go in to the office when things needed to be done. It was a good show, but Justin didn’t really buy it. Brian sometimes struggled to come up with new ideas, and he certainly wasn’t always the genius people thought he was. He sold his image too well, and paid the price in sleepless nights and weekends planted in front of the computer. Nobody was supposed to see that, but then, there was so much about Brian that Justin wasn’t supposed to see.

One time, Justin had asked Lindsay how she convinced Brian to father Gus. Lindsay looked at Justin, and at her feet, and said, "I just asked him."

Justin wasn't convinced. "Yeah, and what else? When I came to the hospital, he really didn't seem ready to have Gus around even then. That was almost a year after you needed him for...well...you know. How did you really do it?"

Lindsay chuckled and leaned conspiratorially towards Justin. "You know, I've never said this to another person, and if Brian knew I had, he'd kill me." She sighed and picked at some invisible lint on her jeans. "Brian isn't the jerk people think he is. Everyone thinks that you can't depend on him, and that he only does what's in his own best interest. I'm not saying that's never true, but as complicated as he seems, he's not that hard to figure out in the end. If you really want something, and really need it, just ask. He'll give it to you eventually, it's just that he does everything in his own time. Michael thinks I flattered him into fathering Gus, Mel thinks I threatened him, but neither is really the case - I just kept asking until he was ready."

Justin sighed and returned to the sofa, sketch pad in hand. The couch wasn't a bad place to draw when the windows were open. The afternoon light in the loft was low and pink, and Brian's skin seemed to glow in the golden sun. "Does he know how amazing he looks in the light, how the gold lights him up from inside?" Justin wondered, again almost laughing at his daydreams. Brian would always choose the cool blue neons in the bedroom over the natural glow of the sun – always the darkness over the light. No matter, he had the light now, and that was what mattered. The loft wasn't the park, but it was good to watch Brian here too. He bent his head to sketch and was soon lost in the graphite world of his own creation.

Brian blinked hard and looked at his watch. It was seven p.m., and the sun had already started to sink behind the taller buildings on the horizon. He thanked God that the new project was finally finished, and stretched out his cramped muscles. It was too quiet, and he wasn't used to silence anymore. "Shit," he thought, "What the hell happened to Justin?"

He glanced around the loft, his eyes settling on the couch where Justin lay sleeping. His head was curled over his sketchbook, and the pencil had fallen under his outstretched hand. Sometimes Brian really did need to work at home, but most of the time he just needed some time to himself. Half the time when he hauled out the laptop, it was to get Justin to leave him alone. Today had been one of those days; he was sick and tired of having the blond boy hanging off of him, yipping around his ankles like a lovestruck

chihuahua. "What does he think I am, a fucking statue? I can't sit around all day posing for him!" he muttered, and finally a light bulb went on over his head. He decided on a plan of action, made a quick call, and crossed the loft to the couch.

"Justin, get up." Brian tapped on Justin's left temple. Justin burrowed his head further into the crook of his elbow.

"Now, Justin, now. Get up." Justin made no move, and finally Brian gave up and shoved him off the couch.

"Ow! Brian, that hurt!" Justin rubbed his hip and glared up at Brian. "You really get off on hurting me sometimes, don't you?" he pouted, watching Brian walk towards the door of the loft.

"Justin, we both know the answer to that," Brian said evenly, a hint of a smile starting in the corners of his mouth. Justin blushed a deep shade of red, and quickly stared at the floor. "Get your coat, we're going out. Bring your book, too," he added, gesturing towards the sketch pad. By now Brian was already standing near the door, leaning on the wall with a bored expression. Justin scurried to get ready and out the door before Brian started talking some more. Some things were just too embarrassing to discuss.

Drive

Justin sat quietly as Brian drove, squirming a little when he realized that they were heading out of town. After seeing one too many suburbs pass by for his liking, Justin finally spoke up.

"Brian, where are we going?" Justin was puzzled. "We're going off into the middle of nowhere. Nobody knows where we're going or when we'll be back. You're not planning to kill me and bury me in the woods, are you?"

"What, you wouldn't like that?" Brian snickered.

Justin suddenly felt cold. Brian was always screwing with him, and sometimes it was hard to tell when he was joking, when he was angry, and when he'd finally lost his fucking mind. Brian could usually be counted on to be a somewhat decent person, but when you pushed him too hard he pushed back. Ted had been only too happy to share some of Brian's more interesting temper tantrums - the window at the Jeep dealership, for instance. Justin took a little comfort in knowing that if Brian really meant to kill him, he wouldn't get this much warning. Hmmm, did other people worry about their boyfriends murdering them in the woods?

Brian glanced sideways at Justin, keeping his eyes mostly on the road. Finally he spoke. "You need to draw, fine. You need someone to draw, fine. I'm fucking sick of having to

sit still every time a goddamn light comes through the window! We're getting you someone else to draw. Pass me the map."

It was dark now, too dark to draw, and with no streetlights Justin really had no idea where they were going. He reached towards the glove compartment, fumbling blindly as he felt for the latch. The map was located and passed on without a word. As Brian flicked on the interior light to read it, Justin looked at him. That messy hair...those eyes...the stubble shading his cheeks from his Saturday shaving vacation, Justin burned it all into his memory for future works. He had to, since Brian would never sit for him willingly anymore. Now, he would apparently have a new subject, who they were driving to see unannounced in the dark. It didn't make sense, but sometimes Brian didn't make sense. He decided to just trust him and relaxed in his seat.

As they drove, Brian stared only at the road ahead. Every time Justin opened his mouth to speak, Brian would just shake his head a little in reproach. Brian flicked off the light, and reached over to caress Justin's leg. Justin started to say something, but Brian stroked his cheek and laid a finger over his lips.

"I'm doing this for you, Sonny Boy, and I don't want a lot of shit about it. I swear to God if I hear a word out of you, we're going to turn around and go home."

Here

The headlights lit only the road in front of them, and Justin watched as the sidewalks and curbs disappeared. The asphalt turned bumpy and potholed, and soon farm fences replaced the neat wooden privacy fencing of the suburbs. He didn't even know that Brian knew anyone this far out in the country.

"Brian, my legs are falling asleep. How much longer?" Justin murmured, feeling sleepy and hypnotized from staring so long at the road.

"We're here." Brian pulled the jeep into a long gravel driveway that really seemed to be just two ruts in an overgrown lawn. Justin could sense more than see the disgust on his lover's face as Brian navigated the Jeep around potholes and through puddles. Finally a large farmhouse came into view, and Justin sighed as the bright halogen headlights swept over the aging facade. It was a beautiful home; larger and better kept than he expected, and to Justin it looked just like a cute little Bed and Breakfast inn. He perked up when he saw a man about Brian's age standing under the porch light near the doorway.

Brian raised his hand in greeting and continued forwards, finally parking the Jeep beside a rather ostentatious red Jaguar. Justin unbuckled his seat belt and gingerly disembarked, stretching and staring not-so-subtly at the cars in the drive. There were quite a few, more than he expected for a private home, though none were as expensive or well kept as the Jag. Brian chuckled a little, calling out, "Sunshine, we're waiting for you."

Justin jumped and twisted around at the sound of Brian's voice. Brian seemed nervous, almost, and that really wasn't a Brian emotion. "Something is going on, and I don't like it," he decided, kicking the gravel as he slowly rounded the Jeep. There seemed to be some awkwardness here, and around Brian, that was never a good thing.

"Brian, good to see you again! This must be Justin," the man on the porch said, taking a step forward to shake Brian's hand. He casually flicked the cigarette in his left hand, and held out his right. Brian took it without hesitation.

Justin stopped walking and appraised the competition. Tall, dark blonde hair, hmmm, not blonde really, just kissed by the sun. Curly hair - had he ever seen Brian fuck a guy with curly hair? Didn't seem like it, but with Brian's schedule it'd be impossible to say no. Lean, strong looking. Nice lips, a little like Brian's. Nice clothes, too, but Justin couldn't quite make everything out under the glow of the porch light.

"Andrew, I thought you were allergic" Brian remarked, smiling as Andrew pulled him in for a hug that left Justin confused. Who was this guy, anyways? Since when did Brian hug strangers? Andrew clapped Brian on the back a couple of times, then gently released him to let him regain his personal space.

"Me, allergic? Still am, Bri, still am. All your best attempts to corrupt me failed. It took a... particular stress to get me on that road." Andrew was being cryptic and Justin was starting to get angry. Why had Brian brought him here to see this? It was bad enough watching him in the back room with tricks, and this guy... well, this guy wasn't just a trick. Brian lowered his voice a notch, and Justin tried to lean in unobtrusively, dying to hear what was being said.

"Andrew, where is he? I mean, I don't want to run into him. I don't have time for that bullshit." Brian looked down, kicking a stray piece of gravel on the porch. Andrew reached out to clasp Brian's arm, and nodded sympathetically as he spoke.

"Last time was bad, Bri. I know, I mean I heard all about it. That was a long time ago, and I've made sure we'll be undisturbed. Why don't you two come in? It's been ages, and I just put on a fresh pot of coffee." Andrew turned and yanked open a stiff storm door, warning the men, "Watch out, that door bites."

Words flew out of Justin's mouth before he could stop himself. "Gee, Andrew, I don't see any teeth, but you can never tell who'll be careless."

Brian turned to his lover with a cold look in his eyes, but Andrew laughed as he moved across the kitchen. "I meant that the door slams itself really fast, but trust an acolyte of Brian to make everything about sex. I see he has trained you well."

Justin smiled nervously as Andrew arranged some coffee mugs, pouring coffee into the cups before saying, "Well, Justin, unless you want it black, how do you take your coffee?"

Justin shrugged. "Milk, sugar, whatever. I'm not picky." As Justin took a seat at the table, Andrew poured milk and carefully measured a spoonful of sugar into two of the mugs. He dumped the rest of the sugar bowl into the third, and crooned, "Brian, your coffee's ready."

Brian finally laughed, an unforced chortle that came deep from his stomach. "You know me too well." He strode over to pick up his coffee cup, completely ignoring the scowling Justin. While Justin fumed at the table, Andrew and Brian stood and chatted about the upkeep on the house, repairs to the Jag, and what seemed to Justin like a million other unimportant things. Justin felt like a forgotten toy under someone's bed. Finally, he just couldn't take it anymore.

"Brian, what the fuck are we doing here? Who is this guy, anyways? You ignore me all day and then drag me on a trip to watch you cruise some guy you've never mentioned. This is so against The Rules it's not even funny, you've got his name and number and everything. It's sick, I don't want to see it tonight, and I'm tired. I want to go home." The day had been a string of disappointments, and he just wasn't up for the game this time. He'd been playing nice (well, he'd been trying, anyway) for a whole year, and this is what it got him. Tears sprang to the boy's eyes and he bowed his head in frustration and defeat.

Andrew looked to the table with unease, and then sighed and looked at Brian. "Shit, Brian, you did it again. Did you go to college to be an advertiser or a sadist?" Brian smirked in spite of himself, and Justin shifted in his seat, flushing almost purple. Andrew barrelled on, and if he noticed the heated stare that had grown between Brian and Justin, he didn't comment.

"He's a great kid, Bri, but he's not psychic. You've got to stop pulling this mime act with people." Andrew came and sat next to Justin, pulling the boy into his strong, lean frame. Justin resisted being embraced by their host for a moment, but he was overwhelmed by the man's concern and melted into tears. Andrew looked at Brian with distaste, and motioned for him to sit. Instead, Brian turned and looked out the small kitchen window, forcing a sigh from Andrew before he continued.

"Shhh, Justin, it's okay, it's okay. Brian and I are old friends. We met in college, when he was still dating Lindsay and I was too scared to date anybody. That didn't last long though, I mean, you know Brian. I'd been around a little, but I wasn't out, and he...well...he was basically still fucking with a learner's permit." At that charge, Brian's head whipped back around towards the table, and he shot daggers at Andrew, silently demanding for him to stop. Justin could feel him glaring at Andrew through the back of his head. Andrew continued, as if he was oblivious to Brian's anger.

"It was fun. Like I said, we were young, the world was our oyster, insert cliché here. We were having a blast, and then James came along."

Brian exploded and seemed to cross the kitchen with one step. "Dammit, Andrew, enough." Brian turned away from the older man and fixed an unreadable glare on his blonde lover. "Justin, I'm not here to fuck him, I've already had him. Now drop it."

Andrew smiled a gentle smile as he turned to Brian. "Bri, if you didn't want him to know, you wouldn't have brought him here. If you can't be here for this part, go somewhere else. The computer room is in the same place it used to be. This poor kid deserves a little information, don't you think?" Andrew chuckled, but Brian held firm.

"No, I don't think. I will fucking leave if you say another word." Brian stood frozen, almost willing Andrew to shut up.

Justin turned to Andrew. "Look, it's really nice for you to fill in the blanks, but I'm okay now. If Brian doesn't want to talk about it, it can wait. I still don't understand why we're here, though."

"This is about opportunities, Justin. In college" he started, but changed tactics after a warning look from Brian. "After college, Brian went on to be an advertiser, which is what he was born to do, and I became a starfucker, which is what I was born to do." He laughed at the shock in Justin's eyes, and picked up the boy's hand from the kitchen table. "Let me clarify. I'm a photographer, quite talented if I do say so myself, and I happen to have models stay over from time to time. It's usually convenient for everyone, but tonight, it's especially convenient for you."

Andrew grinned, and his dark blue eyes twinkled. Justin lost himself for a minute looking at Andrew. He'd never met anyone Brian knew who smiled and laughed so much, and those eyes... "How many men have fallen for those eyes?" Justin wondered as he mentally recorded the details. They were unusual, with navy blue rings around the teal centres, heavy lashes, and dark brows, like a picture with too much contrast. Justin reached out to touch Andrew's cheek, feeling the interplay of muscle and bone as the man smiled. Andrew turned to suck Justin's fingers and was stopped momentarily by a sharp intake of breath behind him. Andrew grinned but Justin yanked back his hand, turning to Brian and mumbling, "I don't know where that came from. Sorry."

Youth

Brian opened his mouth and closed it, not knowing exactly what to say. He was furious with Justin, angry with himself, and feeling betrayed by a man who was supposed to be his friend and should really know better. As much as he didn't want to admit it, Andrew would probably fuck Justin right on the kitchen table if Brian turned his back for a minute. That was supposed to be okay, considering their "understanding," but the thought

of Andrew with Justin made him crazy and angry and something that felt dangerously close to jealous. Brian counted to ten and finally felt the calm, cool Brian Kinney mask fall firmly back into place.

"Fuck, Justin, don't apologize for everything. I brought you here to see somebody, and I think I hear him coming down the stairs. I'll introduce you to him, if you two can keep your hands off each other," Brian growled, shooting a withering stare at Andrew.

Right on cue, a beautiful young man in a light silk robe wandered in, standing in the frame of the hallway door.

Andrew stood up. "Matt, come in, come in. This is lovely baby is Justin, and the hottie sulking in the corner is Brian. We've been waiting for you."

Matt came into the kitchen, stretching and yawning. "Whew, I needed that nap. My last session was crazy. Sometimes it's murder to sit still for five or six hours like that." He ruffled a hand through his short dark hair, crouched down, and then stood back up. Justin winced as the model's joints cracked in protest.

"God, that's better. You'd think it wouldn't be hard to just sit like that, but man, it's brutal." Matt took a bottle of water from the fridge and began to sing into it, "He works hard for the money... So hard for it honey..."

Andrew began to laugh as he crossed the room to refill his coffee. "Yup, Matt, that's why we pay you the big bucks. Your ability to sit on that gorgeous ass is one of a kind."

Matt bowed gently and said, "Thank you, sirs, there will be another show in an hour. Now, is this the young artist I'm to indulge this evening?" He turned towards Justin, a suddenly predatory look in his eye. "Please tell me I get to indulge him?"

Andrew seemed ready to speak, but Brian cut him off angrily. "No, this is the young artist you will SIT FOR. Fuck, Andrew, I think this one's ready for a European tour."

Andrew chuckled and lightly punched Brian on the arm. "It's getting really late. Let's show the boys to the studio and I'll take you downstairs for a beer." He walked into the dining room, and Brian followed, dragging Justin behind him by the hand. Matt brought up the rear, and seemed very happy to do so.

Andrew began chatting with Justin as they walked through the house. "In case you're wondering, I do live here, but I work from here too. The models come and go as I need them - they're on retainer, but if I don't have anything lined up, they're free to do as they wish. Normally I work on advertising campaigns and such, and Brian has been kind enough to send me work whenever he can, but that's not all I do. Sometimes I want to work on my art, and so I need artists' models to pose. Today was one of those days, and tonight is your lucky night, Justin. I used Matt all day and now it's your turn."

Matt giggled in a high, girlish manner that Justin could imagine coming from Emmett. "Now Andrew, please don't give the boy any misconceptions. I was posing all day," he stated loudly, and then leaned into Justin's ear to whisper, "He fucked me in the morning before we started."

Justin giggled, causing Brian to shake his head and groan. Fucking teenagers.

Interlude

The studio was pretty much what Justin expected. It was a midsize room, draped in white cloth, with a large ottoman in front of a white screen. Photography equipment was scattered here and there, but Justin paid no attention once he spotted a comfortable chair. He turned to Matt, and said, "Okay, you get ready, any position you want to take. I need to go out to the Jeep for my sketch pad."

Matt jumped onto the ottoman and struck a series of cheesecake poses, making Justin laugh as he adjusted the knobs for the light dimmers and the thermostat. As Matt adjusted the cushion and cover on the ottoman, Justin left the room, expecting to bump into Brian on the way out. When he got into the hall, Brian was across the room, alone, and Justin decided to take advantage of that fact.

"Where'd Andrew go?" he asked, crossing the room to where Brian stood. It was a wide hallway, with large windows on the south wall. Brian was staring out of one, almost as if he was waiting for someone to come down the driveway. He turned slightly to look at Justin before speaking.

"I'm not his keeper. I think he went upstairs to change. Should go I help him?" he smirked, pulling Justin closer by his shirt. "Or do you have other plans?"

"Yes, but that's later. I have to get my stuff out of the Jeep, will you give me the keys?" Justin flirted, running his hand down Brian's hip and inching it towards his cock. "Please?"

Brian laughed, planted a kiss on the boy's forehead, and turned away. "No need to lock it out here, Justin, just go and get what you need." He tried to unobtrusively adjust his pants, which were now uncomfortably tight. "I'm not giving you the chance to strip the gears on the Jeep again."

Justin was frustrated, in more ways than one. "I'm not going to drive it, I just need my backpack and I'm sure the alarm is on." He closed his hands on the taller man's hips, pressing himself against Brian's back as he planted a kiss on the back of his neck. Reaching around, he flattened his hand on Brian's chest and slowly slid it down to his

waistband. Brian closed his eyes and leaned back slightly, hissing when Justin popped the top button of his jeans. Justin took that as a positive sign and began to open Brian's zipper, whispering, "I don't want to wake up the cows."

Brian turned too quickly, knocking Justin off balance and giving Brian a chance to take control. He leaned into Justin for a hungry kiss, his tongue forcing his way into Justin's mouth. Justin melted into Brian, grinding his hard cock into Brian's hip while Brian's hand gripped the back of his neck. Brian pulled back and whispered, "Take off your clothes, Justin."

Justin tried to pull back, his eyes darting towards the still-open door; then, when Brian held him firm, he tilted his head up and spoke. "Brian, I want to, but Matt's waiting for me, and Andrew could come back, and we can't do this here. Can't it wait until we get home? I mean, I don't want to stop..." he moaned as Brian's hand found his aching dick. "I really don't want to wait but we shouldn't do this here." Justin started to get lightheaded as Brian firmly stroked his dick, but no matter how good it felt, this just wasn't right. "My mom would kill me if she knew I had such bad manners."

Brian froze in mother-aversion shock, and the momentum evaporated. Justin had one hell of a trump card there, and he knew it, because any mention of Jennifer Taylor during sex was sure to make Brian stop dead in his tracks. Justin straightened himself up and quickly nabbed the keys from Brian's pocket, saying, "I'll be right back in. I'm not going anywhere."

Brian leaned back against the windowsill, fists balled in frustration. How did this keep happening? Maybe it happened because he really loved the guy (no, not that, not that word). His mind scrambled furiously for an alternate word, but couldn't find one. He didn't want Justin to control him, but sometimes it just happened.

Lately, Brian seemed to be spending most of his free time finding ways to control the situation, (not relationship, no, not that word either) which had led to some rather pleasurable experiments. At first there was no need, Justin was inexperienced and there was no question that Brian was in charge. Pretty soon Justin became experienced, though - keeping up with Brian had been a rigorous training schedule. As Justin decided he knew more and more, he wanted more from Brian, and that was something Brian wasn't always prepared to allow.

It had started so slowly, Brian hadn't even noticed, with Justin picking up their evening's entertainment at Babylon. He should have noticed that, the flippant, "I'll get him" called over his shoulder as he sauntered over to the catch of the day. That wasn't what scared...no...bothered, yes, bothered him, though. Justin had been pushing to "be a man" more and more often, and that had included being too aggressive for Brian's tastes. It wasn't that he never wanted to bottom for Justin, but not all the time. He had a reputation to protect! Brian fucking Kinney wouldn't turn into a nelly bottom for anyone. It had to stop.

The lesson had started with a simple show of authority, Brian fucking Justin right when he came home from school. Brian remembered the quick, forceful penetration, and feeling Justin's small body pressed against the cold metal door as Brian slammed into him. Justin should have been angry, should have wanted a chance to object or something, but that didn't happen. It was quick and satisfying and when Justin simply redressed and wandered off to make dinner with a smile, Brian was irritated.

The next encounter was more forceful; with Brian holding Justin's head off the edge of the bed as he slowly fucked his lover's face. Justin was eager, and as the blonde's wet mouth closed over his cock, Brian realized that this probably wasn't going to do it either. It really felt too good having the boy's soft tongue working over the head of his dick when he was trying to act like a cruel bastard. He picked up the pace, carefully watching Justin's body language for signs of real distress as he played the tormentor. Despite being sure he'd nearly choked Justin with his cum, that plan hadn't worked either. Justin spent the next two days giggling about seeing stars when Brian came, and raving about how much further he could take Brian into his throat that way. That was when Brian decided to move on to the biggest plan, a plan that wouldn't allow any doubt about who was the master of this little domain. And as grand schemes tend to do, it had backfired the worst of all.

Flashback

"Brian?"

"Yeah?"

"Why don't we ever..."

"Ever what, Justin?"

"I saw those videos you left out. We don't do all that stuff."

"Some of that stuff is impossible unless you're a contortionist."

"Brian, that's not what I meant. You left the tapes beside my computer! You know what I'm talking about."

"I haven't got time for this."

"Don't make ME say it, please."

"I'm not a mind reader. If you want something, ask."

"I don't know how! Okay, a lot of people are into...no, that's not what I mean...um, we've never, uh, um..."

"Come on, spit it out. You got 1500 on your SAT's, you should be able to have a simple discussion. I've had clearer conversations with Gus."

"Why haven't you ever tied me up?"

"O-kay...Where did that come from?"

"You're the one that left all those tapes out! It just got me thinking it might be fun."

"Sure, you get to lie there and relax and I have to do all the work. Some fun. "

"Well, it would be different, wouldn't it?"

"Not for me, but maybe for you."

"Come on, please?"

"Why all of a sudden?"

"I'm curious. How can I be the best homosexual if I haven't gotten all the lessons?"

"Fuck, I'm starting to regret that I ever said that."

"Well? I don't usually have to beg."

"You have to do something first."

"What? I'll do anything!"

"Pick a word, so that I'll know when to stop. It's called a safe word."

"Huh?"

"Sometimes when you're fucking around, no means yes and stop means don't stop, and you need to have a word that's a red light."

"You mean if I said no, you wouldn't stop?"

"Don't know. Maybe. Probably, but you can't know in advance. Sometimes things get going and it's hard to know what's fantasy and what's real."

"Okay, but I don't really know what to pick. I have one, but it'll sound stupid."

"You have to pick one, or we won't do a fucking thing. Go."

"Powerpuff."

"Shit, Justin, that's enough to stop anyone."

"Then it's okay?"

"Yes. Go get me your ties."

"Why mine?"

"I don't want stains on mine. Bring all three."

"Why?"

"You don't get to ask questions anymore, Justin. You do what I want or we stop. Those are your choices. If you agree with me, say okay."

"Okay."

Flashback, Part II

Brian shook his head, remembering. Well, remembering what he could. It had been intense for both of them, and Brian had passed out sometime in the early hours, sweating and exhausted. The next morning had been a shock for both of them. Brian had opened his eyes to find he was sleeping with a very contented, very battered young man. Justin cocked an eyebrow and smiled.

"Hey."

"Jesus Christ, Justin, what happened to you?"

"Brian, you were there."

"I didn't do all that."

"Like hell you didn't. Do you think I'd let anyone else do all this?"

"I'd never hurt you like that."

"I bruise easily, Brian, that's all. Don't freak out."

"Like fuck I won't. You look like someone beat the shit out of you."

"More like someone fucked the shit out of me, Brian. I saw it when I went to brush my teeth. It's not that bad."

"You can't cover all that up. Deb is going to kill me."

"I'm good at excuses, and it won't be every night, right? 'Oh, it was an accident, we were playfighting, Brian's so big and strong,' and all that. They'll totally buy it."

"Maybe they shouldn't. Maybe I should have been more careful."

"But that wouldn't have been as fuuuun, would it?"

"It's not right to let people hurt you for fun."

"Well, maybe I was the one having fun, Brian."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Did I use my safe word? Did I ever even say no? Come on, Brian, I'm not an idiot. I would have stopped you if I wanted to."

"I doubt it."

"We'll never know, isn't that part of it?"

"You couldn't stop me when they found the kid in the dumpster."

"That time didn't leave a mark like this."

"JESUS CHRIST! You look like you got strangled!"

"Um, Brian, I'm reminding you again that you were there."

"I should just change my fucking name to Jack now."

"Brian, you're not your father, so quit being a drama queen. God, I never thought I'd say that. Anyways, I could tell you about last night, but I'd prefer to give a guided tour."

"Justin, I can't. I can't look at that."

"I'm not angry, I'm not hurt, so why are you being this way? This isn't like you."

"I shouldn't have done this."

"Done what? You mean the welt here from your belt? That's going to have a good bruise tomorrow. How about this bite mark? I probably shouldn't be able to see teeth here, right? Do I have to remind you that I'm not going to be able to sit comfortably for a couple of days?"

"Stop! I don't want to hear it."

"Is that the only pain you're talking about, or are we going back further? Does tricking count? That hurts. What about shutting me out of your life? Do you regret ever picking me up at all?"

"Don't be so fucking stupid. This is about me beating the shit out of you."

"It's not that bad! This is just going to be a good story for Emmett one day. It doesn't hurt, not in the way that matters."

"I'm not doing this again."

"We don't have to decide that right now, do we?"

"Justin, what are you doing?"

"Starting this morning the way we start every morning, Brian."

God, it was draining just thinking about it. It seemed that no matter how hard Brian fought, Justin sometimes ended up with the power without even trying. It didn't feel right, and maybe it was better not to think about that right now. Brian turned at the sound of Andrew coming down a set of stairs, tucking in a clean shirt.

"You know, Andrew, I could really use that beer."

Catching Up

Andrew laughed, and pointed to a closed door across the hallway. "The bar's down there, Brian, we've renovated since you were here last time."

Brian blanched and turned towards a large window, staring out into the darkness. "Quit saying 'we', Andrew. Don't fucking remind me that asshole lives here."

Andrew walked over behind Brian, gently putting his hands onto the tense man. "James isn't an ogre, you know. He was there for me when you left me. I survived, and now we have a decent life here. We've been together so long, I'm not sure I could leave him even if I wanted to." Andrew started massaging Brian's shoulders, hoping that the tension between them would leave and they could just relax. "We need to just enjoy this time together, Brian. It's been years since the last time I saw you in person. Michael invited me to your birthday party, but from what I've heard, it's better that I didn't show up after all."

Brian sighed, frustrated with Mikey yet again. Michael might be his caring best friend, but there were some things he'd never get. Andrew was from the past; he just didn't fit in with 'Brian Fucking Kinney'. Why didn't anyone understand that? Why didn't anyone understand HIM? 'Brian Fucking Kinney's' life was neatly compartmentalized: childhood years, right in the trash. Teen years with Mikey, with Deb and later Vic acting as

surrogate parents. College with Lindsay, both pretending to be something they weren't. Ever since then it had been a steady stream of tricks, until Justin came. Deep in his mind, Brian wondered if Justin wasn't a figment of his imagination, like, "This is how Brian Kinney would have turned out with parents who loved him."

Andrew didn't fit into the legend. He didn't belong to Brian Kinney at all, he belonged to Bri, the fumbling young queer desperate to learn the ropes without becoming somebody's victim. Brian wasn't Bri to anyone except Michael anymore, but somehow he couldn't tell Andrew that. It sounded harsher than he really meant to be.

"Are you expecting a conversation or a trip down memory lane? I don't reminisce, it's fucking out of the question." Brian spit, angry to have his carefully constructed life blowing up in his face. Try to do something nice for someone, and what does it get you? Indigestion. This trip hadn't been about remembering an old trick. (Not a trick, Brian, you know better than that.) Andrew remembered Brian fresh off the lot, so to speak, when he'd had little besides a few handjobs and some furtive cocksucking in the high school locker room. It wouldn't do to let it get around that Brian's prowess was as a result of Andrew's teaching, even though to some extent, it was. He decided to change the subject.

"About Michael... why did you talk to him?"

Andrew shrugged. "Oh, I don't know, I talk to him a lot. More than I talk to you, which is funny, considering." Actually, Brian did find that pretty funny. While Brian had been experiencing college, Mikey had been stuck at home, working at the Big Q. Sometimes he came up for weekends when he was off, but it wasn't the same. Brian's whole life had changed, and he knew that Mikey felt abandoned and left out. Dating Lindsay had made that worse, but seeing Brian with Andrew just about killed him. Brian guessed that he felt it was okay to be second to a woman, if Brian wasn't gay after all, but not to be the man in his life was excruciating. Michael had barely tolerated Andrew's presence... hmmm, come to think of it, he'd acted the same way with Justin - sort of angry, but mostly pissy and hurt. That attitude healed over time; Michael always came around eventually. Brian just didn't know when Andrew had become Mikey's new best friend.

"Are you two plotting against me or something?" Brian was genuinely curious now. "I didn't think you had much in common."

"Like I said, I talk to him more than I talk to you. He calls me when something happens at the shop, or to tell me about...what's his name, Ben? He called me when Vic got arrested, and when Justin got hurt. I got a lot of calls during his dating dry spell. Sometimes he just needs to talk without being called pathetic. I'm outside of everything. I can give advice without having an agenda." Andrew had made his way over to the old wooden bar, and was rummaging around for a bottle opener.

Brian was a little hurt at the implication that he didn't actually care about his best friend's life. "So how was he?" he said casually, eyes pointed directly at Andrew, who returned his gaze without guilt.

"Are you asking if I fucked him? Yeah, Bri, I did. Not just once, either. He's hot, in a cute little kid kind of way. Why do you care? We don't answer to you, and besides, it's in the past."

"He's my best friend. If you're fucking up his life, I care about it." Brian edged closer to the bar, trying not to get flustered. Andrew should really know better than to rattle him like this.

"I haven't fucked him in a while. You want dates? I won't tell. You want details? It was okay. We had some fun. He kept the bed warm for me, and I really listened when he talked. We didn't realize we needed a special dispensation."

Brian snorted. "I'm hardly the Pope, Andrew. I just don't want you fucking with him the way you fucked with me."

By now, Andrew was half-buried in a bar fridge looking for beer. His breath came out in steamy white clouds as he spoke. "I didn't fuck with you, James fucked with you. As I recall, we were doing just fine until he came along and you took off. Never thought that you'd back down from a challenge like that, but here we are."

Brian hardened his jaw and said, "One more word about James and I'm going home."

Andrew shrugged. "Fine, Bri, whatever you want. It really is good to see you, you know. Except for business calls, you talk to me twice a year unless somebody dies. I've turned into an uncomfortable obligation, and don't deny it. Tonight is a gorgeous night and I've got you all to myself for a couple of hours. Don't you think that makes me happy?"

Studio Time

Matt looked up from his magazine as Justin re-entered the studio. "I thought you'd abandoned me forever."

Justin laughed. "A little dramatic, don't you think? I had to sweet-talk the keys out of Brian." He gestured to the centre of the ottoman, which Matt had neatly draped with a dark blue cover. "Why don't you try laying there? It should be comfortable to stretch out on your side."

Matt shrugged, slipped off his robe, and took the position. "Hey, standing around is my specialty. Whatever you want, ask. While we're in here, you make the demands and I obey."

"That sounds familiar," Justin giggled as he settled himself in his seat. "Maybe I should be the one posing."

Matt smiled as Justin got down to work. Soon Matt's lean frame appeared on the page, fine shading indicating each bunch of muscle or protrusion of bone. Next, the soft glowing light diffused in his hair, and his thin fingers splayed over his stomach. It wasn't right, though, it was missing something. Justin flipped the unfinished page and tried again.

Matt drifted off into daydreams while Justin quickly roughed in a new sketch. His question took Justin completely by surprise.

"So, how long have you two been into S&M?"

"WHAT?" Justin jumped, the tip of the pencil breaking against the page. He looked up at Matt, who was returning his gaze but hadn't moved an inch.

"He ties you up, Justin. I can tell. If you don't want to talk about it, that's okay."

"How the hell do you know that?" Justin fumbled, turning to rummage through his backpack for a new pencil. He'd been caught off-guard, and when his mind was racing, his bad hand just wouldn't work. Matt watched with interest as Justin scrabbled at the buckles and ties, finally pulling the bag around to open it with his left hand.

"It's not magic, your wrists are still bruised. I noticed when you pushed up your sleeves."

"We were play fighting, it was just a joke." Justin tried to look at Matt, but his eyes quickly found the floor. "It was just a one time thing."

"Hey, you don't need to use all your excuses on me at once." Matt chuckled, trying to soften his words. "I'm sorry, you can lie to me if you want, it's none of my business. I'm sort of just making conversation." He looked up at Justin then, and the blonde boy somehow looked so young and innocent while lying to his face. "Can I give you some advice?"

"Sure, if you want," Justin replied warily, "But turn your head a little to the left."

Matt complied, murmuring "Lying to other people about this is fine, but don't lie to yourself. Screwing around with S&M is like playing with fire, especially if you're not both in it for the same reason."

Justin frowned at this earnest declaration and demanded, "And how do you come to know this, O wise swami? It's nothing. We're just playing around."

"Are you really, Justin? I wonder about that. He's older, richer, and more experienced. Andrew talks about Brian sometimes - out all night, drunk and stoned, fucking into oblivion. You're what, eighteen or nineteen? You can't keep up with that."

Justin was getting angry again. "He's not like that all the time, and I keep up just fine, thank you. Can we drop this?" He finally located his new pencil and resumed shading in the hollow under Matt's hipbone.

"No, I want to say one thing first. Take it from a poor gay boy who's seen more than his share of older men. Don't push him too far."

Justin was livid. Everyone was always poking their noses into his business, and it really pissed him off. Telling him he was immature to think Brian loved him, or that Brian would only hurt him in the end. "What? I hardly ever ask for anything. He gives me anything I could possibly want, and what I don't get... I can learn to deal with." He slammed the sketch book shut and looked up at Matt. "If I pushed him too far, he'd never let me stay. You don't know what the fuck you're talking about."

Matt sighed and smoothed out a wrinkle in the ottoman cover. "I do, I swear I do. I know this one all too well, honey. I'm not talking about your regular life, I'm talking about those hours when something you don't understand is spinning out of control. You're way into getting beat up by Brian. You like getting marked up and having something to look at in the mirror the next day. You think it shows him that you'll do anything for him. That he'll love you if he can only see that you're not afraid of being hurt. Well if you ask me, the fact that you're getting fucked at the same time is merely a coincidence."

"You're wrong. It was totally about the sex, I think I came about a hundred times." Justin boasted as he picked up his pencil and began twirling it between his fingers.

"Justin, it had nothing to do with sex and you know it. You're laying yourself down at his feet and begging him to let his demons out to play with you. You think you're being tough, but you're begging to be loved because sometimes you don't think he does."

"I don't need him to say it all the time." The pencil fell off his lap and rolled towards the ottoman. Justin hopped up to retrieve it, and when he crouched to pick it up, Matt grabbed his shoulder.

"Has he ever? Honey, I'm gonna tell you one last thing, and I don't want you to forget. You can't ask Brian to define you as a person. He's got his own problems! We all do. He needs you to have your own standards and limits. If that little fantasy game got out of hand, then you had a responsibility to make it stop and not feed his insanity."

"You're overreacting. He's not the devil. He's messed up sometimes, but it's no big deal."

Matt clucked sadly, sitting up and looking Justin in the eye. "Justin, you have no idea what's going on in his head, do you? Sure, he's angry and bitter and callous and cold. That's fine, sweetie, we all get off on pretend danger, but how much real danger is in there? Is it directed at you, or at himself? If you fuck things up, who's it gonna hurt more - him or you?"

Justin gritted his teeth and whispered, "He would never, ever hurt me. I've made all the rules I need to make." He took Matt's hand as he rose from his crouch on the floor. Matt stood to put his hands on Justin's shoulders, and looked down at the boy who still looked so young.

"The rules aren't for him, they're for you! You should still have some free will in there somewhere! If you don't learn how to tell him what you think, and what you want, he'll walk all over you. It's not good for either one of you. You're more than Brian Kinney's faithful puppy, and he needs to know that."

Twenty Questions

Brian, rising from sitting sideways on a recliner, yelled "Beer me!" and staggered towards Andrew, who was giggling on the couch. Andrew leapt up and dashed towards the bar, running full tilt into a bar stool and falling flat on his ass. Laughing hysterically, Andrew repeatedly tried to get up, finally giving up and laying on the floor. Brian eased himself off the couch, weaving slightly until he was standing over Andrew. Andrew grinned and said, "Kinney, you're still the hottest guy I've ever met."

Brian leered at Andrew and dropped to his knees, straddling him suggestively. "I didn't come here to fuck an old man."

Andrew laughed again and grabbed the back of Brian's neck. "I don't believe that for a second. Besides, I'm experienced. I can do things to you that Justin probably hasn't heard of."

"Doubt it. I don't want to talk about Justin." Brian shook off Andrew's hand and leaned back on his heels, absentmindedly stroking his stomach right above the button on his jeans.

Andrew gently pressed his hips up to meet Brian's ass, grabbing his arms and saying, "Bri, you never want to talk about anything. You never did. We don't have to talk, you know." Brian stared off into space while his body reacted to Andrew's touch. Andrew sighed quietly and said, "Don't get all worked up about it. We're supposed to be having fun here. Make you a deal. If I can guess why you're upset, you have to let me cheer you up."

Brian ground his ass into Andrew's now-hard cock, saying, "That sounds like a bet."

Andrew smiled and ran his fingers across Brian's collarbone. "I never lose. The game's twenty questions, and we're playing just like we used to. Winner take all."

"I'm only answering yes or no."

Andrew smirked. "Fine. You always were a challenge. Question one: You're here to please yourself and not Justin."

"Yes."

"Did he cook you Christmas dinner?"

"No."

"But you went to a couple of places and ate together, right?"

"Yes."

Hmmm, that sounded suspiciously like a relationship. Better to get away from those questions.

"You fuck Justin at least three times a day."

"Yes."

Andrew shifted, his cock hardening at the thought. "Okay, question five: You haven't thought that maybe Matt will try to have a go at Justin again while we're down here."

Brian's eyes flew open. "No."

"He will, you know, and he's such a sweet boy," Andrew teased. Brian tensed and Andrew restarted the questioning. "You don't think Justin tricks, even though you do it all the time."

"That's not a yes or no question."

"Fine, I'll try again AND take a penalty for that one. Seven: You're always there if Justin is tricking."

"No."

"Sure, Brian, sure. Has he gone it alone more than once?"

"Yes."

"Three times?"

"Yes."

"If your little twink has gone out alone and picked up more than five times, I'm the Virgin Mary. I'm not even asking again. You're delusional."

"Whatever." Brian was gently rocking on Andrew's cock, and it was distracting. The next question was a few minutes in coming.

"Have you met his mother?"

"Yes."

"Has he met yours?"

"Yes, it was a fucking disaster."

Oooh, that didn't help his cause one bit. Even Andrew hadn't met Brian's mother, and they'd dated for almost two years. Also, Brian's rocking had gotten faster, but Andrew couldn't tell if it was intentional or simply force of habit. He put his hand on Brian's shoulder, intending to make him stop moving. Instead, Brian took that as an invitation to lean closer to his face.

"Bri, has he met your son?"

"Yes. He named Gus, the night we met."

Andrew was surprised that Brian was growing talkative, not knowing if it was from a deep need to reveal his innermost thoughts, or the effects of too much beer. The openness was entirely unlike him, but Andrew thought he could use it to his advantage. He also noticed that for a man who had sworn that they weren't going to fuck, Brian was doing one hell of a job of starting it up, and he decided to go with the flow.

"Lucky question thirteen: Do Michael and Justin get along?"

"Yes."

"I find that hard to believe, Bri. It took Michael and I years to be civil."

"They do now, so it counts." Brian reached behind him and gently started stroking Andrew's cock through his soft khakis. "This game never took so long before."

Andrew grunted and brought up his left hand to cup Brian's ass. "It never used to, but I want to make it count this time." He pulled Brian down onto his body, and leaning in for a kiss. Brian opened his mouth over his and sucked his tongue into it. Andrew was enjoying the attention, but wanted the information more. He gently pushed Brian away.

"I want to ask question fourteen, are you ready?"

Brian dropped his hand to his cock and gently squeezed, smiling seductively. "Yes, and I'm counting that as a question."

"Fine. Whatever. So that makes it fifteen? Okay. Fifteen: You've taught Justin pretty much everything you know about fucking."

"Yes," Brian whispered, pulling back to kneel beside Andrew. He slowly undid Andrew's zipper and pulled out his leaking dick. Andrew moaned and sat up, allowing Brian to pull off his clothes then watching as Brian undressed himself as quickly as he could. Andrew reached for Brian's dick, but Brian held him off, searching his pocket for a condom before he threw his jeans across the room. Brian lay back and Andrew hovered over him, pressing his face into Brian's pubic thatch. He just breathed for a minute, remembering the heat and passion and Brian-smell from his youth, before taking Brian's cock deep into his throat. Brian moaned and wove his fingers into Andrew's hair.

Andrew licked and sucked along Brian's shaft, stopping when he reached the head to flick it gently with his tongue. He closed his lips firmly and sucked, rotating his head to meet Brian's eyes. When he was sure he had Brian's attention, he let his cock slip from his mouth. "He's a child prodigy of fucking, now, isn't he?"

Brian pushed Andrew back onto the floor and rolled him slightly onto his side. He switched around, laying against Andrew's back and gently massaging his ass. "Yes." Brian reached around Andrew's body to find his cock leaking pre-cum. He stroked it almost meditatively as he thought about Justin. "He was a very fast learner." Brian licked Andrew's taste off his fingers, wetted them, and moved to penetrate the prone man's asshole. "Too fast sometimes." His fingers slowly slid into Andrew, probing and twisting. Andrew whimpered, but he didn't resist and the preparation didn't take long. Brian slid the condom onto his cock and quickly slid it in.

"Ungh," Andrew sighed, trying to relax against the intrusion. When he caught his breath, he knew that now was the time to finish the game.

"Bri, you'd rather be with him than anyone else."

Brian was lost in the act, and for once he was unguarded. "Yeah." He hooked his leg over Andrew's and reached across his body with an arm.

"And he loves you." Andrew was panting now, so close to release but needing to know what had pushed Brian to come and see him.

"Yes." Brian picked up the pace, forcing Andrew face first onto the carpet and raising his hips for leverage. Andrew cried out at the brief contact between his cock and the floor, and Brian reached around to grasp it.

Andrew was close, too close, and it was too much like a daydream to be here with Brian again. Brian had begun stroking Andrew, and from the pace of his thrusts, they both knew it wouldn't be much longer. Brian closed his hand tightly around Andrew's dick, and he was gone.

Brian felt the contractions of Andrew's orgasm squeezing his cock, and closed his free hand over Andrew's shoulder, pulling him up and off the floor as he pounded his ass. Two more thrusts and then he came, face pressed against Andrew's back as they both rode the waves of their orgasms. Finally, Brian released Andrew and allowed him to stretch back out on the carpet. Brian removed the condom, threw it into the trash, then lay back companionably on the carpet himself.

Andrew was dazed, and looked at Brian with half-lidded eyes. He wanted to bask, wanted to run upstairs and gloat to the little blonde twink, but he had one question left. He turned onto his side, propping his head up on an elbow bent underneath him.

"Bri, you love him, don't you?"

Brian sighed and closed his eyes. "Sorry, Andrew, we're finished here. Game over."

Back Story

Justin put the finishing touches on a full-length sketch of Matt, who had gone upstairs to get dressed. He was surprised at how well his drawings had actually come out - except for a figure class here and there, he'd only ever drawn people he knew. Despite the rather personal conversation they'd had, Matt was a stranger, and Justin was pleased to see that he could still make a connection with his subject. These were very good, and he couldn't wait to show Brian.

Matt sauntered back into the room, opening the door quietly and deliberately. Justin looked up as Matt came in, saying, "I'm not asleep, you don't need to be so quiet."

Matt laughed. "I'm not sneaking around. Andrew doesn't like to be disturbed when he's working. James doesn't like to be disturbed either, as if he could be more disturbed." He used a crumpled pack of cigarettes to motion towards a door on the south wall. "Wanna come outside for a bit?"

Justin nodded, packing away his sketchbook in his backpack. Matt stood about halfway between him and the door outside, and Justin got the sense of being watched as he moved towards the door. He became curious when Matt ushered him through the door and closed it quietly behind him.

The front porch of the house was barely lit, and housed nothing but an old wicker table with a much-used ashtray. Matt slid down the wall, leaning his head against the bricks and resting his arms on his knees. Justin sat cross-legged beside him, looking at Matt in the light spilling from the front windows.

He was very tired, that was easy to see, even though Justin had seen no hint of it during their session. His eyes were closed, and he took a couple of long, deep breaths before sighing. Finally, he looked straight at Justin and said, "Sorry about the conversation earlier, if it was too intense or something. Maybe we can finish it now, if you're ready."

Justin wasn't sure if he wanted to finish that conversation or not. It was embarrassing to be talking about such personal things with anyone, but Matt seemed to have some experience in that area. Sure, half of Pittsburgh knew about his sex life, but he only shared what made him look good, and this just made him look warped.

After blowing him off before, Justin had tried to ask Matt a couple of questions during the session, but Matt had just turned to him with a dreamy smile and said, "Do you mind too much if we don't talk? If I'm going to sit for hours, I need to be able to do my thing and zone out." Justin had been happy to oblige, because it gave him time to think as well. Now that Matt was interested in talking again, Justin was eager to listen.

"Sure," Justin replied. "We can talk some more if you want to. You did me such a huge favour here. " Matt stretched, and Justin winced again as many of his joints cracked and popped.

Matt smiled a bit and ruffled Justin's hair. "Brian's paying through the nose for my time, so don't get all sentimental on me."

"Fine, " he mumbled, stretching his legs in front of him on the concrete. "People say that to me so much, you'd think I worked for Hallmark or something. I want you to tell me everything you know about James."

Matt sighed again. "James is a total jerk. Andrew likes him, but I don't think anyone else does. He's loud and bad-tempered when he's drinking. He's lazy, and I heard a rumour that the first time he went to visit Andrew's parents, he had to write Andrew's name on his hand so he wouldn't forget it."

Justin was amused, but not satisfied. "No, not that kind of stuff. Tell me what happened between the three of them. Why Brian hates James so much."

Matt reached for the crumpled cigarette pack and pulled out a joint. Finding a beat up lighter in his back pocket, he lit it and passed it to Justin. Justin shook his head no, and watched as Matt drew in another deep drag. Matt offered it to him again, and Justin accepted this time, visibly enjoying the feeling of the hot smoke traveling to his lungs. He exhaled and explained, "Sometimes when I'm taking my allergy medicine, this stuff puts me to sleep."

Matt laughed and said, "Don't worry, I can't afford anything that good." Justin snickered and Matt continued. "This could be wrong, it's only what I figured out by myself. They have a lot of fights, and they practically wreck the place, screaming and throwing shit. Sometimes they don't pay attention to what they're saying in front of company."

"Okay, I get the picture."

"Well, in college Andrew and Brian were dating. They were pretty serious. Andrew fucked around a lot, but he always smoothed it over somehow. He can be a charming bastard when he wants to be."

Justin nodded, recalling the few times Brian had really brought out the charm. He didn't have to give much to make Justin think he was lucky just to be his presence. He motioned for Matt to continue.

"They were a real, actual couple until James came along. I don't know why, but James decided that he wanted Andrew and nobody was going to stand in his way. He tried everything, but Andrew was into Brian and wouldn't give him the time. Finally, Brian broke up with Andrew, and from what I hear, just disappeared into thin air. James stepped in to pick up the pieces, and they've been together ever since."

"You're saying Brian just gave up and vanished?" Justin repeated, trying to make sense of the story. "That's really not like Brian. If he were tired of him, he'd have said so. Andrew must have done something."

Matt was adamant. "No, I'm sure he didn't. James teases Andrew sometimes, when he's really drunk, that he wasn't good enough for Brian and he's not good enough for him either. That he's sorry he ever went to all the trouble of getting him in the first place." Matt shook his head a little, and took another hit off the joint. "That's the part I don't get. I mean, how hard is it just to swoop in when someone else has left the field?"

Justin was concentrating on the story, drawing little scratch marks on the concrete veranda with a pebble. "Let me get this straight...um...you know what I mean. Andrew and Brian were together, and Brian puts up with bullshit until one day he magically disappears? Weird."

Matt watched the last of the joint burn to nothing in the ashtray, making sure it was out. He turned to Justin and nodded. "Like I said, I don't get it either, but it's not like I can ask. I'm just a nosy visitor. It's their melodrama, not mine. I can't go asking them about their painful pasts and expect to be a welcome guest anymore."

Justin smiled, and Matt was surprised that he could see Justin's teeth even in the near-darkness. Matt knew he was stumbling into dangerous territory by pushing Justin for more of his own story, but he really wanted to know. He leaned forwards, very close to Justin's face, and asked, "So, do you loooooove him?"

Justin reached up to push Matt's forehead with the tips of his fingers. "You ARE nosy!" he giggled, and then a shadow seemed to fall over his face. His hand dropped to his lap, and he started playing with the seam on his jeans. "Of course I love him. Nobody would put up with Brian Kinney if they didn't. He's obnoxious and annoying and sometimes he's so mean you want to hit him. How could I not love that?"

Matt reached for Justin's hand. "You know, there are plenty of boys out there dying for a chance at a guy like you. This one would love to try."

Justin's Story

Justin sighed, but didn't move Matt's hand. He stared at their hands together like an alien being had landed on his knee. "You've said love more times in this conversation than Brian ever has," he whispered. "It's nice."

"If you're not happy, sweetie, why don't you leave? Don't you have anywhere to go?"

"No, I do. Debbie would take me back, and if it was really bad I could go back with my mom. I have lots of good friends who'd let me crash for a couple of days if I needed to get out."

"Then why don't you?"

"It's not that easy."

"Sweetie, it really is. You've got to know when to hold 'em and know when to fold 'em."

A smile tugged at Justin's lips. "What's next, singing show tunes?"

Matt reached up and gripped Justin's chin. "I mean it, Justin. If he's hurting you, leave."

Justin sighed and released Matt's hand, pulling away from his grip and laying back on the concrete. "I can't just walk away. It's not like I haven't wanted to! There's something about him, something about us together, that I don't understand. I can't stop. From the very first time, there was something there. He told me he wanted me to always remember that time, and I'm never going to forget, because every time is like that."

Matt pulled himself onto his knees and crawled over to lie beside Justin. "Honey, that's sweet and sentimental, but weak. I don't hear a reason in there."

"Okay then, let me tell you a story. It's a long one, are you comfy?"

Justin was surprised as Matt snuggled up to him and laid his head on his shoulder, but he continued. "They found a dead kid in a dumpster near where I work. Brian didn't really seem to care much, but it bugged me for days. I kept talking about it. I brought it up at the weirdest times. Maybe I was being naive before, thinking we were safe and nothing like that could happen to us, but that's really what I thought. Finding a dead kid that looked like me...well, it made me feel like I'd never be safe again. It was freaky, you know?"

Matt nodded as much as he could with his head still lying on Justin.

"Anyways, Brian decided that I needed to know that I hadn't ever been safe, especially when I was with him. He got on top of me, and when I thought he was going to fuck me, he started choking me instead."

"Jesus."

"I can't remember much of what we said or anything, it's just pictures and feelings. He stood over me, and I looked up and thought, 'My God, he's so hot, and he looks so much taller than me this way.' He crouched down until he was sitting on my hips, and he was stroking my dick, and his, and talking. I think I was just watching, because I can't remember a thing he said. He jumped me just like that - one minute he was talking, the next minute I thought I was dying. The rest is mostly just feelings and images...I can feel his weight on my hips, the way he rocked against me like what we were doing was so natural to him. I can feel his hands on me, and how his thumbs closed over my throat so that I couldn't swallow. His fingertips pressed against my spine whenever he pressed me into the bed. I think I made some kind of stupid joke, but I was sort of surprised. At first I could breathe through my nose, but I guess he felt it because he pressed harder, and then I couldn't. No air."

"Umm, did I say Jesus? You must have been scared."

"That's the thing. I wasn't scared. I was so turned on I thought I'd explode. He leaned over me and licked my lip, and when he looked me in the eyes I came. He loosened his grip for a minute, and I flipped him. He fucked me, and life went on."

"Well, at least it ended well."

"That wasn't the end, Matt, that was the beginning."

Searching

Brian awoke with a start at 2:30. "Fucking curfew," he thought wearily, looking around to get his bearings. He hated waking up in a strange place, and Andrew's games room couch was the strangest place he'd been lately. Scanning the barely-lit room, he saw Andrew's head peeking out of a sleeping bag laid right beside him, but no Justin. Brian sat up slowly and squinted into the dark, but his blonde lover was nowhere to be found. This would have been a little hard to explain - not that he would if he was asked.

Easing himself off the couch, he padded to the stairs and crept up slowly, dreading what he'd see at the top. Would Justin be fucking that Matt kid on the kitchen table? It was only twenty to two now, so technically Justin still had nineteen minutes to do as he pleased - what did it matter where he was? Brian checked that line of thought at the gate. It mattered, all right.

The studio was empty, and so was the kitchen. Plates were soaking in the sink, which didn't really surprise Brian - some days it seemed like Justin needed a meal every couple

of hours just to keep going. Backtracking towards the studio, Brian listened for anything that would indicate where Justin might be, but the house was still. He eased open the door to the studio, which was in a slight disarray but otherwise deserted. He'd have to check upstairs.

Sighing, Brian trudged up the stairs, wondering why he was hunting for Justin. It was ridiculous to chase after him as if he couldn't sleep by himself any more. (Well, he really couldn't, but that was beside the point entirely.) Brian crested the stairs and passed the bathroom, which was empty, as was the first guest room. Feeling ridiculous but determined, he turned to the next room.

The door to this room was closed, and Brian gently turned the knob and pushed. A smallish figure was huddled under the blankets in this large room, and Brian crossed over to kiss Justin goodnight...and maybe he wasn't thinking as much about kissing as finally connecting with him in the only way he knew how. Brian leaned in, pulled back the blankets, and got the shock of his life.

It wasn't Justin, it was James.

The Best Advice

"The beginning? I don't get it." Matt closed his eyes and breathed deeply. This was a fucked-up situation if he'd ever heard one, and he felt like he was walking a tightrope, trying to give advice to a lunatic about a sociopath.

"Well, that's the part that's hard to explain." Justin continued. "It seemed like everything had gone back to normal, and then I got an email from him the next day. One liner. A song quote, from Alice Cooper."

"Brian likes Alice Cooper? I can't see it."

Justin grunted and turned towards Matt, daring him to look away. "Can we continue? Anyways, it said, 'I wanna hurt you just to hear you screaming my name.' Do you know how that made me feel?"

Matt sighed and patted Justin's leg. "Sweetie, I'm starting to think I really don't."

Justin shifted onto his side, until he and Matt were eye to eye. "That's my point! It should have felt bad, and weird, and wrong to get that message, but it felt good. Too good. Real. If anyone else on the planet said that to me, I'd call the cops! But I didn't feel that way at all. I felt...possessed, in both ways. Not just like he owned me, but like he'd put a demon inside me. The idea of Brian hurting me again was suddenly the best idea I'd ever heard. We started playing rougher after that, but it always seemed like Brian was waiting for something to happen. I guess that's why he put out the videos...mostly light bondage stuff, nothing frightening. I didn't even need to watch them, every time I walked by the pile of tapes I thought about us doing something like that. It felt like a knife twisting in

my gut in a sensual way, if you understand. I had to ask him to do it. I couldn't pass it up."

"He's slick."

"Well, yeah, he is. He knows how to sell the message, that's his job. After a while, I sort of got the idea he wanted to show me who's boss at our place. He needs to have the power all the time, you know, he's sort of predictable that way. I think this time he got more than he bargained for."

"How?" Matt murmured, raising an eyebrow.

Justin leaned closer to Matt, and sighed deeply. "He didn't think I'd like it, but I do. Now he can't back down, and I don't want to. I get too much out of it to say stop. The last time we fucked around, I realized that I could keep myself under control longer than he can. After five or six hours he loses his temper and gets vicious, but I can keep control long enough to take it."

Matt sat up and shifted in front of Justin, then leaned down and put his arm around his shoulders. "Sweetie, that stupid attitude is how people get hurt. Didn't he tell you about the safe word and stuff?"

Justin leaned into his embrace. "We did talk about it before that last time, but I can't imagine ever using it, or wanting to. I don't want it to stop, not really. Besides, I can do a lot of things to make him ease off without him even noticing, and the word never gets said. The last time I just cried until I couldn't cry any more."

Matt hugged Justin and started rubbing his arm. "You keep calling it the 'last' time. What happened? Was it bad?"

Justin rested against Matt's chest for a minute, ducking his head so Matt couldn't look him in the eye. "I guess so, looking in from the outside, but I didn't really even feel it until the next day. I looked awful. My face hurt and my throat was raw from crying. There were all these little broken blood vessels in my eyes. My back caught more of the belt than I thought it did, and a couple of the welts bled. I had bruises all over the place, and it took a couple of weeks for them to go away. I mean, you saw some of them."

Matt was startled. "What, you mean those are from two weeks ago?"

Justin shrugged. "Yeah, give or take." He stared off into space. "None of that was the bad part, it was Brian. Afterwards, he kept acting funny; like he'd done something he expected to be punished for. Brian lives his life with no apologies and no regrets, but for the next couple of days, that's all I heard. 'Oh, I shouldn't have done this' and 'Oh, I'm so sorry I did that to you' and all that shit. It was like he was pleading guilty to an imaginary crime. If he hadn't laid off with the mushy apologies, I would really have started to worry."

Matt grabbed Justin's shoulders and gave him a shake. "Honey, you're playing too hard. You can't do that again. It's too dangerous." He pulled Justin in for a hug. "It's so sad that you think you have to do this to keep him around."

"I DON'T think that! That's the thing. It was his idea, but by the end, he didn't want to do it. I could tell. I could see him begging with his eyes to stop him, let him save face. Let him be the boss and decide how much I should take. He even asked me to stop it, but I couldn't. I ruined The Plan by doing what I always do - taking everything he gives me with loud complaints but no move to stop him. Now he thinks that I have the upper hand somehow, and it's killing him. He'll do it again and again until I give in, and I'm not going to, because for some sick reason, I like it."

Matt gave Justin another squeeze and let him go. "Let me see if I understand this. Brian planned on getting you to submit to him."

"Right."

"So that he could be the boss and protect...what exactly?"

"Me from him, and him from me."

"Huh?"

"So I would be frightened enough to see the animal in him, and not fall too far in love... and so that he won't forget that he's supposed to be the big bad wolf, and it wouldn't do to fall for his prey."

"And the plan backfired."

"Exactly. I'm perfectly willing to be his prey, and he's already fallen for me," Justin whispered, leaning back to brush a hair from Matt's forehead. "Do you see the problem here?"

"He wants you to know that you're his prey and to run away before he kills you."

"You're such a drama princess. Brian would never do that. Besides, if it got that far, I like to think I'd have a little more sense than to let it happen."

Matt laughed loudly and leaned in to quickly peck Justin on the lips. "I don't think so, sweetie. You're sunk. You two are like gasoline and a match, and I just hope one of you comes to your senses."

Justin raised a hand to Matt's face, looking at him and then at his watch. "Listen, I have a few minutes left before I have to find Brian. Do you want to..."

Justin trailed off, interrupted by the sound of shattering glass.

Conflict

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Brian sputtered, stepping away from the bed as if it had bitten him.

James scrubbed at his unshaven face and tried to focus through the darkness. "Brian Kinney? What the hell are you doing in my room?" He scrabbled at a side table until his hand connected with the button on the bedside lamp. Turning it on, he ordered Brian grumpily, "Get the fuck out."

"Fuck you. Where is Justin?" Brian had backed up against a tall chest of drawers, and he now leaned against it in studied boredom. "I'm waiting."

James sat up in bed, raking his fingers through his hair. "If by 'Justin' you mean that blonde kid fucking Matt on the front porch, then that's where he is."

Brian went cold. It didn't bother him that Justin was fucking Matt...well, it did, but he didn't understand why, and he quickly pushed the thought away. The fact that James had been able to rattle him like this was really pissing him off. When James barked his name, he snapped out of his reverie.

"Kinney, get out of my house. Just take your shit and leave. You're not welcome here."

"Whatever. It's been charming." A sly, lazy grin crawled across his face, "Thank Andrew for his...hospitality for me."

James seemed to turn five shades of red as he leapt out of the bed. "You didn't fuck him. There's no way. He'd never do that!"

Brian meditated on how unattractive James really was. Short, in a stunted way. Eyes and hair the colour of mud. Bad teeth, bad skin. What did James see in this guy again? He laughed bitterly and clapped James on the shoulder. "He fucks anything that moves, buddy, and he always did! I couldn't stop him then, and you can't stop him now. The only thing you ever actually stopped him from doing was dating me." Relaxing his momentarily-furrowed brow, Brian leaned into James with a wicked smirk on his face. "You know, I heard a rumour that he's still out there fucking women too."

James shoved Brian's arm off and glared at him. "You're a liar, Kinney. Shut the fuck up and get out." James was furious, but his anger came off as a ridiculous temper tantrum.

"No man, I'm serious. He really is a man after my own heart-- no attachments, no commitments... well, except this sham relationship the two of you have. But I guess he needs somewhere to stay."

"No way. You're jealous. You could never control him, and you're just pissed off that I can."

Brian paused for a minute, and his tongue slid into his cheek as if in deep thought. "Andrew knew who he was and what he was before I came along. I could never have controlled him, and neither could you. If you think he's being faithful to you, you're fooling yourself." Brian paused again, to give maximum impact to his next words. "He probably doesn't even love you."

James exploded instantly, rushing at Brian, who easily sidestepped the attack. "You don't know what you're fucking talking about, Kinney! You wouldn't know love if it pissed in your cornflakes! You're a fucking empty, soulless bastard." Reaching the chest of drawers, James blindly began picking up cologne bottles and hurling them at Brian.

Brian retreated a bit across the room, avoiding the badly-thrown bottles easily, but growing angrier with each smash. Backing away from a fight reminded him of being that frightened child, cowering in front of Jack. No. He wasn't doing that again. James was going down.

James was startled when Brian began to charge him, but recovered enough to hastily put out a foot to try and trip him. Not all fooled, Brian changed his course to arrive at James' side, and with a sneer, shoved the wiry man into the chest of drawers. James hit it with a sickening thud, grabbing his side in pain at the impact. Ruthlessly, Brian kicked him hard in the stomach as he fell, smirking evilly as James coughed back what sounded like vomit. Brian was filled with an unfamiliar rush of vicious glee. His adrenaline was racing from the years of resentment and revenge he had stored up. It was finally time to make a withdrawal.

Brian knelt carefully beside James, who laid face-down on the floor, somehow simultaneously panting and gasping for air. Grabbing James' hair in both his hands Brian brutally slammed his head into the floor. "That's for fucking up my relationship with Andrew." James tried to scramble away, but Brian jammed his knee between the struggling man's shoulder blades. "Don't even fucking think about it. We're not done here yet."

Again Brian smashed James' head into the floor. "That was for conning me into fucking you, you little son of a bitch. You were lousy, by the way." Brian ground his knee into James' spine, evoking another satisfyingly terrible groan. "And this? This is for bullshitting me into believing you were a card-carrying masochist, just dying to be hurt. Jesus! Do you even fucking remember that?"

James fought desperately to turn over, eventually succeeding and momentarily throwing Brian off-balance. Taking fast advantage of the break in Brian's control, James struck out with a punch that connected solidly with Brian's jaw. Revived somewhat, James smiled at his success, struggling to sit up before he spoke. "I'm not an idiot, you stupid fuck, you bet your ass I remember! I tricked you into beating me up, then I threatened to have your

ass thrown in jail if you didn't drop Andrew and walk away forever. You think I'd fucking forget THAT? I was a goddamned genius! And you were such a little pussy that you just took it and left. Huh. You know, I really thought you'd fight harder for someone you supposedly loved."

As James' words assaulted his brain through his ringing head, Brian became even more furious, and his next punches were thrown without much aim. Swinging his right arm out, he gritted his teeth and roared, "You filed the fucking charges and wouldn't drop them unless I left. I had no fucking choice!"

James laughed coldly as he caught Brian's wildly-flung fist deftly in his hand. "Life is all about choices, Brian. You chose to save your ass over your relationship. Not my fault." He levelled a disdainful look at the younger man. "You're a loser, Brian. Get the fuck out of my house."

Fueled by ten years of repressed anger and the shattered heart of a terrified nineteen year-old, Brian's rage exploded. Without warning he brought his free hand up to James' throat and pressed his thumb into his enemy's windpipe. James' eyes went wide as he lost his ability to inhale. He let go of Brian's fist and reached up to his throat with both hands, scratching at Brian and vainly struggling to free himself.

Brian was beyond rational thought. Though his hand ached from squeezing James, he was energized by an adrenaline high so strong he could practically taste it. Just as he poised to watch the life drain out of James, he heard a voice slice into the room.

"Brian, stop."

The Beginning of the End

Brian turned to Justin, his face a strange smiling mask like Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*. Justin stepped into the room, and repeated his plea. "Stop it, Brian. Let him go."

Brian's response was swift. "Justin, get out. This isn't about you."

Justin took another step forwards, and softly stated, "Maybe it is, maybe not. I don't know. You have to let him go."

Brian laughed and gave James a little shake with his free hand, eliciting only a soft moan. "I'm almost finished here."

Justin shook his head no. "Come outside and talk to me, that's all I'm asking. Please?"

"Forget it."

"Think about Gus, think about Lindsay, fuck, think about Michael if you have to. What will they do without you? Don't go to jail over this guy. Come outside," Justin pleaded. "We can leave right now if you want."

Brian hesitated, and Justin spoke what he hoped would be the magic words. "Don't let him fuck you over again. If we leave now, you win."

Without a word, Brian released James and let him fall, unconscious, to the floor. He stalked out of the room, and Justin raced to keep up. The two men nearly ran down the stairs and out a patio door, ending up in the backyard of the house. Brian stopped, and Justin watched him warily in the bright moonlight.

Brian stood breathing heavily, eyes unfocused. Justin was relieved, feeling that he'd just averted a disaster. When Brian said, "Justin, come here," he didn't hesitate to go. Justin crossed the damp grass slowly, giving Brian a chance to pull away and be alone if he needed to. Justin put his arms around Brian and looked up, saying, "I'm proud of you."

Brian looked down at Justin, and a spark flew between them. Brian's heavy breathing seemed to take on a purpose, and Justin was confused until he saw the look in his eyes. He knew in an instant that he hadn't averted disaster; he'd just become the target himself. Brian smiled the Jack Nicholson smile again and said, "Take off your clothes, Justin."

Justin tried to pull away, but couldn't get free; Brian was holding him very tightly. Since he couldn't seem to escape, he considered his options. He could step up and let Brian vent his frustration and pain, or stand back and allow him to kill a slimy but currently innocent man. To Justin, there wasn't a choice - he was the only one who could save Brian from himself. Closing his eyes, he nodded.

Brian said, "Arms up," and Justin obeyed, trembling a bit as his shirt came off and the cool night air made contact with his skin. Next, Brian's hands dropped to Justin's zipper, and in moments his jeans and underwear were down. He smirked coldly and murmured, "I think I can trust you with the rest."

Justin quickly removed his shoes, socks and bunched-up jeans, standing naked and trembling in front of Brian. Brian appraised him by the garden light. "You're still marked up."

"Yes."

"Still mine."

"Yes."

"Did you enjoy it?" Brian asked casually, eyes boring into him as he circled Justin like a lion with his prey. Occasionally he reached out to trace the pattern of the faint bruises that remained.

Justin hesitated, shivering at the inspection. "Yes...more than you know."

Remembrance

Damn, it's cold out here. I've never felt this exposed in my life. When Brian first brought me back to the loft, I couldn't believe that he just took off his clothes like that, in front of a stranger. I've never seen anyone as comfortable being naked as he is. I'm learning to be like that, comfortable in my own skin, but this is different. He's not looking at me, he's looking into me. It's hot. He's asking me if I enjoyed it the last time we played. If he only knew. I lied when I told Matt I didn't remember much, because I remember every fucking second.

When I brought the ties back from the dresser, he told me to sit on the bed. I didn't really know what to do, so I hopped up and sat cross-legged in the middle. He chuckled and told me to stick out my hands so he could bind them together. I stuck them out and crossed them at the wrists, and he laughed and laughed. 'You watch too many movies. Straight out. If they're crossed, you'll be able to slip out.' Hmmm, really? Good to know. He bound them tighter than I expected, and I tested the knots by giving my arms a quick pull. For some reason, that made him laugh again. 'Silk is tougher than steel, Justin. It can stop bullets. You're not getting loose until I let you go.'

He stared at my face for a long time, holding another of the ties in his hand. He'd bring his hand close to my face, and then drop it, and then raise it again, like he was making a decision. Eventually he just dropped it on the night table and said, 'This is enough to start.' I sort of just sat there, I mean, I didn't actually watch the videos, so I didn't know what to do.

The beginning wasn't any different than any other time we've had sex, except that my hands were pretty useless. I sort of just put them over my head and relaxed while Brian kissed me. Funny, when you're tied up like that, even a kiss feels like an invasion. He slipped his tongue into my mouth and I accepted it ravenously. Kissing is better when you spice things up a bit.

I started to notice that I was at a real disadvantage. He could tickle me if he wanted to, and he did. His fingers slid over that tiny spot on my rib until I was writhing breathless, begging him to cut it out. He didn't. I think my cock was pressing into his side, because he got really distracted. After a few minutes of me giggling hysterically, he moved on.

I could feel his hands sliding up and down my body, and it was really good. The caressing became harder, more like kneading, and I began to feel some real pressure in his touch. Then the kneading became harder, his hands grabbing at my flesh until I cried out in pain. I'm sure he noticed, but he didn't stop, and I would have been disappointed if he did. He pinched my nipple tightly, and the flash of pain made me jump. He continued down my stomach and legs, occasionally stopping to pinch me so hard I had to suck in

my breath. His fingers slid over my cock for a second, and my hips jerked up to meet them. He laughed and slapped it not so lightly, telling me to be patient.

I think that's when he started biting me. It wasn't much at first, a sweet, soft kiss on my stomach, and then a hickey here and there. I was really surprised when the teeth came out - he was sucking on a tiny patch of my thigh, too, too close to my dick, and he bit down. The cry that came out of me then was a lot louder. He lifted his head a little and his eyes met mine, and my God, he was smiling. He'd intended that one to hurt, and it did. I didn't even get a chance to take another breath, and he was just below my hipbone, doing it again. The sensation was so different from anything we'd done before, the soft kiss becoming harder and firmer, then the suction that made it throb, and finally the teeth that caused a bright splash of pain that lasted as long as he bit. Brian is pathologically afraid of teeth, and frankly I was amazed that he knew what to do with them. He only did it once more, finding a soft spot off on an angle from my nipple. There seemed to be a little more skin there, and when he ground down with his teeth, it was like my body was trying to crawl away from the pain, even though I wasn't. I could practically feel my nerves screaming in protest.

When he moved down to my cock, I had no idea that he still planned on using his teeth. It hurt before, but this was my first big surprise, because I had never really been in sexual pain. The whipping and biting hurt, but they were just topical skin things. Brian had never caused me more than the briefest physical discomfort, and this was so much more. He was alternating little licks and sucks with tiny, firm nibbles that seemed to catch only a layer or two of skin. These bites sent me flying off the bed, my body bending in self-defense as I wailed in misery. Brian asked me if I remembered the safe word, and I told him I did. He asked me if I wanted to use it, and I told him I didn't. I don't understand the look he gave me after that.

He told me to roll over, and I took a really deep breath before I did.

He jumped off the bed for a while, and I almost looked up to see what he was doing. He told me to put my face back down, and when he came back, I'd know it. I sure as hell did. I heard a whistling sound in the air, and then a whack that felt like liquid fire had been drawn across my back. I remember saying, 'What the fuck was that?' but he didn't answer, he just told me to put my face back down. I might have said no, because when he hit me again, it was twice as hard and hurt twice as bad. I asked him again what it was, and he brought his narrow belt around in front of my eyes and told me that if I didn't shut up, he'd put it around my neck instead. I shut up and put my face back down.

I've heard since then that some people forget how many times they've been whipped. I never will. It was twenty-three. I don't know if that's a lot or not, but it seemed like it at the time. Every stroke made the air sing and whistle, every contact was like a line of hornet stings. Eventually, the welts started to cross, and those places hurt ten times worse. I'm pretty sure that this is when I started screaming, and if anyone can take that without screaming, they deserve a medal.

He was a little choked up when he told me to roll over again. I didn't really want to do it, I could feel something wet on my back and I had a sneaky suspicion it might be blood. Lying on those bloody wounds would wreck Brian's sheets, and then he'd really give me something to cry about. He'd doubled up the belt to toss it into the closet, but when I hesitated he brought it down hard and fast on my ass, maybe a dozen times, and told me to move it or else. If I thought the belt hurt before, this was much worse. Doubled up, it was heavy enough to really move my flesh and not just slice into it. I don't know if you can be punched by broken glass, but that's what it felt like. I shrieked when it hit, and moaned when he pushed me over onto my back.

It hadn't occurred to me to use my safe word yet, I mean, it wasn't that bad. Sure, it hurt, but as long as he stayed the hell away from my cock, I could handle it okay. Besides, I'd never been so fucking hard in my entire life. Even when I started crying I still didn't think about saying Powerpuff. I wouldn't give in. It was turning into a game that I wanted to win.

I think something in Brian was changing, too. Even when he was inflicting pain before, biting or whatever, he'd been careful and deliberate. Now, he was getting sloppy, bending my fingers back or pressing down on my stomach with his knee if he wanted me to stay put. I looked him in the eye and he was manic, absolutely going crazy with it. He was breathing harder than I was. He was hard, but he seemed focused on finding new ways to cause pain. I didn't want to wait that long. I was crying and begging him to fuck me, please fuck me now, and something about that really did it for him.

I don't remember him pausing to get ready, but I know that I wasn't. He's probably fucked me a thousand times, but that was the first time that it had caused real pain. It was different than the usual pinch I get from Brian being impatient. This was a slicing pain that couldn't be mistaken for anything good. It really hurt, and for the first minute or so, I was suffering. Amazing how something can feel so good or so awful. Even though it hurt, I could still feel the pleasure through the haze, and I was hanging on to it. He was fucking me so hard that my back was rubbing against the bed, and that added a new layer of pain, but even then, it wasn't all bad. There was pleasure in there too, and I was holding on to it. I was sobbing and begging for more, and harder, but I'm not sure it made any sense at this point. It was like chanting, oh god oh my fucking god don't stop Brian god fuck me fuck me harder please please god Brian fuck me...

I was pretty close to coming when he made his last move. I was on overload, every nerve was trying to send pleasure and pain signals at the same time, and I felt dizzy and drunk. Brian was plowing into my ass, and I just kept begging for more and more. He leaned forward with that crazy look in his eye, and I thought for sure he was going to kiss me when it happened again. His hands slid up around my throat, and at least this time I had the sense to take a deep breath before he started. It was so much more vicious than last time, he was using both hands and squeezing very hard, but he never broke the rhythm of our fucking. I tried to suck in a breath, but there was no way. I could feel where the heel of his hand was closing off my ability to swallow. My face was filling up with blood, and that hurt worse than everything else, the feeling that my eyes would explode if the blood

couldn't get out. It seemed like there wasn't enough room in Brian's hands for everything in my throat, and it was all starting to swell and close off. Suddenly I felt like my whole body had started vibrating, and lights were flashing in my head. My orgasm was long and mind-blowing, a fitting end to an evening of torture, as far as I was concerned. I would have been disappointed if it were any other way. Brian started coming as my ass clenched. I could tell by the way his whole face just changed all at once, like something had escaped from his soul and it took him by surprise. He was loud, far louder than I had been, and after he was finished, he pulled his hands away from my throat as if I were burning metal. We looked at each other for a minute, then he carefully untied me before he laid beside me and closed his eyes. I tucked my head into the crook of his shoulder, and we slept for a long, long time.

We bought new sheets.

Consent

"So should I do it again?"

Justin hesitated, not knowing what to say. They weren't alone, or even in private here. There were patio lights everywhere, and the full moon was almost as bright as day. There was no comfortable bed to sink into when it was all over. On the other hand, he couldn't ignore the feeling in his stomach, the screaming need that was filling him up. He wanted that again, the delicious feeling of pleasure and panic mixed with anticipation.

"I don't know."

Brian pulled off his shirt, tossing it to the side and barely breaking his gaze. "Come now, Sunshine, only yes or no answers allowed on this test." He reached out to run a finger lightly down Justin's arm. "Do you want to do this," he continued, his hand sliding across Justin's stomach, "Or not?"

"Yes."

"You realize we have certain standards to meet now. I can't let you down this time."

Justin felt like he was melting under Brian's touch. His hands were running lightly all over his body, and it felt like an electric shock every time they touched. He shivered, and whispered, "You never let me down."

Brian clenched his fist in Justin's hair, eliciting a sharp cry. "That's not true. I fuck with you all the time. You're always disappointed in me."

"I'm not! Don't put words in my mouth."

Brian released his grip, running his hand down Justin's face, following the curve of his cheekbone. "You want me to say I love you. I won't do that. I know that hurts you, so don't lie to my face."

Justin sighed sadly, but still shook his head no. "Three fucking words. Do you want me to just forget everything and leave over three fucking words? Sometimes I want to, but I can't. We have a connection when we're fucking, it's like my body is on fire, like you're consuming me or a drug is racing through me. I can't give that up. I've had sex with a lot of people, not just you, you know. I don't get that from anyone else. I want that connection, and I want it with you."

Brian leaned in, his eyes dark. "I don't believe in love, Justin, I believe in fucking."

Justin smiled, and leaned in to kiss Brian passionately. Brian responded roughly, and they clawed at each other for several moments. When they pulled apart, Justin reached up to cup Brian's cheek gently in his hand. "That's when I know for sure you love me, Brian."

Brian placed a hand on Justin's shoulder and pushed him towards the ground. "Then I guess we're going to have to change that."

When I Know You Love Me

Justin lay sprawled on the ground, staring anxiously at Brian. It was always best not to push him on when he was in a mood, and this was worse than he'd ever seen - worse than the New York thing, even. Brian was seething, looking for a target for emotions he hadn't ever expressed before. Justin had asked Brian's demons out to play, and they'd finally accepted the invitation.

Justin hastily rose to a kneeling position, staring at the dewy grass with his head bowed. Sure, he'd only seen it on a porn site once, but it felt like the right thing to do. Brian smirked at his compliance, but there was no happiness behind that smile.

"Last chance to get off the highway, Justin. Are you in?"

Justin looked up at Brian and fearlessly replied, "I'm in."

Brian smirked. "Good boy. Eyes down." Justin obeyed, and Brian circled the naked boy slowly, sometimes reaching down to touch his neck or slide a finger down his arms. Justin's skin immediately sprung up in goosebumps.

"Cold out here," Brian remarked casually, returning to face Justin several paces away.

"Yes."

"Do people still die of hypothermia?"

"I think so." Justin shivered again, his mind racing for calm. "They call it exposure."

"Appropriate," Brian laughed, "But pedestrian. You should go out with a bang."

Justin knelt quietly, fighting the rising panic that always seemed to accompany these encounters for some reason. Go out with a bang? Did other people worry about being murdered by their boyfriends in the middle of nowhere?

Brian flicked his eyes towards Justin, and then looked away in mock boredom. "We don't have any of the tools of the trade around tonight." Justin nodded a bit; he'd considered that before he agreed. Brian mused, "I guess we'll really see whether or not you can hold up."

Brian circled around behind Justin, crouching behind the still-kneeling boy. Justin could hear only breathing, then a slight jingling as something cold and metallic was pressed to his back, then over his neck and up the back of his head. Justin fought to stay still.

Brian ran the key back down his neck, and then gently touched it to the inside of Justin's ear, causing a violent shake and a cough that he couldn't stop. Brian frowned, saying, "You won't like what happens if you move again." He circled the key around to the other side of Justin's head while the boy fought to stay calm and still. He tensed slightly as the key approached his other ear, already knowing what would happen. The contact was made, and Justin couldn't suppress the harsh coughing spell that followed. Brian shook his head, clucking, "I told you not to move."

Brian watched Justin trembling as he moved the key slowly down to Justin's back. He gasped at the cold and Brian laughed, running the key over his back in a crosshatch pattern that left behind shallow white scratches. He repeated the pattern over and over, watching the scratches turn red and swell in the moonlight. Justin trembled at each pass, as the sharp, cold metal made his skin begin to burn. Brian repeated the pattern on a larger scale, watching the welts beginning to form where the key had scraped over and over. When he was content with his artwork, he leaned in to touch his tongue to the burning ridges. Justin yelped and flinched away.

"I said, 'Don't move'! Three strikes, Sunshine." Brian hissed, slapping his open hand down directly onto the welts, causing Justin to writhe in pain. "If you move, you'll ruin my picture."

A tear escaped Justin's eye, but he took a deep breath and returned to his position. Brian smirked again. "Fast learner, but we knew that already." He returned to his drawing, engraving words and initials into Justin's pale skin. When Justin's back was a mass of painful welts and scores, Brian leaned back to admire his handiwork. "Wish you could see this. I've outdone myself."

He jumped up and came around until he was standing directly in front of his prey. Justin was dying to touch Brian, smell his skin, feel his cock, but he was keeping his distance.

He began to wonder if this encounter would actually help Brian or not, since he didn't seem to be getting anything but spiteful glee out of it. Even now, he was standing and staring off into space.

Justin raised his head to look at Brian, and was rewarded with a fierce slap to the face. Justin was stunned, raising his hand to touch his stinging cheek. Brian looked rattled, but his voice was calm as he said, "I didn't tell you to look up, either."

Justin nodded and fixed his gaze on the ground.

Brian desperately wanted Justin to be safe, and this was the only way.

The Best Laid Plans

I can't believe I just hit him. I didn't really hit him, did I? Fuck, there it is, I can see it on his face. My handprint is there, burned into his skin where I've touched him so many times. What the fuck is wrong with me? This has gone too far.

I don't really know when I decided to do this, but it was fun when we started. He loved it. I loved doing it. I didn't have to go out of my way to make it happen, either - he's pretty good at taking a hint, well, in bed anyways. I had been trying to regain the upper hand for a while, and I thought this would be as good a way as any. It was better to let it happen naturally, because when I went out of my way to dominate him, I think he went out of his way to submit. I never thought it would be this hard! I started looking for things that he'd never agree to do.

Damn him, he always agreed.

The first couple of times, I didn't see that his cries were an act. I was trying to take it easy, but still let him know I would push him past his limits. I wanted him say his safe word and admit that I'm still in control. Let's just say it didn't work.

There are so many things I thought I'd never do. I'd never purposely cause him pain. I'd never raise a hand to him; never cause a bruise. Hey, I'm not Jack. I wouldn't do some of the stuff we did in bed to my worst enemy, but once we got started, I couldn't stop. I never really understood this shit before, but I do now. He's hot every day of the year, but he's gorgeous when he's suffering. I always had to make it last just a little bit longer. He always whined, and always cried, but he **never** tried to stop me, and fuck me, I never realized it.

I decided to plan out a little scene that was sure to be painful enough to make him submit. We did everything that I had planned, and he still hadn't said the magic word. Wasn't even close. I started to panic, and I'm still panicking. I mean, how much more is this kid willing to take? That's when I thought of the belt, and picking up that piece of leather to strike Justin was the one of the hardest things I'll ever have to do. I swung very hard. I wanted to make it count.

For a second, there was no sound other than the whistling thump, then he let out a tiny little hitching groan that meant I'd broken through his act. Great. Just a couple more shots, and it would be over. He was being real, and his sobbing was like music to me. He'd give in now. I'd hear the safe word, and we could go back to normal.

He didn't say it.

I kept hitting him.

He moaned, and wailed, and eventually he screamed. I've gotta say that was pretty hot, and it made it easier. I watched the welts rise up. My arm was getting tired, and I lost count of how many times I saw that belt slam into his back. I'd actually started to get a bit of a rhythm going when his skin broke open. Shit, I didn't want that to happen; ever since the bashing the sight of his blood is revolting to me.

He was really starting to piss me off - he should have stopped me before this. What kind of idiot lets someone beat on them like that? I just wanted to fuck him and go to sleep, and pretend it had never happened. He wouldn't go along. When he refused to roll over, I really lost it. I beat his ass until my arm wouldn't move anymore, and then I picked him up and flipped him over myself.

He had to surrender. He had to. We'd gone too far now for me to go home without my prize. He was begging me to fuck him, and I did it in the most brutal way I could think of. Damned if he didn't beg for more, and harder, and I wanted to give it to him. Fuck, I wanted to be in him so badly, I would have broken down doors to get to him. It was surreal to hear him begging me to hurt him, damage him, own him like that. It was fucking incredible and I was fighting for control. It had to be now or never.

He wasn't surprised when I put my hands on his throat, but I was. I wasn't really thinking anymore, I just wanted to make him submit. The first time I'd done this, it had been a little game, but not this time. This was for keeps. I choked him hard until my hands hurt and his face filled up with blood. He looked drunk and like he was too far away for me to touch. I shook him like a doll, thinking, 'Fuck, Justin, come back and say the word before it's too late.' That moment is when I finally caught on, and I felt like an idiot.

He would never say it.

Not like this.

Not when my cock was up his ass and he was too close to coming to care.

He looked at me, and his eyes were wide and bloodshot, but tranquil. His body was rocking back and forth, instinctively fighting to get my hands away from his neck. He would never breathe again unless I let go, and I got off on that so much. The feeling of

power was unbelievable. I let go when we came, and for a while, I was happy. I had held his life in my hands; I had the control.

I didn't realize until the next day that he didn't say the word, and here we are.

Look at him. He trusts me. Why would anyone do that? I could have killed him last time, so obviously I can't be trusted. He's so beautiful down there on the ground, so calm. I'm being an asshole and he just keeps on taking it. That sure as hell won't last forever, will it?

He scared me last time.

I scared me last time.

It shouldn't have gone that far. The next morning he looked like he'd been jumped, and I have never felt so fucking sorry in my life. Sometimes sorry isn't bullshit, it's the only way to say I never should have gone there in the first place. Waking up with him was the worst part. He was so proud of himself! An act of violence had taken place, I was the aggressor, and it made him...happy. His blood was on my hands again, but this time it was my fault. He was still romanticizing it in the morning, but he's not the one who had to put cream on his back or throw out those bloodstained sheets. It makes me sick just thinking about it.

When I looked at him, I saw pain and cruelty and blood. He saw, in himself, a man who had accepted his lover's touch without limits. Houston, we have a problem.

I tried to make this stop. I asked him so many times to use his safe word...well, I didn't tell him to, but he should have known that's what I meant. I pushed him beyond his limits, beyond *any* sane person's limits.

Beyond my limits.

Too bad that I don't have a safe word; I'd have gotten the hell outta Dodge a long time ago. I can't back down from this, though. He's still a kid. I'm not going to be around forever, and I'm not going to be the last person to do this to him. I can see it in his eyes when we're fucking, how a single pinch or whispered word can make him hotter instantly. He needs it too much. He needs to see that not everyone who plays rough wants everyone to come out of it safely. I have to show him where his limits should be.

I need to get control of this now.

I've been standing here thinking for too long. I should walk around and look menacing, but my heart isn't in it. I can still see the marks from last time, and that doesn't make me feel good. It reminds me of my mother covering up a fresh batch of bruises before church on Sunday morning.

Ugh, put that thought out of my head. I move towards him now, and I touch him. I need to feel him. His hair feels so soft against my fingers, his skin so smooth and warm. Even now, after everything, he still turns into my touch. He is a living sacrifice, right at my feet.

Dammit Justin, why are you doing this to me?

I'm running out of ideas here. He's sitting there all zoned out and serene, like the fucking Mona Lisa. He thinks I can't damage him. He has to be wrong.

I'm doing this for your own good, Justin. Please just say what I need to hear so we can pretend that all of this never happened.

I've gotta get my head together. We have to end this. I brought just one prop, accidentally, and I'm going to use it. I hope it's enough. It has to be. If this doesn't do it, I don't know what will.

Fair Warning

Brian fumbled in his pockets until he found what he was looking for. He pulled it out and held it up in the moonlight, but Justin couldn't quite see what it was.

"Justin, you know what this is. Think about it. Look at it. What is it for?"

Justin scrunched up his nose in concentration, staring at the object in Brian's hand. It was small, about the size of a finger, maybe. Not heavy or bulky. Brian flipped it over and over in his hands, like he was anxious about holding it. Suddenly, Justin knew exactly what it was, and what it was for.

"No, Brian, no no no," he stammered, trying to find the calm that he'd had just moments before.

"We're going to play a little game."

"No, not with that. You can't."

Brian sneered and advanced on Justin, locking their gazes. "I don't remember asking for permission. I told you, we have standards to uphold. This is a natural progression."

"Oh my God, no, you can't. You can't," Justin was shaking his head as he was speaking, his voice going higher and higher as he considered the possibilities ahead.

"I can, but I won't. I want you to do it." (Say the word, Justin.)

"What?"

"You're going to do it, and I'm going to watch you."

"That's sick."

"Yeah."

"I don't want to."

"I know." (Please say it.)

"Then why are you making me?"

"Because I want to see it. I want to take this to the limit. Don't you think that's hot?" (I'm gonna be sick here, Justin, make it stop, only you can make it stop.)

"This isn't hot, Brian." (Um, actually it is, but I'm not going to be the one to say so.)

"You're the one who drew the lines."

Justin sighed, conceding the point. Brian was right, it was his choice not to give in, and he still wouldn't. He was so fucking scared, but he just couldn't say no. "So what now?"

Brian turned the knife over and over in his hands. He was asking something completely illogical and totally insane, but he had to go big on this one. This had to stop. He felt cold and sick at the thought of what he was asking Justin to do, but nothing else had stopped him.

He watched Justin kneeling on the ground, obviously afraid of the situation, but strangely unafraid of him. He looked small down there, chilled and terrified and still so hard he looked like he'd shoot at any second. 'This is fucking demented,' he thought as Justin's fingers wove in and out of each other while he tried to stay calm. Justin reached up, trying to take the knife, once, twice, but his hands shook so badly that it was a futile gesture. Brian prayed, actually prayed to God, that Justin would just say the word.

It didn't come.

"Let me make the first cut. You're shaking," Brian observed coolly, his mind still raging. He could not do this. The knife was as sharp as a razor, and he knew it. He'd been using it to cut twine for newspapers last week and it had gotten dull, so he'd sharpened it. He should have left it dull, the cuts would have been ragged but they'd be shallower and less dangerous.

"Is it clean?" Justin asked, struggling to stay composed. This isn't what he'd bargained for at all, but his adrenaline was racing. He was pretty sure that wanting this to happen classified him as a deviant.

"Yeah." Brian opened up the folding knife until he heard the tiny click, marvelling how it went from decoration to deadly weapon in one movement, sort of like their encounter.

Justin held out his left arm, and though it shook in fear, he gazed adoringly at Brian. Brian knelt in front of him, turning Justin's arm palm up and holding the knife in the same grip one would use for a scalpel. They stared at each other for what seemed like an eternity, and Brian lowered the knife to Justin's skin.

Lines in the Sand

The knife touched Justin's flesh, and a pinpoint of blood pooled against the tip. Brian bit down on his lip and gently dragged it, watching the pinpoint of blood become a droplet with mounting terror. He gently dragged the knife again, then gave it to Justin, hand shaking. When he spoke, his voice came out strangled. "That's a pretty good cut. A couple more like that and you'll bleed to death. You need to say the word, Justin, that's how this ends. It's just one word."

Justin was visibly frightened, but reached for the knife without hesitation. "It's my turn." He picked up the knife and quickly dragged it in a line parallel to Brian's. When the blood started to pool around the blade, he handed it back to Brian, no longer shaking. "Your turn again."

Brian stared at the bleeding wounds before grabbing the knife roughly and throwing it to the grass. "Are you fucking psychotic? Justin, stop this right now!"

"No."

"NOW!"

"NO!"

In one move, Brian grabbed the knife back into his hand and pressed it against Justin's throat. "Fine then. If you don't end it, I will. I can end this right now." Brian pressed the tip of the knife gently into Justin's neck until a droplet of blood flowed. "I can end YOU right now."

Justin didn't move. "You can, but I'm hoping you won't." He was getting shocky and euphoric from the cuts, and he was grinning like an idiot. Brian couldn't tell if the silly smile was real or an imminent sign of danger. "You can't hurt me in any way that really matters."

"What makes you say that? I have bitten you, bruised you, whipped you and strangled you. You're sitting here bleeding from wounds that I made."

"You love me."

"Well if all that is love, and sitting here with a knife to your throat is love, then loving me is a death sentence."

"Who's being the drama queen now? No matter how you hurt me or try and tell me to run, I'm still around to tell the tale. I've still got your number."

Brian just held the knife against Justin and stared, at a loss for words. So much for the Brian Kinney mystique.

Justin broke their gaze to gape down at his fast bleeding arm, watching the blood flow as if he was in a trance. After a minute, a drunken look crossed his face, and he whispered, "I'm getting dizzy. I think we should stop now."

Brian softly pulled the knife away from Justin's throat, exhaling sharply in relief. It wasn't the word he'd been waiting for, but he couldn't afford to wait any longer. With Justin's arm now covered in streaming red rivulets, that admission of danger was close enough.

Justin ran his finger along the paths of the blood flow, trying to clean it off before Brian really started to panic. He popped the finger into his mouth, and when Brian startled, he reached out to brush a hair off of Brian's forehead with his now-clean finger. "I won't say the safeword. When I agreed to your rules, I didn't know I'd end up liking it so much, and I don't want to deny you any part of me. I can't say it, so don't try and force me."

"I'm *not* trying to force you."

Justin smiled. "Like hell you aren't!" He solemnly held up his bleeding arm until the tiny streams of red coursed down to his elbow, watching Brian shudder. "You think this is repulsive. Do you think I'm blind? The way you scrunched up your face when you cut into me was priceless." He was actually beaming now. He took Brian's hand and dropped his voice down low.

"There are words that I'm waiting to hear from you, but I don't push for them as much anymore. There have always been things you can't say and do, and now there are things I can't say and do. I've learned to get used to it. Now that we both have lines in the sand, maybe you should do the same thing."

Brian touched a finger to the small cut on Justin's neck, pressing gently to stop the bleeding. "So this is what, a truce? A stalemate?" He didn't normally engage anyone in this type of discussion, but he needed to understand what had just happened.

Justin smiled. "Let's call it a negotiation." That sounded good and strong. No winners, no losers.

"Okay." Brian said, pulling Justin into his arms for a tentative kiss. Nothing had really changed, but it felt like everything had.

"Can I get dressed now? It's fucking cold out here." Justin whimpered when they broke the kiss, dabbing at a few stray droplets on his arms.

"No way. I have plans for you."

"Come on, Brian, I'm freezing here."

Brian smiled, noting that Justin's lips were starting to turn blue. "Fine then. Let's get you taken care of and go home."

Epilogue

Brian found his shirt, and watched as Justin gingerly pulled his clothes back on. He picked it up, frowning at it before starting to dress. "Here, wear this one," he said, throwing it to Justin instead. "Yours is too tight, it'll hurt."

"First time you've ever complained about my clothes being too tight. Usually they're just too ugly."

"I'm trying to be nice, don't push it. And don't get it all bloody, either."

"Aw, thank you sir, it's ever so romantic of you."

Brian chuckled. "I just want you to be able to lie on your back. It serves my purposes."

Justin had forgotten about the welts on his back, and groaned as the fabric touched his sore skin. "Damn, why don't they tell you it's gonna hurt ten times worse afterwards?"

Brian laughed again and poked Justin in his good arm. "It's called adrenaline. You should know about that by now."

"I guess so. Say, what did you write on my back? I felt letters but I kept losing track."

Brian chuckled. "That's for me to know and you to find out. I'm sure they'll still be there in the morning."

"Is it dirty?"

"Some of it."

Justin thought that was a good answer. "Can we go say goodbye to Matt and...Andrew?" he said, and the unnatural emphasis on Andrew's name made Brian anxious.

"I think I'm done with Andrew for now." Brian looked away, waiting for the lecture he just knew was coming.

"Come on, Brian." Justin smiled and dragged Brian towards the patio doors. "Good friends are hard to find. We can't let them feel neglected."

"Did you make Matt feel not-neglected before?" Brian muttered, an uneasy tone in his voice.

"We had a moment. What about you and Andrew? Do I have to run him down with the Jeep?"

"If you fucking touch my Jeep, you're dead. We had a moment."

"Then I guess our work here is done, and we should go say goodbye."

Matt held Andrew's shoulders from behind as they watched the Jeep pull away into the darkness. Both sets of eyes followed the taillights down the laneway and onto the road. Finally, Andrew turned to Matt, exhaustion visible in his teary eyes.

"It was nice of them to stay until James left." Matt said, rubbing Andrew's arms in the cold night air. "I just wish we didn't get the audio version of Brian and Justin's make-up sex." Andrew flinched and Matt patted him gently. "Are you gonna be okay?"

Andrew sighed, running his fingers through tousled hair. "James has been lying to me about absolutely everything for ten years. Our whole relationship was built on a lie. I couldn't let him stay."

"Are you sorry Brian's gone?"

"Sort of. We had something once, but I guess you can't go back in time. Did Justin's artwork turn out okay?"

"He's amazing." Matt looked wistfully at the front porch, and then out towards the road. "They're long gone now, we should go in."

"Okay," Andrew allowed Matt to lead him through the kitchen and through the hallway door, but stopped as they reached the stairs. "I'm not ready to sleep yet."

"We don't have to sleep."

"You're not talking about watching television, are you?"

"I'm not going to pretend that I mean anything special to you. Just let me be your friend. You can decide what that means for yourself." Matt smiled gently and leaned in to kiss Andrew. Their lips touched gently in a kiss open for interpretation. "For what it's worth, I'm very taken with young artists."

Andrew laughed. "Good thing Brian didn't notice, or he'd have chased your ass away so fast your head would spin. You'd be begging James for a ride to the city."

Matt giggled, then sighed deeply. "Honey, nobody can take Justin away from Brian. They'll never be apart for long, because they're both fucking crazy. Besides, nobody else could stand them!"

Andrew leaned back to look into Matt's eyes. "Not fond of high-maintenance men?"

Matt shook his head. "Sorry, I don't know how to fix one with those problems."

"Yeah, Brian's pretty messed up. We all just try to help him to hang on."

"He's not the one I'm talking about. People should be locked up for doing the things that Justin described to me tonight. They're both mentally ill."

"I know. I saw a bit of Justin's back when they came in smiling like idiots. I didn't even want to ask about his arm, but it's not really our business, unless you know something that I don't."

"Nope, that's the sick part, Justin wants it and Brian wants to do it...but neither of them probably wanted what they ended up getting."

"Sounds like a learning experience. Just think, Brian Kinney, learning about life. I'm glad that they're happy. God knows why, but they are."

"Isn't there a British saying about nothing being weirder than fags?"

Andrew roared with laughter, taking Matt's hand to soften the insult. "Hey, I resemble that remark! Besides, that's not what that means. It means that there's nothing in the world stranger than people." He touched Matt's chest, running his finger down towards the button on his jeans.

Matt smiled gently into Andrew's eyes, saying, "I think that those two are the strangest people I've ever met!"

Andrew undid the top button of Matt's jeans and whispered back, "I agree. I think I need a good friend tonight, babe...because if that's a relationship, I sure as hell don't want one!"

Push – Part Two

Prelude

"Brian?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you love me?"

"What? Jesus, Justin, don't start with me. It's four o'clock in the fucking morning!"

"Sorry... I...I...."

"Shit, don't cry. Why do you always do this?"

"Do what?"

"You know I'm not going to say it, but you push me anyways. You're making both of us miserable. Quit it."

"I just want to hear it sometimes."

"Well, you're not going to, so forget it!"

"Fine... I love you, you know."

"I know."

"You used to say thank you."

"Fuck, I'll say it slow. It's FOUR IN THE MORNING, Justin. I don't want to have a conversation, I want to get some goddamned sleep before I have to get up in...shit...two hours!"

"D - ddo you even care?"

"Please stop crying... Oh okay... yeah, I do care."

"Okay, that's better than nothing."

"I think so."

"I love you, Brian."

"Go to sleep."

Pool

Brian walks up to Justin and slides his hands up inside Justin's shirt. It's like the whole friggin' world is their bedroom.

"Hey, little boy, pay now or pay later." he whispers, as if I wasn't even there.

"Definitely pay later, Brian. I'm doing okay for a change," Justin mutters, trying to see a decent shot on the table. We've been playing pool in the afternoon for a couple of months, and I beat him every time. With a little practice, he could be a decent player, but he's too easily distracted. Emmett shows up, or Brian comes in with Michael, and the game is shot to hell.

"You're gonna regret that, I have plans for you." he whispers, pulling Justin back against him to speak directly into his ear. I try not to overhear them, but hey, Woody's is quiet in the late afternoon, and I'm not deaf.

"Oh, really?" he says, turning to give Brian one of those big, bright Sunshine smiles that lets him get away with murder. "I'm going to remember that."

"Good. Don't finish up too early then, I'm supposed to be meeting Michael."

Justin puts on a little pout. "I thought we could go home and have dinner together."

"Not tonight, I've got other plans." Brian squeezes his ass and walks towards the washroom. I come around the table and watch Justin half-heartedly line up his shot. He looks up towards where Brian went, and of course, misses.

"You should have banked it a little more. It would have gone in." I'm trying to encourage him because he's just learning. "You're getting better."

"Thanks, Ted" he says, and moves out of the way to let me make my shot. I'm pretty good at pool. The proper combination of trigonometry and careful thrusting will always work. The shot goes as perfectly as I expect it to. I'm not as good as Brian, but then again, I spend about half as much time here. Justin seems antsy, and I notice the bruise on his wrist for about the tenth time. I debate staying out of it, but just as I decide to ask him about it, he turns to me.

"Ted, you've been staring at me all afternoon. What's going on?"

I set my beer down and take a step closer to him, briefly checking to see where Brian might be. He says he's not the jealous type, but I've seen enough to know that's not true at all.

"Are you doing it willingly, Justin?" I whisper, looking down at my feet the whole time.

"Doing what?"

"Don't play dumb with me. You guys have been different for the last couple of months. You don't think anyone's paying attention, but I've seen things and I've heard things. You need to know that you can't keep it a secret from everybody."

If someone were confronting me like this, I'd be falling all over myself making up excuses. I can't get over how he's so cool and collected. Brian must be rubbing off on him in more ways than one. "Ted, could you be a little less vague?"

I think about just butting out, leaving it alone for tonight and minding my own damn business, but I can't. This is so uncomfortable, but I really think I have an obligation to ask. He's still just a kid.

"Justin, I know what you're doing with him. More like what he's doing to you. Just answer my question, consenting or not, and I'll drop it right here."

Oh, he's learning all of Brian's tricks, because for a kid who is normally an open book, he's suddenly very hard to read. He stands there smirking while I wait for him to say something, anything so that I can go back to my world, where I can pretend that 19 year old twink's don't play S&M games with men in their thirties. I'm waiting for an explanation, an excuse, even a joke. Something that says he understands, something that says, "Hey, I know that you know."

He just stands there. It's infuriating. I know he doesn't owe me anything, but still, a little consideration would be nice. I'm trying to look out for him here. Over the past few months, he's been showing up with scratches and scrapes and bruises, and I suppose they don't look like anything unusual unless you know what you're looking at. I think they forgot about me. I know exactly what I'm looking at.

"Dammit, Justin." I reach for him, grabbing his arm and yanking his sleeve up to his elbow. I grasp his forearm, and with my teeth clenched, I quietly start to explain. "Look, I know what these marks are from. He's tying you up, and you're fighting it hard." I go to hold up his wrist to show him what I see, when I notice two fine parallel scars running up the inside of his arm. Clean, deliberate scars. Shit. This isn't a game anymore.

"Holy shit, Justin, what is that? Tell me if you consented. That's all I want to hear."

He's got this dreamy look in his eyes, like he's remembering something, and I shudder to think about the kind of scene that causes those wounds.

"Please, just say yes or no and I won't say another word."

For a second, I think he's going to say something. His mouth opens just a little as he looks over my shoulder. He catches my gaze, and in a second everything changes. His head tilts back a little; his arm goes a bit limp. He's sort of leaning into me, like he's about to take a step closer. He looks directly over my shoulder, and then down at the floor.

In a flash, Brian has his hand on the back of my neck, whispering in my ear to get my fucking hands off of Justin if I want to keep them. I'm sure this whole scene looks pretty friendly and casual, but the pressure from his hand on my neck hurts so badly that I don't even think about holding Justin. I drop his arm and step sideways so that they're facing each other without interference. It's like I was never even there.

Brian whispers something in Justin's ear; he nods wordlessly and walks out the front door. Brian follows him, turning only to glare at me before he leaves.

Quarry

"Come inside, little boy, I've got candy for you."

"Brian, you can't keep saying stuff like that. Somebody's going to think you're a perv and arrest you." I smile at him through the doorway of the loft, my hands pulled up inside my sleeves. It drives him crazy when I do that. He says it ruins my clothes and makes me look like a child.

"I think everyone in the free world knows that I'm fucking you by now," he says, standing half-naked in the middle of the loft, almost like a monarch surveying his kingdom. "If someone was going to haul me away, it would have happened a long time ago."

"Oh, I don't know about that," I smile and kick at the frame of the door. "I think some people are worried about what we're doing."

"People always worry about what I'm doing, and they should." He smiles back and gestures towards the bedroom. "Justin, are you going to come in or not?"

"Come and get me."

He shakes his head no, but I can see that little spark in his eyes. "Justin, get your ass in here."

"No." I throw him a little pout and take an exaggerated step back from the door. "Maybe I'll go visit my mom instead..."

He's walking towards me now, and he looks just like a panther, stalking me slowly and gracefully. Like if he moves slowly enough, I won't notice him getting closer.

"Justin Taylor, this is your last warning. I WILL lock your ass out." He's enunciating now. Hee hee, I'm in trouble.

"Okay, well then I guess I'll just go and bunk with Debbie for the night..." I'm turning to walk towards the stairwell when I feel his hand snake around my neck from behind. He leans in and whispers in my ear, "You want to come in under your own power. Trust me."

I freeze, because if I move an inch, that arm will get so tight around my throat that my eyes will pop out. I've never gotten away from him yet.

"Or what?" I whisper, a delicious chill racing down my spine.

His breathing changes, it's deeper and faster, like he's excited but trying to hide it. "Or you'll hurt so bad tomorrow morning, you'll wish you ran when you had the chance."

I'm breathing faster too, and my pulse is beginning to speed up. "Never."

He spins me around to face him, and we're only inches apart. His hands are holding my biceps tightly, and I know there will be fingertip bruises there in the morning. "I can make you wish you were never born, Justin. Don't forget it."

I don't know what's gotten into me, but tonight I'm up for a fight. "Promises, promises. You've never done it yet." I think I'm laughing, my adrenaline is so high that I'm shaking and I'm laughing like this is the funniest thing we've ever done.

He's shaking too, and his hands are moving up towards my neck. He goes for the neck every time. I think it's like a survival instinct or something - he uses it to try to restrain me. It's going to be different this time, 'cause I have a trick up my sleeve tonight.

Just as his hands are settling around my throat, I clasp my own hands together almost like I'm praying, and bring them up sharply in front of me, breaking the chokehold just for a moment. His eyes go wide with shock as he's knocked off balance, and I use my chance to run.

I'm through the loft door before he has even turned around, but he's fast and I have to go at top speed just to stay in front of him. Thank God there aren't any walls in here, or it would be too easy to back me into a corner. I gain a body length of distance from him and we circle each other, breathing heavily as we plot our next moves. If I can...

Oops, too late. He thinks faster on his feet than I do. He comes at me and I take off in the only direction left open, the bedroom. I'm almost up the stairs when a flying tackle sends me face-first towards the bed. He pins me on the floor in what feels suspiciously like a wrestling hold and asks, "What the fuck was that for?"

He's heavy this way, and I can't really breathe. I think he's got his hand on the back of my head. "Oh, I don't know, just a little change of pace...gotta keep the old man on his toes."

"Old?" He laughs a bit and I feel him patting his pockets for something. "You should be so lucky. You're not going to live that long."

Fuck. Now I've done it. I know exactly what's coming next. He's been carrying that little knife ever since the trip to the farm.

It shouldn't be possible for me to hear the little click that quickly, but I do. I'm getting dizzy from his weight pressing down on me, and I don't understand how he can be holding me down and running his hand up the back of my shirt at the same time. Wait, that's not his hand. The cool air meets my back as yet another of my favourite shirts is shredded into a pile of rags by that damned knife.

"Any last requests?" he murmurs, pausing from his work to trace the point of the blade up and down my back. I don't think he'll cut me tonight, but I stay very, very still. Accidents have happened before.

"I want a fancy funeral with a big party afterwards."

He goes back to cutting parts of my shirt loose, and soon he's got the whole thing off. "Jesus, you want to spend my money even when you're dead, don't you?" He leans in to slowly lick my ear. "Let's make sure I get my money's worth first."

"Anything you say," I moan, and right now, I really mean it.

He's just started scoring a word into the latticework of scratches on my back when there's a loud pounding at the door, and we both sigh. The sound of banging on the loft door has got to be the biggest fucking pain in the ass I've ever heard, and I can tell that it's Michael, because he's really hammering with the secret knock. Just for a minute, I can feel Brian's hesitation. He's considering not answering, but we both know that Michael will use his key if he doesn't. He sighs and hops up onto his feet, leaning down with a hand out to pull me up. I have to stand still for a minute because I'm light-headed, and I only manage to kick the knife under the bed just as Brian is opening the door.

"Are you okay?" Michael pushes his way into the loft, turning to look at Brian only when he's far inside. "You were supposed to meet me an hour ago. I got to Woody's, and Ted said you guys got into a fight and left."

"That's not what happened," I offer helpfully from the bedroom. Brian shoots me his death stare, and I quietly turn around to straighten out the duvet on the bed. Michael gasps and I turn back to ask him what's wrong.

"Jesus, Justin, what happened to your back?" His eyes are wide, and he's half-pointing towards me from the bedroom doorway. Shit, I haven't put on a new shirt yet, and I'm sure my back is a mass of lovely red welts and scratches from the blade.

"Art project." It's the first thing in my head, and the first thing out of my mouth. Brian shakes his head back and forth, and I can tell he's thinking, "Fuck, Justin, that doesn't even make sense."

Fortunately, Michael either believes me or doesn't care, because he turns back to Brian. "Are we going out or not?"

"Sure," he says. "You can wait for us here or meet us at Babylon. We need a few minutes to get ready."

I look over Michael's head at Brian, wondering why he gave Michael the option of staying. We're gonna fuck in the shower, I mean we almost always do, and we're still a little worked up from before. It's going to be loud and brutal, and I didn't think he wanted his best friend to have to listen to that.

I'm watching him, and he's not saying anything else, just letting his eyes flicker between Michael and I with a sick little smile on his face. Oh, I get it. I'm supposed to say the word and call this off. He will never understand that I won't.

I give him my biggest smile and walk into the bathroom without looking back.

Bluff

He called my bluff again. Now I have a bit of a problem - how do I get rid of Mikey without losing face with Justin? I hate just booting Michael out the door like that, looking like I'm whipped, and it happens all the time. I force myself to make small talk for a couple of minutes, until I hear the water turn on. I tell him we'll meet him at Woody's, Babylon, wherever. I mean, Liberty's not that big, we'll find him. He seems placated and I get him out the door without much fuss. It's not always that easy to tell him to get the fuck out.

Believe it or not, I have mastered the art of closing the door without slamming it. I just have to put some music on first, because the latch makes a banging noise no matter what you do. I choose Mikey's favourite band, slide the door into place, and make my way towards the bathroom. Dropping my clothes on the bed, I go into the bathroom and don't quite close the door. Perfect, you can hear the music in the bathroom. Justin looks up as I get in the shower.

"Did he go?" he asks, rubbing soap over his arms.

"Nope, he decided to stay," I reply easily. I need shampoo, fast. It's easier to lie when he can't see my face.

"Oh."

"Bother you?" I spit out a mouthful of water.

"Nope."

"Good." He really doesn't look worried. Brat. He turns around to reach for something, and I see the angry red pattern on his back. I have to touch it, his skin gets so hot when you scratch it like that, and I want to make sure I didn't draw blood again. He gasps as I start tracing the pattern with my fingers.

Before I know it he's on his knees, and fuck, he gives great head. I know he took lessons from the master, but I can't take credit for all the practicing. Dammit. He's probably only done half of his practice with me. It's probably better not to think about that right now - not when I have to stay ahead of the game.

"Justin, make it quick. We have to get going," I say, running my fingers through his wet hair. I want this to take longer, to be more, but that wouldn't look right. I'm not Mr. Hallmark; there won't be any of that romantic bullshit going on around here. I mean, we have expectations about how these scenes are going to work themselves out. He was so close to getting whatever it is that he gets out of this fucking around - I'm sure that giving me head doesn't really compare. I feel like I've let him down.

He doesn't seem too upset. He leans back and grins up at me, as if to say, "You asked for it."

He takes orders well. It **is** good and fast, and he's just about to finish me off when I pull away and step out of the shower. God, so close, so close my teeth are grinding to stay calm, but I've got to be cool. "Hurry up, Sonny Boy, we don't want to be late." I look back at him kneeling in the shower, and he's so wet and soft-looking that I don't want to do anything except get back under that water and nail him to the floor. Fuck, they should write songs about my self-restraint.

He scowls at me, getting up to turn away from the shower door. I see his hand move towards his dick, and I make a clucking sound.

"Come now, no time for that, we must be leaving!" I sing, grabbing his arm and dragging him right out of the shower. Nothing pisses him off like having to wait, and he's pouting. He pulls his arm out of my grasp as I'm guiding him to the door, acting like he doesn't want to go with me. Well, I'm pretty sure it's an act, but he knows how to tell me if it isn't.

I open the door and herd him through it. He goes to look and see if Mikey is still here, but I put my hand over his eyes. "Oh, no you don't. I didn't tell you to look around, did I?"

He leans back into me and shakes his head no. He's standing there with his eyes closed in a perfect pose of obedience, and I can almost feel my self-restraint flying out the window. I shove him towards the bed and his wet body falls right on my clothes. Frankly, with him all wet and spread out like that, I could give a fuck about my clothes. He's laying there so submissively, I get the feeling he'd let me do anything...anything...What would I do if I...Fuck. He's killing me.

There's nothing special about fucking Justin, about fucking anybody, I've done it a million times. I don't know why it feels like time has slowed down, I'm jittery and it's taking forever to get ready. My body is screaming, "Fuck him!" and my hands shake

while I'm putting on the condom. I'm sure the prep work has taken all of three seconds, but it feels like three years, and I pounce on him like I'm starving for him.

He's still laying face down on the bed, so really all I have to do is cover him and slide it in, which I do. Even as my dick slides into his tight little hole, I try to think about it rationally. Even while he's moaning and whimpering because I didn't take the time to make sure he was ready, all I'm thinking about is how I can still save face. That's what I *want* to be thinking about.

I can't think when I'm inside him like this, when he's so fucking hot and tight and rocking back to meet every thrust. Can't think when I feel the welts on his back, the ones that I gave him. Can't think about anything but the pain he lets me inflict, and how much I enjoy doing it.

"Can I open my eyes yet?" he asks, and I put my mouth beside his ear to whisper, "Why bother, you've got your face in the duvet anyways?" That almost sounded like a joke. I don't sound cold enough. Just a couple minutes more, I have to get through this with the attitude intact. Just have to keep it together for a couple more minutes.

"Please? Please Brian, just for a minute...I'll do anything you want...just please, please let me for a second, okay?" He's begging, dammit, it's so hot to hear him beg like that. "I just want to make sure we're alone."

"We're not." Okay, I'm lying now, but I need to keep the situation in check.

"Oh." Is he going faster now? He giggles and turns his head towards the wall, opening one eye a crack to look back at me. "I forgot we were putting on a show. Too bad Ted's not here to have some of his questions addressed." He's laughing, enjoying himself despite my best efforts. I fucked it up again. He's on to me, again, always. Why do I feel so out of my depth with him around? It's not right.

I press his neck into the bed, leaning back and grinding out, "If I catch you pulling this shit with anyone else, Ted included, you're not going to live to see the next day." Fuck, I wish he didn't bring up Ted, it made me physically ill watching him submit to someone else. No, no, stop, can't think about that right now. Time to default to what's always on my mind. "I'm ready. I'm not waiting any longer."

"Hope you weren't waiting on my account, I've been ready since this afternoon."

"Shut it, Justin, I'm not here for the conversation," I snap. Fuck. He really isn't intimidated by any of this anymore. I'm going to have to do something about that, but not right now.

Right now I have one thing on my mind, and that's to get off and get out of here.

Expert Witness

Good God, what is it about me that attracts the young and tragic? I think I sat and worried about Justin's health and safety for twenty minutes or so before it hit me: I'm not prepared to deal with this kind of problem. I need the advice of a trained professional.

I called Dale Wexler later that night and asked him what he thought of the situation. He followed the story with concern as I described the bruises and scrapes I'd seen lately.

"I have to wonder what's going on," he mused towards the end of the call. "It's not unusual for the sub to come out of a scene with a couple of scrapes or bruises, but it sounds like Justin is going out of his way to get marked up. Then again, I don't think Brian's an expert in any sense of the word, so it could be accidental." He sighs and chuckles a bit. "Amateurs."

"I don't see what's so funny. He's just a kid. What if Kinney is really beating the shit out of him? What if it is play, and he consented? CAN someone his age consent to that?" I'm getting agitated again. I can't stop thinking about what happened at Woody's, and I tell him the story all over again. Dale makes a shushing noise, and it's very comforting, knowing that he's experienced and he knows what to do. He starts to think out loud.

"Okay, let me see if I understand this correctly. You and Justin were playing pool, and Brian was fine with that."

"Yes."

"And you decided to confront Justin about his bruises when Brian was out of sight."

"Right."

"And Justin wasn't upset or panicking when you asked him."

"Nope, cool as a cucumber."

"And then what happened?"

"All of a sudden, it seemed like he melted into a puddle in front of me. I mean, all of his spirit was just...gone. Then Brian was on me and they left."

There's a brief pause on the other end, and then Dale starts laughing. Laughing at me! I get very angry. "Just tell me what the fuck is going on!"

I can practically hear him wiping tears from his eyes, he's laughing so hard. "Ted, did you get what you wanted out of that situation?"

"God no! All I wanted was an answer."

"Did Brian?"

"Well...he left early, he was supposed to be meeting Michael, but he just walked out with Justin before Michael ever showed up."

"Think about that for a minute. You stopped asking questions, Brian took him home early...who got what they wanted in that situation?"

"Shit. Justin did."

"Right...he used you to make Brian jealous."

"Dale, I don't believe it. Brian doesn't get jealous. He sees Justin fucking other guys in the back room at Babylon, and he barely bats an eye. Hell, they do it together half the time."

"Ted Schmidt, do I have to explain to you the difference between sex and love?"

"Brian doesn't love anyone but himself."

"Maybe, maybe not. If you ask me, what Justin gave you today was more valuable than sex to Brian. He submitted to you, just for a second. For Brian, that was more than enough."

The more I think about it, the more sense it makes. Damn. A nineteen-year-old boy has used me for his own purposes, and I never even noticed. I knew their relationship was a bit complicated, but my God, that kid was born to play games with Brian Kinney. It seems that my interference was nothing but a convenient way to manipulate Brian into dominating him publicly. I can't wait to tell him.

Babylon

I remember the first time I came to Babylon. I was with Brian, I mean, of course I was with Brian, I do pretty much everything with Brian. He arranged the whole thing, the cover story, the fake I.D., everything. I guess he got sick of me complaining about him going without me, because one day he said, "Tonight's the night for Babylon, Mikey. All you have to do is show up and try to act cool". Does that sound like something I can do? I mean, I was eighteen, and who could act casual with hot half-naked men making out on the dance floor? Not me, that's for sure. I think I stared at the dancing guys until Brian bought me enough "calming" drinks to get me really wasted. Next thing I know, I'm standing at the bar alone and Brian is across the room, leading some guy down a staircase by his shirt. I followed him down, because yes, I really was that naive, and hel-lo back room! If I wasn't so horny and drunk, it would have hurt to watch him fucking some random guy in public.

Let me correct that. I was a little hurt then, but it's not like watching him on the dance floor with Justin. Holy shit, those two behave like the whole fucking world is their bedroom. I don't know if I'm used to them being together yet; it still sort of hurts to see it. I've never actually seen them from start to finish, but I've been "treated" to enough peeks to put it all together. I never know if Brian means for me to see it or not. I'm not sure he cares.

Justin is nothing like I was when I first came here. Even the first time he came, he was nervous but so much cooler than I was. He came, he saw, he did what he wanted to do. Hell, I bet by now he's spent more time in the back room than I have. He can totally keep up with Brian in every way I can think of - and I don't know if that's a compliment.

They're coming towards me now, and it's just gross. Justin has his hand up the back of Brian's shirt, and Brian has his hand on the back of Justin's neck, under his collar. The perfect picture of domestic bliss, except they're pointing out potential tricks the whole time. Half the time they look like they want to crawl inside each other's bodies and let their brains go on vacation. The other half, they're fighting and giving off such weird vibes that nobody wants to be in the same room.

Brian leans down to whisper something to Justin, and it looks like, "Remember not to take your shirt off." Come on, I've been coming here for over a decade; you think I can't read lips by now? Justin nods and says something about finding Ted and Emmett. Brian gives him a disgustingly wet kiss, complete with spit trail, before he leaves.

"What was that about his shirt?" I taunt. "Hate to break it to you, we've seen a hell of a lot more of him than that, and dancing on stage, too."

Brian shrugs and turns to ask the guy behind the bar for a beer. When he turns back, he takes his usual minute to scan the crowd for fresh meat. His eyes settle in a corner, and when I realize he's looking at someone besides Justin, I turn to inspect. Tall. Dark. Really built, and sort of mean looking. Brian doesn't pick that kind very often, so I decide to be nosy and ask what's up.

"Nothing, Mikey, just keeping tabs on things." I'm about to ask him what the hell he's talking about when I see Justin and Emmett walking onto the dance floor. They dance beside the big dark trick for a little while, and Brian seems to relax when he sees Justin with Emmett. He finally asks if I want to dance. Of course I do.

For some reason, Brian keeps looking over at Justin, so I do too, still wondering what's the big attraction. I didn't come to spend my night watching Justin dancing with Emmett! I turn to Brian and say, "Look, if you're that worried about him, just go and get him."

"I'm not his mother, he can take care of himself." He scowls at me, but his eyes never leave Justin and Emmett on the dance floor.

Suddenly, Justin turns towards tall, dark and handsome and says something I can't quite make out. I mean, I can't read lips from this far away, but I don't need to be psychic to know what he's asking. The trick smiles and puts his hand on Justin's shoulder, pushing him towards the back room. Justin holds up his hand to get the guy to stop for a second, and he leans into Emmett. I can't read that message either, but Emmett looks worried and he seems to be moving fast to get over here.

As soon as he's within reach, Brian grabs him and drags him towards the bar. "What did he say to you?"

Emmett removes Brian's hand, smoothing out the sleeve where Brian's hand had been. "I think I got this right. He said, 'The eleven o'clock show is about to start.' Does that make any sense to you? Why did Justin leave with Dirk?"

"FUCK!" He screams it so loud that I can actually hear him over the music. "That little shit is going to get himself killed!" He takes off for the back room, and I can't help but follow because this is the most interesting thing I've seen in ages. Brian Kinney jealous. Who'da thunk it?

The Offering

I shouldn't have done it this way, but Brian has to stop pushing me. He wants to be in total control all the time, and I'm fine with that, but he's got to learn that it's not easy being in control. Being in charge means more than getting your way all the time, and it's more than having people's respect and admiration. It's fucking hard work staying two steps ahead of me, and he has totally fallen down on the job. I get what I want when I want, and he hadn't done anything to stop it. Where's the fun in that?

I know this isn't the safest way to prove my point. I'm young and stupid sometimes, but I know what I like and I know what I need. If I'm not getting it at home, I'll go out and look for it. Brian should understand, he wrote the book on that attitude.

The trick's name is Dirk, or so he says. It sounds fake and I don't believe him, but what the fuck do I care, I'm not writing his biography. He's got a reputation for doing what I want to do. I just want to get this little itch scratched, and I'll be done with him. Brian can come and watch if he wants, or stay out there if he wants, or find someone else to fuck somewhere else. Right now is all about me and what I'm not getting.

This is about what I need.

Daphne says that I need some kind of counseling to deal with my...ahem...masochistic tendencies, but I don't think so. I spent months dealing with real pain and real injuries. Every minute of every day, I can still hear Brian's voice screaming my name, warning me to defend myself. It's funny that that's all I remember, him warning me that nothing is ever going to be the same again.

Sometimes it's hard to stay in the moment and not go back there. Sex is fine and great for forgetting, but sometimes I need more than just to get fucked; I need to be dragged back to reality. Before I got bashed, I used to think that nothing was more real than making love to Brian, feeling his cock up my ass while his mouth breathed into mine. Yes, great, that's real, but not as real as lying in a hospital bed for six weeks being ignored by your lover while you fight to take back your life.

Pure animal lust won't help me forget anymore. It has to go beyond real, to a whole new level. I need this now, need to disconnect my mind and just float in a sea of pain. Watching the expression in his eyes while he's making me writhe in agony is hyper-real. Having his hands around my neck while I fight for air is hyper-real. That feeling gives me ammunition against the demons in my head for days.

My body is used to pain now, but my heart still isn't. As long as he's hurting me now, I don't remember how he broke my heart before.

I never thought I'd get addicted to the pain.

The trick is pushing me along by my head, and it's sort of a weird achy feeling, but not in a bad way. He's had a lot of practice, I can tell. I feel very owned right now. It's something that Brian can't master, dominating my senses, my behaviour like that. That's the feeling I came for.

The back room seems closer than before, or maybe we're going faster than I normally do, because I didn't expect to be here this fast. He shoves me down on my knees, and I know what he wants. It goes beyond control, which is where Brian is always messing up. Brian thinks the game is all about him and his need to micromanage every situation to his own liking. He thinks I'm a puppet with a conveniently high pain tolerance. He can think what he wants, I don't care. I have to get something out of it too.

As long as I submit, he'll never have control. I decide when to stop, and when NOT to stop. He will never push past his own discomfort, past my apparent pain and fear...past the things that I can't remember and he can't forget. He's so good at head games, but he just can't wrap his mind around this one. I hardly have to work to outthink him when it comes to this stuff.

I need more than this pretend, play-violence thing we do sometimes. We've never done a damn thing that I wouldn't have consented to without pressure. Maybe I want to. I told him at the farm that I'd never say the safe word; it's been six months and I still haven't, and I've got the scars to prove it. He's frustrated, and I think he's hit the wall. I know that it's never going to be any different than this unless I do something about it, so I've arranged a little tutorial.

The trick's hands are pulling at my hair, and it's not a pleasant feeling. His fingernails are digging into my scalp, and it sets my teeth on edge and makes my head throb. It's a good start.

Breaching the Defenses

I am going to kill that fucking little shit when I catch up with him. Going into the back room with Dirk is the fucking dumbest thing he's done in months. He's gonna get the shit beaten out of him, and knowing the way he's been behaving lately, he'll probably enjoy it. I don't care what he wants, there are some things I'm not going to do, and I'm not going to let him push me into it just because he's into experimenting.

God fucking dammit, the back room has never been this far away before. I can't stop wondering what I'm going to see when I get in there. I mean, what the fuck is he thinking? We joke about it, sure, but he hasn't seen me tricking in a couple of months. If he's doing it, I don't know about it. This is a publicity stunt for my benefit, and I've got about fifty feet to figure out why...if I don't go fucking insane first.

Justin. Fuck. Why does this keep happening to me? Either he's chasing me or he's making me chase him. Why am I still doing it? Jesus, I'm so fucking sick of this game.

There he is, and oh God he's beautiful. Dirk has already taken it out of him a bit, he's got a nasty black eye coming up and his lip is bleeding. Don't think about the bashing, don't think about the blood...Those eyes, I can see his eyes from here. He's looking up at Dirk from the floor, fucking thanking him for the pain. I...cannot...stand...this.

Watching Ted's hand on his arm was just an annoying itch compared to this...pain? No. Anger...closer...jealousy. I fucking hate it, but that's the word. This guy has something that's mine and I want it back. Right now.

"Get the fuck away from him!" I roar, and for once I don't care how I look to anyone else. I'm getting MY boy and taking him home. I'm so fucking sick of this shit.

Justin looks up sweetly and I've never wanted to pound on someone more in my entire life. "We won't be long, Brian. Wanna watch?" God, the thought of that, watching someone else beating Justin...Sick, I feel sick...I shudder and turn away from him, bleeding on the floor, to address Dirk. He's really not worth my time, but I can't stand him here, he's got to go.

"If you fucking touch him one more time I will knock your ass into next week." It seems we have an understanding, because he nods and steps away. I turn back to Justin, grabbing him by the shirt and dragging him off the floor. "Get up, we're going home."

He smiles and gets up, dusting off his knees. Dirk shrugs and walks away...nobody wants to get into the middle of a lovers' quarrel. I guess we're all lucky that he's not really a psycho and just likes it a little rough. He'll find someone else.

Justin is still being all sweetness and light, and my adrenaline is ramping up just thinking about how angry I am. The Sunshine smile won't be working on me tonight. I'm glaring,

and I hope he's feeling it, because I'm dying to kick the shit out of him right now. If he wants pain, fuck, I'll give him pain. I know he's not afraid of me anymore, but he fucking better well be. Shit, *I'm* afraid of me right now.

"Are we going home early then?" He leans into me, lazily rearranging his clothes as if he doesn't have a care in the world.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" I'm still yelling, and my hand is tightening on his shoulder. What is wrong with me?

"What? It's not like we have an exclusive relationship." He's taunting me, using my own words against me, and I fucking can't take that.

"You know why I'm pissed off!" I can't believe I'm doing this here, but I can't seem to stop myself. I try to drop my voice into the quiet-but-threatening range I use so often, but it's just not working. "You don't do that with other people."

"Do what?" His voice is all innocent, but he's mocking me, I can see it in his eyes. "Jesus, don't tell me you're dictating who I can and can't fuck? Hypocrite!" He's angry now, and it happened so fast I didn't see it coming. Ever since the bashing, his moods change so fast that sometimes I can't keep up. He's even got the low-threatening tone down cold. "You aren't going to like how this argument ends, Brian. Drop it."

"The fuck I will!" I'm seething, and that word says it so well...I feel like I'm all cold liquid anger and it's seeping out across the floor, towards my wayward blonde lover. "Justin, what we do - I mean, when we do that - that is for us. You don't just give it away like that." I pause so that he's really listening to what I'm about to say next. "Fucking slut."

That word just hangs in the air while I watch a million emotions wash over his face. When he finally says something, it's like a sonic boom. "WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?!?" Jesus, do people really scream like that? If we didn't have it before, we certainly have everyone's attention now. Everyone wants to see the Great Brian Kinney getting chewed out by his teenaged lover, right? He sprints past me before I can say anything to take it back. God, I should take that back. The things I say around this man - I don't even believe in that prehistoric bullshit! I chase him down out in the alley, and when I find him he's curled up in a ball on the oily pavement, crying his eyes out.

"Justin, I didn't mean that." I walk towards him slowly, crouching beside him but not touching. If someone slagged me like that I'd fucking take his head off, but he internalizes everything. I'm not really surprised when he sighs and pulls me down to put his head on my shoulder.

"Why is it wrong for me to want this?" he asks me, and I don't really have an answer for that. I feel like I owe him something...when did that start? I stammer out some kind of reply.

"Look, Justin, it's hard, okay? It's hard for me to start, and then it's hard to stop." Too hard to stop. It feels too good when you struggle to get away and I catch you, when you're writhing in pain from my touch. One day I won't be able to stop.

"It doesn't feel right if you don't let go." I can't stop staring at the black eye, the busted lip. He's asking me to do that, stop behaving like a human being and fucking take it all out on him.

"It's not that easy." Dammit, Justin, no, God no. Don't ask me that, please don't ask me that!

"Brian, I can't change what I am. I need this. Once you know, you can't go back and forget. I have to go further. I'd rather do it with you, but I will do it with someone else if you force me to."

Sick. I feel sick. My mind is going in faster and faster circles and I want to stop it but I can't. I'm thinking of Dirk choking him like I do. I'm seeing faceless strangers beating him and whipping him and raping him. They won't be careful. He'll beg them to hurt him, and they will. He doesn't just like it rough, he likes to be hurt. He'll end up dead in six months. I have to make it stop, and I hate that this is what it's come down to.

"Justin, fuck, you can't do this with anyone else." Okay, getting there, just spit it out. Shit. I can't. I'm babbling about how he'll get hurt, how people will use him up and throw him away like a sad little hustler. My voice is going higher and higher, cracking when I tell him that some sick freak will cut him up and dump him like yesterday's garbage. I've been waiting all this time for him to say his safe word and get me free; now I realize that I'm the one who needs to say the things that will set *him* free. I know that I have magic words too, but I can't say them. I am biologically unable to say these words, but I have to, I have to! He doesn't understand what he's doing. It's his life, his fucking life he's throwing away and I can't watch that. It hurts. "I can't do what you want and I can't watch anyone else do it either."

Fuck, that wasn't it, if I can't get this out then I can't fucking protect him from anything. My father was right, I AM a useless shit. I'll never keep him safe, the bat will always swing and I'll always be two seconds behind. Knowing that, really knowing that is too much to bear. I'm gone.

I'm shaking and I think I might be crying. Losing it in the alley outside Babylon, isn't it fucking special. I think he's trying to comfort me, his voice is coming down a tunnel and even though he's here and alive I can't think of him as being anything but cold and dead in an alley somewhere. Corpse arms hugging me. Cadaver hands running up and down my arm.

I'm in hell, my own private hell, realizing I have no choice in what I'm about to do. I barely hear his voice breaking through the fog.

"I'm sorry, Brian, we can forget this. We can pretend it never happened. Let's just go home." Shadow of a man grasping my arm, ghost of a smile. All I can think of is seeing his beautiful dead body in a dumpster like that kid last year. I think about going so far that I can't come back.

The things I care about are always taken away.

I have to do this. It's his fucking life.

I hate to do this, but I have no choice.

"Justin."

"Yeah?"

"Marry me."

Deflated

"What? Brian, are you okay?"

"You heard me."

"Seriously?"

"I'm not going to say it again."

"Why are you crying?"

"I'm not. Fuck, Justin, forget it."

"No! I don't want to. I mean, I do want to. I'm just...surprised."

"That makes two of us."

"Yes, I want to. I will. I love you."

"Yeah."

"Aren't you going to say it back?"

"Didn't know that was a requirement."

"What if I said it was?"

"Then you'd be packing your shit tonight instead of coming to bed."

"Oh. Okay."

"Don't look at me like that."

"How am I supposed to look?"

"Well, at least YOU stop crying. You're supposed to be happy."

"I am, but Brian, are you gonna be okay? I mean, really?"

"I'll have to be."

"Are you sure?"

"Shut up. Here come the Three Musketeers."

The Lost Boys

I don't know how I lost them, but I did. Brian outran Michael in no time flat, but I'm a lot harder to shake. I think I looked away to find Teddy and they just disappeared.

We hunted all over Babylon, expecting the worst, but we couldn't find them. Finally Ted suggested we look outside - Teddy is so practical - and we trooped off to find our lost boys.

I swear my heart just about stopped when I saw them curled up on the pavement together, staring at each other like scary weird aliens. Justin's eye was swollen and his lip was bleeding, and Brian - yes, Brian - was crying. Terrible, bad things happen when Brian cries, so we all rushed over to see what the heck was going on.

Of course, trying to talk to Brian is like trying to talk to a rock sometimes, but Justin was more than helpful in filling us in. Nope, everything's fine, he said, he had a little run-in in the back room and Brian came to his rescue. Ted and Michael sigh in relief, but I don't buy it. Brian's had a hundred bad tricks himself, and I've never seen him cry over it. Everyone's okay, so I doubt he'd be out here wailing over one of Justin's. Something is very wrong with Mr. Brian Kinney tonight.

I don't know what to do or what to say, so I just stare at him until he scowls. He's pissed off now, but at least that's something normal. "Well, I guess we could go to the diner for a bit," I say, just trying to break the tension still hanging in the air.

"That sounds good, Em, I wanted to talk to Deb anyways," Justin says, and he's just beaming. He offers Brian an encouraging little smile and somehow they pull each other off the pavement.

We start towards the diner, but everything feels wrong. Our fearless leader is hesitating, gesturing and whispering things in Justin's ear. Finally Michael turns around and asks, "Brian, what the fuck is going on with you tonight? You're being weird."

"Sorry, Michael, you caught us in the middle of a conversation," Justin smiles and leans into Brian to whisper something else. Brian is still agitated and stops, grabbing Justin's arm to pull him back. They whisper furiously, until I hear Justin say firmly, "We can finish this at home." Brian sighs and starts moving again. I would gladly give away every designer labeled *anything* I own just to know what they're talking about!

I guess that tete-a-tete solved the problem, because Justin is walking beside Brian again, and Brian's got him all wrapped up in his arms like someone is going to come along and steal him right off the street. Michael drops back to ask if everything's really okay, and Brian just shakes his head no and sighs. I'm really starting to worry about him when Justin gives Michael that big Sunshine smile and says, "We have some things to work out, that's all."

Brian stops and huffs like a racehorse, and we all know what's coming next. Somebody's angry. We all turn our backs on Brian, huddling to protect ourselves from his sudden mood swing, and hoping that there aren't any swinging fists to go with it.

"Justin, enough! Shut the fuck up. NOW."

Justin isn't surprised either, and he's not hurt or anything - he just nods sweetly like a debutante and kisses Brian's shoulder. Lord, I hate watching these two argue, I never know where to look or what to say. It feels like we're on a death march! I start a conversation with Teddy, because if I don't, we'll walk the rest of the way to the diner in silence.

We've gone maybe ten more feet when Brian says, "I think we'll just go home early," and we all nod and shrug. I'm not the only one who hates it when they argue, and besides, I've changed my mind - I really don't want to know what they're arguing about tonight.

Negotiations I

"Can we have a ceremony?"

"No. Why do you always start arguments in bed?"

"It's not like we spend a lot of time anywhere else! Why not?"

"Our relationship is not for public consumption."

"The whole fucking world already knows everything about us anyways!"

"Not about this, and they're not going to!"

"What? I want to tell everybody!"

"NO! We're not telling anybody. This is for us, not for them."

"I'm going to tell my mom."

"Fuck off, Justin, I said no!"

"She's gonna figure it out anyways, then she'll be hurt that we didn't tell her."

"Jesus Christ. Fine! ONLY her."

"And if somebody guesses, that's not my fault."

"You're going to drop hints until everybody finds out, aren't you?"

"NO! I just don't want you getting all pissed off if someone happens to figure it out."

"Whatever."

"This is surreal. I never thought we'd be talking about this. Will you tell anyone?"

"Fuck no."

"You're not happy about any of this, are you?"

"Yes...no...I have to get used to it."

"Well, I want you to tell one person."

"Why?"

"I'm not going to be your dirty little secret, Brian. You have to tell at least one person, non-negotiable."

"Fuck...Okay."

"Can we have a party?"

"Jesus fucking Christ, Justin. You and your goddamned parties. Without telling anyone why?"

"Whatever you want. I think it's worth celebrating."

"You would."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. Never mind. What kind of party?"

"Don't look at me like that. You love parties, it won't kill you to throw one."

"I'm taking it back. Fuck all this bullshit."

"No way, Brian, you asked and I accepted. This is a negotiation of terms...and just for that, I want us to have rings, too."

"Jesus, what are you going to ask for next, bridesmaids?"

"Look, this is important to me. God only knows why you asked, but I'm taking it seriously. If you want to back out, do it now."

"I do...no wait, I don't...I mean....Shit. No. Whatever."

"I've wanted this for a long time, Brian."

"Don't whine, you sound like Lindsay."

"Fuck you. Last chance to get off the highway."

"I know."

"I love you, you know. I'll never love anyone else this way."

"I...uh..."

"Yes?"

"Dammit, Justin, why can't you ever just go to sleep?"

"Don't sound so sad. That was a pretty good wedding for two naked guys."

"You're gonna be satisfied with just that?"

"You said it yourself, it's just for us."

"I didn't think you were listening. You never do any other time."

"Well, I was, and that's all I wanted to say."

"Okay. Good. Sleep!"

"And you can bring the rings here tomorrow night."

"Damn, I thought you'd forget about that."

"Not on your life."

"Say, I think I'm entitled to certain considerations now."

"Like what?"

"Come here and I'll show you."

Negotiations II

"No, I don't want to this time." Justin flopped back against the pillows, sulking. "We shouldn't have to use them anymore."

"Don't be a twat, Justin." Brian threw the unopened condom back on the night table and rested next to Justin. "It's the only way."

"But why?" Justin whined, rolling towards Brian and sighing. "We're married now. We should have a proper consummation of the marriage."

Brian shivered visibly at Justin's enjoyment of the M-word. "Jesus Christ, Justin, quit fucking saying that! The answer is NO."

"It's true. I should be able to say it here if not anywhere else!" Justin suddenly sat up in bed, fixing Brian with a glare. "You're not going to stop tricking, are you?"

Brian sighed. "I never said I would, but that's not the reason. You're making me do the PSA again, and I hate that! You need six months with no tricks, preferably a year, clean tests before and afterwards, and the knowledge that you're never going to slip up and fuck someone else ever again. It's too much. I can't promise that."

"We're both negative. Why not just cut the drama queen act?" Justin mumbled, picking at the duvet.

"How fucking slow do you need me to say it? It's not safe. It may never BE safe for us. I won't do it. If you want to take some stupid fucking chances with someone else, I can't stop you... but first, go ask Ben or Vic how it feels to be taking handfuls of pills every three hours just to stay alive."

"I don't want anybody else." Justin sighed as the tears started to pool up in his eyes. "I just don't want you to want anyone else either."

"I know." Brian reached over to gently push Justin back onto the pillows, leaving his hand on his shoulder.

Justin wasn't ready to let it go. "You never use a condom when you blow me, that's not really safe."

"It's a lower-risk activity. I'll take my chances."

"We take other risks all the time. You can't tell me that it's safe to have me bleeding all over the place every time we have sex."

"YOU may be fucked out of your mind when we're doing that, but I'm always careful."

Justin wasn't convinced. "But there's still a risk. A big risk!"

"With unbroken skin, no more than if you came on me. Look, nothing is completely risk-free. I pick and choose what I'll expose myself to and what I'll expose you to, and I expect you to understand and do the same. If you make different decisions, they don't trump mine."

"I guess"

"I will never fuck you without a condom. I'm not taking that chance, period. I'm done with this conversation." Brian was suddenly tired, and overwhelmed with everything that had happened. He closed his eyes and willed Justin to stop talking.

Justin turned again and tapped Brian's shoulder until he could look him in the eye. "About the condom thing...I was just hoping, don't be mad at me."

"It's a stupid teenage fantasy that you need to outgrow. It's probably never going to happen, so get used to it. I'm saying this once, Justin. You have more of me than anyone else ever has or ever will," he paused as a blazing smile broke out on Justin's face. Brian put his head in his hands and closed his eyes. "But there are things I won't do for anyone, including you. That's reality."

Justin linked his hand with Brian's and brought it to his lips. "I know that. It's just hard to accept sometimes." He laughed a bit and squared his shoulders, then suddenly rolled to push Brian to the bed. "Show me what's hard?"

Brian gently rolled back over until Justin was held firmly underneath him. "Now that I can do."

Floating

Too much is going on lately, I can hardly keep my head above water and I'm so, so tired. I would probably be just as happy staring at the wall until I fell asleep, tonight, but no, Justin has plans. There are always plans. I don't know why he pushes me all the time. If we could just stay like this, in bed and quiet and letting our bodies do the talking, we'd be fine.

His eyes are so big, and the blue lights make them glow. He doesn't realize how often I lay here with him, without any real purpose, just wanting to feel his skin and look into his eyes. I can play it up as teasing or whatever, but really it's for me. I've never wanted to be with anybody just to feel his heart beat. It's new, and I like it.

His skin heats up so quickly when I'm here like this. It's not the flush from sexual excitement, don't get me wrong, watching his throat and chest turning scarlet when he comes is fucking amazing. It's something different...stronger, warmer? I don't know. It used to make me uncomfortable being touched like that. At first it felt like another way he was trying to get into me, and I didn't want that. I don't want that. I'll give what I'm willing to give. Tonight, I'll let him do the giving, because I've given him everything I have, and I feel empty, like there's nothing left.

I'm still on top of him, and his hands are sliding up and down my back, slowly, so slowly. When I let him take the lead, nothing happens fast, it's always quiet and peaceful. His legs are wrapped around me and his lips touch gently to my cheekbones. This tenderness, this peace is what he was born knowing - I taught him how to fuck, but for him, knowing how to make love came factory installed.

He's sliding out from under me now, rolling me onto my back, and I know that's something he had to learn. I'm a lot stronger than he is and I used to keep him pressed to the bed out of habit more than anything else. He wants to taste me, he tells me all the time that when he can't kiss me, it's like nothing else is happening. I wasn't happy to hear that fucking his brains out doesn't seem to count, but we'll just add that to the pile of things I don't understand about Justin.

His lips are soft, and he's tracing my body with them, almost like he's painting. He says there are always new contours and textures to explore, and he sounds like one of his fucking art professors. Feeling his tongue sliding across my hipbone or his fingertips tracing my bicep will never make me come, but sometimes it's good when everything is just nice and safe and comfortable for a change. It's good to relax with another person.

I've been drifting, just staring at the ceiling and thinking about nothing while he plays and explores. His mouth finds my cock too soon, and I'm a little startled that he's there so fast. For some reason, I thought we could just float for a while, no worries. I'm too tired to play the game, and I don't want to be the predator tonight. Drug me up and let me float away.

He climbs on top of me for a second, and looks into my eyes. I'm sure that I look as worn-out and used-up as I feel, and I guess he thinks so too, because he nudges at my shoulder to get me to roll over. Just like the first time, just like every time since. When I'm achy and tired and so fucking sick of the world, he's gentle and I need his gentle touch more than I need the frenetic high and ego-boost of the perfect kill. I don't have to admit it to anyone; I just have to roll over.

He's massaging my back now, and it feels so good, Justin doesn't do anything that doesn't feel good, ever. His tongue touches to the top of my spine and slides down like I did to him so long ago, finally stopping when he reaches my hole. He's so gentle, and the warm wetness of his tongue is just pleasant and comfortable. Feathery touches, nothing more than that, not until I start to squirm at the sensation of his tongue dragging over every wrinkle. God. I don't even get a chance to ask for more, because his tongue is inside me now, thrust in slowly as always, but stiff and searching until I can't lie still. He's not stopping, fuck, he's not stopping and the pleasure is coming in waves and he sets me up for the fall every single time. Even when I've already decided to let him drive he has to make sure, I have to invite him in. I don't want to, I mean I don't want to be open to him, but I always, always let him in eventually.

I don't hear the lube snap open, but I feel it on his fingers when he touches me. He always warms it up first...I guess he doesn't want to shock me out of my daydream. The first finger is always easy, but the second, that one I have to breathe into and actually work at relaxing for. I can always feel every bump and ridge as he slides them in so slowly, so carefully, as if he's deflowering a virgin every single time. His fingers are shorter and thicker than mine, and as long as I can take that second finger without complaint, his cock won't be a problem. By then I'm usually too far gone to care.

I can hear the condom wrapper tearing behind my head, and he throws the empty package in front of me. He's not happy, but he's done it anyways, under protest I guess. As long as he does it, I don't care why. It's not about me, or him, or us as a unit, it's bigger than we are and something that just needs to be done. It doesn't change how we feel about each other, and he's got to know that it's better this way. It's easier to relax when you can trust that your partner is looking out for you.

I always panic a bit when I feel him pressing against me...the loss of control, the subservience, it's hard to hold on and relax against him. How do you force yourself to relax? It's not me to just open up and accept it, and I have to work to let myself go. He always leans into me, but I always lean away. For that first second, the first contact between the bluntness of his cock and my hole, the promise that it will feel good in a minute is never enough. He has to be firm, holding my hip so I can't creep away from the pressure, that pressure that isn't pain unless you can't relax.

He's talking now, whispering words of love and confidence that I never thought I would want to hear, but I can't do without any more. He's so easy, I think I'm spoiled that all he needs is a quick tease and the promise that I'll fuck him until he's dizzy. I'm not easy at all, it's humiliating that I can't get through this without his silent and not-so-silent

encouragement. It's embarrassing that I expect to be, no, *need* to be coddled and congratulated through an act that he joyfully performs several times a day.

He doesn't wait for the silent signal that I'm ready, that I've adjusted to his length and I'm comfortable going on. He won't get it and he knows it. If I get a chance to think about this for a minute, I'll stop it right here because I'm too vulnerable. I'm painfully aware of how little control I have right now, and if he slows down it'll all crash down on me.

He's still moving, slowly, and it's like the ebb and flow of the tide. I know it sounds schmaltzy, but I'm tired and it's the best I can do, okay? It's not about gymnastics and special tricks, just a steady friction and the occasional bump deep inside that makes me shiver. His hand slides around to my cock from my hip, and he presses his lips against my shoulder blade, still whispering those words. He loves me, I'm beautiful, I'm resilient and special and he'll never let me go...it sounds so good and I want to believe him, want to believe that he's somehow strong enough to mean all of that after he comes. I want to be strong enough to trust him.

His hand closes tightly around my cock, and he's getting warm and sweaty, he's wrapping me up in his heat and I want him to enjoy me like I enjoy him. I want to feel his heat and know that he's alive, he's okay, he's here with me. I saved him this time, I was close enough and I heard the bat and this time, everything's going to be okay.

One more thrust, one more tug and he's pushed me over an edge I didn't even know I was close to. It's not the sharp, urgent feeling from fucking the hell out of somebody, it's a warm wash of pleasure that radiates through my whole body. I feel him jerking against me, and I imagine that I can feel his dick swell for a brief second before he stiffens against my back. He's breathing heavily against me still, but I can hear what he's trying to say in between pants. He loves me.

As I drift off to sleep, I wonder if, just maybe, I love him too.

Disclosure I

"Daph, are you there? It's me. If you are, pick up! It's an emergency."

"Don't hang up! Hello? Okay, there, the machine is off. What, Justin? Tell me what is more important than studying for finals!"

"It's big, it's huge. I need your help. I think maybe Brian has gone crazy or something, I mean, it's that big."

"What? Just tell me already."

"Okay, Brian and I were in bed last night..."

"Hold it right there, mister. If you're going to start telling me about that kinky stuff you guys have been doing, I don't want to hear it. You're sick, both of you."

"Ha ha, I don't remember you complaining when I was telling you about the trip to the farm."

"Well, what am I going to say, 'Please hold the line while I send the men with the white coats to your house?' I'm not saying don't do it, just don't tell me every little detail."

"Whatever. Anyways, we were in bed and we did something really, really weird."

"Justin, finals? I don't have time for the drama princess act. Spit it out!"

"Well, it started when he asked me to marry him."

"WHAT? Are you sure?"

"He said it during an argument, and I kept waiting for him to take it back, but he didn't."

"OH MY GOD! What did you say?"

"Um, hello? I said yes!"

"Well, when is it? Can I come? Can I be your best woman?"

"It's already done, I think? We had a fight, I mean, he tried to take it back, but I told him it was too late. We talked a little, I fucked him, and he fell asleep right afterwards. That was my wedding. I didn't want to push for anything more, he was mad already. He would have freaked."

"Oh wow. That's weird. Do you think he meant it?"

"Brian doesn't say stuff he doesn't mean, but what I can't figure out is why he asked. I mean, why now?"

"Well, sometimes he does spontaneous romantic stuff..."

"I don't think telling me he loves me when he comes is the same thing."

"He's old, Justin, maybe he wants to settle down or something. Wow...you're nineteen and you're married. You're a freak!"

"Come on, this is Brian. It's not going to be that different."

"Wouldn't it be funny if he turned into Mr. Husband, though?"

"God, I can't even imagine it. I'm not going to try. He'll probably overhear me and I'll never live it down."

"Yeah, I can just imagine trying to explain that one. 'No, Brian, I wasn't picking out a china pattern, I swear!' He'd run so fast you'd need a plane to catch up with him. Justin, I've gotta go, my last final is in three hours. I'll see you when I get home, okay?"

"Yeah, thanks. Wait! We're having a party next Friday night and you have to come."

"Totally. I want to see this with my own eyes. Oh, I'm taking Charles up to Grandma's cottage on Sunday, do you guys want to come? You can bring Michael and all of them if you want."

"Ooh, the new boyfriend, how could I say no? Good luck on the exam, Daph."

"You too, Justin. I think you need it more than I do."

Disclosure II

I was watching The View when Brian came in without knocking, like he always does. I don't need to ask why he's here in the middle of the day, because I can tell he's upset about something right off the bat. He doesn't even say hello, he just jumps right in.

"Vic, can I ask you something?" He's so nervous he's bouncing, and I'd love to tell him to calm down, but if I say anything, he might stop.

I shrug, I mean, it's not often that Brian feels talkative, so I'll do what I can. "Sure."

"Do I look fucking insane?"

"What?"

"I mean it, Vic, am I crazy?"

"Crazier than usual?" He looks so worried; I have to know what brought this on. "Just tell me what's going on, Brian, you'll feel better."

"This is fucking bizarre." He's raking his fingers through his hair.

"I got that. Shoot."

He jumps up and starts pacing around the room like a caged tiger. "I have something to tell you about Justin. About me and Justin, I mean."

Damn, now I'm getting worried. I settle further into my chair, waiting for the bad news. "What about him? Look, Brian, just tell me what you did and we'll fix it."

He sinks onto the couch with a sigh and covers his face with his hands. "I...uh...Look, I fucked up. He backed me into a corner, I said something I shouldn't have said... We're...uh..."

Damn, he finally pushed the kid too far, and they broke up. "Brian, say what you came to say."

"We're married."

"What?"

"You heard me, I'm not saying it again."

"I'm sorry, kid, but you're going to have to explain this one." I get up to make us some coffee, since this sounds like a long story. "Try starting at the beginning."

"It's nothing official."

"Gee, you don't say? And here I thought we lived in Vermont."

"So sarcastic." He's up off the couch again, staring out the front window. "I had no choice. I had to. It's the only way to keep him safe."

"Safe from what? I don't understand."

"He has a dangerous hobby, Vic, better he's with me than someone else."

"Are you sure about that?" He looks like he could go off at any second, like an overwound spring. "This arrangement doesn't seem to be doing you any favours."

He scrubs his hands over his face and through his hair, and I see a bit of a smile come across his face. "Last night was okay, I mean, so far so good."

"Right, but now it's the morning after, and the honeymoon's over." I think he's in shock that I'd even mention that word in his presence.

"Whatever."

"Do you really want my take on this?" I ask the question, but plunge ahead anyways, since he really wouldn't be here if he didn't care. "You're upset because you have buyer's remorse."

"What?"

"You saw something you wanted. You've been thinking about getting it for a long time, but it didn't fit into your lifestyle, and you thought it would cost you too much. It cost so much that you've had to be content to borrow it until now, but I'm guessing someone threatened to take it away?" He cocks his eyebrow at me, but I don't get an answer. That's okay; I didn't expect one.

"So you said to hell with it and got what you wanted. Now it's the morning after and you've had time to figure out what it's going to cost you. You don't think you can afford it after all. Problem is, you didn't buy a big-screen TV that you can take back to the store for a refund. You made a commitment to Justin that you can't keep."

"I don't want him getting hurt."

"Okay then, here's a piece of advice from a tired old queer who was on the scene before you were born. He loves you. You love him," he opens his mouth to say something, but I shoot him down with a look. "Don't hand me that bullshit about not believing in love, it's a pile of crap. Sometimes love believes in you and you just have to hang in there." He's getting antsy again, I've said the L word too many times for his liking. I lean in and take his hand. He jumps, but doesn't move away.

"You're afraid that you're going to let him down, and that he's going to let you down. You know what? Maybe you're right. Maybe it will be a huge fucking disaster. Doesn't matter. Even though it didn't turn out well, I wouldn't trade my time with Roberto for anything."

He pulls his hand away deliberately and glares at me. "You told Michael that it took the two of you six months to decide to live together and two weeks to break up."

I laugh to see the Great Brian Kinney grasping at straws like this. "Hate to break it to you, kid, but Justin's been living with you for well over a year. You've been seeing each other for two. Pencils down, you passed that test already." His shock is absolutely priceless. I wonder what kind of time warp he really lives in, not to have realized any of this by himself. Smart boy, but he's got a terrible selective memory. I get up to take my coffee cup to the sink, but turn to look at him firmly.

"Brian, just let it be what it is. Don't spend your time thinking about what other people are going to say. Enjoy yourself for a change. Let him love you. Let yourself be in love. It's fun! Please don't be a drama queen. Don't make love all about pain and suffering."

A look crosses his face and he storms out of the house. Something's got Brian spooked, and I wish I knew what it was.

I wish I'd made things better instead of worse.

Without Fanfare

"Here." Brian threw Justin a small blue velvet box. Justin was surprised to see something flying through the air, and ducked instead of catching it. The box hit the floor and slid halfway across the room.

"What the hell was that?" Justin asked, realizing that the box wasn't a projectile and scurrying to grab it.

"You obviously weren't a member of the football team," Brian remarked, throwing his suit jacket over the back of a chair.

"Yeah, well I was more interested in playing with them than against them," Justin laughed, finally picking up the box. "So what's this? Is it what I think it is?"

"Why don't you open it?" Brian said with a typical tongue-in-cheek smirk.

Justin breathlessly opened the box, but stopped short when he saw the contents. "Wow. They're not what I expected..." he said carefully, pulling the two silvery rings out of the box. "I sort of thought they'd be gold."

"Stainless steel. They'll never bend, never tarnish...they won't look any different in a million years." Brian replied, only his eyes hinting at how much he'd worried over the bands.

"They're beautiful," Justin remarked, running his fingers over the rounded edges of the smooth steel bands. "Why not gold or platinum?"

"This isn't a straight wedding. You wanted rings, you got them." He hadn't wanted them to be romantic, and the plain metal rings seemed to hold no weight of history or purpose. For Brian, they were a representation of feelings he couldn't explain and didn't want to share. Something binding and unyielding, like handcuffs.

Something comforting but confining.

"I think they're perfect." Justin held out his ring towards Brian. "Put it on me?"

"I told you, no ceremony. No hearts and flowers and sentimental vows and shit. We're entering a limited partnership. These," he took the rings and shook them in his hand like dice, "These are a symbol of that."

"Okay, okay, whatever. Will you put it on me, though?"

"Fine." And with a minimum of fanfare, Brian slid the ring onto Justin's left middle finger, exactly where he'd planned for it to go. Brian had given directions to the metalsmith for an hour to make sure that the rings turned out properly, and they had. They didn't look like wedding rings, they didn't go on the ring finger, and in fact, they

didn't really even match. He was pleased with how he'd disguised the outward meaning of the ring itself, minimizing it almost to nothingness...but at the same time, he couldn't ignore how sexy it felt to slide the metal band over Justin's skin. Without all the fanfare and the circus atmosphere of a wedding, it really did feel sort of erotic and sexual.

"My turn." Justin smiled and picked the other ring out of Brian's left hand, trying to straighten it out to perform the task. Brian shook his head and held out his right hand with a long-suffering sigh. Justin was a little dejected, but slid the ring on anyways, stopping to caress the dent between Brian's fingers. He smiled when Brian shivered.

"We're married now."

"Don't get all sentimental and shit. I'm looking after you."

Justin smiled, taking off his shirt and walking towards the bedroom. "Then come to bed and look after me properly."

"Not right now. I have something more important to teach you."

Justin smirked. "Sounds interesting."

Brian gave him a pained smile, picking up a small plastic shopping bag and walking towards the bathroom. "Well, it's something you need to know. I wish you didn't, but..." He stopped and sighed sadly. "Just come on in. It won't take long."

Aesthetic Concerns

I followed him into the bathroom, pausing by the door as Brian started unpacking things from the shopping bag. He looked so sad as he pulled out the tiny tubes, pots and square plastic cases. I've never seen any of it here, but it's familiar, like I've seen it all before, somewhere...Mom's bathroom counter? Daphne's bedroom.

"Brian, that's makeup!"

"Ding, ding, two points," he says, holding a small bottle up to the light. He squints a bit, looking between the bottle and my face. Sighing, he shakes his head and throws the bottle back into the bag. "If you were any less tan you'd be clear. This isn't going to be easy."

I haven't even come all the way into the bathroom, and I already want to leave. "I'm not wearing makeup, Brian. No way. I'll leave that to Michael and Emmett."

He seems lost in thought, and isn't even looking at me. "You can't walk around looking like you've been in a bar fight every night."

"Even if you have?"

I stop smirking when he slams down a little tube and says flatly, "Yes. It's completely unacceptable." He shakes his head as if to clear it, takes a deep breath, and starts rummaging again. "All of this," he continues while gesturing to the makeup, "is not a big deal."

Good God, he sounds like his mother. "Excuse me? It IS a big deal." He's giving me a glare that could melt steel, but I'm not backing down this time. "I just don't want to, okay? The bruises will fade fast enough."

His hands start to shake as he sorts through the small containers. Finally, he grips the counter to steady himself and slowly shakes his head. "No, they won't. The more you get, the longer they'll stay. Besides, that eye will be purple and yellow and green in a couple of days. Nobody's going to buy the excuses forever." He sighs and finally looks up at me. He's got tears in his eyes. "Trust me."

I cross the room, taking him into my arms. He's so upset, and I think it's at least partly my fault, but what can I say? "It's okay, Brian."

"No, it's not okay." He takes a deep breath and kisses the top of my head. "The world doesn't like seeing bruises, Justin. Life is a lot easier for everybody when you learn to cover them up."

I nod my head against the bottom of his chin. "Whatever you want. When did you learn how to do this?"

He presses his face back into my hair and I can hear him forcing himself to breathe. "High school. Every Friday morning."

"Why Fridays?"

"Dad got paid Thursday night, and took it to the Union Hall."

"Yeah?"

"Let's just say he was never happy to see us when he came home. It was easier to just get in his face and let Mom and Claire sleep."

"Oh." What can you say to that? I don't want to hear any more. I don't want to think about him shaking in his dark little room, waiting for his weekly beating. I don't want to think about a boy much younger than I am trying to protect his mother and sister by being a punching bag. It's horrible.

He takes a deep breath and looks at my reflection in the mirror. "I saw my mother cover up a black eye once, so I tried it. It wasn't as hard as it looked." He turns back to the frighteningly varied collection of makeup on the counter. He sees my wide eyes and finally cracks a smile. "Don't panic, you'll catch on fast. You like painting and colouring

stuff, your face will be easy." He finally holds up a black plastic compact with some multicoloured stickers on the front. "I think this is what you need."

I take the small box and open it, surprised to see shades of yellow, green, pink and purple inside. "Umm, Brian, last time I checked, my skin wasn't green."

He laughs. "Hey, you're the artist, you should understand the contrasting colour thing. Whatever colour you're trying to cover, just put the opposite one on top. Lindsay was going on and on about this stuff last month, so I took a chance." He starts pulling little spongy things out of bags. "You should feel lucky, when I was a kid this stuff only came in a couple of shades."

He looks up at me again, still frozen in the mirror. I'm just holding the box nervously and not really moving to *do* anything with it. He takes it back from me and clears a space on the counter. "Up."

I hop up and he smoothes my hair back from my forehead, kissing the trail his fingers leave. "Relax, Sunshine, it doesn't hurt anything but your pride." He sighs softly as he drags the little sponge across the yellow paste, and then taps it gently against my eyelid. "It won't take long if you hold still."

I sit and let him work his magic. When he's done with the pasty stuff, his hand hesitates over the bottles of skin-coloured liquid, finally choosing one so pale that I can't believe that anyone has skin that light. I can tell that he knows what he's doing, it's a practiced hand that rubs and pats and blends the makeup around my eye without pressing too deeply on the bruise. It hurts me in a way I can't explain to think of him doing this to himself every Friday morning, then going off to face the world as if nothing had happened.

"There." He says, closing up all the containers. "Take a look."

I turn around from my perch on the counter, and take a closer look in the mirror. I don't look like I've been in a fight anymore, I just look a little tired. What was once a terrible black eye now looks like nothing more than a shadow or a trick of the light. The slate is wiped clean, and we can pretend that nothing ever happened.

"Nobody needs to know," he whispers, hugging me from behind. I should be reassured. I should be thankful that I can keep it all a secret, but this feels so wrong. I'm about to tell him to forget it, that I'm not ashamed and fuck anyone who thinks I should be, when I look at Brian in the mirror. He's so relieved, like I helped him bury a body or something. He looks like this is HIS secret we're keeping, and it makes me think. He's been through hell lately, I've put him through so much. If he has some peace for the first time in a few days, who am I to take that away?

"Okay, Brian, anything you say," I whisper, and right now, I really mean it.

Summons

Brian walked around the loft, picking up the papers that had been strewn all over while he was working. He turned to Michael, who had just come to pick him up for Babylon. "We're having a party, Mikey, wanna come?"

Michael watched Brian stalk back and forth through the room with renewed interest. "Since when do you just throw parties, Brian?"

Brian paused, turning to glance at Michael with a tongue-in-cheek smirk. "Maybe I don't always invite you. Don't come if you don't want to."

"Wait, I didn't say no, I'm just surprised," Michael stammered, racing to accept the invitation. "Are you going to invite Emmett and Ted?"

Brian turned to Michael and smiled. "Yeah, whatever. Bring them along, we'll have soda and pie."

"You don't have to be sarcastic, I was just asking. Geez."

"Fine. Tell Deb to come, and bring Vic."

"What's with the family reunion? Nothing's wrong, is it? What's going on?" Michael started to pace nervously at the thought that maybe Brian was sick and needed everyone around to tell them.

"Questions, questions," he replied with a perfect poker face. "Nothing's up. Come or don't come, I don't care."

"Sounds like Justin has something to do with this."

Brian scrubbed his hands over his face, and took a deep breath. "Fuck. Am I speaking another language lately? Party on Friday. Nine o'clock. Don't bring fucking presents. Are we clear?"

"Presents?" Brian was startled by Justin coming through the loft door. "Who's getting presents?"

"Not you, not me, not anyone. I'm just inviting Michael to the party."

"Yeah, I can't wait." Justin was beaming ridiculously as he dropped his backpack and took off his shoes. "We don't get everyone together in the same place very often."

Michael looked at Justin with derision. "Are you stealing Brian's stash again? We're ALL together *all the time*. I see my mother more often than my boyfriend, for God's sakes!"

Justin laughed. "Kinky." He crossed the room to give Brian a kiss before wandering towards the bedroom. Once there, he started stripping off his clothes while Michael turned away in embarrassment. "Speaking of Ben, is he coming?"

Brian sighed and tracked Justin to the bedroom while he was changing. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" he hissed quietly. "Would it kill you to stay dressed for another five minutes?"

Justin laughed and threw his shirt onto the bed. "I thought you wanted him to get a show, Brian...remember?"

Brian grunted and turned away. "Well, not today. Put some fucking clothes on and call your mother. She left a message while you were at the diner."

"Okay, Brian." Justin, still half-dressed, came around in front of Brian and flashed the famous smile. Brian couldn't help but smile back at the little shit.

Voyeur

"Umm, guys, should I go?" I call out, still acting as if my shoes are the most interesting things in the world. I hate watching these two hanging all over each other. Hate it.

"No, I'm ready to go." Justin flashes his biggest, brightest smile at me, not the pissy one that I normally get. I think he uses that one instead of sticking out his tongue, but nobody else ever notices. I bet this is the smile that that hooked my mom, and I'm sort of surprised how good it feels to be at the receiving end. No wonder Brian keeps him around.

"Well then get your ass in gear. I've been waiting too long already - Ben will wonder where I am." I don't like this feeling, the let's-give-in-to-Justin-'cause-he's-so-damn-cute feeling that everyone else has been infected with since day one.

"Okay." He comes over to me and slings his arm over my shoulder, and I peel it off like he's diseased. He laughs and practically skips over to the door. I'm starting to wonder what the fuck he's on! Oh great, now Brian's glaring at us, and it's not my fault! Not this time. I don't want him to get any bad ideas. I couldn't be less interested in Justin if I tried.

"Let's get the fuck out of here." Brian walks so fast, he's got such long legs. I end up bringing up the rear, like I always do around these guys. I practically have to jog through the door so that Brian won't slam it in my face.

I head towards the stairs while Justin races down to wait for us on the landing. Brian's still locking the door, and I have no choice but to follow Justin. He's so fucking hyper tonight, he's driving me nuts! "Will you cool it already? I mean, holy shit, what's wrong with you?"

"Nothing, Mikey, I'm happy and all's right with the world!" He laughs and jumps up and down the stairs like Gus, two feet on each one.

"Don't call me that!" So fucking irritating. He acts like a bratty little kid sometimes, and sure, NOW Brian is smiling. He's taking the stairs down to Justin two at a time and I see him cover his mouth with his hand when he passes me. Damn, I chase him all the time, and he's always faster.

He catches up to Justin and spins him around, shoving him hard against the wall. They're smiling at each other, and panting. You can practically count down to the second when they start making out. I just keep going, I mean, I am a little slow on the stairs and I sure as hell don't want to hang around and watch.

Well, I should be honest. I do watch, I mean, I always watch. When I get to the next landing I turn my head and look back. It's like pulling out a loose tooth, a little pain that you think will be a relief afterwards, but usually just hurts worse. I don't know what to say to defend myself, so I won't bother. I'm jealous as hell but they're impossible to ignore - I swear the hormones follow them around the room. Besides, there's nothing like painful free porn to start your evening right.

How long have I been standing here? They don't look like they're gonna stop. I don't know if they're into having sex in public or what, but Brian's pulling at Justin's zipper and suddenly I **really** don't want to see any more. Part of me doesn't believe they'd actually do it here, but the other part knows that they probably will, with me watching or not.

That's it, I don't want to see this, I can't stand watching someone else get what I want. Well, I don't think so, anyways. It's all so fucking confusing! I don't even know if I want him anymore, but it's not fair that it's not me. I'm going to go and meet my real live boyfriend and take him home instead of watching this crap. I yell "I'm leaving," up to them, but I only hear Brian answering with a grunt... God, I hope he was answering and nothing else.

I don't want to think about it.

Small Victories, Small Sacrifices

God, I can't believe it's almost nine. I've been working my ass off getting things ready for the party, and now everything's done and I can't do anything but pace. I'm a fucking mess. This has to go right, I have to be careful or it's game over. "Thanks for playing, Justin, but you tipped your hand and you've been eliminated." I know it's not wrong to want to celebrate something so important to me, but Brian...well, he's not into celebrating in any way that doesn't include a fistful of poppers and a 12-pack of condoms.

In a lot of ways, keeping the marriage secret...ha, I still giggle every time I think of that word...isn't hard. Brian is still Brian, after all, cruising every guy he sees, probably fucking most of them. I don't know for sure; he hasn't brought anyone home since we put

the rings on. But still, the show must go on, for Mikey, and Ted and Emmett, and anyone else who might ever suspect that Brian Kinney has a heart in there somewhere. The show goes on for Brian more than anyone.

As for me, I never really tricked much to begin with, so I don't have much to hide. I can't be bothered most of the time - it smacks of effort to find a guy who isn't a troll, spend those precious seconds chatting him up, and submit to a mediocre blowjob while my thoughts are on my next project or how much I made in tips on my last shift. I don't give a flying fuck about any of the guys themselves, so why bother? Why not just do the project and count my tips and come home to have amazing sex with someone I care about?

I'm glad he let me have a couple hundred bucks to decorate the place. It's another test, a "Can he really pull this off without embarrassing the shit out of me?" type of thing. Every day around here is like writing an exam lately, but it's not too bad. I'm pretty sure I've aced 'Brian 101.' I have what I want, now; I just have to work to keep it.

I think the place looks pretty good. I bought flowers, and Brian will have a fucking aneurysm but I like them, so tough. There are black and silver and deep purple roses, the kind you have to special-order so that the colour isn't funny when they arrive. I actually kicked in some of my own money so that they'd be right. There's ivy, trailing here and there to warm up the furniture that's so spare and utilitarian. I don't think he'll bitch about that, we've had ivy here before so he can hardly complain about having it again, right? I got twinkly lights because I like them. I think they make any little room look magical, and I know how much that makes me sound like Em, but I don't care. Everything is always sharp corners and angular lines around here, I just wanted something softer and gentler for a change. The decorations aren't flashy and garish - it's like colour in shadow, shaded by black. With all the lights down low, it looks like we're in a garden at midnight. Just for tonight, the loft isn't cold, I've made it warm and green and full of life. I really think it's beautiful, and I just hope Brian doesn't notice too many of the flowers.

Five minutes until people start to show up. I know Ted and Emmett will be here right on time - Ted because he's a Virgo, prissy and punctual until the day he dies, and Em because he wants to help out and maybe hear some good dish before Brian comes home. God, I wish I could tell him why we're having the party; that would keep him going for weeks! Daphne will probably come right after them, and I'm so glad she's coming because I'm dying to talk to somebody who knows! I'll probably spend half my time talking about Brian and the other half begging her not to tell him that I told her. Then all I have to do is keep Daphne away from Emmett.

Deb and Vic will come next, I'm sure, and Deb will bring something to eat just in case nobody likes the fancy crap that Brian has arranged. It's a good thing, too, because some people just don't like sushi, or calamari, or whatever slimy protein thing that Brian's into these days. "There's nothing wrong with a little comfort food," she'll say, and she's right. Brian insisted on calling the caterer himself, since, "If I let you do it, Justin, we'll end up

eating pizza and drinking beer." Maybe, but I've never heard anyone complain about pizza yet. I really hope Vic has a good time, too. He doesn't get out much.

Lindsay and Melanie will come next. They get awfully nervous whenever Brian and party are mentioned in the same sentence, but they'll come anyways. When I called Lindsay to invite them, she sighed and murmured that Brian's parties always end up with a big fight and a broken heart for somebody, but in the next breath she said they'd love to come. I think they just need a night out. Lindsay will start taking keys and handing out drinks while Mel grills me in her best lawyer-like style for ten minutes to make sure "that asshole is treating you okay." Damn, it's not like I need four mothers! Nobody worries about Brian that much. As soon as mostly everyone is here, Lindsay will retreat to a quiet corner and Mel will get drunk on my margaritas. God, I love Mel at parties. Lindsay'll probably spend the whole night sitting in the same place, embarrassed that Mel gets so loud and wild...but by the end of the night, we'll all have spent some time with her chatting in a corner somewhere. Everybody just seems drawn to her - I guess the world really does revolve around some people.

Michael will come with Brian. I don't know how that works, but they're pretty much always together, even now. It must be some kind of homing signal that Brian puts out. Michael is okay, he really is, and I'm sort of getting used to being on the outside when it comes to them. I mean, they've been friends for almost as long as I've been alive, so how can I complain? I don't have much to complain about anyways, I've got most of Brian now...there's just this little extra bit that Michael has, that I don't even get to see. It's frustrating, I guess. Michael would fall over dead if he knew why we were celebrating tonight. He's stronger than people give him credit for, because I'm not sure I could stand by and watch someone else with Brian like he has. I have to remember that even though there's a part of Brian that Michael has that I want, there's a much bigger piece of Brian that's all mine, and that has to hurt him. I should try harder to be nice about it.

I don't know when Mom will come. I was sort of vague when I invited her, and she doesn't know why she's coming. I don't have the words to explain this sort-of-but-not-really-a-real-marriage to her. It's not much more than a promise and I don't think it means anything to anyone but me. We'll never have a ceremony and monogamy and a home with Kinney-Taylor on the mailbox; we only have rings and promises and a limited partnership. I don't think Mom will understand. I'm not sure I understand either. It's the best I'll ever have, but it's not what I really wanted and it sort of hurts.

Shit! People will be here any minute. I'm getting all upset and I shouldn't be. Tonight is for celebrating the small victories. We're here and we're happy, and that's good enough for now.

Okay, I can do this. I can play the game.

Breathe in, breathe out.

Welcome to my wedding reception.

Party of the First Part

I used to think there was nothing I liked about Brian, but that's not true - he throws kickass parties if you're not the one he's gunning for that night. It seems like he can't celebrate something without having an ulterior motive. I always think about everything I've done to him lately before accepting an invite, because he can be a cruel fucker, and that's hard to remember when you're dancing your ass off with a big margarita in your hand. On the other hand, as long as you're innocent in his eyes, you can go and have fun in spite of him. I guess that's why all these other people are here, too.

Everybody's here. Lindsay and Jennifer are talking mom stuff in the only quiet corner in the place. Deb and Vic are holding court on the sofa. Poor Teddy is leaning against a post, trying to work up the courage to actually dance and not just bounce on the sidelines. I wish sometimes he'd just buck up and do something for himself already, instead of standing alone, feeling pitiful all the time.

Brian is dancing with Ben and Michael, Emmett and Daphne are dancing with Justin, and I'm going for another drink when there's a knock at the door. I detour to answer it, since it appears that I'm the only person in the room with ears AND legs. Dammit, I have to do everything myself, even when I'm a guest!

I slide open the door to see two men on the other side - one older, with curly, sandy hair, and the other young, thin and tall. "Great," I think, "Brian's still inviting tricks to his parties. Justin's going to love this." The older one gives me a disarming smile and tries to hit on me. Asshole.

"So, can we come in or do we need a password?" he flirts, leaning seductively against the door and licking his lips.

The younger one laughs and nudges the older one. "Andrew, save it for a better audience. I don't think she's interested," he says sagely. "Why don't you just tell her who we are?"

"Because it's more fun to cause trouble..." he whines, stomping his foot and overacting terribly. Actually, he looks just like Michael when he's angry, and it makes me laugh. I have no idea who the young guy is, but the older one seems familiar, somehow, like I should know who he is.

Just then, a deafening shriek scares the living shit out of me! Justin comes barreling towards the door, screaming, "Matt! Andrew! What are you doing here???"

The younger one, Matt I guess, steps forwards and picks Justin right up off the floor in a giant bear hug. The whole room practically goes silent as the tall boy spins Justin in a circle, kissing him before he sets him down. I look over to Lindsay, just for a little "Ha, let's laugh at Brian moment" when I see the look of shock on her face. She's staring at the curly haired guy as if he's the devil. Jesus Christ, I never get to have any fun around here.

Nobody moves, nobody breathes, we pretty much all wait for Brian to kill this kid. We look at him expectantly, but he's playing dumb. He looks around at the motionless room, and says, "What the fuck are you looking at? Go back to what you were doing," and comes over to where Justin is still hugging and whispering to the younger boy.

I don't know if anyone else can see this, but I'm still close to the door and I see his face hardening as Justin and Matt whisper and hug. He's sweating, tensing up, and I swear he's just about to attack when the curly haired man starts to speak.

"Hi, Brian," Andrew says in a low, calm voice. He steps closer to him and gently pulls him away from the two boys. His voice flows just like warm honey and I can tell he's used to getting his way, even with Brian. "Let them have a minute, it's been six months."

Brian seems to relax a little and allows himself to be hugged. "Andrew, I'm glad you could come."

The curly haired man - Andrew - smiles and kisses Brian on the cheek. "Would I miss this? I thought it was about time you threw a party without throwing someone off a cliff at the same time."

Brian grimaces at the reference to Michael's awful birthday party. "No hidden agenda tonight - just come in and get shitfaced with us." He steps back and looks Andrew up and down. "Fuck, you look hot, Andrew. I'll warn you now, I'm glad to see you," his voice changes to a teasing, singsong tone, "but there's someone here who isn't!"

Andrew looks over Brian's shoulder to where Lindz is now sitting with a big fake smile plastered on her face. Shit, NOW I know who this guy is! This would be the guy who broke up Lindsay and Brian in college. I want to kiss him! He smiles hugely at me when Brian says, "Of course you remember Lindsay, always pouting in the corner at parties. This is her wife, Melanie."

"Oh My God, I KNEW IT! He crows, releasing Brian and grabbing me in a big hug. Jesus, is this guy a hugger or what? "I knew she was a dyke! There are a couple of guys from my dorm who owe me twenty bucks."

Just like Brian did before, I let this guy hug me. It just seems natural, somehow. Suddenly I get the urge to whisper something in his ear. "Thank you."

He leans back a bit and smiles just for me. I want to swoon. Either he's very good at this, or I'm more drunk than I thought. "No problem, babe. Worked out for everyone."

Brian looks nervous again, like he's going to jump out of his skin, so I lean back in and stage whisper, "You talking to me is killing Brian. I like you already."

Brian's looking between Andrew and me, and Matt and Justin, and you can tell he doesn't know where to intervene first. Andrew smiles and gently weaves an arm between Justin and Matt. "Justin, could you please release my boyfriend? I'm getting terribly jealous."

Justin turns and flashes that megawatt smile. "You two? When? Why didn't you say anything?" I swear to God he starts jumping up and down. "I'm so happy for you!"

Brian groans and starts dragging Justin backwards. "You're way too hyper, Sonny Boy, you need another drink." He pushes Justin towards the kitchen and motions for Michael to leave Ben and come over to say hello.

That's when I remember that I've been standing at the door for ten minutes with an empty glass in my hand. "Justin! Wait up!" I call, following him to the kitchen. Sure, I could make the drink myself, but his are better and I'm dying to get the gossip on these strangers. Besides, I'm drunk and happy and nobody's getting hurt tonight - what could be better than that?

Party of the Second Part

"Come on, Em, just this once. It's a special occasion," he whispers to me, patting my pants pocket gently but urgently. "I won't tell Brian."

"Baby, you won't have to tell Brian, he's going to take one look at you and know you're flying higher than a kite." His hand is still resting on my hip, and he's giving me the cutest puppy-dog face. He may be able to talk Brian into stuff that way, but not me, honey, I'm smarter than that. Brian would tear me a new one, and that's the last thing I need. I like the one I have.

"Sweetie, no." His face falls; he knows when he's beaten. "Your mom is here, and Deb, and Lindsay, and I don't want to mess with any of them, either. If you want a bump, go ask Brian."

He nods and says, "I understand, Em. Don't go anywhere, kay?" You could knock me over with a feather when I see him walk right up to Brian on the dance floor. Hmmm... he's asking, Brian's shaking his head no. He whispers something else; Brian shakes his head no again. Justin slides in front of him and clicks the ring on his left hand against the ring on Brian's right. Hmm, those are new...rings...on Brian...and Justin...Oh My God!

They're married!

I want to shout it across the room, but as soon as I open my mouth, I close it again. Who can I tell? Who would believe me? I'm pretty sure most of Gay PA thinks that Brian getting hitched is the seventh sign. I could shout it from the rooftops, and the only thing it would get me is a trip to the loony bin. I think back to every little thing I've seen lately, and it's the only explanation that makes sense.

I have to tell Teddy, though, I mean I just can't hold this in. I make my way over to him by the kitchen, trying to look smooth and casual. I get about ten feet away and I can't control myself any longer. I race up to Ted and start bouncing up and down. "Guess what I know about Brian and Justin!" I whisper excitedly, but he isn't biting.

"What, that Brian's leading him down the path to juvenile delinquency?" he smirks, pointing towards the pillar just off the dance floor. Brian's got Justin backed into it, and I watch him laying out a tiny little line on his wrist for him. Ted can think what he wants about Justin being an innocent, but he's wrong - these two have done this before. It's too fast, too practiced - the quick breath, Justin's tongue snaking out to lick Brian's wrist afterwards. I mean, Justin doesn't even cough, so you can't tell me it's his first time. He closes his eyes and smiles while Brian leans in to lick a little powder off his lip. Damn, I'm hard just watching them.

"Uh, what was I talking about again?" I nudge Ted, who's still watching Brian and Justin kissing against the post. Brian picked a good spot - hardly anyone can tell they're making out behind the column, and I'm sure nobody saw what happened before. They act like the whole world is their bedroom. It's so adorable.

"Ummm..." he falters, tearing himself away from The Brian and Justin Show. "I don't know. Sorry."

I can't very well blame him, I don't remember either. We're distracted from our conversation by Lindsay going over to Brian and tapping him on the shoulder. He pulls away slightly, but Justin grins and makes the "go, go" move with his hands before coming back to join me.

"I see you got what you wanted," Ted snickers.

"Ted, be nice," he giggles, wiping his nose. "We're supposed to be having fun. Lindsay is," he says, pointing towards the dance floor where Brian and Lindz are dancing to "Love Shack." Ted snickers again, but I think it's sweet. If you sort of squint a bit, you can imagine them in college, shaking it together at a kegger or something. I'm almost finished my drink, and I'm going to go and join them when Justin taps my shoulder.

"Oooh, look, here comes Andrew. I wondered if this would happen. Watch them..." he gestures towards Brian and Lindsay. Out of the corner of my eye I see Andrew move onto the dance floor as the song changes to "Too Funky."

"Ooh, I love George Michael!" I exclaim, watching as Andrew literally takes Brian right out of Lindsay's arms. Lindz stomps off as they start to dance.

"Andrew arranged for that to happen, I bet," Justin says. "He and Linds still don't get along, and it's got that whole, 'I stole him from you once and I'll do it again' ring to it."

"Don't you mind?" Ted asks as Andrew moves a little too close to Brian, and I'm wondering if he's trying to cause trouble or really just curious.

"Well, it bothered me at first, but it doesn't really anymore. I've had months to deal with the Andrew thing." He sighs sadly. "If I worried over every guy Brian fucks, I'd never have time for anything else."

Poor baby, he looks so sad! "Aww, honey, don't worry about that tonight. We are here to have fun fun! Besides, Lindz isn't the only one who's upset." It's true. Michael is standing beside Mel, looking like his eyes are going to pop out of his head. He turns on his heel to go over to the CD's to rifle through them.

Ted gestures towards the CD changer. "Michael will make sure that his song gets on there...if Brian still has it."

"Of course he does, Ted." Justin shakes his head at Ted's silly griping. "Michael decided on their song. He would never hurt him by getting rid of it." He nods towards the wall of CD's over by the changer. "Besides, we don't exactly have a shortage of CD's."

Ted snorts as the music changes and Bizarre Love Triangle comes on. "You mean Brian hasn't got a shortage of them."

I want to smack Teddy sometimes, he can be so mean! Justin just laughs, though. "Ted, I've lived here more often than not for the last two years! Think what you want. I don't care. Some of them are his, some are mine, but most are ours." He looks over at Brian and Michael bouncing to the music. "Excuse me for a minute."

He walks over to the CD's and I see him picking up case after case, finally choosing one I don't recognize from this distance. He puts it in the changer, and comes back over. "All done."

"Brian's dance card is pretty full tonight, sweetie, what's that all about?" the tall stranger, Matt, asks as he comes over to join us. "You could cut the tension in this room with a knife."

Justin laughs and grabs his arm. "Yeah, the floor show is something else. Lindsay claimed Brian first, but it made Andrew crazy, so he went and stole him away. That pissed Michael off, so now they're dancing." He bumps Matt with his hip and smiles. "Living around here is like a soap opera sometimes."

Matt laughs, but I'm confused. "So when are you going to go and get him? The song is almost over, and I saw you pick one."

"It wasn't a special song, Em, the music doesn't really matter. We don't have a special one...well, not one I'm going to share." He looks so faraway and sad for a minute, my poor baby never gets anything the easy way. "I would never waste my time doing

something so sentimental. If I'm going to piss him off, I'll save it for something big." Matt pokes him in the ribs and he breaks out in a smile. We see Brian suddenly look over here with a strained, fake smile, and I wonder why he doesn't just come over and say hi if it's bothering him so much.

Ted suddenly gets a huge look of recognition on his face, and Matt pats me on the shoulder in condescending sympathy, but I'm still waiting for clarification.

"I'm not going to get him. He's coming to get me," Justin explains patiently as the song changes to a faster techno song. "Matt, care to dance?"

Ted shakes his head towards Matt. "I wouldn't suggest it, Matt. Brian is very territorial."

Matt smiles and takes Justin's hand. "I know. That's half the fun."

Party of the Third Part

Justin and Matt are almost to the dance floor when he turns back to ask me a favour. "Say, can you make sure my mom doesn't get the show?" He blushes and looks at the floor for a minute.

The show...the show...why does that sound familiar? "Sure, baby, anything I can do. Look, she's in the corner there, she can't really see you if you stay over here."

"Thanks, Em." He smiles and pecks me on the cheek before taking Matt's hand and leading him to the dance floor.

Ted nudges my arm and whispers, "Brian won't let them dance. Trust me."

"Oh Teddy, don't be silly. Justin dances with other people all the time."

"Not since last week." He smiles triumphantly as we see Brian's gaze break away from Michael and move towards the two teenagers. "Justin is Brian's property now."

"Don't sound so ominous. Brian finally loves somebody. It's sweet."

"I wouldn't call it sweet. Have you seen Justin lately? I mean, really looked?" He starts fiddling with the label on his bottle of beer, trying to pull it off without tearing the paper.

"What on earth are you talking about?"

He takes a deep breath and his words rush out like a river. "They're into S&M, Emmett, I mean really into it. Brian has been beating on Justin for months, apparently with his consent."

I could not be more shocked if Publisher's Clearing House came to my door. "NO! Teddy, no, that's not it! I don't believe it. I came over here to tell you that they're married."

"What?"

"I saw the rings! I haven't confirmed it yet, but..." I trail off, wondering where Teddy got such a strange idea.

"Brian Kinney? No way. I know what I've seen, Emmett."

"Well, so do I, Ted. I'm going to ask Daphne, she'll know what's going on." I'm about to go looking for her when a very low heartbeat of a bass rhythm starts to rock the floors and rattle the windows. It's hypnotic, and I can feel it vibrating in my stomach, like an orgasm that that needs release.

I swear Justin picked that song as a mating call, because right on cue, Brian comes over and rubs himself against Justin's ass. "Hey stranger, wanna dance?" he whispers, drawing Justin out of Matt's grasp. He gasps and nods his head. Brian pulls him to the middle of the dance floor, because hey, it's Brian, and he can't stand not to be the centre of attention. Now I'm frantically searching for Jennifer instead of Daphne, making sure that she doesn't get a front row seat for her baby and Brian dry humping on the dance floor.

"If you're looking for Justin's mom, she walked Deb and Vic down to the car. Deb has the breakfast shift in the morning," Daphne says behind me. I turn my head to see her stumbling towards me with a fresh drink. "Do you want this? I think I've had enough." She hiccups, giggling as she says, "You'll need it. I think it's going to get hot in here in a minute. He borrowed this song from me on purpose."

"I'll be your sexual freak...of the week...I'll be your educational lover...your one-fuck fantasy..."

I'm not really hearing her, just listening to the song and watching Brian and Justin do their slow grind...watching like everybody else. It's a George Michael song, Freeek I think it's called...newer than anything from the CD's that I have. I can see why Justin picked it, it's slow and sexy and the beat vibrates inside your body.

"Daphne, I don't think you're old enough to watch this," Ted says solemnly, his eyes never leaving the point where Brian and Justin's bodies are starting to come together.

Daphne huffs, "Hey, it's **my** CD, so I get to watch! Besides, when am I gonna see this again," she continues as Justin's hands slide up and down Brian's chest.

Matt laughs. "Come on, Ted, let her enjoy the show. God knows I always do."

"Always?" Nothing piques my interest like good gossip. "So, what exactly do you know about our two?"

He chuckles and shakes his head solemnly. "I know enough to make your head explode, but I'll never tell."

Ted snorts. "Don't be so sure of that. We've been kicking around some information ourselves."

That statement makes Daphne finally look away from the dance floor for a minute. "He told you? He's not supposed to tell anybody." She giggles again and stumbles a bit.

"What did he say?"

I feel so awful taking advantage of a drunken teenager this way, but I'm DYING to know. "When did they get married?"

She giggles again and her drink spills over the edge of her glass. "I dunno, week ago?" She's looking at them on the dance floor again, sort of swaying to the beat. "This is their reception."

Ted and I are openmouthed in shock, and I really want to scream and jump up and down when Matt nudges me and says, "Hey, check that out."

We turn our heads expecting to see the usual Friday night bump and grind, but we don't expect to see them stripping each other. "Damn," Ted and I murmur in unison. They're out there, fucking with their clothes on. I mean, mostly on. Justin's in the process of undoing Brian's buttons oh so slowly, his hip sliding firmly across Brian's his crotch. Brian's doing his part too, sliding his fingers up under Justin's shirt to play with the nipple ring that we all know is there. Two beats later, a quick tug and a flick of the wrist have left them both half-dressed in their living room with a houseful of people who don't know where to look.

Oh, Jesus, come and save me from watching this, because I can't stop myself. Justin throws his head back, and Brian attacks his neck, leaving giant purple love bites in his path. The beat is pulsing and you can almost see the steam rising as Justin slides his hand down to grab Brian's ass, grinding into him in time to the thumping bass.

Michael is walking towards us, saying, "We shouldn't be watching this..." but he sort of just trails off as Brian starts playing with Justin's zipper.

"Would they?" I murmur in shock as Justin pulls Brian's head up for a kiss. "I mean, with all of us here, do you think they would..."

"No." Ted says, "Brian wouldn't let us see Justin that way."

Daphne says, "Justin would be worried about his mom."

Matt says, "Brian wouldn't make Lindsay or Michael watch that."

Michael just looks sick. "Of course he would. This is how they feel, and they want everybody to know it. They don't give a damn who it hurts," he finishes bitterly, turning his back to get another drink.

"Touchy..." Daphne giggles, her eyes glued to Brian's hand sliding into Justin's pants. "It's not like I see this every day. I'm not going anywhere."

"Me neither, honey," Matt says, throwing his arm over her shoulder as they drink in the scene in front of us. Justin's eyes are glazed and he's got his mouth near Brian's ear. I can't hear him for the music, but I can read his lips, and it's just one word, please, over and over again...

Matt nudges my arm. "Better clear a path to the bathroom, song's almost over."

I look between the guys on the dance floor and the bathroom door, and realize I'm on a collision course, so I shift to the side just as the last panting moans of the song come on the stereo. Brian grabs Justin by the back of the neck and pushes him roughly off the dance floor, following at lightning speed. Michael opens his mouth to say something, but they blaze by him without a word. For those two, there isn't anyone else in the room at all.

Party of the Fourth Part

"God, Brian, fuck me, please fuck me..." I wail as he slams the door behind us. My voice makes him turn to me with that feral grin that's so fucking sexy I could shoot right now. "Please!"

He's got the condom out of his pocket and on before I can even blink. "Bend over," he pants in that low growl he uses to give orders. "Now."

Everything is happening so fast...my pants are down around my ankles and he's pressing his lube-covered fingers into me roughly, urgently. Every thrust makes me yelp and pant and beg for more. I'm not too proud to beg for his cock, I need it to fill me up. I want him so badly it hurts.

He's too hot to draw it out and make me plead for it. He pulls his hand away from my ass as if I'm on fire, moving it to my hip as I brace myself against the wall.

In a second he's in me, slow and steady so I have time to breathe with the intrusion. One breath and a subtle shift on my part is all it takes for him to start moving, slowly at first but faster as I start to adjust and move with him. I'm so close it hurts; the hand job on the dance floor saw to that. I'm pretty sure he won't be far behind, because I'll bet my ass grinding against his dick was just as hard hard for him to ignore.

I like it like this sometimes, fast and hard. It's a sexual pit-stop, and I need these little breaks as much as he does. He's panting and groaning, and the sound breaks back into my consciousness. I mean, what we're doing, knowing that everyone out there knows that we're fucking in here... Oh God, that's enough to send me over the edge right there, and it does. I shake and buck into him, enjoying my orgasm but waiting for the hitch in his breath that means he's finally joining me. He doesn't hold back for long, and his low groan is the music I've been waiting for. I love these seconds when we're still connected and our breath and our hearts make the only noise. Tonight he just holds me against the cold bathroom wall as we learn how to breathe again.

"How long have we been gone?" he asks, pulling out slowly and dropping the used condom in the garbage.

"I don't know," I puff, retrieving my pants from the floor. "Five minutes?"

He laughs while he straightens himself up in the mirror. "That's gotta be a record."

I join him at the mirror to inspect the various hickeys all over my neck. "Jesus, Brian, I look like a leper. Do you know where my shirt went?"

"We're not at the bar," he laughs, dampening his hands to try and tame his hair. "If you can't find your shirt, go get another one out of the drawer."

"Yeah, I guess..." I say, just watching him turn back into the cool, collected Brian that everyone else knows. It's sort of sad, really, that nobody else gets him in the morning, when he's sleepy with cowlicky hair, wanting to talk about stories in the paper. Nobody else gets him at four in the morning, when we're both lying awake and scared of the nightmares still intruding into our dreams. Pillowfights, rented movies, old music...all the things about him that are really *him* are bound tightly behind the façade of perfection and control.

"You ready to face the masses?"

"Yeah. I just hope my mom didn't see that."

He laughs, so unguarded for a change. "Me neither, she'll never forgive me."

"Oh, that reminds me, Daphne invited us all to her Grandma's cottage on Sunday. I'm going up with her and the guys are coming, do you want to come too?"

He looks at me with a suddenly cold glare. "So, you accepted the invitation without even asking me?"

"Huh? Where the hell is this coming from? I accepted for ME. I told her I'd ask YOU."

He turns away, his shoulders still stiff. "From now on, you ask me first. If I'm busy, I don't want to run all over hell's half acre looking for you."

"Uh...sure, Brian, whatever. Do you want to come?"

He seems calm now that that has been settled. "Sure. We'll make a day of it." He pats his hair down and sighs. "You ready to face the room again?"

"Yeah." I grab a t-shirt off the top of the hamper and toss one to Brian. Sometimes it's lucky to be messy and leave clean stuff lying around. He opens the door and we sneak through, thinking that the coast is clear until we pretty much run right into my mother.

Disclosure

"Justin! I've been looking for you," she smiles, going on as if it's perfectly normal for us to be coming out of the bathroom at the same time. "Your friends seem to be enjoying the party."

"Not half as much as we are, Jennifer," I smirk. Justin groans in exasperation and kicks my foot. Apparently, I'm no longer allowed to fuck anyone in my own house.

I have to say, his mom has perfect control, because her smile doesn't falter a bit. I guess that he hasn't told her yet, because she hasn't been sending death glares my way tonight. He takes a deep breath and I start to inch away, knowing in my gut what's about to happen.

"Mom?" Justin's voice is shaking, and I'm want to run, run as far and as fast as I can, without looking back. Why couldn't he have taken care of this without me? He clears his throat and lets his words out in a rush. "We have something to tell you. We...uhh...we're married."

Fuck, I hate that word, and I'm pissed that he's making me stand beside him and pretend to care about this bullshit. I'm not going to look his mother in the eye and promise to love, honour, and cherish him, so what the fuck is the point of this little confession? I don't want to be here, I need to go and get better acquainted with my friend Jim Beam.

I'm starting to pull away as he rushes to explain. "It's a partnership, Mom, not a ceremony thing. It's already done. I just wanted you to know." He can't get through this without giggling, he's happy, and why shouldn't he be? He's got everything he wanted - my apartment, my stuff, and my fucking soul in chains. I don't fucking know why I bother, because it's never enough. I let him stay twice and he wanted a relationship. Let him have a relationship and he wanted ME. Let him have that, and he wants the whole fucking world to know that a teenaged twink took down the legendary Brian Kinney. Can't I at least keep my dignity? He's still giggling as he holds up his hand for his mom. "See my ring?"

I guess not.

Fucking asshole.

She looks dazed, but tilts her head to examine the ring anyways. She turns to me with that ice-princess face I've seen on Lindsay when she's faking being calm; I guess it's bred into them or something. "So, I don't suppose you have one of these?" she says coldly.

Fuck off, bitch, two can play at that game. I hold up my hand, momentarily relieved that I got one of these bitter little reminders for myself. "See for yourself, Jennifer. Everyone steps in the bear trap at some point."

"How romantic," she ventures grimly, taking his hand to compare his ring to mine.

"We're men, Jennifer. Romance is unnecessary. I didn't need to marry him to get him into bed."

I take my hand back sharply and shove it into my pocket, wanting to go and forget that I'm...attached...to Justin for at least the foreseeable future. Fuck, that thought is more than I can take, but I can hold it together if everyone leaves me the fuck alone. I should know better than to want ask for that, to ask for anything, because just when I want to be by myself, suddenly we seem to be surrounded by people.

"What the fuck do you want from me?" I blurt, trying to back away from Justin and Jennifer and all the people choking me, cutting off my escape with their false kind faces. They look at each other and shake their heads, until finally Michael opens up his big fat mouth and blurts, "So when did you two get married?"

I turn to Justin, wanting to see him surprised, wanting him to be pissed at everyone for their unforgivable intrusion. I want him to be shocked that anyone could possibly have guessed.

I want him to be innocent, but he's not.

Public Spectacle

"Justin!" I've never seen him this angry before. "What the fuck is this?"

Justin's looking around at everyone's expectant faces, scrambling for an answer that he doesn't have. "I don't know, Brian, I didn't tell everyone."

"Well they didn't pull it out of the fucking air, Justin, you knew the rules. I asked you for ONE FUCKING THING! ONE GODDAMNED THING AND YOU DIDN'T DO IT!!!" His voice is getting higher and louder, and damn, he's scary.

We're all backing up slightly, except for Jennifer, who's trying to edge her way between the two of them, and Lindsay, who's trying to pull Brian away. They might as well not bother, this is going to be an argument whether we want it to be or not.

"You were here when I told my mom, Brian! That's it!" Justin scrambles, stepping sideways to evade his mom and Brian at the same time. He looks to the side and repeats, "I didn't tell everyone."

Brian is so angry, he's shaking. His face is starting to go red, as if the Irish in him can appear at will. "YOU'RE A GODDAMNED FUCKING LIAR, JUSTIN." He would be advancing towards him, if Lindsay weren't pulling desperately at his arm. "WHO DID YOU TELL???"

Justin doesn't need to say anything, because Matt starts shuffling his feet and looking very, very guilty. Out of the blue, Daphne suddenly bursts into tears and starts apologizing all over the place. "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry!" she wails, allowing Emmett to collect her in his arms.

"Shh, baby, it's okay. We'll get it worked out," he murmurs, raising his head as if to reprimand Brian but dropping his eyes again when Brian glowers at him.

"JUSTIN!" Brian has finally managed to shake Lindsay off and is backing towards the bedroom. "Get them the fuck out of here. We need to have a discussion."

"Sure, Brian," he says, taking a deep breath and starting to herd us towards the door. "We'll talk, it'll be just fine," he's murmuring, and I wonder if he's trying to convince us or himself.

"I'm not leaving you here with him like that," his mother says, and Justin just smiles weakly and pats her on the arm.

"He's just blowing off steam, it'll be fine."

The partygoers start to collect their things and head out the door, and in the confusion I pop around the corner to talk to Brian. He's sitting on the edge of the bed, perfectly still and perfectly calm, and that's the most frightening thing I've seen all night. He looks up at me and smirks. I have always hated that smirk.

"Sorry, Andrew, it's time for you to go. It seems that Justin misunderstood something in our agreement. We need to hash it out."

"He made a little mistake and it snowballed. Surely you didn't think that something as big as a marriage could be secret forever?"

His eyes are full of cold fire when he answers me. "I expect to be listened to and obeyed."

What the fuck? "Brian, what are you talking about?"

"Andrew, this is officially none of your business. Would you be so kind as to get the fuck out of my house?" He gets up and starts rummaging in his night table drawer, stopping when he finds a small object that he places in his pocket.

"Um, okay, but call me if you need me." I don't want to leave them like this, something's wrong with Brian and I can see Justin crying on Matt's shoulder by the door.

"Andrew," Matt calls, and I make my way over to him. "I don't want to go. I'm worried about Justin, he's really upset."

Justin squares his shoulders and smiles bravely, but he's still got tears in his eyes. "No really, I'll be fine. Go before he gets really angry."

Now if that tantrum wasn't **really** angry, then I'd like to know what is. His voice is still shaking, but Justin is very firm. "Just go, guys. It will all be okay in the morning."

Brian's friends are in a clump closer to the door, but Ted, the dark-eyed quiet one, won't go. They're practically dragging him out the door, but he's resisting, quietly saying, "No, we have to stay for Justin. He needs us."

Justin gives them a fake, forced smile and says, "It's fine. He's not even yelling anymore. This will all be over in the morning."

They finally pull Ted out of the apartment, and Matt and I follow...all of us wondering if we've done the right thing in leaving, I guess. We all just stand at the top of the stairs, not really moving to leave. Ted and Matt are still hovering by the door, as if to go back in, and I wonder what they know that I don't. Suddenly the door slams shut, as if to end our questions...but just on the other side of the metal, the sound of Justin's panicked crying is enough to break my heart.

Silver

And so it began.

"Justin, come."

"Not tonight, Brian."

"I'm not asking."

"I mean it, I'm not into it tonight. I'm too worn out."

"I don't care. Come here."

"Fuck you, Brian. I said no."

"Shut it down, then. Say the word."

"I shouldn't have to! Having a safe word isn't an excuse for you to beat me up."

"Bring yourself over here or I'll come and get you. I'm taking you either way."

"No."

Nobody says no to me.

close your eyes, your christ has come

the crippled boy that you once knew

the charmed enigma

chosen one

He's fucking furious with me, and I don't want to be here. It's not that I want to escape the blame, because I know I did something wrong. I don't want to get away with anything. I'm just fucking terrified.

I am scared of Brian.

There, I said it, but I don't feel any better because he's still doing that slow circle around the loft, the panther walk that's meant to distract me. I'm not supposed to notice that he's coming for me. Coming to get me, just like he said...like it or not.

He pulls his shirt over his head, and tosses it away like garbage. I guess he plans on working up a sweat...Shit, has he planned this? Has he got something here that will really hurt me? I used to think that he'd never do anything really violent, but his face is red and his eyes are damn near glowing in the dark. I need to get out of here. The air between us is vibrating and no matter how I try to melt into the wall, it's still him and me in this room with nobody to save me this time. I need to run, he's dangerous and we're dangerous and I need to run away because I'm so fucking scared...

with painted lips

skin ripped and torn

come touch and feel and lick and smell

this envy that i've worn so well

He's easy to catch, I run faster angry than he does scared. Nothing can keep me from wanting this, doing this, feeling this boy breaking in my hands. I've been so good and waited so long and now I get to feast, feast on his fear. The panic in his eyes, the tears, the thin sweat coming up on his forehead is the greatest fucking aphrodisiac I've ever had. He's babbling and mewling like a kitten. Like prey. It's a high keening noise and it's bugging me, he's got to stop. Hit him. Hit him again. Hit him until he gets the point and shuts the fuck up already. Hit him until my hands hurt, until I see blood, until his shirt is soaked like that night and my hands are wet like that night and his eyes won't open like that night. Hit him until he screams for me to stop...

everybody wants

everybody says

everybody begs in time

"Brian!"

"You asked for this."

"NO! Please, don't."

"This is how you wanted me to be."

"Not like this! Never like this! Please stop."

"Why? I know you like that. Not enough? Fine, I can do it harder."

so drink me in

like tainted wine

come bite down on my sharpened cup

and taste the dreams that numb the mind

I'm screaming, I'm screaming and I can't stop because it hurts, it fucking hurts. My face is on fire, there's too much blood and my skin is split and leaking but he won't stop. I can't taste anything but metal and salt and I go to touch my lip, I think it's my lip that's bleeding, but he won't let me. The floor is too hard for this, he's heavy and strong and even though I try to move him, he just laughs in the sickest way and leans down to lick some blood from my face. He's got a taste for it now.

This is bad, this is horrible, how could I ever think that a little heartbreak could compare to this? What the fuck is wrong with me that I asked for this? The bashing and the hospital and everything hurtful and wrong that's ever happened to me is just a bad dream

compared to this unending agony. He's breaking my body and my heart at the same time, and it's too much.

His hand is on my neck, I can't even struggle any more because it makes him press hard into my throat and I can't fucking breathe, there's no air in this room anymore and I'm seeing stars even before he sinks his teeth into my side. Teeth, fucking tearing me, I can't stand it, I can't stand it and my hands will only slide against the floor. There's nothing to grab, nothing but him and I have to do it or this will never end. I croak out his name and beg him with my eyes to please just make it stop.

a simple word

a harmless glare

that binds me with the thinnest thread

and pins me down to pleasures bed

He said my name, and it sounds like a prayer and a curse at the same time. Worship me, sacrifice yourself to me, I want it and I'll take it all. His skin is on fire, his eyes are on fire, and the blood racing through my face feels like it's on fire too. I'm fucking cruising on the high from feeding this demon, why don't they tell you it feels so good? Why don't they tell you that no drug feels as good as beating the life out of your lover one minute at a time? He's mine, he's mine and I'm taking him to bed whether he wants to or not.

Pitiful struggle. He's so much smaller than I am! I never ever took advantage of him before. I could have done this every time, could have felt this fucking amazing rush from his terror. Takes less than a minute to pick him up and throw him onto the bed, and that's including his pathetic escape attempt. Don't make me really angry, baby, or I'll be forced to get violent. Ha. Funny how his face magically connected with my knee like that. There, that slowed him right the fuck down. Heh, should have known better than to try that shit with me.

everybody wants

everybody says

everybody begs in time

Holy shit, his knife is out and he's never been crazy like this when he uses it, not even the first time. I'm scared of so much, is he going to kill me or just cut me? I'm trying hard to catch my breath and just be in the moment, because I totally don't want to know what he's got planned for the future. I can't afford to go forwards or backwards right now, I need to stay here, move fast and think faster, and maybe we'll both come out of it alive. God, I am in so far over my head right now. If he saves me from everybody, who's going to save me from *him*?

He's hesitating, watching or waiting for something, and I have to get away. I have to. He's cutting my clothes, not carefully like he does when we're playing, but pulling them away from my skin and sawing. I don't want to move, I know if I move I'm going to get cut, but if I don't move, something worse will happen. He's crazy and I'm scared and I need to get away.

I think I'm only being held by my shirt, so I try to slide out from underneath him like I always do. I feel the pressure before the sting, the cold slide of the blade before the blazing streak of pain. Damn. The blood trickles down the side of my back, itchy and hot, tracing the lines of my muscles until it hits the bed. He reaches into his night table for something to tie my hands together. I can't escape now.

Fuck, I'm dead.

and you will be the first to fall

every feeling will dissolve

we are silver

This time it's not me. I'm not giving up, I'm not giving in. I'm going to fucking break him if it's the last thing I do.

He's not struggling much anymore. Maybe he's submitting, maybe he's lost too much blood. Who knows? I don't care anymore. His blood is all over my hands, and everywhere I touch leaves fingerprints, palmprints of red. It's good. I like the red against his pale skin. I like the ownership. You're fucking mine, Justin. You thought a wedding ring meant you owned me, well, do you wanna tell me what my bloody handprints mean? I'll tell you - I fucking own you. I bought you so that I can do whatever I want, and you're going to pay and pay.

The knife is long gone, kicked somewhere the last time he tried to break free, but that's okay. I have something better, purchased just for this evening, but not for this event. That's fine, I have a great imagination and he thinks he's safe because all the toys we use for our little rituals are safely locked away in the drawer. If he should know anything by now, it's that I have an endless capacity to cause him pain. I like the toys, but I don't need anything fancy. This will do fine.

morphine baby's final breath

ever pressed into my breast

we are silver

He flips me over like a doll. I don't want to look him in the eye, I don't want to see what monster has taken up residence in his head. There's a wet spot on the sheet from my blood. I'm not going to be able to get away from him, this time, this won't be a quick tease before the main event. I think this IS the main event.

I have to look at him. I used to love watching him hurting me, the bitten lip, the tongue in cheek murmuring was such a turn on. It was good when he was concentrating on making me feel pleasure and pain. It's not good when he's only thinking about new ways to feel the adrenaline rush while his conscience goes on vacation.

What the fuck is that in his hand, his lighter? At least it's not still the knife. He won't ruin his stuff by starting a fire, I think I'm okay. It hurts too much to think straight and I don't know what to be worried about next.

I hate not knowing.

He's sitting on my hips, and I watch him light the lighter, just holding down the button until the flame burns high and bright in front of his face. Sweaty and red, with his hair in his face and the flame reflecting in his dark eyes, he looks like a psychopath. After a couple of seconds, he quickly blows out the flame and touches the hot metal to my chest. This isn't pain, that word is too small for this insane burning shock. The hot flush/cold rush, nauseating, bone shaking hurt that I'm feeling, that's not pain. It's torture, and even that word seems too small. They need new words for something that hurts this much, and the worst part is that I'm not even his lover anymore, I'm his livestock.

Now I'm really screaming, I can smell my skin burning like meat and every touch is a blazing white flare that dulls to an aching throb. He's inching lower and lower, and the little burns rise up in a pattern all down my body as I scramble in vain to get away. The evil grin, that malicious little light in his eyes when he watches the flame, it's horrifying. I'm shutting down, the room is getting hazy and cold and I'm not sure if I'm going into shock because my body hurts or because my heart hurts. There's a sound, high and in the background, of someone screaming and screaming. It takes me a while to understand that I'm the one making the noise.

so shy and poised

with few regrets

a judas kill, a complex thrill

a memory i won't soon forget

I have to have him, I want to tear him apart and drink from him like a fountain. He's still struggling to get away, but his body melts into my hands anyways. There is always something soft to clutch and grasp and hurt. Why the fuck couldn't I feel this before?

How could he deny me this amazing fucking high? He's mine, my possession and he can't even take a fucking breath without my permission. I'm taking his soul and it's electric.

His clothes are gone and I can't remember doing it, but that's fine, I don't care. Nothing could come between me and what I want. I put my mouth on him for the first time, tracing my tongue from burn to burn, while he flinches and wails at the increasing pain. It's not enough, still not enough, but I want to take a minute and just taste him. His mouth is salty from the tears and blood, and it tastes just like him only better, somehow. My hand slides down to his cock and my tongue finds its way into him, and I fucking knew it, he's coming after me like a drowning man finding a life preserver. He'd fucking eat me alive if he could, and he might be scared or whatever, but he's so fucking hard I can feel his pulse in his dick. His skin, his body is so easy to break, and my clenched hand will accomplish that just fine.

It's music, his screaming is like music and I have to put my lips over his, and make him spew it all into me. I want to take everything he has, his fear, hurt, confusion...everything I could ever make him feel, I want it and I want it now. I want more than his feelings. I want to do damage.

been washed out clean

till all runs dry

come touch and feel and lick and smell

the hurt that only you could sell

Jesus Christ, his hand is off my cock, thank you God. Never thought I'd say that. He's got a hand on my throat, like always, and the other searches through his pockets while I struggle to find some air. He's still kissing me, giving me breath and sucking it back like he's teasing me with his cock, and it's a warm, cadenced feeling. I feel so empty, so worn. My heart slows down, my vision starts to blur as the combination of his body weight, his hand clasped around my throat, and his mouth over mine starts to rob my brain of oxygen. It's warm and fuzzy here, and the screaming, overwhelming pain is starting to fade as I slide into unconsciousness. He clenches his hand tightly and pulls away from my face, watching my body go into autopilot and try to draw a breath. My mouth moves without a purpose; I know there is no air here for me, and I want to breathe but it just isn't possible. Brian has stolen my ability to keep myself alive.

You know, I think that's okay. It's so warm here, so quiet, and nothing hurts anymore. It's like sinking, melting deep into the bed while his weight and his hands wring the last of the air out of my body. I'm sliding down a warm dark slope, I can feel the blood pooling below his hand, trying to get back into my head. The lights start going off in front of my eyes, and that's when I know he's killing me this time.

I'm dying, and I know it when I feel something falling gently on my face, like snow. His voice, sweet and slick and absolutely without remorse, floats down to me through the mist, saying, "Come back to me, Justin. Breathe."

He sits back further onto my hips and releases my throat from his grasp. The huge, shuddering breath that I draw is mixed with the fine white powder that he so carefully spread under my nose. The high is immediate, white light flying through my veins with every hammering heartbeat. I'm panting now, almost revelling in the feeling of renewed pain and the flying oxygen high.

"Thought I was going to lose you there," he smirks as he starts to unbutton his jeans. "Can I trust you to stay put, or do I have to tie you down?"

"I'll stay," I gasp, thankful still to be alive and breathing. He puts his tongue in his cheek thoughtfully as he slides his jeans to the floor. He's back in a flash, I'm still breathing hard when he's all over me with his teeth, licking and biting the welts and bleeding wounds until I'm screaming again. I can't even think of how much this is hurting, hurting my skin and my muscles and my mind worst of all. I cannot stop and think that I almost died at his hands, because if I do, I'll go insane and never come back.

There's worse than that in this whole mess, too. I don't want to think about how hard I am, how I'm aching for him to touch me, to take me and fuck me right back into oblivion. The pain of wanting him, it's horrible and I can't understand why I need him so much right now, but I do. I want him so badly, and if this is the price to get him inside me, to watch my body betray me by responding to this abuse, then I'll pay no matter what it costs. I didn't want this, I mean I said I don't, but my cock is hard and my hole is aching, so how can he be expected to stop now?

everybody wants

everybody says

everybody begs in time

He's such a slut. I can't fucking believe what a whore I've turned him into. He's my whore, he does what I want, and what I want is for him to feel sorry. Sorry for what he's done to me.

I can smell his fear and his desperate, terrible wanting at the same time...he doesn't even know what to beg for anymore. There's something about his crying that feels like mercury in my veins, fast liquid metal that races from my ears straight to my cock. I need this, need him like I've never needed anyone before. The fucking high is incredible, I'm breathing his pain like air...one more breath, baby, one more...yeah, it's all right.

I shove my fingers into his mouth so roughly, he's choking on them, but he knows what to do. He knows that if he doesn't get them wet enough, it's not ME that's going to be

hurting, so he licks and sucks my fingers like his life depends on it. I guess it does, I don't even fucking know anymore.

He doesn't offer any resistance anymore, and it's disappointing. I like the smell of terror, and I don't want him to rest easy when I never have around him. He's always about the fucking hunt and running away and staying ahead of me when I don't want to chase anymore. Two can play at that game, Sonny Boy, and you're going to be fucking sorry you came down to Liberty that night.

There's no teasing tonight, none of that happy sappy foreplay that he likes so much. I just want to take him and tear him open for me. The look on his face, that frozen moment before he starts to scream again, that's what I want. I need it, his adrenaline and mine the ultimate drug. Fuck, no drug can match what your body can do and I'm getting off on making this hurt too much for him to take.

It's not too much for him to take. It's never too much. Damn, I underestimated this whore, because even though I can practically taste his agony and his frantic need to escape from me, his eyes are glazed and he's licking his lips when he rocks to meet my hand. Shit. He's into this, I mean, really into it and that makes me so fucking hot it's unbelievable. Gotta get inside him, have to feel his throbbing panic and know that I'm the one, I'm the only one that can do this to him. My territory, mine to use and abuse and destroy because I love him and he loves me.

and you will be the first to fall

every feeling will dissolve

we are silver

His eyes are changing, he's staring daggers into me, daring me to move, to breathe, to use that fucking safeword that I should never, ever have agreed to.

I'm afraid to say that word because I know it won't make him stop.

Nothing could stop him now. It's a sick realization, a knowledge that comes from some deep animal part of my brain. Like those zebras that get caught by the lions and know that they're going to die, that's how I feel. Some ancient part of me knows that I have two choices, play or die.

Fine, I'll play. That's okay. Nothing could feel better than this or hurt worse than this, and if I died right now I'd know I've already felt everything a person can feel. I'm bursting, and I know there's love in him now, love for the perfect kill and the love of the predator for his prey and somewhere in that, love for me too. He's thankful that I'm here to give him what he needs, and that almost makes up for the terrible slicing pain when he bends me almost in two to jam his cock up my ass. The whole world goes black and I struggle against the pain just to breathe in, breathe in, get some fucking air in my lungs even

though he's hot and heavy on me and I can't see or think or feel anything but the pain that I shouldn't want.

I DO want this, though. I want this more than he could imagine, more than I could imagine. Every gut wrenching thrust, the tight hands holding me down, the blood and sweat and thin metallic taste of adrenaline in our mouths, I want it. The pain and pleasure that's buried so deep inside that he has to tear me open to get it out. I'm going to come, I can feel it pushing away everything in my mind but the high screaming sound that must be me. I want him, I have to feel him shatter me and destroy the terrible darkness that won't go away.

I can't stop licking his face, letting the sweat drop into my mouth as he presses into me. I lock my eyes onto his, and that's when I see it, his desperate burning need just as strong as mine, and just as frightening. He wants me dead, he wants to be dead himself, we're both trying to get the fuck out of our bodies and in this instant there's nothing but our bodies and our pain and the vulgar white light that's burning behind my eyes. I can feel his love now, wound tight with my pain like a killer vine that won't let go.

Now he's the one who's screaming, and he's like a wounded animal caught in someone's headlights, frozen in time and painted with fear and blood and that horrible knowledge that he can't survive on his own anymore. He says my name, and it's a curse, a terrible realization that we both lived and we have to face another day. He grips my cock again, and it's just too much, I'm coming and my blood is hot and racing, my heart has stopped and I'm hollow and empty because now he's got my soul.

morphine baby's final breath

ever smothered to my breast

we are silver

"Justin? You okay?"

"Yeah...can you untie me now?"

"What? Fuck, look at your hands! Oh, oh God, Justin, God..."

"Brian, calm down. Undo the knot."

"I can't, Justin, I can't..."

"Stop crying, it's okay. I'll be okay."

"Fuck, you're still bleeding... God, I'm so sorry."

"Don't say that, Brian. Just go to sleep."

"But..."

"No, just sleep. Everything will look different in the morning."

"Justin?"

"I promise. I forgive you. Now go to sleep."

silver...

Father Confessor I

I heard him out in the hall before he knocked, but I just thought my dippy neighbour forgot to let her cat in again. The low mewling noise got louder and louder, like a reverse Doppler effect, until finally there was a soft rapping at my door. I opened it not knowing what to expect - there's no controlled entry on this old building, after all.

The man on the other side looks like he's been jumped...or worse. "Can I come in?" Justin sobs quietly, like he really doesn't know the answer. I put my hand out to bring him through the door, but he shrinks away.

"No! Don't!" he gasps just as my fingers connect with his shoulder. His eyes glaze over and a low hiss of pain escapes from his mouth. "It's not safe," he apologizes, looking down at the floor. I can't do anything for him but back up and let him through the door.

"Thank you," he says, flatly, tiredly. He toes off his shoes in the entryway and heads straight for the kitchen.

I'd love to know why he's here, but he'll talk when he's ready. I think he probably doesn't have anywhere else to go. "Coffee?" I ask, picking up my own mug from the living room on my way through the apartment.

"Please." That's it, no, "Sorry to interrupt you at two in the morning, Ben," or "I need to talk to you, Ben." Come to think of it, that's what makes him different from everyone in the group... except Brian. Anyone else would have been talking before they came through the door.

I make the coffee in silence while Justin does a surreptitious inventory of his injuries. He doesn't need to be so sneaky, he looks like hell and it's obvious that someone has been using him as a punching bag.

"Justin?" I say quietly, handing him a mug, "Whenever you're ready, I'd really like to know what's going on."

He drinks from the cup and nods, his hands shaking. "Me too. I thought I understood, but I don't."

"So I guess that discussion after the party didn't go very well, then." I'm torn between drawing out the story and buying some time for him to calm down. This kid has been through too much.

"No." He laughs bitterly.

"Justin, I want to help. Whatever it is that you came for, I want to give it to you, if I can...but first, you have to let me in. Tell me what happened."

He sighs and looks around the room, finally perching himself carefully on the edge of my kitchen chair. "I want you to promise me something first. Don't blame Brian for this. It's my fault." He looks down at his mug and sighs. "I came to you because I know that you won't judge him."

At this point, I don't have enough information to judge a beauty contest, let alone their relationship, so I just nod and smile. That has the effect I was hoping for, and he continues:

"I know what you guys did at the White Party. I mean, Brian didn't tell me everything, but I got the gist of it. I know you won't think that we're crazy for what we do."

"What you do. Uh, Justin, can you be a little more specific?"

"I'm trying. This is hard."

"Okay, just take your time."

He pauses, fiddling with his coffee mug and eventually taking another sip. "Um...Brian and I have been into S&M for about seven months. It started slow but it's gotten a little...extreme."

My mind flashes back to the White Party, back to Brian fucking my brains out while I was tied to the bed. I can practically remember every second that I was bound and helpless while he did things to me that until then I'd only dreamed about. Hell, it was so intense that I still get hard thinking about it, and I was a grown man at the time. Justin's still very young and I'm not surprised that he feels outclassed. I **am** surprised that he doesn't think anyone else has noticed, though. The marks and bruises from being bound are very distinctive and easily discerned by anyone who has ever had or given them. I suppose he came here for reassurance more than anything else.

"Look, Justin, sadomasochism is a perfectly acceptable sexual practice. It doesn't mean that either of you are sick or demented unless it's interfering with your daily lives."

"You seem to know a lot about it."

"Sexuality is my field of study...and I have to admit that I have a personal interest in the subject."

He looks down with a giggle and flushes a bit. "And I had to study art."

I'm still standing by the counter, pretending to clean up a coffee spill but mostly just giving him some space. "There were a lot of things about myself I didn't understand. I never felt 'normal'," I hold up my fingers to make quote marks, "but I felt that the differences went beyond simply being gay. I figured that while I was out doing research for my own reasons, I might just as well write some papers and get a few degrees out of it, too."

"I guess that makes sense." He shifts painfully in his seat, and opens his mouth several times as if to say something. Finally, he blurts out, "I don't think we're doing it right."

"Right? Justin, there's not any right or wrong way to have sex! As for S&M, well, there's not much to it, really...I guess the biggest issue is whether or not you have a safeword."

"We do. I've never used it."

"Oh, well, that's fine then."

"No, I don't think it is. He wants me to, and I won't."

"Do you want to talk about that?"

"Not really. He thinks he can boss me around, everywhere, all the time. This is my way of saying that he can't control everything about me."

I'm looking at a teenager who has had the shit beaten out of him by a grown man, and he's proud...fucking proud...that he drove Brian to do it. "There are safer ways to assert your equality, Justin. Safe words are there to keep you from getting dangerously injured! You could really get hurt one day..." I trail off, realizing that he has already been really hurt... today, yesterday, who knows how many days before. I clear my throat and go into detached-teacher mode.

"Okay, then I guess the only other thing to think about is the three guidelines - every scene should be safe, sane, and consensual."

He puts the mug down on the table and starts slowly wringing his hands, one over the other, as if to bring back the circulation. His shirt slides up his arms, and for the first time I notice the deep purple bruises circling his wrists. "Oh."

"Is there something in that that bothers you?" I prod gently, looking away to give him a little emotional space. Talking about this with me can't be easy for him. I watch him from under my eyelashes, and this really isn't the Justin I've come to know. He's so quiet and dim, like a light inside his eyes has been turned off. They call him Sunshine because normally he's all pale and golden, but tonight, he's more like midnight, all dark eyes and purple and black bruises. It makes me feel ill to think of Brian taking something we shared, something that was hot and sexy and wonderful and using it to bully Justin. Then I wonder if Justin's bullying Brian instead, withholding the one thing Brian is looking for. This is too much thinking at this time of the night.

Now that he knows I'm not going to start a vendetta against Brian, his posture is relaxing a bit. Funny that he thought I'd go after Brian, though. How could I? I still don't really know what's going on, and I don't think they do either.

Anyways, now that he's relaxing, he's staring into his coffee mug, and I get a really good look at the damage - black eyes, split lip, and most disturbing, a red circle of welts and bruises running around his neck and under his shirt.

"Justin, did Brian really do all of that?" It seems like a loaded question, calling their credibility into question. He doesn't seem angry, just resigned.

"Yeah."

"Is there more?"

His voice is soft and tired. "Yeah."

"How bad?"

He looks up warily, but then sighs and pulls off his shirt, wincing in pain as he lifts his arms over his head.

Father Confessor II

"Holy shit!"

I look as hard and fast as I can when Justin's shirt is covering his face for a second, so he doesn't feel like I'm doing inventory...but I can't stop that small exclamation of shock from coming through my lips. I notice for the first time that there are blood spots on his shirt, corresponding with bite marks on his stomach, and side, and a cut on his back. There are also a lot of tiny v-shaped welts that I can't really figure out.

"Uh, Brian did all that?" Not smooth, I know, but I'm doing my best. This is my first experience with "When Sadomasochism Goes Wrong," and I just don't have the training to deal with it. Let me tell you, reading a hundred journal articles about abnormal sexual psychology doesn't prepare you to console a battered teen at your kitchen table.

His shirt is off and he lays it gently on the kitchen table, his voice breaking me out of my reverie. "Yeah, this is from tonight. Don't say anything to anybody, okay? I don't want Brian to feel bad. He's so upset already." He looks utterly defeated. "Ben, I don't know what to do."

Shit, I was hoping that some of those bruises were old, that somehow this was cumulative and not the result of one awful night. I feel sorry for Justin, and I wonder who he's fooling, thinking that he could have stopped any of that abuse with a safeword.

I go to get myself another coffee, because I need time to think. He doesn't know what to do? Well, Jesus, that makes two of us. I never realized their relationship was so... complicated? Not the right word. Passionate? No, they crossed that line already. Urgent. Their relationship is urgent - there are issues that need to be settled right now, not just for their relationship but their sanity as well. Justin is sitting in my kitchen looking like he was mugged, and he's worried about *Brian* feeling hurt. I guess there's only one thing to ask.

"Did you come here to get away from him?"

He looks thoughtful for a minute. "Yes...No? I don't know. I mean, I know that when he's angry, Brian can take pretty much anybody he wants. He goes insane! There's no point in hiding with anyone else. If he really wanted me, he'd get me no matter where I went or who I was with. At least you'd give him a challenge." He sighs deeply and shakes his head. "When you're in trouble, it's sort of an instinct to run away. Maybe I overreacted."

For what it's worth, I don't think he overreacted at all. I would have gotten away from that scene before it even started, but that's me. "What do you want to do?"

"I'm not going to do anything. I think I just needed to talk for a while. Brian's not exactly Mr. Exposition, you know." We laugh together at the unlikelihood of Brian suddenly deciding to talk about his feelings. He gingerly touches his fingers to a sore spot on his cheekbone and sighs. "I mean, this is my fault."

"Justin, nobody deserves to be abused." It's an automatic response, and it's true, but it doesn't seem...sufficient in this situation. I try again. "Domestic violence and sadomasochism are completely separate activities. Having an agreement and a safe word should mean that this is prevented."

"An agreement AND a safeword? Keep dreaming, Ben. It would help if we *ever* talked about it...or if we'd agreed on boundaries in the first place." He sighs and runs his fingers through his hair, fingers that are scraped and scratched, with broken fingernails. Every minute he's here, I'm finding new damage, and I can't help but be worried about his safety. I decide to be blunt.

"Look, I've never disagreed with your ability to run an adult relationship, Justin. I don't doubt for a second that you and Brian are on the exact same emotional level, but you have to understand that he has psychological issues that predate your birth! I'm not sure you're equipped to deal with that."

He looks up at me, angrily, his cold blue eyes boring into me in a very uncomfortable way. "So you're going to say what everyone else says, then. 'He's too fucked up to be in a relationship, Justin, run away while you still can.' Well, I can't do that!" His voice softens and cracks, and tears come into his eyes. "I love him. I can't let him waste away like he was before."

I can't help but be offended at that. My own relationship with Brian is very much a result of his tricking, but that doesn't mean it wasn't significant and I resent Justin's implication that it was. "Justin, just whom are you saving here? You have no right to judge what he did before you came along to help himself cope with problems that YOU don't fully understand."

"You have no idea WHAT I understand! You're not the one that walks the floor with him when he wakes up screaming! You aren't the one who has to keep him from killing himself every now and then, just because he gets the urge sometimes." I can't hide my shock at the last statement, and I almost miss his next whispered words. "You aren't the one who gets hurt every time he needs to revisit the Legend of Brian Kinney."

"Justin, Justin, I'm not saying that you don't know him - you probably know him better than anyone. I'm saying that you have your own needs, and they might conflict with his. You have your own agenda."

He's silent for a moment, dropping his eyes in defeat. "So you think what Michael thinks, what everybody thinks - I manipulated myself into his life."

My mouth goes into gear before my brain can stop it. "Maybe."

He looks stung. "I shouldn't have come here." He reaches for his shirt, but not before I come over to the table and sit down.

"No, Justin, I think you should stay and listen to what I have to say. Brian never wanted to be part of a couple before you came along. You put pressure on him to be together, to be monogamous, to be with you and only you forever, because that's what you want. He's not sure what he wants and he's not dealing with it all that well, haven't you noticed?"

"If he wants me out, he'll throw my ass out! He's the one who decided to propose, I haven't said a word about that since Mel and Lindz got married. That was a long time ago, Ben, not everything is my fault!"

"Right, not everything, but you do share in the blame. I don't think you deserve to be abused, but there was a trigger and if you don't figure out what it was, it's going to happen again."

"He'll never do it again. He said he was sorry."

Jesus Christ, that's not good. Mr. No Apologies is suddenly falling all over himself with Mea Culpas, and Justin is sucking it up like a sponge. I'm starting to wonder if there's going to be a pattern here - escalating violence partnered with increasingly romantic gestures of apology. It's a classic trap; the pattern of the abuser. If that happens, is Justin really wise enough to see it for what it is?

Justin looks at his watch and starts. "Damn, Brian always wakes up around now, I was hoping to be home. Thanks for the coffee, Ben, but he'll be calling soon. I have to get going." He reaches for his shirt, sliding it over his head as smoothly as I could expect under the circumstances. His cell phone rings right on cue, and he answers it quickly, without hesitation.

"Yeah. No, I'm okay. I needed to go for a walk. No, I'm OKAY! Calm down, I'm coming home. Yes, right home. No, I'm not far from the loft, you stay in bed. Yeah, I need a shower too. Don't worry, it washes right off. It always has before! Relax then, we'll just get new sheets! Brian, if they're that bad we can throw those ones out like the other ones. No, I don't need a ride, I'll be home soon. No. No! Okay, fine, come and get me. I'm at the coffee shop on Bigelow. I love you. You're welcome. Later."

He smiles sheepishly and gets up to put on his shoes. "I know it's sappy, but ever since the bashing, he worries about me when I'm out alone. He used to say he'd rather I was fucking a stranger than walking down the street by myself... but I guess now he just wants me at home." He ties the laces sloppily and looks up with a smile. "I've gotta book! If I hurry, I should make it to Bigelow just before he does."

I'm not feeling good about this little talk. Actually, I feel like I did more harm than good. I didn't say any of the things that I wanted to, about how he's a special person who doesn't have to put up with violence to be loved. How Brian is a damaged soul who needs more than just love to heal. More than anything, I can't easily describe this funny feeling I have - how I feel that Justin has brought a lot of this on himself by asking things of Brian that he can't deliver. He broke through Brian's careful façade to find nothing but a rotting mass of damage and insecurity, and neither of them can handle the discovery.

He slips out the door in a practiced way, the stealthy moves of a part-time lover accustomed to being sent home alone at three in the morning. I feel pity for both of them, both for Brian having his infected wounds torn open so publicly, and for Justin, who has had to quietly and secretly bear the brunt of his pain.

As I close and lock the door, a thought occurs to me: Justin is so damned happy to get some romance that he's going to let himself get beaten into the ground for it...and I'm powerless to do anything but sit and watch.

Road Trip - The Jeep

"You're sure you want to come," he says, throwing his backpack into the back seat.

"I wouldn't come if I didn't want to." I put the cooler on the floor behind the driver's seat and look at Justin in the daylight. He looks good, I mean really good. He's a wizard with the makeup. Unless you look really closely, you can't even tell that he's got a single mark. Outside in the daylight, I start to do the inspection I've done every day since we started playing rough. Checking for marks that haven't been covered, necklines too low, sleeves too short. Fabric too sheer to cover the vicious purple bruises, so rough that it irritates the welts, or too light to mask the blood from reopened cuts. Yesterday we realized that there's nothing he could do to cover the rashy red garrote marks circling his neck, so I intervened. One trip to the head shop downtown, a small cash expenditure, and he's now the too-proud owner of a cowrie shell choker that solves the problem. Out of sight, out of mind.

He sees me staring at him, and rounds the jeep to look into my eyes. "Problem?" he teases, grabbing at the car keys in my hand when I shake my head no. "If you let me drive, we won't get lost."

"I never get lost, Justin," I say truthfully. We're not going to fucking Timbuktu! Besides, as long as you don't panic, you're never lost.

"I've been going there with Daph almost every year since I was little, Brian..." his voice trails off, and we both think about why he didn't make it up to the cottage last year. Fucking Chris Hobbes, that asshole is hiding around every corner. Sometimes I think we'll never get rid of him. He shakes his head a little, and flashes that megawatt smile. "Please let me drive! I could do it in my sleep."

He's still hoping to get behind the wheel, and I shoot him a glare that lets him know that that's not going to happen on my watch. I can follow fucking directions. "No! You still drive this like it's an automatic. Do you know how much it costs to replace a transmission?" I say, making sure that the cooler is in there firmly and our bags won't come loose if we hit a bump. I fucking hate going back for shit that flies out of the Jeep. Who am I kidding – I never go back unless it's something I can't replace. "Besides, I don't want you operating heavy machinery while you're taking those painkillers. How the fuck did you get them to give you Vicodin?"

"I'm allergic to codeine and Demerol! It was either that or Percocet, and that knocks me right on my ass."

"Good thinking. I have other activities planned for your ass." I can smell his hair from here. Up this close you I can just barely see the deep purple rings around his slightly bloodshot eyes. "You're still not driving."

"Fine," he pouts, but it's phony. He's happy that we're going, and actually, so am I. I need to get away from the Pitts, away from all the shitty history and melodrama...but first... "Let me see," I whisper in his ear, and he shivers.

"Here?"

"Yeah."

He leans back against the Jeep provocatively, and my mind flashes to the image of him as the young blonde I saw leaning against the streetlight on Liberty. There was something about him then, something that still gets me right *here*...he just looks so corruptible, like he's begging for someone to take his sweetness and innocence away. Hey, I can do that. I watch as he lifts up his shirt at the front, just enough for me to see the white, white skin of his stomach covered with tiny burns and bruises. Oh God, the feeling of shame and regret and that secret little thrill is too fucking much.

He runs his hand lightly over his stomach, and I watch him flinch a little as his fingers caress the marks. That shift in his expression, the visible pain and his eagerness to show it to me, it's the most amazing fucking turn-on. I can feel myself getting hard as he gently moves from bite to burn to scratch, his eyes closing gently every time the hurt is new. So fucking hot. I can't take it anymore.

"Upstairs."

"Now? What about Michael?"

"So we're twenty minutes late. Fuck him if he has a problem with it."

Road Trip: The Car

"So do you really know where we're going, Teddy?" Emmett says, rubbing my suntan lotion into his arms. I can't believe that Brian blew me off, AGAIN, to fuck Justin, AGAIN. It was bad enough that he didn't return my calls all day yesterday; forgetting to pick me up is too much. I should be used to it by now, but come on, this is getting ridiculous! It's not MY boyfriend's best friend that invited me, after all.

"Of course I do, Justin draws very good maps." Ted hands back a folded piece of white paper for me to look at. I open it up to see the roads marked neatly in black pen, city names in red, road names in green. The lake and river are drawn in as well, probably with blue pencil crayons. I can't believe it - he even makes a fucking map look like a picture!

"Oh, isn't it pretty?" Em gushes, turning to take the map from my hands. "I love it when he draws things! He makes it look so easy."

"It's just a map!"

"Don't be petty, Michael, it really is a nice map," Ted says, taking it back from Emmett. "I can see exactly where I'm supposed to turn and how far to go on each road."

"Well, maybe it's a good map, but it's not the fucking Mona Lisa." Justin doesn't need any more members in his fan club, and I'll be damned if I get named to be the president!

"Can we not fight about this now? We don't have very long left in the car!" Em says cheerfully, turning a bit in the front seat so that he can look at both Ted in the driver's seat and me in the back. "So many miles, so little gossip. I want to talk about Justin and Brian!"

"Jesus, Emmett!" Ted grouses, staring intently at the road. "There are other things on this planet to talk about besides those two!"

I don't feel like talking about it, either, but I'm sick of being accused of being jealous and resentful of their, "Relationship." If he wants to be...ugghh...married to Justin, that's his business. I'm tired of cleaning up after him anyways. Let Justin do it for a change.

"Okay, fine then," he pouts, frowning until he comes up with a new topic. "How about Daphne? Can we talk about her new boyfriend? I hear he's just adorable!"

"I don't know what he's like, Em. I've never met him, and after what happened at the party..." He trails off, and everyone fidgets uncomfortably in the silence. He offers weakly, "Well, I didn't get to talk to Daphne much." He starts fiddling with the radio. "I just hope that everyone behaves."

"Now where's the fun in that, Teddy?" Em smiles and taps him playfully on the arm. "It will be so nice to just get away and soak up some sun."

That makes me laugh. "Em, you're wearing enough sunscreen to keep a chicken from cooking in the oven! What makes you think you're going to get any sun?"

Ted interjects, "Sun protection is very important. You wouldn't want to get skin cancer from a day at the lake."

"Ted, I think it takes a little more sun than one day's worth," I say, grabbing for the sunscreen and giving myself another coat - just in case.

"Well, I'm not interested in having wrinkles before I'm 30." Emmett laughs and checks his reflection in the drop-down vanity mirror, pulling at the corners of his eyes. "Honey, if there's one thing I've learned, it's that I really can't afford to have any work done!"

"Hey! There's the mailbox!" Ted shouts suddenly, pulling the car off the road. He creeps slowly towards an overgrown laneway that really isn't more than two ruts through a forest. "Do you think the car will be okay for these bumps?"

"Yeah, I think so. Just go slowly." I'm trying to reassure myself as much as him, because every inch we crawl forwards is like driving on a seesaw - up, then down, then up again as we bump through a long line of potholes and grooves.

The road twists and turns, and it seems really long because we're going soooo slowly. Finally, we come around a large bend only to be surprised by a bright yellow metal gate.

"Uh, why didn't Justin say anything about a gate?" Ted looks at the gate, and the map, and back to the gate, as if its presence will somehow be magically explained.

"Oh! Didn't he mention that to you? He gave me a little paper with the keycode on it." Emmett rummages around in his pocket and finally produces the yellow note. "It says, 'Hey Em! Don't panic, it's an old combination lock. It has buttons with the numbers from 1 to 9. You open the lock by pressing 2-4-6-8 at the same time, and it'll open. Make sure you lock the gate when you're done. J.' Well, that doesn't sound hard," he says merrily, jumping out of the car to open the gate.

We watch Emmett fiddle with the lock, throwing it in his pocket and swinging the gate wide. He finds the chain latch to hold it open right away. I'm telling you, I wouldn't have thought to look for a chain like that! He waves us through, unlatches the gate, and locks everything back up behind us like a pro.

"Where did you learn how to work a gate like that?" I ask him when he has returned to the car, dusting off his hands.

"Uh, I lived in the coun-try, Michael, the real country and not the suburbs. We had farms and gates and things. If I couldn't open a gate like that, I would never have been able to leave my yard!" he shudders deeply and sighs. "Thank God I'm here and not there. This gate is for keeping people out, not in."

"You're as out as they come, Em," Ted says fondly, putting the car back in gear. Emmett smiles and we all turn towards the rest of the road, driving in comfortable silence.

Small Talk

We aren't even done unpacking the car when he starts back in on it.

"Teddy, do you really think they're married?" God, he just won't shut up about Brian and Justin, and I don't want to think about them today! I'm tired of worrying about Justin's health and safety even when he won't. I'm tired of the feeling that something terrible is happening and I'm powerless to stop it. I hate that feeling.

Maybe if I just blather on about nothing, Em will get bored and change the subject.

"What do you mean by *really* married, Em? If you mean he's done with the tricking, I have no idea. I don't think Brian is capable of doing anything that mature." Well, maybe not that exactly - I don't think it's right, but it's hard to explain. It doesn't sound like the Brian I know.

"Well I think it's lovely, and I'm so glad that they're finally getting along," he says, reaching for the drink cooler still in the trunk. "Want to help me with this? I thought I'd be standing around all day looking pretty. I'm not dressed for slave labour!"

I look around for someone else to help him out, but eventually I go. Somehow I always end up being the lovely volunteer from the first row, ready and available to assist.

"Do you believe this cabin? It's very...uh...rustic," I say, grabbing the silvery metal handle of Debbie's big old cooler.

Emmett favours me with a glare that even Brian would be proud to put on. "Teddy, Daphne's grandfather built this cabin himself. It has running water and electricity, and look through those trees. The lake is beautiful! I've known a lot of people with houses that weren't this nice." He looks around at the forest and chuckles a little bit. "Sure, it's miles from a Starbucks, but it's fine for vacationing."

He's right, it's not bad, I guess. I'm just used to the city, where everything is neat and orderly. Around here, the paths are messy with pine needles and leaves and I'm sure the beach will leave sand in my shoes for days. It feels so disorganized and wild here, like a bear could pop out and eat us at any moment.

Speaking of messy, Michael ran off as soon as we got here to look for Brian. He hasn't come back yet, so I have to assume that the golden couple are here, somewhere. God, what am I going to say to them? "Uh, congratulations Brian - way to go, binding Justin into your servitude while he's still a teenager?" Or how about, "Hey, Justin, good for you on finding a man who will beat you senseless every day for the rest of your life, or until he gets tired of you, whichever comes first." Oh, who am I kidding? Whatever I come out with will be ten times worse. I get so tongue-tied around them! I never did well with the cool kids in school, and surprise surprise, I don't do well with them as an adult, either. I have nothing to be ashamed of; I'm decent looking, successful, SANE...but that doesn't matter. I always feel outclassed.

"Earth to Teddy," Emmett laughs, throwing me my bag from the trunk. "Where did you go?"

"What? Oh, I was just thinking." I've tried to talk to people about this feeling I have that something's wrong between Brian and Justin, but these days I can't find an audience. I guess that shouldn't surprise me, listening to the spitefulness that sometimes comes out of

my mouth, but I'm serious this time! Tell me, if everything is fine between them, then why don't they come out to Babylon anymore? Why is Justin always wearing makeup to cover up bruises? Why is Brian always looking over his shoulder, like someone is coming after him? It's not right.

The whole situation is not right.

"Thinking about what, sweetie? Do you want to talk about it?" He's still unpacking bags from the car, and I'm starting to wonder how we fit everything in there on the drive up.

What have I got to lose? "Emmett, I don't want this to come out the wrong way, but try to listen. I mean, listen to what I'm saying and not how I say it, because nothing I say ever really comes out right anyways." I'm struggling for words and looking at the mud that's already on my shoes. I knew I'd end up dirty before the day was over.

Em puts on his "serious face" for a minute. "Of course, Teddy, anything."

"Okay, here goes. Brian and Justin are into S&M, and that's fine. I think Brian is taking it over the line, and that's NOT fine. Justin is really getting hurt."

"Teddy, it's sweet of you to worry, but I really think you're fussing over nothing."

"It's not, 'nothing'! Justin has SCARS, Emmett, real scars from cuts. Do you know how far gone you have to be to let someone cut you?"

"Oh, I'm sure that they're not..."

"And I'm sure that they ARE. Justin has been walking around black and blue for a while now, and it gets worse every time I see them! And what's with Brian lately, staking a claim on Justin like that Friday night? Pulling him right out of someone's arms in front of a roomful of people? It's not like him at all."

"Brian has always been possessive of Justin. Maybe he decided to finally grow up and follow through."

"Sure, maybe. I just want you to do me a favour today and watch them like today is the first time you've ever met them. Forget that it's Brian-and-Justin. Look at them like they're strangers, listen to them like they're strangers. If you don't think something is wrong at the end of the day, I'll drop it altogether."

"Fine, Teddy, I will. Look, here comes Michael. He must have forgotten his bag." Emmett locates Michael's bright red bag and dangles it in front of him at the end of his arm. "Forget something, honey?"

Michael comes running up the path all short of breath. "Yeah, the beach is awesome and I forgot my towel up here." He looks at the mountain of bags and coolers at our feet, and says, "Are you going to bring those down, or what? Brian and Justin are already here."

He turns back to the hilly path, and I think for a minute about what today is going to be like. Will they be okay? Will I be okay?

I think I'm getting an ulcer.

With Friends Like These...

Mikey comes bounding down the path with a smile on his face, and I fucking swear I know what he's going to say before he even opens his mouth.

"So, what did you two end up doing yesterday? You never returned my calls, " he says, like maybe Justin and I fucked off to the movies yesterday or something and I just forgot to call.

Like what kept me away from the phone is nothing at all.

Well, it IS something, and how can I pretend that it's not?

Justin looks to me quickly, that big Sunshine smile disappearing in a second. It's back for everyone else in an instant, larger than life and phonier than hell, but I saw.

I know why he stopped smiling.

I *had* hoped for a quiet Saturday, a day to catch up on work and maybe go to the gym with the guys - all of which was shot to hell by my little temper tantrum Friday night.

Justin is looking at me carefully from the other side of our little circle. He mouths to me, "It's okay, Brian," and starts to casually walk over. I know he doesn't want me to worry. He doesn't blame me, he's not angry with me, whatever. He doesn't need to blame me; I already blame myself.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

I've had lots of time to think about it. Pouring Justin cereal in the morning because he couldn't walk comfortably, I thought about it. Sitting at the clinic while he had his cuts taped up, I thought about it. Getting his prescriptions filled, for painkillers and antibiotics and that goopy cream that goes on the burns, I thought about it. Lying in bed, looking into his sad eyes when we realized that he was in far too much pain for any kind of play, I thought about it.

He has turned me into an evil bastard.

He turned me into my father.

I don't know how he does it to me, but he does. It's in him somewhere. It has to be! I've never been violent with anyone, not anyone I gave a damn about, anyways. Assholes on the street don't count. I had never done anything like this before he came along, never did a lot of things before he came along... so it **has** to be him.

That makes all of this his fault! Asshole! Wait, that's not right. Isn't he the victim here? Or am I? I feel worse about it than he does, so does that count?

Who the fuck knows anymore?

I didn't want to hurt him, but look at him now! I've fucked a lot of guys, but I've never done any kind of physical damage that a few hours of rest and some ointment wouldn't cure. This is different. I won't be able to fuck him for a couple of days...and the doctor said maybe a week, if he doesn't heal quickly. I put him right out of commission.

But he let me!

I don't fucking understand this, I swear I don't. Every time I think I know what's going on, the sand shifts, and I'm right the fuck back to square one. He's such an asshole. He **has** to be going out of his way to fuck with me, because there's no way I'd do any of this shit on my own. I wish I could just dump his ass in the woods and never look back.

He's finally schmoozed his way over here, past Daphne and her hot new boyfriend, past Ted and Emmett and even Michael. He's so slick, slippery even, so innocent and trustworthy that you never wonder why he's standing behind you. I feel him next to me before I see him, and I want so badly to tell him to fuck off, get the hell away from me before I do something he'll regret. Something else he'll regret, anyways.

"Hey," he whispers, and my resolve melts again.

"Hey yourself."

"Wanna go for a walk?"

I look around at my "friends," the people who are supposed to know me so well and really don't know anything at all. Brian Kinney is nothing but a legend to these people, not a person who could be forgiven for a fuck up or two. I think about the questions I don't want to answer, the chatter I don't want to hear, and suddenly a walk sounds good. At least Justin knows when to shut the fuck up and leave me alone.

"Lead the way."

His eyes are still generally pointing towards the ground; he won't look me in the eye. I'm glad. Lately it feels like there's always a challenge there, and I'm not interested today. I'm too fucking tired.

"I love you," he whispers into my shoulder, and it rolls off his tongue easily, a statement of fact. It has the same value as, "The sky is blue," and somehow it doesn't feel oppressive anymore, not like it used to. Surely anyone who puts up with that violent bullshit has to love me, right?

"Thank you." He smiles as I put my arm around his shoulders.

Get me out of here, Justin. At least you, I can deal with.

With Friends Like These II

"What was that all about?" Steve asks innocently when Justin and Brian are out of earshot. Oops. Dangerous to be an innocent in this crowd!

"Uhh...Justin and Brian had a fight on Friday night, but they seem mostly okay now," Daphne says, fiddling with the drawstring on her cute little terrycloth cover-up. "I think they just wanted some time to themselves."

Teddy looks up from rearranging the beer in the cooler. "Yeah, well they had all of yesterday to themselves, and I don't think it helped."

I wait for Michael to say something in Brian's defense, but he's still watching them walk down the beach. They're not touching, just walking arm in arm; that's not a usual arrangement for them but I swear they look just like the cover of a romance novel. I look at them and see two people very much in love, but I know that not everybody does...*especially* Michael. I wish I knew what he sees, or what he wants to see, I suppose. "He was supposed to call me, but he didn't," he says sadly, and there's no doubt in anyone's mind, not even Steve the New Hunky Boyfriend, that he means Brian.

Daphne nods her head in agreement. "Yeah, Justin didn't call me, either. My mom says that that always happens when people get married - they get self-involved for a while and you just can't get their attention."

"Brian? Self-involved? Never!" Teddy scoffs, and we all laugh. It's as good an explanation as any.

Steve starts opening up the bags that are at his feet, spreading out towels for him and Daphne, sorting CD's, locating the sunscreen. We all get to business making ourselves comfy, enjoying the pretty little beach under the trees. Teddy is still fussing with the cooler, and I'm sure the drinks are probably in alphabetical order by now. Daphne, on the other hand, is standing like a princess watching her foot servant, and I'm thinking, "Honey, take advantage of it, 'cause if you can't do that with a new guy, you'll never get

to." Steve is just spreading out a big blanket to sit on when we hear his deep voice ringing out like a public announcement: "So, do you ever talk about anything other than Justin and Brian?"

"Steve!" Daphne cries out in shock.

Michael turns from his bag with a look of surprise, as if a day without Brian is somehow not possible. "What?"

Ooh, this boy is a bright one. He's got our number. He pulls himself up to his full height, and I just now notice how tall he is, and how toned. He's darker than Daphne, and I retract my original statement that nobody looks good in orange. This boy is wearing bright, loud, screaming orange, and he looks good.

"I said, 'Do you ever talk about anything other than Justin and Brian?' Do you work or have hobbies or anything? They're good looking and probably interesting in a movie-of-the-week kind of way, but..." he trails off as Daphne begins to glare holes through his head.

"We talk about plenty of things!" Ted exclaims.

Daphne holds up her hands in a gesture of surrender. "Hey, he's my best friend, and I never get to see him anymore! If I didn't listen to the gossip, I'd never know WHAT was going on with him! It's bad enough I only see him a couple times a month."

Michael snorts. "Yeah, hoping that maybe one night he'll forget that he's gay and fuck you again." His eyes fly open and his hands cover his mouth. "Oh my God, no, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to say that."

Steve's eyebrows rise as Ted finally looks up from the stupid cooler. I whisper, "Michael..." in what I hope is a threatening tone. She's just a baby, and it's not fair to be so mean to her! Not when she never did anything but love Justin in her overly-romantic-young-girl way. Besides, she's not used to being around a bitchy bunch of queers.

She looks at Michael, eyes flashing, and enunciates calmly, "At least *I* convinced MY friend to sleep with me," before she turns to Steve and says, "It's just like I told you - a mistake and it's long gone. Nothing to worry about."

Me-ow! My jaw drops, and Michael looks like he'd like to melt right into the sand. That boy. Some days he has the worst combination of jealousy and foot-in-mouth disease! Frankly, I'm a little surprised that Daphne had such a good comeback.

Teddy, being the details man, rushes in to explain. "Daphne asked Justin, and he came to us for advice. We told him that since he cared about her, he should do it, for her sake." He sighs and shakes his head. "Not our finest hour."

I have to laugh at that. "Yes, honey, Miss Manners would be rolling in her grave on that little piece of advice." I close the distance between us and give her a great big hug that she seems really grateful to return. I tilt my head down to talk more directly to her.

"We're lucky that you and Justin got everything worked out all right. I would have felt just terrible if you hadn't."

She smiles up at me, still in my arms, and I notice for the first time that she's short like Justin. I never saw that before, she always seems bigger and more full of life than that! I look over to Steve, thankful that he doesn't seem to be the jealous type, and notice that she and he are matched the same way Brian and Justin are - taller and shorter, darkness and light...and Steve and Brian both wear fabulous clothes! Surely a match made in heaven.

Daphne looks over to Michael and reaches out to grab his arm. "Look, that was really mean, what I just said, but you had no right to say that! What if I hadn't told Steve about that mess," she scolds, and at least Michael has the good sense to look humbled. He comes closer, and Daphne pulls away from me and pecks him on the cheek, lowering her voice to give him some sage advice. "You need to think more about yourself and less about Brian. Or maybe, more about yourself *without* Brian. He doesn't love you that way, Justin doesn't love me that way, but that doesn't mean they don't love us, okay?" She starts to giggle. "They need us. Do you think they could keep their shit together without having us around?"

Her giggling is contagious, and soon we're all laughing. Justin and Brian, together without us. How absurd is that?

Walk and Talk

"Are you sure you know where we're going?"

"Don't you trust me, Brian?"

"I don't know...How long have you been coming here again?"

"Ha ha. Since we were really little, like four or five."

"It's nice."

"Yeah, the trees help to keep the beach cool, and it's private."

"How private?"

"You're a perv! I mean that there's no tacky souvenir stands or parking problems, just the cottage and the forest and the lake."

"I'd think you'd be happy to see a hot dog stand or something. Did you have to bring so much food?"

"We're going to be hungry later! You'll thank me."

"Mmm hmm."

"Brian, hold up for a minute."

"Are you okay?"

"Sore, that's all. I'll have to take another painkiller when we get back to Daph and the guys."

"We could turn back now."

"No, I want to show you something."

"Justin, I've seen everything you've got and from angles you can't possibly imagine."

"Brian!"

"Is that a blush or a sunburn?"

"I've been outside for six minutes! It's not a sunburn!"

"Maybe we should throw a towel over your head."

"It's not a sunburn!"

"Or I could take you back to the cottage, I'm sure it's got a bed there somewhere..."

"Oh my God, not in the cottage! Daphne would never forgive me!"

"What is it, a shrine to chastity?"

"It belongs to her grandparents! It would just be weird."

"What, you don't want to get naked around all the wood paneling and flowered yellow curtains?"

"Ewww! Stop! I'm not listening!"

"You don't want to think about me sucking your cock while you're lying on the Astroturf on the patio?"

"I'm plugging my ears!"

"I'm sure there are some cute family pictures of you and Daphne in the bathtub to look at while I'm fucking you!"

"LA LA LA, I'm not listening! Hey, why'd you stop?"

"How many more days?"

"Not long, Brian, I'm almost healed. Besides, we weren't stuck for ideas a couple of hours ago."

"I didn't hurt you this morning?"

"Oh my God, no! It was amazing. It's always amazing. Happy now?"

"Mmm hmm."

"Somebody's fishing...what, don't I worship you enough?"

"Don't be a twat. I just wanted to make sure."

"Well, I'm sure. Besides, we fish for *fish* up here, not compliments."

"Like you've ever fished."

"I have too, I can even bait my own hook!"

"I'll believe it when I see it. You're the prissiest art student I know. Your hands are always clean."

"You'd kill me if I got paint all over the loft, and I didn't think you'd want paint anywhere else my fingers usually go, either!"

"Well, yeah, I'll give you that. How much fucking farther? I'm not walking home!"

"And they say that I'm a drama princess. Follow that path."

"There hadn't better be a guy in a hockey mask back there."

"Nope, just me."

"That'll do just fine."

Expert Witness, Recalled

Daphne and Steve are still swimming in the lake, and Michael and Emmett are lying on the beach gossiping. I'm trying to get into the fun, but I can't. I'm worried about Justin. I know that's it's "pathetic", to use Brian's words, to be such a worrier. Forget worry, I'm an obsessor by now. I shouldn't be butting into someone else's problems and wading into situations that I know nothing about, but I can't help it. What I've seen isn't play, it's abuse, and it's not right. He's just a kid, and even if he wasn't, nobody deserves that.

I don't know if everybody else is stupid or willfully blind, but I don't know how they CAN'T see. It's so plain, so *obvious*, and every new bump or scrape or bruise just reminds me that I'm not looking out for this boy, and nobody else is, either. Maybe all this philanthropy is because I couldn't save Blake; I don't know. I have a lot to lose here and nothing to gain, so I'm pretty sure this is a selfless act.

I'm not going to sit by and watch another essentially good kid get destroyed by association.

Confrontations are not my strong suit, but this time I have a game plan. I will never again be dumb enough to try talking to them about this without knowing exactly what to say. Standing beside that pool table begging Justin to wake up and listen to me did us no good last time... and I'm anxious about how Brian would react to me being that close to him now. He certainly hasn't gotten any LESS possessive, that's for damn sure!

I mumbled something to Michael and Emmett about taking a walk, but they're too interested in their gossip to really care where I'm going. Apparently, my "interest in native foliage" can't compete with the go go boy Emmett tricked with the other night.

Five steps up the path, I pull out my cell and call Dale Wexler. I'm not fucking around this time, I'm doing it right. If anybody knows how to confront them properly, he does.

His voice is staticky on the line. "Ted? Where on earth are you calling from?"

"The middle of nowhere, actually. I have a favour to ask."

"Sounds promising."

"Not really. I need to know how to make Brian stop..." I cut myself off in the middle of the sentence, realizing the futility of that statement before I even finish. "Look, remember what I was saying about Brian and Justin, scars, et cetera? Well, it's a lot worse than I thought. Justin is really getting hurt, and I don't know what to do."

His voice is kind, kinder than the words he's actually saying. "What makes you think that you should DO anything, Ted? Is this your problem, your responsibility?"

"Yes! Justin doesn't deserve to get beaten up. Nobody does! I'm not the world's leading expert on sadomasochism, Dale, but I know when someone has crossed the line, and this has gone so far beyond that it's not funny! I'm worried about Justin, I'm worried about Brian...Fuck. I'm worried about both of them at this point! Tell me what to do!" My mind starts to spin as my imagination, such as it is, runs wild. What would we do if Brian got caught and went to jail? How would we deal with that? With them? It's horrible. My God, I can't breathe.

"Try calming down first. Tell me what you've seen to make you think that something bad has happened."

"I don't have time for this!"

"Yes, you do. If it's a serious problem, I'll need to know the details. If you're just overreacting to a few bumps and bruises, I want to stop you before you make an ass of yourself."

"I always make an ass of myself somehow. I'll take one for the team this time."

"All right, fine. Pick ONE thing that's bothering you about Brian and Justin and tell me what it is."

"Easy. They got married."

The line goes dead silent for a minute. I worry that the connection is gone until he starts talking again. "Are we talking about the same Brian I'm thinking of? Brian Kinney?"

"Yeah."

"Very interesting." I've never heard someone take so long to say six syllables in my life! He's mulling it over, and the pause in the conversation gives me time to start worrying again.

"I told you I don't have time for this! Brian actually beat Justin up the night of their so-called reception! Dale, are you starting to see the problem?"

"Ted, I'm not jumping to conclusions. There may be a problem, there may not; it's hard to tell from the outside. What would issue number two be?"

"Justin showed up to the lake today with deep bruises on his face and two black eyes, and that's only what I can see through the makeup."

"Makeup?"

"Yeah, the marks they leave were getting worse and worse, and they've started covering it all up now. Makeup, bracelet, and a nice little collar masquerading as a declaration of love. I think that that collar covers some lovely garrote marks on his neck."

"Garrote? No shit?" he asks with hushed wonder. Another pause. Then, finally, "Do you really think Brian has that in him? That Justin would let him do that?"

"That and more, Dale. Help me!"

I can hear the wheels turning in his head, running through the scenes that could possibly cause those types of injuries by mistake. Sure, accidents happen, but to accidentally look like someone nearly beat you to death is next to impossible.

The benefit of the doubt doesn't extend to fairytales.

I've been mulling it over so long that his voice surprises me. "Ted? Hold on for a second."

"Okay." I can hear him rummaging around his place, some thumping in the background, and then he comes back on the line, ruffling some pages.

"Listen, I've got a book here on the psychological theories behind sadomasochism. It's old, probably from the fifties or sixties, but there's a quote you may find interesting. Are you ready?"

"Yeah, go."

"The essence of sadomasochism is not so much 'pain' as the overwhelming integration of one's senses - emotionally more so than physically. When we understand that it is pain only, and not cruelty, that is the essential element, we begin to come nearer to an explanation. The masochist desires to experience pain, but he generally desires that it should be inflicted in love; the sadist desires to inflict pain, but he desires that it should be felt as love...' Do you understand what that means?"

"I don't know. I never thought much about any of this before."

"Well, you'd better, because butting in right now could do them both more harm than good."

Recalled, Part II

I have thought this situation through a hundred thousand different ways, and to me, it still boils down to one fact - Brian is hurting Justin and I have to make him stop...but you

can't make someone stop doing something they want to do...and is it even my place to get involved? I don't know what to say! "Dale, I don't know what to think."

"Let me help you out then, Ted. Brought down to the basics, I think this is the situation Brian and Justin are in right now: They've experienced an emotional and physical pull from the very beginning, but those things weren't integrated. Brian the one-night wonder had never connected fucking with love, as far as I can tell. As soon as Justin broke through the attitude, got himself a hold on Brian and therefore got some real power, Brian panicked. He started to try to "put Justin in his place." Am I making sense so far?"

"So far, yeah."

"Okay then. Brian's getting rougher and rougher, and Justin isn't responding the right way. Turns out Justin likes it, which leaves Brian with an even bigger problem - how is he ever going to get the power back?"

"What makes you think that's what's happening?"

"Because it happens in relationships all the time, Ted. The only difference is that Brian is comfortable being physical, so he expresses his emotions that way."

"If Brian really loves Justin, then why is he hurting him this way?"

"It's not about hurting him! Brian is desperately trying to regain control by going to further and further extremes, judging by your many, many phone calls..."

Damn, I feel like a little kid apologizing for being scared, but I guess I owe him one.
"Yeah, sorry about that."

"It's what I'm here for, as your guide to the world of BDSM. I take that very seriously, you know," he adds kindly. "I just wish you'd call with problems of your own sometimes!"

"My life is not this exciting. I'm not going to be killed by my...well, I don't have a boyfriend, but if I did he wouldn't kill me."

"O-kay, if your sex life is not your concern, we'll get back to the Wonder Twins. Brian's hurting Justin, Justin's liking it, and it's building up an even bigger bond between them - being a little bit twisted in a vanilla world isn't easy. They share something that nobody else understands. Brian starts being possessive and protective, shielding Justin from the world around him. He tells him what to wear, who to see, when to be home...is any of this right?"

"How do you know all of this?"

"Because it happens all the time, just normally not to this extreme. Now Ted, answer me. Am.I.Right?"

"According to the gossip, yes."

"And Justin isn't objecting in any visible way?"

I think back to the many times when Brian has said or done something a little weird, a little controlling, and what comes into my mind is Justin's steadfast denial that anything is going wrong. He's just as firm whether he's smiling his face off or crying his eyes out; you really can't argue with him. "No. I wish he would. It would make this a lot easier."

"Why would he object, Ted? In his eyes, he's winning! All this time they've been pulling each other deeper and closer together, they've also been playing a big, bad game of one-upmanship. Justin thinks he has the upper hand, and frankly, he probably does at this point."

"At this point?" I pause as a sick wave washes over me. "You don't mean it could get worse?"

"Brian's a smart man. He must know that he's the one being controlled right now."

"So what happens next?"

"As far as I can see, Brian has some choices here. He can force Justin away by doing any manner of Brianesque things; it would seem that that tactic failed right at the start of their relationship..."

"Right, he didn't even want one."

"Exactly, so it's unlikely that he'd go back and try that again. Choice Number Two: He can keep trying to escalate things beyond Justin's physical limits...but that doesn't seem to be working, and Brian's not a stupid man. He won't push it too far."

"Okay, so that's options one and two."

"Good listener. He has a third option, and it's my bet that he'll take it: Brian can move his domination into another arena. If he plays on some of his other strengths, he may find some aspect of Justin that he **can** control."

"Sounds like a lot of work."

"It is, but the stakes are very high."

"Do you really think he'll bother?"

"I do. Since Brian has basically made every wrong move he could have to get Justin to leave him, I can only figure that on some level, he wants him to stay."

"Dale, what are you on? Brian hates being attached to Justin."

"Ahhh, Ted, think about that for a minute. Does he really, really hate being with Justin, or just the idea of it? I find it hard to believe that he hates his relationship that much, since Justin's still there after what, two and a half years? More? No dominant partner would permit an unacceptable submissive to linger for that long."

"So you're saying Brian is setting this up?"

"Ted, how long did you go to college?"

"Too long. Why?"

"Did you learn anything about people while you were there?"

Ouch. "I'm going to have to say no to that one."

"Then here's a lesson you can take to the bank. The essence of sadomasochism is a subliminal need to get inside another person. For the people involved, it's very much about breaking each other down, mixing up the parts, and building yourselves back up from the core. You share something so physical and emotional and intense, being on the exact same wavelength for so long, that it ties you more to each other than any rings or ceremonies ever could. You might convince Brian to stop beating Justin into the ground, but you could never stop them from sharing this partnership. Don't even try. Maybe if you're sympathetic to their need to explore their control issues, you can break through to them that domestic violence and sadomasochism aren't the same thing."

"You think?"

"Maybe. They stepped over the line, but if it's the first time, maybe they can steer themselves back. Mistakes happen, and it's not the end of the world. Just be sure to tell THEM that."

"So I'm supposed to go and say that I approve of what they've been doing? No way. I can't do that."

"No, Ted, I'll speak slowly, so listen to me. You are going to go and be non-judgmental but firm. Tell them that you see what's happening and that it needs to stop for their own safety. Ignore the excuses and the threats, say your piece, and leave them alone with it. That's all you can do."

I'm still walking on the path when it forks - a large one to the left, and a smaller, slightly overgrown one to the right. I decide to take the path less traveled, figuring that that's what

Brian and Justin are always doing. "Dale, I have to go. Thank you for listening. You're such a good friend to me."

"I get what I need. You're still coming over on Thursday."

"Shouldn't that have been a question?"

"No."

"Sorry Sir. Your suck pig will be there Thursday night."

"Much better. Goodbye Ted."

Clearing

"Justin, you brought me to a SHACK?"

Brian took another step forward in the woodlot, noticing that the lake met up with the far wall of the shed. "Who would build a shack this close to the lake?" He looked Justin up and down with a predatory glare. "Seems like it's private enough here."

"Stop looking at the shed! I didn't bring you to see that!" Justin pushed him gently out of the way, twirling in a circle once he got fully into the clearing. "This is my space! What do you think?"

Brian eyed the clearing carefully, his brow creasing in thought. He carefully examined the mixed forest that created a nice shady canopy for a tall, flat rock overlooking the water. The forest floor was covered with dry leaves and pine needles in a large circular pattern that sprang from the trail and ended up at the door of the shack. It was cool and comfortable in a naturalistic kind of way.

Brian saw nothing but the hideously ugly shack covering the cleared bank of the lake. "You brought me to a PINK shack! A pink shack covered with...aluminum siding? What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"I didn't bring you to see the damned dock, Brian, get over the shed!" Justin laughed, crossing the clearing with slow, lazy steps and dragging his feet in the carpeting of dead leaves.

Brian pointed to the siding, exclaiming, "How can I? It's hard to miss! That's just fucking grotesque." He shivered in an exaggerated fashion. "Who buys pink aluminum siding?"

"Someone who needs to buy the cheapest thing that will work! Look, I helped to build that thing, sort of, so can we stop making fun of the boat house?"

"Helped to build it..." Brian mused, following Justin across the clearing and watching the subtle sway of his hips as he walked. "I can't picture you hanging aluminum siding."

"Hey, I helped! I...no wait, I...Well, I was eleven!" He chuckled sheepishly. "I brought Mr. Chanders cold drinks, mostly."

"Ahh, a busboy even from such a young age." Brian put on a terrible Jamaican accent, mimicking some fortune teller they'd seen on television the week before. "I can see you've got the gift."

"Ha, ha." Justin giggled, finally reaching the rock and patting it like a pet. "I used to come here to be by myself for a while. The cottage is fun and all, but it's hard spending so much time with someone else's family sometimes."

Thinking back to the many times he'd been stuck in the middle of the Novotny family's squabbles, cheesy soap operas, and impromptu disco dancing, Brian nodded with understanding.

"This is a good place to just sit and think. I used to come here every night, and just lay here and think about the stuff I couldn't say to anyone else. Daphne is a really good friend, but there are things she can't understand, you know? Stuff like how to tell my mom I'm queer, or what it would be like to...well...you know." He blushed faintly and turned to closely examine some imaginary spot on the rock. "Besides, it's got a nice view," Justin continued, leaning over the rock like a counter and looking down the slope towards the lake.

"Yeah, I like the view just fine," Brian leered, stepping up behind Justin and pressing himself firmly against his ass. He leaned over Justin, running his tongue along the blonde's ear, making him shiver. "Now, what exactly would my nasty little boy be thinking about out here? Did you think about...this?" he whispered throatily, grinding his dick into Justin's ass.

"Of course! I was seventeen, Brian, I never thought about anything else." Justin sighed and squirmed against Brian. "Isn't it beautiful? You can see this whole end of the lake from here."

"Humph," Brian grunted, ignoring the lake view in favour of his view of the blonde in front of him. Not to be ignored himself, he grasped Justin's cock firmly in his hand.

"Oh..." Justin breathed, pressing himself harder into Brian's groin. "The problem is, everyone from this end of the lake can see up to here, too."

"I don't care, do you care?" Brian pressed, beginning a firm stroke while Justin struggled to decide.

"We shouldn't."

"That's not what I asked. Do you care if anyone watches me fucking you?"

Justin shivered, feeling a hot rush at the thought of some nameless stranger watching he and Brian together in the clearing.

"I want to, but we can't...not here..."

"You mean if I unzipped your shorts, like this," Brian intoned, letting his hand drop towards Justin's zipper, sliding it down firmly. "...and reached inside, like this..." he whispered, letting his hand slide thorough the opening. "...you would tell me to stop? You **could** tell me to stop?"

Flushing red with lust, Justin's head tossed as he fought his indecision. "Um...no," he finally said.

"Then say it properly."

"No, Brian. I don't care who sees."

Brian gently turned Justin to face him, then moved his hands to Justin's shirt, sliding it up and over his head. He held the fabric in his hand for a moment as they both considered the sight of Justin half dressed.

"Does it still look bad?" Justin asked, his voice choked with an emotion Brian couldn't identify. He ducked his head as Brian's gaze bore into his body.

"No," Brian breathed as a wave of lust flashed through him, followed by a sharp stab of shame. "You look fine," he rushed to finish.

"You sure?" Justin slid his hand between their bodies and wove a finger through the myriad paths of unbroken skin created by the pattern of his wounds.

Brian reached out to him, moaning deeply as he watched their fingers dancing around the marks of his aggression. "Yeah." He found an uninjured part of Justin's shoulder and pressed him gently towards the ground. "You know what I want."

Power Play

Justin nodded and fell to his knees, bowing his head towards the ground. Brian stood quietly for a moment, staring at his boy on the ground and trying desperately to control the raging need he felt. Justin had first taken this submissive pose at the farm, and no matter how many times that submission had been repeated, it always gave Brian a deep secret thrill. It was just too fucking incredible to watch Justin abandon his free will and fall under the spell.

"Look at me," he said, waiting until Justin's bright blue eyes met his own. It was about time that he started acting like the dominant one in this situation, to show some of the control that he was famous for exercising. For too long Brian had struggled against Justin's determination, his selflessness, and his courage. A good upbringing, stability, and love in his childhood had given the younger man an unfair advantage in their game; the residual pain from the bashing had only magnified it. Justin knew he was worth loving, and knew Brian's love for what it was as soon as he'd seen it. Unfortunately for Brian, Justin also had a freakishly high pain tolerance after learning to deal with ongoing headaches and punishing therapy schedules. If Brian were trying to discourage and frustrate Justin to gain the upper hand, he'd chosen the exact wrong way to go about it.

Upon reflection one evening, Brian finally realized which mistake he'd spent months making and magnifying, and vowed to himself that it would never happen again. Now he knew exactly how to put his boy in his place - low and worshipful.

To do that, all he needed to see should be in Justin's eyes right now - a little submission, a little lust, and a little fear. A pale, weak reflection of his own strength and determination would be the perfect verification that he'd made the right choice. He'd had the right idea all along, but the wrong execution, and could only hope to fix the plan by changing the venue of domination. Brian had always known Justin's weaknesses as well as his own, and it was time to exploit them.

At Brian's harsh command, Justin raised his eyes eagerly, feeling the exchange of electricity, and hopeful for more. Brian smiled to himself at the blonde's eager obedience and nodded. Losing the wide grin, he slipped in to the mask of the Heartless Master. "You know what I want," he repeated. "Go to it."

Justin dove for Brian like a starving animal, fumbling awkwardly with Brian's jeans in his haste. Brian stared down at him dispassionately, thinking to himself that Justin had at one time or another removed every last pair of his slacks, and yet was somehow less coordinated than a hapless virgin when he was in a rush. "Need some help?" he questioned coldly, trying to forget that Justin had once said the very same thing to him with very pleasant results. He placed a hand on the top of Justin's head and tilted it upwards, daring the boy to look into his eyes.

Justin refused to meet his stare, looking towards Brian's feet despite having his head pulled sharply backwards. "No, Sir, I'm fine. Allow me to finish?"

"Don't call me that!" Brian exclaimed, mindful of how very old the word Sir made him feel. He tapped the side of Justin's head roughly. "I like the way you say my name, so use it. If that won't do, then say Master. This is your last warning - do not piss me off." He shoved Justin's head back down to level. "And fucking finish what you started!"

"Yes, Brian."

"NOW, Justin!"

Justin finally undid Brian's jeans, with considerably less trouble than he'd he had before, and slid them to the ground. Brian had again chosen to go commando, and Justin paused for a minute, close enough to him to smell his scent and feel his body heat, to consider that fact. He was always ready to go, a hedonist in every way, and Justin was always there to both love him and serve him. Did that make Justin his partner, or his slave? Or was it something else altogether?

Somehow, the right word always appeared sometime during the whispered nasty talk meant to make him hot and get him past the pain thresholds: He was Brian's whore. It was supposed to be a bad word, an epithet, meant to make someone feel dirty and used. For Justin, it didn't hurt somehow, because it was absolutely true. When had he ever denied Brian? Tired or ill, stressed out, in need of a meal or a nap or just some time to himself, Brian had come to him demanding and always left satisfied. They had words for people like that, and whore was at the top of the list. Besides, he liked it better than slave or submissive anyways; it conveyed the power of the choice that he'd made under the street light so many months...God...years ago. The choice to *be* Brian's, no matter what effort it took, what it cost him, or who eventually had to pay.

"Dammit, Justin, what the fuck is wrong with you today?" Brian growled, grabbing the back of Justin's head and firmly shoving his dick into his mouth. "Don't tell me you need fucking instructions."

Justin replied by closing his mouth and applying as much suction as he could create, smiling to himself when Brian gasped in surprise. Sliding down on the shaft, he let his mouth move into a rhythm almost by force of habit, concentrating not on the motion but on Brian's expression. He watched as each teasing flick or flattened swipe of his tongue was translated to a look of greedy ecstasy on Brian's face. After a few minutes of this attention, Brian's eyes opened to see Justin's teasing grin.

"I didn't tell you to look at me! Get back to work." Trying to wipe the smile from his face and failing, Justin couldn't help but chuckle when Brian grabbed the tie of the choker on his neck threateningly. He always knew when Brian was angry enough to be a threat, and that wasn't today. When he twisted it in his hand, Justin looked up again with mocking adoration.

"I'm ever so sorry, Master. Please spare my life and grant me permission to finish your blow job?" he taunted, his hands beginning a slow ascent up Brian's thighs. Brian felt himself starting to drift, floating away in the pleasure, but shut it down cold. Not this time. This shit had gone on long enough, the price was too high and he was always the one that paid. Never again. This time he would win.

"What makes you think I wouldn't kill you here?" he said evenly, his hands languidly running up the back of Justin's head, making him shiver.

"What?" Justin pulled away, shocked at the hurtful comment that had come at him out of left field.

"I said, what makes you think I wouldn't kill you? Right here, right now. I'm bigger than you are, stronger. You couldn't stop me. What makes you think you're safe?"

Justin shivered briefly, but met Brian's gaze and nodded. "I...I guess I don't think that... It's not my place to say. You do what you want to do." It was more than an acknowledgement of power and control - it was permission.

Brian's stomach lurched, not with the revulsion he was supposed to feel, but with lust. Lust for the man who instinctively knew how to play his game at least as well as he did, who would let him entertain the basest and cruelest thoughts without judgment. It seemed that Justin knew how to give him enough rope to hang himself, and didn't particularly mind being taken along for the ride, no matter what the consequences.

Brian admired that tenacious love and ached for the day when he would finally break it down.

Just as he was considering how to raise the stakes and improve Justin's debasement, an ally appeared. Ted, dirty and out of breath, came crashing awkwardly through the underbrush and into the clearing. Justin tensed nervously, but Brian broke into a cruel smirk. "Why, Theodore Schmidt, as I live and breathe! How nice of you to join us." Justin peered up at the intruder nervously, causing Brian to place a hand on his forehead to look deeply into his eyes. Brian watched as Justin moved to draw back, clamping his hand on the boy's shoulder just as he was getting ready to flee. His cold directive rang firmly through the clearing.

"I didn't tell you to stop."

His voice had a tone that would brook no argument, but his malicious enjoyment of Justin's embarrassment was shining.

"Don't disappoint me."

Justin nodded weakly, closed his eyes, and returned to his task, concentrating on feeling anything but Ted's pity.

Jaded

I'm not saying I didn't expect them to be fucking somehow, I mean, this is Justin and Brian that we're talking about. I'm sure they do talk, or have common interests, but they seem to fit it in between the sex. Really, the sex is all that we ever see.

What I didn't expect was to break into a scene, and God, I wish I could just disappear into the ground. Justin is down on his knees, worshipping Brian's cock, and Brian's got this expression of enjoyable malice that only widens when he sees me, and sees that Justin sees me too. Shit!

"Why, Theodore Schmidt..." Brian says, followed by a bunch of stuff I don't really hear. I should be listening, hell, I should be backing away as fast as I can, but I'm frozen. I'm stuck on Justin's eyes, that fleeting look of shame and regret when he realizes that I'm watching his humiliation. For some reason, it really seems to bother him that he has an audience this time.

I know that this is a scene I've stumbled into, but I wonder if Justin knows. There's something in the air, I guess, that tells me what's going on. It's a sense that the balance of power has shifted and Brian is holding all the cards. I have been involved in many scenes, both unwittingly and on purpose, but I've never been the innocent bystander, and this isn't the scenario I wanted to start with! Justin has his eyes tightly closed, but Brian is looking from him to me like a cat who's cornered his prey.

"Justin, how do you expect me to enjoy your performance if you don't open your eyes?" he chastises before turning to me with a sneer. "How do you like my handiwork?" he comments coldly, running a harsh hand down the back of Justin's head until he can point at his pale, bruised skin. "I'm nothing if not thorough."

My eyes quickly move from Justin's head to his torso, following Brian's gesture. In one single moment I'm instantly sickened and numbed with shock. Justin's right side is facing me, and there's a nasty gash right on the border between his back and his side being held together with a series of little butterfly-shaped surgical bandages. He's black and blue with bites and these little V-shaped welts I can't really identify, but look a lot like brands. Shit. Brands? Did I just say that? Justin's eyes dart towards me as I'm taking account of his injuries, and I'm surprised at what I see there. He feels fear, and shame, and that's written all over his face, but the flush on his cheeks and neck tell a different story. Blake used to flush like that sometimes, when he was so turned on that he couldn't breathe and he'd beg me to fuck him dizzy.

He likes it! Some part of him, somewhere in there, **really** likes it. They both do. What the fuck is wrong with them? The brutality in their sex life may turn them on, but it's unhealthy and it has to stop.

I'm here to help them, and I can. I **can** do this.

"I want to talk to you two. Do you suppose you can let Justin up for a minute?" I say, speaking as if Justin has no free will of his own. Thank God Dale has been helping me with the etiquette here, or I'd be lost.

"I'm almost finished. Give me a minute," he pants, raking his hands through Justin's hair and closing his eyes. I don't look away. I don't want to show weakness, but I don't want to

focus on the act itself, either. I mean, it's arousing in a frightening kind of way, but it's my friends! Besides, this has to be hard enough for Justin without me being here. I don't want to make him any more uncomfortable.

I go to take a step back, to leave the clearing and give them some privacy, when Brian looks to me and says, "Ted, you are NOT listening. Do not leave! I think young Justin here needs a bit of a lesson today." I can see Justin's tongue sliding up and down Brian's cock, and my own blood starts to race even as my brain is screaming, "Say it, Ted, say it! It's now or never!"

I take a deep breath, determined to say my speech and leave as soon as possible. "Look, I understand why you need to do what you're doing, but it's gone too far. You have to stop while you still can." I wheeze in another lungful of air, and rush to continue before Brian cuts me off. "It's okay to play, guys, but one of these days one of you is going to get hurt."

Brian is stroking Justin's neck, tugging at his collar - and I'm not stupid, I know that's what it is - and running his fingers underneath the leather ties. It seems that Justin is doing his level best to make this end quickly, if the suddenly visible bulge in his throat is any indication. Brian gasps and turns to favour me with a glare. He's high on the moment and looks more strung out than any night I've ever seen him at Babylon. Actually, he's so far gone that I swear he's slurring. "S'okay, Teddy, I've got him under control now. No more incidents, right, Baby?" he murmurs, tightening his grip on the back of Justin's neck until Justin rears back and cries out in pain. "See, I told you, and he agrees. We've moved on."

Yeah, Brian, you've got it all figured out. Hurt him and humiliate him to make him agree with you.

That makes me feel MUCH better.

Brian pulls Justin back to work, mumbling something towards him that I strain to hear despite myself. I wish I hadn't.

My limits with Dale are very clear - no purposeful humiliation. They don't play by that rule, unfortunately, and I could not feel more sorry for Justin. Brian's whispering turns into low grunts, and his lust-thickened voice starts to fill up the clearing. "That's it, fucking whore, take it all... Suck it... Choke on it, for all I fucking care... He's watching you, you know.. You don't wanna do this, I don't care, I fucking own your ass... He's watching my fucking bitch suck my cock... You want him to watch, don't you? You want everyone to see what a goddamned cheap slut I've made you..." On and on, it makes me ill but Justin is moaning around Brian's dick and I think that maybe he doesn't see this situation quite the same way that I do.

The clearing gets sort of quiet all of a sudden, the only sounds an occasional gasp from Justin struggling to breathe through his nose. Watching Brian force him to suck like that

looks horrible, but I've been in that situation and I know that all you have to do is relax a bit and you're fine. I'm trying so hard not to overreact, to separate the things I know to be true from how horrible and frightening it looks for Justin.

Maybe I'm the one that's scared.

I'm going to look away, look at the awful pink shack, or that big boulder over there, anything but the main attraction, a beaten teenager down on his knees in front of his Master. God, **anything** but that. I've moved on to carefully studying some blades of grass when Brian's urgent moaning fills the air. Now I'm down to counting, filling my head with numbers to avoid thinking about Brian shooting his load down Justin's throat. Why am I still standing here? Oh, that's right, Brian told me to stay, and I'm a little too submissive to say no to someone in full Domination mode!

When Brian comes, it's a roar, a deep, earth shattering groan that I swear Justin echoes. They both slump slightly, and then Brian drags Justin up off the ground, kissing his swollen lips and murmuring in his ear, "That's my good boy. I knew you could do it," while Justin shakes. They sink back down to the ground, together, and slowly arrange themselves while Justin begins to sob. Justin's really not a "crier", I mean, he'll tear up when Brian pisses him off, but it's not like he weeps during long-distance commercials or anything. I'm not sure I should really be seeing this moment that is somehow more intimate than the sex that came before it. I start backing up, Brian's voice still filling my head..."Shh, it's okay, you did so well. It'll be easier next time, you'll see. You're mine, just do what I ask you to do and everything will work out fine..." and Justin is wiping his tears and nodding like it somehow all makes sense.

They don't notice me leaving. I've seen enough.

I've seen everything.

Day of Reckoning

I fell apart during a scene again. I feel so babyish when I break down like that, like a sniveling little faggot, but I can't help it. It's too much emotion all at once to hold it in. Brian says I need to toughen up a bit sometimes, and I'm **trying** to learn, but I can't really repress my feelings - well, not like SOME people I could mention. I'm always like a raw nerve afterwards, I need a minute afterwards just to be held, to learn to breathe and be myself again.

He's still stroking my hair and smiling that concerned crooked grin when I finally look up from his chest. "You gonna be all right, or do we have to call in the Marines?" he jokes, leaning down to peck me on the lips.

"Ooh, Marines please!" I say, and he chuckles and stands up, offering me his hand. I take it and he pulls me up off the ground. He walks across the clearing a bit, but turns in the centre to face me accusingly.

"You didn't say it."

I thought that that was self-explanatory. "I didn't need to."

"You didn't want to do that." I can't say yes or no to that. I didn't really want Ted to watch me, but it was okay. Sort of hot, thinking back on it. It would have been better if it weren't someone I'm friendly with. I decide to play it off and hope for the best.

"Jesus, Brian, enough with the mother hen routine! It wasn't that bad. I'm all in one piece."

His whole body stiffens, and I suddenly realize how much I just pissed him off. Shit. Wrong move. When he starts to speak, his voice is flinty. "No, you're not. You're not all right, and you're NOT in one piece anymore. I fucked you up on Friday, Justin, why the hell won't you admit it?" He advances towards me, shouting the whole time. "Why did you MAKE me do that to you?"

"I don't know, all right!" Now I'm shouting too, and they can probably hear us all the way back at the beach. "I don't fucking know! I like it when you hurt me that way, okay?" My voice drops back down and threatens to crack. Fucking asshole. "What the hell do you want me to say?"

"How about your fucking safeword, Justin? Why don't you have the fucking sense to shut it down when you know it's not safe?" His face is right in mine, and he's bright red again, my angry Irish lover who seems to turn his temper on and off at will. Right now, needless to say, it's on. He's pushing me, pushing me all the time, and I'm sick of it.

"Why don't YOU stop, then? Why do you have to go that far? You nearly fucking killed me on Friday, Brian. I could be dead in the ground right now, and it would have been YOUR fucking fault, not mine!"

"MY fault? It's not my fault, not when you were supposed to stop me!"

"Stop you? Stop YOURSELF! Why is everything always my fault?"

"Because it fucking IS! I've never done this to anyone before you. It's your fault."

"You've never loved anyone but me, not like this! Maybe you can't be a man and admit it to yourself!"

Bull's-eye. He stops yelling, suddenly finding something fascinating on the ground. When he speaks again, it's very cold and very quiet. "Next time, you say your safeword, Justin, and I mean that. I don't want to hurt you anymore."

"I never have, and never will, Brian. Don't hold your breath."

He looks up at me, seeming as drained as I am. "Then it stops, Justin. Right here, right now, the game is over."

"WHAT?"

"I will never lay another hand on you that way, end of story. Somebody has to be the fucking sane person here. I can't trust you to look after yourself."

"That's not how it works, Brian! You look after me, and I look after you. That's what a relationship is."

"Maybe on TV, that's how it works. You have to look out for yourself, because I'm doing a piss-poor job of it." He kicks a rock on the ground and I almost miss his pathetic murmur, "I can't even trust me not to kill myself." He looks, surprisingly, dangerously close to crying himself. "What would I do if I *HAD* killed you on Friday, Justin? What would I ever be able to say to defend myself? How would I look my son in the eye?"

"How would you get Clinique moisturizer in jail?"

"Fuck you! That's not funny."

"Oh come on, it is a little bit. You look horrible in orange!"

"Nobody looks good in orange, according to Emmett."

"He's not wrong, you know. Say, do you know where my shirt went?"

"Maybe Ted took it," he says spitefully, dusting off his jeans.

Oops. Ted. I can't imagine what he thinks he saw, or even what he actually saw, for that matter. "Do you think that HE'LL be okay?" I wonder out loud, scanning the clearing for the bright blue of my shirt..

"I don't give a fuck *what* he thinks, Justin." Brian says, like he needs to or something. "Ted will be fine if he minds his own fucking business!"

I think about that for a minute while I'm looking for my shirt. "Well, how would you feel if YOU walked into that? Wouldn't you be at least a little curious?"

He finds my shirt beside the boulder, shakes it out, and hands it to me. "Just because I happen to see something, doesn't mean I'm involved. It wouldn't be my responsibility."

"So you'd stay out of it, then, fine. Not everybody feels that way." My shirt is still scratchy against the burns, but they really do feel better. I'm glad we went and got the cream and stuff yesterday... I know it killed Brian to have to take me to the doctor, but I thought that he had to learn that if he kept getting carried away, he'd have to deal with the consequences. I never thought he'd decide to stop altogether!

And then there's me... Going on and on about Brian dealing with the consequences of his actions when I'm not taking any responsibility for my own. I think I damn near drove him crazy Friday night, and he had to deal with that, and how he feels about what he did. I know what his family was like - I should know better than to mess with his head like that!

Maybe I've done a lot of things wrong. Maybe it's wrong that I haven't said my safeword yet, but I don't want to! I'm so sick of him being in control all the time. It's hot when he's ordering me around during a scene, telling me where to be and what to suck and when to breathe, but when we get out of bed, I want to have some input. It's his money, his life, his way. I want to decide on dinner and pick the movie sometimes too!

I sit down on the boulder, still just thinking, content to be inside my own thoughts for a while. After the closeness, the argument and all the angst, I need some space, time to check my head and make sure that I'm okay. Lately, it's been time to regret letting it go as far as it went. The times when I feel the aching pains that aren't sexy anymore after I come.

Maybe the ending of the violent stuff is for the best. Obviously, we can't be trusted.

A normal person would be thinking, "Hey, if I want something to stop, I should say the word, the REAL word that makes things come screeching to a halt, and not just no. It's insufficient, and I damn well know that. I have to stop being so fucking stupid." But that's not me. I fell in love with the danger, and his name is Brian.

I was terrified on Friday, and maybe I didn't need to be. Maybe if I'd said the word, he would stop. Then again, maybe he wouldn't. How will I ever know? He can't be trusted to do anything that's good for him, either. We're one fucked up pair.

He's watching me watching him, and I still feel the heat that we make when we're together. Sure, I almost get myself killed at least once a week, one way or the other... but fuck me; it's a great ride.

Aboard

Brian's leaning against the boathouse, smoking a cigarette, when I finally leave the safety of my rock to come over and press against his side. "So, you say there's a boat in there," he drawls, all cool and casual. Okay, so we're normal, then. I can do that.

"Yeah. Wanna see it?" I tease, turning my back and fishing for the keys to the boathouse in my pocket.

"I don't know," he hems with a smile. "Do you swear that it's not pink?"

"Ha ha. Yeah, the boat is just a regular red boat." I finally find the small key and open the door. "The light is in here somewhere...shit, it's burned out. Wait, what's this?" I say when my hand brushes against an envelope taped above the light switch.

"It's got your name on it, Justin. Open it," Brian says, stubbing out the cigarette on the ground. I glare at him - it's not safe to leave hot ashes in the forest, after all - and he sighs and spits on it. "Happy?" he smirks, and I groan, opening the note.

"Okay, this is from Daphne's grandfather. He says be careful with the boat, and replace the gas we use." Actually, the note is very sweet. He says to be careful with his granddaughter, mind the rules of the house, and not to let anyone else drive the boat, since, "You just can't trust those city boys, Justin." Mr. Chanders is a riot. I think he knows I'm queer, because he always let me sleep in Daphne's room, even when we were teenagers. I don't think he'd let me do that if he thought I was sleeping with her.

Brian flips the light switch, and the boat is sitting there, minding its own business. "You don't know how to drive this!" he pronounces with disbelief, and I laugh.

"I do too. I don't know what anything is called, but I can get it from A to B." I take a lifejacket off a hook on the wall and hand one to Brian. He rolls his eyes, but I shrug my shoulders and say, "Hey, not my boat, not my rules. You want to walk back to the beach?"

"I should buy my own fucking boat and fuck these stupid pieces of shit," he grumbles illogically, shaking the vest like a dead rabbit.

"Well, that's not going to happen in the next five minutes, so just put it on and try to forget about it, okay?" I reason, like I'm talking down to a small child. The jacket goes on with an exaggerated sigh, and I try really, really hard not to laugh. He looks hot, but totally miserable - I wish I had a mirror!

Once suited up, he eyes the boat warily, saying, "YOU are going to drive this back to the beach? Wait, is drive the right word for a boat?"

"Well, you *can* say drive, since it's just a powerboat, but I always say sail. It sounds better. Snooty."

Him looking incredulously between the dock and me: "And I have to let you drive?"

Me, smugly: "You've got no choice."

Him, grasping at straws: "I'm supposed to let you drive when you're fucked up on Vicodin?"

Ha, now I know he's really desperate, he knows damn well I won't drive if I'm wasted. I'm not him. "Brian, you're reaching. That wore off hours ago," I tease, then decide to twist the knife, just for fun. "Time to give up a *tiny* little bit of control and let me drive."

"Shit."

"Maybe later. Jump in while I pull off these rope thingies."

Instead of moving closer to the boat, he backs towards the door, looking incredulous. "Rope thingies? ROPE THINGIES! Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"Of course I do! I just don't remember what everything is called. It's been a couple of years since I was up here." His lack of faith is frustrating me, and finally I just spit, "Get the fuck in the boat, or walk back to the cabin! Your choice."

Another long-suffering sigh. Jesus, he'd make you think he's been stuck with me for twenty years instead of two! "Okay, I'll get in. Where do you want me?"

"Wherever I can get you," I say, leering, "Just don't fall over the skis."

"Skis?" Now I have his interest. His eyes shift from me to the inside of the boat, where there's a very nice pair of water skis waiting for our use.

"Yes, water skis. Daphne wanted to ski, that's why she came up this weekend. I thought you guys might like to give it a shot, too." I'm crossing my fingers in my mind, praying that this little surprise is acceptable to him today.

He looks like a kid in a candy store, all of a sudden, and I try not to laugh as his cool face disappears. "We came up here to water ski? I've never..." His voice trails off and just like that, the mask is back, but it's the five seconds of him acting like a kid that I really came for. I wanted the chance to give him something back; the chance to be there for one of *his* firsts for a change. I wanted want to make him happy, just for a minute, just once. He smiles. "Yeah, we could do that."

"Awesome!" I give Brian a little nudge into the boat, and run around to the part of the dock near the door as nimbly as my aching body will allow. With the door opened, I pull off each mooring line, (see, I remember things eventually) hop in the boat, and push us gently forwards.

"Uh, Earth to Justin, shouldn't you start it up?"

"Not unless you want both of us to die of carbon monoxide poisoning! This boathouse ISN'T a shack," I say, glaring at him in the receding gloom, "But it's about the same size. We have to clear the door first."

He helps me push it through the door, and when the steering wheel has passed the boundary of the wall, I start the motor and ease it forwards. We go slowly through the no-wake zone, me pointing out the coves that are good for fishing, and the sandbars that make great private beaches...and I mean REALLY private. He smirks appreciatively at my suggestions for future visits.

We're just about to pass the last bunch of trees before the beach when he turns to me seriously and gently grabs my arm. "Thank you, Justin. For everything."

I look into his eyes, and say, "I love you too, Brian."

He groans loudly and turns away, but I think I see a smile, and I'm going to keep on thinking I saw it for the rest of my life.

Just now, maybe just this once, Brian Kinney loved me.

Extra-Ordinary

Mama always told me that if I really wanted to get to know someone, watch him with a group of his friends. It's easy to pretend to be someone else with a stranger, but your friends will call you on your bullshit, most of the time.

That seems to be the way this group operates. It's easy to stay on the outside and watch, because they don't seem all that interested in including me. I don't know if it's because I'm straight or because I'm new, but I think they should give Daphne a little more credit for picking me. I mean, her best friend is gay; surely, they don't think she'd pick a homophobe for a boyfriend? Or maybe they do, and that's why I've gotten such a good opportunity to watch them without having to go to the trouble of conversing with anyone but Daphne.

Emmett, I like. My mama used to call people like him, "One of the boys," although I never quite figured out why. Maybe because he's so enthusiastic about life - these days, enthusiasm seems relegated to children and people with mental deficits. I would love to face every day with his surety that something good WILL happen, and that there's a happy ending around every corner. It's enviable, really, not to wake up every morning and think, "Well shit, now I have to get my ass out of bed and go to work without gunning down my co-workers in a fit of rage." Maybe everyone needs an Emmett in his

life. Not much of a water-skier, but he tried and had fun doing it, which is more than I can say for some people.

Ted is quiet...too quiet, sort of Ted is quiet...sort of...too quiet. Ok, he's creepy. He spends all his time watching Brian and Justin, like they're going to explode or something. He didn't come out water-skiing; he just sat on the shore and glowered from a distance. Then, he laid a precise and perfect log-cabin style fire, to make sure that there were exactly enough embers to cook hot dogs and marshmallows later. I swear he could have measured the twigs to get them all even, because the fire is so perfect it looks fake. He must read Martha Stewart like it's the Bible! The only other things he's done today is complain for half an hour about getting water in his ears, and take Brian aside to bitch about something I still haven't figured out.

At least Ted was making himself useful while he pouted - Michael came on the boat but complained the whole time. "I'm seasick!" "This lifejacket is too tight!" "It's my turn now!" On and on and on, just like my little sister. I think he does it to get attention...and I have to hand it to him, it works. When he starts talking, everyone pays attention in the hopes that he'll stop whining and have a normal conversation for a change! He's not a stupid child, but the more he acts like one, the more people treat him like one. It's a vicious circle, and I'd tell him so, but somehow, I doubt he'd appreciate it. Most people don't think of whining as just another form of communication, but I guess with Brian as a best friend, it's a survival skill.

Last, but not least according to the estimation of everyone else present today, is Brian-and-Justin. I've stopped thinking of them as anything but a sentient being with two heads. I gave up trying to get to know them or even talk to either of them individually; frankly, it just wasn't going to happen. Brian spends a lot of time staring at me warily, arms around Justin from behind...I don't need to be told to *know* he doesn't trust me at all. I'm pretty sure he was even glaring at me while he was water-skiing! If looks could kill, I'd be one dead duck.

I guess I can see where he's coming from. Daph told me about Justin and Chris Hobbes, the taunting, the rumours, the bullying, and the bashing. I'm very sorry for that; the amount of unnecessary hate in this world is ridiculous. I'm not Chris, though, and I don't hate gay people; my mama raised me a lot better than that! My only problem with Brian is that he acts like an asshole and people congratulate him for it. Besides, I know *plenty* about unnecessary hate. I can't help but notice that I'm significantly darker than anyone else in the group, and it makes me wonder... I'm not saying anything, mind you, just wondering. Mostly wondering how a person who demands so much acceptance from others can give so little of it himself.

I think there's something else going on between Brian and me as well. He has noticed that I'm watching them, watching HIM, and for some reason that makes him very, very nervous. It's not like I meant to spy on him all day, but that's just sort of what happened. Basically, he's acting like he's either done something wrong, or is about to do something wrong, and he's waiting for someone to catch him at it. It's the kid-in-the-cookie-jar

expression, but with the extra-added bonus that he's pissed off that someone noticed! I'd really like to talk with him sometime; he seems smart and well spoken, and he's a lot different from the rest of my acquaintances... but it's hard to get to know someone who doesn't want to be known.

Justin, on the other hand, is content to spend the day at Brian's feet, worshipping him from a-near, so to speak. I HAVE spoken to him before, but this isn't the same man who talked about classes with Daphne and asked me how my finals went. This man is all about Brian, in a way I can't really explain. It's like the rest of us have just disappeared. He spent part of the afternoon explaining the intricacies of water-skiing so that Brian could look like an expert on his first run. (Which he did, by the way, and it pissed me off; it took me an entire weekend last year just to learn how to stand up without wobbling.) Justin didn't even come skiing himself; instead, he drove the boat juuuust right so that Brian didn't hit any strange wakes until he was ready. He's spent the last couple of hours hobbling around fetching water and beer and whatever else Brian wants, or needs, or might possibly have considered asking for. Mama used to see people like that and say, "Gee, I need a wife like that!" and I totally agree; it would be great to have someone to have sex with who also acted like your personal valet! I asked Daphne if she knew why Justin looks so achy and has been acting like he's in pain, but she just blushed and changed the subject.

So here we are, sitting around Ted's perfect fire, making Emmett's s'mores and listening to Michael complain that Brian doesn't come out to the bar anymore. We're all feeling a little lazy after our dinner, and I have to say that sitting, watching the fire and listening to music is just about my speed. The sun isn't going down yet, but it's gone from that bright white noontime glare to a golden glow, and it's easy to just sit and relax. I guess I should know by now, that nothing is ever really that easy.

Mix Tape I

"So, who picks the next CD?" Daph asks sweetly, rustling through the plastic cases on our blanket. I'm glad she brought her CD's, because nobody else has decent taste in music...well, in my opinion anyways.

"Not Ted!" Michael and Emmett cry in unison. I'm glad, because when it WAS his turn, he wanted to put on some loooong opera. Not that I don't like opera or anything, but it's really not "beach music". In the end, we managed to bargain him down to Enigma, but I'm worried he'll try again.

"Not me, I picked the last one," Justin offers sleepily. He's half-sitting, half-lying between Brian's legs, but looking sort of stiff and uncomfortable. He shifts slowly, sighing when he finally gets onto his other side. That's cool; his choice in music left a lot to be desired. Two Moby CD's in a row is too much!

"Look, will you just take your damned meds already?" Brian grinds out quietly, searching Justin's pockets. He looks up but continues talking when he sees nobody but me is paying attention. "How many pills did you miss? Two? Three?"

"Two, and I can take my own damned meds, Brian," he snaps. "We needed someone to drive the boat."

"Fuck that! If you need to take your meds, then TAKE them!" Brian snaps back. "And don't forget to share."

"Ah, I should have known," he replies with a smile, reaching into the tiny watch pocket of his shorts and pulling out some little pills. He pops one in his mouth and hands a couple to Brian, and absolutely nobody says a damned word about it!

"Say, what's that, Justin?" I say casually, leaning back and being as non-confrontational as I can manage. I'm sure it sounds a little fake, and he looks at me strangely before he smiles.

"Vicodin. I...uh...hurt myself last week. You need one?" he offers generously, reaching back into his pocket to dig for more.

Much as I'm dying to ask how he got hurt, I decide to just shut my damn mouth and listen. "No, I'm good, but thanks." He smiles and moves back until he's leaning against Brian again.

It seems that the music debate has continued without a resolution, so finally Daph just decides to put on a mixed CD that she burned, in the hopes that everyone will like something. It's a good CD, very mellow, and we finally start to have an actual conversation like normal people would. After about twenty minutes, I notice that Brian seems to be taking up more and more of the conversation.

I'm not the only one who has noticed that normally-untalkative Brian is hogging the discussion. Justin smiles when Brian starts waving his hands around during a discourse about fashion with Emmett. While the music plays, he becomes more interactive and verbose, going from an executive selling his opinion to an evangelist exhorting us to believe. Poor Emmett tries desperately to get a word in edgewise, but he just can't, since it doesn't seem like Brian is even stopping to breathe anymore.

By the time we move on to books, everyone is suspicious but only Michael has the guts to finally ask what's going on. Of course, if they'd been paying attention, they would already know.

"Brian, what the hell did you take?" he shrieks after we listen to Brian's five-minute monologue proclaiming American Psycho the best book he's ever read. "You're acting so fucking weird."

"You just don't understand because you haven't read the book," Justin says cattily, throwing a tiny, fake smile at Michael while the poor man turns red.

"What have I told you about playing well with others, Sonny boy?" Brian singsongs before turning to Michael. "What's the matter, Mikey, are you jealous?" Brian cackles, sitting up into Justin's back and hugging him like a teddy bear. "Sunshine decided to share his Vicodin with me."

"Justin!" Ted yells, startling me a bit. I forgot he was there. "You don't share prescription drugs with other people. It's very dangerous!"

Justin just smiles a sleepy little grin and tilts his head to kiss Brian's jaw. "He always shares with me."

"But that's not a prescription medication!" Ted's still on his mother-may-I kick. Who died and made him God of Partaking? "Just listen to him. He must be really messed up."

Much as I would love to watch Ted have a panic attack, I have to look at the situation objectively. Brian may be talking in run-on sentences, but his eyes are relatively clear and he doesn't have the shakes. "Ted, I've heard of this before. It's a side effect of the Vicodin, they call it 'speaking into the Vike.' He'll be fine when it wears off."

Daphne squeezes my hand, and Ted nods gratefully - well, I think that's what he's going for - but speaking up has earned me a glare from Brian. "Just how do you know that, Steve? If you were any straighter, we could draw lines with you."

Pompous shit. "I can read a fucking website, Brian. Funny thing about being in college, sometimes you actually end up researching things."

Brian is getting ready to start a new diatribe when Daphne squeals and turns up the music. "Oh my God, Justin, do you remember this song? I forgot it was on here."

We all listen to the quiet, mellow strains of a single acoustic guitar, soon accompanied by another. I've never heard this song, and apparently, neither has anyone else except Justin. He has slumped over Brian's leg like a pile of rags, but he opens his eyes and looks strangely at Daph. "Tell me this isn't the song we sang for that talent show!"

"I forgot it was here, okay! Sing it with me." She looks at him pleadingly, and he closes his eyes and nods a bit. "Fine. I'm still not a singer, though. If anyone has a problem with it, YOU deal with them. And YOU get to chase away the cats."

She nods and starts singing with the music, quietly at first, then more loudly when Justin finally finds his voice. I'm not even hearing the words, just listening to them finding their rhythm, figuring out how to accompany each other and not drown out the music itself. It's precious, really, and it's not until the chorus that I start to listen to the words.

And if you call

I will answer

And if you fall

I'll pick you up

And if you court this disaster

I'll point you home

I'll point you home

Daphne has leaned further into me, and her sweet voice makes me feel warm and sleepy. Justin's voice is lower and rougher, and he wasn't kidding when he said he didn't sing well - this song is pitched very low and he's still barely hanging onto the melody. They've got everyone's attention now, and both enter the next verse with a little more confidence.

You think

I only think about you

When we're both in the same room

I'm only here to witness the remains of love exhumed

You think

We're here to play a game

Of who loves more than whom

The chorus starts up again, and I can't help but notice that Justin has pulled away from Brian and is sort of hugging himself while he sings. The song is making him so sad, and there's nothing we can do to help him.

Funny how someone can be sitting right next to someone else and still look so alone.

Call and Answer

Fuck Daphne. This is all her fault.

She brought along one of those stupid mix tapes that people make, full of angsty reminders of things you should just get over already. Songs that are supposed to be laid-back mood music turn into episodes of Jerry Springer, with people sobbing over lost loves or other useless shit. I'm just about to say that when Justin starts singing. Fuck, I didn't know he could sing. Not that he's any good, but at least he picked a song that makes it easy to fake it.

Sitting here while they do their Tiny Talent Show is awkward. If we weren't in the middle of fucking nowhere, I'd take off right around now. Besides, I don't like having everyone looking at him. He's mine, and they can point their fucking nosy eyes elsewhere. This is something about him that I don't know and don't own and it reminds me of how many parts of his soul that I've probably never even seen. He costs me too much to keep hiding from me like that.

I feel him pulling away from me sometime around the second chorus, and now I'm more confused than anything else. What the fuck did I do now? I actually start listening to the lyrics, and then it hits me - he's thinking about us.

He thinks the song is about us, or maybe that it should be, I don't know. There's something not-Justin in his voice when he joins Daphne on the next stanza.

You think

It's only fair to do what's best

For you and you alone

It's only fair to do the same

To me when you're not home

I think

It's time to make this something

That is more than only fair

They start in on the chorus, again...how many choruses does this fucking song have, anyways...and it actually *hurts* me to think that Justin might believe that shit. I AM thinking about him, all the time! Thinking about when to pull him closer, and when to push him away; why I should set him free, and why I should destroy him for fucking with me.

I think about how to kill him and how to save him. Or maybe how to kill me, and how he saves me.

By the time the next verse rolls around, he's almost a fucking basket case, and I'm surprised at how much he's letting a fucking song affect him. I guess it's almost the end, because he takes a deep breath and pulls further away before finishing the song.

But I'm warning you

Don't you ever do

Those crazy messed up things that you do

If you ever do

I promise you

I'll be the first to crucify you

Now It's time to prove

You've come back here to rebuild...

Rebuild...

The song fades away, and Steve hugs Daphne close to him, saying, "That was great, Daph. You're an awesome singer."

Emmett claps enthusiastically, like a marionette on a string. "I didn't know you two could sing! When did you do that talent show?"

Daphne smiles broadly as Steve gives her another big hug. "It was a couple of years ago. We had to do something at the club, our moms signed us up for the show and Justin suggested the song."

He nods absently and plays with the threads of the blanket we're sitting on. They wait for his comments, expectantly, and his voice drones out flat and dejected. "Yeah, we had to do something, and I kept listening to the song, so I figured we should just go for it."

"It's a beautiful song," Ted murmurs, and Justin sighs, pulling his knees up to his chest.

"Yeah, I used to think so too. I used to lay in bed at night and dream of having someone who cared about me that much." He drops his head against a knee in what looks suspiciously like defeat. "That was before I knew how the world really worked." There's a hush as everyone looks to me, and I feel their smug little, "Brian never does anything right," like giant chunks of icy hail.

Call it what you want, but there's a nanosecond of silence before a lightning bolt of anger and pain blows away my conscious thoughts.

Fucking little twat! How DARE he say that!!! I grab his shoulders and jerk him roughly into me. He cries out in pain, but that doesn't matter now. "Listen, you stupid little shit! You HAVE that! Are you hearing me?" I start to shake him, hard, as I yell in frustration. His eyes are big, and blue, and scared, but I won't stop until he understands. I'm up on my knees now, my tense body hovering like a dark cloud as I grab tighter and shake harder. He's trying to get himself together, but he's way too stoned to completely pull himself away. Finally I grab his chin and wrench his head around hard, turning him until his entire body pivots on his hip and he's looking right into my eyes. "What makes you think I don't care?"

Silence. Silence from him...from everybody, actually, but I don't care about anyone right now except my boy.

"Answer me! What more could I possibly do to convince you?" See, my hands know what to do, they're still grabbing and squeezing and shaking him even though I'm trying to be calm. "I've said I'm fucking sorry a thousand times! I didn't mean to hurt you, okay? I'll never hit you again, just fucking tell me you believe me!"

His eyes are wet and pleading, darting from one side to the other as he whispers, "Brian, shh, not here." The Three Musketeers are gaping and Steve is slowly getting up to come to Justin's aid. They think I've gone crazy, that I'm finally beyond aggravation and just as dangerous as they've always suspected. Hey, if they only fucking knew, right?

I don't care. Justin has to believe in me! He made me care, and now he's going to fucking return the favour. I don't do this shit for just anybody. I have put my fucking ass on the line for him, so many times, so many ways. Brian Fucking Kinney, Legend of Liberty, is married to a fucking teenager! Wasn't that enough to prove it to him? Is anything ever enough for him?

"Are you listening to me? I will always come for you, you hear me? Always. Don't ever forget that." Damned if it doesn't sound like a threat, even to me, but fuck it. He knows what I mean. He's crying, that means he understands. He always cries when I'm being romantic.

"Brian?" Emmett lays a hand on my arm, gently, like I'm a confused drunk going into the wrong house. If he thinks that, well, at least he'd be half right. Does that make sense? I notice that I'm still gripping Justin tightly, and let him go. It's fascinating, watching the white indents of my fingerprints flush angry red with blood, seeing how his beautiful paleness fades right to white before magically colouring itself. I want to see that again.

I'm still lost in his eyes and my thoughts when Emmett crouches down beside me. He smiles and pats my arm again, but not in an overbearing, talking-down-to-a-child way. "Why don't you let me take you two home now?"

Michael pipes up, "I always take Brian home! I'll do it."

"Fuck that. Last time you drove the Jeep the repairs cost me three hundred bucks! You *do* know where the clutch is, right?" I scowl. My poor fucking Jeep! He still drives it like it's an automatic. Wait, should Justin be lying on the ground like that?

Emmett hops up easily, far more easily than Justin will. I hurt him again. Dammit! Maybe that's all I'm good for. He smiles sympathetically at Justin as he helps him up. I can feel everyone glaring at me as Justin staggers off the ground. "Easy, honey, that's some strong stuff you took. You can sleep in the car on the way home." Emmett looks at me kindly, too kindly, and I'm so used to seeing an agenda in people's eyes that his face almost looks blank. "Why don't you take everything up to the Jeep and I'll help Justin say his goodbyes." It's a demand, not a request, and since he seems to be the only person here who doesn't want to tear me apart, I do it.

I *must* be too fucked up to drive if I think Emmett taking me home is a good idea.

I take our shit up the path, and I can hear voices through the trees as I'm walking. Michael says, "Emmett, what are you doing?" and I wonder briefly if he might be jealous of Justin even now. Idiot. Nobody in his right mind would choose to be stuck with me! Ted, of course, is silent, since all of this is about as surprising to him as his shoe size. The voice that makes me pause is Daphne's plaintive wail: "Justin, come with me! Don't leave! Steve, don't let Justin go home with him!" Like I'm some fucking murderer or something.

Oh shit. Maybe I am! Maybe this day has all been a dream, and now I'm waking up to a reality where everyone can see right into the twisted, evil thoughts in my head. Do they know what I've done to him? What have they seen? Do they know how close we came?

Maybe they know everything.

Emmett's voice is soothing like warm tea, easing me out of my paranoia when he finally speaks. "Don't overreact. They're going to go home, sleep off the bad drugs, and forget this ever happened. We should all do the same thing."

Ted's voice is low and firm. "I'm not going to forget this."

Emmett is so composed, so reasonable. He has skills that none of them will ever appreciate. "Fine, just don't make a big deal out of it. See? Justin's a walking zombie, and Brian's probably not too far off that himself. I'll take them home, tuck them into bed, and tomorrow they'll be back to their fabulous selves."

It seems like forever until I finally see him guiding Justin up the path, an expert in the care and handling of drunks and addicts. He's sweet, but he's always been honest with me and he won't sugar-coat the truth. There's something I have to know.

"Emmett, am I a good person?"

He looks at me strangely in the fading light of the forest, still propelling Justin forwards on the path. "Of course you are, honey. You love this boy, no matter how much you want people to think you don't." We trudge silently until we're almost back to the Jeep, and he turns to me seriously. "The person you need to love more is yourself."

Emmett is a wizard, somehow manoeuvring Justin into the back in the time it takes me to find the door handle. I think about what he said, something about loving Justin more, and I nod. Fuck, what was in that shit? If Emmett's making sense it must be the end of the world. I must have mumbled something like that, because he smiles and tugs at my shirtsleeve. "Now come on home and sleep off those bad drugs. No more Vicodin for you."

"No more Vicodin for me," I parrot as I buckle myself into the Jeep.

I hate fucking road trips.

Let it Ride

Brian is stirring. He'll be awake soon.

I wonder, absently, how many times and in how many places he has woken up without a clue where he is or who he did. It happens to everyone, I suppose, but for him it must be an occupational hazard. I don't think I could keep doing that, always watching my back, never getting a decent night's sleep, feeling burnt up and used up and so worn out. In fact, I couldn't do it. This is exactly why I quit the drugs cold.

Spending three days tweaked out on crystal meth was the highlight of my life, and that's so very sad. Of course, the first high is the best...well, maybe the second, you know enough to enjoy that one...but the second never lasts as long as the first, and you need more and more just to get the same high you had yesterday. Keep doubling your dose from one day to the next, and pretty soon you're hustling for cash to pay Lady Crystal. I don't need to tell you what happens after that, but I will. One morning I woke up in some stranger's apartment, shaking from exhaustion and literally starving to death, because I'd spent the past thirty-six hours getting my ass fucked off by God knows who. Just like I'd spent my free time the week before, and the week before that, and the week before that... I said to myself, "Emmett Honeycutt, you were not put on this Earth to die a junkie whore! Get your shit together!" and that was the end. It had to stop somewhere, so I made it stop. Not that it wasn't hard, but stopping in the Pitts was the best decision I ever made. The drug scene here is much less obvious and obtrusive...and I think Brian supports at least half of it himself!

Brian. Poor Brian. I just wish he'd love himself enough to see what he's worth. There are always good times to be had, but eventually you learn that you don't have to have all of them at the same time - and that applies to men, too. There's always someone around the corner, and if you're patient, you don't have to fuck every man in your path to find him. Of course, that's MUCH easier to say when you've already fucked every man along several paths, I suppose.

I hear groaning before he actually speaks; quite a bit of it, in fact. He must be right out of it.

"Emmett, is that you?" he says, eyes squinted shut against the glare of the setting sun.

"Yes, it is. Go back to sleep."

He shakes his head to clear it, completely ignoring my good advice, as usual. "How much longer?"

I look at the directions I borrowed from Teddy, and the clock on the dash. "An hour, maybe? Why, do you need to stop for something?"

He's loud and bitter, surprise surprise! "I wanted to know where the fuck I am!"

He can feel as greasy and tired as he wants, but the attitude? I'm not having it. "Shh! Justin's still asleep!" I look away from the road just for a minute, and catch him turning around to check on the young man curled up on the backseat. "He'll be fine, Brian. Don't worry."

He puts his tongue in his cheek and quickly looks away. "I'm not."

I laugh. "Of course you are." He leans his head against the window and stares at the road with half-closed eyes. Yes, that would be the expression I moved to Pittsburgh to avoid, the "What the fuck did I do this time?" face. I got tired of doing the rounds on Sunday morning, making apologies for my appalling behaviour the night before. Sundays must be easy for him, since he never apologizes for anything! That's okay, I don't want an apology.

I want the truth.

"Brian?" I whisper softly. He opens his eyes, but doesn't reply. "How long?"

He sits up and looks right at me, like he's startled, then sighs and slumps back towards the window. "Six months."

"Bad?"

He closes his eyes, as if to avoid the pain himself. "Yeah."

"How many stitches?"

I'm lucky he's still in the talkative stage of his Vicodin high, or he would have clammed up a long time ago. I think he's trying to shut up and just can't. "How the fuck do you know about those? Have you been talking to Ted?"

Honesty is the best policy. "Teddy told me a little about his walk today, but that's not how I guessed. Justin didn't go in the water - on a boiling hot day like today, it's a dead giveaway. Now, how many?"

I can see the wheels turning in his head, so slowly, trying to figure a way out of this without answering me. They should use Vicodin as truth serum, because his mouth starts moving even though his eyes are trying to shoot me down and shut me up. "Seven last time, but he'll be fine. No scar." He shakes his head and thumps it gently against the window, as if for emphasis. "He never scars." His voice drops down very low and quiet. "No matter how hard I try."

If he believes Justin's getting out of this unscarred, then I have some land to sell him in Florida! It doesn't look like Brian's coming through it with flying colours, either. I'm not here to make him feel bad about what they're doing, but I do need to know the truth. One more question and the Spanish Inquisition will be over.

"How close, Brian?"

Low, threatening voice: "Close to what, Emmett?"

Sure, he finds a tiny thread of steel right when I'm asking the most important question! I need to know that our baby is going to come out of this! I know that real life is hard on some people, the people who have to touch the stove to believe that it burns. Justin and Brian are both like children that way, believing their own lies, living flip sides of the same fairytale. Justin lives the sweetness and light, Brian the gloom and darkness, and that's why they feel so good together. They're balanced and whole.

It's a special thing they have, and I want to smack Brian into next week, not that I think I'd survive the attempt. He can lie to Michael, he can lie to Ted, he can lie to himself if he wants to, but *I* know what's going on here. "Don't start with me, Brian, I'm not an idiot. I've been around, and you *know* I know how these games work, so I'm saying, close to you know exactly fucking what. Are you being smart or being lucky?"

He has the best, and worst, evil grin of anyone I've ever met. It's creepy. "We're always lucky, Emmett. Lucky, lucky us."

He is so arrogant it's not even funny. Somebody had better talk some sense into this boy. "You *ARE* lucky, you stupid fool! A lot of people would say, hell, they *DO* say that you can *both* do better! You could find someone more mature, more experienced, who can

be more your partner and less your protégé. Justin could find someone young to discover life with, someone who will worship him and tell him he's the greatest thing that ever lived. Frankly, the two of you as a couple... Well, you go beyond opposites attracting. It's just unexplainable."

"Shut up, Emmett."

"Forget it! I'm not stopping until I'm done. It's not really all that unexplainable, is it? You love him. The Great Brian Kinney fell in luuuuuv, and it's killing you."

Of course, this pronouncement is met by a great big Brian Kinney glare. "Shut the FUCK up, Emmett!"

Almost done, just have to push it a little more..."Fine, fine. Too much truth in one day isn't good for the complexion. You know, it wouldn't hurt if you told him you like having him around."

"I do that, Emmett. Enough!"

"Do you really? Do you tell him you like being around him or just that you like fucking him, hmmm? And while I've got your attention, what about Michael? When was the last time you came out with us? He feels so neglected."

"Does he now? Listen, it's been a slice, but if you say one more word I'm going to fucking kill you right here and bury your lifeless corpse in the ditch."

"Brian?" Justin stirs in the backseat, and his voice is gravelly from sleep. "Let it go."

Brian swivels around to check on Justin, this time not caring if I see him or not. "Let what go?" His voice softens a bit, hoping I might go temporarily deaf for his convenience. "You feeling okay?"

"I know that tone of voice, Brian, and I don't think you're wearing your burying clothes today." Justin yawns and stretches as he sits up. "Yes, I'm fine, better than okay. I guess the painkillers were the Extra Strength kind, I wonder why I didn't notice that yesterday?" He looks up towards the road, and then at the clock. "So I guess we're almost home, then."

"Five, ten minutes...tops." Brian says, and I can't help but laugh. Michael told me *that* story, and I can't wait to share it with Justin. He needs to know that Brian may not always seem to appreciate him, but he wasn't one little bit better off before.

Incubus

Hot and wet. I'm not awake yet, but I feel his mouth on me, tasting, pulling blood into my dick.

This must be a dream... another beautiful dream about Brian and I, maybe stranded on a desert island with the sun beating down on our sweaty, naked bodies. Nothing real should feel this good, but it does.

It always does.

My eyes open to meet his, his eyes with the colours that change like shifting sand. Even in the pale gloom of the early morning half-light, I can see the greenish grey flecks that let his eyes be any colour they want to be. Why should mere physiology keep him from being fluid and changeable, like a god? A sex god, that's what he is.

The swirl in his eyes is hypnotic. He's hypnotic. I want to say something to tell him how I'm feeling, how I love waking up to him sucking my cock. How my mind drifts during the day to think about his strong hands and slim hips. How much I love being with him.

How much I love him.

I can't say that, though, not now. I don't want to scare him away. This is how **he** feels, how he expresses his emotions, and sometimes I have to just be quiet and listen with my heart.

His head dips, taking more of me into his mouth. I reach out to stroke his hair, still crazy from sleep. My fingers slide against his scalp in the soft massage that I know he likes, and he looks up at me with a smile.

"Why, Mr. Taylor, are you trying to seduce me?"

As if I have to.

His tongue snakes out, drawing patterns around the head of my cock while I take deep, controlled breaths. My fingers in his hair match the patterns he's drawing on me, and I can feel his shudder of arousal when he realizes it. For a man who has been everywhere and done everyone, he's remarkably easy to please, and I've had more than enough time to figure out how.

He likes knowing that I'm really paying attention when we're in bed. I remember every touch, every word, and every breath. He never did; his tricks are disposable and so are his performances with them. He could have given the greatest fuck mankind has ever known, but he wouldn't remember it.

I can help him remember. That's my gift to him.

He parts my thighs a little more, but questioningly. He wants to ask if I'm feeling okay, if I'm healed from Friday night. I'm awake enough to know that I'm not in pain, but I'd keep going even if I were. He needs this.

I nod and draw my legs further apart, exposing myself more to his intense gaze. Oh, who am I kidding, he's staring. I KNOW he's cheating now, going for the easy turn-on, and I know that he knows when I catch that little grin before he gets all serious again. I haven't spent the last fifteen years on display for a series of men, and he knows how hot and dirty it makes me feel. Even though I **have** done it in front of other men, it's always for him.

"That's cheating," I whisper, swallowing forcefully to keep the saliva in my mouth. Just the thought of what we're going to do makes me drool.

"Who me? Never!" he exclaims sarcastically, kissing my inner thigh before sinking his teeth into the soft flesh there. Damn, that felt good. "I could stop," he offers with mock-seriousness, then slides his tongue along the crease between my thigh and my ass.

"Don't you fucking dare," I grit.

"Somebody's being a bossy bottom this morning," he chuckles, rubbing my legs with his hands. "Roll over."

I want to. I want him so badly I ache. Three days without sex is a recent record, and even though I know he's been tricking and hasn't got the needy edge that I do, I'm still afraid. I think I'm healed, but I remember last time that he took me before I was ready, after the incident months and months ago. I thought I was fine until the pain went slicing into my body and I had to shove him off of me to make it stop. It wasn't my Master hurting me, it was Brian and it was an accident and that made it ten times worse. Somehow having to use all my strength to buck off my **lover** was horrible beyond words. The lines were blurred and I felt really damaged and defenseless for the first time.

I don't want that again.

"Relax, Sunshine, I'll check you out this time, okay?" His voice is soothing, and the gentle nudge I get on my way over doesn't feel like pressure. We're pretending that it's just a suggestion, although we both know it really isn't. What Brian wants, Brian gets.

My face in the pillows, I breathe slowly; in, out, in again, until my heartbeat is calm and I don't feel the need to run away. Gentle hands slide down my back, kneading and pressing as they travel towards my ass. I have to relax. He won't hurt me.

He promised.

"Everything looks much better," he says, mumbling a steady stream of words meant to coax me into calming down. "No permanent injury."

"Okay," I call over my shoulder, turning my head so that my voice projects out of the pillows. "Are you sure?"

I don't get a reply, just a warm, wet tongue sliding right into my hole. It feels so good, but I'm still tense, waiting for the sting that signals the tears haven't quite healed. He lays a hand flat on the small of my back, pressing me into the bed, gently nibbling and probing until I finally let go. The tension drains out of my body like water running down a hill, and he takes that as his signal.

I don't feel much over the next minute; it's a medley of sounds and smells. The crinkling of the condom wrapper, the ticking noise it makes as it hits the floor. The cold chemical smell of latex that will always, always smell like sex to me... Finally, I feel the hollow snick of the tube of lube before the slippery liquid takes away my heat. My teeth chatter, as usual; he laughs, as usual.

It's business as usual in the Kinney-Taylor household, so why does it feel so wrong?

In an instant I feel it, his cock pressing against my asshole, no argument, no choice. He's having trouble getting in, and I just can't help it! It hasn't taken this long or felt this uncomfortable in a long time, but I just can't let go and allow the easy penetration I know he wants. He pulls his body off of mine, further onto his knees to get the leverage he doesn't usually need. He's always said I'm like 7-11, "Always open," and it's true. Even the first time we didn't have half the trouble that most people do. This is different. This is the struggle I've heard so much about, the inability to relax and accept someone else into your body. I'm not even to the point of feeling pain, he can't get that far without either my cooperation or a lot more force.

I have no conscious thoughts now, nothing to consider but the play of my muscles against his, my body still willing itself to reject his advances, no matter how much my mind cries out to accept. I want him inside me down to the very core of my being, but I just can't break down and let it happen. My brain has forgotten that this man, the man that I love more than life itself, can be vicious and brutal, but my body hasn't.

"Justin." His voice again, curious, questioning. The voice that follows me in my dreams, telling a collage of stories that he's slipped me in bits and pieces over the years. I want to give in, melt into his heat and strength, let him connect with me in the only way he really knows how... but there's something I have to have first.

"Talk to me, Brian."

I feel his tongue again, focused right in the middle of my back, sliding as he brings his mouth closer to my ear. "You have the most beautiful body, Justin. Your skin is so hot." His lips come closer to my neck, I can feel them moving against me as he speaks. "Your lips are so beautiful, did you know that? I have dreams about holding you down and fucking your face until you take my load down your throat."

I'm moaning now, his lustful whispers getting louder and more urgent as I feel his dick pressing against my hole again. I let out a long, deep breath just as he thrusts halfway in without a word of warning. It startles me, even though this time it's an easier fit, and I'm about to cry out when he says, "How did you feel when I was looking at you, all spread out like a slut, hmmm?"

My stomach flips over as his sweet compliments turn into effortless humiliation. "God..." I moan incoherently as he tests the waters again, dipping just a little bit further, staying in deep a little bit longer.

"Maybe I should take you to Babylon and repeat our little performance for Ted. Kick it up a notch. I'm sure plenty of people would pay to see you tied up and sucking my cock like the slave you are."

I should feel dirty and sick. I should wonder why it's easy to surrender to his command but not to his love. I should wonder why lately, instead of giving, I always make him take.

I should, but I don't.

He's going faster, and his hipbones pound against me and shake my insides in a way I haven't noticed before. It's like my body is rearranging itself to make Brian's way a little easier. Fuck, that's it, that's always it! It's never about my heart and his, or my mind and his. It's our bodies, his predatory animal forces tangling with mine. My own body betrays me again, as the friction heats me up and his weight against my ass presses my dick harder into the bed. I start forcing myself back onto him, sweating harder, and you can smell the musky scent of two men fucking in the air. He's pulling me tightly to him, grabbing my hair and my skin and anything else that will give under the strength of his hands. I'm so fucking close, and I mean almost.right.there. when he says it to me.

"I fucking own your ass, Justin. Come for me."

I do.

I come screaming, harder and faster than I have in ages.

I know he won't be far behind. He's panting, the sweat is dripping off of his face and sliding down my back as he bottoms out in me on every stroke. His teeth fasten to my shoulder and I can feel the deep suction that means I'll have another purple-black love bite when he's done. And he is done. Now that I've been reminded that I'm owned, he can let himself go with a quiet whisper.

"I need you, Justin. You're mine."

He drops us gently back to the bed. Our hearts slow to the same beat, our bodies cool to the same temperature, and almost mindlessly, I make another mark in his column, the

endless scorekeeping of the game almost beyond me now. He won, and he knows it. I would have let him fuck me senseless, injured or not. My gentle submission, masquerading as love and affection, is what he wanted today, and he got it. The problem is that he took control on the fly, and dropped us into a scene without my consent. Shit. He thinks he's forcing me to prove my love and trust, but he's really just trying to push the limits a little further, work outside the boundaries long enough that maybe I won't notice anymore... and I let him.

I let him blur the lines, and that's not something I can take back.

"Brian?" I whisper, his sweaty body still half-covering mine.

"Mmmm?" he mumbles, not moving.

"You're setting me up for something, aren't you?"

His intake of breath whistles past my ear as his arm tenses over mine, then releases. "Yeah."

God, it hurts! Fuck! After everything we've been through together, why do I always have to pass the final exam? Always more tests, more burdens, more hurdles to jump, and cliffs to survive. I can't spit out anything except one tiny, plaintive, insufficient word.

"Why?"

He's stroking my forearm with his finger, drawing the same pattern he makes with his tongue, the pattern I make with my hands and my hips. "You still love me, don't you?"

"Always. Forever. Nothing will change that."

His hand tightens into a claw, and he rakes his nails up and down my arm, a little pressure meant to titillate and not gouge. "And you still trust me?"

"With my life, Brian."

He rolls off me, and when I turn over to meet his gaze, the fear I see there is completely overwhelming. He brushes a bit of hair off my forehead, and ominously says, "Well, Sunshine, there's your answer."

Easy

You don't get it. You'll never get it unless I make you get it.

Life was easy before you came along. One fuck per customer, in and out and on to the next... Onto the next? Buying condoms in bulk is a lot cheaper than any other drug that

makes you feel that good, and it's much more satisfying. Of course, it's even better when you do both, but that could be a matter of opinion.

Sex is exactly like a drug. It's a commodity, something to something to make you feel good, your heart racing and your hormones raging. Commodities are easy to control; bought, traded, and sold. I've done all three, and I'm not going to sit here and pretend I haven't. Of course, times are not so lean now that I need to sell, but it's good to know you have a backup plan. Besides, when everyone is sure of their role, life is very clear-cut and there aren't any hidden expectations or demands. I'm giving you twenty bucks to suck my cock, how much easier can it be than that? Tricking is a little easier on the mind for some people, but you're still out there buying and selling; it's just a change of perspective. Selling your body for cash and drugs isn't a whole lot different from selling it for reputation and admiration. Not if you're already dead inside.

The point is, fucking is fucking. Nobody falls in love, nobody gets hurt. I'm not going to see you again tomorrow, so what the fuck do I care about your thoughts, your dreams? Why would your house matter to me, as long as it's somewhat warm and clean? Don't tell me what you do with your free time; I won't remember you when I sober up anyways.

Your name doesn't matter because you could be anyone and as long as you looked like that, I would fuck you just the same.

Life was so easy then, and not one person noticed that I didn't have a soul anymore.

Then you came along, damn you! The trick that never went home. I know that's not exactly accurate, since you DID go home, I made fucking sure of that! Sent off with a high protein breakfast and a big, giant cliff that you so gracefully threw yourself over to spare me the trouble. Bright pink spray paint outing you to your entire school, and did you care? "Fuck no!"

Mikey and I laughed our asses off at your false bravery and then went on our way, and that would have been the rest of the story, if not for you. You and your easy tears and teenage bravado and that hot salty flesh that I can't get enough of. Young, eager, easy to train, more thankful to be in my bed than anyone I've ever known... Now how can I say no to that? They call me a hedonist. Would I be living up to my reputation if I sent you away?

Sure, I broke the "no-repeat" rule a couple hundred times, but fuck, you were practically a child and I got off on that. There's something very appealing about being your protector and corrupter at the same time. I can always say, "Look at what I'm shielding him from! He'd be out there selling his ass in no time flat if I wasn't here, keeping him fed and clothed, with a roof over his head." Acting as if it were somehow my place to "let" you keep your identity, your soul. Pimping affection as if it were stability, clothing the fact that I was starting to like waking up with you in the truth that I like having a convenient, comfortable fuck at my disposal. Always lying, masquerading, pretending... Looking at that good-little-boy angel face and knowing what you'll do with me, and what you'll let

me do to you. Face it, there are some things that a trick will NOT let you do, not one with any instinct for self-preservation. Promise you a couple of months of peace and quiet, and you'll always pay off.

It's not like we both don't pretend. I may get off on the way that you seem so innocent, but you *work it* for all it's worth. You're out there pretending that I'm hurting you worse than you're hurting me. Pretending that my game is strange and unplayable, when it's your game too. You get off on me playing the Big Bad Wolf, and you know it. Well, by now you must have noticed that I really AM the Big Bad Wolf. I have fantasies that nobody in their right mind would let me play out, things that would make normal people cringe in fear and disgust. Occupational hazard of always getting what you want, I guess...soon you want things that no sane person would ever ask for.

I think we've established that you're just as fucked up as I am, and it's time to start getting what I want. Like it or not, we own each other lock, stock, and two smoking barrels, and it's not fair for you alone to reap the reward. I can give you what you want; I can respect you and worship you and maybe even admit to loving you, but this is still a commodities market. I'll sell you whatever you need to keep you here, because I'm too far-gone to let you go. I need you more than I have ever needed another person, and I can't have that. It's parasitic.

Maybe if you let me tear us down we'll have enough pieces to make two whole people again. I promise to try really hard not to kill you. I can't say the same for myself, but I'm hopeful.

"Brian?" Your voice comes through the louvers between the bedroom and the kitchen, floating on the smell of waffles like a Bugs Bunny cartoon. "Breakfast is ready."

"Coming." Another normal day in the Taylor-Kinney household. Morning fuck, breakfast made by my cute little wife, and a nice day of togetherness courtesy of Emmett's quiet threats last night. "Spend some time with our baby before I start to worry about you, Brian," is surprisingly intimidating when uttered by a normally fey retail queen. He meant business.

I called in sick.

Emmett fascinates me. Interesting how many people have an inner source of strength that you just can't fuck with. Well, not without having the time and patience to break them down properly. You are one of those people...

Let's see how long it takes.

Mindfuck

"Justin. Come here." I can't put this off anymore.

"Yes?" he skips over to me. I'm not kidding, he's bouncing off the fucking rafters. Time to take him down to ground level. I wait patiently until he's wrapped all that naked, warm skin around me, his mouth busy on my neck.

"Down." He eyes me hesitantly, obviously hurt that I'm going to take our romantic day of togetherness and turn it into something nasty. Come now, what else would he expect?

"Brian?" he says questioningly, taking a step back to look for some sign, no matter how small, that maybe I'm kidding this time.

I'm not.

"Justin, get your ass down on the floor right now before I put you down." He nods, almost imperceptibly, and sinks gracefully to his knees.

"Look at me." Easy commands, always the easy ones at first. Sit. Stay. Best not to work up to the harder ones until I'm sure he'll be obedient.

He looks up, the requisite mix of lust and fear in his eyes, and I swear I lose my breath. I'm a man who has made a career of profligacy and corruption, and to have this innocence in my hands is still...always... so unbelievably hot. It doesn't matter that I know his innocence is all an act; I feel it in my dick anyways.

Okay. First things first.

"Will you submit yourself to me?" I ask, placing a hand on his cheek to direct his head further back on his neck. The cowrie shell choker is still there, left in place by some unspoken agreement, and I can't decide if I like it or not. I enjoyed seeing the line of his neck become long when I forced his head into some unusual angle, watching the tendons reveal the stress that Justin tries desperately to hide. The choker has its charms, though - I bought it myself, and I know that those shells are strung on leather thongs and not braided cotton. Push comes to shove, I could pick him up by that thing and it wouldn't break.

The choker stays.

I really shouldn't have had time to think about that - I'm not pleased by his hesitation. This shit can take so long to set up if someone's playing reticent, and I just don't have the patience. I slap his cheek, a solid connection that's meant to leave a print. Funny how shocked he looks, considering all the things I've done to him in the past. That was nothing more than a love tap, really, just to get his attention. I guess he has something about getting hit in the face. I'll have to remember that.

"Well?" He's still just staring at me, daring me to make a move without his permission. I'm in the midst of deciding if I should hit him again, just for effect, when he finally speaks.

"What would happen if I said no?" He's still on his knees, but it's just for show because there's no submission in his eyes. He is hot and desperately horny again, but still challenging, threatening. Holding my past misdeeds over my head like an anvil. He needs a push.

"Don't you want me to ask your permission before I degrade you? Isn't that how these things work?" I taunt, sliding my hand along his jaw line to trace a finger down the very centre of his throat.

He shivers deeply and swallows before answering. "We don't do these things the way other people do, Brian. I don't know **how** this works."

I start to circle him like a shark, pausing to speak every now and then from different positions around his body. It seems that he gets a little nervous when I'm behind him. Wonder why? No matter now, he's ready to hear my message. "Oh, but you DO know how this works. We've been playing this game for months, and months... You piss me off, I go too far, and you make me feel like shit for doing something YOU should have stopped me from doing in the first place! I spend days and days apologizing, and then you piss me off again. The cycle repeats itself until I start to wonder if I'm losing my fucking mind, while you get to show off your wedding ring to all your little school friends. Sound familiar?"

No answer. Maybe he's smarter than I give him credit for, because even I know that there's nothing he can say that will make this sudden anger go away. Time to finish my bit.

"So here we are again, but this time, the game is going to go a little differently." I cross over to the bedroom, returning with a bag of equipment that we've never actually used.

"You'll recognize these." I taunt, pulling the stainless steel handcuffs out of the bag and tossing them at his feet. "They're not ours, though. Ours have a safety catch in case some inept prick loses the key or you get tired of the game. These ones are police-issue." His eyes go wide when he realizes that there would be no "accidental" escape from these cuffs. "I froze the key in an ice tray in the freezer. Once you're in, there's no getting out for a long, long time."

I'm still rummaging through the bag of treasures, pretending to search for objects while I listen to his breathing speed up in panic. When he's calmed himself back down, I toss out another item.

"Blindfold. Not that pretty little silk thing we've been using; this one's the real thing, too." I give him a minute to inspect the thick red leather blindfold with pads to fill in the eye sockets and a solid steel buckle. "Can't see over it, under it, around it, or through it," I say, reminding him of the cutesy children's song he sings to Gus sometimes. "You probably couldn't get that off by yourself even without the handcuffs," I add, an evil grin

taking over my face. He shifts a bit; leaning further back onto his heels and forcing himself to take deep, controlled breaths. He's panicking, and I'm enjoying it. Let him be off balance for a change!

"Oh, what else do we have in this bag of tricks?" I murmur with a laugh, enjoying his discomfort and increasing fear. That's what I'm going for, after all, and it's nice to see some results. "Zap straps!" I shout with fake glee, and he jumps a mile. "I forgot about those! You can tie ANYTHING to ANYTHING!" I enthuse like a bad TV salesman while he starts to tremble slightly. I really do feel like a kid on Christmas morning, because everything I find in this bag is scaring him more than I thought was possible this late in the game. That's even better than being excited myself.

"I'm still waiting for an answer, Justin. There's more in this bag, things you've probably never imagined in your life, but we can't play unless you say yes."

He takes a deep breath, hesitates, breathes again, "I...I want to say no this time." He looks down at the floor. "I can't Brian. Not today. I just can't."

"Okay, that's fine," I soothe, like I'm trying to get Gus to sleep. He hates it when I do that. "If you're too scared, that's okay." He glares at me in aggravation, and it's time to go in for the kill. "Just say the word."

His eyes widen in shock. "NO! That's not fair!!!" He shakes his head vigorously, as if he could make it all disappear by clearing his head. "You can't make me do that!"

"Yes, I can, Justin. I can do *anything* I want to do." Evil smile. I feel evil, can feel it coursing through my bloodstream and pulsing into my dick. I've got him, and my heart is beginning to pound. "You have two options here." His glare is hardening, and I wonder if I can actually make him hate me. Hatefucking is so hot.

It's worth a try.

"Option one is easy. Shut it down. Just say the word and I put away my bag of tricks. You find out at the tender age of nineteen exactly where your limitations are, and I promise not to tease you for being a pussy. Not too much, anyways." He shoots me another death glare, and I laugh.

"Option two is for the few, the proud, the insane. You let me continue; we do what *I* want to do. Maybe it's just a session of slap-and-tickle, or maybe I've developed a sudden interest in snuff." He shudders violently, and knowing I've hit a nerve this raw is priceless. Maybe I'll play just a little longer. "It's the not knowing that's really getting you." I crouch in front of him to grasp his head in my hands, so that he can't move while in my grip. I enunciate every word, whispering low and clear.

"I've thought about it, you know. Killing you, I mean." I hold his gaze, his beautiful eyes filling with some unnameable emotion. "Giving you the ultimate rush, the one thing I've

never been able to give myself." He's trying to pull away, but I've still got him tight, tight, and his breaths are starting to hitch in his throat. "Wondering if they would connect the discovery of another dead blonde boy to Brian Kinney." I press my face close to his ear, while my hands slide from his cheeks to bracket his throat, one each on the front and the back. "Raped..." low moan, but he's not moving. "Strangled... a kinky game gone too far."

"God, Brian, stop..." he whispers, but it's lust, not fear.

I've got him. Time to finish the lesson I learned from Ocean's Eleven - the question is irresistible and the answer obvious if you take the time to phrase it properly.

"So I'll ask you again, and this one's the keeper." I release him roughly and lean back on my heels, far enough back so that we're eye to eye. "Are you out, or are you in?"

"I'm in," his voice shakes, but his eyes are clouded with need. "God help me, I'm in."

A furious banging shakes the loft door, and again, Justin jumps a mile.

"Our guest is here!" I exclaim, jumping to my feet and rushing for the door. "Perfect timing." I want to catch the door before the man speaks, but I cross back to stand in front of Justin's naked form on the floor. "Don't move, don't speak, and don't turn around, or any time I've ever hit you before this moment will feel like a tickle. Got it?"

"Yes, Master," he whispers, and I nod to myself. Everything's going according to plan.

Wicked Game Part I

He found Blake.

That's all I've been thinking, all I could think, ever since he left me that message at work this morning. "Ted, it's Brian. I found Blake. Come over to the loft when you get this." No hello, no goodbye, just Brian in all his terse glory. I almost want to hug him.

He even gave me the code to get through the front door, something he's never given me before. He'll probably change it when I leave, but I feel good for a minute, knowing that he trusts me at least that much.

He's probably going to take my head off for banging on the door, but I don't care. Blake. His name runs through my head like a melody. He found Blake. How is he? Where is he? Does he remember me? Does he want me, still?

Brian pops the door open a tiny bit and slides through it, pulling it closed behind him.

"Uh, did I come at a bad time?" I stammer as he stands there expectantly.

"No. Perfect timing," he says, and still he stands there, as if he were waiting to hear something from me instead of vice versa.

"You found Blake? Where... how... is he okay?" I can't hold it in anymore. I need to know.

"We'll get to that. I'll tell you everything in due time, but first...I need something from you. A gesture of goodwill."

"What? Anything, Brian! What do you need?"

He smiles faintly, saying, "Well, there have been expenses, of course. Private investigators don't work for free." He ticks off points on his fingers. "Phone calls, meals, transportation...well, you get the picture. I'm going to need a return on that."

"Of course, Brian. Whatever you need!"

"I was hoping you'd feel that way. I don't want any money, just a couple hours of your time." He steps to the side and pushes me brusquely through the door, and BANG. My heart just...stops!

Justin is there, his naked body faced away from the door. I want to wrap a blanket around him, or at least get him up off the floor, where he's kneeling in subservience and absolutely shaking with fear. I turn to leave, but Brian is standing in my way like a brick wall. He puts a finger over his mouth to threaten my silence and shakes his head "no" when I open my mouth to speak.

"Justin," he singsongs, sounding like a serial killer and making us both tremble. "We have a visitor. Let's show him some hospitality, shall we?"

I gasp, suddenly completely aware of what I'm here for. Brian clamps his hand tightly over my shoulder and says genially, "My friend here is new to the slave-owning business." he laughs and pats my shoulder a little too hard. "So I've decided to offer him some lessons. "

"What?" His voice is panicked, and nothing more than a strangled screech comes out. I must say that he's very good at his role, because even though he's objecting quite strenuously, he hasn't moved an inch or even started to turn around. "Who is it?"

Brian chuckles and crosses the room towards Justin.. a hot, sweaty, naked Justin. Oh God, I'm in trouble. "Now if I told you THAT, it would spoil the fun! I'm quite sure this owner has potential..." I do? News to me! "Sadly, however, it's going unexplored. That's where you come in."

Brian stops in front of the boy, poised where he can look down on his slave and across to me as well. Such a position of power. "I'll start, but he'll do the honours from here on...

with my direction, of course." He laughs and picks up a red leather blindfold from the floor in front of the boy. "Close your eyes."

Justin takes two deep breaths, and I'm so sure that he's going to jump up and run that I almost miss his gentle nod. Brian buckles the fold behind his head, probably pulling it tighter than it needs to be. "Goodnight, sweet princess," he whispers with what sounds like genuine tenderness. Justin smiles a little as Brian caresses his face, and kisses him on the cheek. I'm never going to understand these two.

He sees me staring, and his harsh laugh startles me out of my daydreams. "Guest of Honour, it's up to you." He reaches for something else on the floor, and is soon swinging a pair of handcuffs on the tip of a finger, pointing them towards me. "I assume you know what to do with these?"

I lift my foot, unsure whether I should step forwards or back. If I leave now, Justin will never know I was here, and I can go back to my sane, normal life wondering if Brian really did find Blake. I think about how awkward I'll feel around them from now on, knowing things that no friend should ever really know. I've already seen too much, and already want to erase so much of my memory. On the other hand, if I step forwards, all I have to do is spend a little time playing their wicked game to get my information. Besides, if I'm here, I can make sure that Justin is treated well. I won't hurt him. God only knows what kind of scene the next guy might be into!

It feels like an eternity, but I only waffle on the decision for a second. Brian pulls a business card out of his pocket, and I can see the word "Blake" written on it, even from here. That's it. I have to do this.

I nod and walk calmly towards them, taking the cold steel from Brian and leaning down behind Justin. "Look tough, look tough!" my mind is yelling, even though I still want to turn around and run. Now, how do I like it when Dale does this? I pat Justin's head gently, tracing my hand down his neck to his arm - there are no surprises that way. When my hand has closed around his wrist, I clasp the cuff firmly around it...firmly, but not tightly. I'm not here to upset him. He offers his other arm behind his back, and I repeat the process, guiding his hand into the other cuff as gently as I can.

"Very nice," Brian observes, breaking the connection that was starting to form between us. When bondage and discipline is done with mutual respect, you form a partnership of giving and receiving that can be very strong. Maybe Brian doesn't understand, or maybe he understands all too well - I won't get to form that bond with Justin today. I'm nothing more than a prop.

That's okay, though, because I know a secret. Brian can say what he wants, he can pretend that he's whoring Justin out if that's what gets them off, but I know better. He loves this boy and he's terribly jealous. He chose ME because he knows I'm safe - a little naïve, maybe, but safe.

"Earth calling!" He grabs my arm and hands me a bag of wire ties. "Finish the job, will you? I don't really have all day, and I'm sure you don't either." Hmm... wire ties... zap straps, I think they're called? What the hell do you use these for? I look at his wrists resting against his back, a few inches from his feet, and I remember. One tie goes around each ankle, and the third threads through the chain between the cuffs to keep his hands bound tightly to his feet. It's not the prettiest way of binding someone, but it doesn't cause much damage and is nearly impossible to escape. Dale never does that to me - he says he'd rather compel me to obey than bind me in place. I have no problem with doing it to Justin, though, since it won't hurt him if he doesn't stay down there too long. I fish out three straps and place them smoothly, always keeping a hand touching his skin so that there are no sudden moves or hidden surprises.

Brian lies to himself if he thinks I'm new at Dominating. Dale has taught me more than Brian could imagine just by being a good Master. He explained everything as we went, during our first session. We have a series of safe words to signal my comfort level, and signals to use in case I'm bound or gagged and can't communicate. After that first session, we didn't do anything without discussing my limits beforehand, and the whole scene afterwards. The process of trust building and communication has been stolen from me here, but there are other things I learned that aren't as easy to take away.

I know the routines and rituals. I can make him obey with the touch of my hand, telling him when to go faster, when to slow down, when to stop. I can let him know when he's pleasing me, and when I think he should be doing better.

I can be warm and compassionate and Brian can't stop me.

"He's in position. Do what you came to do." Brian is cold, angry, and I marvel at my lack of sense of self-preservation. Messing with Justin is a sure way to get myself hurt sooner or later, but I won't back off now. I'm tired of playing enthusiastic devotee of La Diva Kinney. He asked me here, forget that, he coerced me to be here and do this... so I'm doing it and doing it well.

I move around in front of Justin, taking in the sight of him. I don't think he's crying, his breaths are even and regular and no tears are escaping from under the blindfold. I open my mouth to ask for his permission when Brian grabs the back of my neck. He shakes his head no and puts a finger over his lips angrily. I gesture to Justin and he nods.

"It seems our guest here needs some reassurance that this is consensual, slave. Give it to him."

Justin sighs and nods his head. "I'm giving myself to you of my own free will." He pauses a minute, thinking before he speaks. That's always a good idea when one wrong word will bring you a world of pain. I won't hurt him today, but he doesn't know that. "I am here to serve you." He smiles the briefest of smiles, and inclines his head a bit towards Brian. "Do with me what you will."

Wicked Game II

I can see it in his mannerisms, and hear it in his voice. Justin wants this as much as Brian needs him to do it, though I doubt he would have admitted it before that exact moment. I don't know why he's doing this, though; I can't even begin to imagine how to play their complicated game from the inside. BDSM itself is quite simple - you learn a series of rules and rituals that apply to any situation, and there's always a canned response available to fall back on. On the other hand, these two seem to be making it up as they go along, and the unpredictability of that is scary. That's how scenes go sideways. He seems to be okay with it though, so I pat him on the head like a pet, and he smiles for me.

I have what I need to continue.

I fish around in my pocket for a condom, telling myself that safe sex is always a good idea, and trying not to think about the number of men that Brian and Justin have fucked...separately... together. I try not to think about how many times I've seen them both go out tricking for the night and come home to fuck each other. Jesus, they could populate a town with their old tricks! Anyway, one or both of them could be positive by now, and once bitten, twice shy, I'll never forget the condom again. Ever. It's five seconds that could save my pathetic life, and I can go to that much trouble!

Brian watches me like a hawk as I grasp the back of Justin's head and guide him towards my cock. I feel funny hoping that Justin's oral talents live up to his reputation. Hey, word gets around! Liberty is a small neighbourhood, and there are enough bitchy gossip queens out there to know when it's just hype and when it's the real thing. Persistent, fast learner, lots of tricks up his sleeve...I guess I'll have to wait and see. I feel funny being here, trying out the merchandise when I have no intention or opportunity to buy.

I should know better than to be fucking with a friend this way, but it could be life or death for Blake, and I'm not giving up that easily.

He breathes deeply when his body is close to mine, and his tongue makes contact with me tentatively, sliding along my length to test my size. If I were cruel, I'd ram myself right in just to watch him choke, but I don't get off on watching people suffer. Instead, I stroke the back of his head, letting him know that he's doing fine. He can do this however is comfortable for him.

I want to close my eyes and just enjoy, but that's not wise. Brian is watching, unblinking, and his uneasiness is filling up the room. He really doesn't want me here anymore, and it's distracting me from the gentle suction that Justin is applying with his mouth. Theoretically, as his invited guest, I should have complete control of his slave, but I'm not dumb enough to buy that for a minute. The rules of our community do not apply to these two.

Justin suddenly takes me fully into his mouth, and I have to fight the urge to groan. Brian obviously doesn't want Justin knowing that it's me, but I don't know how I feel about that.

Maybe it will be easier to see him socially if he doesn't realize that he sucked me off, but I don't like the idea of having this information to hold over his head. I don't play head games with people - I don't need to. It actually makes me a little ill to try and lie to people, and that's a prerequisite of a good mind game, it seems: double-dealing, withholding the facts, sins of omission, unnecessary silences, feinting and dodging, and outright ignoring the truth whenever it rears its head. Frankly, I'd rather use my energy knowing and loving my partner than avoiding ugly parts of his mind. It just seems like such a waste of time, and if anything, Blake taught me that time is always in short supply.

I stroke Justin's head a little faster, signalling him to speed up. He's very good, better than I'd get on a random Saturday night, but I still want this to be done. I'm really uncomfortable being watched so closely by Brian. It's not just that he and Justin are my friends either; my experiences with Dale have helped me separate the details of a scene from the relationship you have with your scene partner. Dale and I have done plenty of scenes, some very uncomfortable and intimate, and stayed really good friends. I know it can be done, but it can only happen if everyone is ready to be mature and leave the scene in the past, where it belongs. I do not think Brian is capable of that level of maturity.

Oh, God, Justin has the porno moves down cold. I thought the deep-throat swallowing thing was one of those urban legends, something that was done by professionals and not real people. Nobody has ever done that to me before. Actually, when you get right down to it, I'm surprised that he CAN do that, since I was always under the impression I wasn't big enough for anyone to deep-throat. Hmmm, live and learn, I guess. I'm getting so close, and I suddenly realize I haven't actually looked at Justin since I walked through the door. I've looked over him and around him and sort of through him, but not AT him. It's not fair, he deserves to be appreciated and not just treated like an object. Braving Brian's wrath is worth it to make Justin feel special. I'm going to do this right.

I look.

His body is flushed with arousal, splotchy red covering his throat and chest like someone has been massaging him. He's hard, too, obviously enjoying himself on a level I know all too well. I burn the image into my memory, part of an experience I'll never repeat. Brian steps forwards as I'm drinking in the scene; his face is unreadable but his body language is so tense. I wonder if he knows what I'm thinking? Justin is bringing me so, so close to the edge, and just for a second I entertain the thought of fucking him. I trail my hand along Justin's jaw and across his collarbone, drifting off into memories of the man I loved. He looks so much like Blake right now, pale and eager and sort of woozy with lust, and I can't help but remember how tight and hot and loving he could be.

"DON'T even consider it," Brian whispers very, very coldly. He snuck right up behind me without me even realizing it. "I want you to get off and get out. Nod if you understand."

I do. I understand perfectly. Brian miscalculated how this would feel for HIM, how much it would make him suffer to see Justin excited to submit, no matter who was dominating

him. He doesn't seem to realize that this is only a pale afterimage of what I saw at the lake. I can't compete with the arousal that Justin felt to submit to a man he loves, and I know better than to even try! After all that they've done together, how can THIS upset Brian? I don't understand. This is warm, comfortable, a low fire on a cold night... safe, predictable, relatively unthreatening for everyone involved. The scene I stumbled into at the lake was a five-alarm towering inferno - terrifying, devastating, all-consuming love.

Brian flashes a card in front of my face, a private investigator's business card with some information jotted down on the back. "Blake Wyszeki," it says, followed by, "Promises, Malibu," and a phone number. "Nod if you understand," he repeats, and I do. I want that card more than any material object I have ever seen. It's a second chance.

"Justin," Brian says, circling around him to lean against him from behind. He sounds cold and angry, but he can't stop patting and touching him as if he could get up and run away. He's being so sweet and gentle, softly raking his fingers through the boy's hair. "Our guest needs to leave, he has some business to attend to. Finish him off."

My world explodes as Justin puts his all into making me come. There's no way I can last, he's used to working on men far more practised than I am. Brian is staring at me from behind Justin, only a couple of feet away, and I see him like I've never seen him before. Scared. Desperate. Fiercely possessive of something he never knew he wanted. I watch his cold grey eyes, and I want to tell him it's okay to be in love, but I can't. I want to ask him why he's doing this to Justin, and why he's doing this to himself, but I can't do that, either. There's really only one thing I CAN do.

I lean forwards and kiss him, very gently, with eyes wide open. Brian's hands are still close to mine in Justin's hair, and I shift my fingers to cover his. He returns the kiss, and I begin to lose myself in his eyes, the eyes so full of confusion and a pain I want to soothe. There is nothing in the world but us, moist heat and suction and Justin's dancing tongue.

When my orgasm finally hits, I think of Blake. I miss him so much. I wish I could thank them both for bringing me a little closer to Blake today, but even my thanks don't belong here. I put myself back together as quickly as possible, crouching down to Justin's level before I go.

"Thank you," I whisper in a lower voice, part of me hoping he doesn't recognize me, and part of me hoping he does. I can't tell either way, he nods his head and says, "I hope I pleased you, Sir, and that my Master is proud of me." Brian blanches and turns away. I don't know what to say to that, so I pet Justin on the head and begin to make my way towards the door. Brian stops me halfway across the room, the card extended in his hand. I take it with a short nod, tucking it carefully into my wallet.

I don't know who just paid for what, here, but I'm done. Finished. I have something new to look forward to, and I'll leave the game to its players.

Wicked Game III

My heart is going to jump right out of my chest. I want to scream, just open my mouth and scream until every bad feeling inside me comes puking out like badly mixed drinks. That thing with the stranger was beautiful and horrible but it's over now and I'm still naked and alone on the floor.

I hear Brian walking the man out, the door banging closed, and the thump that means, like so many times before, he's leaned his head against the cold steel. I'm not sure if he does that to centre himself after a bad visit, or simply to clear his head.

There's so much I don't really know about him.

His feet make soft padding noises as he walks back across the floor, and he stops behind me. I can hear him breathing, and not just the tiny whistle that he makes no matter what he's doing. Deviated septum, he says. Of course it is - deviated by his father's fist. So many reminders of his father are on his body and in his mind. That's not the problem right now, I don't think. Something else is wrong, and I don't know what to do, or what to say, to get him to let me up. I don't know how to fix it this time.

He's panting, short shallow breaths that he doesn't normally take. He controls his breathing like everything else in his life - concentrating on sounding calm, cool, collected all the time. I wish I could see into his eyes. Sure, he's usually unreadable after all those years of practice, but I still get clues. His eyes turn green when he's really happy...and when he's been crying and doesn't want me to know. If he's angry, they look grey, and his eyebrows shift together, just a little bit. There are a hundred little reactions he doesn't know about and therefore can't control...and I'm not going to tell him. He can't know HOW I snuck inside, or he'll change the locks and I'll be screwed.

He moves from behind me, walking towards the bedroom. Thump, thump, thump up the steps, and then a heavy creaking as he walks across the bed. My mother would kill him for wrecking his own furniture, but then again, there's so much she'd be angry about that that's really just the tip of the iceberg, isn't it?

Maybe me needing seven stitches is worse than his jumping on his own bed.

He's rummaging in the closet, and if I had any sense, I'd be scared, but there's too much in there to worry about. No point in borrowing trouble, I'm sure I'll find out soon enough. He repeats the process in reverse...creaking, then thump, thump, thump back down the stairs. He stops short in front of me and I'm surprised when he grabs my chin.

"Did you enjoy our guest, Justin?" he says, and there's a dangerous note of something in his voice. Anger...jealousy? Brian Kinney doesn't do jealous...didn't do jealous...didn't do jealous before now? Fuck, I don't even know what's going on anymore. How do I answer this? I knew I had to be careful around the visitor, but I don't know how to *be* around Brian tonight.

"Uh...he was fine." I say noncommittally, knowing that it would be suicide to enthuse on THAT topic. "Did my performance please you?"

"No." From out of nowhere, a whistling howl passes by my ear and a line of fire races down my back. "You didn't say it!"

The anger in his voice is really startling - almost more than the contact of whatever he just whipped me with. I want to scream again, just open myself up to purge all the pain, and fear, and confusion he makes me feel every minute of every day. I need a rest, I need some space, I need a place where I can go and let my guard down and just exist without catering to the whims of a slightly demented man.

It's always my first instinct to run, and it's always his instinct to chase me when I do. Tonight I'm completely bound, and escape is simply not an option. My heart sinks at the thought that I have, for some unknown and probably fucked up reason, laid myself at his feet and invited him to do whatever he wants. After that first lick of pain, my mind has become very, very clear, and I really **know** something for the first time.

He will do whatever he likes because I TOLD him to do it!

If I never say no, then any sick little fantasy he can dredge up from the bottom of his mind is fair game. I cannot take back the words I've whispered in his ear on too many of those dark, dirty nights, when I was sure he'd violated me in every way possible but I still wanted more. I begged him a thousand times, teary wet eyes and strangled voice pleading him to finish me off, please God, make the pain go away one more time tonight.

I hear the whistle twice this time, the upstroke and the down stroke, before the pressure of the contact and the racing, aching pain that follows it. It wraps around my side this time, across my arms still bound at the back, and I catch my breath as my body retracts away from it... all the time thinking, I asked for this, this is my fault. It's all my fault.

Confirmation is close at hand. "You make me do this to you, you know. I wouldn't need to hit you if you'd just do what I want you to do." Another strike; another line of fire, burning me up, igniting every nerve and causing electric light to flash behind my sightless eyes.

"I do! I did! What more could I have done?" I wail, wanting pity in my confusion. His breathing is as ragged as mine, and he steps forwards, back, stops in front of me and turns away. I can feel every move his body makes, even when he gains a distance of a few feet. His anger and pain is radiating off of him in waves, and it's devastating to me that I hurt him this way. **I** did this to him, and I don't know how I could possibly have done any different. He hurts me, I hurt him; it's an unavoidable animal instinct.

Fucking destroy the other at all costs.

He's screaming now, pacing and screaming. "YOU are a fucking slut, Justin! Am I supposed to approve of that?"

Wait! No! I'm confused. I don't think I asked to do that. He made me, didn't he? "Brian, I didn't ask to do that. I didn't want to do that." He just has a way of setting things up...I say no all the time, but somehow that's not what I end up doing.

"Liar. You didn't say it."

I hear his sharp, angry intake of breath as he steps closer to me, to my side I think...one big thumping step that I can feel in the floorboards right before the blows start to fall on my back, hard and fast. It's like heaven coming down, a rain of fire on my shoulders. I've lost the ability to discern between the heat and the pain anymore, and still he doesn't stop.

I will NOT scream this time. I can't. I won't.

I will.

I do.

"BRIAN!!!" My blood is racing and my heart is pounding, and the panic reaction is a thousand times worse when escape is completely impossible. My mind will break, my heart will explode and I'm so afraid...I can't do this anymore! I can't! This has to end, and there's only one way to do that.

"BRIAN! I'm sorry!!!" I take a very deep jagged breath so I can be sure he hears me between the shrieking, pounding blows. "Whatever I did, I'm sorry!!! Call me whatever the fuck you want, just please don't stop!"

I swear a breeze flies by my head on the next stroke, but it doesn't stop him from demanding, "What did you just say?"

I'm panting like I just finished a marathon, and every nerve is alive in confused protest. It's blending now, pleasure, pain, all melting together into a hot flowing metal sliding through my veins. "Fuck me, Brian, please...I need you inside me...the pain, my God, it hurts so bad..."

I hear something clatter to the floor in the moments before he crouches down, and he nudges my hands out of the way as he cuts the tie connecting my hands and feet.

"Now, for future reference, slave, you belong to me. Say it for me."

"I belong to you, Brian," I cry out, the pain in my shoulders from being released competing with the pain in my back.

"And that means this," he hisses, reaching around my body and grabbing my cock roughly, "Is mine."

"Yes, Brian!" I gasp, surprised that new pain could even register when every feeling I've ever had has dissolved into a bright hot mass of white noise in my brain.

"And your mouth?" he whispers harshly as his other hand comes around my neck to brace me inside his arms.

"Yours, Brian. Only yours."

"Good answer." I'm surprised as the arm across my throat pulls me backwards, onto his lap, as if I were nothing but a rag doll. He takes his hand off my dick long enough to position me like a bendable toy, legs apart and leaning deeply forwards, forehead on the floor. I hear him spit on his hand, and then his fingers are sliding, stretching me from the inside.

"You look so fucking hot this way..." his low, demanding voice drops a little more and I can feel his breath flowing across my back. "You should see your skin, so red and hot... and your ass...fuck..." he trails off, and I take my last coherent breath before he stabs roughly into me. "Who owns your ass, Justin?"

"You, Brian," I moan, putting the last effort I have into saying the right thing. "You. Forever."

"Mine forever. You've fucking got that right," he grinds out, one word per thrust, and I listen remotely to the scream from deep inside my chest - the scream that means my body has come and my mind has gone.

In Dreams

I need more sleep.

Justin's screaming wakes me faster than a bucket of cold water. At some point, he actually rolled on top of me, and he's thrashing and screaming in my ear. I'm sort of pissed, he's interrupted the first decent night's sleep I've had in a couple of days. I have to work in the morning!

"Justin, another one?" I mumble, shifting a little so that he's not completely on top of me. "What's wrong this time?"

"I don't know!" he yells irritably, sliding over to his side of the bed and starting to sniffle. Fuck. You'd think I'd be better at this by now, but it's always touch and go.

"O-kay," I sigh, resigned to be going through this bullshit again. Ever since the bashing, we do this nightmare-recovery thing every now and then. Usually it's him, but sometimes it's me. I hate it when it's my turn to do the debriefing; I'm no good at it. "Why tonight?"

He's over on his side of the bed, losing it for what, at 3 a.m., seems like no good reason. I know I must sound like an asshole, but come on! If I had known how long the bashing would live in the back of his mind, I'd have tossed his ass in therapy a long time ago.

"Who was it today?" he says between hitching breaths.

Nice try. "I'm not going to tell you that. You don't need to know." I can see his shoulders shaking in the moonlight, and I wonder if he actually might need to know after all.

"I thought I recognized his voice."

Shit. "We know a lot of people, Justin. You could have."

"You wouldn't bring home someone who would hurt me, would you?"

I pause for a minute to think about that. "I don't think anyone can hurt you more than I can."

He's still sitting with his feet over the edge of the bed, but I can see him nodding. It's true. I know his weak spots, the soft underbelly of his mind. His secret fears and pet fetishes. Nobody can arouse him, exploit him, or damage him like I can, and he knows it.

"But you wouldn't let him hurt me?" he repeats in a soft whisper, crawling back to the middle of the bed to lay his head on my chest.

I stroke his hair, and try not to think about Ted doing the exact same thing a few hours ago. "He wouldn't have dreamed of doing anything bad, Justin. I promise."

"He wouldn't?"

"No." My hand drops to his back, testing the temperature of his skin, feeling for breaks and welts. There aren't any this time...that was the point of choosing the wide leather strap in the first place. He's had enough damage to last for a while. "You know I'll never let anyone hurt you."

"Good." His arm crosses over my stomach, his hand resting low on my side as he burrows further under the duvet. "Guess that doesn't apply to you, huh?" I resent that - I went out of my way not to hurt him today!

"Hate to break it to you, Justin, but being a masochist means that you're going to get hurt sometimes."

"And being a sadist means that you're going to enjoy it when I do."

Fuck. Touché. "Look, I'm going back to sleep now. Some of us have to work to pay for your candy ass."

"Fine," he says, and goes to get out of bed.

"Excuse me? Where the fuck do you think you're going?"

"I don't know, draw, surf the net, or watch TV. I can't get the dream out of my head."

"Well then fucking tell me about it so we can go back to sleep!"

He sits up in bed and cocks an eyebrow at me. "We? Since when do you worry about whether or not *I* am in this bed?"

"Don't be a brat."

"I'm serious. Since when?"

"Since always!" I'm getting even more pissed, this is really not the time for a "relationship talk." If he wants one of those, he should go and harass Linds and Mel.

"I seem to recall being...how did you put it so romantically... 'Just a fuck,' Brian."

"What the fuck is your problem, Justin? Do you KNOW how to operate a calendar? That was almost three years ago!" I sit up in bed, laughing at the irony of "not taking this lying down." "We're m..." Shit, this still doesn't come out all that easily, I should be used to it by now. "We're...m-m..." Nope, it's just not coming. "Fuck, I'm used to you, and I'm used to you being *asleep*. Is that too much to ask?"

He flops down on his pillow. "Fine. I'll lay here until you fall asleep."

Fucking twat! "Don't do me any fucking favours, Justin. Go watch TV, watch the wall, I don't give a fuck! Get the hell out if that's what you want to do, just BE QUIET!" He's still laying there, and I pray to whatever the fuck is up there that I'm going to be able to get back to sleep. Five a.m. comes too damned early these days. I lay beside him, and he snuggles up to me.

Funny how easy it was to get used to that.

He turns his face up to mine, and kisses my jaw. It would feel so good if I weren't trying to go the fuck back to sleep!

"Justin! What NOW?"

"Did you use a condom this afternoon, Brian?"

Jesus Christ! "What do YOU think?"

He pauses a moment, as if to weigh the options. "Normally, I'd say yes, but I didn't hear the package or smell the latex, so I'm wondering."

"Have I ever 'forgotten' a rubber before, Justin?"

Quick answer. "No."

"And do you think I've tricked with anyone in the last six months?" He flinches at the thought. I don't push it in his face anymore, but I'm as much a free agent as I've ever been. Okay, not quite as much, but still.

"Yeah, I get the point. Shut up."

"No, Justin, I won't. You started this! I'm not taking that risk with you. I'm not."

He wriggles up the bed, leaning on his elbow while he looks me in the eye. "I've been doing some reading, Brian, and I'm not fucking stupid, you know. Edgeplay is way riskier than unprotected sex, according to the statistics...and we do that all the time."

Now how do I answer that? I never really intended to go that far? (I never ever did, anyone with any sense of self-preservation would have run the first time I pulled that knife, and probably called the cops to boot.)

I shouldn't like it, but I do? (And damn, I really do. After the bashing, I couldn't stand the sight of blood...especially his...but the more I saw it, seeping and leaking from cuts and welts and bites, the more I wanted it...the more I saw it, the more I wanted to taste it...and when I got it, I wanted it again and again...)

How about, it doesn't count because it doesn't mean I love you? It's not true, and even *I* know that, so so I say the first thing I can think of.

"Not any more, Justin. Go to sleep."

He lays back down and I'm drifting again, two seconds from falling asleep, when he whispers, "Do you love me, Brian?"

"Not THAT again!" I am so fucking aggravated it's unbelievable. One more ridiculous question and he'll be sleeping on the couch - or the roof! "I absolutely refuse to answer that question one more time."

"Okay, I have a new question. Would you hurt me if you didn't love me?"

"I hurt people, Justin, it's what I do. It's what I am."

"That's the PR, Brian, and I don't buy it. I never have."

"So why the fuck do you keep asking? Look, at some point you're going to have to decide for yourself how you think I feel, and go with it."

"I keep asking because you never tell me." His voice is sad, but he's not half as sad as I am aggravated!

"I'm fucking sick of being pushed!" Now it's my turn to sit on the side of the bed. I take a deep breath and turn to him slowly. I don't want to yell at him after he had a nightmare; it's not fair. It's not his fault Chris Hobbes still lives in there somewhere. "Look, did you want to tell me about that dream or not?"

He scoots beside me and lays the back of his head on my thigh, looking up at me. I make the, "go on" move with my hands, and he takes a deep breath and sighs. "I...uh...okay...I dreamt that you left me."

Sounds underwhelming to me. "Left you in my house, with my stuff? Not fucking likely."

He glares at me for interrupting. "You know what I mean."

And I do. The thought of him in that coma, possibly never waking up, still makes me sick. If he were alive and well and **still** not here with me, well, I could NOT handle that. I guess it's only fair he feels the same way. "I'm not going anywhere, Justin."

"Good." I find myself stroking his hair again, without necessarily meaning to. Sometimes everything we do is all a routine, since our bodies always know what to do even when we're lost and confused. Halle-fucking-luia.

The next thing he says surprises me.

"So...I thought we could bring someone home from Babylon on Friday night."

"What? My virginal wife out tricking with me? I thought you didn't want to do that anymore."

"I never said never!" He sits up with a gleam of mischief. "I'm still a growing boy, Brian, I don't want to wear you out."

"Ha! Fat chance!" I laugh, wondering if it may in fact be possible. "If that's what you want, then we will. My choice, though."

"Fine. You won't pick anyone younger than me anyways, old man."

"Justin!"

"Sorry, sorry. Hey, I called Matt this morning; he and Andrew are both in town all week. Do you want to invite them to Babylon Friday night?"

"Whatever. I'll call. I'll invite the whole damn town if you promise to GO TO SLEEP!" I give him a little shove towards the centre of the bed, and lay back down in my now-cold spot. Damn him. I can't even sleep in peace anymore!

Cavalry

Okay, so I'll admit I'm worried. Brian invited us to Babylon. Andrew took the call and accepted before I could get within ten feet of the phone! As soon as I figured out who it was, I started waving my hands and screaming, "Noooooooo!" but by then Andrew was already hearing the details of Brian's shopping trip for his new suit. Hugo Boss, apparently. Too many buttons for easy access, but it looks good...like I really care.

Brian inviting anyone anywhere, to do anything, never turns out well.

Justin has been on the phone to me every single day since Monday night. I don't know who I want to smack harder, Brian for doing all this bizarre shit, or Justin for letting him! No, making him. Justin really thinks there is no other way to get Brian to admit that he cares than to beat him at his own game. Well, I hate to break it to both of them, but they're acting like fucking idiots and they should both get some psychiatric help.

Therapy. Now THERE is a good idea! They'd both have to do it, though, and probably together. Just like nobody likes to drink alone, and getting high by yourself is just sad, being insane alone is unpleasant. There's too much time available for introspection, thinking about why you're not right in the head...what put you here, how hard the road really was, whether or not any of it is really your own damned fault. So much easier to find another damaged soul to share your pain than to admit that you need help and go through the torturous process of breaking your twisted psyche and resetting it so that it will heal and you can be whole again.

People look at Brian and Justin, and wonder, “Why do they stay together?” I, of course, have my own theory on that, because I’m privy to information everyone else just doesn’t have. I’m the one that gets the SOS cell phone calls from the bathroom at midnight with the ghost of Justin Taylor at the other end. I’m the one who listens while he describes every last scene in excruciating detail. I listen while he analyzes every bruise and tries to understand what’s going on. I listen while he cries from a pain that comes from his body and his heart, a pain that he keeps returning to like a moth to a flame. He says he’s playing it cool, but day by day; this is killing him as surely as anything ever could.

There are some games that NOBODY is equipped to play. Matching the damage in your soul with the damage in someone else’s to try and make one whole, functioning person is a bad idea. They really are like two halves of the same person – not because they make each other whole, but because they have complementary damage. I have no doubt that they are in love, but love isn’t always enough to transcend such great differences.

I think they share an unbelievable list of dramas and traumas that nobody else could ever really understand, and that, more than anything, is what keeps them together.

Lust can be forgotten and broken hearts healed, but a truly kindred spirit is impossible to push away. When you know that you have a complement out there, that person is never truly forgotten...and if they go, they take a piece of you with them.

I remember how I felt when I met Andrew. I thought he was fascinating, and I wanted to spend time with him, get to know him, hear his stories and listen to his thoughts. Our relationship has grown gradually, carefully, from friends to lovers in a smooth, natural progression.

Justin said it wasn’t like that for them. Well, duh! He told me the story once, how he finally worked up the courage to go down to Liberty...standing there, lost, confused, and scared until he saw HIM. He said that when Brian turned to look at him, it was like being electrocuted; he said he felt a physical jolt when their eyes connected, and he just knew. I asked Brian about it once, and he just said, “Justin’s prone to exaggeration, Matt.” I laughed, because that can be true, but then he looked at me seriously and said, “I wanted him, I got him, and I still want him, so don’t fucking think about it.”

That's the deepest conversation I've ever had with Brian.

So this is how we find ourselves on the road to Pittsburgh from the country house where I've gradually come to spend almost all of my free time. Andrew wants to catch up with Brian, do one of their periodic meet and greets that usually ends up with them getting trashed and talking about college. I'm coming to see for myself that Justin is really okay, because if he's not, he's coming home with me and that's it!!!

I don't care what they're doing, and I don't care how they justify it. I'm a big boy, and I know that not every relationship is moonlight and roses, but come on! Somebody has to know when to say when, and I think it's pretty fucking obvious that neither of them do. I'm taking my life in my hands in trying to get between them, and I know that, too. An old...ahem...patron of mine told me that only the person who inflicts the pain can take it away, and I believed him at the time. I didn't want to interfere in their complicated relationship, but I'm frustrated and I KNOW they don't know what they're doing anymore. It doesn't leave a lot of room for manoeuvring.

Meet and Greet

I feel anxious walking into the club, and I know it's unnecessary but I can't change how I feel. Even Brian knows better than to start a scene in a place like this - not that anyone would intervene, but with that many prying eyes, that would be the end of his privacy, and he doesn't want that. Part of the thrill is in the secrecy of it all, the sense that they're sharing something that belongs just to them and nobody else, and doing too much in here would ruin that.

I scan the crowd for Brian and Justin and find them on the dance floor, all over each other as expected. They look...normal. Feeling more secure, I let Andrew walk me over to the bar, where I nod to Ted and give Emmett a hug.

"Where's Michael?" Andrew asks, scanning the crowd himself.

"He and Ben are over there," Ted gestures towards a corner of the dance floor where Michael is doing...uh...some weird dance thing. That stereotype about all gay boys dancing well is SO not true, and I can point out at least ten more guys who aren't any better. That's fine, better to be the belle of the ball anyways!

"Have they been here long?" Andrew is still talking to Ted. I'm not surprised they get along. They're both older, successful, and way tired of the Brian and Justin show.

"Not really. We all came in at the same time," Emmett explains, picking up a lovely blue drink from the bar. "Isn't it pretty? I don't know what it's called, but it tastes like oranges!"

Ted pats Emmett on the shoulder with condescension and returns to his conversation with Andrew. Emmett rolls his eyes at Ted, sighs dramatically, and grabs my arm. "So, how's the big romance coming along?"

"Fine, Em. Really great, actually." I turn towards where Brian and Justin are dancing to some old disco song. "What's with the music tonight?"

"Oh, that. They put in a new set of speakers and they said they wanted to test them out on different songs, so they're doing all sorts of requests." He leans in to me and whispers conspiratorially, "I think they were just too cheap to do a proper sound check. Someone's going to ask for a song that will send feedback through the whole room, wait and see."

I nod, because that certainly WOULD be a cheap way to do a sound check, and make people pay for it to boot. "Request night," my ass.

The song ends, and Brian saunters off for the DJ while Justin makes his way over to the bar. He's got a couple of drinks in his hand before he even notices me. "Oh my God, Matt! You came!!!" He screeches joyfully, throwing his arms around me and sloshing his drinks all over my back.

"Don't get your panties in a bunch, Justin. Brian called, and we're here." I'm trying to be pissed about the alcohol running down the back of my shirt, but I can't. It's good to see him, and it's even better to see him happy. "How's tall, dark, and surly tonight?"

"He's fine," he grins. "I think he went to ask for a song or something."

"Spare us from Brian's taste in music, please!" Emmett exclaims dramatically, throwing his hand over his forehead like a fainting debutante. "If he gets them to play The Smiths, I'm leaving! Nobody here is pretty enough to make me put up with *that* again."

"I don't know what he's picking, Em, he didn't say anything to me." Justin turns to me and smiles that megawatt smile again. "I'm so glad you came. How was the drive?"

"Long. Lots of cows. The usual." The DJ finally gets his act together and starts playing Rockafella Skank by Fatboy Slim. I guess someone was in line in front of Brian. It figures they'd play that song, it's long and screechy and if anything's going to cause feedback, that'll probably be it. "So, do you wanna dance or what?"

"Let me ask Brian," Justin replies quickly, spotting Brian returning from the DJ. He pours the remains of one drink into the other glass and hands it to Brian. "Sorry I spilled it."

"Whatever," Brian replies, staring hard at my hand on Justin's arm. He nods curtly. "Matt."

"Hi Brian." I reply cheerfully, trying my level best not to let him get a rise out of me. Brian's game is just Andrew's game with ten extra years of practice, so I know the basics here, and Rule Number One is never, ever rise to the bait!

I watch as Brian drains the drink Justin gave him and signals for two more. Even though neither of them is speaking right now, trying to hold a conversation feels like an interruption, so I'll keep this short. "Andrew wanted to say hello, Brian."

"I'm not invisible. He knows where to find me," Brian replies, wincing in aggravation as the speakers begin to shriek and wail in a sustained note sliding up the register. Miraculously, there isn't any feedback, and the bass beat starts up again. We watch the dance floor and make small talk until the song is over, and Justin and I never do go and dance that dance. Brian has staked his claim, and I have two choices - spectate or fuck off. I do a little of both, standing beside Justin but talking to Emmett about some of the regulars.

Andrew and Ted make their way back over to where we're standing, and I've never been so happy to see Andrew in my life! It's funny, I travel, I speak to the wealthy and famous without batting an eye, but being in this room makes me feel more frozen out than I ever have in my life. Andrew slides his arm around my waist, and I don't feel like an outsider anymore. He nuzzles the top of my head and I lean back into his strong body, wondering if Justin ever feels this safe and secure in Brian's arms, and hoping for his sake that he does.

A sudden bass beat, steady hard thumping, rattles my teeth, and I can feel Andrew stiffen and turn to Brian in shock. "You didn't! Not this song!"

Brian smirks from where he's holding Justin in a remarkably similar pose, grinding his hips gently into Justin's ass. "I do whatever the fuck I want, Andrew." He whispers something in Justin's ear, who flushes bright red and takes off for the dance floor with Brian in hot pursuit.

"What was THAT all about?" Emmett inquires, returning to the group with another of those lovely blue drinks.

"Search me," Ted replies. "Looks like a repeat of the party to me, you know, the hot song and performance thing."

"You don't get it." Andrew is still shaking his head. "This is Brian's favourite song, and he always said that he'd never play it for anyone..."

"No, this is THEIR song, Andrew," I interrupt. "Justin told me so. Has been for a long time."

"Oh." Andrew looks confused, and a little sad, but that doesn't matter anymore. We're getting ready for the show.

Closer

"Brian, are you sure you wanna do this here?" he asks breathlessly as I tear off his shirt on the way to the dance floor.

"Yeah," I tell him. And I do. I don't give a fuck what anyone else thinks of us right now. Mikey thinks he knows me, but he doesn't. Andrew thinks he's got me figured out, and he knows even less than Mikey does. Fuck them. They don't know shit about me and what I need.

I have what I need right here.

"Sing it to me..." he whispers in my ear, the words like a hot wet tongue circling in my mind. Like I would do it any other way.

* * *

you let me violate you

you let me desecrate you

you let me penetrate you

you let me complicate you

* * *

He's singing it to me; that real low growling that goes straight to my dick every time. The first time he did it, it felt funny...no.. weird...no, I don't know how it felt, but it made me smile. Just think, being serenaded by Brian Kinney! Of course, that was before I heard all the words, before I knew that it was *our* song. He heard it in college, and saved it in his head and his heart all this time to share it with me - of course, I was like eleven years old then! We play it all the time at home, but out here it's different. Here on the dance floor in front of everyone we know, it feels even more like a secret made just for us.

God, listen to me, my head is spinning with crazy thoughts when I want to just listen to his voice...deep, scraping, rasping through each word of the song as if he wrote it himself. He has me tight against his chest, one leg thrust between mine, his mouth right beside my ear, singing the words that everyone hears but only we understand. Even if he hadn't touched me, that voice would still have me hard as a rock in a heartbeat...he's not mocking this feeling, this moment, because he can't. He feels this just like I do, the aching and needing and the crazy love that just won't let go.

* * *

help me i broke apart my insides

help me i've got no soul to sell

help me the only thing that works for me

help me get away from myself

* * *

I love this song. The bass fucking thumps in your chest like a hammer. I can feel it in my feet and my hands and my dick, the way it rattles and swishes on the off beats. It makes Justin vibrate. It makes me want to feel that vibration from the inside.

His skin heats up so fast... I spread my hands out on his back, covering the whiteness of that unbroken skin with my darker flesh. If I press down, I'll leave fingerprints, small red marks of ownership, of possession. He's mine - always mine, forever mine, only mine. Mine to use and abuse and ultimately destroy, according to my so-called best friends. He's mine and I will mark him in front of the whole room if I have to.

His fingers are on the back of my neck, tracing up and down my spine as if we hadn't done this before, had never touched and rubbed and danced and then raced to the back room as if we were burning up. He's tracing down my jaw as if we hadn't spent years going through the same motions under the blue lights in the bedroom, hadn't lost days to the simple act of fucking ourselves in and out of exhaustion. Maybe it's me who feels different tonight, like for some reason the ever-present awareness of repetition, boredom, and conquests yet unclaimed has just... disappeared.

He knows me. He knows that his hand on the flat of my chest makes my heart beat faster. He knows where to kiss, and where to lick to make my breath catch. His hair, fuck, his hair smells good and clean and when I wrap my fingers through it to pull back his head, he moans and closes his hand on my shoulder for balance.

I think he really knows me... and right now, that's okay.

* * *

i want to fuck you like an animal

i want to feel you from the inside

i want to fuck you like an animal

my whole existence is flawed

you get me closer to god

* * *

I'm not going to make it through this song. Not a chance. His voice is rough and ready and hard on the consonants and he sounds just like he does when we're fucking - breathless and strained, like it's an effort not to consume me whole. Just the mental picture, me on my back and him thrusting into me, panting, screaming my name like I have something very, very bad to answer for is enough to get me off right here.

"Take me home..." I whisper urgently, begging, pleading for a moment of privacy so he can fuck me senseless, take away all the pain and hurt and confusion that we tend so carefully. I can feel his dick pressing against my hip, hard like a weapon, and I want it. I want that little pain, I need to take it and grow it into something big and annihilating. I want him to devour me with his fire.

He thinks I'm the one that's innocent, the one that makes him pure and whole, the one that takes away the sins of the world. I think if he believes that, he's fucked in the head. If anything, I make it all worse. I'm his fucking partner in crime, but I'm okay with that - I just need him to be okay with that! He laughs at my urgency, and...I'm not kidding... fucking pats me on the head! Asshole! I reach for his dick, stroking it firmly through his jeans. That's fine, if he's not going to play fair then neither will I. He's the master of self-control, whatever; I know how to push his buttons just as easily as he can push mine. My eyes catch his, that dancing, shifting hazel green, and it's game on.

Pouting lips, big blue eyes, and the puppy dog expression that makes me look about five works every time. Something in that gets to him, that I can get him off and let him in and look about twelve years old doing it. Like he can somehow take a piece of childhood from me and add it to his own miserable experience. I wish he could. I wish I really **could** take away his sins, his pain, but I can't...all I can do is let him take me, time after time, until I'm raw and aching and we're both crying and exhausted, but we can't stop until we die that little death one more time.

I've never said no.

My fingers are working their magic and if I get two more minutes with him, he's mine. He drops a hand to cup my ass and whisper in my ear, "Not yet, Sunshine, not until I say so."

Fuck.

* * *

you can have my isolation

you can have the hate that it brings

you can have my absence of faith

you can have my everything

* * *

He has to know what he's doing to me. He's pure fucking evil. What's it going to look like if we don't at least make it through the song?

I repeat the words, the mantra of Trent Reznor, and it slides out of my mouth so easily... it's too fucking easy when it's really how I feel. He's already taken all of that from me, absorbed all the self-loathing and apathy that I was peddling and replaced it with something newer and less routine. Who knew that a kid with a filthy mind would be the one to break me, finally? Angel in a devil's shoes, that's my baby.

Fuck. He needs to stop doing that, grinding against my cock in that "accidental" way... sliding his hands under my shirt to play with my nipples while he looks up at me with those big, innocent blue eyes...and fuck me, I want to say I know better than to fall for the act, that I've already called the shot and I'm immune to its effects, but my cock twitches and hardens against my will.

I can take him. That's my will.

I can take him to the backroom or take him in the alley or take him home and fuck him in our bed until he's shrieking and I can feel every nerve in my body flashing with electric light.

I can hurt him if I want to...I can love him if I want to, because he's mine.]

This man is mine.

* * *

help me tear down my reason

help me it's your sex i can smell

help me you make me perfect

help me become somebody else

* * *

I'm desperate now, absolutely desperate, I need to get off so bad it hurts and he has no intention of moving until the song is over.

"Brian!" I grasp the back of his neck hard, digging my fingernails into his soft skin until his eyes fly open and flash with surprise. "Brian! I need you. Now, right now!"

"I said not yet," he murmurs against the side of my head, but that's not good enough. I can smell his sweat, there's something in that smell...his Brian-ness... that just fucking knocks me over with lust sometimes. I'll just be sitting at the computer, doing homework, and he'll walk up behind me after coming in from a workout, and I'm done for the day. It's like that now only a thousand times worse, with the sweat and cologne and his hot flesh pressed hard against mine...his fingers and his mouth and that dirty voice whispering those dirty words that act like sex mainlined right into my brain.

It's just a few more minutes, but I can't stand it... I'm remembering all the beautiful expensive clothes and the smell of cigarettes and Beam and maybe just a little of the pot we shared before coming out tonight, all mixed together with his smell and the memory of a thousand hours spent covered in sweat and cum and God knows what else... memories of lying in bed while his tongue explored my body...my first taste of his sweet gentle side...the first time he hit me... the first time he let me fuck him...all rolled into this one moment of anticipation that's gone so far beyond wanting and into painful desperation.

* * *

i want to fuck you like an animal

i want to feel you from the inside

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* * *

He's frantic now; I can smell it coming off of him in waves. He's babbling in my ear, but it's working anyways, he knows my weak spots. His voice is higher than mine, cleaner and lighter, and listening to the depraved fantasies coming out of his mouth just fucking undoes me.

He's going all out, dragging up stuff that I might have whispered once or twice, in abject fear that maybe this is the one thing he can't stand to hear and he's finally going to bolt...I guess I shouldn't have worried. It all rolls off his tongue easily, naturally, like there's absolutely nothing wrong with me wanting to cut him and lick up the blood like a

vampire. And of course it's okay that I want to kidnap him off the street, lock him up tight, and fuck him until he cries himself hoarse. It's okay. I'm okay. Not weird and damaged and wounded beyond repair, but okay. Whole and normal and not corrupt and fucked up beyond repair. He makes me feel like something worth wanting, and I want him more than I've ever wanted anyone...more than I've ever needed anyone.

* * *

through every forest, above the trees

within my stomach, scraped off my knees

* * *

Now he's dragging me to the back room, practically pulling me right off the ground as we make our way to the darkness. His shirt is open, and mine is just gone, but I don't care anymore. I need to feel him inside me like I need water or food to live. I can see the muscles rippling under his skin when he turns to kiss me, his tongue pushing past my teeth and sliding along the inside of my jaw while I gasp for air. This feels too good, the music rolling in my veins and the heat and smell and him looking into my eyes with crazy lust and maybe something more, it's all too good. I don't want this to end, but if it doesn't, I'll explode, or spontaneously combust. It's overwhelming, and when we get to the wall it feels good and solid, stable, like it's okay if I pass out now because I have something else to hold me up. This feeling is like being high, the dizzy amazing sickness when your heart beats too fast and your mind moves too slowly to do anything but feel.

I finally manage to get my head together long enough to whisper one word, "Please," and shove him towards the ground. He doesn't like doing it this way, being on his knees, at my feet in a public place, but he will. He thinks there's something submissive about being down there like that, but it's bullshit. I'm not asking him for anything he hasn't done a thousand times before. I just want this small consideration, a few minutes with his hot, wet mouth wrapped around my dick... I want to feel the rhythm learned from hundreds of men but perfected just for me.

I have to close my eyes now, just slide my fingers into his soft, messy hair and enjoy the bumps and grooves and soft resistance of his mouth working me over while I struggle to breathe. It's over too fast, he's up and got me turned face to the wall, and he finishes murmuring the words to the song, our song, into my ear and straight to my dick.

* * *

i drink the honey inside your hive

* * *

It hurts not to be fucking him right now. I could manipulate him, make him wait and show all that famous Kinney control, but what the fuck would it get me? I want to be inside him, and I want him to feel that.

His back is arching as I stand behind him and just breathe in his scent...I want to take a while, play with his tits until he can't see straight, stroke his cock until he's so hard he begs me to do something, just do something to make him come...but we don't have time for that now. I fish out the condom and lube, and get him greased and open and ready for me while he twists and wriggles on my fingers like I'm pushing a button. He's never bored, never jaded, even though we've done this very thing a hundred times, a thousand times...I lost count a long time ago, but he acts like every time is his first time, and that makes it new. Or maybe it's that he doesn't just want me to fuck him, he wants me, all the time, every time, any way he can get me. Being someone's obsession is surprisingly gratifying.

I hold his hip firmly as my cock goes into him...so tight and hot, I lose my breath for a minute and just stay put, buried hard and deep. I can't move! I can feel his heat under my fingers and in my cock, but I just can't make air go into my lungs, not when his pulse is thumping against my dick and our breath makes the slippery black wall in front of us drip with moisture...my hands have a life of their own, tugging and grasping and pinching at his nipples so that he bucks and writhes, impaled in the small space between me and the wall. He reaches back to hold me against him, tighter, urging me faster, harder, deeper inside. His plaintive cry, my name, over and over again, is what really gets me going. This is what you can't have from a nameless, faceless trick, the utter desperation to join you in the pleasure you take.

I'm beyond all rational thought now, every thrust of mine gets met by a screeching wail and we end up meeting somewhere in the middle of every drive. I don't know if he's as loud as I think or if it's just his voice that rings in my head, but my whole world is wrapped up in my arms right now.

I fucking hate him and I fucking love him, and he should know, he has to know, as the obliterating tingling burn radiates from my back and forces itself into him to the music of his screaming. He has to know, and the song is almost over, and I can tell him now... if I say it now he will hear me and know exactly what I mean...so I whisper the last words of the song, our song, the words I've saved all these years for someone who would understand what they really meant.

* * *

you are the reason i stay alive...

People Watching

"Well, Matt, I win the bet. They didn't even make it through the song that time..."
Emmett exclaims to me as we watch them race towards the back room.

"Too bad it won't last," Andrew says spitefully. I can see him wince when Brian stops them cold to give Justin a deep, wet kiss before shoving him around a corner and out of our sight.

"What makes you say that?" Ben asks mildly, sipping on his beer.

"If you knew what I knew, you'd agree with Andrew," Ted hedges, clearly dying to tell us something.

"Ted, if you know something about Brian, you should tell us," Michael exclaims with concern. "If he needs our help, you can't keep it a secret."

We can't keep dancing around the issue forever. It's time for someone to spill, and it looks like that someone will be me. Here goes. "They **both** need help, Michael. It's gone too far!"

"Matt, what are you talking about? What's gone too far?" he asks in alarm. We shuffle around silently until Michael begs, "Somebody please tell me what's going on!"

Now, some people think that Michael is stupid...well, he's not. He's simply unwilling to believe the worst of any person or situation...especially if Brian is the person or situation in question. We all give each other sheepish glances, trying to figure out how to break this to Michael.

"So, who starts?" I ask lamely, suddenly very sorry to have pressed the issue.

"We shouldn't be doing this. It's a horrible invasion of their privacy, guys. I thought we were all more mature than that." Ben is still trying to talk some sense into us, but this has gained some momentum now and it's going to take more than one reasonable man to stop it. I

Emmett draws a zipper across his lips, saying, "This is none of my business unless they want it to be." Of course, all eyes turn to me, but I'm not ready... and as far as I know, that leaves only Ted.

"Okay, fine, I'll start." He clears his throat and begins. "Michael, I swear every word of this is true. Please don't think badly of me, for doing it or keeping it secret."

Emmett and Ted are hovering around Michael, trying to protect him from the truth even as they're telling him. I find it interesting that nobody feels the need to guard Andrew's feelings. I guess nobody realizes that Andrew loves Brian just as much, but no longer feels that he has any right to have input in his life. I squeeze his hand, hoping he'll be able to handle what we're about to say.

Michael fidgets with worry as Ted begins. "I...uh...about six months ago, I started noticing weird marks on Justin. Scrapes and scratches and weird looking bruises, like little dots, or fingerprints." He has our attention now, and continues with some hesitation. "One day I saw circular bruises around his wrist, the kind you get from..." he gulps, but continues..."handcuffs. I asked him about it, we argued, and when I was looking at his arm, I found some scars. They were put there on purpose. I know they were! I begged him to tell me what was going on, but he and Brian both told me to butt out."

Emmett looks at him sternly. "And you should, Teddy. Leave it alone."

"No, Emmett, I won't 'leave it alone'. Not anymore." He looks around to make sure that Brian isn't going to sneak up on him, and continues. "When we were up at the lake, I interrupted something. They were...well, I don't know WHAT they were doing before *I* got there, but I wanted to tell them both that I knew that they had a problem and needed help." He looks at the floor and sighs. "Anyways, I ended up seeing them in action, the whole thing from beginning to end. It was horrible. Last Monday, Brian called me and said he had some information for me...then when I got there, he bribed me to stay."

"Stay?" Michael echoes dully.

"Yes! Those details aren't important here! Look, I've seen a lot, and it's not just kink anymore. What they're doing is dangerous and we have to make them stop."

"And how does this fall to us?" Andrew snarks. "What they do in bed is their business."

Michael opens his mouth to agree, or maybe to tell us all to shut up, but I'm already shaking my head no. As much as Andrew doesn't want to hear this, he's a realist and he has to understand that Brian and Justin are in trouble. "Sweetheart, this isn't silk scarves and ice cubes! There's something really wrong going on." I fumble for the words to describe it, but it's all a jumble in my head. I try to describe it rationally, how Justin has used makeup to cover the bruises, how many sets of sheets have been thrown away, how many phone calls I've gotten at midnight with my friend crying his eyes out because it hurts him to be sick in the mind this way. It's all a jumble, so I try and simplify it to the bottom line. "Brian is beating the shit out of Justin, and Justin is fucked up enough to ask him to do it. And Justin's not just letting him; he's practically BEGGING him! They had to take Justin to the doctor after the party! It was that bad... Dammit, it IS that bad!"

Andrew won't look me in the eye, but I can feel him stiffening against me. "So they're kinky and stubborn! Big deal."

"This has gone beyond bedroom play, Andrew. They're fucking around with knives and shit! Dammit, this is not FINAL JEOPARDY! Once Brian choked Justin until he passed out and then brought him around with a handful of coke!" I hear my voice getting higher and more strained, and I'm struggling to control myself. "The worst part is they're killing

each other and they know it. Neither of them is gonna back down now." I stop and take a deep breath, hoping someone, ANYONE, is going to step in and help me stop this mess.

"I don't believe you..." Michael murmurs, searching the dance floor hopefully for Brian, as if he'll just magically appear and reassure him that we're lying. "Brian would never do that to anybody, not after the way he was treated at home. It makes him sick! And I know I'm not Justin's number one fan, but even I don't think he's that stupid. He wouldn't stick around just to get beaten up."

Emmett sighs. "I knew nothing good would come of this discussion."

Michael's interest is piqued. "You knew? Why am I always the last one to hear this stuff, anyways? Not that it's true," he enunciates pointedly at me, as if I just made it up out of the clear blue sky.

Ben hugs him tightly. "Maybe you know better than to listen to gossip. Hey, do you want to come and dance?" he asks, drawing Michael away from our group and back to the dance floor, just missing Brian and Justin start making their dishevelled way over to us.

Game On

Michael and Ben have just left when Brian and Justin make their disheveled way back to us. They make a quick stop at the bar and rejoin us, slightly worse for wear. Damn, freshly fucked is a look that works for both of them!

"Hey," Justin says cheerfully, looking at us standing in silence. "What's up?"

Emmett pipes, "Oh, nothing sweetie, just looking at the scenery," while glaring at the rest of us. "I'm surprised you came back at all."

Brian looks at me, and smirks. "I didn't want Justin's little friend to feel all lonely out here."

"Brian," Andrew warns, hugging me close to him. "Lose the claws."

"Yeah," Justin whines playfully, rubbing a spot on his shoulder.

Brian laughs and bumps Justin with his hip. They're so cutesy sometimes; it's just like watching, "Jekyll and Hyde - The Marriage." Or maybe more like The Twilight Zone! They knock each other back and forth for a minute, and then Justin turns towards the dance floor, sweeping his arm over the room like Vanna White.

"Your Kingdom, my Lord," Justin teases. "Are you going to pick, or what? Don't tell me you can't decide."

"It's my choice, and I'll take my fucking time about it," he says, scanning the crowd.

Ted and Emmett exchange glances, but only Ted is brave or stupid enough to actually ask what they're thinking. "Not *another* date night???"

"Date night..." Andrew asks in a tone as dull as Michael's had been a few moments before. "You're still tricking?"

Justin nods shortly; sometimes he doesn't like Andrew any more than Brian likes me. I have a feeling it's mutual - after all, I know that sometimes I want to drop-kick Brian out a window.

Brian laughs and throws his arm around Justin's shoulder. "I want Justin to get the full advantage of my expertise."

Emmett laughs. "After three years, honey, he's had all the expertise you could possibly provide."

Justin isn't amused, though. He turns to Brian and glares. "What is your problem? I do just fine without you, thank you very much."

Brian looks doubtful. "Since when?"

"Shut the fuck up, Brian. I just don't push it in your face. I get what I need." Justin says smoothly, hiding a grin behind his hand.

"Oh, you think so?" Brian taunts, "What, that has nothing to do with me? I paved the way. I taught you everything you know."

Justin turns to me, smiling wickedly. "He taught me the basics, but I've modernized and *vastly* improved on the technique."

Brian scowls at the age crack. "If you think you're so fucking hot, then YOU go pull him, Your Highness."

"That still requires you to make up your fucking mind, you know."

"I should pick someone who's not into twinkies, just to make it interesting..." he murmurs distractedly.

Justin shrugs. "Go ahead, Brian, feel free. Anyone YOU would want *will* come home with ME. I figured that out exactly one week after I met you."

Brian waves his hand although he's above the petty squabbling, searching his fucked-over kingdom for fresh meat. "Never mind, I've had everybody here. Nobody's worth a repeat."

He hasn't had me, and I'm dying to correct him, but I'm not sure that I feel like getting smacked down right now. I wait for anyone else in the group to correct him, but it looks like I'll be waiting in vain. Part of me is disgusted that he has fucked all his friends and acquaintances, and the other part is somewhat in awe. He's nothing if not thorough.

Andrew speaks up: "You haven't had Michael."

I can't for the life of me figure out why he contributes that fact at this particular time. I swear, just when you think a person has grown up and is ready to move past his childish squabbles, he goes and pulls this shit. Every person in the bar stops dead and listens as the air thickens with tension. The man in question dances away with Ben, oblivious to the battle royale that is about to take place on his behalf.

"Fuck that," Brian says, and Justin heaves a huge sigh of relief - exactly one moment too soon, because Brian adds, "Mikey would NEVER go home with Justin."

"What the fuck am I, a leper?" Justin shouts, his feelings obviously hurt. "Too dirty and disgusting for your innocent little friend? Fuck that! He's with Ben. THAT is why he wouldn't come home with me."

Brian lights a cigarette and takes a deep drag before speaking again. "Hey, whatever gets you through the night. No need to feel inadequate, Justin, you're still so young. You have time."

Brian is baiting him, waiting for him to admit that he can't compete, that he's outclassed in his lover's arena. I know Justin better than that, and it isn't going to happen. You can see Justin's stance hardening, his shoulders pushing back. "Fine then. I'll go get him. If he looks over, you nod and smile, nothing more. Deal?" he counters, holding out his hand.

"Whatever," Brian says, and when they shake hands, you can see each of them subtly struggle to keep a hand on top. "You're never going to get him. You're fucked."

"Doubt it," he blasts over his shoulder as he rushes to the dance floor...moving so fast, that none of us can catch up to tell him what a horrible mistake he'll soon be making.

Ted looks over at a very sulky Brian. "Do you know what HE says to them?" he smirks, playing with the fact that Brian really, really hates watching Justin tricking, unless he knows that Justin's hating it too. Everybody knows that.

"No, I don't." Brian replies, devoid of any outward traces of emotion... and that can only mean one thing.

Brian fucked up, he knows he fucked up, and it's killing him.

Good Intentions

This has got to be the worst idea Brian has ever had.

I'm standing with the guys, nursing a drink or ten and thinking that by now, he has to know that Justin is more like him than he'd ever admit. They're stubborn, bullheaded and so focused on playing the game and winning that they've forgotten why they stepped on the field in the first place.

When Ted started talking about their interest in sadomasochism tonight, I didn't want to hear about it. I mean, I already knew that Brian liked it rough; he always did when we were seeing each other. He liked it a lot rougher than I would ever, ever participate in, which is how he and James got into that mess in the first place. Eventually I wrangled the whole story out of James...as he was packing his shit to leave for good, actually... and I regret blaming Brian all this time. I wonder how much of his inability to love, and feel loved, is my fault, James' fault. It's true that I had no way of knowing that James had blackmailed Brian into dropping me without a word, but I should have wondered why. I should have tried to talk to him, to see what was going on in his head. Really, I should have been concerned, and not relieved that I'd gotten yet another reprieve from the relationship warden. Funny idea, that. I moved in with James not three weeks after Brian left anyways. It just hurt too much to be alone.

Anyways, my point is that I'm not really surprised that things are spinning out of control. I knew Brian would get mixed up with the whole BDSM scene sooner or later. He always got a charge out of being in control and getting his way...I just thought he'd gotten enough power and recognition in his life that he didn't need the extra push from being so autocratic with a person he cared about. I guess I was wrong.

I feel guilty now, and I don't really know why...like maybe I should have warned someone about something. But who? When? They were already playing rough when they came out to the farm, I know that much. I saw it then, the bruises, the scrapes and such, but it was more than that. The scars that Ted was talking about came from the cuts Brian gave him at my house... Intellectually I know all of this, but in my heart, I don't want to admit it. I saw something then, I see it now, but it doesn't make any fucking sense... it's just a weird dynamic, passion, misplaced jealousy, something bizarre and unusual. Huh, like I'm one to talk about jealousy.

I really don't want to think that Brian is hurting that badly, or would be so willing to inflict this much pain on anyone else. Admitting it would mean that Brian loves Justin, and I'm not ready for that.

Justin! Fuck! Don't even get me started on Justin! I like Justin, I mean, I really like him as a person, and not just because he nags Brian to call me! I try to forget that Matt would fuck him in a second because really, so would I. Safe to say that Brian gets his "fuck anything" attitude from me, since I've made a career out of bagging anything that moves. I've just never had Brian's fortune? misfortune? of picking up a trick who won't go home. That stupid little twink! He knows Brian, as well as anyone ever has, he should have the

sense God gave goats and stop this stupid stunt before somebody "accidentally" gets killed. Tell me, if everyone knows it's going to happen, is it still an accident?

Brian turned away from the dance floor as soon as Justin gestured to get Ben's attention. I always thought that Brian was the one who fucked Ben, because God knows Brian left me a five-minute voicemail after THAT White Party, but Justin looks awfully cozy over there...whatever. I suppose it's not unusual that he'd be friends with Ben, it would sort of be a "third wheel club." I kiss Matt on the cheek and release him back to Emmett and Ted, to talk about fashion, celebrities and other things I try not to think about when I'm off the clock.

"Brian?" I ask carefully, taking up position off to his side. "You okay?"

"Just peachy!" he scowls, staring into his drink as if waiting for a psychic vision. "He still over with Ben?"

"Yeah. Look, you had to expect that, Brian. Be logical. If he's going to get anywhere with Michael, he's going to have to talk Ben into it first."

"It's not going to be hard," Brian bitches, but won't elaborate.

"Brian, cut the drama queen act. You're not so fucking hard done by! If you don't want to do this, then stop. That is ALWAYS an option. Take a rain-check, put it off, whatever. Just stop!"

His face is completely unreadable. "Justin won't make it through tonight. I know him. He's going to crack."

"Or YOU will! Listen, why are you so bent on destroying him? Don't you love him?" I press, putting a hand on his shoulder to try and get him to look me in the eye. Jesus, I wish he wouldn't make me do this. Defending their relationship is probably best left to someone who doesn't envy the shit out of them! "He's a good kid, Brian...a stupid kid sometimes, but a good kid. He loves you desperately. He knows everything there is to know about Brian Kinney and loves you anyways, not despite it, but because of it! Doesn't that count for anything?"

"No." He finally looks me right in the eye, and the cold, steely glare is almost physically painful. "He deserves a chance, and he'll never get it with me. This is the only way."

"The only way, the only way, both of you fucking run around screaming that! 'I can't do this any other way! This is the ONLY way! As if nobody else on the planet has ever had to deal with issues. Jesus Christ."

"Now who has the attitude? You've been glaring at Justin all night. You're angry that I'm not with you... that you're finally free of James and I don't want to be with you. Fuck you, Andrew."

"Oh, you think so? You're just pissed that I understand this stupid mindfuck you're putting each other through, 'He who dies with the most points wins.' Well, fuck that, Brian. You're being an asshole. Michael has loved you for what, sixteen years? And for me, it's going on ten now...and you know that we'd both do anything for you, but that's not enough! Never enough! Nothing of this world is good enough for Brian Fucking Kinney!!!" I'm getting louder, and his eyebrow raises mockingly but he doesn't answer. "But then, like a bad plot twist in a cheesy soap opera, along comes Justin, little boy lost. He loves you, he adores you, he worships the fucking ground you walk on right from the first second he sets sight on you...but the difference is, this time you want him back. You love him back, and it's YOU who'd do anything for HIM. Surely devotion like that has a price, right? A big one?"

He shifts uneasily, but his voice is firm and angry. "Andrew, you don't know what the fuck you're talking about."

"Oh, but I do. I know **exactly** what's going on here. I taught you the code, Brian, how to put on the stone face when your heart is bleeding. Well, that's my fucking fault, and I'm sorry I didn't realize that you'd turned into a fucking psychopath. What's the word? Sadist? Masochist? Aren't they really the same thing if you're hurting each other for sport?" I grab his drink out of his hand and down it, waiting for the liquid courage to kick in. I'm rewarded with a fiery burn in my throat as the alcohol slides down. My voice soon starts to slur, sliding out from under me as I continue my rant. "Justin didn't know how much it would cost him to take down The Legend of Liberty Ave., but that's okay, because he'll give everything he's got anyways. And no, we wouldn't want Brian Kinney to be human and vulnerable for one second, would we? I know how you think, Brian. You tried pushing him off a thousand fucking cliffs, and it didn't work, so you're going to make him prove that he loves you so much he will go one step beyond what any sane man would do. He will stand beside you while you destroy your lives pretending that this is all okay. You're going to make him die for you, and he's just fucking stupid enough to do it! Grand romance my ass. Good fucking thing you're in love with a twink, Brian, because Mikey and I aren't that fucking daft."

He grabs my face in his hands, as if to hold my attention, and enunciates very carefully as his fingers grind into my jawbone. "Andrew. You don't know shit. Fuck off."

And then he turns his back and won't say anything more.

Compelled

Justin pulled me down to a room that he says the dancers use for "alone time" with their customers. I'm not sure if I want to inquire what that might mean, or if he's taken advantage of it. It's a good place to talk, since it's very quiet and very, very dark. His voice floats, disembodied, in the room.

"What did you say to him?" he says urgently.

"Restroom. What do you need, Justin? What is Brian up to this time?"

He takes a deep breath. "It's time, Ben. I'm going to invite Michael home with us."

"WHAT???" I want to take a step back, but the room is too unknown and dark to do it safely. He seems to think there's enough room to step closer to me, though.

"We knew it was going to come to this sooner or later," he murmurs, and that's true. We've talked about that many times. "Brian and Michael will never let each other go unless we help them to do it."

"That's very altruistic of you, Justin, but I'm not buying it. You're pulling Mike into your little game, and it's not fair. He's not prepared for that."

"Don't overreact. He's a grown man. If he doesn't want to come, I won't push."

I listen to his voice, and try to picture the man behind it, and even though I know Justin very well, the picture I conjure looks remarkably like someone else. "You won't have to! You've been around Brian too long, it bleeds right out of you! You've got his confidence, his swagger, his pickup lines, backed by a killer smile and the impression that you actually care. You're smooth when you want to be, Justin. Michael's going to hear all the right words, at exactly the right time...and it's a two for one deal. He gets to satisfy his curiosity about you AND get the man he's always wanted. How could he say no?"

He laughs gently, and I can hear his clothes rustling as he shifts around. "I'm tired of everyone trying to protect poor innocent Mikey. He's been around Brian for over fifteen years, Ben. He **knows** that if he comes home on date night he's not Brian's true love, and why would he want to be? It's fucking hard work. Besides, he's got you, and you're a much better catch for someone like him."

"Someone like him?" That statement sounds vaguely condescending, and I can't wait to hear the explanation he rushes to provide.

"He's not an emotional cripple! He's not sophisticated, but at least emotionally, he made an attempt to grow up! He loves freely and openly and without reservation. So do you."

What he doesn't know... "You assume a lot."

"I don't have to assume, I know. Besides, he deserves someone who thinks he's hot and smart and the greatest fucking gift that God ever handed down. That's NOT Brian. Brian will always look at Michael and see his 14 year old, goof-off, perfect best friend."

"Those things aren't incompatible. I don't see your point."

"That IS the point! They ARE to Brian!!!" He takes a deep breath, and drops the pitch of his voice again. His words become low, weighty, reflecting a serious man making a serious argument. Things seem very different in the dark. "Ben, I want you to be happy, too, okay? This is how it needs to be. Do I have to draw you people a picture? Michael won't get over Brian until he gets his fuck, and sees that being one of Brian Kinney's tricks is only slightly preferable to going home alone, if you actually care who is fucking you."

"You seem to have this all figured out."

"I've had a long time to think about it. Michael has been on the sidelines since day one; he's someone I've had to adjust to, and I have. I like him! He's a good person, Ben. I'm used to him being the interfering best friend, the annoying big brother, and even a little bit of competition, but the whole scene is stalled. I'm trying to get Brian to make some progress. Maybe this way, Michael can get on with his life too."

"It sounds so good and makes so much sense, Justin, and that's how I know it's a bad idea. These things never turn out the way you want them to. What if you've miscalculated and Brian falls for Michael?"

Derisive laugh. "Won't happen. Brian knows a lot more about himself than he used to, and very little of it is appealing to most people. Michael isn't really into kink - you know that as well as I do. Michael likes to play at submission, but if Brian ever made a real demand, you know, if he ever **really** broke like he does with me, Michael would run screaming. There's no way he could take it, and no way conceivable he would, either. You know that, I know that, but most importantly, Brian knows that. That's how I know Brian would never permanently choose Michael. Brian would never risk hurting Michael that way."

Fine, he has a point there. "Okay, then what about Michael falling harder for Brian?"

"See my earlier comment about being our guest on Date Night. Your weekend at the White Party was a fluke, Ben; Brian is nicer to telemarketers than he is to most of his tricks! We have done this so many times, I can tell you what we'll be doing practically every second. I guarantee he'll go into autopilot the second we get to the loft - Tab A goes into Slot B within ten minutes, and the guy is gone in two hours, tops. He's got it down to a fine art, and that's going to be a hard habit to break. Michael isn't going to get any poetry and flowers."

"I don't want him feeling used."

"That's what I'm there for. Fuck, that's what I've been there for, for the last year! Brian's reputation goes before him, and not everyone feels like being verbally and emotionally abused as someone's evening's entertainment. Brian can pull any trick he wants to, but getting them to stick around is sometimes a different story... I help to smooth over the

rough edges, and I promise to go the extra mile for Michael. Make him feel like something more than a trick...a special friend. But only a friend."

"Justin...dammit... I have to say no. I've got such a bad feeling about this. It's not a bad idea, but this isn't the right way...or the right time at all."

"There's no time like the present. This is how it has to be." He steps closer to me again, and I can feel the heat from his breath on my neck, but I'm not having it.

"What, because you say so? I'm not going to my boyfriend and telling him to fuck someone else because YOU tell me to. It's not happening."

"I'm not asking you to approve, just to stay out of the way and let me get this done."

"Jesus, you're talking about bringing home a man I love, and fucking him like he's part of an assembly line! I can't give you permission to do that, Justin. I'm sorry."

Soft, soft voice. "Please, Ben. For me."

"No."

I hear an intake of breath, and then he's quiet now, deadly calm, cool and hard as steel. "Please don't force my hand. You know what's going to happen if you do."

Fuck. Not that. "You said you wouldn't!"

"I don't want to!"

"Then don't."

"It's the only leverage I *have* right now! Don't make me tell Michael about us. Please."

"Houston, we have a problem!!!" my mind shrieks while I force myself to stay calm. "There's not that much to tell."

He laughs Brian's sardonic laugh. "Sure, what's a couple of blowjobs between friends?"

"That's not what I meant."

"Yes, it is, and you know it."

"It's really not that big a deal, Justin. I was angry with Michael for blowing me off and then crawling back as if nothing happened. You were angry with Brian...hmmm...help me out here, why were you guys fighting again?"

"He started pushing the tricks in my face again, once he thought I was all better from the bashing. Asshole."

"Look, my point is that it wasn't a big thing! Good conversation, good dinners, a couple of weeks of Clinton-defined "non-sex" and nothing more."

"Except about a million times that I came over and cried on your shoulder when I needed to run and had nowhere else to go."

"That's just friendship, Justin."

"Michael won't see it that way. He'll think you're one more person I'm 'stealing' away from him."

"Have you considered how Brian's going to feel if you tell Michael all of this?"

"I think Brian already knows."

Yeah, and he's a guy I want to have pissed off at me! "You could have warned me about that."

"What, that he *maybe* thinks that I was fucking around on him like he does to me? I thought it might be nice to do the things I'm getting blamed for, for a change. He won't actually say anything."

At this point, I give up. This is a hopeless conversation, and I literally feel the fight draining out of me. "You're not going to give up on this, are you?"

"No, I'm not."

"Shit. Okay, I'm leaving...just please call me to pick up the pieces of Michael when you're done."

"Michael will be fine. Scout's Honour! Anything I can do to make it better for him, I will."

He's fooling himself, just like he always does, but I feel like there's nothing I can do about it anymore. How he can come to me battered and bruised, and still believe that this is all going to turn out for the best, is beyond me. "I'll lay it on the line, Justin. I don't like this. Sometimes you have to step back and let the chips fall where they may, but I'm NOT happy to do it. Not to mention that I'm really pissed that you're manipulating me this way."

"I really am sorry about that, Ben. I never intended to tell anyone anything. It was very special for me. I was so angry with Brian, so confused...I felt so rejected when he kept bringing home tricks. Being with you felt good."

"So why ruin the memory?"

"Because you were right. His demons are ancient and powerful and there aren't a lot of ways to kill them. I'll do anything I have to do to set him free."

"You can't do that! You don't have that power. He can only set himself free."

He sounds determined, determined to win or go down trying. "He doesn't love himself enough to even take a shot, Ben. I have to do it for him. I have to love him enough for both of us."

"I'm sorry, Justin, but that's not a possibility."

He pecks me on the cheek and gives me a hug that I can't stop myself from returning before he turns to leave. "Well, forgive me if I don't take your word for it. I have to get to Michael, that's not going to be fucking easy either... Good night, Ben, and thank you for letting me try."

Deeper and Deeper

I know I'm being watched before Justin even comes over, but I've been so caught up dancing with Andrew, Matt, and Ben that I don't have any idea how long or why.

"Hey," he yells, since we're really way too close to the speaker to speak normally. "Dance with me."

I look at Ben, and he nods, pulling his cell phone from his pocket and pointing towards the door. He's been waiting for some news about a sabbatical in Asia, and I don't think he has checked his messages since early this afternoon. Matt drags Andrew off for a drink, leaving Justin and I alone.

He doesn't say anything, just smiles a bit and dances, and I relax. I always feel sort of tense around him - trying to like him, trying not to like him, trying not to like him so much that Brian gets jealous, when that much liking is really the **last** thing on my mind. I close my eyes and lose myself in the rhythm...and when Justin moves a little closer it doesn't feel wrong.

The next time I open my eyes Justin is right in my face. "What are you doing?"

"I love this song!" he shouts, resting his arm on my shoulders, as if to lean in closer to talk...only he doesn't. He just stays there. Then he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a hit of E.

"I'll share, if you want..." he says, biting it in half and offering me the piece that didn't fall apart. I take it out of his hand, and he smiles at my...what, innocence? It's not such a

huge fucking surprise that I don't want to lick it off of his tongue - he is NOT Brian. He goes back to dancing while I try to work up enough spit that the E doesn't leave a bitter paste on my tongue.

Once that's accomplished, I take a minute to think of the situation. Here we are, dancing like best friends from way back, and I'm wondering what the hell to do here. Ben hasn't returned and Brian hasn't cut in, so we're in the middle of the longest dance we've ever had. Not to say that something is going on! I mean, we're only dancing, and if I say something and end up looking stupid, Brian's going to tease me about it until the end of time! I decide not to say anything, just fall into Justin's natural rhythm...which, strangely enough, is much easier for me to follow than either Ben's or Brian's.

He smiles again when I press a little closer. "We're almost the same size," he shouts. "It's easier to dance."

He's right. I've never been the best dancer, because it seems like all my partners are ninety feet taller than I am...Brian's what, eight foot three or something? Ben's the same size, so we have the same problem. Justin is more...well...*me* sized. Not short, because I AM NOT SHORT!!! Just not ultra tall.

Our bodies finally touch, and everything lines up exactly right - hips at the same height, shoulders at the same height, eyes at the same height. I refuse to think about anything else that might line up properly too. I can't!

I won't.

The song changes, the new rhythm is faster, with deeper bass and more backbeats. My heart starts beating like a hammer, and I can feel the warm glow of the E starting to wash through my body, painting my skin with light from the inside. His hands start to slide up to my neck, and for a minute it just feels so good that I don't remember to tell him to stop.

Then I do.

"Justin, lay off." I say firmly, and try really hard not to giggle at the absurdity of it all. Talk about no degrees of separation - if Justin and I slept together...wait, why am I thinking about that? Stupid fucking E.

"Sorry," he laughs, and I get a good view of his teeth before he leans in really close to my ear. "It's just the E, you know? It feels so good. Too good not to share."

"I know," I say, and I really do, since Brian gets very, very good drugs and Justin and I are both lightweights, compared to his scary tolerance. If we'd taken any more, we'd be flat on our butts laughing at our hands right now!

He's still talking in my ear, babbling about something, but I'm not really listening. Why listen when you can feel, his damp hot skin on mine, his breath in my ear, his hips sliding and rubbing in a way that has *nothing* to do with Brian...

...and then he kisses me, deep and hard. "I want you, Michael. Come home with us," he pants, and kisses me again.

It feels so fucking good, just this amazing strong sucking wetness, and he pulls his mouth away from mine to kiss down my jaw to a spot on my neck he should NOT know about. When did the little twink get so fucking good at this?

"Justin, no! Are you insane? What about Ben? And what about Brian?"

"What about them?" Justin says simply, his tongue sliding easy circles across my throat. "I talked to Ben, he thinks it would be very therapeutic. Cathartic, even."

"He...he does?" I wonder, confused. That certainly sounds like something he would say. "But Brian..."

"It's Date Night, Michael. Brian picked you out of the whole bar. He wants YOU. He sent me over here to get you."

"He did?" I look around, finally finding him talking to the guys over at the bar. As if on cue, he turns to me and nods a hello...or is it more than hello? I don't know what to think.

"Yeah, he did. He wants you and so do I, and I know you want him, so...I guess the only question is, do you want me enough to come home with us?"

The world has closed in and the music isn't as loud anymore, it's just me and Justin and we're dancing and it's NOT like it is with Brian. This is about me, finally about me, maybe getting what *I* want for a change and not having to be second best. Maybe a little about knowing what HIS boyfriend is like in the sack, too...

Okay, maybe more than a little.

It was harder to decide when Brian offered before; I had all these questions...Why are you asking? Am I just a pity fuck? Will this hurt Ben? This time, it's all been taken care of. It's all wrapped up in a neat little package. Brian wants me, Ben says okay, and Justin is making it happen. All I have to do is accept.

"All right. Let's go..." I mumble, suddenly giddy and afraid. Justin waves to Brian, and I watch in fascination as they have a whole conversation with hand signals across the bar.

"Me...Michael...You," Justin points, followed by a gesture towards the door. Okay, I get that, he wants the three of us to get out of here. Brian shakes his head "No" and points to his drink, which is one I've seen a thousand times myself - "Wait until I finish my fucking

drink!" Justin laughs and repeats the "Me and Michael" pointing, but instead of pointing to Brian, points towards the backroom instead. I don't really want to think about what that might mean, but it gets results. Brian hands Andrew his drink, kisses him on the cheek, and starts towards the door. Justin grabs my hand and pulls me along after him, and my head is spinning with one thought.

I'm finally going home with Brian.

Tainted Love I

I'm sure Brian thought it would be virtually impossible to get Michael to come home with us. I mean, if it hadn't happened in how many years, it wouldn't happen now, right? That's ridiculous. Michael wasn't any easier or any harder to pull than any other trick we've picked up. Actually, he WAS easier, since he already knew he wanted to come home with Brian. I'm just a bonus.

Easier or harder is a moot point. The point is that, when it comes to my role here, Michael isn't any *different* than any of the other skittish tricks we've picked up. Sometimes they're young, sometimes they're just inexperienced, but every now and then we get one who can't move or breathe without being told when and how. They want to do it SO badly, but they're nervous. Afraid of the unknown, I guess.

The first danger point comes when we leave the club: keeping them from bolting once we get to the Jeep. It's one thing to agree to being part of a threesome when you're hot and heavy in Babylon, but it's quite another to realize you're getting into a black Jeep with two complete strangers! It's a routine for us, and it's usually not too difficult to persuade them to come along; all it takes is a kiss, some kind words, maybe a little something else if they ask.

Come to think of it, even that...convincing?...facilitating?...is easier than what I have to do tonight. Then, my job is simple - be reassuring and polite without conveying any real interest. Let the trick know that we're not serial killers, just out for a decent fuck without too much conversation. Sometimes I have to talk to them all the way to the loft - asking them about jobs, music, clothes. Never family, because frankly, most people out tricking at Babylon would prefer to forget that their families ever existed...or vice versa. Never ask why they're in the Pitts, because it seems like nobody actually *wants* to be here, it's just where the money ran out in the great escape... not enough bus fare to make it all the way to New York, that sort of thing. I'd prefer not to have to talk to them at all, but face it; Brian is not the King of Bedside Manner. Sometimes I have to step in or we'd lose them altogether.

Michael will be much harder that way, because I can't rely on the script. It's full of meaningless chatter that I cannot use, because everything I say will remind him what he's doing... and frankly, I don't want that. I want him to be in the moment, and not spend the night thinking about what everyone else is going to say. It's really none of their fucking business. Everything I normally say could lead him to the conclusion that this isn't a good

idea, and...I don't know how to explain myself, but I just don't believe that, and I don't want HIM to believe it, either. I really think this is something we need to do.

The walk to the Jeep is made in silence, and I graciously offer him shotgun. I don't usually do that for the trick, but I think we all know this is a slightly different situation. Brian takes the wheel, and I sit in the back, leaning my chin on the back of Michael's seat to talk to him. We've gone about three whole blocks before the atmosphere starts to get weird. Uncomfortable. Michael starts picking at his jeans nervously, rubbing and scratching at the threads like he's digging for buried treasure. Fuck, he's gonna bolt, I know it; they always look like this when they want to run. Talking, we have to get him talking, what will he go on and on about without even thinking...

"Michael, if I was going to buy a comic, you know, to collect, which one should it be?"
There. Done.

Michael starts waxing poetic, (The answer is definitely Captain Astro, by the way. He appeals to a wealthy niche market and there are a limited number of issues available since his untimely demise.) and Brian shoots me a look in the rear view mirror. Not an angry look, but more of a question - Why?

I don't answer, just point discreetly to Michael's hand, now relaxed on his leg while he continues his impromptu eulogy to the Captain Astro series. The nervous ones all have to talk about something and feel like we **care** about them, even when we don't. I do my best to find that one thing and listen graciously all the way back to the loft.

Brian parks on the road and this is the second danger point - when the trick realizes that he's not here to watch a movie or anything wholesome, but to get fucked, plain and simple. I didn't think this part was going to be hard - I mean, Michael **knows** we're not serial killers and he knows he'll go home safe and sound in the morning - but he hesitates as I punch in the door code. He's halfway through the door when he turns to look at me, then at Brian, and I swear he's going to run for his life at this point, so I turn to Brian and glare, whispering, "Do something!"

He smirks and shakes his head no. Damn! I could shoot him sometimes; he usually handles it once we get to this point. I can't help but sigh, I mean, do I have to do everything around here?

"Michael, go inside." I command flatly, pointing towards the elevator. It's a last resort. I hate ordering the tricks around while we're still dressed, you never know when you're dealing with someone who'll resist taking orders "just because". He looks at me sideways, like he's deciding whether or not to listen, so I get right in his face and direct, "NOW, Michael. Go upstairs."

He nods and walks through the door, shaking his head and mumbling, and I laugh when Brian salutes and follows. I have a distinct advantage here - Brian is a natural top, and can't conceive of someone taking orders because it feels like the right thing to do.

Michael is a natural bottom - no matter how much he may want to assert himself, it's always an effort, because his natural tendency is to do as he's told. Me, I'm not either of those things - I'm a switch. I top when it feels right and bottom when it feels right, and really, I can do both as needed. These things wouldn't work if somebody wasn't willing to just go with the flow. I'm not sure Michael realizes how comfortable I really am ordering the catch of the day around the bedroom...and although Brian's seen it a hundred times, I'm sure he doesn't understand it, because he's never tried to use it against me. Flexibility always comes in handy - tonight, it's going to have to be my secret weapon.

We get into the elevator, and here it's all about personal space. If they want to get all over you, that's fine, I mean, that IS what we're here for, but a lot of them just want some time to regroup, and that's okay too. Either way, it doesn't really bother me - I don't always want to be mauled in public either. So I grant Michael his corner of the elevator, with free access to the door, and let him keep his illusion of freedom a little longer. It hardly matters what Brian is doing at this point, since I think we all know that Brian could stand right on top of Michael and he'd just grin like an idiot.

Brian opens the loft door and walks through like he doesn't care who follows him in, but I wait politely for Michael to enter before I come in behind him. The door is the last real sticking point - you can talk anybody through the first two, but up here, they have to be really sure of what they want if they're going to stay. When it's two against one like this, Brian always makes the trick shut the door himself. That way, the guy knows it was his choice to come, and he knows how to work the lock if he wants to leave. We may give them drugs and chat them up and make one-time offers too good to refuse, but nobody is *forced* to do anything around here. The choice to follow us to the bedroom or walk right back out the door is not ours to make. It's his.

Even knowing all of that, once we're in the loft, I'm still tempted to skip the preliminaries and lock us in myself. There's one thing that stops me, though: I remember the feeling I had when Brian told me to shut the door, looking at the steel, thinking that if I ran fast I'd have a head start and he'd never catch me. Never realizing, of course, that he wouldn't have come after me...it was my last chance to make a break for it, and go home unchanged. I'll never forget that moment of truth, and I can't deny it to Michael.

"Shut the door, Michael," I say to him, impassively, walking towards the kitchen for some water. "Brian? Water?"

"Yeah," he says, tossing his coat on the couch.

"My God! He speaks!" I tease, tossing him one of the plastic bottles in my hand. "Michael?"

"Yes?" he says, squinting at the open door like it's an unfinished Rubik's Cube.

"Close the door and take some water." He's still looking at the door, ciphering the lock, reading the invisible ink, whatever. If there really IS anything written there, it should say One Million Served!

We wait in silence for a moment, until finally, the Sphinx decides to participate. "Mikey, are you coming in or not?"

"Brian?" Michael turns towards us, tearing himself away from the Mystery of the Open Door. "Brian, I need to ask you something."

"What?"

"Do you want me here?"

Fuck, and that's the million-dollar question, isn't it? I look at the floor, praying to whatever God is responsible for queers attempting a threesome.

"It's Date Night, and I picked you, Mikey. That's why you're here." And that's all *I* need to know, being somewhat fluent in Brianese after all this time. Brian isn't okay with this, but he will be. He'll have to be, if he's not going to back down.

"Come with me," I whisper to Michael, taking off my shirt and tossing it towards the bedroom. "Brian can shut the door."

Tainted Love II

Fuck.

Let me repeat that. Fuck!

I'm starting to understand the charm of staring at the loft door like Mikey did a few minutes ago. If I stand right here, in this very spot, and don't move or breathe, I can disappear. It used to work on my old man sometimes, when he was piss drunk and looking for a fight. I don't see why it won't work again. Nervous breakdowns are perfectly acceptable when carried out in a private place. After all, mommy knows best, right? Whoa, that's it! I've got two naked men in the loft and I'm thinking of my mother. I must be hysterical.

I'm being ridiculous. It's not like I'm some blushing virgin here. If there's something that a man can do, with or to another man, I've done it, so there's nothing here I can't handle. The mechanics are simple, and neither of them are trolls, so it won't be hard as long as I shut off my fucking brain. I just have to put Brian to bed and let the tiny whispered fears, the paralyzing self-doubt, the kernel of my mind that wonders if maybe this isn't such a good idea after all...all be banished, gone to who the fuck knows where. No fucking way Justin's getting the best of me this time. I've been doing this since he was a baby, and with how many men? Five hundred? A thousand? Five thousand?

What's one more?

Fuck it.

I shut the door and cross to the bedroom, ripping off my shirt on the way through. I'll be damned if that little shit is going to try and get the best of me, especially in here! This is MY fucking turf he's playing on now. I don't know what the fuck he was thinking, but he's a fucking moron. This is what I do. This is what I am.

It's quite obvious that little Sunshine doesn't need my help; he's got Mikey wrapped around his little finger. The tricks love Justin, he's so nice...so thoughtful...and he never lets it slip that it's mostly an act. He doesn't like them any more than I do; he just cares enough to lie. I would have thought Michael would understand that by now, but he doesn't, and watching Justin whispering miscellaneous compliments in his ear while they kiss and strip is just plain disturbing. I'm dying to interrupt the endless patter, the words that flow out of his mouth in an endless stream of sweet meaningless flattery, but really, what can I say? "Uh, Mikey, he's lying to you, your eyes aren't the nicest brown he's ever seen, and your hair isn't the softest, and that cologne...fuck, where do you buy that shit?" Nope, the words have never been my business, and I'm not about to start now.

Justin wrangles off both of their clothes, but I don't take the time to really look. I know both of their bodies like my own, so there's no need for mapmaking today. Justin is just snaking his arms around Mikey to go in and close the deal when I slide a hand into the small space between their bodies. Justin's had his turn at playing Alpha Male, now he can fucking stand back and do what I tell him - and I'm telling him, in my way, to just let me do my thing.

All I have to do is forget that I happen to know this trick and everything should work out fine.

Mikey is as ready as they come, you can tell, his face is flushed and his breathing is rough as he looks from me, to Justin, to the bed. "Are we waiting for a fucking engraved invitation, or what?" I can't help but snort, and push Mikey onto his back on the bed. He falls back, surprised at the roughness like so many of them are, and yelps quietly when Justin fucking JUMPS onto the bed.

"Jesus Christ!" he stammers nervously as Justin crawls up beside him, laying openmouthed kisses on his chest. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Justin looks up at me, and smiles. "Can't a guy get excited about getting laid anymore? And I thought Brian was the jaded one."

"Who me? Jaded? Hardly," I smirk, kneeling on the other side of the bed as Justin starts to leave love bites here and there on Mikey's pecs. "There must be at least two or three things I haven't done yet."

"I wouldn't bet on it," Justin grins, running his hands down Mikey's body, taking his cock in hand gently as he looks from him to me. "I'm thinking there may be only one thing you haven't done, right Michael?"

Mikey can't force out a reply, just stammers as Justin starts stroking him, firmly, locking their gazes as he says, "Yeah, I know allll about what Brian hasn't done, don't I? And so do you..." he trails off slowly, daring Mikey to finally say what he's been thinking all this time, wanting all this time. The one thing I haven't given more than a moment's thought to is something he's been dreaming and fantasizing about for years.

Mikey's eyes open wide in realization, or panic, or something equally unappetizing and inappropriate. Ooh, look, the worst kept secret in Pittsburgh is out, and fuck if I care. We're not on Oprah here, it's not time for Taxicab Confessions, and I have absolutely no use for this self-actualization bullshit. He knows, Justin knows, we all fucking know already! Enough!

"Quit being such a twat!" I exclaim, smacking the side of Justin's head as if I could suddenly knock some sense into him. Fucking shit disturber.

"Hey, you don't wanna hear the truth, that's your business. Either shut me up or shut him up," Justin offers crudely, touching his tongue to his top lip while stroking Michael and looking at me with laughing eyes. I can't believe I was worried about how he'd handle this, the little fuck. He's doing just fucking fine.

"I wanna watch you blow him," I order coldly, gesturing towards Mikey as if he had no say. He doesn't. If this is going to go, it's going my way, and I call the shots. "Let him see for himself if the rumours are true."

"Rumours," Justin echoes blankly, which finally draws a chuckle from the deaf/mute formerly known as Michael. I vaguely hear him repeat the word as I rummage through the drawer of the night table for a handful of condoms.

"Hey, I'm not always uninterested in gossip...especially involving you. I've heard things...lots of very interesting things..." I enunciate, watching a flash of panic cross his eyes. He thinks I'm talking about Ben, but that's old news compared to the juiciest of the gossip currently circulating. Normally I'd ignore it altogether, or laugh it off if I couldn't, but I knew that soon it would be useful...mostly for intimidation. Threatening, coercing, intimidating...well, it sounds so nasty, but if he won't mind his manners, what else is a conscientious Master to do?

"I don't see any sucking..." I singsong harshly, holding out a condom and watching Justin struggle with his indecision. He's worried about the information I've got, and he knows I'll use that against him if he doesn't behave himself. You can almost see him trying to figure out when he lost control - he doesn't know where it went, but he knows it's gone. I

guess he doesn't want to play if he can't be the boss. Poor baby. If that's his game, then he's fucked right out of the gates, because nobody runs this show but me.

"Yes, Brian," he mumbles, casting his eyes down and using my name reverently to signify his submission. It's about fucking time. I like him feisty sometimes, but Jesus, this is really starting to drag. I can see him pouting as he tears open the condom, smoothing it none too gently over Mikey's dick. Mikey flinches, and starts complaining about something or other, but I'm thinking ahead and I just tune him out. I won't penalize Justin for unnecessary roughness until later.

"Much better. Get going, and make it good, because I WILL be watching. This is my best friend, he deserves at least as good as Ted got, right?" I taunt, hearing Mikey yelp, "Ted?" a moment before I shove my own, sheathed cock into Mikey's awestruck mouth.

Justin's eyes hold a very clear mix of lust and anger as he dips his head to run his tongue up the shaft of Michael's dick. He holds my eyes as his mouth slides over Mikey like a tight wet glove, a feeling I know too well...drawing patterns that I could mimic in the air from repetition. Now that we're back to business, back to me watching him give one of the blowjobs that are more performance for me than titillation for the trick, I'm comfortable. He'll do what I tell him, hell, they'll both do what I tell them to do. I cannot believe how much I enjoy that thought.

"I see you're doing fine, little boy. I'll be up here if you need me," I tease, running my fingers through Mikey's hair as he finally starts to suck. I chose this position on purpose - I can look at Justin, or at the wall, or at Mikey if I want, but I probably won't, especially not that last one. I don't want to see his deer-caught-in-headlights look, the one that says, "This isn't what I was hoping for," the one that he perfected sometime after I introduced him to Lindsay. Disappointment springs eternal.

I close my eyes a minute, okay, a few really long minutes, coasting on the sensation, listening to Justin's exaggerated breaths as I imagine what he's doing with his tongue... wondering if he's giving head the way I taught him to do it. Mikey's doing a fine job himself, but it's not quite what I want. I'm about to open my mouth to order a change-up when Justin beats me to it.

"Brian, I think he needs you now..." he whispers, running his hands over Mikey's lower stomach in a soft, soothing pattern. He's still treating him like a skittish trick, which I suppose would be a good idea if I didn't have him pinned to the bed. Old habits die hard, I guess.

Mikey stammers his agreement around my cock, but I have other plans. "You first, Justin."

I can feel Mikey's shriek of disapproval? disgust? disappointment? through my pubic bone, but it's Justin's disagreement that concerns me. He pulls back, right away from Mikey's body, and looks at me critically. "Why?"

"You always go first."

"Not always!"

"Close enough. I want to watch."

He looks analytically at Mikey, and then practically dismisses his presence to start to argue. "Brian..."

Fucking twat. He fucking got me into this mess, and now he can just suffer if he doesn't like the consequences. "Justin, now. I mean it. Don't make me ask you again." I grab his wrist, closing my hand tightly over the fine bones in his hand and squeezing to make my point. He yanks his hand back and nods sullenly, shifting Mikey onto his hip so he can take him from the side.

Mikey is still murmuring something completely unintelligible, but urgent-sounding, so I free my dick from his mouth and lean my head beside him to say, "Yes?" and hoping that he'll at least keep it short.

"I want it to be you," he whispers, but makes no move to actually stop Justin from the rearrangements he's already started to make. "I need it to be him," I answer, kissing him hard before I slip my dick back into his mouth.

Once we're settled again, I watch, removed and disconnected. Justin works Mikey comfortably on his side and lays slightly angled behind him, shifting once or twice and sliding lubed fingers into his ass. All the preparation and positioning takes some time, during which Mikey continues to be appropriately attentive to my cock, and it gives me time to think. I've gotten loose with the rules, and if Mikey had a nasty bone in his body, he'd see the way Justin follows my orders despite his instincts. The way he submits against his will. The way I've made him do the same. I suppose Mikey thinks that I'd never have to take anything by force, since so much is offered to me freely. He's right. I don't have to - I want to.

"Justin, now," I murmur, pulling my cock out of Mikey's mouth. I've met too many guys with the urge to bite down when they're being penetrated, I'll be damned if I'm the victim of this little get-together! Mikey moans with frustration, and maybe he's even about to object again when I lean down to look into his eyes. Somewhere, deep down, I need to know that he's not mad at me. That he's not angry that I blew him off again, that he doesn't think I added another insult to the pile. That's not what I meant to do.

Mikey might think he wants me first, but he doesn't. There's a reason I never go first anymore - I can't be fucking bothered to do the prep work half the time. It's boring. The

tricks are boring; they're not worth the extra effort. I've gotten lazy...Justin lets me get away with murder and it's turned into a habit. Justin gets off on the pain sometimes, the burning friction from barely-lubed fucking, and who am I to say no? After a while...well, after a while you forget that not everybody wants to be hurt like that. Not everybody *likes* to be hurt like he does.

Anyways, Mikey's going to love this, Justin is so gentle and graceful. He's kind, and he pays attention. What he offers is what Mikey wants, really. Not me at all.

"Relax..." I whisper in his ear, kissing his neck, letting a slow hand find its way to his nipples. "Let him in. It's okay."

I'm still rolling Mikey's nipples in my fingers when I look up to watch Justin take him. I was serious when I said I wanted to watch; I love it. The hair at the back of his neck gets sweaty, in fact, his whole body does...light, salty sweat that makes his body glide and glisten in the dim lights. Some nights we just send the trick home and I spend hours making him sweat like that and licking it off of him like I'm dying of thirst. He bites his lips until they turn bright red, just aching to scream, but nearly silent after having decided he's "too experienced" to carry on like he used to. He's doing that now, fighting his urge to groan and clench Mikey's hip with more than just a light touch. The fight, the struggle to look cool and casual even though he's just about to shove his dick up somebody's ass, I know that's for me, too. He thinks if *I* think he likes it too much, I'll get worried about him wanting to top me all the time. That's pathetic. Who doesn't like fucking?

"While we're young, Justin..." I urge, sliding closer to Mikey's dick in the process. He raises himself onto his elbow and eyes me critically. "Do you want to come and hold it for me?"

"Twat."

"No thanks, I've got something better here," he grunts and finally slides his cock past the resistance in Mikey's asshole. I can tell the second it happens, because the groan I hear from Mikey would raise the fucking dead!

"I told you to relax!" I scold him playfully, stroking his thighs firmly as Justin waits for Mikey to settle down. Michael takes deep breaths as Justin rocks slowly, shallowly, letting him adjust in his own time to the invasion. I knew he would be better for this than I am...I'm not so sure I'd wait this long.

"Not everybody gets laid as often as the Boy Wonder," Mikey finally stammers between thrusts as Justin picks up the pace. I start stroking his cock as I consider that statement.

"It's...not...about...that..." Justin gasps out, pausing his speech to wrap his arm more firmly around Mikey's chest, and laying a kiss on his shoulder. God. Romantic fools. "I...learned...the control...in therapy." He looks over at me, pausing, waiting to see if I'm

going to freak out that he obliquely mentioned the bashing. Seeing all is well, he resumes his thrusts, saying, "It... just...takes...practice."

"Happy to be of service," I comment, and Justin humphs. I watch as Justin shifts and rearranges himself to get the sweet spot on the hard thrusts, and Mikey gets closer to coming pretty quickly. I'm about to lean down to give Mikey the most fabulous blowjob of his life when Justin calls my name. "Brian. Take over."

"What?" I reply dubiously, but he pulls his dick out of Michael with a wet slurp and scrambles over beside me.

"He needs you." Justin replies simply, and it's obviously true - Mikey was probably a minute from coming and he's suffering with the emptiness of being fucked and then left lying. Since when have I ever looked for more subtext than that? Justin kisses me firmly, sliding his tongue into my mouth and grabbing at my cock roughly.

"I want to watch too, you know," he moans lowly. "It'll be okay."

I don't know why he thinks he needs to console me, but...it's nice to hear it, I guess. I cross over Mikey's body, hesitating just a moment in choosing a position before the thought strikes me. "Justin, sixty-nine him. I want to watch."

He nods and arranges himself, shifting close to Mikey on his side and angling his leg to provide easy access. Mikey finally takes some initiative and grabs for Justin's hip, taking him deep with one careful movement, and Justin closes his eyes and moans with appreciation. Justin sighs again, and finally inclines himself to return the favour.

I hold my dick firmly, circling the head around Mikey's slightly open hole, slicking it in the lube Justin so carefully applied...and I watch. They're so perfectly size-matched, there's barely an inch of difference between them, and it looks just like the movies. You know, when two people can fuck and it looks so perfect, without anyone having to crane his neck to get the right angle, and the lube lasts forever, and nobody comes too soon or too late.

It's fucking perfect, and fucking hot.

I watch my best friend and my partner making love for far longer than I should, but how often do I see this? These two misguided little shits love me more than anyone else in the world; why haven't they had the chance to love each other? When did I decide that they had to love only me? This ménage seems right, and fair, and finally, I want to play too.

Mikey moans as I push through the resistance of his sphincter and bury my cock in his ass. I do too. I adjust my position slightly so that I can watch Justin's dick thrusting deeply into Mikey's mouth, and Mikey reaches back over his body to grab what he can reach of my ass. Justin puts his hand on top of Mikey's, and for some stupid reason, I do too, and we come. Not right together, but close enough.

It's fucking, disgustingly perfect.

Tainted Love III

Waking up in Brian's bed feels like waking up from a dream. And not in a romance-movie kind of way, where you open your eyes, and birds are singing, and there are flowers and soft music and you think about how wonderful life can be. No, it's like waking up from a dream you've been having over and over again, and you try and sit and figure out whether any of it actually happened or if you just need to go back to sleep. God, I could sleep for a week - the E hangover I've got right now is unreal.

As many times as I've been here, I've never been HERE, if you catch my drift. I can't count how many nights I've slept in this bed, holding Brian as he cries, or pukes, or rambles on with an insanely high fever. If I'm in this bed, you have to know that something has gone wrong, or is going wrong, or is about to go wrong, because that's the only time Brian can really tolerate having anyone else that close to him.

So right away, you can see why I'm worried when I wake up, because it takes me a while to figure out why I'm here, naked...and alone. Because I AM alone, the blue lights are on and I'm swimming in his big blue velour duvet by myself. I'm surprised to be alone, too. I mean, where are they? What are they doing? Don't they **ever** get tired? I'm still exhausted... we all seemed to lose something after Brian fucked me. We all came down off the E at the same time, I guess. We fooled around for a while after that, but it just wasn't the same... Eventually we fell asleep, Brian curled around my back, Justin snuggled into my arms. I looked at him funny as he was wiggling his way closer to me, and he just whispered, "You're a cuddly sleeper too," before he nuzzled his head into the crook of my shoulder and drifted off. It was okay, though. Comfortable. I'd been worried that Brian might have a change of heart, or Justin might get jealous, but it was fine and we just fell asleep.

Last night. Wow. I never would have bet that that would happen in a million years. One hundred percent not what I would have expected...and not in a totally good way, either. Don't get me wrong; they were great. Brian is awesome and Justin...well, I have to give him credit for living up to his reputation. It's not that anything in particular could have been different, I'm just used to something...more. It felt like we were auditioning for a porno, with everything technically perfect but sort of empty. Hollow. I'm used to being with Ben, and laughing, and talking and being told how wonderful I am. How special I am, not just the Date Night Special. Used to being able to do whatever I want to do, to sharing as much as I can. Sharing **something** more than a notch on the bedpost. As much as I felt that connection between the two of them, I didn't feel it between them and me, and it made the whole thing beautiful, but sort of sad. I knew I was making a memory before we even finished.

Eventually I get tired of rehashing the play from last night, and I turn my head to read the clock. 3:45 am. I'm just turning over to go back to sleep, when I hear their voices drift into the bedroom.

"He's going to ask, you know. You're gonna have to let him at some point." That was Justin.

Brian's voice is lower and harder to hear, but his tone is almost angry. "I don't have to let him do anything, Justin. Forget it."

Their voices sound almost hollow coming across the loft, so they must be on the couch. Justin pauses a minute, then replies firmly, "He's not stupid, Brian, he's going to figure out that things haven't exactly been fair tonight."

Brian converts to what my mom calls the 'you can't tell me anything I don't already know' voice. "Who needs fair? I haven't heard any complaints."

I can hear rustling in the darkness, and I creep further forwards on the bed so that I can hear the conversation better. Justin's reply is immediate. "Only because he's not awake! Sooner or later, he IS going to wake up, and he's going to remember that I fucked him, and you fucked him, and he did not fuck either of us."

Brian snorts. "He's a total bottom. Come on, don't tell me you didn't notice that yourself. It's not the first thing on his mind."

Justin chuckles, and I almost feel offended. I mean, I expected that sort of thing from Brian, but Justin has no right to judge me. His voice is serious as he continues, "You're fooling yourself, he's had a loooong time to think about this. I'm sure that it crossed his mind at some point, and he's given it plenty of thought since then. If you think he's going to be content to go home now..."

They argue back and forth for a couple more minutes, but I stop listening. Honestly, I hadn't even considered the possibility of fucking Brian tonight. Justin, maybe, but not Brian. Not that I don't want to! No, it's just that I haven't seriously thought about doing that in years, and it kind of just fell off the radar screen.

It seems that Justin's following my train of thought, because their bickering stops a minute, and a quiet hush falls over the loft. He sighs and says, "So I guess it's up to me, then."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Brian hisses angrily, and I'm sort of surprised at both of them. Not only does Brian sound more than a little bit jealous, I never really thought Justin thought about me that way.

"Brian, it's only fair. It's not like I've never done it before," he laughs - a laugh that is cut off by his own harsh gasp of panic. I quietly fish my jeans from the floor and creep out to where I can see their dark shapes in the glow of the streetlights.

Brian has Justin's face firmly in his hand, and his mouth is beside Justin's ear, whispering words I can't quite make out. All I can hear him say is, "Mine." Repeatedly.

Justin shakes his head, or tries to, in agreement or panic I can't tell. Finally he pulls away, and I can hear him sniffing as he says, "Look, you fuck anyone you want. Everyone you want. I don't. You can't freak out every single time I decide to let it happen."

"They're your fucking rules, Justin, and you're the only one who breaks them!" Brian jumps up off the couch, and I shrink back behind the bedroom shades despite myself. He's so angry, and if *I* were the one with him in the living room, I'd be doing everything I could think of to calm him down. Justin isn't.

"Fuck that, Brian. You know how many guys have fucked me since you put this ring on my hand? One! You." He's up on his feet as well, and I realize that they're arguing buck-naked. I couldn't do that. I would feel too defenseless.

"And what if we stop using the Clinton definition, Justin? What then?" Brian takes one, dangerous step closer to Justin, and peers into his eyes. "How many?"

"Oh, no you don't. That's not fair." Justin goes to turn away, but Brian spins him back around. "I don't know, okay? A few!"

"A few. A FEW!" Brian's voice is starting to rise, which really isn't necessary considering they're about a half an inch apart. "You know what I told you."

Justin moves to step back, but Brian grabs him by the arms and brings him closer. "You know what I told you," he repeats harshly, and too loud for me NOT to hear. They must not realize that I'm awake...either that, or they've forgotten that I'm here altogether.

"Fuck you, Brian!" Justin spits, and wrenches out of his grip. "I don't want to fuck legions of faceless men! I'm not you. I *want* to know their names."

"And I don't want you to...so let's see, who's going to get his way?" Brian smirks, following Justin closely as he backs away from the couch and into the centre of the room. "You fuck your friends. Justin, it's a bad idea."

"Hey, Ted was your idea, not mine. I didn't even know for sure it was him until you told Michael."

"Better I tell him about Ted than about Ben."

"Shut the fuck up about Ben! You know NOTHING about me and Ben!" Justin exclaims angrily, pausing in his retreat.

"What about Ben?" I can't stop myself from asking as I finally enter the living area. "Is he okay?"

They both turn to look at me in surprise. I wonder if this is a ritual for them, naked arguing. Weird, but I won't be distracted from what's important here. "What about Ben?"

Brian cackles and rushes forward to take my hand, drawing me closer to the space that he and Justin are sharing. "Come now, Mikey, Justin's got a story for you."

Justin looks at me, softly shaking his head no. "I won't do this to Michael, Brian. Forget it." He turns to me and says, "Michael, you'd better go."

"At four o'clock in the morning? I think I'd rather not."

"Please," he begs. "Just go"

I look at Brian, knowing that he'll tell me the truth if I ask him to. "Brian, tell me."

Justin nods to Brian, then spits on his hand and starts rubbing the spit into his arm. "Go ahead, Brian, tell him if you want to." I watch him rub at his forearm until a deep purple shadow appears on his skin. "You've got nothing to lose, right?"

Brian's smirk disappears as Justin repeats the process, spitting into his hand and rubbing it firmly into his jaw until another dark shadow emerges. "Justin, enough!" he finally yells, releasing my hand and rushing over to his side. "That's fucking enough!"

"Oh, no, it's not enough, is it Brian?" Justin babbles as he caresses shadowy patches of skin with his fingers. "It's never enough for you, not when I'm begging you to stop, it's not enough, is it? You have to hear me screaming Brian, why do you do that to me? Why???" He's crying, absolutely crying his eyes out, and now I can see his body covered in bruises, even in the dim light from the street.

"Justin, you fucked Ben! So much for no names and numbers, that's Michael's boyfriend! Am I supposed to let you get away with that?"

"It's not your job to punish me for anything!"

"Oh, yes it is, and YOU made it that way. You agreed. You *begged* me to hit you harder. Don't come crying to me now because you've forgotten how to say no."

"Send him home!" Justin shrieks incoherently, surprising the shit out of me. I thought they'd forgotten I was even here. "Just send him the fuck home, Brian, I can't do this anymore! Send him away!"

Justin collapses to the ground, crying and staring vacantly at the bruise on his arm. Brian turns to me, his brow furrowed, and then turns away. "I think the little boy needs a nap," he jokes vacantly, walking over to hover around Justin crying on the floor. "Why don't you come back tomorrow?"

In that one surreal moment, I see.

Those bruises came from Brian. Justin fucked Ben. Those things are connected in a way that I don't quite understand, but that doesn't matter right now. What matters is that they were willing to hurt me so that they could hold that knowledge over each other's heads. Then, they let it all slip anyways, and the fact that I was standing here listening didn't fucking matter either! That's not love, not friendship...that's not even something you do to your worst enemies unless you're on a soap opera! I can't process this. I have to get out of here.

"You do whatever the fuck you want. Both of you. I don't fucking care anymore." I run back to the bedroom for the rest of my clothes, knowing that I'm leaving Brian in a bad spot, leaving Justin in a bad spot...and since when is that MY problem? Brian wouldn't let me love him, wouldn't let me need him, wouldn't let himself need me. Didn't THAT come back to bite him in the ass, because he needs me now and I just don't give a fuck. And here I've been sooo worried about poor little Sunshine, and it turns out I had every right to worry, but for reasons I hadn't even imagined.

Well, to hell with them. Stupid fucks. They deserve each other.

Bulletproof

"Is he really gone?" Justin sobbed, still on the floor, his voice wavering as Brian slammed the loft door.

Brian turned to Justin with a look of disdain. "Yeah, Drama Princess, he's gone. Get off the floor and come to bed. Fuck, that was worthy of an Oscar."

Justin took a deep, shuddering breath and sighed. "Yeah, it wasn't bad, my drama elective is really paying off." He hopped up and stretched, brushing invisible dust from his legs. "Jesus, it's after four. I thought he'd never leave."

"Well, you certainly took care of that," Brian smirked, watching Justin circle the loft, turning on several small lamps until the room had a dull yellow glow. Justin nodded towards Brian when he was finished.

"I wouldn't have had to if you would have kicked him out right afterwards, like we do with everyone else. I know he's your best friend and all, but no good can come of having a trick lying around the loft. You were right about that..." Justin stopped mid-sentence in the middle of the room, pausing abruptly in both motion and speech as if he'd suddenly

come to the end of a tether. "Uh, Brian? How did you know I could cry on cue? How did YOU know I was faking?"

Brian did nothing but stare, watching Justin's unease growing across the room. Justin repeated, "How?" in a small voice, seemingly nervous at the response he would receive.

Brian laughed, but held his position near the door, forcing Justin to come closer. Justin tilted his head when he'd approached to just outside Brian's personal space, as if asking permission to enter. Brian shook his head 'no' and leaned back against the warm bricks of the wall.

"It's your game, Justin. Make everyone feel bad for 'poor Sunshine' and want to protect him from Big Bad Brian." Brian chuckled again as Justin's eyes widened in righteous indignation. "Call this a revision to the program."

"I don't! I mean, I haven't...I don't do that!" Justin argued, pressing further into Brian's personal space. Brian shrugged, meeting Justin's hot denials with nothing more than a cool, detached stare. "We had been doing this for *months* before I said anything to anyone! And I was only looking for advice, even then!"

"So you couldn't handle the game on your own..." Brian whispered in a low voice, his motionless body belying the tension in the room.

Justin shook his head madly, racing to refute the accusation. "NO! It wasn't like that! I just asked Matt for an opinion on what to do...I mean how to..."

Brian tilted his head forward, suddenly catching Justin's face in one outstretched hand. "So the great strategist has been getting help from outside sources? I think that entitles me to a penalty shot."

"Oh, no you don't!" Justin exclaimed, attempting to pull backwards, but Brian held him firm. "I am *over* being punished by you, Brian. It's not your place to do it," he continued angrily. "You're not my father."

"Oh, but you see, that's where you're wrong," Brian replied coolly, turning Justin in his hands and beginning to march him towards the bedroom despite the young man's attempts to stand firm. "Surely you've done a little more reading by now, Sunshine. I have. It seems that as your Master, I am entitled to a total power exchange - the complete subjugation of your will to mine." Brian laughed again as Justin suddenly fought to free himself from his grasp, tightening his grip on the boy's smooth, pale skin. Justin struggled vainly for several moments before sagging in defeat. "Unfortunately, you have decided to be underhanded and give me the illusion of control, which I'm sure I don't need to tell you is *quite* unfulfilling. Confusing, even." Justin attempted to pull away again, and Brian clucked his tongue and turned the boy to face him.

"See, now that's exactly what I'm talking about. You look like you're submitting, and really you're just plotting a new way to cause me trouble. You're never contrite and obedient until I punish you...surely you agree that that sounds more like a naughty little boy than a trained slave?"

Justin's confusion was evident, as was his inability to answer the question in a way where he could come out on top. "Yes, but...no...I mean..."

"Exactly, Justin. There are two people in this room: a boy in need of correction, that's you, and by default, that puts me in the Daddy position." Brian shuddered visibly just in speaking the words. "We need new terminology, but we can work on that later. The list of grievances I have against you is long, little boy. You're a jealous, mean little sneak...you cost me my best friend! Playing with peoples' lives with no consideration for how it might affect ME - this is behaviour that will not be tolerated."

Justin finally managed to twist himself back out of Brian's grip, anger flashing in his cool blue eyes. "Fuck you! You started all of this! Do you even remember what you were like after the bashing? You punched that waiter that touched my shoulder! You'd practically throw a tantrum if I cut myself shaving! Goddammit, you did up my seat belt for me! YOU made me your little boy, Brian, by treating me like a child!"

Justin shook his head feebly, as if to erase the memories of the bashing he'd resurrected. "So what if I liked it! I NEVER thought that would turn into this!" He looked at the floor as a hot blush crept up his neck. "I was naïve once, you know, just an innocent kid that didn't even know about fucking, let alone kink! Do you think I had even *imagined* some of the things we do, Brian? How was I supposed to tell you I wanted more? How, when you acted like it hurt you to do it?" He looked up at Brian, a challenge in his eyes. "Admit it. It doesn't hurt you as much as you let on. You get off on it!"

Brian nodded calmly, again holding his position like a marble statue. "That's all true. The thought of anyone hurting you was more than I could handle. But what *we* do isn't hurting you, Justin - it's helping you." He took a single, long stride towards Justin, catching him off-guard and leaning his mouth close to the blonde's head. "And you know I get off on it, Justin, I *always* have, and I know you do, too. Knew that right from the hotel room in New York." His tongue extended to trail wet circles inside the boy's ear before he continued, "It wasn't some big fucking secret; I knew right away. You like it rough, but you feel guilty asking for it. So instead of being a man and asking for what you want, you piss me off purposely and then lay back, thinking, 'No matter what happens, it's not my fault...he did this against my will...' but that's not the way it is at all, is it?"

"No...yes...I mean, I never said that..." Justin trailed off as Brian's tongue danced along his jugular vein.

"You didn't need to. I'm not stupid, just slow on the uptake sometimes...I just couldn't believe that you had it in you. I suppose it's my fatal flaw. You made me feel so fucking bad for hurting you! Well, rest assured I won't be feeling that again."

"No?" Justin murmured fearfully as Brian picked him up and carried him to the bed, dropping him squarely in the centre.

Brian shook his head, watching his pale golden boy cowering in the blue ocean of bed.

"No. I'm going to hurt you and I'm not going to feel sorry. Not anymore."

Bygones

"Have I thanked you for forgiving me?" Michael asked, snuggling deeper under Ben's duvet.

"Yes, you have, and in very pleasurable ways...but really, you're not the one who should be begging forgiveness. I am." Ben replied contentedly, resting his head on the pillow beside his lover's.

"I'm not angry about Justin, I'm not. Really." Michael furrowed his brow, finally turning to face Ben in confusion. "I just don't understand why."

"I'm not a hundred percent sure I do either, Mike," Ben sighed, staring up at the ceiling. "You and I were just back together, and I was so angry...I mean, I should never have accepted your apology if I wasn't ready to put it behind us, but I was so hurt; I felt like damaged goods. And of course, along came Justin, needing a friend, and he can be very convincing when he wants to be...Look, it made a lot more sense at the time, and there are some other reasons...but basically, I was stupid. I'm sorry."

Michael burrowed himself into Ben's arms, molding his body along the muscular line of his lover's form. "You don't need to tell ME about feeling stupid, Ben." He laughed and sighed at Ben's still-worried expression. "I know you're sorry. I did something terrible to you; you felt hurt and did something back, to make yourself feel better. It's my fault too, so let's...well...let's just call it even, okay?"

"Are you sure you can do that?"

"Ben, I just spent the evening at the Loft, where I got a step-by-step tutorial in what happens when you don't learn to forgive and put the past behind you. Mom had some stupid little rhyme about the past being history and to live in the now, and I always

thought it was corny, but she's right. Brian and Justin are a fucking mess, and I don't want that to happen to us."

Ben reached over to turn out the light, resting his head back on the pillows when he was done. "That whole thing can't have been easy...do you want to talk about it at all?"

Michael paused, considering the loaded question he'd been asked. "Yes and no. It's too fresh...and I don't think I have the whole story... and I'm not sure I want to, either. I can't believe that someone who lived in a house like Brian's would want to do that to someone else."

Ben nodded without lifting his head. "Some people think that that's WHY people like him might want to do that - to take back some power and control."

"So then Justin had too much control when he was growing up?"

"Not necessarily. Childhood abuse can manifest itself as a desire to Dominate or submit, but abuse issues don't tell the whole story either."

There was another pause, and then Michael said, "You're saying that nobody knows why people do that?"

"Exactly. What we *do* know is that many people feel pleasure at playing a role; it feels natural and expands the experience beyond 'just sex'. These are people who feel like they've been missing something all their lives, and then their complement comes along and plugs in the missing piece. Once you know you need that, you can't go back," Ben stated, beginning to twist the bed sheets in his hands.

"And this would be why you're playing with the covers? Because you feel like you're missing something?" A hush fell over the room that spoke to Ben's assent more thoroughly than any reply possibly could have. Michael ran his hand up to Ben's face, palming his lover's cheek. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"It's not easy to bring it up... We've done...some things...but I wanted you to decide for yourself if you wanted more. I think that's why I might have gotten involved with Justin, he plays the submissive very well. Call it a booster shot."

"Plays? How do you play at that?" Michael wondered, seeming to be interested in Ben's choice of words.

Ben nodded in the dark. "When he was here, he made it his business to do what he felt I wanted him to do, without rocking the boat. He's not naturally inclined to Dominate or submit, but to roll with the experience. Sexuality is a spectrum. There are gay people and straight people and people who are a combination of both. Sadomasochism is the same way. There are people who *need* to Dominate and people who *need* to submit, and then there are people in the middle, called switches, who flip back and forth depending

on the situation. Their needs aren't as well defined. Some need to fulfill their own fantasies, or cater to a partner's whims; some simply grow from one role to another."

"Then, that's why he's having trouble with Brian," Michael stated definitively.

Ben laughed quietly. "What makes you say that?"

"Any kind of growth or change makes Brian nervous, unless he pre-authorized it himself."

"Maybe. I only know what Justin has told me along the way, and it's really not enough to make any kind of sweeping statements about their intentions." The lovers paused for a kiss, content to be safe and quiet in each other's arms for the moment. Michael's next question was thoughtful.

"Do you think they'll be okay?"

Ben sighed, seeming ready to speak once or twice before deciding on a comment. "Honestly, I have no idea. I'm not going to lie to you, Brian has beaten Justin very badly in the past, and I'm sure it will happen again. Every indication I have is that Justin is consenting and isn't telling him to stop, but they can't avoid the safety precautions forever and expect to be okay. They've also gotten a lot of people involved in their drama - me, you, Ted, Emmett, and Matt. Brian and Justin are at war, and taking hostages... that's not a sign of good mental health."

"What exactly do you know about Ted and Matt?"

"Very little. Matt is Justin's confidant, and has been telling him to stop this mess since day one. Ted got mixed into it when he expressed concern that Justin had started showing up with bruises. It seems he was the first to notice that their relationship had drifted into sadomasochism, but he didn't know how to warn us."

"What was he saying about blackmail? And how do you know all this stuff?" Michael wondered.

"I stayed at the bar a while after you left...I don't turn into a pumpkin after eleven, you know! As for Ted...well, I think Ted's situation is best left for him to explain."

"No, really, tell me."

"It doesn't make Brian look good."

"I guess I'm going to have to get used to the idea that Brian is not what I thought he was."

"Can you do that? Seriously? After all this time?"

"I don't know. I guess it depends on what you tell me. I'm not exactly surprised Brian blackmailed someone, he sort of thinks that the rules aren't meant for him anyways."

Ben stroked Michael's arm thoughtfully. "I don't know much about Ted's story, but it seems that Brian has been looking for Blake, on Ted's behalf, for over a year now. He kept it a complete secret and didn't say anything to anyone about it - not when he started looking, and not when he found Blake on Friday."

"He found Blake?"

"Yeah, at a rehab in California. Ted says that Blake spent six months drying out, and he's clean, but he doesn't want to leave Malibu. Apparently he leads a support group for teenagers trying to kick their drug habits."

"Wow...but where does that leave Ted?"

"Well, Ted has already made arrangements to fly to California, but other than that, I suppose it's up to them."

"At least something good came out of this mess." Michael turned his head back and forth on the pillow, and groaned. "Ben, I hate to bug you, but do you have any of those pills for E hangovers? You know, the tryptophan thingies?"

"You mean the hydroxytryptophan? Yeah, I have it, go look in the cabinet in the kitchen, with all the other herbs. Don't tell me Brian's stuff was bad this time?"

Michael shuffled out of bed, padding listlessly towards the kitchen in the gloom just before sunrise. "I don't know. I only had half a tab, and it didn't last very long..." His voice receded as he rounded a corner, and began to increase in volume only as he was returning with a glass of water and the capsules. "I think I came down while I was still at Brian's, actually. Remind me not to roll for a while, I feel like shit."

"I can do that. Now, I know it's Sunday morning and all, but do you think we can get some sleep? It's not every night I answer the door and get a bedmate at four in the morning. It's exhausting."

"Oh. OH! Of course, I'm so sorry!!!" Michael apologized profusely, getting back into bed and arranging the covers neatly around himself and his lover. He turned and smiled brightly. "I love you, you know."

Ben nodded and returned Michael's tired but radiant smile. "I love you, too... and I'll love you even more with a couple more hours' sleep."

Temptation

"Justin, do you remember your safe word?"

"Brian, I..."

"Shut the fuck up. This is a yes or no question. Anything else, and you'll be corrected. Am I making myself clear?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Do you remember your safeword?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Do you want to use it now?"

"No, Sir."

"Okay, this is how it's going to work. You don't speak, you don't move, you don't fucking *breathe* without my permission. Say 'Yes, Brian'."

"Yes, Brian."

"Good."

Driven by restrained desire

I want what I need

I've made some serious tactical errors in this game of ours, little boy. I've never had any real competition in my whole life, and the thought of YOU being my most worthy competitor seemed like a joke. You're a kid, an innocent blonde boy with a heart of gold, and I thought I could crush you without a second thought. Fuck, was I ever wrong.

I know I've hit on the truth more than once, that I've said these exact words to your face, even...but somehow, I never realized it, never assimilated the information into the core of my being. It was never a truth, like I need air to breathe, when it should have been. I could blame you and your acting skills for my lack of understanding, but that would be ridiculous - you're not that fucking good. It's my fault, completely my own ego and self-delusion. My belief that nobody could ever touch me went far, far deeper than your ability to prove me wrong. Even AS you were proving me wrong, I wouldn't buy it.

Now I think back to all the times I've hurt you, all the times you've cried, and wonder, how many of those were real? Did I ever step over the line, really? I want to believe I was close - I HAVE to believe that I've been close, because I don't want to think that I've fucked up AND failed. My goal, this whole time, has been simple - break you no matter what it cost me. Prove that I'm the top dog in the pile. Somehow, somewhere, I lost sight of that...lost in a fetish I'd buried so deep down that I'd forgotten it was there.

You make it easy to forget.

James wasn't ever good for much, but he put a scare into me that I would never admit to another living soul. He made me afraid to really be what I am, and that made life so cold...so meaningless. I could feel the punishment, but I couldn't commit the sin. I had a craving that I couldn't feed, so instead I devoured every man in my path, thinking that maybe quantity would make up for quality. Sheer volume would obliterate the nagging itch deep inside, that drive to exercise a spirit in me that feeds on fear and pain. It didn't work. Conquering the bedroom wasn't enough, so eventually my whole personality became ruthless and cruel, callous, unfeeling to all but a chosen few...and it still wasn't enough. There was never enough, no such thing as enough...not until a virgin boy came along and made himself a living sacrifice to my name. You saw the face of God, and I saw my sacrifice in you. I let you keep coming back because I knew there was more in you to take.

As much as I want your love, Justin, I need your submission...The time has come, and we are not leaving this room until I get your real, true, honest admission that I've won. Even if I have to push every molecule of air from your lungs or wring every drop of blood from your veins, this time, I will win. I'll do whatever it takes.

Shaking as the sex takes hold

I've lost all control

Brian has turned his back on me, rummaging through the room with a purpose, and that's left me some time to be alone with my thoughts...which is really the last place I'd like to be.

Do you ever get the feeling you've gone too far? You know, missed a turn somewhere? Like at some point, the road of life offered you a choice between the sensible and the insane, and you waited too long to get off the highway?

I do.

I wish I could tell him that I never meant for it to be this way, but he wouldn't believe me. Not after all the lying, the manipulating...damn, I feel like the boy who cried wolf. I want to tell him that most of those tears were real. Most of those pleas for sanity were real. What I want and what I can actually handle are sooo far apart that they're not even on the same map! When we're here, alone in this bed, I can do things I never thought possible, because it's for HIM. Because he asks me to, demands me to, needs me to. I want to feel pain for him. I want him to make me beg.

As long as the scene is running and the adrenaline is high, when we're coked up or getting our second wind, punch drunk and crazy with exhaustion, it's all good. When he's got me under his spell, and I'm watching his long, beautiful body put me through my

paces, there's nowhere else I'd rather be. The pain is still there, but it's different somehow. You get a taste and you want more, right away, you want it to wash you in fire and paint you in white light until it obliterates everything except his will and your need. The pleasure that comes then, it's annihilating... it's a kickstart to the heart. Every circuit blows, and when you've felt that feeling, you can't put it away and ignore the addiction that makes you want it again and again.

It's just that afterwards, it scares me. Really, really scares me. I know people do things that are worse than what we're doing, but it doesn't feel that way. The movies and books and shit never mention how much it actually hurts when you come down. Cuts don't magically disappear, bruises don't magically heal... some people call sadomasochism "sex magic" because of how it transports you to another time and place... well, I wish they'd save some of that fucking magic for afterwards! It's not the physical pain that's the worst, though, it's having that emotional connection suddenly torn apart when it all ends. It's like having all your nerve endings exposed for another person to play with... when it's all over, you're one person again, cold and alone. Then, the fear breaks loose, and it runs deep and strong. I hear it's not so bad when you discuss a scene afterwards... but let's just say that Brian hasn't really made it his business to get into my head then. I think that's why I've gotten away with acting for so long! He doesn't look beyond the pale, never below the surface to where my voice is steady but my nerves are shot. He never sees the shaking hands, the white knuckles that grip the phone to dial Matt's number from the farthest corner of the dark, empty bathroom. He takes the act I've been flaunting since the bashing at face value, so it's very easy to fool him again. It's not that I've never been afraid, I am fucking terrified of Brian sometimes - he just doesn't know what the real fear looks like.

I don't know what he's looking for, but this isn't going to be pretty... I'm going to save us all a lot of trouble and not pretend to be scared. This is anxiety, yeah, that's it, anxiety. Not fear.

Great, now I'm even lying to myself.

Drowning in a sea of rage

I taste the embrace

He hasn't moved an inch while I've been circling the room, digging out toys that I haven't even thought about in years. He's a much faster learner than I've ever given him credit for, because I think he knows that if he moves a muscle, I'll beat him within an inch of his life.

Of course, that's part of the problem; I'm quick with my fists, just like dear old Dad. It's an impulse, really, and it has nothing to do with this except now I know I can get away with it. I do know how to do this properly, the whole ritualized scene thing, but I don't think he knows that. I've never had much use for the rites and ceremonies, and truthfully, no matter how much I've missed this, the pat answers were something that I wasn't sorry

to give up. All those, "Yes, Master's" reminded me too much of I Dream of Jeannie! I liked it better spontaneous, but I can see now that that attitude has brought me this mess in the first place. Giving myself free rein meant letting my bad habits get the better of me...not to mention that it lets him get away with murder. I won't have that any more.

"Justin! Give me your hands." I yell, snapping him out of whatever daydream he's using as a refuge. If I have to be on him every minute, I will, because he's not getting away with lying to me. Ever. Again.

"Yes, Brian," he murmurs, and his arms come out in front of him, only a slight bit of tension keeping them outstretched. I kick a box over beside the closet, making sure that the edge of the opening has moved beyond Justin's line of sight. No point in tipping my hand before I need to.

He keeps his gaze cast downwards the whole time I'm rummaging through the box, and his eyes don't stray when I throw two sets of cuffs onto the bed behind him. I pick one up from the duvet and hold it in front of his face.

"Look familiar?" I tease as his eyes widen. They should. We were walking through a sex shop, and he was the one who pointed them out. They're gorgeous black leather, very stiff and solid. The store owner said they were better than handcuffs, since no matter how hard you fought against them, they'd flex and not cut into the skin...which wasn't really a concern of mine until he mentioned that police-issue cuffs had been known to cause nerve damage. I think Justin has quite enough nerve damage for one lifetime. The cuffs connect up with a series of clasps and rings, so that you can fasten them together in a wide variety of positions. The thing that intrigued Justin was that the riveted fastenings were closed with small stainless steel padlocks, each with a unique key. Something about that idea, being locked into this leather that had only one obvious purpose, disturbed him. It's not like handcuffs, where even police-issue cuffs are more of a fashion accessory than anything else - these clearly identify you as someone who gets off on being controlled. Fuck, he's still bothered by the idea that people can tell he's queer; the thought of possibly having to go out in public in bondage gear was just too much for him to process...so I let it go, and THAT was my big mistake, ladies and gentlemen: when we'd hit his walls, I'd always let it go. I thought that my boy was an innocent child who needed protecting from my worst instincts.

I know better now.

His eyes never return to their normal, half-sleepy fuck-me height, not the whole time I'm buckling him in. He actually moans when I put the cuff around his left wrist and slide the hasp through the metal fixture...and if I ever had any doubt how much he wants this, I don't anymore. All that time I lost; all those doubts, and regrets, and the apologies that felt so foreign...it wasn't any more real than his helpless innocent routine, but for a while, I almost felt it. For that, he'll pay.

Helpless as it steals my soul

I've lost all control

The cuffs are cold, and they make me shiver, but not like watching him...he's so angry, but it's a different kind of anger than he normally projects...calculating. Cunning, like a fox chasing a rabbit. I do feel like prey...watched...considered...observed like an alien species. He locks the cuffs around my ankles the same way he did my wrists - sort of detached, like he's putting a new padlock on his bike or something.

Once I'm buckled in, he takes a step back and just...looks. I'm not yet bound, just locked tightly inside some bands of leather. I sit nervously, waiting for him to make a move, any move, and let me know what to do next. This is different, having time to be anxious, to wonder nervously if he's really still sane in there. I know how to handle Brian when he's drunk or stoned or ranting like a fucking madman, but this is different. Nothing in this room is bound and chained more tightly than his emotions.

The silence continues, and it's almost like it has an actual weight to it, settling against my chest like a hand pushed against my breastbone. He doesn't move, and I can hardly hear his breathing over my own. I take a chance and peek up at him from under my eyelashes, but there's nothing to read there but a calm, serene smile. I want to say something, but fuck, I'm not that stupid, I understand perfectly that I do not have permission to speak freely, and I'll regret it if I do. Still, I'm desperate to get a read on him now, so I can figure out how to play this right, and the urge is overwhelming.

"Brian..." I whisper, hesitantly, and when I get no response, I raise my head, clear my throat, and say it again. "Brian. I'm scared. Talk to me."

The next minute is in slow motion...I feel the breeze first, and then the back of his hand connects solidly with my right cheekbone, rocking my head back on my neck. For a second, the wind is knocked right out of me, and my own hand rises unconsciously to feel the warmed, red skin that his blow left behind. He doesn't come one inch closer, and the smile never leaves his face, not even when he finally speaks.

"Your mouth does not move unless I tell it to. You do not speak unless I say so. Are we clear on this? Say yes or no."

"But Brian..." I instantly regret opening my mouth when he slaps me again, harder, leaving a burning hot handprint on the other side of my face.

"We will do this until you grasp the concept, Justin." He takes a step closer, and pulls me towards the side of the bed so he's leaning right into my face. "You do not speak unless I specifically ask you to do so." His voice drops one degree, frosting the air between his face and mine. "DO YOU UNDERSTAND?"

I'm startled by his yelling, and try to shrink back into the middle of the bed, but his hand rockets out to grab the back of my neck. "Yes, Brian!" I screech, more out of shock than anything, and he nods absently.

"You'll learn that it's better to obey of your own free will, Justin. I can *make* you do anything I want to, but..." He pats my cheek thoughtfully and smiles. "Let's just say that good little boys are allowed to stick around, and bad boys end up in dumpsters."

My deep shiver of revulsion and fear is followed by a sad, solemn realization: He can make me do anything he wants.

Temptation...

It never lets me down

"On your knees," I command, watching him like a hawk while he shifts onto his knees on the bed. I think about moving him off of it for about five seconds, eventually deciding that the bed will be more comfortable for me, so fuck him if it messes with his balance. Once he's settled again, I just...wait. He's a teenager, a perpetual motion machine by definition, and being forced to think when he's hard and scared is frustrating for him, at best. Not that I've ever felt the need to conceal that I'm looking at him, but this inch-by-inch inspection is new. I never took the time before...frankly, I've never cared that much. Any inspecting I want to do can be done by my tongue with the lights down.

"Lock your hands behind your head," is the next order, and he complies quickly. All of the individual cuffs have D-rings and latches, so I clip them together with the latch from one, and pull his arms back from his head with the other latch.

"I'm hooking this one onto your collar, Justin. Don't get any ideas - that choker is leather, it won't break," I chuckle, looking for the tiny loop I tied into the strands when I put it on him in the first place. "You'll just strangle yourself if you struggle."

I release his hands from my grip, and he immediately tests my theory, wincing as the leather bands close tight around his neck. If he really wrenches it, he'll break the shells, but those leather thongs will cut right into his neck long before they break. I don't think he notices now, but soon, his arms will grow tired in that position, and they'll naturally start to pull against his bonds...which ought to be an interesting battle to observe, if we make it that long.

His ankles lock together much more quickly, no fancy arrangements there, just a matter of latching each cuff to the opposite loop. Now that the logistics have been taken care of, I can pause for another minute or two and watch his uneasiness grow. He'd be much more comfortable if I blindfolded him...so I won't. Behind the fold, he can pretend that I'm busy doing something, or maybe that I'm somehow unprepared for all of this and unsure of my next move. Without the fold, he can't pretend I'm not watching. There's no safety, no security...and that's the way I want him. Unsure. Scared.

This time barely counts as discipline, let alone torture, but he feels it acutely. If I don't let him speak, he can't try to "handle" me. If I don't let him move, or look me in the eye, he can't fish me in. So we wait together in this lethal silence, him hoping for some kind of reprieve, and me waiting for him to fuck up.

I don't have to wait long. "Brian?" he whispers again, interrupting nothing at all, but I feel intruded upon nonetheless. I slap him much, much harder than he expects, but not harder than I intended, and he bows his head instantly. That's what I'm looking for - making it his gut reaction to obey.

"I can give you permission to speak freely, but it will cost you," I murmur, toying with his emotions, watching the conflict dance openly on his face. Eventually he just shakes his head no; whatever he needed to say can obviously wait. "Good. Now stay put, I have things to do." Which is, of course, a huge joke, since he's probably couldn't go three feet if he was paid.

Back to the box of toys I go, not taking my eyes off of him for a second. He's tricky; I know that now. When I'm convinced that he won't be trying anything stupid, my attention goes back to the chest on the floor...full of leather accessories made unusable by neglect. I haven't even looked at this box, other than to drop the new cuffs on top of it, in ten years now, and every last object inside has suffered from the lack of care. It's nothing that can't be fixed; a little oil and some body heat and it'll all be good as new...but that takes time we don't have right now. I sigh and kick the box into the closet, retrieving the narrow belt and the wide belt we've used in the past and cursing my own lack of foresight the whole time. I'm just about to close the closet door when I see another box. The white plastic case calls to me, whispering wicked thoughts, and I take it down without hesitation. Justin needs to be punished for what he's done to me, and now I have the perfect tool.

Temptation...

One foot in the ground

I've never felt this kind of danger before. I've been scared of him plenty of times, but this is different - like the difference between being chased by an angry dog and being stalked by a serial killer. I don't know how to feel, and I don't know what to do to make this better. For all the posturing, this is the first time I've really been under his absolute control, and it's so fucking hot and so disturbing at the same time.

He's been fussing with something in the closet for what seems like forever, so I'm not surprised when he comes back with the belts. He's got two, the wide black one and the narrow brown one, made by Gucci or Prada or someone else who charges too much money for their gear. He throws them down in front of me, and says, "Pick one."

It's funny and strange to look at them, while we're both calm, and know that he's going to use them to hit me...I hesitate just for one second before I choose the wider one, because it spreads the pain over a wider area and just plain hurts less. He's waiting for an answer, but I look up for permission to speak first, since I'm not making that mistake again. My face still burns from the last time I spoke without his approval.

He nods, and I whisper, "The black one, please, Sir." He breaks into a wide smile and tosses the black one back into the closet, and it dawns on me that he doesn't need to fuck me over as long as I keep doing it to myself. He picks up the narrow brown belt, the one that stings like fire, and doubles it in his hand, tapping the opposite palm thoughtfully.

"You have a lot to answer for, Sonny boy. I'm tired of the deceit, the lies...you underestimate me, and I find that insulting." I bow my head, knowing that it's true, and I hear his tapping suddenly pause. "I will give you two choices. You may accept my punishment..." he trails off, sitting in front of me and cupping my chin in his hand. He kisses the top of my head and gently lifts my face so that his eyes can meet mine. "...Or you can accept my anger."

Two choices. Two choices in name only. He's offering me forgiveness - how can I say no?

I want to hold his gaze, and not back down, but I just can't. I close my eyes and inhale deeply, hoping to steel myself enough to say the words. I take two long, deep breaths, and when I'm at least outwardly calm, he lifts my head and says, "Speak."

My response is swift, the words tumbling out of my mouth like a waterfall. "I deserve your anger, Sir; I am here to please you and I have failed. I am worthless in your eyes, below consideration, below sympathy. Please redeem me. Do your worst."

He sighs sadly, releasing my face from his grip so that he can start tapping the belt against his hand again. "Shhh...I've always envied your ability to say exactly what's in your head...now it's your turn to listen."

We exist in a world

Where the fear of illusion is real

His body relaxes slightly on the bed; he thinks he knows what's going to happen now. One quick compliment and he's boneless. I trace my palms down his smooth, pale skin, hesitating on each dark blotch, outlining the worst of the bruises with my fingertips, and then my tongue. Each one of these represents some dishonesty, some deception on his part; some moment when I was manipulated into a gut reaction without stopping to think about its consequences. He moans gently, pulling away from this gentle aching pain, beginning to strain against his bonds as if that matters, somehow. As if what he wants still matters.

I have all the time in the world, and I take it, just touching and tasting, avoiding any patch of flesh that isn't marred by a deep purple bruise. Pretty soon, he starts to get hot just from the attention...and it's not something I need to look for, I can smell it. I can taste it in his sweat, the way he's dying for me to touch his hard, leaking cock. I can feel him begging with his body, pleading with me to please, please just touch him, just once, and bring him a little relief.

I don't.

I watch the tension in his body rise as I increase the pressure on his bruises...watch the sweat break out on his skin as he strains to hold his position...and laugh to myself, knowing that this is only a tiny fraction of what I want him to feel. His eyes are closed, his mouth open just enough that I can see his tongue touching the ridge of his front teeth, and he's already struggling - fighting his body's reactions to stay calm.

Sliding behind his back, I unlock his arms from his collar, noticing the fine red line beginning to cut itself onto the shadows already circling his neck. His hands are still clipped together, and I debate releasing him only for a second.

"Lift your hands over your head and put them in front of you," I suggest casually, laughing when he yelps at the release of the tension in his biceps. So naïve, to think I'd suggest something comfortable! He waits obediently for a new order, the first intelligent thing he's done so far, and I take the back of his neck in my hand and push his face right into the bed. We have work to do.

"Give me your hands," I yell, the volume of my voice in the silent room startling him from whatever little fantasy he was trying to hide in, and grabbing his wrists roughly in mine. He yelps, just a bit, and then relaxes, allowing me to pull his hands off the edge of the bed until his head hangs over the side and only his shoulders rest on the mattress. Hopping off the bed myself, I stand in front of him, watching the muscles in his back and legs flexing gently, needlessly testing the strength of his bonds yet again as he lay crosswise on the mattress. I walk around him quietly, pausing for an eternity of shallow breaths before my hand slides for the belt, out of his range of vision. When it cracks down onto his ass, his scream isn't pain - it's one hundred percent panic. Perfect.

"That was one. I want you to count them off for me, Justin, and thank me after every ten. Are we clear on that?"

"Yes, Sir."

The belt whistles through the air again, the impact leaving a clean red welt behind in nearly a perfect parallel to the first. His voice catches in his throat, and he mumbles, "Two..." then after a moment's pause, he rushes to add, "Sir."

"Very nice, Justin." Eight more lashes stripe themselves onto his back, but only after he coherently counts out the appropriate number... a duty which appears harder and harder

after every stroke. He pants, and wails, and moans between the strikes...low hot growls that go straight to my cock. Despite his protests, we don't run into any major problems until number ten, where he very, very clearly forgets to thank me.

"You ungrateful little bastard! 'Ten, Sir,' isn't good enough!" I bellow, doubling up the belt and raining blows onto his back, ignoring his panicked wailing. Some little part of me is worried about hurting him, but he's acting. I'm sure of it. He's a liar, and I'm not getting suckered again.

And we cling to the past

To deny and confuse the ideal

I lost count. If I live to be a hundred, and someone asks me what's the biggest mistake I ever made, I'll tell them that one day I lost count. I know the second he loses his cool and starts screaming, I mean really screaming, that I'm in deep shit, because I can count the number of times he's actually screamed at me on one hand. And now I AM scared, absolutely fucking terrified, because if Brian has lost it, well...God.

No, I'm not going to think about it, I'm not. I'm just not.

He starts hitting me with that damned belt, over and over again, and my skin is like fire but still he pours it on...harder...faster...making me shriek with every stroke, and then in one long scream... God, make him stop, he has to stop...but he won't. Somewhere in the bottom of my mind, sick and dull, is the thought that he won't stop until I bleed again. Bleed worse. That scares me more than anything else, because there's only one step past what we've already done, and that's dead.

"BRIAN!!!" I screech, finally making my sobbing, injured-animal sounds turn into words. "Stop it! Please!"

He laughs, and runs a fingertip down my spine, leaning forwards to show me the thin mix of sweat and blood collected on his skin. "This is only the beginning, Justin."

I get a chill looking at his hand in front of my face, and when he slides his finger into my mouth, I just feel sick. The taste of my sweat and blood makes my stomach churn, but if I don't do this, I'll be in a world of pain...he knows so many ways to hurt me...

My head is starting to pound from all the blood rushing to my head, and I can't keep track of what's going on...where is he? Sounds come from that side of the bed, but they're all muffled by the whooshing in my ears. The feeling of lube-slicked fingers slipping into me is startling, and I should be relieved, but I'm just more confused. The wet sliding of his stiff, warm fingers against the walls of my asshole...God...It feels so good, so fucking good, but it doesn't hurt. It should hurt. I know Brian and if he's as mad as I think he is, then this should hurt like hell.

I can feel him behind me, unlocking my ankles, spreading me quickly but not too roughly, and I hold my breath for that minute when his dick forces itself into me, waiting to feel anything not right, steeled against a pain that never comes. He slides into me smoothly, to the hilt in one stroke, and the feeling of being filled and possessed is overwhelming. The pain doesn't come until he presses himself onto my back, making a burning hot impression against my bloody, welted skin...his flesh grinding against me like coarse sandpaper, rubbing and rasping against me until I'm crying again from the pain.

He strokes my hair when the tears come, and licks the occasional trickle of blood from my shoulder...and his cock strokes every inch inside of me until I need to come so badly that I can't breathe.

It's so good that I forget that it's just all wrong.

Once inside we conceive and Believe in a God we can't feel

Eventually he relaxes, releasing the tension he's holding deep inside...he's almost ready. Almost ready to come, and almost ready to forget why we're here. Fuck, at this point, so am I.

Jesus Christ, why the fuck can't it be like this every time? He's so tight and so fucking hot inside and the thin, sweaty blood on his back seals us together with flat, sucking wetness. His hole grips me so fucking tightly that the feeling goes straight to my head, like hands around my neck instead of hot, slippery muscles clenching on my cock. Fuck.

He turns his head back to look at me, just for a second, and the look I see there...he loves me, dammit. Jesus fucking Christ. He loves me, and I...and I... I don't think I can do this. Not THIS - I could fuck him until the end of time, and God knows I want to sometimes... but the plan? Fuck. Beating the shit out of him won't work this time. It's never worked before, and it's not going to work now, either. I can see that now.

He's never going to let this go, this stupid desire of his to be a "partner" in my life. Never. He's never going to give in and take his place under me, where he belongs; never going to stop fighting to be an equal when I HAVE no equal. He'll never give up, and he'll never give in, and I won't fucking fight with him about it any more. If I do, it's never going to end! I'll be fucking old and grey and pissing myself in a nursing home somewhere, and he'll still be there, changing my diapers and swearing his undying devotion and going off to fuck the orderlies during my naps. Well, fuck that shit!

From here on in, we're playing a new game. Nobody else could pull this off, but I will. I have to. Nothing else has worked, and fuck it, I give up.

"Justin, roll over. I want to see your face when I'm fucking you."

Destined by a fate so cruel

And drugged to delight

"Oh, God, Brian, fuck me...Please, I have to...please...please..."

"Don't come. Not yet."

"Brian...God...I...I can't...please..."

"I said no!

"But...I can't! I...have...to...please!!!"

"Shhh, just a little...longer..."

"Briannnnn....."

"Okay...then, Justin. Now."

Laughing as these lies unfold

I've lost all control

Brian is just so beautiful when he's all fucked out like that...lips red, eyes rolled closed, sweating in a heap on the bed...I love to watch him, and I always feel a little sad when he jumps up and starts running around. This time's no exception.

"Brian, what are you doing?" I whisper gently, trying to shake some feeling back into my hands. My bad wrist is getting sore from twisting underneath the cuffs. "Come back to bed."

He doesn't answer me, just goes back to rummaging through the closet for something. I try a different question. "Brian? Can you untie me now?"

"No." And then he does something sort of strange - he comes back over to me, and before I know it, binds my ankles back together.

This is really...uh...disturbing. Not an average scene at all. Normally he rushes to untie me the second we're done. I hear his words from earlier running through my head, so dark and full of threats, but...no. The game never, ever goes on after he comes...He must be joking. That's it. "Come on, Brian, my hands are going numb."

"I said no, Justin, I'm not done with you yet. Now shut the fuck up," he says evenly, "And let me show you what I've been looking for."

I don't really know what to do about that command, but...the thought of maybe going again makes me hot, even if I am a little nervous. I curl myself onto my side, waiting to see the "big surprise." When he finally turns around, I'm confused, but not really surprised.

"Uh, those are my headache meds, Brian." He nods in agreement when I identify the small white plastic case that holds the prepackaged disposable needles and little ampules of Depacon. "I'm fine. I don't need them now."

And it's true, I haven't needed them in a really long time. When I first got out of the hospital after the bashing, I was getting migraines so bad they made me puke, and almost every day, too. They tried all sorts of pills, but I couldn't keep them down long enough to work, so they gave me the injectable version instead, and it helped... most of the time. Brian was a lifesaver, sometimes the pain was so bad that I couldn't see to give myself the shot, and he always did it for me. That doesn't explain why he's got it out now, though.

"What are you doing with that?" I ask, struggling to sit up comfortably with my hands and feet still bound. Damn, being chained up like this makes it hard to move!

"It's not for you. It's for me," he says, pulling out one of the wrapped needles and setting it on the night table.

"Why, Brian? Do you have a headache? A bad one?" I press, concerned that he's hiding something that big from me. When did he start getting headaches?

"I've had a headache for a little while now, but not for much longer," he calls on his way out of the bedroom, adding, "Don't go anywhere."

Ha, ha. As if I could. I end up doing what I normally do in the bedroom - I stare at the ceiling, worrying about Brian and trying to figure out what the hell he's doing this time.

He comes back and sets a vial of something on the table, but when I try to ask what it is, he lays right on top of me and starts kissing me...hard and long, like I'm going off to war and he's never going to see me again. I just knew we'd end up going one more time. I lose myself in his kiss, in the feeling of his mouth covering mine, his tongue running along the ridges and bumps of my teeth, and the soft feeling of the warm, wet skin inside his cheek. I breathe from him, sucking air out of his lungs as our mouths melt together and his body weight on my skin heats me up all over again.

When he finally breaks the kiss, I'm panting. "What was that for?"

He smiles a tiny little smile and runs his fingers through my hair. "Please give in, Justin. Say your safe word."

"What? Why? We're not doing *anything* that I want to stop, you know," I laugh, pressing my groin against his pelvis just to feel my hardening cock slide against his.

"I know," he murmurs, looking at me so, so sadly. "Call it a favour. The only time I'll ever ask you for one."

I don't want to deny him anything, especially not anything that will cheer him up when he's being maudlin, but if I give in now, I'll be giving in for the rest of our lives! "I'm sorry, Brian, I can't! Don't you see that that's mine? I can't stop you from running my life, I can't stop you from fucking me...and God knows I've tried a couple of times...but I *can* stop you from taking this. It's my self-respect, Brian, and *you* wouldn't respect me if I gave in, either. If I want to be a man, I have to draw the line somewhere." I try to take a deep breath, but end up just sniffing at the air. "You understand, don't you?"

He nods thoughtfully, and his hand starts stroking my neck. "Yeah, I think I do."

And then he presses on the side of my neck, as if he were trying to squash my pulse.

"What are you doing?" I ask, confused that he keeps pressing. It doesn't hurt or anything, it just feels funny...and it makes my head throb. I get the feeling that something just isn't right, but after everything we've already done, it seems silly and immature to complain about this. If it doesn't really hurt, how bad can it be?

"I can't do this anymore, Justin. I'm sorry..." He nods once, and presses just a little harder on my neck. "Work is too much pressure, and this is too much pressure, and I'm tired of walking around without any dignity. I'm not going to be someone's poster boy for queer marriage," he threatens quietly. "You backed me into a life that I have never, EVER wanted, and I want out."

The tears spring to my eyes almost instantly, and the intensity of my headache suddenly doubles. "You...you want to break up with me?"

His only reply is a cruel laugh, and I'm hurt and angry all in a second. "Fuck you, Brian. Let me go." I try to shake him off of me and regain some kind of leverage, and quickly realize that I can't. Being bound like this makes it very hard to fight against someone who is bigger, stronger, and completely prepared for your moves. He laughs at my bucking and writhing as if it were nothing more than a twitch...the struggles of a tiny fly in a spider's carefully crafted web.

When he speaks, his voice is hard. "Do you take me for an idiot? I've tried getting rid of you a hundred times, but you've pretty much found a way to rebut every objection. If I threw you out, you'd just come crawling back. It's time for a new tactic." His eyes glint coldly. "I'm getting rid of you by getting rid of you."

"What?"

"I want out, Justin, OUT. Out of this shithole town, out of a marriage I never wanted, out of obligations I got talked into, out of everything. That needle is for me. The vial...well, you don't need to know what's in there, but one dose will put me right into sleepyland. There's enough to kill a horse in there."

The room spins, and my vision doubles. "I...I don't understand."

"Justin, you can be as dense as a fucking brick wall sometimes. I'm getting out, and I'm taking you with me. "

Temptation...

It never lets me down

Temptation...

One foot in the ground

It's funny how alike Justin and I can be. All that time when he was acting...and even though I know it wasn't **every** time, it happened more than I want to think about...he was really trying to say something else. He needed to play rough, and he wanted it to be with me. The truth was always there, despite what he said, and if I had looked for it, I'd have seen it right away. Now, the tables have turned, and he's the one unwilling to see the truth. Willing to fight, willing to suffer, willing to endure any consequence so that the illusion of his manhood can be maintained. Like a lamb to the slaughter, he doesn't think I'll **really** hurt him...there are none so blind as those who refuse to see.

He's weakening now, the oxygen deficit in his brain making him tired and slow. Hey, I warned him that I'd been reading, it's not my fault he didn't believe me. Turns out that choking is the least effective way of depriving someone of air...a little carotid pressure makes him think he can breathe even while his brain is suffocating. Choking is nothing but a rookie mistake made in the heat of the moment, and I'm not about to make any more mistakes.

He continues fighting, thrashing and bending to try to slide out of my grip, but it's a lost cause. Slowly, as the struggle uses up the last of the oxygen in his body, the realization crosses his eyes. I can finally see that he knows that I'm not fooling around this time. He makes one last, desperate battle to free himself and then lies still, his big, blue eyes looking right into mine.

"Don't do this," he pleads. "It doesn't have to be this way."

That doesn't merit a reply. This has to be the way I say it has to be.

He sighs, and yawns deeply, forcing me to chase his neck under my fingers. "Do what you want with me, just...please..." his voice slows down, like he has to think hard to find the right words. "Don't kill yourself."

His eyes close, and my heart just...stops. Funny, I still hold his neck, though. I think I'm frozen right into this place and I don't know if I can ever move again. "Justin?"

"Yeahhhh." It's more of a breath than a word.

"I love you, baby."

"Know that. Love...you..." he sighs, and then he's gone.

Temptation...

You satisfy my soul

He's gone. Gone.

Fuck.

The word scurries around in my consciousness like a rat, gnawing away at my heart and making it hard to think. I have to move fast now, time is short and I have to get out of here. I check, and his chest rises and falls once... so he might be okay...not that I'll be around to see it.

I pull out my cell and key in a number while I circle the room, assembling all the bottles and vials from the loft into a small plastic grocery bag and throwing in the needle from the nightstand.

"Hello?" The voice on the other end is faint, tinny, and my voice echoes in the phone and in the dead silence of the loft.

"Justin needs you now. It's an emergency."

"What? Who is this? Brian?"

"Come to the loft. Justin needs you." I click the phone off and toss it on the bed, knowing that where I'm going, I can't be reached - nor do I want to be.

I have to get out before they find him this way.

Temptation...

I've lost all control

Truthletting

"Andrew! Andrew! Wake up!!! I shout, shaking him urgently. "Get up. Brian called. We have to get to Justin!"

Andrew opens one eye, glaring at the ugly little clock radio on the night table. God, I hate hotel rooms! You pay an arm and a leg for a luxury suite, and they still give you a freaking Casio clock radio from 1972.

He closes his eye and rolls back over. "Matt, it's seven o'clock on Saturday morning. I am not alive before ten. Go back to sleep."

"We have to get up!" I shout, hopping out of bed and searching for my underwear, which for some reason is hanging off the edge of the desk lamp. I knew we were eager last night, but...damn. "Something's wrong with Justin. I have to go make sure he's okay."

I think that's finally caught his attention, because he sits up in bed and murmurs uneasily, "Hurt how?"

"Brian."

His face turns ashen, and he shakes his head. "No. Not Brian."

"Dammit, Andrew! YES BRIAN!" I yell, finally losing all patience for the formalities. "Get your ass out of bed and get dressed! I'll go check us out."

"Wait! Matt...why you?" he wonders, scurrying out of his warm cocoon and into the clothes that I've thrown into a pile on the bed. "If Brian was in trouble, why would he call you and not me? And how the fuck did he know we were still in town to clean up after him?"

I stop with my hand on the doorknob as he picks up the phone to check out, wishing to God that my dear, sweet *idiot* of a lover would just get with the program. "Maybe because he wants someone who gives two shits about Justin? I'm guessing he knew we'd be here, since you TOLD him that last night at the bar. I seem to recall you getting trashed and bragging about taking me to some sleazy motel!" I look around crossly, thankful that at least we didn't end up in some dirty and disgusting shack somewhere. "Jesus, Andrew, you are too fucking slow in the morning!"

His face falls a bit at the insult, and I shake my head. "Baby, I'm sorry, I didn't mean that at all. Look, I'm more interested in making sure Justin's okay than anything else...more than starting a witch-hunt, and more than making excuses! He knows that I won't waste time. I'm sure it's not about you."

He hesitates on the phone for a minute, almost as if he's considering my comment that it really isn't all about him. He and Brian are so alike that way it's scary! Finally he hangs up the phone and picks up speed, circling the room in a search for forgotten clothes... not that he'll find any, since we checked in last night with only the clothes on our backs. Gotta love those spur-of-the-moment booty calls! He finishes the search and turns to face me. "It's clear. Let's go. The loft, right?"

"Yeah." He meets me at the door and I grab his hand, pulling him in for a kiss. "Look, I know this must be hard for you, but we have to go and help Justin. Brian could bomb an orphanage, and you'd think it was all right! I don't know what happened, but I know that it's bad and I know I can help Justin without judging him. Please just be supportive."

"I don't even know where to start with that," he replies as we walk down the hall towards the elevator. We wait nervously as the steel doors open, but thankfully, it's fast and it's empty. "I do support you in **anything** you want to do, Matt, but I don't want you to get hurt! I've tried every version of hands-off friendship that Brian will accept, but he's still stubborn and self-destructive. I don't know if Justin will be any different for you, and I don't want to see you waste your life the way I wasted mine...chasing after a damaged soul and settling for second best because the one you want is too fucked up to care."

He...doesn't believe in me, and that makes me so sad. "This isn't like you and James, you know. I don't love Justin. I don't want Justin, and I'm not killing time with **you** while I'm waiting for him!!!" I take a deep breath, trying to keep myself in some sort of control despite my melodramatic tendencies...I can always freak out later if I have to.

"I'm glad," he smiles, and just like that, the matter is closed.

We jog the rest of the way to the car in silence, me trying to guess what we'll find at the loft, and him...honestly, I can't tell what's going through his head, but I feel sorry for him. It seems like everyone had illusions about what Brian was, and they made him into a legend in his own time - Brian Kinney, the fuck'em all queer lothario with a secret heart of gold. Turns out he's just an ordinary, albeit very flawed man, and that seems pretty hard for them to stomach.

We're over halfway to the loft when a sick, sinking feeling settles in my gut. "Andrew, how are we going to get in?"

"So I can finally be of assistance, is that it?" He smiles and produces his wallet from his back pocket. "There's a tiny domed compartment in there. Look inside." I do, and I'm surprised to see a small paper with a code and two silver keys on a tiny black ring. "You have keys to the loft?"

"Yeah, and he's got keys to the house. In case of emergencies." I'm still sitting there in shock, surprised that Brian would be vulnerable to someone like that. No, I'm surprised that Andrew was still carrying a torch for him. Oh, who am I kidding, I'm upset that

Brian has the keys to my home - OUR home - and I didn't know. He looks over, surprised that I'm quiet, I guess, and pats my knee.

"Really, it was just a safety precaution. No ulterior motives...Not anymore. I swear."

I consider that for a minute, and decide that I have to trust him sometime. "Okay. I believe you."

He smiles and points up the block a bit. "There's his building. Take the keys, I'll park."

Time seems to blur as I race out of the car and through the front entryway as if it weren't even there. Six flights of stairs disappear faster than any five minutes on the Stairmaster. The loft door is considerably more trouble, but I take my time with that. Now that I'm here, I don't really want to know what horrible sight is going to greet me on the other side.

My hand shakes, and I feel like I'm about to have a meltdown any second as I put the key into the lock. I pause for a moment, listening for some sound - any sound - that will convince me that everything is okay. "Please be all right, please be all right..." I mumble as the door finally shifts open on the tracks. I want to see, but I don't want to see, and it's killing me.

The loft is cool, dark, and very still. It's like a cave, and I have to squint to see anything by the blue lights emanating from the bedroom. I'd turn on a light if I could find one, but I don't want to take the time. I know where he is. I just know.

I shove down my rising panic, as best I can, and convince my feet to walk towards the bedroom, one step, another step, anxiously listening for any sound that would convince me that he's okay. "Please let him be okay..." I'm still thinking to myself when I finally see him.

He's dead.

I haven't even gone up the stairs yet, but I can tell. You can't look like that and still be alive. My mind starts spinning in circles, the word... dead... dead...repeating in my brain like a broken record. I push myself up one step, but his body looks so battered and bruised that I can't make myself go any closer. He's face-down on the bed, and I can see that his ankles and wrists are still bound and chained together. He never even had a chance.

I want to go closer, want to touch him, feel his hair for the last time, but I can't bring myself to do it. I can't even look anymore! I close my eyes against the horrible vision, trying to make it all disappear. That broken wreck on the bed isn't how I want to remember him. I want to see him smiling and laughing, dancing at his reception or sketching me on the first night we met, with his bottom lip bitten between his teeth. I

don't want to see the oozing, bloody welts and patches of purple-black skin that remind me how he went. I know how, but I'll never understand why.

I'm already sniffing hard, barely keeping it together here. I need Andrew. Where the hell is he???

I sit on the top step, my head in my hands, and wait to hear his quick but deliberate footsteps on the stairs. He pauses at the loft door, and I look up to him with tears in my eyes.

"Well?" he asks breathlessly.

"Andrew, we're too late. He's dead."

"Fuck. No way," he murmurs, and somehow, his shocked disbelief finally makes it all **real** to me. I burst into tears, crying like a little girl at the loss of my friend. Andrew crosses the loft and pulls me to my feet, guiding me across the room to the couch and helping me settle myself. He sits beside me, pulling me into a tight hug that just makes me cry that much more.

After a couple of minutes, he sniffles a little and I realize that he's crying too. "Are... are you sure?" he chokes out, a tear escaping from the corner of his eye. "I mean, did you... check..."

"I couldn't! I can't! I don't want to see him like that..." I trail off. "You saw what I saw. He looks awful. I don't want to disturb the..." Another wail shakes my body, and I take a deep breath to sob, "...crime scene..." before the weeping steals my voice again.

"Shhh, okay baby, all right. We'll go do all that stuff in a minute. You have to calm down, sweetheart, just a little bit," he soothes. "Can you do that for me?"

"I wish I could have told him how much I cared about him..." I choke out between pathetic girly sobs, my tears soaking the soft, cottony fabric of Andrew's shirt. He pats my hair softly.

"He knew how you felt. I'm sure of that." He pauses, then pats my hair again. "I'm sorry he's gone. He was a good kid."

His words make me cry that much harder and now I can't stop. I try to control myself, try to choke it back until my head feels hot and my nose is runny and sore, but I just can't help it. It feels like forever until he clears his throat. "Umm...I hate to say this, but I really think we should call the police now."

"No. Not yet! I didn't get to say goodbye..." I say, struggling to free myself from the corner of the couch. "Come with me?"

"Okay." And he pulls me to my feet, holding my hand tightly in his and leading me back across the loft. Up the stairs we go, one at a time, and it feels just like walking up to a coffin at a funeral. I want to see him, but I don't want to see him like that.

"Holy shit..." he murmurs softly, trailing off at the sight of Justin's battered body under those damned blue lights. I try to approach the bed more than once, but I just can't bring myself to do it. Finally Andrew steps away from me, and goes over to kneel beside the bed.

"Poor kid," he whispers, reaching out to touch a black-and-blue patch on his cheek. "Never had a chance, did you? All you did was love him." He pulls his hand away, and looks at me sadly. "How long have we been here? He's still warm."

What a horrible thought, that soon he'll be no warmer than the room we're in, all his heat and vitality gone...oh God, I can't take this. I don't even feel myself hit the floor - I just know that I'm down there and crying again.

Andrew is still hovering near Justin, saying a quick little prayer for him...I guess old habits die hard. He leans in to give him a last kiss on the cheek, and sits back in alarm.

"Fuck, he's breathing! Get over here, Matt. NOW!" he yells over his shoulder, turning back to Justin when he's done. "Justin, wake up. Come on...open your eyes. It's okay. Wake up."

Something changes in the room, and I finally hear it for myself - he's breathing. God, thank you God, he's still breathing. I rush over to the bed and sit beside him.

"Justin, sweetie, wake up for me. Please wake up!"

The moment when he stirs and opens his eyes is the happiest moment of my life. I feel like I just snatched him back from the brink of death, all by myself.

"What? What's wrong?" he murmurs sleepily, tugging feebly at his wrists, forgetting that he's still bound, I guess. "Matt, what are you doing here?"

"Justin, you little shit, you scared the living fuck out of us! What the hell is wrong with you???" Andrew exclaims angrily.

"What?" he says groggily, shaking his head. "Why are you yelling?"

"Dammit, Justin, get out of bed!" Andrew rants...He's trying to sound all bad and tough, but I can tell he's as relieved as I am.

Justin closes his eyes and opens them again, trying to focus on our faces in the near-dark. "I was asleep, IN MY OWN BEDROOM, and you wake me up and start yelling at me!" He wiggles himself up to a sitting position, and yawns deeply. "Where's Brian?"

"We thought you were dead, sweetie..." I sob, sitting beside him and pulling him into a hug that, for obvious reasons, he can't return. "Brian called, and he said something was wrong, and we rushed right over and you were lying here and I couldn't hear you breathing and you looked so awful-"

"Wait." He shrugs my arm off of his shoulders and looks me in the eye. "Brian's not here?"

Andrew answers for me. "Nope."

"Fuck. FUCK!!!" He yells crossly, pulling again at his wrists. "Andrew, go and get the keys for the cuffs, they should be in a small leather box in the closet. Matt, find me some clothes. We have to go find Brian."

"Again with Brian. Everything's all about Brian!" I yell, sliding off the bed and walking over to his drawer. "He nearly killed you, Justin, I think it's time to let Brian have some, 'me-time.' In JAIL!"

"You don't get it, Matt, so don't fucking start with me. Damn, my head hurts! Andrew, are we making progress with finding those keys yet?" He fires off sentences in rapid succession, giving orders like a battlefield commander...Great. We have our very own mini-Kinney.

"Found them," Andrew says, bringing the tiny keys over to the bed. "They were all in a pile in the closet. Which one goes where?"

"I don't know, they're not marked. You'll have to try them all." Justin turns to me, suddenly a big ball of nervous energy. "Matt, where the fuck are my clothes?"

I'm tempted to go twice as slow, listening to him bark orders at me like that, but I don't. Besides, I don't need to make excuses to be slow - he's got everything he owns jammed into one drawer! Not to mention that finding blue clothes under the blue lights is like trying to see pepper in the dark. Eventually I track down his clothes and throw them at him, saying, "There, your Majesty. I still say let the cops find Brian. He's psychotic."

He shakes his head angrily, visibly losing his temper. "No! We have to go and find him right now. All of this shit," he yells, shaking off a cuff as Andrew finds the right key, "It's all play. Pretend. Brian likes to scare me, and he does the dumbest things to try and teach me a lesson." His other wrist cuff comes off, and Andrew moves to his feet while Justin is struggling to get into his t-shirt. He hisses when the fabric touches the welts, but seems to shake it off.

"Some lesson," Andrew mutters from Justin's feet, and I almost laugh to see him trying not to look at Justin's half-naked body. Almost.

"Jesus, guys, I know it looks bad, but let it go. Brian's the one we have to worry about right now. I'm not a murder victim! It's just a game with me, but when it comes to him, he plays for keeps, all the time. Every time. He won't pull any punches." With two cuffs already gone, unlocking the other two goes much more quickly and Justin is soon yanking on the rest of his clothes.

"Justin, can you please tell us what the fuck is going on?" Andrew says, grabbing his shoulders to look him in the eye. "We'll take you wherever you need to go, but first, you have to tell us what happened."

"It's hazy," he admits, dropping his eyes guiltily to the floor. "We hadn't slept in a long, long time, and when we came down from the E...and then the whole Michael thing...I guess we got into an argument. He...uh...he didn't know about some of the things I've been doing behind his back, and it made him really angry at himself." I'm sure that Andrew and I have both cocked our heads in confusion, but he rushes to try and explain. "That's why I'm worried! He thinks he corrupted me. What he did to me was symbolic, but what he's going to do to himself is real." And with that, he takes off for the bathroom, opening and closing drawers and cabinets like a madman and swearing all the while.

"He's got the drugs. All of them." I've barely recovered from my crying spell, and he's racing around the loft, sliding on his sock feet when he rounds the corner from the bathroom to the kitchen. Dead man to Olympic sprinter in fifteen minutes - that must be some kind of record. His muttering carries from the kitchen cabinets all the way to the bedroom. "He's got at least one bottle of Beam, too. Fuck."

"Justin?" Andrew says gently, hoping to stop the tornado just for a minute. "I want you to stand right where you are and tell us what you want us to do."

"Brian is going to..." He glares icily, like he can't believe he associates with such dullards, and shakes his head. "Fuck, we haven't got time for this! Let's go. I'll explain on the way."

My Way Out

"Hey, Linds...let me talk to Gus. No, I don't have time for that, Linds... I can't... I'm not kidding. I have to go away...yeah, I'm an asshole, I know. A huge fucking disappointment. No. Lindsay, no, I'm fine. I can't talk anymore...Just tell Gus...tell him I love him. Bye."

"Justin, you have a lot of explaining to do..." Andrew sighed wearily as the car zoomed out of the city, passing farmers' fields and small hamlets on the way to the country house.

"I know, I know. Just shut up and give me some time to think," Justin replied testily from the backseat, leaning his head back onto the headrest behind the seat in his frustration.

"I can't believe some of the shit you've pulled, you know," the older man continued, piloting the car with a minimum of interest in the task. Instead, he concentrated on staring into the rear-view mirror with an angry glare. "You're supposed to be the stable one, you should never have let it get to this!"

"Right, and this is ALL my fault." Justin met his pissy gaze in the mirror. "It's not like I got a handbook called, 'How To Deal With a Suicidal Brian.' I'm not perfect. I have to make it up as I go along."

Matt turned towards the back from his position in the passenger seat. "Honey, maybe you can't deal with it anymore. Maybe he needs professional help."

Justin laughed bitterly and scrubbed his face with his hands. "Jesus, you don't need to tell me that! Of course he needs professional help, but he doesn't WANT it. Any therapist is going to tell him to lay off the drugs and keep the tricking to a dull roar, and he doesn't want to do that. Fuck, I don't know if I want that from him!" Justin sighed wearily, and a strained hush fell over the car. Sensing that the other men were waiting for something more, he spoke again, but quietly, his voice near to breaking. "I just want him to be happy! I don't want him to change...well, I do...Okay, I'm still working on what I want from him. I thought I'd have more time. I never expected for this to happen again."

Matt made sympathetic clucking noises, and they all fell silent again. Finally, Andrew asked him the one thing he'd been dying to know, his worry betraying itself in the harshness of his voice.

"Okay, you said you've been through this before. Fine. Exactly how many times has he tried?"

Justin shook his head as if to ward off the question, but eventually just closed his eyes and answered tactfully. "Tried to kill himself? That I know of? Six."

"What???" Matt and Andrew replied in unison. Andrew fell silent, but Matt kept up the questioning. "Honey, that can't be right."

"Sure it is." Justin's tone became more bitter than weary as he started counting off the attempts. "The bracelet hides the time he slit his wrist when he was 14, right before he met Michael. So that's one. He overdosed in college when James made him leave you, Andrew, so that's two. I really wish he hadn't done that, the fact that he didn't die made him think he's fucking invincible..."

"He...he did that?" Andrew stammered. "Fuck. I didn't know."

Justin sighed and kept counting, almost oblivious to having been interrupted. "There have been a couple more overdoses since I've been around...okay, three...then there was the whole scarfing thing, don't even get me started on that. This will make seven."

Matt furrowed his brow in thought, going over the explanation and finding plenty of holes. "I'm not even going to ask how you found out all of this background information from Brian, when we all know that it would be easier to squeeze blood from a stone. That's not why I have a big problem with your story, Justin. My problem is that you're telling me you've let him overdose on your watch at least three times."

"I'm not proud of that! The first time I was scared, and I didn't know, okay! I can't even take Tylenol without getting sick; I didn't know anything about all those drugs! I thought he knew what he was doing. The other times...well shit, I'm not a psychiatrist. I just didn't see it coming because I didn't know it was a pattern."

Andrew sighed. "Right. Because we all know that someone who tries twice SURELY isn't going to try again."

"Maybe I was just hoping it would all go away!"

Matt tilted his head as if engrossed deeply in thought. "He seems so strong. Strange to think of him as a suicidal head case."

"DON'T SAY THAT!" Justin screeched sharply. "He believes in his own infallibility. Making mistakes and showing weakness are crimes punishable by death. He's got a warped world view, but that doesn't make him crazy!"

Justin paused for a minute, and when he had regained his sense of calm, he continued his thoughts. "If I were older and more experienced when we started all of this, I would have known better. I wasn't street smart, I wasn't wise to the ways of the world...I was a seventeen-year-old virgin from the suburbs! Maybe I didn't handle it right. Maybe I didn't handle HIM right. I don't know. All I know is that the stakes are high and I need you two to shut your fucking mouths so that I can have some time to think!"

Andrew shook his head sadly and sighed. "Justin, maybe he's just tired of being handled."

I can't fucking do this anymore. I'm tired. I'm tired of being backed into corners, and tired of fighting for things that I'm not sure matter to anyone but me. Tired of being lonely and misunderstood, tired of behaving like the badly-written tragic hero of an after school special. I AM Brian Kinney, for fuckssakes, and I deserve better. I refuse to do this anymore.

It's not a huge fucking thing, either. It won't take long, and nobody will really care that I'm gone. I have a fan club, so fucking what? My family sure as fuck won't waste their time sobbing over my grave. Well, maybe Claire will, but it's not like I fucking care about HER either way. She'll cry over anything, and her suicidal queer brother will probably just be a great story for her therapist.

I don't need to worry about Mikey, either, he's got the Professor now. Besides, Mikey hates me anyways. Just add our little tryst to the long, long list of fucked up bullshit that I should have known better than to pull. He's a giant pain in the ass, but he didn't deserve that...and I let it all happen. It's my fault that he got hurt. It's my fault that everyone gets hurt.

I let fucking Justin loose on everyone. He's like a demon, I called him out by name and now he's here and haunting everyone...He's so fucking determined to break me down that he'll bulldoze anyone in his fucking path. He doesn't really care who gets taken out, as long as I'm the prize at the end of the course. He's got a one-track mind, and that's something that I actually respect about him. Nobody can knock him off course, not his fucked-up father, not Chris Hobbes and his Louisville Slugger, not even me. This? This won't scar. He never scars. Lucky, lucky him.

He was determined to have me at any cost, to pay any price, to demand that anyone and everyone should give him what he wants and then get the fuck out of the way. Would I have let him in if he weren't so damn determined? Fuck, no. Not even close. If there was any other choice available, I would have made it. Yes, I'm sure I would have been able to say no if he just didn't come around as much. If he didn't...if he wasn't...what the fuck is it about him, anyway? He manipulates and he pushes and he threatens...he pretends and lies and cheats. He steals what he needs and takes what he wants, and *I* fucking made him that way. I let him think I was worth fighting for. Worth the effort. It's not wrong that he tried; it's not even wrong that he hurt so many people along the way. It's wrong that I let him do it.

I don't know what the fuck I was thinking...I stood by while he ruined his values and beliefs. It's been happening for so long that I can't even remember when, or how, we got into this sick little game of one-upmanship...only it wasn't "up" we were going. We were competing to see who could go further down...whose limits could be ignored, erased...who would take the most abuse, who could manoeuvre the other into being the most unlike himself. Now he's nothing like himself and I'm nothing like myself, and I don't think we can go on that way. He shouldn't have to, and I just...can't.

It's insane the way we've come to depend on the pain. I like hurting him. Fuck that, I love hurting him. I love seeing him in agony, and he loves it as much as I love doing it to him. I like to see him marked. I like to make him cry. Just like dear old Dad, I'm a fucking sick man, and I can't stop.

I can't stop.

I can't do it anymore, but I can't stop. I fucking need that. I've had everything that any man has to offer, but it's not what I want. I want that. I want him. I need him.

I'm fucking sick.

Okay, this has happened before. We got through it then, and we'll get through it now. Think, Justin, think, what did it this time? What is it that pushed him that little bit too far?

It's not like I haven't done enough to make him uncomfortable, but it has to be something more! I mean, it has to be bigger than the little melodrama that has been going on lately.

I think.

I can guess until I'm blue in the face...okay, maybe that's a bad choice of words...but when this has happened before, I've never **really** known what the trigger was. Sometimes it's big, sometimes it's small, but either way, the cause is usually completely illogical. Maybe it changes. Maybe HE changes. I feel like I'm tap dancing around land mines... constantly... because it's never that far below the surface and never that long before it happens again.

He's a dark man. I love that about him. The intensity, the passion...zero to a hundred in less than a second, all the time. It's amazing. In that white-bread suburban hell where I grew up, people weren't supposed to have "emotions." My mother is very much respected throughout our social circle because she can paste a frozen smile on her face no matter WHAT is going on. She could be running a PTA bake sale or shooting a burglar in the middle of the night, and she'd look exactly the same. Polite, aloof, sort of amused but not really engaged. Untouchable. When you see it enough, you can see how fake it is, how forced. Rigor mortis of the soul.

Brian's not like that. He tries to stay detached and above it all, but he just hasn't got the hang of it. It wasn't bred into him. Even though he has the stone face, there's just...an intensity... simmering somewhere below the surface. His eyes burn with it, and it gives him away. When his awareness is directed at you, it's the most amazing feeling in the world, like an all-consuming electrical storm strumming across your nerves. He makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up just by walking near me. I feel him.

Even though I can always feel him, sometimes he's not easy to see. Not in body, but in spirit, he has this habit of...disappearing?...hiding away in himself. Pushing it all deep down inside. I can tell something is going on, but not what; he becomes impenetrable and the search for **anything** resembling emotion is completely exhausting. After a while, I get tired of guessing and tired of assuming and it feels like I imagined the whole thing. Does he care about me? Does he care about himself? Is he okay? Who can tell anymore?

I have to figure this out. I feel like I **should** know what's wrong, like he's been telling me something all along and I just don't get it. Am I really that stupid that I can't figure him out? How can I say that I love him and I know him and not have any idea why he's being so...

Oh, shit.

I am such a fucking idiot.

"Andrew, do you think he'll ever forgive me?" Justin's quiet plea seemed to echo in the silence of the car. Matt had fallen asleep on the drive back to the farmhouse, and for the last hour, they had ridden in a contemplative but uneasy silence. Justin wasn't willing to waste the last half hour of their trip when he needed to crystallize some ideas.

"Forgive you? Look, Justin, I'm having trouble staying on the same page as you today. You're worried that Brian is going to kill himself, and you barely break a sweat. Then you sit and brood and decide that he might not forgive you for something, and you have a panic attack? I just don't understand where that came from. Besides, those things aren't even in the same league, honey."

Justin nodded, sitting forwards to try and make eye contact with Andrew in the rear view mirror. "Yes, they are. If you think about all the things I've done wrong, with him and to him and because of him, there are too many to name...As much as this **can** be someone else's fault, it's mine. I don't think he'll ever forgive me for hurting him like this. If he's hurting himself, then I made him do it."

Andrew considered that comment briefly, looking away from the mirror to shield himself from Justin's hurting eyes. "You pushed your way into his life, and he's come to like having you around, but neither of those things are a crime, you know. I'm not incredibly impressed with your behaviour right now, but I can't let you blame yourself for everything."

"But it IS my fault."

"I don't think so. You made him love you, Justin, and you know how he feels about that sort of thing. That opens him up to so much pain...Being vulnerable to you might just be a bigger adjustment than he can handle right now, but that still isn't your fault. The fault for that belongs to the people who helped to damage him."

"That's what I worry about, that he might not ever be able to accept me being in his life," Justin confided, resting his chin on the back of Andrew's seat. "Seriously, I stay awake at night thinking about this sometimes. I can deal with him being angry, I can deal with him trying to ostracize me, but when he's scared, he just shuts down. I can't fix this if he won't open up!" After hours of cool, calm, and collected, Andrew was surprised at Justin's sudden anger. "This isn't easy for me, you know!"

Andrew shushed Justin, pointing towards Matt sleeping in the passenger seat. "After the night we had, Matt needs some rest, so just shush!" Justin's eyebrow raised, and Andrew relented slightly.

"Fuck, I'm sorry. I just don't know what to tell you, okay? I think it's perfectly clear that I've never really known how to deal with Brian. When we were young, we were just playing house. He thought he loved me, I thought I loved him, yada yada. You know how well THAT ended. My love life has basically been me stumbling from disaster to

catastrophe and back again...I didn't know what real love could be like until I found Matt, and frankly, I'm new at it. I don't have one bit of useful advice for you except for what Matt has told me."

"What did he say?"

"He...well...I don't know how to...Look, maybe it's not what he said, but how he said it. A year ago, I would never have even considered looking at him twice. Too young, too pretty, too hopeful. I'd lived in a bad relationship for ten years, and I thought I didn't have anything to give. I mean, James and I...we shared a house, we shared a bed, but that was all. Two complete strangers in the same home."

Justin nodded with some understanding, prodding Andrew to continue. "So, that's what I thought love was like, okay? A lie people told each other to get laid, or a daydream that you just couldn't let go. At best, I figured it was a convenient living arrangement and nothing more. Knowing that I'd fallen for a lot of pretty words and empty promises didn't change my mind one bit - I felt like the biggest idiot in the world for believing that he loved me. After we broke up, I would have been content to fuck every queer in the tri-state area until I couldn't pull them anymore. I think I actually told Matt that much."

"Sounds familiar."

"Humph, that's what Matt said."

"You older men are all the same."

"Very funny. I'm trying to give you advice here, so will you shut the fuck up and listen? He said to me, 'I'm 23. You're 33. We haven't got much in common. It's going to be an uphill battle all the way, but you're worth loving and to me, you're worth fighting for. You can say what you want about caring for me, but this isn't going to go anywhere until you decide if YOU are worth being loved.' Justin, that's where Brian is right now...he needs to decide if he's willing to *be loved*, and he has to do that all by himself. I don't know if you can do anything to change that."

"I know." Justin leaned his elbows on his knees and put his head in his hands. "I know that, I swear. I just...Whatever happens, there's something I need to tell him."

"Mikey, where are you? Shit...I fucking hate your machine, by the way. It's...fuck...it's after ten. I'm...uh...I'm going away...I wanted to say goodbye before I left. See ya."

Silent Lucidity

Hush now, don't you cry
Wipe away the teardrop from your eye...

I think now it's time to admit, at least to myself, that I wasn't really a hundred percent sure that Brian would go to the farm. Call it a spark of insight, or a gut feeling, maybe, but when I closed my eyes at the loft, I could see him going there in my mind, and I jumped. If I'm on the right page here, and God, I'm praying that I am, then he'll go to the farmhouse for closure.

Suddenly, I have another flash of intuition, and my eyes turn towards the house. "Andrew, you have our keys, and he has yours, right? Keys to the garage?" I ask briskly, enduring the potholes from the millionth gravel road of the day. Dammit, why is this taking so long?

"They were on the ring," he affirms, "But we never use the garage. I don't think he would..."

"He's not using it to park, you moron! He just found a new way to go. He's tried slashing his wrists, and hanging, and overdosing, and it's never worked...I think he moved on to something new, and symbolic. Asphyxiation."

They both shudder and protest, I simply tune them out... it feels right. One way or another, what started here will end here. Either I came in time to stop him, or he went somewhere else and I blew it.

The car doesn't move fast enough, going up the farm's long, lazy driveway, and it makes me even more anxious. I feel like piano wire that's strung too tightly, ready to snap at the barest of extra pressure.

Andrew and Matt are still in the front seat, physically, but in my mind, they're already gone. I'm here for one reason - to tell Brian what he needs to know - and I feel like time is growing short.

I don't see the jeep outside; the lane is empty aside from Andrew's Jaguar and Matt's little sport coupe thingy. I would really, really like to start panicking now, but if I do that then all hope will be lost for sure.

"Let me go in there alone."

Andrew and Matt both shake their heads no, and Matt says, very firmly, "You'll just fall over dead yourself. Wait until we can get the door open."

See, now that would be the safe and logical thing to do, but it won't work. "Brian told me that he would always come for me, no matter what, and I have to show him that I'll always come for him too. Let me handle this by myself."

Andrew groans in frustration, and turns to stop me from getting out of the car. "Forget it. I'm coming in there with you."

"No, you're not. I need to get in there now. Think about it...His attempts never actually work, do they? If he's alone, it's really half-assed, and if he's with someone, he never chooses a way that can't be undone. That's his plan, but it only works if I get to him in time. Wish me luck."

With that, I hop out of the car and jog towards the garage, leaving their protests behind and praying that I called the shot right this time.

You're lying safe in bed
It was all a bad dream
Spinning in your head...

He's in the Jeep. How the fuck did he get into the Jeep with me? One minute, I'm sitting by myself...alone, not lonely, *never* lonely... euphoric, in a cloud of thin grey smoke...and the next he slips through the door like magic. Magic isn't real, so he must not be here. Ghost Justin smiles and pops the front seat down to the horizontal so he can sprawl out on it. He doesn't say anything to me, but that's okay because I don't believe in ghosts anyways. I take another hit off the joint, suddenly wondering if it's laced with something. Maybe Anita should have charged extra for this bag.

I feel my face moving, and as he cocks his head to the side, I realize that I must have asked how he got here. I was saying stuff out loud. Who knew? I squint very hard to make my ears work better, and he repeats, "Andrew unlocked the garage door, and then I used the spare keys."

Oh, okay, that explains...nothing at all. "How did you know I was here?"

He's got this giant fucking grin on his face, but his words aren't triumphant or snotty at all. "Didn't, not for sure. I just had to trust my instincts." He shifts further onto his side, and I try to process the information coming at me. He's in the front, lying across the seat...okay, that means I'm in the back. It's hot - too fucking hot. The heater is blowing on maximum, and the air is rancid with thickening smoke and exhaust. In fact, the smoke is so dense that I can't see him very clearly. Maybe that's why I thought he was a ghost... or maybe not. Who the fuck knows what's in this shit Anita gave me.

He coughs and presses his face against the seat. "Do you think we can turn the car off? It's too hot in here."

I watch him watch me for what seems like an eternity, a slow motion moment in an old, silent movie. I'm sort of hazy on this point, but I think I had the car on for a reason... not the heat...something to do with the smoke. Wanting the smoke, wanting to be in a warm, cloudy room where I could just go to sleep and everything would be wonderful and all fixed in the morning...those things go together, and if I could remember how, I would know why his suggestion makes me suspicious. If I weren't so fucking tired, I would

understand why the car being turned on has something to do with me being happy. Or not happy. Whateverthefuck.

The problem is, I *can't* remember, so I just sit still.

"I'll take that as a yes," he murmurs. He sits up to turn the key and slide it out of the ignition, and I see his hand unintentionally flex, allowing the keys to drop out of his hand and hit the floor. He looks at his hand in dismay, and I recognize that expression all too well.

"S'alright, Sunshine, it was just a spasm." It's an automatic response, but he turns back to look at me anyway, knitting his brows in some indecipherable emotion...then again, they're all pretty much indecipherable to me, aren't they?

"Brian? Do you care that my hand is fucked up? I mean, you don't think I'm damaged goods, do you?" he says solemnly, working his wrist around in tiny circles as if that'll somehow fix the injured part of his brain.

I can't decide if he's serious or not, bugging me about *that* when I'm pretty sure I was in the middle of something else...something important. I refuse to try to work up a pep talk for poor wittle Justin right now. I was busy thinking about my pathetic life when he barged in here, and if I wasn't so drained...I mean, if my head didn't hurt so much...I'm so fucking exhausted! It's been...fuck...two days since the last time I slept? That can't be right. I shake my head, and he takes that for an answer again.

"Okay."

He sits up and yawns, stretching in an exaggerated way. "Hey, can we go upstairs and go back to sleep? I'm so tired today."

He's so tired. He's so tired? Join the fucking club, Sunshine. I CAME here to sleep. I need to sleep for a long, long, long time. You're the one that's interrupting!

"I'm sorry about that, I just don't want to stay in the Jeep, Brian," he apologizes, answering those mysterious loud thoughts I keep having. He grabs my hand, and sort of tugs. "Can we go upstairs? Please?"

Why the fuck not. He always gets his way anyways.

"Whatever." He exhales deeply and smiles, and before I know it, he's wrapped around me in some clean white bed, and I can finally fall asleep.

Your mind tricked you to feel the pain
Of someone close to you leaving the game of life...

Justin comes racing down the stairs, not ten minutes after he dragged Brian up them. "Justin! Slow the fuck down before you kill yours-" Andrew yells, but cuts himself off from using that particularly accurate turn of phrase.

"Fuck off, Andrew. The drugs are missing. Every damned pill in the loft was gone when we left, and I have to try and find them." He flies through the kitchen, flinging open the door to the garage so hard that the handle leaves an imprint on the wall. We can hear slamming and banging in the garage, and after a few minutes he comes back triumphantly carrying a large plastic bag. He dumps it out on the kitchen table and starts sorting bottles like a well-trained pharmacist, peering into them to check the level on the pills inside.

"Xanax...one, two...Valium... one, two, three...okay, they're all here. Tylenol with codeine, Tylenol without codeine, aspirin, ibuprofen..." he counts out, hastily throwing the bottles back into the bag as he goes.

"Justin, what are you doing?" I can't help but ask, and he smiles sadly, pausing in his inventory.

"Asking Brian what he took is like asking a waiter what's on the menu. It's usually faster to count up what he DIDN'T take and go from there."

Wow. I can see the logic, but there's something so profoundly fucked up about it all that I just don't know what to say. Justin's counting again, moving from labelled prescriptions to vitamins to small amber bottles containing God only knows what, mumbling the name of each one under his breath and eyeing the level before dropping it into the bag. The accounting seems to take an eternity, but I know that for anyone else, this process would take hours, and again, I feel sad that **this** is his life.

Andrew seems a little more nonchalant about the whole thing, but even HE is startled when Justin opens a white plastic box and starts a brand new inventory.

"One, two, three, four, five, six..." he mumbles, and Andrew freaks out.

"NEEDLES?!? What the FUCK???" He grabs Justin's shoulders and almost, **almost** starts to shake him, sputtering in anger. "If you two are doing smack, I'll kill you with my bare hands, you stupid little fuck."

Justin glares and twists out of his grip, not even bothering to lie. "Andrew, grow the fuck up already. You don't know everything about us, and it's going to stay that way."

I swear to God that Andrew's going to punch him out, but I catch his eye and he steps back - at least he has the decency to look somewhat embarrassed. Justin continues, "Anyway, these needles aren't for that, they're for my headache meds. I'll talk to you about that if you want, but later. I have more important things to do right now." Andrew backs away, frustrated, probably looking to go and kick something. Justin returns to the inventory.

"Okay, seven needles, seven amps of Depacon, and one vial of God knows what. As far as I can tell, it's all here."

Andrew grunts and leaves the room altogether, looking like he'd really like to smack Justin around for a bit...so I decide to give him a little space. I sit at the table and help move the rest of the bottles back into the bag.

"So you think he's going to be okay?" I venture, looking at all the pretty, pretty poison in the small amber bottles.

"I don't know. We lucked out - he didn't take anything. He was too tired to hurt himself."

"But not too tired to hurt you. He almost killed you, Justin."

"Jesus, Matt, is that what you think? It's just a game. He held his hand against my throat until I passed out." He pauses to double check the table for stray pills. "It turns him on, but it really scares him, too. He's always sure he's going to do some kind of permanent damage...but I know that he went looking for a safer way to put me under than he used to use, so I guess that's a good sign? I don't know. I *went under* because of him, but I stayed asleep because I was fucking tired."

"So I freaked out for nothing?"

"Not for nothing, Brian set you guys up to find me like that...and freak out...to give himself enough time to come here. I still can't believe he made it in one piece. He was too tired to think by the time I found him."

"You're telling me that nearly comatose guy you dragged up the stairs was 'just tired'?" I press, hoping that I sound as skeptical as I am. "I don't buy it."

"Well, you should. Brian almost never sleeps. Like, we're talking a couple of hours a night. He sleeps really late on the weekend sometimes to make up for it, but it's not enough."

"Being tired doesn't make you suicidal, Justin."

He ties up the bag by its handles and glares at me, giving me that "I can't believe you're so stupid" look again. "Well, it sure as fuck doesn't help! Sometimes things don't look so bad after eight solid hours of sleep, but Mr. Perfect up there doesn't know that because he won't relax for that long. He can't get to sleep, and then he can't stay asleep when he does." He sinks down into a chair, and suddenly looks pretty damned tired himself.

"You know how messed up you get when you've pulled an all-nighter? You're not hungry, you drink more coffee, you smoke more...you feel like if you don't keep moving, you'll just fall over."

I nod. I've had my share of sleepless nights.

"Well, Brian walks around like that *all* the time. How long would it take you to go completely insane, being strung out all the time? Five days? Two weeks? Six months? He's been doing it for years and years...and when he's tired, his impulse control is the first thing to go."

I guess. "You know, Justin, I think that's the most sense you've made all day."

He bows, saying, "Happy to help. Now, can you please throw that bag under your bed until we leave? I don't really want all this stuff hanging around in plain sight. No sense tempting fate."

I nod, and he deposits the bag gently onto the counter. "I'm going upstairs. Brian's still asleep - I'm hoping he'll stay that way, at least long enough for me to take a nap."

"Are you going to talk to him when he wakes up?"

He shrugs, and sighs. "I want to...no, I have to. This can't keep happening, because if it does, neither of us will survive."

So here it is, another chance
Wide awake, you face the day
Your dream is over... or has it just begun?

I wake up before Brian does - pressed tightly against his chest with his arms wound around me, safe and warm in my favourite place. I lie there, entwined with him, for several sleepy moments before it hits me all at once - suddenly I realize how easily I could have lost the one person who matters to me the most. I've been so selfish...so fucking greedy and immature...and I hate myself for it. In seconds I'm crying, trying not to wake him up but failing miserably because I just can't stop thinking about it. Brian. Dead.

God.

He stirs and draws me closer for a split second before his eyes open. "Justin. What the fuck is wrong this time?"

I take a deep breath, trying to answer, but end up dissolving into tears again. Dammit. He pulls back and watches me warily until I can finally get my act back together.

"Brian?"

"What?" He answers slowly and guardedly, bending his arm under his head to prop himself up in a pose of studied boredom.

"Are you angry that I'm here?" It's a simple enough question, even for him, I think. I can't expect him to share anything resembling his feelings, but he never has a problem telling me when I'm pissing him off.

He rolls his eyes and blows a lock of hair off of his forehead. "I'm the one that called Matt... I hoped they'd get you here before it was too late."

I told Matt before I came back to bed that Brian and I would have to talk about this stuff. And we will, I swear...but just once I wish that it wasn't always me who forces the conversation. I never thought of myself as a procrastinator before...but the thought of ignoring the problem until next time suddenly seems really appealing. I can see the charm of pretending everything is okay - it's a lot more comfortable that way. I wouldn't have to take a risk. I wouldn't have to be so strong.

I wouldn't have to be strong again until his funeral. Fuck.

I guess it's time.

There's a place I like to hide
A doorway that I run through in the night
Relax child, you were there
But only didn't realize, and you were scared

"NO, I mean, are you mad that I followed you to the farm? I think we both know *why* you came," I hedge, unwilling even now to put the problem into words. He smirks, and it makes me angry. "Don't play stupid with me. Nobody knows you like I do, Brian, and I knew you were going to try and off yourself again before you even knocked me out."

Oooh, that was a hit. He flinches and turns away. "Whatever. How did you know I was coming here?" he counters, not even acknowledging the fact that he was probably ten minutes from dying when I found him...choosing instead to move on to his second favourite stall tactic - answering a question with another question.

"I wasn't a hundred percent sure. I figured that..." I break off, knowing that I can't avoid saying it any more, but wondering if he's...if I'm...no, if *we're* ready to have this in the open. "I thought that if you were going to kill yourself, you'd come here to do it."

"Oh, really?" He arches his eyebrow smugly.

"Save it, Brian..." I bitch before cutting myself off. He's onto stall tactic number three - aggravation - and I should really know better than to play into his hands by now. "I thought that you'd come somewhere far enough away that you'd have enough time to do whatever you were planning... but busy with people who care about you, so that your body wouldn't be forgotten, overlooked, or left to rot."

He winces with distaste. Another hit. "Sunshine, that's morbid."

"So what? YOU'RE morbid, and stupid...What the fuck made you think I'd just let you take off like that?" I can't resist punching him in the arm. "I know that killing yourself seems so uncomplicated, and that actually being upset and feeling pain is messy, but... Dammit! Brian, you did it again! And...last time...you promised."

He glares at me, and rolls out of bed like a wave drawing away from the shore. "Justin, you can't count on me for shit. Be a fucking man, not some betrayed little housewife! I don't want you depending on me to be happy, because that is NOT my fucking job!"

I don't respond to that, because frankly, I don't know what to say. He circles the guest room quickly, looking for his cigarettes, and finally finds them on the side table - right where I was pointing, if he'd pay attention. He lights one, carefully ignoring me the whole time, and settles himself into the easy chair by the window, sitting forwards and staring at the floor.

It's a standoff, Kinney style, with him pretending to be a block of ice...cold and unfeeling...and me forced to try and argue with him until he sees the truth. I'm tired, that scene is played out, and I'm just not doing it anymore. Why bother? It never works anyway - so let's try something new.

"Is THAT what we're going for? Brutal honesty? Oh, I've been dying to play this game; it'll be a pleasure. Nobody has ever told you the truth in your entire fucking life!" I shift into a more defensible position in bed, ready for the battle that's coming. "I'm ready when you are."

It's a place where you will learn
To face your fears, retrace the years
And ride the whims of your mind

Yeah. Ready my ass. "Justin, knock it off. You wouldn't know the truth if it smacked you in the face. I've been hearing rumours. I know about your little performance at Meathook, I know that thing with Dirk was a set-up."

He looks confused. "What about Meathook...and who the fuck is Dirk?"

Jesus Christ. You know times are bad when I can remember the names of HIS tricks!
"Uh, Dirk, six-three, dark hair...I found him beating the shit out of you at Babylon..."

"Oh, him." Recognition finally dawns. "It wasn't a set-up at all. I just ran into him, and I wanted to give him a try...His reputation goes before him - much like yours."

Humph. "And yours, you stupid little fuck."

"Whatever."

"Okay, what about Ben? And...those other guys..."

He shakes his head and sighs. "Forget it. You're not pulling me into 'Name that Sadistic Trick.' I won't play." He chuckles. "I'm at an obvious disadvantage. I tend to ask for their names first, especially if they're going to get rough. If you have a problem with me tricking, tough shit. People in glass houses, Brian."

"Fuck you. People have been talking about you for weeks... 'Hey, Kinney, you just have to try out that hot little blonde at Meathook who likes it a little rough, or a lot rough, if that's what you're into.'"

He sighs, and flops back on the bed for a minute. "Do you even understand the concept of a rumour? It's a really good story, shared by a legion of gossip queens. It has a basis in truth but is mostly just embellished for shock value. I can't believe that you would listen to that shit! It wasn't a big deal. Take a guess how many guys I've fucked at Meathook."

I don't want to hear this. "No."

"Oh, come on, you know you want to!" He taunts in a singsong voice. "Five guys? Ten? A Hundred? Try ONE, Brian. I've been there twice...once I went with friends and got introduced to that Dirk guy, and the other time..." He speaks slowly, patiently, as if I should understand what he's talking about. I shake my head, and he continues..."I met this one guy, this really hot guy...and it was amazing..." Nope. He's not accomplishing anything but making me angrier.

He grins and keeps talking. "He fucked me so hard I thought I was going to die...and it seemed like maybe the whole back room was watching that time," Still not ringing any bells...He chuckles, and gives me one last clue. "I went to meet the hottest guy in town, he really nailed me, and word got around."

One time...he went alone one time...and met someone...

Oh, fuck me. The other time was with me. How fucked am I to forget that? Turns out I CAN get jealous. Who knew?

Commanding in another world
Suddenly you hear and see
This magic new dimension

I sink onto the bed, beside Justin, and he takes my hand. "Look, there was something I came to say to you, and I'm going to say it now," he starts, staring at the ceiling. "I love you, Brian, I'm always going to love you more than life itself...but...this thing we're doing? This marriage thing? It's *all* fucked up."

Well, shit. You don't need to tell *me* that. Kinneys are NOT marriage material.

He pats my hand and continues, "...It's...just totally and completely fucked. And I'm not saying you're to blame," he rushes to add, soothing the frown I'm sure is spreading even as we speak. "...Because that couldn't be further from the truth. I harassed you for months to make the offer, I worked it and worked it until I boxed you in, and I *know* you were just trying to protect me..." he trails off, a fleeting grin punctuating the sentence. I like it when he remembers that night. I like him happy.

"I just don't know how to say this...I should have done it long before now, but I was...afraid." He squeezes my hand, and looks me in the eye.

His next words shock the living fuck out of me.

"I don't want to be married to you anymore."

"WHAT?"

"It's over, Brian. It has to be over! Neither of us is going to survive the next time you fly off the handle. You'll kill me and then kill yourself, and I really don't want to die."

"I would not!" I know I *said* I would, but that was just fantasy, a little playacting in the middle of heavy scenes - an imaginary bump for an adrenaline boost, like the music in a horror movie. I was always afraid of the game suddenly "getting out of hand," though. Really...just...scared that I wouldn't know when to stop...but still, I never thought HE thought so.

"Spare me," he grunts. "Not during a scene - I meant when you're trying to kill yourself. One day you're going to take me with you."

"I won't! So that's it then? You're a freak, thanks for playing, buh-bye?" Stupid little fucker. How dare you dismiss me...

"NO, Brian! Don't you get it? You win. Powerpuff. There, I said it. YOU WIN. You found my weakness, I can't stand the thought of you hurting yourself, and I'm saying the word to make it stop. I could bear ANY pain you inflicted on me, because you did it out of love, and out of need, and I would never reject that. Our scenes made me so strong... So much shit has happened to me, Brian, but when we got into the zone, I started to feel like that was the only time I really had control. It was all so simple - it's MY choice to submit and keep the control...but if you need it that badly, then take it! It's my gift. I won't just sit and watch you kill yourself because I'm stubborn and I won't give you what you need."

"That is such bullshit, Justin."

"No, it isn't. We have to trust each other...but you're waiting for me to say that I can't depend on you. That you're not good enough. I thought we were working on that, but if

you don't feel any closer to me, or any better about yourself, then I'm just making things worse. If you feel like less of a man for being shackled to me, then please let me set you free. Divorce me, and take back the power."

I... will be watching over you
I... am gonna help you see it through
I... will protect you in the night
I... am smiling next to you
In Silent Lucidity

"What?"

He nods his head seriously, never breaking eye contact once I finally look at him. "I'm not kidding, Brian. You think you want out? So do I. Watching you hurting yourself...hating yourself...well, it's killing me too. I thought I was strong enough to deal with someone who didn't want to be alive, but I was wrong."

"You're being a drama princess."

"Oh, no I'm not." He chuckles grimly, and sets his jaw. "I've been thorough this every day for almost three years now, you know, right beside you every fucking step. I've done the guilt, the frustration, the anger...I kept saying to myself, 'Is it my fault? Am I doing this to him? But there's really no answer to that, is there?"

This shit is none of his fucking business. "It has nothing to do with you."

"Maybe it didn't at first, but it sure as hell does now. Don't you remember the first time? Seventeen years old, Brian, I was seventeen and you overdosed right in our fucking bed! I mean, what the fuck was THAT all about? I was just so...stunned...I didn't know what to do. And you know, the worst part is..." He snuffles, wipes his nose, keeps talking...

"I really thought that once we got through that, we'd be strong enough to get through anything... and then it happened again. After that, I just hung on because I love you...I thought I could save you, but I can't if you don't want me to. One day our luck will run out and I won't be in the right place at the right time."

"So now I'm a charity project?"

He glares at me. "Don't be an idiot. You've got it all, if you'll just open your fucking eyes and see it. I wondered why someone like you would want to off yourself, but I think I know now, and it's not something that I can change."

Jesus fucking Christ! I'm going to sue PIFA - what part of Psych 101 made him think he's the next Freud? "Oh, really? You think you know it all? Well, please share. Don't let my total disinterest in your theory stop you."

He grips the sheets hard in his good hand, but his voice and his gaze stay steady. "You're upset because you like to hurt me. You were trying to teach me a lesson and you got carried away...and the worse you hurt me, the more it reminded you of your father." I go to get up and leave, but he launches himself at me, straddling my lap and holding my head in his hands.

"YOU ARE NOT YOUR FATHER! You're not even LIKE your father. What he did to you was wrong, it was out of anger and drunkenness and just plain cruelty. That's not why you hurt me, Brian. You do it because you love me."

"Fuck that!" I push him back until he slides off my lap and nearly falls to the floor. I go to get up, but finding I have to shake his grip off of my leg, I decide just to retreat to the other side of the bed. "I should KNOW better! I KNOW what it does to you to get beaten every day! I *promised* myself I wouldn't...That I would never..." My voice feels too close to breaking, so I take a pause. He's watching me closely, head cocked with interest, and I decide to just say what I need to say. "I promised myself I would stop, and I can't. I don't even want to."

"But that doesn't make you like Jack."

"No, it doesn't. It makes me WORSE! I get off on beating you up, Justin, and I can't live with that. He was a bully, but I'm a hundred times worse. I MADE YOU WANT IT!"

I stand still, blinking hard to make my fucking eyes stop watering. He crawls across the few feet between him and I...on his hands and knees, like a prisoner begging for mercy...and throws his arms around my waist, burying his face against my stomach.

"No, you didn't. You made me want YOU, Brian. I've always wanted *it*, ever since before I knew what IT was! I was born to be a masochist, and I need that pain...not all the time, but sometimes. It's not wrong to give it to me, and it's not wrong to want to, either," he whispers against my skin. "Hurting me because it's what you want to do AND because I want you to do it...well, that's the difference between being a sadist and being an abuser."

He lifts his head to look up at me, adoring, but I can't return his gaze. I won't let him look at me...worship me...love me that way, not now. Not this way. He sighs and sits back, reaching for my hand in the process.

"Know what I think, Brian? Rough sex is romantic. When I can let go, and let you do what you want to do, and let you use my body like you need to, that's love. When you can express feelings with me that you've never shared with anyone else before, that's love. I said it before, and I'll repeat myself until you hear me - when we're being rough, that's the only time I'm absolutely sure that you love me. I can feel it! You share something with me, something you've never shared with anyone else or given to anyone else. Don't you feel the same way?"

If you open your mind for me
You won't rely on open eyes to see

He is...excuse the phrase...dead silent. O-kay, that went about as well as I expected it to.

I'm sure he's going to break. I'm fucking terrified that he's going to jump up and just... vanish...take off for a place where nobody has ever heard of Brian Kinney and find some hunky slave boys to fuck on a seven-day rotation.

Fuck. Why isn't there a better way to say this?

"Please say something, Brian. You're scaring me." It's lame, but it's a start. I want him to yell, scream, jump up and down and throw things at me...Fuck. I'd actually sit here and take it if he started hitting me - I just don't want to see him all shut down and hurting like this.

"What, Justin? What is it that you're expecting to hear from me?" His expression is empty, a hollow shell of nothingness. No anger...nothing. The fact that he's not fuming scares me more than anything else. I think I'd better explain this faster, or I'm going to lose him altogether.

"Brian, it's not about you and me. It's all about YOU. You need to accept the fact that you're worth loving...and to realize on your own that the bullshit your parents spewed at you was fuelled by Jack Daniels and nothing more. You ARE amazing, and smart, and lovable, and totally cute."

I giggle, hoping for some kind of positive reaction, but it goes over like a lead balloon.

"They don't matter. I never listened to them anyway," he mumbles. Great, now he's not even giving me coherent sentences.

Here we go again. "Listen to me. You are stronger than what happened to you! It's going to hurt, but you're going to get through this. You locked up your emotions for so long to avoid the bad things that you never felt anything good, either. Now you have to relearn everything. You have to get it through your head that there are more emotions than just fear and pain."

"You just think you know every fucking thing, don't you?" He bolts upright on the bed, and in seconds he's just about screaming... and I silently thank God that he's not going catatonic. Who would have guessed that one day I'd actually be *thankful* that Brian was yelling at me? "You don't know jack shit about this, Justin. Nothing at all."

"Oh, I don't think so, Brian, don't start with me. Don't be pulling that whole, 'Nobody knows me, nobody understands me,' thing, because I've been watching you do that for three years and it's reeeeeeally getting old. People overcome their childhoods all the time. You wouldn't be the first and you won't be the last."

The walls you built within
Come tumbling down, and a new world will begin

He just stares at me, and I know I've gone so far over that imaginary line in the sand that we made so long ago. I feel...better. "Sorry about that little rant. I've been saving it up for a couple of years now."

"You should have saved it longer. I'm not into this 'sharing' thing."

"We have a lot of things to talk about...negotiations," I shrug, hoping not to get shot down. "Being married was a bad idea. It would never have worked - not because we're gay, and not because we're men, but...because we're US, you know?" I wait a beat for him to acknowledge me, but he doesn't, so I go on. "But that doesn't mean we can't stay together."

"Can you be a little less vague?"

"Okay, I was thinking...and...there has to be more to a relationships than 'married' or 'not married.' *I* think there's more. We can do better than that."

"Continue." And that's when I know I've got him back, because in Brianese, being asked to finish a thought is a lot like winning the Pulitzer Prize.

"I mean, we'd have to figure out what works for us...and it'll be hard, because other people are going to expect things from us that we won't be able to deliver."

"Well, fuck them." That's Brian's answer for everything.

"Riiiiight..." I poke him in the chest, hoping he'll pay attention. "You say that now, but as soon as everyone figures out that we unmarried ourselves, they're going to bitch and whine and call you all sorts of ugly names...will you still be so indifferent then?" He closes his eyes, no doubt picturing Deb and my mom tag-team nagging him to make an honest man out of me. Fuck, the thought of that messed up little scene even makes ME shiver.

He nods. "Fuck. It would be like Chinese water torture."

"I know, but I'm not willing to...give you up. I mean, it's not like I owned you in the first place, but I'd rather be with you than not with you. I think it'll be worth it...in the end...and maybe you do too?"

I wait, scared to breathe, hoping and praying that I've made myself clear, that he understands that I'm not trying to chain him up again...and I'm hoping that he'll say yes just as hard as anyone has ever hoped to hear it answer a proposal.

"Yeah. I do."

Living twice at once you learn
You're safe from pain in the dream domain
A soul set free to fly

He rolls over and smiles at me, that big Sunshine smile that I get sucked into every single time. "Give me your hand." He grabs for my arm, and before I know it, he's got my ring off my finger.

"Hey!" Not that I want to keep it...necessarily...but it's strange looking at my hand bare like that. Where I got used to seeing the stainless steel band, now there's just a pale circle of skin where my finger isn't quite tanned. Without fanfare, he pulls the ring off of his own finger and holds it out towards me.

"Here. I'm sorry I pushed, Brian."

"Sorry is..."

"...bullshit. Yeah, I know," he rushes, still holding the ring between his fingers, like he's grasping a pencil or a paintbrush. "I want you to take this one."

"No, it won't fit." Despite my protest, I find myself picking it up to look inside - it has the same inscription as mine. The only thing I could think to put inside... B + J. The same letters the knife always traces on his skin.

He smiles wistfully as I hold the ring up to the light.

"Just give it a try. I know that sometimes you can tell right away if something won't fit... but sometimes things fit when you don't think they will." Jesus, he doesn't have to hit me over the head with a fucking anvil. I pick up his ring and find, to my surprise, that it slides onto the ring finger of my right hand. He takes mine and slides it onto the middle finger of his left hand. When I made the rings, I had them fit so that they WOULDN'T fit on the traditional finger, as if that would somehow make us less married. I guess I believed that the symbol was more important than the vow.

It turns out that the symbols were more flexible than my own delusions. Both the rings fit...only in the exact opposite places they were meant to.

"I figured that it would work out like this," he murmurs. "My hands are wider, but yours are longer. It pretty much evens out."

I don't know what to say about that. "Yeah. It's funny-strange."

"Right." He holds up his hand, and looks at me seriously. "I know these rings don't mean anything anymore. You can take it off if you want...I won't be upset. I'm going to keep

mine, though." He looks at me for permission, but I guess he doesn't see what he wants to see, because he sighs. "I'm going to look at this ring and know that at least you cared enough to give it a try."

"...and mine's supposed to remind me that you cared enough to let me go."

"Exactly. I'm glad you understand."

A round trip journey in your head
Master of illusion, can you realize
Your dream's alive
You can be the guide

"Justin, how exactly will we be working this?"

"I don't know, right now. Nobody can tell us, and there's no model out there to work from. We're just going to have to figure it out for ourselves."

"Because I'm so good at that."

"Whatever. How about this? I'm going to wake up every morning loving you more than anyone else, and you're going to wake up every morning wanting me more than anyone else."

"And?"

"No 'and,' Brian. That's it. Those are my expectations."

"Are you going to be happy with that? It's not much."

"It's more than you think. There's a good enough balance of freedom and responsibility in there that even WE shouldn't fuck it up too badly."

"I don't know about that."

"I'm just saying take it one day at a time, and see how it goes."

"I'm not promising forever... but I think I can give you tomorrow."

"That's all I'm asking. Just keep giving me tomorrow."

*I... will be watching over you
I... am gonna help you see it through
I... will protect you in the night
I... am smiling next to you....*

One – Part Three

Prologue

I drop the groceries on the floor and race to the phone, listening to Daphne's disembodied voice floating through the loft from the answering machine.

"Justin? Justin, pick up, it's Daphne, I need to talk to you..."

Shit, give me one more second... "Wait, I'm here. Don't hang up!"

I can hear her smile on my end of the phone. "Hey, I was hoping I wouldn't miss you. Listen, are we going to get together before I go back to school, or what?" It must be nice to be that happy all the time.

I feel really bad about blowing her off since we came back from Matt and Andrew's. It's been almost a month, and I haven't even called her to say hi. How would I explain what's going on around here? I don't even have the words. I guess I'll have to blow her off again.

"I can't. I picked up a bunch of extra shifts at the diner, you know, trying to save up some money so Brian doesn't have to pay for everything..." That sounded good, and it's sort of the truth. I am so fucking sick of Brian paying for everything.

She sounds really disappointed. "Come on, you can't get away for even one afternoon?"

"Nope." I try to make myself sound strong, firm, like I'm happy with the choices I've made...but it doesn't come out that way and I know she'll rag me for it the second it comes out of my mouth.

"Justin...what is wrong with you? You've been acting really strange lately, and of course I have to hear it second hand, since you won't even TALK to me!" She's getting screechy. "Tell me what's going on!"

Mmmkay. I don't even fucking know where to start. I don't even know what's wrong myself! I'm starting to see the allure of never, ever talking about your feelings, because it's sort of frustrating to have these half-formed ideas floating around in your head...to try to clearly explain yourself to someone else...to admit that you just *don't know*. Maybe Brian has the right idea after all.

"Daph, I want to, but I don't think you want to hear it. It's about...you know..." I trail off, hoping that she catches my drift and loses the questions that I don't want to answer.

Daphne is still totally freaked out about the whole "beating" thing, as she calls it. She doesn't understand, and she doesn't want to, and not only can I respect that, I use it to get out of a lot of uncomfortable discussions. And it's funny, she's worrying about nothing. I never need to talk about the BDSM thing anymore - in my mind, and in our bedroom, the

discussion is settled. I like it rough, Brian likes giving it to me that way, and our sex life is pretty much the only thing working right now. A simple fact of life that nobody understands - the violence is not the problem. It never has been.

Not only does she NOT fall for my lie, she surprises me by...well... at least attempting to empathize. "Oh. Um...Ugh, I'll never get used to the idea of him hurting you, but I can try to listen. Really. I want to help you. I want to be your friend."

Now I've backed myself into a corner by underestimating her, so I decide to blow her off. "Hey, it's not like I'm the one that needs help anyway. I'm still worried about Brian. He spent years trying to do himself in, and now he's suddenly just fine. I don't buy it."

When all else fails, blame Brian. Everybody falls for that.

"Have you talked to him about it?" Such practical advice. She has no idea.

"Right, I'll just say, 'Hi, Brian, how was work? Oh, and when was the last time you had a suicidal thought?'" I hope that I sound as sarcastic as I feel, hearing that. I mean, seriously. "Daph, are you mental?"

There's a pause on the other end, and she sighs. "Yeah, I know, I know. I just...What else can you do?"

I sigh too. "I'll get him through it, just like I always do."

"It's always about Brian, isn't it?" I actually look around to see if someone else said that other than Daphne, because it's getting to be all I hear. And whether I'm saying it to someone else or reminding myself, the answer to that never changes.

"It's not Brian's fault. Not always."

That satisfies her, and we chat about nothing for a while, just bullshitting like we always do. Eventually I cave and agree to meet her for a movie, somewhere dark that features other people talking constantly. A place where I don't have to talk about what's going on with me, because I don't fucking know what's wrong anymore, I'm really, really scared.

Chapter 1

He's tense, still straining against the bonds at ankle and wrist as if he had a choice in his own captivity. As if he didn't understand that his free will is only an illusion, and his authority over himself nothing more than an occasional conceit of mine.

He's my boy and I like it that way.

"How long, Justin?" I challenge, questioning, and he turns his head away from me in resentment. You could think of it as taunting, but it's simpler than that. Forcing these answers out of him keeps him locked inside MY reality...where his awareness is focused entirely on his own suffering.

I know all too well how easy it is to get lost in the rhythm of a fuck, to let your mind follow the in and out... sweat washing away all conscious thought... The way it takes your brain to a basic level that isn't even capable of forming words, only of feeling pleasure and pain and the way they swirl together. I can't lose him to that; he has to be present for this to be useful.

If I've learned anything in these last few months, it's that it's no good unless he serves as a witness to his own torture.

He turns back to me with pleading liquid eyes, breathing, "Oh, God, Brian, please no more!" He always just blows me away. He speaks so...earnestly...so sincerely... as if he still really believes that begging will help. As if I'll just decide to let him go.

"I asked you a fucking question, Justin, and I want an answer!" I threaten quietly. "How. Fucking. Long?"

"Two hours, Sir." His voice shakes like his body does, as if the tension and strain of the evening has almost been too much for him to bear. Bullshit. His boundaries are very crudely drawn - and it never hurts to help them stretch a little.

I lean in close to his face, wanting to see his expression when I demand more information. "Two hours...yes...Two hours of what, Justin?"

I like to hear him paint the scene for me. Justin is an artist, and a description of *what* he sees often exposes the thought process behind it all, and reveals *how* he sees. Not that I'm normally interested in that kind of deep thinking, especially in bed, but lately...I can't help but wonder what he's got hiding in the shadows. Besides, I'm always interested in information that might prove useful.

When I thought out today's scene, it was a very black and white process, no muss, no fuss. Tie him up...tease him...approach and back away...continue until he's contrite, and then pitiful, and then about ten minutes past the point where he's lost his mind. Go in for the kill. It's so straightforward; you can practically put fucking checkmarks beside each point.

His view of things is...different. "It hurts, Brian..." he trails off, struggling to form lucid sentences while his body is begging him to seek out a little less sensation - or a little more. "I can't...I mean, I wanted to come so many times, but you won't let me...but I need it...I need YOU. I need you to touch me some more. To fuck me. Make it stop hurting...please?"

"So you think THIS is pain?" I taunt, sounding incredulous, and his eyes open wide.

"No, no, I didn't mean that...not like that..." he stammers, but he relaxes once he realizes that I'm not interested in punishing him for *that* slip of the tongue. I know he's right, and that withholding his pleasure hurts him worse than any terrible, violent thing that I've ever done to him. His body tells me that every time we fuck.

I let the subject drop. My hand strokes his cock, slowly, reflectively, tracing every ridge and vein until he gasps with pleasure. He jerks against me. His dick stabs into the heat of my closed fist as he pleads for release. It would be so easy to let him free, to let him have a little gratification... So easy to give in, to let him let go...

But I won't.

"So you think you've had enough?" I bait him shamelessly, knowing that he won't fall for it unless he's truly desperate. We've done this too many times for him to just follow the leader.

And yet, he screws it up every time. "I can't take it anymore!" he affirms, writhing as much as the tightly ratcheted metal chains will let him. "Please, no more!"

"You forget yourself. You've had enough when *I* say so, and not one second more," I chuckle tonelessly. He must have been pretty far gone to say that. I draw back from his shuddering body, watching the relief in his eyes fall away once he understands that he walked into a trap.

I keep watching for a minute as he yanks against the leather cuffs, listening to the rattle of steel on steel...the chains shaking against the hooks driven into the underside of the bed frame, and the padlocks rattling on the cuffs. He doesn't say a word, but the rustling and clinking give away his frustration as well as any spoken phrase. I can't help but smile as I turn my back to go down the stairs.

"For the record, there IS no such thing as enough, Justin. We're starting over. Two more hours."

"Noooooooo!" he finally wails, thrashing against the ties in an attempt to...What? Not to get away - probably just wanting to stand in front of me and talk to me. "Please, Brian, please! Whip me, beat me, I don't care, just please don't go away!!!"

I turn back around to face him in the dimming evening light. "I'll leave you here for a week if I want to, Justin. You take what I tell you to take."

He nods eagerly, his head hardly moving against the bed. "Yes, I will! I'll take anything, just please don't make me wait anymore!"

I force my face to harden again, even though my cock is betraying me...he's not the only one who's been waiting...but I really can't let that one slip by. "When did I give you permission to question my orders, Justin?" His eyes open wide in recognition...knowing that he's done something that I won't stand for...and he's wary as I come back to the bed. "You know how much that gets on my nerves. You need to be punished - I'm making it three more hours."

His face scrunches up in frustration. "I'll die," he threatens as I start massaging his feet, just under where the leather cuffs have kept him locked tight to the bed for the better part of the evening. "I'll have a heart attack and die."

"Empty threat..." I murmur as my tongue works its way along the edge of that stiff black leather. "You said that an hour ago."

And he did, screaming it over and over again while I stroked his cock just gently enough to keep him hovering on the edge. My hand went on autopilot while I mentally filed my taxes. God knows I couldn't do that if I were thinking about him, if I were paying attention to the straight, white teeth biting into his lip...the flush on his throat...his skin, smooth and slick with sweat from being pushed to the edge and denied again and again...

Okay, we're tormenting *Justin* here. Right. "Maybe not three hours."

My hands slide up his legs, my fingers catching in the fine, soft down on his legs. Caressing the soft skin behind his knees, touches that make him jump and gasp for air. Every inch of skin that gets licked and sucked and fondled nudges him that much closer to release, and if I just touched his cock, breathed on it even, he'd let go.

I back off again, and he groans.

"Do you want my safeword? I don't want to say it, but if that's what you're asking..." he trails off, clearly miserable, and I'm surprised at how frantic he really seems to be.

"Oh, no, nothing like that."

"Or do you want me to beg?" he demands, forcing some steel into his voice, searching for the exit door to this misery. "I'll beg if you want me to."

"Now, why would I ask for that? You beg me for things all the time. I only want one thing from you."

"What?" he murmurs, an edge to his voice. I know what he's thinking - he's eager to obey, to please me so that I'll take pity on him and end his torment... but he's nervous, because he knows what lurks in my head sometimes.

"Oh, I think you know what I want..." I kiss the words into his skin, blazing his inner thigh with my thoughts, running my tongue along the burning heat of his balls.

I wait a beat, feeling the stiffening of his body as the realization floods through him. "Noooo...." He shakes his head again; his body obviously conflicted between retreating for sanity and thrusting forward for release.

"I want to hear you scream, Justin." His breath hitches in his throat as I hover, my breath warming his dick from slightly above. "Five...."

He grunts and thrusts desperately towards me... I laugh and withdraw, letting my tongue paint the skin just below his navel.

"Four..." The groan becomes a lower, desperate moan, following my mouth along its slow path to his cock. I grasp at his left nipple, rolling it gently as I blow little currents of air over his skin. "Still with me?"

"Fucking bastard! Just do it! Suck my cock!" He yells angrily, thrashing against the chains and fighting for release. Helplessness doesn't sit well with him sometimes.

"I'll take that as a yes," I chuckle...being free, I can afford to laugh at his struggle for release. He glares, hateful and urgent, and I almost feel guilty enough to return to my task.

"Three..." I remind him as I start stroking him again, our eyes locked as he dares me to stop and I dare him to complain. Here, right in the middle of a scene, he still finds a way to act like a little twat. He won't back down, won't drop his eyes, and I'm in the midst of pulling my hand away again when he finally submits. I smile and lean onto his body.

"We're playing nice tonight, Justin, but challenge me again and I'll whip you until you bleed, you hear me?" He nods and I restart the countdown.

"Two..." I whisper as I take his dick into my mouth, wrapping him in moist heat. He moans again, higher this time, and I slide a finger into my mouth alongside his cock, wetting it quickly as my tongue works over the head. Thirty seconds go by...a minute...and then....

"One." I pull away just long enough to slide a finger in while I say the word, swooping back down to swallow his cock. His body stiffens, arching so that he's pulling against the chains, and I can feel his hole clenching against my invading fingers. After so many hours of torment, his orgasm is strong, and he shoots right down my throat. The scream that rips through him is completely satisfying to me, and he slumps against the bed, exhausted.

If I were kind, I'd let him loose...and I will...in a minute. Right now we have some unfinished business.

"Open up." I order, and he parts his eyelids to see me looming over him, one knee on either side of his head as I get into position. "I'm going to fuck your face. Play along or just lie there, I don't care."

He gives me a tired grin and takes my cock into his mouth, choosing to give head rather than being held down and forcibly fucked. I start a quick, steady rhythm, and it doesn't take long for me to finish up either - I have hours of pleading looks and eager begging to think back on while my cock disappears in and out of his mouth. When I come, it's more relief than pleasure. It doesn't have to be amazing, though. I can always go out for it once he falls asleep.

He closes his eyes and just lies there while I pull away and start unbuckling the cuffs. His arms are reddened and a bit chafed, but it's nothing a bit of cream won't fix. He doesn't move an inch while I pop the cuffs and chains back under the ledge of the bed frame. His breathing is still heavy, and I think he might fall asleep right away if I let him.

"Get up and go take a shower. I'll change the sheets." I nudge his hip with my knee, and he half-opens his eyes and licks his lips, looking exhausted and obscene all at once. If I didn't think it would kill him, I might help myself one more time.

"Can't." He licks his lips again, and slowly rolls his head in a circle. "Too sore."

"Sure you are," I agree in my most sarcastic tone, but that tiny spark of guilt flashes anyway, and I pick him up off the bed and carry him into the bathroom, setting him down just outside the shower. His eyes open in surprise when his body leaves the bed, and he never loses the quizzical expression the whole ten steps to the bathroom.

"Don't say I never did anything for you," I offer by way of explanation, and he snorts, "Ridiculously romantic," under his breath and wobbles into the shower. Twat. I go and change the sheets, soaked with sweat and God only knows what else. Changing the sheets is such a simple act, but there's something raw and nasty about having all the evidence right in front of you, so to speak. I entertain thoughts of round two for about three seconds, until I look over my shoulder and see him sitting on the floor of the shower.

"Justin!" I can't help yelling, I mean the word flies out of my mouth before I can stop it, and I race in just as he turns his head, yawning deeply.

"I'm okay, just tired..." he mumbles around the yawn. "Long day."

I can't help but snicker at his innocent appraisal of being tied up playing sex games all evening, but he's half asleep and doesn't join in.

"Come on, Sonny boy, time for bed." Somehow I manage to manhandle him into a state of relative dryness, and push him into bed. He yawns one of those head-splitting yawns again, and I know he'll be asleep in no time flat.

"Brian?" he murmurs, his face turned towards my pillow. "Thanks." And he's asleep.

It's ten o'clock. I could still go to Babylon...no...it's too early to go to Babylon yet. I could finish that research I brought home from work this weekend. I could call Mikey and go to the movies. Fact is, I could be doing a hundred things, but I'm not.

I'm sitting on my bedroom floor in sweatpants on a Saturday night, waiting to see if my lover will wake up screaming... like he has several times a night for the last week. Watching for another panic attack that makes the days after he came out of the hospital pale in comparison.

Waiting to see if my impromptu therapy bought us one fucking night's sleep.

After about half an hour, he murmurs and sighs, and he seems to have made it into a deeper sleep. I know that fucking him unconscious every night isn't going to solve his problems, but it's working out okay so far...and...well...

I just don't know what else to do.

Chapter 2

From: Justin Taylor <taylor550785@pifa.edu>

To: Matt <mstone@hotmail.com>

Subject: Hey stranger

Hey, you wanted me to let you know that everything is okay, so here it is. Again. Everything is still fine! Brian set up my PIFA account to work from the loft. I picked up more hours at the diner, since school doesn't start for another week, and that keeps me busy. Why does everyone keep asking how I'm doing? I'm going back to school, of course I feel like shit!

Miss you. Come back soon.

J.

From: <custserv@torsothestore.com>

To: <mstone@hotmail.com>

Subject: News!!!

Matt-

You know that if they catch me using the company Email, I'll be in trouble, so I'll make this quick, honey. There's trouble with Brian and Justin again. I think our baby needs you to come home. I keep trying to get him to talk to me, but he won't. He keeps saying that everything is fine, but he looks like he's not sleeping. The bags under his eyes have their own luggage! It's just not right.

Is he telling you anything? Is there anything I can do? Since you left, I get the feeling there's nobody for him to talk to anymore. He starts to talk, sometimes, you know, like when we're at the bar and Brian and Ted are shooting pool, but he opens his mouth and nothing comes out. It's like one of those old black and white movies on the Lifetime channel, where the sound goes out, and you think you know what's going on, but when the sound comes back, you're totally surprised at what was really happening. Was he like that before? How did you get him to talk?

No need to ask about Brian, honey, he's just fine. He's walking around like the cat that swallowed the canary, actually, but he doesn't seem to be doing anything especially mean to anyone, not even Ted, so maybe there is something going on!.

Honey, I'm no James Bond! I can't spy on these two by myself, and Daphne is being NO help. How long are they leaving you in that godforsaken country again?

Licks!

Em

From: Andrew <alee@LeeStudios.com>

To: Matt <mstone@hotmail.com>

Subject: Where are you today?

I lost your itinerary again. Where are you today, anyway? Which city? Which country? I can't keep track. I don't think you should travel for business anymore. There are enough hunky green-eyed models to go around, I want to keep mine at home with ME. I'll take artsy pictures of your naked ass while you lie on a fainting couch eating grapes all day. Call it Freedom 25. :-)

I know you asked about Brian and Justin, but I don't know what you expect me to tell you? In case you hadn't noticed, our house is a long way from the Pitts. Brian doesn't call a hell of a lot more often than he used to, but everything seems fine. He seems happy, actually, for the first time since college. Justin seems okay, maybe a little tired, you know the life of a student - but I'll admit he doesn't usually share his innermost thoughts with me. I haven't got a lot of gossip to pass, hon. Sorry.

I know it's only six more weeks until you're home again, but...I miss you. Fine, so I'm a sentimental fool, but I do. I want you to come home as soon as you're done working, and we'll make up for lost time.

Love you.

Andrew

From: <b.kinney@vanguard.com>

To: <mstone@hotmail.com>

Subject: Re: Is Justin okay?

Matt, I'm not even going to ask how you got my work address. You're lucky that there is a filter on this account, or you'd really be sorry.

Justin is fine. What makes you think he isn't? He goes to work, comes home, goes to Babylon. He draws. His hand is fine, he is fine, and if YOU want to be fine, don't use this account again. Oh, and if you want information about Justin, ASK Justin, and DON'T bother me.

Brian

From: <mstone@hotmail.com>

To: <custserv@torsothestore.com>

Subject: Re: News!!!

Em, don't tell anyone I replied to your email. I've gotten a bunch of them today, but I'll catch up on them all after work. (I feel so guilty about leaving Andrew's sweet little note for later...but what he doesn't know won't hurt him, LOL.)

On to the good stuff. The gossip! I'm sorry, but we're being fed a line here, and I don't buy it. Something is going on. Justin has always bitched about Brian to me. Always. Like, the first conversation we ever had was him bitching about Brian, and me trying to help him straighten it out. It's sorta what we do, you know? And I swear I don't mind. I don't understand, but I don't mind helping HIM try to understand, either. If he's saying that everything is okay, he's lying through his teeth and hoping nobody will catch him. If he's not complaining about Brian to someone, then we definitely have a problem. He's probably not sleeping cause he used to call me real late at night, and we'd talk until he felt better. He couldn't get to sleep until he got some things off his chest. I wonder who he's talking to now.

Can you try and pry a little more? Please? I'm still gone for another six weeks! But why the hell does everyone think I'm in the middle of nowhere? I'm in Michigan! Grosse Pointe! They made a fucking movie about it, for fuckssakes, it's not the North Pole!

Get Justin talking, and get him to CALL ME! You call me too. These shoots are usually four hours of waiting, fifteen minutes under the lights, and then I go back to my hotel room alone, looking and feeling like a cafeteria dinner. Please tell me why I agreed to these ads again?

Matt

From: <custserv@torsothestore.com>

To: <mstone@hotmail.com>

Subject: Re: Re: News!!!

Honey, you agreed to the ads because Brian set them up for you! You wanted to see if you could be a star, remember? You've been gone for a couple of weeks already, six more is nothing if it makes the rest of your career!

I'll try to get Justin talking, but sweetie, what could they be doing that's worse than what they've already done? If it didn't bother him to be knocked out and drugged up and tied down, then what on earth is making him so miserable? Help me out here!

I'm off in ten minutes, so don't reply. Call me on my cell when you're done baking.

Licks!

Em

Chapter 3

"Justin!" Deb's screech rings clear across the diner, and snaps me out of the doze I was just settling into. "Break's over!"

I can hear her cross the floor, gum cracking, and when I open my eyes just a crack, all I can see are heavy, black rimmed eyes staring right into my face.

"Ahhhhh!"

"There, I thought that'd get you going," she chuckles, bumping my shoulder with her hip. "Used to work on Michael every time. He was never, ever late for school the whole time he lived at home."

"I can see why," I mutter, dragging myself out of the vinyl and Formica booth that was doubling quite nicely as a bed. She squints, replaying that comment for sarcasm, so I rush to add, "You scared the shit out of me! I just...need a minute to recover."

She laughs and starts clearing the dishes from the morning rush, chattering away as plate after plate of leftover pancake goop and coffee cups full of sludge get dumped into the bin. "Oh, honey, I know doubles are hard, but you'll get used to them. It only takes a couple of weeks, and then you're fine..."

She pauses briefly, then checks her wristwatch (which isn't there) and looks at the calendar on the wall (which is still stuck on the James Dean picture from February, 1987.) Finally, she spots a customer with a fancy watch, and drags his arm off the table to check for the date.

"Sunshine! You're back at school in a week! Why didn't you say something?" she exclaims excitedly, as the customer mutters about her invasion of his personal space. She pets him on the head and comes over to pinch my cheeks. "We have to get you ready for school!"

"Debbie, I'm fine, really." I twist my head just a bit, to at least get her to ease her grip on my face, because OW! I mean...have you seen her nails lately?

"What do you mean, fine? You need pencils..."

"Deb..." I interrupt, but she's on a roll.

"And a new backpack...and spiral notebooks! The ones with the dividers!" She continues making the list, checking off points in the air, and now I know why moms really send their kids back to school - so they can buy new school supplies!

"No, Deb, I mean, I'm set! Brian brought me some stuff from work." That's true. Last Friday, a few packages of notebook paper and a pencil case full of pens magically arrived on the kitchen counter without a word. I think he made Cynthia go and buy them for me, but at least he remembered that school would be starting soon.

She bustles around the diner, trying to repair the damage from the morning herd in time for the lunch customers. "You can't go a full year on office hand-me-downs and stolen pens! You need your own things, sweetie."

I swear to God I've spent ten minutes scrubbing off this ketchup stain. Gross. If I had my way, ketchup would be banned from public use forever! "We're doing a lot more studio work this year, and less theory, so I need more art supplies and fewer school supplies. Don't worry so much! Brian makes sure I get what I need."

She comes back over to me, pinches my cheek, and searches my face appraisingly. "What you NEED is more sleep, Sunshine. Have you seen the bags under your eyes lately? Your

luggage has luggage!" She steps back, laughing at her own joke, and then peers across the counter again. "How **are** you sleeping lately?"

"Well, you know, it's the end of summer, I'm trying to pack in as much in as I can..." I trail off as she crosses her hands in front of her chest, shaking her head no.

"Try again, Sunshine."

"I'm not used to doubles and I get home too keyed up to sleep?"

"Oh, so now you're asking ME why you're tired? I don't think so, kiddo." She clucks her tongue while she refills the napkin dispensers. "What did Brian do this time?"

Jesus Christ! The whole fucking world does NOT revolve around Brian! I throw down the dishrag and barely restrain myself from stomping my foot. "Why is it always Brian? Why can't anyone have problems around here without it being Brian's fault?"

She sighs and shakes her head. "Honey, I've been asking myself that question since he was fourteen years old, and I still don't have the answer. Tell me, if it's not Brian, then what is it?"

"I...uh..." Oops. Back to Plan A. Now, all I need is a Plan A. Damn, I wish I wasn't such a terrible liar. "It's my allergies. I can't sleep because I can't breathe right. Don't worry, Brian and I will get it worked out."

She smiles. "I know you will Sunshine." She picks up the dishrag between long, fake fingernails coated with gummy polish, and confides, "You give Brian whatever he's got coming to him, kiddo. Be tough! I always thought you had a shot, and I still think you do."

She takes the bin of dishes back to the kitchen, and after that, I think she's leaving to check on Vic for her break. That gives me about twenty minutes to myself while I serve coffee and midmorning snacks to the trickle of patrons. Good. I need time to regroup.

I should have corrected Deb. I should have stood up for Brian. What the fuck do I think I'm doing? I can't keep going around letting people think he's being an asshole, when he hasn't done a damn thing to me in weeks. I mean, he's on his best behaviour, which is still pretty shitty, granted, but he's trying. He tries, and I reward him by lying about him. Maybe not **outright** lies... except that whopper I told Daphne... but I think lies of omission might count. I'm lying about him, and lying about us, and it's just not fair. He took **so** much heat when word of our "un-marriage" got out. Holy shit, if I thought people were angry before...

We never meant to tell anyone. When I made the plan, I was a bit under the gun, and it really wasn't that well thought out. Rearrange our vows to ourselves, move the rings, bingo bango, end of story. I knew it would be hard to explain to people. In my defense, I

DID warn Brian about that when we were at the farm...but I'd sort of just hoped that we could just leave it all behind us. Am I fucking stupid or what? Nothing stays quiet around here, and that one got out in a BIG way.

At dinner.

At Deb's.

We might as well have hired a fucking skywriter.

Emmett must have been a jeweler in a past life, because he noticed the rings first, seconds after we walked into the room. I could see him just **dying** to ask what was up! I thought I saw him pinch himself a couple of times, but he was good and didn't say a peep. Linds and Mel sort of cocked their heads when I passed them the cannoli, and I could see them looking from my hand to Brian's, but they also stayed quiet. Ted was probably about to ask us something inappropriate when Mel kicked him under the table, because he very suddenly choked on his wine. It was Michael who blew it wide open, and it just flew right out of his mouth...

"So, what's with the rings? That's not where you used to wear them." That's all it took, one probably innocent question, to get the moms on the trail. Killing someone with kindness is a highly effective method for achieving one's goals, but so is Chinese water torture! Drip, drip, drip, my mom and Deb were on Brian like white on rice, and I tried, I really did... but no matter how honestly or vigorously I defended him and our decision, it came out sounding pathetic - it just went from lame to incoherent. I sounded like I was defending Brian's right to fuck around, which I wasn't, but nobody wanted to believe that. Brian wouldn't sit and be harangued, so he left in a huff, and that made both of us look even worse. Jack the Ripper would have gotten a better reception that night.

Oh, not to mention that my mom threw a fucking conniption fit, and it took me forever to convince her that he hadn't just decided to kick me out. "What happens when he gets really tired of you, Justin, what then?" she kept repeating, and I got so tired of debating the issue that I snapped, "And won't you be disappointed if he doesn't!" I don't know if she actually WAS convinced, or if she just gave up on me, but it wouldn't be the first time either way.

Deb just looked at me so sadly, probably thinking, "Poor naïve Sunshine," and damned if I didn't want to smack that fake empathy right off her face. Off of everyone's faces! I've had enough phony compassion from this family to last me the rest of my fucking life. It would be one thing if they ever **really** believed in us, but no matter what they say to my face, they didn't and they don't and that's something I won't easily forget.

I tried to explain it to them anyway, alone and in groups, over and over again until Brian actually came back and got me. If I could have planned the conversation, I would have said, 'Quit pitying me! This is what **I** want too, and it's such a little thing, such a small price to pay to make Brian happy. I don't want him to be miserable anymore.' Of course, I

fuck up the conversation even in my imagination, because trying to explain anything would involve telling people how horrible he's been feeling... how scattered and crazy and desperate and afraid... and I think he's ashamed of that perceived "weakness." Maybe trying to hide it all is stupid and conceited, but if he wants to keep the magnitude of his problems secret, I can't break his confidence. Not if he's not in danger.

So everybody knows, and it's not my fault, but I did let it happen, and that's bad enough. I don't want to make it worse by letting people think we're fighting all the time, but what else am I going to say? "Oh, no need to worry about us, really, it's nothing. Worse than nothing, it's me! I'm just having night terrors again... Yeah, I wake up screaming all the time, but of course I'm perfectly sane. Oh, Lindsay and Melanie, feel free to leave your toddler son at his father's house, I'm pretty sure I won't hit Gus the next time I wake up in a panic and throw the lamp." Well, maybe I'm exaggerating a little.

I wish.

The worst part is, I just don't *get it*. Why now? Brian and I are, knock wood, pretty happy. He's calmer and happier than I've seen him in all the time I've known him! School hasn't started yet, so it can't be that... What the fuck is giving me nightmares this time?

Oh, will you look at that, eleven thirty already. Thank God. Bring on the lunch rush.

Chapter 4

His elbow connects solidly with my jaw, and it wakes me from the best sleep I've had in the last couple of weeks. Okay, maybe it wasn't the best... maybe I just needed it the most.

My hand flies up to my face, and, "Fuck, what the hell!" shoots out of my mouth, probably the most redundant thing I've ever said. I know exactly what's going on, but this late at night, my brain rebels. There's an instant of mental mutiny, a small inner shriek of, "This is not happening! Not now, not again!" I would love to play along with it, but I can't. Like Pinky and the Brain, that ridiculous cartoon that Justin watches with Gus, I feel like we're repeating the same futile task, over and over again: "So, what are we going to do tomorrow night, Brian?" "The same thing we do every night, Justin, try to keep you sane and take over the world!"

Fuck, listen to me. I must be more tired than I thought. Sure enough, my voice DOES sound tired as I'm cajoling him out of his nightmare, murmuring, "Justin, it's me. Wake up." I sound tired and old, and he doesn't appreciate it one bit, or even answer me. He just thrashes and moans my name in a frightened whisper that's not very sexy at all. It's more horror movie than porn.

"Justin!" I reach out to him, making one last try to reclaim him from his nightmare, but he won't let me. I'd like to touch him, shake him awake, but in his sleep, I'm no different than any of his other demons and he pushes me away. Fine. I'll get up.

I pull on the pair of sweats I conveniently left lying on the floor last night, and I wonder - does it still count as last night when it was only three hours ago? I guess I should have known he wouldn't stay down for long, it seemed too easy to get him to sleep. I've been practically knocking him out every night for weeks, and tonight... he drifted right off after nothing more than a quick blowjob. Almost like he was back to normal or something.

Normal my ass.

I flip on the blues so I can watch him sleeping, and he's almost settled again, almost calm. In this light, he looks...I don't know...He looks like blue light. Shining. I'm sure I'd be more eloquent if I was awake, but fuck it. Before he pushed his way in here, everything in my space was dark, or colourless, because I like it that way - neutral. Give me black or white, without any confusing, complicated colours to break up the lines. He is the brightness I didn't think I needed in here, and if he loses that light...I mean, if he lets his demons win this time...Damned if I don't sound like some pathetic after-school special, but it frustrates me. All of that fucking ground work for nothing.

I need coffee - ridiculous amounts of coffee with my friend Jim Beam. Now that's a concept that'll sell.

Wandering around the kitchen, I can't help but think about the last few weeks, standing by helpless as Justin turned into 'Nightmares R Us' without a goddamned reason... without a reason that makes any fucking sense to me, anyway. Maybe it's something I would understand if I had more experience in caring about other people. Scratch that. At this point, I'd settle for experience in liking other people.

The coffee is done, and I end up making it a little more Irish...read, flammable...than it needs to be. I'm too tired for this shit, I need to sit down, but there isn't anything close enough to the bedroom. I spent fifty thousand dollars furnishing this place, and rather than use any of those tastefully arranged pieces, I've spent the last six weeks lurking on the stairs to my own bedroom. Hell, I should have them upholstered - I've been spending enough time on them lately! What the fuck, Italian top grain leather for every riser, Egyptian cotton cushions for the storage units... why not just retrofit the whole fucking loft so that I can watch my lover going slightly mad?

Hmph. There's a blast from the past, I haven't heard that song in years. Old Queen songs really do stick in your head, don't they? My voice echoes dully in the loft as I shuffle over to the couch, probably looking like Ozzy Osbourne while I mumble: "I'm going slightly mad... I'm going slightly mad... It finally happened...I'm slightly mad..." I remember how excited Mikey was when he went out and bought that tape, 23 years old and actually excited that the record was called Innuendo... Like we needed help to figure out that Freddie Mercury was queer. Whatever. I pick up Justin's sweatshirt off the back of the couch, slipping it on one arm at a time to ward off the air conditioner's chill and trying not to spill coffee on my clean white sofa. The lyrics continue to dance around in my

mind, just on the edge of my memory until I sit back down in the bedroom and really think about them: "I'm knitting with only one needle, unravelling fast, it's true... I'm driving on only three wheels these days, but my dear...How about you?" How about you indeed. Not once in the past six months have I stopped to ask him if he's doing okay. I just assumed that being better than I am meant being fully functional. Shit.

This is so much worse than when he came here from the hospital, and damned if I ever thought I'd say that! Sure, he was a certified headcase when he moved in, but he had every right to be, for a little while. Back then, I stashed him away up here and went out without remorse - no excuses, no apologies, no regrets, because I didn't break him and it wasn't my responsibility to fix him. It wasn't my tricking that had made him anxious and afraid, so why stop?

He says that's not the problem this time either, but I don't think he knows his own mind anymore, so I'm not taking the risk of him finding out. I'm not a fucking monk and I've never pretended to be, but I don't need to be so ostentatious anymore - I can expect the tricks to come to me. That tall redhead that Marty staked out at the baths...the Greek twins...that new UPS guy...the dirty blonde Italian kid with the freckles at the gym, they all practically laid down at my feet. I still help myself to the buffet; I just don't take the food into another restaurant anymore. I'm not taking the risk of wounding the one guy I didn't forget, over a pack who were never important enough to remember.

He says it doesn't bother him, that he's getting used to it...but I don't know. He asks their names, I swear to God he does, but "Don't ask, don't tell" isn't just for the Army anymore. When all of this comes out, and I know it will, I will NOT be accused of having made it worse.

Fuck making it worse, not making it better is bad enough. What the fuck am I going to do with him? Throw him into therapy? What good is THAT going to do? He doesn't trust shrinks after that mess with his mom... and frankly, I don't either. Never have, never will. What possible motivation could you have for spending all those years learning to get into peoples' heads? Either you're born with the skills, or you're not, and it's not something they can teach. And then...Once they fucking get in there, they're only going to try and squeeze you into a little box, give you a diagnosis that's defined by a fucking textbook, and charge you a couple hundred bucks an hour to listen to you whine. Then they tell you how lucky you are to be functional with whatever batch of neuroses they've "expertly" diagnosed you with, and explain that you'll have to come back every week for years to preserve whatever shreds of sanity you have left. It's bullshit, and I don't buy it.

Besides, if Justin repeats his "I love dick" speech in public one more time, I'm either going to strangle him or die laughing.

I sit and swirl the last of the lighter fluid posing as coffee, and stare at Justin, unmoving, almost unbreathing...a work of living white marble, the smooth, pale skin broken only by the marks that say he's mine.

Mmm hmm. The marks. Oh, fuck me, why didn't I think of that? A shrink is just not an option.

Not for people like us.

Any doctor is going to take one look at him and think he's being abused. Not that Justin would ever say it that way; in fact, I know he would argue the point quite vigorously, because he always has with me. Whether or not he'd agree to that assumption doesn't matter, though; people still jump to conclusions, and I can't say I'd blame them. Our arrangement looks pretty bad from the outside. I'm older, I've been around, and I've been known to have a temper from time to time. I bring in the money; I own the loft, and the lease on the Jeep. It could look like he has no choice but to take what I give him. Like he has no way out. He's younger, smaller, more naïve and poor as a fucking church mouse... constantly covered in bruises, scrapes, scratches and scars... burns and welts and sometimes thin little cuts that he just can't seem to explain. It doesn't take a good imagination to see those things and extrapolate; it takes a good imagination to see those things and NOT extrapolate.

I can only imagine what would happen with a shrink. Justin would go by himself, once, twice, maybe even a few times. Fuck, "Tell me about your father," would use up a hundred hours all by itself; finding ways to spend the time is not the issue. The question is, how many times would he go before he showed up with the telltale marks? What is it that Ted says? "It doesn't look like anything unless you know what you're looking at." Right. So, what does it look like if you DON'T know? The party line goes something like, "If your partner is hurting you, get help." But what if the person helping doesn't understand that you need to be hurt?

Justin obviously needs someone to get into his head and sweep out the cobwebs. If all of this is my fault, and I'm the one upsetting him, then I want to know. If it's his dad, then I want something worked out. And if, God forbid, Chris Hobbes is still lurking in the depths of his mind, then I will personally find him and beat him beyond recognition for doing this to Justin.

Just thinking of that name is like an 'on' switch for my anger, and I set my mug down harder than I needed to. The clock in the kitchen clicks over to four a.m., and it's like someone rang a bell for round two to begin. That's it. I have got to get this under control.

Chapter 5

I'm suffocating. I can't breathe. Oh my God, I can't breathe, please God, let me wake up, let me wake up and breathe again...

But, I am awake. I open my eyelids, and they scratch against the cotton of the pillowcases, but no light comes in and I still can't fucking breathe. Someone is on top of me, holding me flat, pushing my face into the pillows and collapsing my ribs hard against the bed. Suffocating me. Killing me softly.

If I struggle, I'll just run out of air faster. Every second I can't move makes my throat constrict; it makes the sweat seep out of my pores and soaks the pillows. If I struggle and scream, or fight the will of the intruder, he will kill me. I have to escape. Okay.

To do that, I have to put the brakes on my racing brain, even though my head is screaming for air and my heart is beating like a fucking hammer. I have to think slowly. I know I have to think slow and very carefully; I have to get myself loose from this maniac and run away...run into the darkness or out of it, I'm not sure yet, but I want to run. Get me the fuck out of here. Let me go!

He rips the pillow harshly out from under my face, wrenching my head roughly to the side, and I have time for one big, loud gasp before he pounces on my neck with both hands. I realize that the constant, crushing pressure on my back is actually his knee, forcing my ribs to collapse around my lungs, denying me the right to even take up my own space. His other leg is flush against my body, and in one quick move, he's got his forearm planted across the base of my neck. I can feel his hot breath on my ear when he leans in to talk to me.

"Hey, little boy," he whispers, and it's a hiss, a low exhalation of alcoholic fumes and little else. "Have a bad dream?"

I've had an uncountable number of bad dreams lately, creeping, slimy visions of things I can't quite see, sort of like looking into a dark mirror or a thick fog. I try every night to forget, we try every night to make me forget, but nothing makes it disappear like pain... and this brutal pain radiating out of the back of my head is doing the job. I feel like I've been hit with a sledgehammer, and I still can't turn my head or even breathe. The rest is all fucking moot right now.

Should I answer him? I consider and reconsider my options, letting the seconds drift away, until I realize that I don't have a choice. He asked me a question, and he wants the answer - the "right" answer.

When it matters, I just can't lie to him. "Yeah," I confirm, relaxing into his grip, which, strangely enough, also relaxes. "It was bad."

Jesus, if I never have another dream like that, it'll be too soon. I can still feel the remains of panic flowing through my veins, a cold and trickling liquid that won't mix with my blood. Just trying to remember the dark, slimy hands of my faceless attacker almost makes me sick. I shiver violently, and he eases off my back, settling his legs at my sides to cover me instead of holding me down.

He strokes my cheek with his, stubble scratching against my softer skin on each stroke. "You know the drill, Sunshine," he says, the fatigue creeping into his voice. "Which do you choose, the hard or soft option?"

Such a simple question, and impossible to answer even though it's coded into words we borrowed from a song. He's really asking me if I can take it, if I can make it through another scene and let him banish the demons in the best way we know how. It's better than asking for my safe word, which has already been coerced out of me; better than being intimidated into going along or giving in. We did agree that I needed a way to get out and still save face, and I don't have a problem with using it, because this time it's not just about me - I'm worried about him, too. He doesn't do well without sleep, and right now, he sounds like he's fucking ready to drop. If I don't have it in me, I can push, but I won't force him to do it when I know he can't. I don't think he's got it in him tonight, either.

"Brian, I'm sorry." He might have allowed me the option to say no, but it feels like a failure and I still can't say it without apologizing. "I'm really, really sorry, but I can't."

He sighs, and sits back on my hips, one knee dug in on either side of my body. "Neither can I," he replies, simply. "Too fucking tired."

I believe it. When he first came to bed, he sounded drunk, but I quickly figured that the alcohol was Irish coffee and nothing more; that his slow, slurring speech was simply from exhaustion. For him, sometimes being tired is worse than being drunk.

"What time is it?" I ask, sighing, while he traces wide, sweeping patterns on my back with his fingertips.

"Four fifteen," he says, the two words book ending a stifled yawn.

Fuck. I've gotten four hours of sleep, but it feels like four minutes and I'm never going to be able to work another double today. Brian has to be up at five, and God only knows how long he's been up already. He can't sleep when I'm restless like this, so no sleep for me means none for him, either. We're going to be walking zombies all day... unless...

"Bri, can you fix me? Just this once?"

He practically leaps off of me, coming to rest on his knees on his own side of the bed.

"No fucking way, Justin. Forget it. We locked that shit up for a reason."

"I did it for you."

"That was different."

I roll over, trying to get him to look at me. "Fuck, Brian, think about it. Do you really think I'm going to make it through a sixteen hour shift? How long do you think I can go without sleeping?" He tilts his head back thoughtfully, and I can tell I'm winning the argument. If his body hurts half as much as mine, if his head aches and his eyes burn like mine do, then he'll go along.

He groans, partly in frustration because he knows it's wrong, and partly because he doesn't know any other way himself. He would do it for himself, and he'll do it for me. He needs the relief as much as I do.

He punches the bed and it's almost endearing, that little gesture... his body language gives away so much. He'll give in, but he wants me to think he won't go down without a fight. "You know I don't like the needles, Justin. Why the fuck can't you snort it like normal people?"

"Hey, it's not my fault that my sinuses are bad. Do *you* want to spend the next hour cleaning up after a nosebleed that won't stop?" He exhales sharply, probably remembering the last time that happened...one innocent bump of slightly impure coke and I had to spend two hours with my face packed in ice. My allergies are just too hard on my nose already, and I even have trouble with poppers in the summer. I can't be snorting shit whenever I feel like it.

He hasn't moved, and I can tell that the wheels are turning slowly in his head. No matter what I take, if it goes down orally, it'll take too long to hit, and if we smoke it, we'll need ten times as much. He's just postponing the inevitable. I need a hit to stay awake, and so does he, and no matter how much he doesn't want to spike me, it's the only way that it's going to work out.

I take the risk of interrupting his train of thought to plead, "Brian, please. Let me peak before morning."

He sighs and looks at the clock on my night table. "It IS morning." The night isn't as deep as it was even when we started talking, and what was a black, starry sky is now fading to navy blue. The moon is just setting, casting a square of weak light onto the bed.

"All the more reason." I sit up and catch his eye, and he looks every bit as tired as I feel. "You can trust me."

He just sighs and turns his back before getting out of bed. "Up or down?"

I have a theory on people and drugs. It seems that most people don't choose a drug by the effect that they're supposed to get, but by their own personalities. People who are naturally upbeat will start by going up; people who are naturally depressed will start by going down. Of course, once you really get going, where you end up isn't something that can be predicted by anyone.

Out in the living room, Brian is shaking his keys out of his coat pocket, looking for the one that opens the storage cabinets.

"Up. I have to get out of bed in an hour."

"What? I thought you were bullshitting about that double shift!" He turns back to me, incredulous. "You expect me to send you to work with Deb when you're high? Forget it."

I get up on all fours, crawling to the very bottom edge of the bed, where I settle on my knees. "If I go down, I'll have fifteen minutes of peace, and then I won't be able to get back up again. I won't be able to get out of bed!"

He snorts derisively, finally finding the right key, and taking a minute to hang up his coat. "You can't get your ass out of bed on the best of days. It's not the drugs that make you lazy."

I yawn deeply, and sink back onto my ass. "You're going to give me whatever you want anyway, so hurry up about it. Give me a speedball for all I care."

"My, my, aren't we jaded these days?" He laughs at my suggestion and returns to the bedroom, jingling his keys. "I can't give you a speedball, not that I ever would. You're probably allergic to heroin, since you're allergic to morphine, and that's basically the same shit. Hmm...but let me think about the new job description...Brian Kinney, discopharmacologist. Nope, doesn't exactly have the cachet of my current job title."

He laughs, and stoops down to unlock the "magic" drawer, where we agreed to store everything except Tylenol and a little bit of weed after his last incident out at the farm. Truth is, he doesn't think about killing himself as often when he doesn't have the means around to tempt him. Out of sight, out of mind has never been truer for anyone than it is for Brian. He only looks logical on the outside; his inner core is that of an impulsive six year old with a bad temper.

He sorts through the drawer, pauses, then lifts up a plastic tray and sorts again. It's all in a small storage container, two-tiered, with lots of little drawers to keep the high and mighty separated from the low and deadly. That's his job. Even after all this time, I still don't recognize a lot of it. In this low light, I'd probably pick up the wrong bag and kill us both. He chooses carefully, picking up a few small bags with one or two pills each, and spills them out onto a wide, flat piece of smoked glass that I'm sure he bought just for this purpose.

"I'll do it, but just once. ONLY once," he repeats, looking up from his task and daring me to argue, "And on one condition. When I get to the office, I'm calling in some favours and taking you to a therapist, and you're going to be a good boy and not give me shit about it."

"Fuck you, Brian!" His eyes narrow, and as he settles himself on the cabinet, I instantly regret my knee-jerk reaction. What's that about biting the hand that feeds you? "I mean, I don't want to go."

He nods from his place, sitting with one foot up on the cabinet, cutting together the mix with a straight razor. "I know. I don't want to make you go." He stops what he's doing, the repetitive tap tap tap slide, and locks his gaze onto mine. "But you **need** to, Justin."

"No, I don't." I don't want to go back to a therapist, don't want to be told how I have the right to feel violated, since I was bashed. Don't want to hear that it's, 'Okay to express my feelings.' At this point, I just want to forget that it ever happened, and it's easier not to talk about it, since I never have in the first place.

"Yes, you do." Finished cutting the powder, he leans over and resumes rummaging through the drawer until he finds the syringes. I watch every move he makes as he starts up the process - I never get tired of watching. There's just something about it that blows apart my country-club calm - it's so dangerous and so precise.

I guess now is my chance to change his mind- the best time to reason with him is when he's distracted.

"Look, it's not the end of the world..." I start. I can't really see what he's doing until he sparks up his lighter, and the flame illuminates his face in a creepy, devilish kind of way. All of his concentration seems to be focused on cooking up whatever magic potion he's got in the spoon. He doesn't argue, so I continue.

"I'm just having trouble sleeping lately..." He's done now, packing up the gear, and if he heard me, he's chosen not to acknowledge it.

"Just give me a little taste of something and I'll be fine." He was in the midst of crossing to the bed, taking those three short steps from there to here, but my statement stops him dead in his tracks. "Will you LISTEN to yourself? What happened to 'You should never take drugs that aren't prescribed by a physician or recommended by a reliable pharmacist'?"

He has such a selective fucking memory it's unreal. Sure, he couldn't remember my name the next morning, but he can still remember the dumbest thing I've ever said...

"That was years ago, Brian, I was a kid. I didn't know shit about anything then."

He nods understandingly, and sits beside me, syringe in hand. I'm mesmerized by the way the tip of the needle glints in a shaft of moonlight. "Where do you want it?"

My answer is quick. "Not in my tongue like last time! That hurt too much. It felt like you jammed a rock under my skin!"

He sighs in irritation, and glares at me. "I'm not a phlebotomist, I'm a talented amateur. I can only reliably hit veins in two places - your tongue or your dick. You choose."

Well, when he puts it that way... "Tongue."

He smirks. "Thought so."

I go to open my mouth, but he grabs my chin with his free hand. "Before I do this, I need to say something to that kid I used to see sometimes, the one who was petrified of everything but Tylenol. Remember him? Just give him a message for me. I am sitting here, in our bed, getting ready to shoot you up with something... and you're not really sure what... but you don't care. All you know is that you need this hit like you fucking need to breathe, because you haven't slept more than four hours at a time in over six weeks." His voice gets very harsh and hard. "What's wrong with this picture?"

Hi, my name is Justin, and I may not be a junkie, but I sure as hell act like one. What's worse is that right now, I'm too tired to care. I'll worry about it later. "Everything."

"Good answer. Open up."

I open my mouth, and he leans in and kisses me hard before I can flick my tongue to the roof of my mouth. There is something so inherently sexual about somebody else fixing you...about letting someone penetrate you and give you pleasure...I can't describe it, I just try to remember it because nothing compares, or even comes close. I take a deep breath, and when he does too, I try not to think about the fact that he really IS an amateur at this. It's mind over matter - if I don't move, he won't slip, and everything will be fine. He grasps my tongue between his thumb and finger, and I wait, frozen, for the little sting that takes away the pain. Pleasure... peace... anything from a full body orgasm to a complete mental arrest. Anything you need, anything at all, courtesy of a tiny pick that you won't even remember later on.

The cold burning slide of the pain is followed instantly by a giddy euphoria, the shock reaction of a body that's not used to being pierced. A cool, sick flush slides down my spine as the sweat breaks out on my face, and he laughs when my eyes glaze over before the plunger of the syringe even moves.

"I forgot you still did that." He stares into my eyes the whole time he presses the drugs into me, talking slowly and smoothly, and the incredible intimacy of what we're doing makes my dick jump. It's just him and me; chemistry and a connection that nobody else understands. He tugs the point back out of my skin, and I press the tip of my tongue to the roof of my mouth, giggling.

When I'm sure my tongue won't bleed too much, I ask, "What was it?" but it's mostly idle curiosity. What I mean is, 'How long will it take?'

I watch as he recaps the needle and slips it back into the package, all serious and businesslike. Somehow, I think that if my neurologist knew what we use my prescription syringes for, I'd find myself back on the capsule form of my meds pretty damn fast. "Leftovers, mostly. Little MDMA, little K, some DMT, some stuff you've never done before, all nice and blended so the peaks stack up. It shouldn't take long."

"Come with me." Seems like a reasonable request. I don't want to fly alone.

"I am, but I can't do it blind. I need the mirror." He goes back over to the cabinet for another needle and the rest of the mix, but on his way into the bathroom, he stops in the doorway. "I mean it, Justin, this is the LAST time. This is something you do because you want to, not because you need to. Say 'Yes, Brian, I understand.'"

"Yes, Brian, I understand."

"And you're taking the day off."

"Yes, Brian."

He's quiet in the bathroom for a while after that, aside from a muffled grunt when he hits the vein. It's like a band-aid...easier if someone else does it for you. Next, I hear him over at the phone, making a couple of calls. By the time he comes back to the bed, I'm lying flat on my back, staring at the ceiling while my body dissolves into the duvet.

He settles in beside me, on his side, and turns my head to look into my eyes. I might go shocky and giggly, but on him, his eyes always go first. His pupils are blown wide open, and it's just so...funny to see him react physically...so innocent and incongruous...that I have to laugh.

He smiles, and laughs right along with me. I love this. "Yeah, I know, my eyes. They've always done that. Let it go." I giggle again, because on some deep, cosmic level, seeing that Brian has committed to at least dosing with me makes me happy. He squints a bit, trying to get the joke, but quickly his brow relaxes and you can just see him releasing himself into the high.

Holding me closer, and letting himself go.

"I called in for both of us, we have the day off," he says when I manage to stop laughing. "Get some rest."

The sun still isn't 'up,' but the light from the approaching sunrise has painted the walls, and it's just beautiful... so totally placid and calm. My blood is starting to warm up, and just closing my eyes is a delicious relief. Flushes of heat and sensation start in my chest and roll over me like waves, and I can feel my thoughts starting to fade away. "I thought we weren't going down."

His body drifts closer to mine, and even though we're not touching, I can see or imagine the current flowing between us, an extra source of heat and light in this dim, pink little room. When his answer comes, it seems far away and almost irrelevant to the question I asked.

"That's the beauty of making your own mix," he postulates, his voice somehow disembodied even though I know he's lying right beside me. "You can go where you want, when you want...and I want to sleep. We can always go up later."

He shifts; his hand half rests on my thigh, and the electric shock of skin on skin is like a rocket shooting straight to my heart. Like getting spiked a second time. Only one thing could make this experience any more perfect...

"Fuck me?" My consciousness is sliding away, and it feels like an eternity before his hot, dry hand grasps my cock. After that, time stands still, and I don't remember anything until noon.

Chapter 6

and through a fractal on a breaking wall,
i see you my friend, and touch your face again...
miracles will happen as we trip...

Touch me...touch me right fucking there...Fuck...I'm on fire, and melting... plastic... impermanent. Melt into me, burn me. Make every fucking nerve hum and buzz with static... static like inside my head. Thick clean blue kisses, wet and open. Take my breath... make me spin again. It hurts to love you this much, I need you to take some of me away and make room for it...make room for you...there is too much inside me, too much darkness and fear, hate and anger, pain and isolation...sticky tarry black greedy hateful souleating gore leaking out of every pore, contaminating you...pulling you down, folding you in like quicksand...push it all out of the way...so unimportant... nothing like this, nothing is like this iridescent fascination for you. Let me into you, and I'll let you all the way into me. Slither over me. Wind yourself around me so I can watch the wet, slimy trails... glittering, shimmering trails that you leave painted on my skin. Vibrate into me and through me so I can feel your sight, hear you with my body instead of my brain, make the cruel white space between us disappear... have to lose my control, lose my senses, lose my mind, have to unlock the cage and erase me. Let me come and let me go.

i know you can feel it, you're already there...

It's very dark when I come to, and I can't tell if I'm actually conscious or if this is another hallucination. We're in the... bathroom...I'm sure it's the bathroom... in the dark. One big white candle flickers on the back of the toilet. The light reflects off the mirror and gets bent by the glass, and the whole room glows...every surface and corner is haloed with pale yellow light that pulses and shifts, and I'm so fucking dizzy...but that's okay.

I'm on the floor. There's water running...a secret waterfall...but I think I'm dry. Sticky, but dry - sticking to the coldness of the floor.

I'm on the floor, and Justin is on the floor, and I'm fucking him, and it's like waves, like breathing, natural rhythm for a necessary body function. I'm on my knees, and he's hunched over and straddling me, and I'm holding him around his chest... At least I came to in a good place, fucking Justin near the shower. It doesn't always happen that way, sometimes when you black out, you come to in bad places. Like alleys. Or other cities. Or being fucked by a bear with bad acne and a green goatee. Bad places.

But, this isn't bad. Sure, he's puking up something or other...and that's...uh...Jesus fucking Christ, it feels so good when he does that...but the puking, that's revolting. My stomach hurts, too many sit ups or something... Fuck... whatever he's coughing up, I think I beat him to it. La Purga...the purge...that's probably why we're in the shower. Must have something inside he needs to get out. He's on his hands and knees, and he's so fucking hot...and tight... and when his chest heaves, he slams back into me and it makes me see lights that are too perfect to just be stars.

strange and beautiful are the stars tonight...that dance around your head...

My hair is wet. That doesn't make any sense. Wait, the rest of me is kind of wet too. I think I'm lying in a puddle of water...God, I hope that it's water. Doesn't smell like it.

"Brian?" It's cold in here, and dark, very dark. I can smell something else, a little metal, a little smoke, but I can't tell if our candles went out or if it's some kind of hallucination. It's sort of a bittersweet smell, and good to my stomach, which is surprisingly sore.

"Brian?" Where the fuck is he, anyway. I want to get up, but everything is jumping around - vibrating - leaving glittery vapour trails and phosphorescent blacklit afterimages. I can't tell if...if...if it's all real, you know? The things in front of me, all two or three or four of them, are moving and twitching and I have to choose only one thing of each to believe in. I have to crawl on one floor, pass by one wall. I would have to choose only one doorway to walk through. If I chose the wrong doorway, where would I go? Who would I be on the other side? Oh God, oh God...

"Brian!" My voice echoes in the bathroom, bouncing off the tiles to multiply itself a thousand times over, swirling and shuddering like everything else in here. Not real. Too many copies to tell which is the original to hang on to. Too hard to tell what to trust as real. What if I'm not real? I could be a fake. I haven't been myself lately...since the farm...since the bashing...since I fell in love with Brian...when I think of myself, I don't know who I'm thinking about anymore. Am I the Justin I want to be, or am I just what people think I am? And how would I know if I was?

"BRIAN!!!!!!" I have to find him. He always comes for me. What if he's hurt? What if he went through the wrong door and he can't come back? It's easy to be scared in here, but what if he's scared out there? Have to be strong. He needs me. I'm going to pick this door, and believe that it will get me out of the shower. Then I'm going to pick this door, this beautiful portal of radiant blue, because the most light is coming through and I'm tired of being in the dark. I would stand up, but I'm dizzy...too dizzy...and being close to the ground just feels right, even though my hands and knees are really sore.

There is a lot more light...here on the otherside... It's day. I forgot that it was day. I don't like day. Daytime hurts, the light is too bright... too big... and everything gets sharp and glinty. It pierces my eyes, and I have to close them for a minute and lie down. My face sticks to the cold floor, and the coldness crawls through my body like melting ice. I'll find Brian and then lie down.

We have a couch. Don't have to go far to see him there, leaning against the back...sort of propped up by it, staring at the ceiling with wide-open eyes. The lights are on but nobody's home. Is he dead? That would be sad. He's so beautiful. I'd like to draw him dead, happy and still...maybe he'd smile for me then. I think that when you're dead, they can make you look like you're smiling, even when you never did before. He looks so peaceful. Too bad we can't do this all the time.

I crawl along, very close to the ground...we're both close to the ground...and it feels right, being low. His legs are cold when I put my head in his lap, but he doesn't stop staring at the ceiling. His eyes must hurt.

I can't watch that. I close my eyes. "I was scared." It's my voice, but notmyvoice...they're my words, but not what I wanted to say. It's not even a tiny piece of what happened in there - I lost myself for a minute, but I don't know...I don't understand...how to explain.

He's a statue...an ikon. He doesn't move, doesn't blink, just allows himself to petrify, and let every cell turn slowly to stone. "You're wet," he says, and yanks down his leather jacket from the back of the couch, letting it drop across my back. It's funny, and nice, and I laugh. How can I not laugh at that? My living God is as fucking clumsy and sentimental as the next guy. Nice hero-worship while I had it.

I struggle to sit up...everything is a struggle right now, like walking through molasses... and slip his jacket over my shoulders. Then I tug him right down to the floor with me, because it's right to be low. When you're losing your body, if you don't lie down you'll float away. When he's flat like the floor, I lie down on top of him... holding on tight, my legs on either side of his body... and all the pieces fit together where they're supposed to. His arms go around me while I stare at the floor and he stares at the ceiling.

since you touched me, i can't be free...this is every lover's destiny

I come to with a sense of horrible aching pain in my body, like I've been kicked repeatedly, and hard. We called it the Beer Monkey in college...that feeling of waking up after a binge to a horrible hypersensitive body ache, like you'd been beaten by some rabid prizefighter while you were passed out.

I'm pretty sure that my eyes were already open, because they feel pasty and dry, like I've been staring for a while. I'm flat on my back behind the couch, so I know there's nothing to stare at but the ceiling, and with the sun almost down, it's not all that interesting.

Sunset? Oh, I blacked out. Right. I'm still looking at the ceiling, trying to figure out exactly how long I've been down when something nudges my side. I crank my eyes downward, and I can just see the top of a blonde head in the edge of my vision.

"Hey." Not inspired conversation, but...fuck.

"I hurt." I think this is Justin's first body trip, and coming down from that is never pleasant...or fun...or painless. Just the most fleeting thought of moving hurts.

"It'll stop." It fucking has to stop; I can't deal with this. Never could.

"When?"

"By tomorrow for sure."

"Fuck that." He starts to get up, but slowly, and I feel his pain. It's just like when you're sick, and every muscle, every joint, every fucking molecule of your body aches with a dull, persistent throb. He gives up with a moan, sinking back down and laying his head on my chest.

My skin feels...different where he put his head... hotter, gummier...whateverthefuck, it's disgusting. Like moving through quicksand, I bring my hand to his cheek, and then slip it under his face.

"What are you doing?" he says, but I'm not paying attention. My hand slides into a pool of cum on my chest, one that I don't remember leaving there, and a little picking thought ignites at the back of my brain... a thought I don't want... but once you know, you can't go back and un-know. I realize that I'm fucking covered in sweat, and cum, and worse... and I don't remember anything. I can't remember having sex with Justin...meaning that probably isn't the only thing we forgot.

In a moment of instant panic, and I shove Justin to the side and sit up despite the sick spinning in my head.

NO. I'm not that stupid. I couldn't have been fucked up enough to do that. I'm an adult, an intelligent, rational adult, and that is a fucking juvenile mistake. Barebacking is a teenage stroke fantasy and nothing more. There's got to be a used condom around here somewhere...at least one... and as soon as I find it, I'm going to feel a lot better.

Justin groans when he hits the floor and sits up, holding his head. "What the hell?" comes out pretty audibly, but the rest is a garbled mess. He coughs up some crap, and tries again, his voice rough. "Brian. What's wrong?"

I debate telling him what happened for about a microsecond. "Nothing. Lay back down, I'll bring you something for your head," I say, absentminded because my head is on one goal: Find the used condoms.

There has to be at least one, somewhere, that proves to me that I didn't fuck up. I was careful, I had to be, that's the one thing I never ever forget, no matter how fucked I am... but then again, I could be wrong.

A tour of the loft proves agonizing and fruitless. My muscles are screaming and my head is pounding, but nothing hurts me like my own fucking mistake. There isn't anything new, nothing I don't remember from before, anyway. I'm such a fucking idiot.

I make a quick stop at our own personal drugstore, and I can't help but notice that there's a LOT missing. Like, almost everything. I don't remember re-dosing, either, but the only things left are some unidentifiable round white pills, a little weed, and a couple of packets I swore we'd never use. I swore I'd never do a lot of things... and now I'm going to forget that they've been done. If now's not the time...

I pick up the brightly coloured packets and make my way back to Justin, trying to figure out what the fuck to say.

in my dreams i'm jealous all the time
as I wake I'm going out of my mind
going out of my mind...

"Brian, what's wrong?" He looks tired, out of it, and preoccupied...I think. It hurts to open my eyes all the way.

"Justin..." He takes a deep breath, and then looks around the loft, distracted. "Holy fuck."

My head throbs when I turn to follow his eyes...the fucking loft has been trashed, in a tight, solid triangle between the bed, the bathroom, and the couch...puddles of water and stuff I don't want to think about mark a trail of where we wanted to go, and every place

where we rested in between. If I thought that he was a one-man wrecking machine when he was rolling, I was wrong. The two of us dosing together are a fucking disaster in motion.

"Brian, I still hurt..." My head pounds, but it's not as bad as my stomach. I feel like I took a hundred punches straight to the gut.

"I know. It's the puking. You'll live," he says, hard-assed as usual, but I see his hand slipping across his own stomach. He hurts every bit as bad as I do.

"So, what's in your hand, then?" I say, tossing a hand towards his in what was meant to be a point. "Will that make us feel better?"

"No," he says, looking guiltily at the floor. "Better. It'll make us feel nothing."

My head hurts so bad, I can actually feel myself thinking. The wheels turn so fucking slow in my head, I can hear the jeopardy theme song...but eventually I clue in. "You mean..."

"It's the last of the smack. Can't say no to a bad thing." He walks back over to me, but slowly, and keeping his distance. It's a dead giveaway that he's hiding something bigger than forbidden drugs.

"What? What is wrong with you?" I don't have the energy to decrypt him right now. "Whatever it is, just fucking say it!"

"I...we...Dammit, Justin!" he explodes, so suddenly furious that I recoil into the back of the sofa, thinking he's going to hit me. "Just go to the fucking bathroom, you'll figure it out."

O-kay...I can do that, I think, because now I can get up without the room tilting to the left. I slip off to the bathroom without turning my back.

The bathroom is an even bigger mess, and reeks so badly of vomit that I almost want to make another contribution. I try to wash up what parts of myself don't hurt, but it's futile and I refuse to go back into that shower until it's cleaned. I'm absentmindedly doing a little inventory when I realize exactly what he's so upset about.

"BRIAN!" I screech, returning to the doorway of the bathroom, panic trumping every miniscule twitch of pain. I hold up my fingers, wet with cum and speckled with a little blood, fascinated and frightened at the same time. "I think we..."

"I know." He cuts me off, defeated. "I think we did too."

I pop my fingers into my mouth on the way back over to the couch, which he's sitting behind like a makeshift bomb shelter. I settle down beside him, taking his hand in my

clean one. "It's okay. It's no big deal..." I start, trying to sound upbeat. "I'll go clean up, and we can go and get tested tomorrow." At this point, I'm not sure who I'm trying to convince, but I want it to sound good. "It'll all be fine."

"Fuck you and your fucking Mary Sunshine attitude, Justin," he practically growls, ignoring my tentative touch, instead slapping the coloured packages against his hand. "I don't need this."

"What, and I do?"

He doesn't answer me, so we just sit together and stare at the floor. Talk about fucking poetic justice. I know I used to bug him about fucking me raw, but I was young, and naive. I didn't know. He DID convince me we couldn't, and I swear to God that eventually I grew up... I understood. I locked it down, filed it under "stupid teenage fantasy" that wasn't good for anything but jacking off. Being safe, being careful, *that* is reality - not this. Not getting high and barebacking when we've both blacked out.

When I wanted it, it was more than a fetish, it was a symbol of everything I thought I wanted - monogamy, fidelity - things that I knew we'd probably never have together. Finding out that we did it and I don't even remember is so fucking surreal it's not even funny.

He's still playing with the tiny little packages of heroin, turning them over and over in his hands, walking one across his knuckles - all the stupid bar tricks that impressed me so much when I was seventeen.

"If you want it so fucking much, then do it."

My voice seems to have interrupted his train of thought. He looks at me, eyes bloodshot, hands shaking with a strange little tremor. "What about you?"

I think about it for a minute...all the wonderful stories I've heard, how it takes away all your emotions, your pain and fear and uncertainty and frustration... and leaves behind... nothing. Pure, empty nothing. Soul-soothing nothing. A void so horribly wonderful that you want to spend eternity hovering in warm, velvet emptiness. I'm scared, I'm cold, and I want that emptiness more than anything I can possibly imagine.

My hand reaches out to it - reaches out to him - when lightning crashes and my last shred of self-preservation whispers in my ear:

...if you go down this road, you will never come back...

and I realize that isn't too far from the truth. It's time to decide if I want to stop now. If I can.

Last chance to get off the highway.

don't tell me all the things i wasn't
could have made this big a difference
to all the things you are...

"Justin?" Please, Justin, please don't make me push you. This isn't about me... it's not about how much I want this stuff, or about the choices I've already made. It's about you making this choice for yourself.

He shudders with every breath, fighting his demons so hard that I expect to see his head rock back with invisible punches. Finally, he meets my eyes, his decision weak but clear. "No. Flush it."

Thank.fucking.God. "Okay." And I go and do just that, weaving through a mess like this loft has never seen before - and coming from me, the Master of Disaster, that's saying something.

When I finish up, gagging on the smell that fills the bathroom, I can hear him shuffling over to the bed. He lays flat on his stomach, on top of the duvet. He just loves ruining my duvets. I sigh, but it's not anything more than a puff as I ease myself in beside him.

"How did we get here?" he mumbles into the pillow. "This is not what I wanted from my life, you know."

I let him burrow closer to me...I won't go out of my way to hold his hand, but if it helps, then I won't stop him from doing it, either. "You need help, Justin. Therapy. No more arguments - you're going."

He sighs, defeated. "All right." We lay there in somewhat agreeable silence for a minute, and then he murmurs, "Come with me."

"Fine." And I will go with him, because he's always been able to make me go places where I didn't want to go.

Chapter 7

The production rooms are humming by the time I get into the office, five minutes late as usual. I still wait for Wertshafter to come lumbering down the hallway every day, until I realize again that this place is really mine. I'll never get over that feeling, the feeling of owning something so important, and of really giving back to the community. I sit down at my desk, thumbing through my bills and logging onto the computer at the same time. The

voice mail button on the phone is flashing, and so I decide to get all the calls out of the way first thing. The single, terse message awaiting me is enough to stop me in my tracks.

"Ted, it's Brian. Call me."

I don't like it when Brian calls me early in the morning. If he's just looking to harass me and shoot the shit, he calls at lunch. (And yes, he does do that sometimes...mostly when Michael isn't around.) If he's looking for tax advice, he calls towards the end of the day. It's these early morning calls that never turn out well - 'Come up to the cottage,' and, 'I found Blake,' aren't exactly high on my list of fond Brian interactions.

I set my lunch in the little bar fridge under the desk and call his cell phone, praying I get his voice mail. It rings, over and over again, until I hear a mechanical voice say, "Kinney." He sounds so hollow that for a second, I almost think I *did* get his voice mail, until I catch myself and realize that it's really him.

"Umm, Brian..." He's already got me off guard, and I'm the one who called him! Jesus. "I got your message. You...uh...wanted to talk to me."

"Yeah." I hear him shuffling papers, yelling at his poor secretary all the while. There's a loud slam followed by a stream of curses, and I'm about to ask him if I should call back when he clears his throat.

"Ted, I need Dale Wexler's home phone number."

It's a simple request, deceptively simple, like everything Brian does. What you see, with him, is never what you get. I've love to just give him the number and get out of his way, but that would get me entangled in his new melodrama. Besides, giving Brian Dale's number is easier said than done. Dale has a number that is widely available for public use; in turn, it's widely known. I suggest that one first.

"Did you try the dungeon? 555-6996."

He sighs, and then takes on the annoying high-pitched whine he uses to impersonate women. "We're sorry, Master Wexler won't be joining us this week. He's taking some personal time."

"I see." Shit. If Brian got past the receptionist to talk to Marie, Dale's screechy personal assistant, then he must have really turned on the charm. It makes me wonder how badly he needs that number, and why.

"How about the office?" I suggest hopefully.

He grunts. "I called them as well. He's not back in there for two weeks."

"His cell?"

"Voice mail. He's on vacation. Tell me what the fuck Dale Wexler needs with a fucking vacation? All he does is fuck people all day long!"

We both know that's not true; Dale runs several businesses aside from the dungeon. Brian is just whining because he can't get what he wants the second he wants it. Come to think of it, I should probably be working harder to sound surprised about any of this, but I've known about Dale's vacation for over a month now. I'm scheduled to spend the weekend with him, and if Brian thinks I'll jeopardize a weekend with Dale for him, then he's fucking insane. I can hear him tapping a pen against his desk, and I decide to just be blunt.

"Brian, you know I have his number, and you know why I can't give it to you." I don't need to tell him what will happen if I give it out - Dale would be disappointed in me. There wouldn't be a big scene, and Dale would never truly hurt me...he'd just stop taking my calls, which would be a thousand times worse. I don't ever want to let him down.

"Ted..." He groans into the phone, frustrated, and I figure that any minute, he's going to throw it at the wall. He takes a deep breath, and says, "I need that number, Ted, what's it going to take to get it?"

"Hold on," I mumble into the phone, setting it on top of a stack of catalogues when Curt the Contractor comes to the desk, asking for his paycheque. Then the ten a.m. shift change comes in, and it takes me a good five minutes to set them to their tasks before I can even find Curt's cheque. When I've finally located the envelope, I pass it over the desk and pick up the phone again. "Listen, Brian, I'm sorry I made you wait, but it isn't up for negotiation. I just can't do it."

"Fuck you, Ted," he yells and I hear his cell phone clatter and crash against something hard - probably a wall. There are a few moments of dead air, and I almost hang up the phone before his voice comes back on the line, soft and resigned.

"Wait."

"Wait for what? I can't give you his home number, Brian, he'd never forgive me."

"Then help me figure something out. I need to speak with him." His voice is convincing, soft and low, and I'm getting sucked in again, falling for the seduction even though I know how this scene always ends. Brian takes what he wants and leaves you with what he thinks you deserve, and I've seen it a hundred times. It's predictable... I'm too smart to fall for this... but it just feels so fucking good to have his full, complete, undivided attention.

"I need to talk to him...professionally. It's about Justin." A pause, then, "Justin and I."

"Oh. OH!" I exclaim, wondering what the hell Brian has done that he needs Dale's help to clean it up. "Is Justin okay, Brian? You didn't hurt him, did you?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that..." he says solemnly. "But I could really use your help." And there's the pitch. I know he doesn't ask just anyone for help, and to be that person makes me completely, irrationally happy, and disgustingly willing to offer whatever assistance I can. I really hate myself sometimes.

"All right, I have an idea. Stay on the line, and I'll call Dale. We can three-way it for a minute, and if he doesn't want to talk to you, he can dismiss us both, no harm done."

He exhales a sharp, raggedy breath. "Fine. I'll wait."

I push all the right buttons, impressed with my own ingenuity. The call takes no time at all; I have his private number in my speed dial directory. Number sixty-nine...tacky, I know, but I won't forget it.

"Hello?" Dale's voice is so deep and powerful, so commanding, that if men could swoon, I'd be doing it right now.

"Dale, this is Ted. I have Brian on the line with me." I get right to the point. I don't want Dale thinking he was tricked into anything.

"And why is that, Ted?" He's mildly curious, and not offended, thank god.

"Because he really needs to talk to you, and he asked me for a favour, as a friend." Now, he didn't ask me for a favour per se, but since I AM doing him one, I'm going to take credit for it. "He and Justin are having problems, and he needs to discuss something with you."

"I see. You know my policy regarding my private line, right, Ted?" My whole world has shrunk down to two sounds - his firm voice, and the tick, tick, tick that sounds like a crop lightly tapping his hand. I can just picture him, sitting back on his living room couch, oiling up all the leather he owns while he watches imported German porn. Naked, glistening with stray droplets of oil, the phone cradled into his neck...

"Right, Ted?" He repeats more firmly, and I jump, even all the way over here.

"Yes, Sir, I do." It's an automatic response to his authoritative tone, and I don't hesitate to fall into place for a second, even with Brian listening in. "I beg your pardon, Sir, but it's a serious matter. Justin is still quite young, and I feel responsible for his care, and Brian has been a good friend on occasion." Brian snorts, and if he were in the room with me right now, I'd smack him. If it weren't for Justin, and my fear for them both, I'd tell him to fuck right off. "That's why I bent your rules. I beg your forgiveness for my indiscretion, and welcome any punishment you may offer." Any punishment except one... whip me, beat me, but please don't send me away.

The few moments until he replies are the most terrifying of my life. My pulse fills my throat as I nervously tap a finger against my desk. After three seconds of the most painful eternity I've ever experienced, he speaks.

"Compelling plea for forgiveness, Ted, and I'm impressed with your cleverness in conferencing the call. Our plans for the weekend will proceed, and we'll address your punishment for breaching the security rules at that time."

I heave a huge sigh of relief. I can't understand why people gamble; the uncertainty is just terrifying!

"Kinney." Dale's voice changes instantly, back to a light, congenial, almost teasing tone. "Never thought I'd hear from you again."

"Wexler." Brian's voice is equally light, and just as challenging. "What can I say - the circumstances are beyond my control."

"So this call would be..." Dale fishes for details, but with me on the line, it's futile. Brian won't give it up that easily, not with me listening in.

"This call would be a professional courtesy, Dale." Brian suggests firmly. "Reimbursed, if necessary."

Dale chuckles. "All right, then. Ted, you may go... Good day."

I'm disappointed that I won't be able to hear what's really going on, but I don't think I have much of a choice. I know better than to defy Dale's rules and still expect a reward. I've almost dropped the receiver back into the cradle when the multitude of buttons on the phone beckons to me. I hit the mute and speaker buttons together, dropping the phone back on the hook only when I hear their voices again.

"What do you want, Kinney, this is my fucking vacation." Dale isn't exactly angry, but he's not the president of the Brian Kinney fan club, either.

"What was all that bullshit with Ted? You both sounded like porn. BAD porn."

Dale sighs. "Kinney, for the fucking Whore of Babylon, you're so naïve! You think you understand everything about the world, and that there's nothing new for you to see, and you just don't know. The ritual isn't there for decoration, it serves an important purpose. Ted Schmidt has a persistent case of bad self-esteem, so I challenge him, praise him, and reward him for correcting his attitude. The happier he is, the happier I am... not that you'd understand shit about being happy or caring for anyone's feelings." Ouch. On many counts.

"Fuck off, Dale, are you always this goddamned touchy in the morning?"

Dale sighs. "Kinney, what do you want? We've been through this. I won't bottom for you, you won't bottom for me, and neither of us needs any new friends." He pauses a beat, and a mischievous sparkle creeps into his voice. "Sex is out, talking is out, so that only leaves one thing... What's wrong with your boy?"

"Don't call him that," Brian bristles.

"Then what should I call him?" Dale teases. "Slave? Partner? Do YOU know what he is, anymore?"

"That doesn't matter, Wexler. You should know better."

"I DO know better. I know that you can't have a good relationship until you know what that relationship is about. That particular distinction is ALL that matters to people like us."

"People like us. What the fuck is it with people and groups! Fuck the community, and FUCK that ritual bullshit. Are you going to help me or not?"

"If you're done with your tantrum, I'm willing to listen."

Brian sighs, and says, "Look. Justin needs a counselor, someone to help him deal with all the stuff he's been through...his family, the bashing...I'm sure you heard about that."

"The bashing? Heard? No, I remember. The two of you wandered around town like maniacs - not together of course, but alone - pissed to the gills and whacked out of your gourds, about six weeks apart, right? Sordid mess. Why didn't you go to a counselor then?"

Good question. We were so concerned with the upcoming trial, and making sure that Jennifer and Deb didn't fall apart, that we didn't even notice how badly Brian was doing until it was too late...and damned if Justin didn't go out and do the exact same thing when he got out of the hospital. I'd love to hear the answer to that question myself, but Brian neatly sidesteps the real issue, focusing on Justin instead.

"At first, I didn't think he needed it. Then, once I figured that he did, I realized that no 'normal' psychiatrist would excuse the marks. He's always marked up lately, he's coming out of the scenes pretty beaten up."

"Can't keep him in line?" It's a harsh accusation, but I know that voice. Dale is testing him, trying to see if it's Brian's temper that's getting Justin hurt, or something more.

I couldn't be more stunned when Brian doesn't rise to the bait. He just sounds...worn down. "I tried, Dale, I fucking tried, but it's not working any more. His pain threshold is too high. We're both exhausted long before it's effective."

"Well, what are you doing, then?" Dale asks, and it's like breaking a dam. Brian briefly describes several scenes...the length, the eventual outcome...while Dale makes the appropriate cues that he's listening. There's a break in the conversation, and Dale says, "Is that all?"

"No. He's beyond that now." Brian seems to be battling himself, balancing his need for privacy with Justin's need for help. "It's not enough to hurt him anymore, it's not enough to degrade him anymore. What he wants now is something I can't give him."

"And what is that?"

"The pain makes him...forget, I guess...so he wants to be in pain all the time. He wants the scenes to last forever and leave injuries that follow him around. He's disappearing into it." Brian clears his throat, still conflicted about making the admission that's not a surprise to anyone but him. "I don't get off on really hurting him, not as much as he thinks he needs. I can't keep doing it."

"Was it really so hard to ask for help?" Dale says soothingly, vocally patting him on the head. He's feeding Brian a tiny scrap of sympathy, and just like Brian, Dale's attention can be very seductive and distracting. "We've all had subs that needed a firmer hand, and difficult cases where it was about more than just sex. It gets harder to do the right thing when you fall in love with them."

Brian starts to object to the phrase, but Dale just interrupts firmly. "When did you notice things starting to go sideways?"

Brian's voice is starting to tire. "It's been a while...Uh... six, seven weeks, maybe. It started slow, but it's going downhill. He's been into the drugs since then." His voice drops. "We both have. It's no good."

"Shit. Again?"

"Yeah."

Dale's concern is evident, but ever practical, he asks, "Give me an outsider's opinion. How far gone is he?"

Brian exhales sharply, but what motivates him...anger, frustration, or exhaustion... I can't tell. "Pretty much all the way, and if he doesn't talk to someone..." There's a tiny choking noise from Brian's end, and it almost sounds like...crying? No. Not him. He coughs gently and continues, "If he doesn't get help we might lose him. He's not dabbling, doing a little pot and some E on the weekends. He's mixing synthetics. He has to shoot anyway because he can't snort, so..."

"You're worried that he's going to skip the formalities and start shooting smack, and you won't be able to stop him."

"No, that's not it." He clears his throat nervously. "I'm worried I won't be able to stop myself from joining him."

"You two are a fucking disaster waiting to happen," Dale mutters, and I hear rustling on his end. "Okay, I have a name. You call him today and quit fucking around. Are you writing this down? His name is Alan Sutherland. 555-6462."

I hear rustling on Brian's end, and then another pause, before he murmurs, "Thank you, Dale." I may be wrong, but I don't know if I've ever heard Brian thank anyone for anything.

"That's what they pay me for."

Brian clicks off, and Dale says, very threateningly, "Ted, your ass is going to seriously regret that its owner decided to eavesdrop on this call."

I can feel my face turning beet red as I touch the call release button, half guilty and half grateful I made such a punishable mistake.

Chapter 8

"Kinney."

Have you ever noticed how much of a habit it is, answering the phone? You do it without a second thought. Without considering whether or not you want to talk to the person on the other end, or what news the call may bring you. I fucking hate that.

"Brian."

His voice on the other end is small, far away...frightened. He's still so young, so unprepared for all the nasty tricks the world still has up its sleeve. This little surprise came courtesy of me, and realizing that, a wave of guilt washes over me, another wave in today's record high tide. I'll just add it to the list of shitty things I've done to Justin.

"You okay?" I ask because I want to know. I rushed out of the loft this morning, no breakfast, just a slug of burnt coffee left over from Wednesday fuelling my hasty departure. I raced around, picking up my keys and briefcase and combing my hair, while he sat silently, following me around with those big, haunted eyes...silent... a pale blonde island in our blue ocean of a bed. He didn't say a fucking word to me, and I didn't say anything to him either. Maybe he needed to be reassured that it'll all be okay...and I would have loved to just blow it all off, but I couldn't. I don't know that it **will** be ok.

Maybe it wasn't even that. Maybe he just needed to be touched, but I couldn't do that, either; couldn't bring myself to touch him at all after what we did. I've done enough damage.

His voice breaks into my consciousness, mumbling, "Not really," and it's no surprise. I'd already guessed that something had to be going sideways, because he never calls on the direct line. He usually emails, or uses my cell...or if he's feeling especially impatient, he goes through Cynthia. Not once has he ever dialed the seven numbers that lead directly to this phone. I didn't discourage it - I didn't have to. He's always known the score with me.

I can hear his breathing, shallow and rapid, and if I were the type of person who worried about things, maybe I'd start doing that now. "What do you need?"

"Nothing..." He takes a deep breath, trying to calm himself, trying to 'be a man'. It's such fucking bullshit. "I called the doctor."

Fuck. Fucking hell. I knew he'd get upset, and that's why I told him I'd make the arrangements myself. I insist on using my own doctor instead of the clinic, just to avoid the safe sex lecture that comes with the territory. I don't need any more lectures, and I don't want to wait around in some dank little room with a bunch of other unlucky bastards wondering about their boyfriends' fidelity and playing "What if." When you get into the room, they tell you the tests are going to be routine, but those fucking tests are only 'routine' if you don't have anything to worry about. If you do...it's a fucking nightmare. Justin's nightmare, now, and mine. Another wave of guilt washes over me, because it's my fault he has anything to worry about. I could have really hurt him...I could have let him hurt himself.

His breath hitches in his chest, and I can hear the tiny hiccup of air. "I told you I'd do that," I whisper into the phone, hoping to calm him down, at least a little. "The first time is always the hardest," That's true but not sufficient...I should say that the first scare is fucking overwhelming as hell, but I don't; I don't want to make him any more upset.

"They started talking about all the tests..." he continues, and I'm not sure if he was actually listening to me or not. "The blood draw and the swabs and the retest schedule and the emergency antibiotics and anti-retrovirals..." His voice starts to break up. "In case I got infected."

God, Justin, I have a meeting in ten minutes, and I can't miss it. Please, please get a grip. "The tests are a precaution, Justin, we're both negative."

"Negative. Ha! What do we know?" he shrieks bitterly. "Those results came in four months ago!" He chokes on his next breath, but manages to stammer out, "You know what they told me, Brian? I'm in the highest risk group possible. Does that mean anything to you? Gay male, under 25, receptive partner..." I can hear him ticking off the points on his hand, repeating the official spiel, trying to be angry with me but getting more afraid with every point. "Non-monogamous..." Sniffle. "I.V. drug user..." Sniff, sniff. "And

what about the cutting?" His sniffing turns into a choked sob. "We've done everything wrong."

"I know." And for some reason, that small admission causes him to totally lose it. I can hear his panic rising, the sobbing stealing his ability to breathe, and I can visualize him, cowering in the loft, clutching the phone in clenched fists...his face flushed and tearstained...because I've seen it a hundred times before. After the nightmares, after the bashing.

I don't even remember 'Before the Bashing' anymore.

"Shh, Sunshine, it's going to be okay..." The words are empty, meaningless, stolen from Lindsay the last time Gus fell at the playground. She said, 'It doesn't matter what you say, you just have to keep talking,' so I do. "Calm down, it'll be all right..."

The phone clatters down onto the coffee table, and I can hear him crying as he retreats into the distance. Fuck. My meeting is in three fucking minutes, and my... boyfriend... my... my... lover... my Justin is losing his mind.

"Justin? JUSTIN!" I hiss into the phone, but I don't get any reply - no noise comes from that end of the line other than a steady, heartbroken wailing. I really fucking hate this. Cynthia comes to the door, tapping her pen against the agenda pages in her hands. I hold up my hand, flashing her a five, and she nods and walks away.

I have five minutes to fix this mess, and I can't do that from here.

"Justin..." There's no point in trying to talk to him. He's alternating between deep, racking sobs and high-pitched wailing screams, and I feel so...impotent... so helpless.

I cradle the phone on my shoulder, and pick up my cell. I hit a speed dial number, and it rings once... twice... My stomach flushes with a feeling of sick anticipation. If I didn't have to do this, if I weren't completely out of options, there's no way I'd even think about...

"Haloo!" Emmett's voice chirps eagerly in my ear, shouting over The Sound of Music playing in the background. "What can I do for you this fine morning?"

"Emmett, you need to go to the loft. It's Justin."

The background noise on his end of the line stops instantly. "Justin? What about him?"

Even though I'd already decided what I was going to say to him, it doesn't make it any easier to admit. "He's losing it, Emmett. Really losing it...and I can't get to him fast enough."

Emmett is the only one who ever saw Justin in one of his rages, other than his family, and when he says, "Like before?" I know what he's thinking. He's thinking Justin is throwing another temper tantrum...but this is so much more.

"Not like before. Worse."

"Shit." He seems surprised, but doesn't hesitate to agree to my demand. "I'm on my way over there. Tell him I'll be a couple of minutes."

What? "Wait," I command, and he pauses, puffing slightly, as if I stopped him in the middle of tying his shoes. "Why would you think I'm still on the line with Justin?"

I can hear him wandering through his apartment, probably turning things off. "Because you ARE, Brian, and I know you are. You're always lurking somewhere in the background when he needs you, and some of us have finally noticed that, so don't act so surprised." There's another pause, and he asks in that curiously innocent voice he has, "So what's keeping you at work? I can tell you want to go home."

"I. Can't."

He waits, as if that couldn't possibly be explanation enough, so I continue angrily, "Listen, I'm asking you to check on him, okay? I have a fucking end-of-quarter meeting that I can't avoid." Cynthia appears in the doorway, hovering while I search for minutes from the last meeting, scattering papers everywhere in the process. Fuck. "I have to work, because money doesn't fall out of the fucking sky, and I'm supporting his ass. If he wants to go to school, I pay for it. If he wants new shoes, I pay for it. He has a fucking roof over his head because I pay for it, and I'm going to that meeting SO I can pay for it. Are we clear?"

Translation - I'm not staying here for the good of my health... or his.

"I'm sorry," he sounds properly chastened, and I'm almost as relieved as when I finally find the goddamned minutes.

"You should be. Go to him." He takes a breath to interject, but I cut him off cold. "I know he gave you a spare key, and we'll deal with that later. I want fucking updates every fifteen minutes. Text messages. Don't call me."

He agrees and hangs up, and I murmur something meaningless and comforting into the phone before I hang up on Justin, too. Cynthia barges into my office, tapping her watch.

"You're late, Brian. Get a move on. Conference room D."

"I'm going, Jesus, who's got your panties in a bunch," I grumble, starting for the conference room, and she laughs, as if she might reply. Nauseated at the possibility of getting an answer, I quickly add, "Wait, don't answer that. It's too early for hetero porn."

"Call me if you need me," she says, and I take a breath just outside the doorway, preparing to make my fashionably late entrance. I open the door, and instead of Marty Ryder and the rest of upper management, I'm confronted with Doug and Dwayne, two idiots from accounting that make Bob and Brad look like geniuses.

"Mr. Kinney," one of them...Doug...no, Dwayne...simpers, offering his hand to shake. "It's good to see you again."

I don't have time for the pleasantries. "What the fuck are you two doing here? Where's Marty?"

"Mr. Ryder was called away on urgent business. We have the quarterly report for your perusal," says the other one...Dwayne...yeah, I'm sure this one is Dwayne. He holds out the slim black portfolio timidly, probably worried that I'll bite his head off. He has every reason to worry.

"Could you explain to me how we already have a quarterly report, when the quarter isn't over until Monday?" I ask, not bothering to sit at the table with these two fuckwits. This day could not get any worse.

They both shuffle nervously, and Dwayne...Doug...whoeverthefuck finally summons up the supreme courage it seems to take to speak to another human being. "It...uh...it's all in the report, Mr. Kinney. Please take a look."

Fine. I take the thin black folder, bypassing the splashy title and welcome pages for the one that really matters - the Earnings Estimate.

"WHAT THE FUCK?"

Apparently, our estimated earnings for this quarter are...zero? "Why wasn't I informed of this development before today?"

"We...uh...we tried to get a hold of you yesterday, Mr. Kinney, but..." the accounting idiot drones on and on, and I tune him out altogether to read the accompanying pages. Apparently, McGann's and Snackerz, our two main clients this season, slipped quietly into bankruptcy protection last Wednesday at midnight without the press or the public being alerted. We can kiss their advertising fees goodbye.

Dwayne/Doug is still chattering away, but that doesn't matter. The damage is done, and nothing he says will change the fact that for this quarter, the firm is several million dollars in the red. "We'll recoup it in the fourth quarter," they finish lamely, almost in unison, just as my phone vibrates with a text message from Emmett:

J NOT WELL HURRY

Not well? Oh, he has no fucking idea how "not well" things are right now. The firm is deeply in the red, my performance bonus just went right the fuck out the window, and... Oh shit. Justin's tuition. I pulled twenty-two thousand dollars out of my investments for that, and even though his fees are paid, if I don't return the capital to the investment account... Fuck. My bonus was supposed to replace that withdrawal, and cover a whole lot of other little things as well... replacing the refrigerator, putting new tires on the Jeep...

Suddenly I realize how far beyond my means I've been living for the last couple of years, depending on five-figure performance bonuses to subsidize my lifestyle. The prospect of going paycheck to paycheck, like we did when I was a kid, is not appealing.

I steel myself to think the two words I've worked my whole adult life to avoid.

I'm broke.

NO, that just can't be right. I didn't work this fucking hard to go right back to the drawing board. Well, maybe if I keep saying it to myself, it'll feel more natural.

I'm broke. Hm, not any better. Wait, Justin's in this too, so let's try that again.

We're broke.

Humph. Doesn't sound any better in the plural than it does in the singular.

My brain keeps trying to rationalize the news, rereading the report for an error or inconsistency over and over again, but it's right. I can feel it in my gut; I could feel it the second I saw that Ryder wasn't in the room. I'm about to go and harass his assistant so I can find the fucker when my cell vibrates again.

911 COME HOME

"Thanks for nothing, guys," I mumble on my way out, nearly slamming into Cynthia lurking in the hallway as I rush through the door. I raise an eyebrow in her direction, but she just shrugs and falls in behind me.

"That meeting was on a need-to-know basis, and I need to know," she offers unapologetically. "So, how do our bonuses look this quarter?"

I can't fucking figure out how nobody knows what's going on. Cynthia knows what time Ryder takes a dump in the morning, so why doesn't she know about this? "That's something I have to look into," I hedge impatiently as she trots behind me. We get back into my office, and I start throwing all the files into my briefcase that I can find - anything to dig myself out of this hole.

She looks at me curiously, and I explain, "I'm taking off for the rest of the day. If something comes up, push it to Tuesday, after the holiday." She takes notes, maddeningly efficient, as I detail what should be done with all of the paperwork left on my desk.

"Like I said, I'm gone. If someone needs me, tough shit," I say, my mind drifting, wondering what I'll find when I get home.

"Okay, but I have a request," she agrees, stepping in front of me to block the doorframe. I glower threateningly, but she stands firm. "Brian, you work too hard. It's Friday! Fuck the paperwork - go home and relax."

Relax. Right. And for my next trick, I'll try something easy, like brokering world peace.

Chapter 9

Now I've got to tell you, I've seen a lot of people having hysterics. My aunt Ida used to "have a fit," as we called it, about once a week. The milkman delivered regular milk instead of buttermilk? The dry goods store is out of black thread? Uncle Charley came home drunk? By all means, a bout of hysterics is the answer for all of those problems and more. Honey, the way that woman carried on... well, let's just say I knew the meaning of 'drama queen' before I met a queen of any description.

So when I let myself into the loft, I didn't really know what to expect. I am, however, prepared for the worst: tearing at his hair, the vapours, jags of sobbing. If he's got it, I can deal with it.

"Justin? You okay?" I venture, stepping into the loft carefully, always wary of heavy objects being thrown at the door. Wait...that would be Brian who'd do that.

He doesn't answer, but I do hear crying coming from the bathroom, so I paste on a cheerful smile and walk over to the door. "Justin?" I knock gently, but there's no answer. "Do you want to come shopping with me? I saw a fabulous cashmere sweater down at..."

"Emmett." It's not a question, more a comment muffled by the tightly closed door and the shower, which beats steadily like a sudden downpour of rain. "Can you please leave me alone?"

Alone doesn't seem like the best idea right now. "Sweetie, you seem upset. Do you want to talk about it?"

There's a sudden silence as the water is turned off, and he comes over to the door, unlocking it. "It's open."

Well, that's a start. I slide the door open, and I'm immediately blasted in the face by a hot, humid cloud, the steam swirling out around me like the fog in a soft drink commercial. It

takes my breath away, and I reach out blindly into the room, disoriented by the sudden heat and loss of vision.

"Justin...why all the steam? What's going on," I ask, praying that I find a wall and don't accidentally grope him instead. With another step, my hand slides against the cool, slick mirror, and I breathe a sigh of relief that I haven't stumbled into the shower with him.

"I needed to get clean," he says, simply, his voice still disembodied in the warm fog. I can hear him drying himself off, but he doesn't say another word as he pads out into the living room.

"Oh my God, honey, what did you do to yourself?" I cry out, rushing towards him, standing forlorn in the middle of the loft. "You're burnt up like a lobster!"

He shakes his head, repeating himself dully as I stare at his raw, reddened skin. "I needed to get clean."

Every inch of skin that I can see is red and angry, practically glowing with a neon throb. I reach towards him, wanting to hold him, wanting to settle down and stroke his hair so that he can cry out whatever made him this upset - but he pulls away, shrieking.

"Don't touch me! Don't EVER touch me!" he bellows, backing away from my hand as if I were a leper.

"Okay, okay..." I soothe, taking a step back. "See? I can't reach you now. It's all right."

He's still backing up, holding his arms out as if to fend off an attack, and backs right into the couch without a thought. "Stay away from me, Em, please."

"All right, I'm over here and you're over there, it's fine." He slides down to sit on the cold hardwood floor, nothing but a towel between him and the world. He looks so vulnerable, so alone. "Are you sure you don't want to talk about it?"

"I...can't..." He rests his forearms on his knees, lacing his fingers together in the air.

"Look, I'll be fine, why don't you just go?"

I came here prepared for a temper tantrum, but this... is not what I expected! I'm off balance, trying to figure out what the hell is going on. I expected white-hot rage, and got cold, trickling fear instead. It's disturbing.

"Honey, please just tell me what's going on. I'm worried." He looks up at me, and for the first time I see how haggard he looks, how tired. His eyes are faded almost to grey, but not bloodshot. He has bags under them, and dark circles, and it looks vaguely familiar... a touch of death around the eyes.

"Tell me it isn't heroin, Justin. Please." His eyes fly open, half angry and half fearful. It all boils down to the same thing - he's busted and he knows it.

"It's none of your fucking business, Emmett. Why the **fuck** does everyone feel the need to be on my back all the time?" he complains, balling his hands into fists. "Everyone thinks I'm so young, that I need advice on how to act and how to dress and how to fucking breathe. You all think you can tell me how to live my life, but you don't **know**. You have no fucking idea what it's like to be me." He stands up, rushing by me at a safe distance, retreating to the safety of the bedroom. I can see him lying on the bed, and I take a moment to let him calm down, sending Brian an update before I join him.

"Hey, I'm... sorry I upset you," I call softly when I've reached the stairs. I refuse to cross this threshold unless I'm invited - that's an invasion of privacy that he wouldn't forgive right now, even though more people have passed through this door than McDonald's! He sighs, burying his face in the pillow, so I continue, "You know, if it is heroin, it's okay. We can help you with it."

"It's not. Believe me, that would be a step up right now."

"Crystal?" I ask fearfully, praying that I'm wrong. I don't actually know anyone who's recovered from a full-blown meth addiction.

"NO, Emmett. Leave me the FUCK alone!."

I'm starting to get a little angry here. "Justin, you're in bed in the afternoon on a weekday. You've obviously been on **something**, and it didn't agree with you. Now, are you going to tell me what that is, or will you make me guess?"

I take a tentative step onto the first riser, but he's off the bed like a rocket and standing by the bathroom door in no time. He growls, "I told you, don't come near me, and I mean it. Get away from me."

He turns and walks around the divider, back into the living room where this whole thing started. I turn with a dramatic sigh and follow him back to the middle of the loft.

"O-kay, let's review. You're fine, but you burned yourself to a crisp in the shower. You're not doing drugs, but you're obviously so hung over that a fucking blind man can see it. You're acting like a bigger asshole than Brian, and frankly, I thought that required some kind of operation. Tell me what the fuck is wrong or I'll call Brian and tell him to forget it."

Ohhhhhh shit. Oops. I just blew my own cover.

"Forget. What?" he grinds out, raising his head very, very slowly. His eyes meet mine, and he's got more anger in there than I could have imagined. "Did he tell you to check up on me???"

Umm...okay, how do I answer this one? "He was worried about you, sweetie."

"FUCKING HELL!" he screams, picking up the centrepiece off the table and throwing it at the shelf of glasses in the kitchen. It's like a chain reaction as the glass vase smashes against the brick, sharp splinters flying everywhere while he shouts out his frustration. Things I never even noticed before - a blender, a fruit bowl, and some tall glasses - roll from the shelf only to shatter on the floor. We both stare at the devastated kitchen in shock as a green glass tumbler rocks back and forth on its side. In slow motion, it finally tips off the shelf and lands rim down, exploding on the hard wood.

The explosion shocks Justin into motion. "Oh my God!" he wails plaintively, moving towards the glass scattered around a surprisingly clear blast radius. He picks his way through the debris, bare feet flat on the glass like a man walking through hot coals. He makes it to the middle unharmed, where he crouches with his back to the cupboards. The tears start to fall then, slipping down his cheeks as he stares into space with unfixed eyes.

"Justin?" I should have stopped him from going through all that sharp glass, but I didn't think he would actually do it until he was already there! "You stay put, honey. Don't move - you'll cut yourself."

He doesn't respond, just rocks himself gently, crying silently and staring into space. At first I'm relieved for the break, but after five minutes, I realize that he doesn't seem to be coming back.

This is not my specialty. Crying, rending garments, speaking in tongues... Honey, that was a normal Sunday morning in church for me. When cold vacancy is the problem, I need to consult with the expert! I turn my back to Justin and type in the SOS as fast as I can.

Ten minutes later... ten of the most agonizing minutes of my life... I hear a thump outside the loft, and Brian enters. When I peek through the door, I see that his briefcase and jacket have been abandoned outside the doorway, and he enters empty-handed and alert. He's calm and smooth, and he makes a quiet, waveless entrance, like a diver slicing into still water.

He scans the loft, unbuttoning his sleeves and rolling them over his elbows. My Lord, that is a fabulous shirt!

"Where is he?" he murmurs quietly, scanning the loft.

"In the kitchen, but be careful, there's a lot of broken glass." I tried more than once to sneak over and pick some of it up, but every time I got within ten feet, he'd start screaming. Not looking at me... *never* looking at me. Blank-eyed but pointed in my general direction - which, in its own way, was a whole lot creepier.

He peers into the space underneath the breakfast bar, where you can just see the top of his head as he rocks back and forth, and swears softly. "Shit. Emmett, I need you to put the kettle on."

Huh? "Uh, Brian, he won't let me anywhere near him, and the kettle is right in front of his face. He's going to get upset."

Brian shakes his head. "No, he won't. Forget he's there, and just go grab the kettle...you can fill it up and plug it in...uh...in the bathroom."

I follow his instructions, marveling at how, if you ignore him, Justin seems content to just let the world pass him by without notice. I retrieve the kettle and leave the room, but turn around to watch them once I'm hidden behind the partition.

"Hey," he says quietly, taking slow steps towards Justin. "Don't move. I'm coming to get you."

"No," Justin protests, his voice rough from the afternoon's crying.

"Yes, Justin. I'll always come for you. You know that," he replies evenly, his voice moving across the open space. I hear glass crunching and then a low grunt as Brian picks Justin up off the floor and starts towards the bedroom. I hurry into the bathroom and start filling the kettle, straining to hear their conversation.

"So, what happened?" Brian asks, and Justin shudders before he replies.

"I don't want to die, Brian," Justin mumbles, and while it doesn't make any sense to me, Brian seems to understand.

"Don't think about it." The stairs creak as Brian mounts them, his footsteps moving so slowly that he's obviously uncomfortable with the burden in his arms. "Fuck, you're heavy. Have you been eating more lately?"

The joke goes over like a lead balloon. "Don't think about it? I can't *stop* thinking about it!" Justin replies earnestly. I catch a glimpse of them, just for a moment, and it's such a romantic sight - Brian, silhouetted by the window, muscles straining as he holds Justin in his arms - that I can't help but sigh. Brian's eyes shift over to me, flashing dangerously, and I quickly go back to boiling the water.

"Well, let me take your mind off of it then," he whispers once the water starts running, and I swear that my ears hurt, I'm straining so hard to hear them. "I'm home for the afternoon..."

"No. We can't..." Justin says, his voice filled with regret... but Brian is adamant.

"Yes. And then we'll go out for dinner, and then we'll go to Woody's, and then we'll go to Babylon..." Brian says, sitting on the bed with his back to the bathroom, Justin still in his arms. "...and then we'll come home and I'll fuck you until you can't remember your name."

"But...what if I'm positive, Brian? I'm...I'm not sure if we should. I'm scared." Suddenly I understand what Justin is upset about, and I feel guilty for those few minutes when I was angry with him. He has every right to freak out... I can't say he's taking it any better or worse than I did.

"We'll deal with it, but there's no point in worrying about it until the tests are back. If you're positive, you're going to kick yourself for the rest of your life anyway... and if you're negative, you'll have upset yourself for nothing."

For about five seconds, I wish that I'd talked to Brian after I had my scare. He's so caring and supportive...and then I snap out of it and realize that he's like that for Justin. Because of Justin. I can't imagine what he'd have said to me - probably something a lot more cynical.

He guides Justin onto the bed, and comes into the bathroom. "So, how long **does** it take to boil water these days?"

I give him my frostiest glare, and pass the kettle. "I didn't want to walk through and interrupt your moment."

"We're queers, Emmett, we don't 'have moments.'" He smirks and takes the kettle, turning to make his way to the kitchen. "Time to go and cook up some comfort food - soup and tea."

"Is that the extent of your cooking skills?" I tease, following him out of the bathroom, carefully avoiding looking at Justin lying on the bed. He... I...right now, I just feel like I know too much. It's strange, but talking to Brian seems to be a safer bet.

He picks through the semicircle of broken glass, and I worry about the glass slashing his beautiful shoes as he heads for the cupboard beside the fridge. "If it involves adding boiling water to a package, I've got it under control," he defends, tracking down two large mugs and two paper packages. He adds the water, and then adds a splash of bourbon in the tea and a splash of vodka in the chicken soup. I raise an eyebrow, and he smiles.

"Irish comfort food."

"Mmm hmm."

I watch him stirring, as relaxed as if he's tending to someone with a fucking cold, and his smugness makes me angry all over again. I rest a hand on his shoulder, and try to force

him to face me. When he resists, I huff in frustration, threatening, "We have to talk about Justin. There is something seriously wrong with him, Brian. He needs help."

"I know that, Emmett," he parrots with false earnestness, rinsing the spoon and dropping it in the sink.

"Well, what are you doing about it?" I demand. "I can't let this go on, now that I know that something is wrong. What are we going to do?"

This time he does look at me, unflappable as always. "WE? There is no 'we'! YOU should mind your own fucking business."

"Oh, no you don't!" I hiss. "You MADE this my business when you sent out an SOS and I found your boyfriend losing his mind. He's not sleeping, he's doing a lot of drugs, working too much... and I don't think he's eating very well," I say, recalling the sight of his unusually skinny frame when he was lying on the bed. "If you're trying to turn him into a copy of you, well then, congratufuckinglations. Mission accomplished!"

Brian glares at me for a minute, and then drops his eyes and stares into the mugs. "I won't let that happen. He'll get the help he needs, Emmett."

He pushes past me and walks towards the bathroom, mugs of cooling liquid balanced carefully in his hands. I know I've been dismissed, and even though I'm walking towards the door, each step is deliberate - I'm not in any real hurry to go.

"Here," Brian offers as Justin looks up at him, smiling. "Drink up, you'll feel better."

Justin takes the mug of soup, sniffing it cautiously and taking a small sip. "How many shots are in here?"

"Does it matter?"

Justin laughs, and I heave a silent sigh of relief, knowing that wherever Justin went, Brian has managed to bring him back. I watch as Justin taps at the side of the mug to test its heat, then, apparently finding it cool enough, tips it back for a long drink. Brian settles next to him on the bed, still holding the tea, since Justin is completely occupied with the soup. He holds it in both hands, like a child, and for a moment it tugs at my heartstrings to see him looking so lost.

"I'm not going to stop fucking you, you know," Brian says, out of the blue, and Justin looks up with an expression I can't read. "If you're positive. I won't stop fucking you."

Justin smiles softly, and agrees, "Me neither, for you." Brian nods, and as I let myself out, I realize that I've overheard yet another phrase that passes for "I love you," here in Kinneyland.

Chapter 10

I wake up, alone and disoriented in bed, with the afternoon sun streaming in the window. Shaking my head doesn't quite clear away the fog, and I try to think about what happened, but my memories of the day are sort of hazy. It's not that I don't remember what I did - I do - but it's like a silent movie with a soundtrack that's not quite in synch... a series of stills with a lot of screaming.

As much as I don't want to think about it anymore, at this point, even I have to admit that there's something wrong. Some of the things I've been doing lately don't seem really... normal. Or healthy. I guess at some point, I started to run away from things, and I never turned around to face my problems; then after a while, I never looked at my reasons for doing anything because I just didn't want to know anymore. My whole life - our whole life together - had gotten overwhelming. I did things as they popped into my head, to protect myself, and to protect Brian, and before I knew it, I was a person I didn't recognize anymore. Brian had so many big, immediate problems, he needed me to think fast all the time, and well... pretty soon, I *had to* start running to keep up, and now I've been running for so long that it would hurt to stop. It's easier to just keep running. Safer somehow.

I guess I can't keep pace anymore; I'm exhausted. We're both running on empty. I have nothing left to give him, and he has nothing left to give me. If we don't get help, we're both screwed, and this might just be the end of the line. I know that, I know it in my head, but accepting it my heart is something completely different. It's just... it's not fair. Why can't I be normal? Why does it have to be me?

I'm thinking in circles, and it's giving me a headache. "Brian?" I call, rubbing my face, smoothing away the squint that appears every time I try to piece together this fucked up puzzle I've created. He always says that I'll end up with crow's feet if I'm not more careful, and remembering that snide comment makes me think back to a time, early in the spring, when life was so much less complicated. I was drawing, and he was working, and I caught him smoothing away this very same kind of frown.

Life is very different now than it was then.

"Yeah?" he finally answers, his voice floating in from the kitchen. "What do you want? I'm kind of in the middle of something."

If I stay in here, he won't even listen to me, so I decide to take my question right to him. I wrap the sheet tightly around myself, and try slipping out of our bed as gracefully as I can. I took off my sweatpants before my nap because they were hurting me - my skin still feels tight and burnt, and my muscles ache.

He hears my footsteps on the floor, and comes over to open one of the louvered windows in the partition. "You stay there. The floor is still covered in glass." He sighs, dustpan in hand, and rocks his head back on his neck. "Every fucking glass we had is broken."

I would normally feel pretty guilty about that, since I know that his fancy glasses cost him more than I make in a week of double shifts, but it all seems remote in my memory, obscured and unimportant. I just can't bring myself to care.

"Sorry." I curl up on the steps, sheet wrapped tight around my shoulders, and watch him methodically sweeping straight, clean paths into the field of litter. In moments, he has reduced a confusing, multihued mess of broken glass into neat, orderly piles. He likes it when his world has order.

"I called the therapist. Your appointment is tomorrow afternoon at one," he tosses out casually, pushing the small, individual piles into larger ones. "His name's Sutherland... uh... Alan Sutherland. He seems okay."

Hearing that, panic grips my throat. The thought of opening up and having to explain everything to a stranger overwhelms me. "I don't want to go."

He sets the broom down against the counters, and sighs. "Do you really think I'd make you go if there was **any** other option? Look around," he says, opening his arms and turning in a semi-circle in the kitchen. His irritation is blazing and rather than meet his irate glare, I drop my head, concentrating on the wood under my feet.

"Look the fuck around!" he shouts angrily, coming towards me in two long steps. He grasps my chin and thrusts forwards and back, lifting and turning my face in his hand... past simply meeting his gaze... forcing me to stand up or risk being pushed over. "Look at what you've ruined without even thinking twice. That's not you, Justin. It's not you and I want you to stop... This shit has to stop now!"

"You're overreacting!" I stumble over the words, surprised at his ferociousness. "I'm sorry for the glasses... I... uh... I had a bad day."

"What?" His eyes widen in disbelief at my innocent self-defense, but the expression of confusion is rapidly replaced by anger. "You haven't had anything *BUT* bad days for weeks, you expect me to... chase after you... pick up after you... heal you... I can't do it anymore!" His voice drops off, an unexpected sadness taking over. "I can't heal you, I never could... but I tried. Justin... I'm just so fucking tired."

"*YOU'RE TIRED?!?!?*" I shout, dropping the sheet and involuntarily taking a step back. I want to meet him on equal terms. Maybe not equal, for us, equal may never be possible, but I want it to at least be on *MY* terms. I want to stand so that our eyes will meet and I don't need to crane my neck to return his angry glare. "How the fuck do you think I felt when you... when you..." He bites his lip, knowing what I'm about to say, and there's something about his discomfort that returns my strength to me. "How the fuck do you think I felt when you tried to kill yourself?"

He stands, perfectly still, fighting to project an image of calm rationality. I'm supposed to think he's untouchable. I know better. He's not.

"It's not fair to resent me for being broken," I state, quietly but forcefully, "When you're every bit as fucked up as I am. Maybe I lost it for a little bit," I concede, earning a smirking roll of the eyes in the process, "But, I can't see how it's worse for me to do it than it is for you. Tell me why that is, Brian."

He sets his jaw, clearly deciding to ignore my question. "You're going."

"And what if I don't want to go?" I challenge, daring him to break eye contact. He aggressively takes another step forward, and a shiver runs down my spine, but I'm holding steady. "I'm not a child. You can't pick me up and carry me like you did this afternoon."

"You don't think so?" He takes the final step towards me, reaching out to grab my face in his hands at the last second. Roughly, he pulls me closer until I slam into him, my head reeling from the contact and hurting from the pressure from his grip. For one moment we're body to body, my skin feeling tight and hot compared to the cool smoothness of his chest.

"Listen to me carefully, because you'll regret if I have to repeat it," he whispers, a menacing thread of steel in his tone. "We made a trade, a long time ago. You might own my heart, but I own your body, Justin. You're mine. You go where I tell you to go and do what I tell you to do, and if you don't like it, tough shit."

"What if I say no?" I try to shake my head inside his grip, for some reason needing to cancel out his forcefulness. I do still have free will, don't I?

"You're mine," he repeats plainly, without a trace of irony. "You have to do as I say."

He tilts his head, and starts to stroke my face forcefully with his left hand, but he still seems detached from it all, almost thoughtful. My flesh heats up under his rough touch, and I moan despite myself.

"You... can't... make... me..." I breathe, vibrating with lust from his harsh caress.

"Oh, you don't think so?" He removes his hands and places one palm flat against my chest, walking us backwards until we're right against the bed. "You have no fucking idea what I can make you do, little boy, or what I want to do to you. It would make you sick." He pushes me firmly, and as I fall onto my ass on the bed, a lightning bolt strikes my memory. Images of him standing over me like this in New York flash through my brain like a slide show at light speed, and that's when I realize that I know how this story ends. I might as well give in.

He starts taking off his clothes, so fucking slowly that it feels like I'm going to lose my mind with anticipation. He loosens his tie, holding the knot and rocking his head while tugging at the fabric. Next, his fingers slide over the rough, raw silk shirt, grazing against the left cuff and then the right as he guides the buttons deftly through the holes.

"Do you really think that?" I ask, mesmerized by the sight of his slow strip. "That if I really knew what you want, I'd be scared of you?"

Every inch of bare skin sends a little shock to my brain, and by the time he's naked, I'm hard, leaking, and practically fucking incoherent. He drops his pants and just stands for a minute, staring at me laid out on the bed, before he nods.

I stare at his body, long and lithe, and my mind just clouds over with desire. I know every inch of him, with my eyes and my fingers and my tongue, but I want to learn it all over again. He crawls up and over me on the bed, pausing with one knee on either side of my hips, his stiff cock bumping against mine and leaving a trail of moisture behind.

"Don't try and deny it," he murmurs, leaning forwards to taste my skin, kissing me, biting my neck, sucking on the skin just below my jawbone.

Deny it, deny it... "Brian!" I gasp when his mouth finds my collarbone and he draws the skin between his teeth, starting a vicious aching pressure that will leave a lasting mark. "Brian..."

"What?" he mumbles, leaving a wet trail of kisses down to my left nipple, then drawing it into his mouth to nibble.

I take a deep breath, wanting to say this while I'm still capable of some coherent thought. "Brian, I've been scared with you, for you, and because of you, but never of you." His hands are massaging my sides, slipping down to my ass, and he has started to grind his cock against me. "I can't... unh... fuck, I can't think when you're doing that... oh, fuck... Brian, listen to me! Do you know the difference?" I force out, as quickly as I can.

"Difference?" he repeats blankly, nudging me onto my stomach, messing with the pillows until there's one under my hips, then bending my body until I'm in the position he wants me in. Mostly flat on my stomach, one knee drawn up to my side... he just rearranges me like I'm a rag doll. Once I've been arranged to his satisfaction, he continues the kissing and sucking he was doing around my neck...licking along my hairline, breathing in my ear, planting wet, openmouthed bite marks down my back until I'm squirming against the bed. Hot, needy, and desperate to be fucked - he likes me that way because it keeps me quiet. This time I can't be quiet. I'm determined to have my say.

"The difference is that I love you," I declare breathlessly, fighting to keep every noise out of my throat from turning into a low, guttural groan. "I love you, and I trust you, and I know you, Brian."

He quickly slides up the bed to get the lube out of the night table, and comes back down to kneel between my knees. "You don't know shit, Justin," he mutters as I hear the quiet snick of the cap. Before I know it, my hole is coated in the fucking coldest lube you can imagine. I'm telling you, if he bottomed even once a week, he'd fucking know better, because it wakes me right the fuck back up.

"I know you," I repeat, "And I'm still not afraid."

His fingers slide inside me, twisting and probing, repeating the thrust until it takes my breath away. His insistent searching makes me rock my head back, gasping for air, arching against his hand. The whole world melts away, leaving only the feeling, deep inside, of unrelenting friction and pressure.

"Fuck me!" I pant anxiously, suddenly unable to take the stimulation for one more second, but unwilling to settle for anything less. "Please, please fuck me! I want you inside me so bad..."

"Okay, okay," he whispers. "Calm down, I'm right here." I feel the blunt tip of his dick pressing against me, and I push myself back and impale myself on it, surprising him with the force.

"Shit, Justin!" he moans, planting a hand on the back of my neck, pressing me back down to the bed. "Jesus Christ, we have all day."

"No, now," I disagree, fighting his calm as well as I can without dislodging him completely. He presses more and more weight against me as I writhe and buck, fucking myself on his steel-hard cock until I'm sure he's just as close as I am. He wants to lead, and the harder I resist, the harder he fights me - pulling my hair to keep me in place, pinching my nipples until I moan and cry in frustration. My ass grinds against him, and I squeeze and clench and milk my muscles around his cock until he cries out and drops to the bed, flattening himself against me and keeping me under his control.

He covers me completely with his body, his weight and force taking my breath away as he crushes me into the bed. Every inch of my skin is warmed by the contact with his, and a thin sheen of sweat makes him slide in me, over me, against me. He traps my wrists tightly in his hands, pulling them over my head until I'm stretched out completely, and defenseless.

"That's better," he chuckles, warm air puffing into my ear, sending a shiver down my spine. He slides a hand down my inner arm while he rocks in and out of me, his fingers whispering past my armpit and down my side until I can feel them resting against my hip. "Are you gonna behave?"

"No..." I moan, and he backs off of me on an up stroke, slapping my ass hard enough to bring tears to my eyes.

"Yes..." he threatens lightly, backing off just before his hand connects again.

"Aaaah!"

His hand snakes underneath me, curling itself into a fist around my cock, warm and tight and just a little bit sweaty and wet. I'm lost between trying to fuck it and pushing back into him, and my nerves are almost overloaded with pleasure when suddenly it's all... gone.

"Brian?!?" I shout in confusion, my ass aching and my dick twitching from his sudden disappearance. Turning around to find out what the fuck happened, I see him sitting back on his heels, wild-eyed and panting. Oh, fuck me, I could come just looking at him... the obscene flush in his cheeks, the bead of sweat running down the valley between his pecs, and the smell... God, the smell... sweat and cum and heat all mixed together. Brian. Fuck.

"Tell me you'll go to the therapist, Justin," he gasps, fighting for control. "Fucking tell me right now."

"I'll go!" I shout, and that's enough for him. He shoves me hard onto my back, knocking my knees apart with his thigh, and grabs my face in both hands.

"Good," he says, and kisses me so fucking hard I can feel blood...his tongue running along my inner jaw, duelling with my own for space in my mouth that he sucks the breath right out of my lungs and then returns it to me. He bends me, and my knees fall up and back just a moment before he slams into me, smashing his body into mine without mercy or restraint. We stay locked at the mouth, trading that one breath of air back and forth until my head starts to spin and lights flash in front of my eyes.

I turn my head, lungs screaming for a clean, cold breath, his sweat dripping onto my cheekbone before it runs into my mouth. I suck it in greedily, turning my face back to run my tongue along his jawline, licking up the sweat that I find. His hand closes hard on my shoulder, and I cry out in pain and bite his neck.

"Fuck! Justin!" he yells, and I can feel his cock swell in my ass. He grabs the back of my neck, crushing my face against his, and his teeth start to work against my bottom lip. He re-angles my body, and a sudden jab deep inside delivers me right to the edge.

He slows down just enough to keep me suspended in that place, timeless, weightless, breathless. Balanced on the knife's edge of pleasure and pain, verging on orgasm, injury, or insanity. Every sense shuts down but the one that relays his kiss... his touch... the plunging of his swelling, grinding, pulsating cock...

He growls deeply, and in the split second before he comes, his eyes fly open to look at me. His eyes... they're so green... his lips reddened and bruised... and I can see every

fucking droplet of sweat before it soaks into my hair or drips onto my skin. Time stops, and it's just him and me, here, for one perfect moment.

Where we were always meant to be.

He closes his eyes and convulses against me, his powerful thrusts pushing me over the edge as well. I hold him tighter, tighter, squeezing the air out of his lungs like he's pushed the air out of mine, and let the bright, flashing fire consume us both.

I fall asleep with him still inside me.

Chapter 11

It's hot outside, the last real weekend of the summer, and Woody's is totally swarming with people when Ben and I arrive. It's not just the crowd that stops me in my tracks at the entryway - the air is heavy and the humidity is stifling. My eyes bob over the sea of men, looking for HIM - for Brian. Who else?

I find him quickly, of course, because I have a lifetime of experience looking. Just like every other time I've gone looking, I find him tucked away in a corner making out with some guy - a blonde, this time. All right, fine. Not just any blonde, THE blonde. Funny how I can spot them instantly, considering every gay man in a two hundred mile radius is in here tonight. It could have something to do with the fact that they're five seconds away from being arrested for indecent exposure.

I sigh my patented, 'He's an asshole but I care about him' sigh and start pushing my way towards their corner at the back of the bar, not seeing Ted and Emmett until I'm a little closer. That pair is at a table a couple of feet away from Brian and Justin, eating fries and cruising the bumper crop of hotties here tonight.

I make a path straight for them, Ben following close behind. As soon as I'm within earshot, which is a matter of feet in a crowd this size, I yell, "Hey guys, what's with the Wonder Twins over there? They're gonna get kicked out if they don't knock it off!"

Emmett looks up, and gestures towards the corner with a smirk. "They've been there since we came in, and they haven't moved an inch. They're in their own little world. I don't think they even know we're in the building."

Ted looks up from his fries, seeming relieved to see us. He wrestles an empty chair away from a table beside him, patting it like a puppy. "Michael, Ben, thank God you're here. Sorry we're short on chairs, but..." He shrugs and picks up another fry. "Maybe you can make them come up for air. I don't think Justin has taken a breath the whole time we've been watching."

Emmett laughs. "You know, if Brian catches you paying that much attention to Justin, you might be the one who never breathes again, Teddy."

Ted huffs. "I know, I know, Princesses aren't for the likes of me." He rolls his eyes and turns to me. "You forgot to say hi to somebody."

"Huh? Who?"

From behind me, Ben takes my head in his hands and guides it to the left, where I find Andrew, sitting slightly back from the table and grinning.

"Andrew!" I yell in surprise, making my way over for my hug and perching on the edge of his chair. "I didn't know you were coming into town tonight!"

"Neither did I," he laughs, "But it seems a certain green-eyed hunk had other plans." A bottle of beer, offered by a mystery hand, gets set on the table from over our heads, and before I know it, I have an armful of green-eyed hunk.

"Matt!" I puff, the wind knocked out of my lungs by him flying onto my lap. This must look absolutely ridiculous - he's twice my size! I'm sure he meant to hit Andrew's lap instead of mine, but that's not much consolation with him on top of me. I guess that's why people don't usually share chairs.

"Hey, Mike," he laughs, scooting over to Andrew's lap. "Sorry 'bout that. I missed."

Ben massages my shoulders as I take several deep gulps of air. "S'okay," I gasp. Several gulps later, my head stops spinning and I rejoin the conversation.

"Matt, does Justin know you're here?" I ask him curiously. "I can't imagine him being all the way over there if he knows you're in from...where?"

"Altoona," he sighs. "Fucking tour. Who does a photo shoot in Altoona? Local colour my ass!" Andrew pats his shoulder supportively, and Matt pouts for a nanosecond before he perks up. "I needed a break, so I flew back for the weekend." He giggles like a little kid. "I can afford to do that now."

We all sort of cock our heads at his private joke, and he sighs. "Just don't try and get me to go over and break up the happy couple. They look... uh... way too cozy."

"They look stoned," Ted grumbles, and Emmett smacks his hand. "Ow!"

"Matt, I'm sure he wants to see you. They can make out any time, and believe me, they do," I reassure him, finally feeling well enough to stand up again. "It's not like you're here every weekend. I'm sure he'd love to see you."

"I don't want to bug them, they've been having a hard time lately," Matt says while Emmett frantically gestures for him to shut up. He receives the message loud and clear,

and looks down, guilt written all over his face. It's too late for the bad-puppy look, though, you don't need to drop a brick on my head. Well, not a big one.

"Hard time? Since when?" I ask, and the noise of the bar seems to turn into a deafening silence. "Why didn't anyone tell me?"

They hem and haw for a minute, and finally Emmett declares, "We didn't know anything for sure..."

Ted breaks in, "And it's not our place to say..."

Like either of those things has ever stopped them before.

I'm winding up for a good, long session of "Why isn't anyone looking out for Brian but me?" when I think back to Ben's answering machine, the light flashing with messages I haven't played. To email I haven't gotten around to reading, and calls I haven't had time to make. 'Nobody' is looking after Brian because 'Nobody' is with Ben now.

I mean, Ben and I have had our bumps, but we have a good, solid relationship, and a life together, now. Brian sort of doesn't fit in sometimes! What am I supposed to do, ask him over to watch Beaches with us? I guess that once I realized I didn't have to hang onto Brian's coattails to get attention anymore, I... just... stopped hanging with him very much at all. Oops.

I can feel the flush working its way up my face before I even open my mouth. "Fuck. Okay, then, does someone want to fill me in now?"

Ted flushes and looks at his watch. "I'd, uh, love to help you out with that, but I have an appointment with Dale this evening. I can't stay." He pushes away from the table and turns dutifully to Emmett, saying, "I'll give you a ride home first, if you want."

Emmett looks towards Brian and Justin, then towards Matt. "Unfortunately, I agree with Teddy - I think they're stoned out of their fucking gourds. Are you going to stay and babysit?"

Matt nods. "Yeah, I'll keep an eye on them."

"Good." Emmett pats Ted on the arm. "Teddy, I'd be delighted to accept your offer. Do you want to get out of here while the getting is good?"

"Oh, God yes," he replies, bowing slightly. "Gentlemen, have a lovely evening."

With Ted and Emmett gone, there are finally enough chairs to go around. I sit down for a moment, still watching Brian and Justin making out. It used to really hurt to see them kissing... groping and grinding against each other...to see Brian giving him the one thing he wouldn't give me. And then he did give it to me, but it was like I wasn't even there.

I've found that it's a lot like getting bitten by a poisonous snake - if it doesn't kill you the first hundred times, you sort of build up a tolerance.

"Maybe we shouldn't have come..." Matt says uneasily, playing with the straw in his drink. "I wouldn't have, but I was worried."

"No, I'm sure Justin will want to see you. I'll go and interrupt them, it wouldn't be the first time." I pat Ben's shoulder and get up to drag Brian off of Justin. It's not like I'm a stranger to pulling Brian off of some guy and dragging him somewhere, so what's once more? At least I know this guy.

Brian looks like he's eating him alive, and not in a good way. Justin has his back crushed against the wall, and Brian has him pinned closely with his body, kissing him hard enough to leave sloppy trails of spit running down Justin's face. He has a beer in the hand I can see, and the other hand is down Justin's pants while the kid moans appreciatively.

"Brian," I call, as usual, and he ignores me, as usual.

Dammit. "Brian!"

He turns around, and his eyes are so fucking glassy I can see myself. "Hey, Mikey, whassup?" he slurs, a big, stupid grin growing on his face. "Jussin and I were jus..."

"The whole fucking bar knows what you were 'just' doing, Brian." He laughs unsteadily, half leaning, half stumbling back into Justin. He's so high that I already know it's a wasted effort to yell at him, so I turn my efforts to the younger, and hopefully more sober, partner in crime.

"Justin, what the hell is wrong with..." I start to turn but my mouth just stops working at the sight. "Shit. Not you too."

Justin is the fucking picture of... well... a drunken whore. He's covered in saliva, flushed and sweaty, and he can't even focus his eyes. He giggles and smiles, reaching out to punch me in the shoulder and missing. "Michael!" he exclaims, lurching forwards to land on me in a semi-hug. "Where have you been?"

"What are you on?" I hiss, trying to peel him off like a bad stick-on tattoo and managing only to transfer him back to Brian. "You're both fucking wasted!"

"I am not," Brian protests, taking a swallow of his beer and trying to manoeuvre Justin to the table. "But, I think he's kinda gone."

Justin stops short, squealing, "Am not!" as Brian bumps into him, almost knocking them both to the floor. They rearrange themselves for a moment, and then Justin finally looks towards the table.

"Matt!" he squeals like a little girl, stumbling past the table and launching himself towards the chair that Matt has claimed. Matt takes it all in stride, rising a little to catch his falling friend and swinging him into the chair I left behind.

"Pretty suave," Ben comments appreciatively, knocking the neck of his beer bottle against Andrew's. "That's some dance partner you've got there."

"You're telling me," Andrew laughs, getting up from his chair and offering it to Brian, who swerves uncertainly before he sits down.

"Andrew. Wassup? Where'd you come from?"

"Well, one night my mommy and daddy decided that they loved each other very much..." he starts, tongue firmly in cheek, and Brian covers his ears.

"Shut up! No straight porn!" he shouts. "Justin, cover your ears!"

"Okay," Justin giggles, obediently covering his ears. "Why?"

"Jesus Christ," Matt sighs, while Ben just shakes his head.

I close my eyes, trying to block out this embarrassing night from my memory. Next thing I know, Andrew is drawing me away from the table while Matt and Ben struggle to keep the drunken duo upright and separated.

"So, are you going to tell me what's going on with those two, or do I have to guess?" he whispers confidentially, both of us watching the train wreck in progress.

"I haven't talked to Brian in a while," I whisper back, feeling a twinge of guilt. "I don't know."

Andrew turns me towards him and raises one eyebrow. "You really don't know? Scout's honour?"

I shake my head.

"You're kidding. I thought you were Brian's keeper these days," he presses, and I shake my head again.

"Ben and I have been busy. He's been travelling, giving lectures, you know. Sometimes I go with him for a day or two. I just haven't been around. We were supposed to be catching up tonight..." I trail off just a little bit wistfully - or in Brian's terms, pathetically.

"Good for you, Mikey," Andrew smiles encouragingly. "I'm glad you got out from under his shadow."

So am I. I didn't realize how cold it was to be a permanent backup plan until I was actually number one on somebody's list. "Yeah, but now...this..." I gesture to the table, where Justin has made his way onto Brian's lap, and they're once again molded together and attached at the face.

"Yeah, Matt has been telling me for weeks that something was wrong, but I just... didn't believe him, you know? I thought that everything had sort of settled down."

I nod, thinking back to the night I spent with them, how together they were, but how fucked up the whole situation felt. I thought it was me, I mean, my presence, and what we were doing that made everything feel so weird. I guess that's not all that was going on.

"I don't know. I haven't really talked to Brian in weeks. He left me a couple of messages, but..." I leave the answer unspoken, but I guess it's pretty clear that I feel like I've been neglecting him.

"Don't feel guilty, Michael. Brian's always running around saying that people cause their own problems, but you know what? That means that they have to fix them all by themselves, too. You might have been a sympathetic ear, but he's a big boy. A man needs to know when to ask for help." Andrew brushes a hair from my forehead, and I have a little lurch of panic wondering what Ben is going to say. David would have had a stroke, seeing Andrew and I in such an intimate conversation. Fortunately, that feeling is just a flash. I know that Ben doesn't just love me, he trusts me. Certainly trusts me enough to have a conversation with someone in plain sight in a bar!

A split second later, I hear Ben's slightly anxious voice over the noise of the crowd. "Michael? Andrew? Little help?"

Andrew looks over my shoulder, and laughs in mock horror. "Oh Jesus, not again. Come on, Mike, help me get them out of here. Looks like we get to babysit tonight."

I want to keep my eyes closed. Whatever the hell is going on at the table, I don't want to see. Frankly, anything that shocks Andrew is probably going to kill me, so I don't want to look...but I do.

"OH JESUS CHRIST, BRIAN! WHAT THE FUCK?" I yell, and he looks up at me with that big, shit-eating grin, both hands firmly down Justin's opened pants. The look of pleasure on Justin's face is just obscene. This has to stop.

"What, Mikey?" he slurs just a bit, while Justin grinds against him in drunken abandon. Fucking little twat.

"That's it. We're leaving before they kick us out," I grumble. "You guys get them off each other, I'll take them home."

"Do you really think we should take them home?" Matt asks in a concerned tone, gently removing Brian's hands from Justin's pants. "God only knows what they took. If we keep them moving, at least we know they won't OD."

I found Brian ODing once, when we were younger. It scared the shit out of me, and afterwards, we both just brushed it off and never talked about it again. I keep trying to live in denial, thinking that one day he's going to stop pushing it, but he always makes it his business to break down my safe little walls. I don't want to think of him trying to kill himself again. It makes me feel a panic that just won't go away.

"Come on, lovebirds, up and at 'em!" Andrew shouts, pulling Brian to his feet in a rough manner that not too many people could get away with. "Get your hands off your boyfriend and get out of the bar. We're going to Babylon."

"Yay! Babylon!" Justin chirps with drunken enthusiasm. Brian just groans.

Somehow, we manage to drag them out to the street. Ben walks ahead of us, clearing people out of the way in his polite, authoritative professor's voice. Andrew and I drag Brian along, one of us on each arm, while Matt steers Justin by his shoulders.

Outside, the air is still hot and humid, but at least it's moving and not quite so smoky. Two seconds after we release them, Brian and Justin are back on each other, pawing and grasping like horny high-school kids.

"Jesus," Matt marvels. "What the fuck did they take?"

"And where can I get some?" Andrew adds.

We laugh, maybe a bit uneasily, until Justin starts unbuttoning Brian's shirt.

"Oh, no you fucking don't!" I yell, grabbing him by the ear and pulling him towards Babylon. "You're going to get us all arrested! It's three minutes to Babylon, you're coming if I have to drag you there." I start to walk away, and he screeches in confusion while Brian just stands there, stunned.

"Ow! My ear! Michael, quit it!" He whines pitifully, and Brian laughs behind me. They get him moving too, and we even make it past the door guy, despite the fact that Justin is still trying to dislodge me from his ear, and Ben practically has to carry Brian up the stairs.

I drag Justin to the side of the dance floor and let go of his ear, and his hand flies up to rub it while he glares at me. Whatever. I wave my hand towards the dance floor. "Your kingdom, Boy Wonder. Go and dance off some of that...whatthefuck was it that you did, anyway?"

He turns to Brian uncertainly. "I don't remember anything after the wine at La Mer."

"Justin got served?" Andrew marvels. "How much did that cost you, Bri?"

"It's none of your goddamned business," Brian glares, "And it was worth every fucking penny." He shakes his head as if to clear it, and pats at his pockets. "Whatever it was, it's gone now." Eventually, he digs out a baggie with a few little white pills from the watch pocket in his jeans, and waves them in front of Justin. "Only got E left. You interested?"

Justin's face lights up, and he snatches the baggie from Brian. "Of course. You coming?" He turns and starts moving towards the stairs, his hips swaying quite noticeably.

"Fuck, I love watching him walk away..." Brian mutters under his breath before he turns to me. "Grab me a beer, Mikey?"

"Uh... sure..." I stammer as he chases after Justin's ass. They pause to swap spit for a minute before they disappear downstairs.

"Well, that was rather odd..." Ben observes calmly. "Who wants a beer?"

I can't believe it! After everything that Brian's been through, I thought Ben would want to help look out for him! "Ben, you can't... I mean... HELP ME!"

"Help you do what?" Ben remarks, moving off towards the bar. "Brian and Justin are grown men. We can't make them do, or not do, anything. We're here, we're going to baby-sit them through whatever high they've cooked up for tonight, and we'll take them back to the loft on our way home. Did you have anything else in mind?"

Pausing at the bar, I have to admit that, no, I really didn't have anything in mind other than that. It's just... I'm so worried... it's been so long since Brian got really, really fucked up... and that's not all. I know how to deal with Brian alone. Brian and Justin sharing this downward spiral... that's worse. I can feel it. The one thing Brian has never needed is more inspiration on how to fuck himself up.

Nobody else is letting it ruin their night, though. Matt is bouncing around like the kid he still is... well, sort of, he's way too tall for me to think of him as a kid, even though he's not much older than Justin. Andrew and Ben are discussing the economy, and I'm sitting here brooding, letting Brian spoil my fun. Nothing's changed! Well, no more. I can be here and watch out for them and still have a good time.

I get myself a beer and we chat, watching the dance floor for a few minutes. Brian and Justin haven't come back, but there are enough topics of conversation to keep our minds away from their problems.

When they finally do reappear, they're flushed and sweaty, like they finally took the chance to get that fuck out of their systems. They're both talkative, and thankfully a little less incoherent. Brian slips off to the bar as Justin rejoins the group.

"Hey," Justin says to Matt, giving him a hug. "When did you get here?"

"You are a fucking chronic! I came in with you!" Matt proclaims with a laugh, but hugs him back anyway. "Feeling better?"

Justin nods, bouncing with the beat of a new song, two little drops of sweat running down from his temples. "Yeah. Looser." He smiles a devilish grin, and I can't help but groan. I mean, it's not like we couldn't guess what they were doing! Brian comes back over to hand him a beer, and wraps his arms around him from behind while they drink. Just then, the music cuts out and the house lights come up.

"What the fuck?" Brian mutters. "It's fucking scummy enough in here in the dark, I don't want to see it lit up!"

Andrew laughs as the Sap taps the microphone at the DJ booth. "Is this on?" he mumbles, and a shrieking whine of feedback bounces off the walls.

"Ow!" Justin complains, and Brian pats his head, mumbling, "Poor wittle Sunshine."

The Sap swears at someone who's in the booth with him, and starts talking again. "Now, I don't know if you've heard the rumours..." he starts, "But it's true. Babylon has been sold."

"What?" we all yell out, looking at each other in confusion. I sure as fuck hadn't heard about that!

"Starting Saturday night, new owners, new management, and new DJ's will be running this place. I'm moving on to greener pastures."

"Good fucking riddance!" Brian yells, grasping Justin to him a little more tightly, who smiles weakly and leans into Brian's shoulder. I don't think either of them is over the go-go boy fiasco yet.

"So, in honour of my last night as the manager of the most fabulous club in Pittsburgh..."

"...Isn't that like being the best couturier in Idaho?" Andrew snarks.

"I'll be returning to my first job at this club..."

"Picking up used condoms?" I mumble, causing Brian to slide his eyes sideways at me and smile.

"Doing what I love to do best..."

"Blowing the go-go boys," Justin whispers authoritatively. Brian pulls him tighter.

"...and trying to leave a little imprint of myself in this building."

"I thought I saw that on one of the couches," Matt jokes.

"When I came to Pittsburgh, I was an unemployed strip-club DJ with a hundred bucks and a dream. You have helped me make that dream a reality, so I want to give a little bit back. I'll be doing the honours tonight, folks. The music's on me."

There are cheers in the room, from guys who obviously know nothing about the Sap's taste in music. "How fucking generous. We've been paying for that music with watered down drinks for years," Brian gripes bitterly as the lights go back down and the music spins up.

"So are we going to watch, or are we going to dance?" Matt yells over the beat, grabbing for Andrew's hand. "You guys coming?"

I listen to see which song it is - "Word Up," by Mel B. Ugh. Fucking Sap. "I hate this song. The first one was better."

"Oh come on, Mike, loosen up!" Ben says, holding up his beer to the light. "Give me a minute."

Justin is still grooving to the beat, and Brian has started to vibrate as well, the E taking over. Justin wraps himself around Brian, grinding his hips against Brian's thigh. "I love this song... come on, Brian...come dance with me..."

Brian shakes his head no. "I'll be damned if I ever dance to the Spice Girls, Justin. Go harass Matt and Andrew."

"It's just one Spice Girl..." Justin pleads, leaning into Brian and sucking at his neck. "I'll be very... very... grateful..." he murmurs, leaving a wet trail of kisses down the part of Brian's chest that isn't covered by his unbuttoned shirt.

"Fine," Brian relents. "Go on. I'll just finish my beer."

"Mine's done," Ben says. "I'll come."

Justin grabs Ben's hand and bounces off, finding Matt and Andrew at the centre of the dance floor. They look so happy out there, so free, but I don't want to dance, not yet. I can't really relax when I'm this worried about Brian.

"So are you going to tell me what's going on, or what?" I ask him curiously. He doesn't look at me - his eyes never leave Justin.

"He seems okay, doesn't he?" Brian asks suddenly, then turns to the bar and gets another beer.

"Who? Justin?" I say, coming around to stand in front of him, hoping for some eye contact. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Yeah. Okay." He takes another gulp of his beer. "Good."

I stare at him in disbelief. "Good? No, not good! Talk to me! What's wrong?"

"I'm going to have to talk enough tomorrow, Mikey. Let it go." He finishes his beer, opening his throat to chug it all in one long guzzle.

"Tomorrow? What's going on?" I reach for his face, cupping his cheek in my hand like he always does to me. "Just tell me."

We make eye contact for just a moment, and his look of sadness and pain nearly knocks me over. His eyes slide back to the dance floor, and the spark comes back, but just a little. "Justin's okay tonight. That's good."

"But, you're not!" I argue, and he doesn't disagree. "Why can't you just let me in?"

"Because you don't want to know!" He explodes, slurring slightly and slamming his beer against the bar. "You don't fucking return my calls, Mikey, when was I supposed to tell you that Justin's having nightmares again? That I haven't fucking slept a full night in weeks? Should I have left it all on your machine? You have the professor now, you don't need me calling you to say, 'Hey, Mikey, my clients are bankrupt and I'm financially ruined, let's go for a beer!' It's pathetic, Mikey, and that's NOT how it's going to be."

"Well, you could have!" I yell back, just as angry. "I'm not a fucking mindreader! How am I supposed to know when you're in trouble! Even Batman had the Bat-signal!" I sigh with aggravation. "Fuck, you're TELLING me what's going on and I still don't get it!"

We stop to take a breath and a swallow of beer. I ask, very tentatively, "Are you really... broke?"

He nods and sighs. "My chequing account has fifty-four bucks in it, Mikey. I'm going cheque to cheque until December. Maybe longer. Justin doesn't know."

"Double shit," I whisper. "Hey, the store's had a really good year, I can lend you some..."

"FUCK. YOU." He enunciates it clearly enough that he spits on the K. "Are you trying to tell me I can't take care of Justin?"

"Brian, what are you on? We've already had this conversation, and you made fun of me for not taking YOUR money."

"I can take care of Justin," he repeats. "No more accidents."

"Huh?"

"Do you ever think about doing Ben raw, just once?" he cocks his head to the side, as if he's thinking, but he's got to be stoned, because that is NOT a rational thought.

"Who are you and what have you done with Brian Kinney?" I kid, but he turns to me, as sad-eyed as he ever gets, and I realize that he's not kidding.

"What? NO! I don't have a death wish..." I start, but I realize instantly that it's not about me at all. "OH. SHIT! Brian, tell me you didn't."

Justin waves from the dance floor, then tears off his shirt and tucks it into the back of his cargos. Brian's eyes waver back and forth from Justin to Ben, and then to me.

"We were stoned, and it was a mistake... we didn't remember... and then we were sober, and it was an even bigger mistake." He looks at me. "It was a lot easier to do it the second time."

"Brian!"

"He's going crazy, worrying about the tests," he says, tilting his beer towards Justin. "He's being a drama princess. The way he eats, we'll starve to death long before we'll have to deal with getting sick."

"Justin? Justin's being a drama princess? You're the fucking Queen! Will you listen to yourself? 'Oh, I'm broke for five minutes, I can't take care of my boyfriend's finances, so why bother to take care of his health. Or mine.' Well, fuck you, Brian. Go get your damn tests and take out a loan like the rest of the world!" His eyes narrow, but that glare doesn't work on me anymore. Whether I piss him off or not, I'll still end up getting laid tonight, and that gives me a power I never knew I had.

"You remember what you told me about Ben? 'Go out with it, fuck it, but don't fall in love with it?' Well, I did fall in love with him, and he's going to die one day soon... too soon. If we're not careful, I will too. I can't afford to fuck around just because I'm in a bad mood." I glare right back at him. "And neither can you, Brian, if you're not monogamous. If you've got a death wish, don't take him down with you, and don't make the rest of us watch you and him dying together. Fucking asshole! Who do you think you are, Romeo and Juliet?"

Brian just stands, watching Justin's hips sway and grind to the beat. "Don't tell me you never think about it, though."

I don't even need to pause before I reply. "Of course I think about it, Brian, but I think about a lot of things! I also think about how much I'd love to have a Porsche, but I'm not going to run off and buy one."

"Good. You can't afford the insurance." He chuckles once, and then sighs when Justin waves him over again. "Fucking Spice Girls. I'm dancing to the fucking Spice Girls. Jesus, the things I do to get in that ass." He sets his beer down with finality. "Come on, Mikey... Let's dance."

Chapter 12

The slave does not speak unless spoken to.

Humility was my very first lesson in this room. The concept was introduced in a very direct way - I was told to show respect for a superior. Later on, over time and repeat visits, other rules were added: I should respond to simple commands; I should never direct my gaze towards him without permission; my body should always be positioned lower than his. It was all so sensible and orderly that it was easy for me to obey. Knowing that the standard poses and rote replies were meant not just for titillation, but for my safety and protection as well, gave me a feeling of confidence.

The routine gives the slave a feeling of security no matter what the circumstances.

But there's more to the ritual than just protection. It's not until afterwards, when you're dabbing ointment on a line of reddened welts, that you realize just how much the repetition and memorized actions take away from your conscious mind, and blocks your senses from being overwhelmed. The rules are meant to take your mind away. Setting matters like personal well being aside allows you to live in the carnal; to revel in the base, the animalistic. It's good. Frighteningly good.

The slave does not think independently of the Master.

Freedom of speech, freedom of thought, and freedom of motion are all elusive treasures bestowed upon slaves. It must be understood that these are not things that any slave inherently expects to have; whether granted by the Master on a whim, or as a reward for good behaviour, it's clearly understood that in the life of a slave, any form of freedom is an anomaly.

The slave does not exist independent of the Master.

In my house, at work, at the diner, and at Babylon, I am Ted Schmidt, because Dale has no interest in my ongoing public ownership. It's been our agreement since day one that this is a fulfilling diversion and not a love relationship, and I'm fine with that. Blake and I are still trying to work everything out, but with him in California, and me making as many visits as we can arrange, it's difficult. Being Dale's slave is different; it fulfills a

deeper longing, a need that I wasn't aware of until it was satisfied. In Dale's presence, my will is subjugated to his - or at least, it's supposed to be.

The will of the Master reigns supreme.

I forgot myself.

I have broken the cardinal rule of this relationship, of ALL Master/slave relationships, and I'm damn lucky to have been received in this house ever again. Dale might have his reasons to forgive 'Ted;' eavesdropping on a private call is a little slimy, but not a capital crime. That's not the issue. The issue is that slave has grievously injured the Master; his Dominance has been offended and his motives questioned. If Dale were an inexperienced Master, or a person prone to holding grudges, I would likely never be allowed to speak to him again. Even Masters who are prone to giving their slaves a little leeway wouldn't put up with what I did, so I am very grateful, and very scared, that Dale is willing to put it aside.

Bless me, Father, for I have sinned, and only the worst and most devastating punishment will appease his anger. That's why I'm here.

He meets me at the front door, wearing khakis and a button-down shirt, and directs me towards the front room. I perch anxiously on his couch, in the boring white room he keeps as a tribute to the vanilla world, and how well he fools them. They think he's one of them.

They think a lot of things.

He closes the door behind me, pausing a moment before joining me in the sleek white room. I can't help but follow him with my eyes as he crosses to a white wing chair, settling himself quickly but with an air of unease. I know the feeling.

"I'll cut right to the chase, Ted, you fucked up," he says coldly, meeting my gaze with more than a hint of forcefulness. I know that even though this isn't supposed to be a personal relationship, I've hurt him, and that really bothers me. I asked him to help my friend, but didn't trust him to actually do it, and that would be pretty insulting to anyone. I hang my head, and he sighs.

"Plenty of slaves have chosen to terminate their relationships rather than accept the punishment I have planned for you," he continues. "I'm angry, but I'll have to put that aside, because anger is not an emotion that belongs in the dungeon. I do intend to make you understand exactly how much I was insulted by what you did. That will require a change to our contract. I need you to remove the stipulation that I cannot break your skin or draw blood."

A lump builds up in my throat, and with difficulty, I manage to swallow against it. "I... uh... I know I hurt you, Dale... I'm sorry. Whatever it takes. I understand."

"I'm not sure you DO understand, Ted, and that's what bothers me." He shifts in his chair, leaning forwards until his elbows rest on his knees, fingers laced together in the open angle of his legs. "You insulted me, but you're not the first to do that. You overstepped your bounds, but we all do that from time to time. What you did - that is unforgivable, in my eyes - was that you broke a confidence. Do you think I don't know who Brian Kinney is, or what he does to his boy? They're not invisible in our community, and even though they don't want anything to do with us, we try to look out for them because nobody else can."

I nod, but Dale is off in his own world, and he doesn't acknowledge my interruption. "We see them at Babylon, at The Meathook, and on the street. We see them high, we see them bruised, we see them strung out on God knows what drugs.... it's enough information to make an educated guess, and I'm guessing that they're in trouble. You nearly interfered with my ability to mentor a very frightened and disturbed man, Ted, and that could have had terrible consequences. Doms who can't handle their roles occasionally cause grievous or even fatal injuries to their subs. Think about that for a minute."

I do think about it. I think about it long, and hard, and as much as I know Brian can be a violent sonofabitch, I don't think he would really hurt Justin. Not really.

"You're skeptical, fine. Look at it from my perspective. Despite many invitations, Brian has avoided being involved in our community for a long while. You know as well as I do that we're not just here to get off together, but to protect each other. He may think he's not a joiner, or that he's sheltering his boy from harm... whatever. What he's really doing is cutting both of them off from an understanding and accepting support system." He leans forward, very quietly stating, "I've known his type before, Ted. Having him reach out to us like that means that they're in more trouble than you can possibly imagine. A man like Brian doesn't make a cry for help unless he's in a life or death situation, and I'd bet more money than you've ever seen that it's not just his life that's in danger."

Dale seems to be waiting for me to say something, or do something, but it doesn't make any sense to me at all. Why did he spend all that time convincing me that they were okay, if he didn't think that they were? What changed his mind? I run what he said over and over in my brain... Danger... Danger... and then I realize that for all the worrying I've done over the two of them, I only worried about Brian's mental health - not Justin's... and like any sub, he's the key. If he's okay, they're okay, but if he's not... Oh. OH. Shit! Suddenly, I feel so artless... so clumsy... and that I have done something terribly, horribly stupid. Hell, at this rate I WANT to be punished for being such a fuckup!

Dale nods slightly, obviously having noticed my moment of discovery. "Ted, I'm glad we're finally on the same page. Perhaps now you understand the magnitude of your error, and why your punishment needs to be severe. From this point, it's your choice if we continue... Now, as in everything. Your safeword is still yours, free to give at any time without adverse consequences."

I can feel my face moving into a frown before I even start talking. "I thought that if I didn't accept the punishment, I'd be banished?"

He sits back and sighs. "Perhaps. There are consequences to every action, sometimes unforeseeable in their scope or severity. I have to admit I'd think twice about continuing our relationship if you put a stop to the proceedings, but I won't hold that over your head as a threat. I repeat: if you are unwilling or unable to continue, your safe word is yours."

"I understand that, Dale, and I'm determined to accept whatever punishment you may offer."

"All right, then. And you're consenting, on this one occasion, to work outside our contract?"

"Yes."

"Understanding the only precautions I take will be basic, to protect your life, your health, and your safety?"

I shudder at that one, because it means that he's free to do anything that will leave me alive and mostly sane at the end... but still I don't hesitate.

"Yes."

"Very well. Go downstairs and get yourself ready. Wait in the blue room to be summoned." He gets up and leaves the living room, giving me a few minutes alone to collect myself and go through the mental preparations it takes just to get down those stairs.

Here in the living room, I'm Theodore Schmidt, MBA and successful entrepreneur. Serious, honest, predictable as fuck. At the bottom of the stairs, Ted no longer exists. There is no, "I", no "ME." There's a slave - a slave to passion, a body and soul subjugated completely by someone else's will to power. A slave in all its wonderful and horrible connotations.

The stairs are the beginning of the journey, and for every step I take, I pay. I lose another piece of myself, another part of my identity. Making the choice to go down those stairs is the last choice I will be free to make tonight. Each step is a loss, felt more obscenely and more painfully clear than the last... but every step is also easier, somehow.

The last step breached, I make my way to the prep room - second door to the left at the bottom of the stairs. Smooth and dark like everything else down here, hiding its true purpose from the casual visitor. Dale really did think of everything when he set up the dungeon - he set aside a special place for us to get undressed and ready. A place to remove whatever residue of myself may be left behind, any reminder of life outside these

walls. The room is Spartan, and sparsely furnished - deep blue walls and a grey slate floor surround simple furniture. A large, squarish black dresser sits against one wall, a black and grey leather couch against the other. The room is lit by shaded white lights around the perimeter of the room, lights that cast shadows reaching towards me at the door. There's a grey door leading to a bathroom decorated in a very similar way - the same deep blue paint, the same grey floor tiles, the same black accents around fixtures of brushed grey steel. It's all hard and angular... utilitarian and unobtrusive... and not the least bit comfortable or comforting. It's not meant to be.

I take off my clothes quickly and not a little nervously, folding and refolding them before I place them in the bottom drawer of the dresser. Even my shoes go into the deep compartment - there are to be no reminders of Ted in here. It only follows that in this room, Ted's things should go into the bottom drawer, because even in this simple act, my role is reinforced, re-emphasized. Not that I don't matter, but that I have a place, and it's the bottom. One time Dale told me that there are different rooms, different prep areas for the many different guests he invites down here, but I've never seen them. It's not my place.

Things put away, I open the top drawer, searching anxiously for any toys or props that Dale might have planned for me to wear. There has always been something - a choker, a set of cuffs - and for some reason, finding nothing in that drawer disturbs me greatly. Empty-handed, I make my way over to the couch, completely stripped of everything I had when I came in here tonight... clothing... pride... identity... everything but expectation. I take a seat on the edge of the couch and wait nervously - but not for long.

"Slave!" Dale announces, bursting into the room dressed in thick leather chaps and a matching black g-string. He's wearing a black hood, and while it doesn't obscure his eyes or mouth, it still makes him frightening and mysterious, like he can suddenly hide his intentions that much more easily. I glance at him quickly, taking in the sight, before I quickly drop my eyes to the floor in subservience. The whole costume makes him awesome and frightening to look at, but I'm not allowed to look.

"Master," I reply softly, hands in my lap, eyes trained on the floor. No matter how afraid I am, the training he has not-so-literally beaten into me always kicks right in.

"Get down," he commands, motioning towards the floor like one would point at a dog. I do it, immediately.

"Crawl," he continues with disdain, turning and leaving the room without needing confirmation that I will follow. "Crawl to the dungeon and accept your punishment."

I hang my head and crawl, meekly on my hands and knees, using only the movement of his feet as a guide of where to go. I never look up and I never stop moving, watching nothing but the floor as it changes from the grey slate of the prep room, through the rose- and blue-veined marble of the hallway, finally ending at the pebbly, dark concrete of the dungeon.

"Stay," he orders, again speaking to his naughty dog, and I instantly obey. This room is lit by nothing but dim electric torch fixtures mounted on the walls. They illuminate the larger and more frightening torture devices, casting shadows in a myriad of frightening shapes on the floor. I shake with emotion - fear, lust, and cold, crawling excitement ball up in the pit of my stomach. Combined, these feelings must make me into the most pathetic sight I could possibly be.

"Slave, you have displeased me greatly. Not only did you disobey my direct command, you have also breached our necessary and sacred trust. Do you understand how serious these transgressions are?"

"Yes, Master," I reply, but he tsk tsk's me instantly.

"No, I really don't think you do...but you will." He leaves my side for a minute, returning with some kind of leather whip that makes a whistling noise when he cracks it in the air. He drops it right in front of me, and I have but a moment to examine the plaited black leather. It looks like a cat o' nine tails, but the cords are braided and knotted until each individual strand is the thickness of my finger. This isn't for play - it's meant to do serious damage.

"Pick it up. With your teeth," he instructs, waiting for me to retrieve it like a pet before he plucks it out of my mouth. He holds it by the very end of the shaft, the strands swinging dangerously in my face. He chuckles a bit at the way I keep trying to sneak looks at it, as if that will somehow make it ultimately hurt less.

"Kiss it," he shouts, and I lunge forwards without hesitation. I can't tell if my eagerness pleases him, he's all shut down now and I can't get a reading on what he thinks or how he feels. He's sterile and emotionless, and his next words are delivered as flatly as a restaurant order.

"This can be your best friend or your worst enemy, slave. Think of it however you like, it's of no consequence to me. I'm here to ensure that we're clear on our roles from here on in, and that you never, ever forget your place again. Understood?"

I manage to force out a quiet, "Yes, sir," even though my throat is constricted as tightly as a vice.

"Excellent." He nudges my leg with his toe, indicating that I should start crawling towards the shackles mounted on the far wall. I do, slowly, doing my very best to do everything perfectly, and not provoke any more punishment than I'm already due.

"Up," is his next command, and it's almost kind, like a temporary reprieve for a not-so-beloved pup. I obey as quickly as I can, and when he adds, "Up and spread," I do it hastily.

He starts to lock the shackles around my wrists and ankles, eliciting an involuntary shudder. I know that the cold bands will warm up quickly, but right now, nothing is colder to me than my fear.

He trails the tip of the cat over my body; across my shoulder blades and down my spine, the pathway lubricated by cold terror sweat. It slips off the rise of my ass, which he taps thoughtfully before resuming his course down my body.

"Count to ten," he remarks, seemingly out of the blue, but I comply, because his commands don't need to be reasonable to be obeyed by me without reservation. That's the point of this exercise.

"One..." I start tentatively, not knowing what he wants or why he wants it. Everything seems condensed in this moment, condensed and yet expanded until time itself stretches and whirls around my head. The cold rough concrete presses against my forehead and my hardening cock; metallic tightness rings my wrists and ankles. His breath is hot on my neck when he leans in menacingly.

"Count faster, slave. We don't have all night."

I oblige him, counting up to seven more quickly, and settling comfortably into the cadence and rhythm by the time I hit eleven.

Big mistake, because he hits me at twelve.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" I scream as the cat comes crashing down on my back, once, twice, and I swear to God that it's ninety percent surprise at first. The pain doesn't start in right away; it takes a minute for my brain to process the signals of my screaming skin around the screaming I'm already doing. It's not until the third solid thrash that the pain builds to a stinging, burning, throbbing crescendo that I can't ignore.

Strangled, guttural groans are wrenched from my body with every blow, adding pain onto immeasurable pain as the lash falls again and again. I can't breathe, my God, I can't breathe through or around this wall of pain, I'm being suffocated with it, pushed face-first into these watery waves of pain. Drowning in the torturing jolts that fall on my body like acid rain.

"Scream for me, slave," he says with just a tiny hint of emotion in the voice I can hardly hear over the white noise of my thoughts. Pain, there is nothing but pain in my head, tracing burning red lines across my back, making his hollow voice compete with the loud throbbing of my heart. "Scream for me, slave, I want to hear the pain," he yells, but it doesn't matter... he has to already know that nothing could hurt more...he has me trapped alone in a universe of pain, and he has to know that I'm here because he wants me to stay here.

The blows rain down, until my voice is raw and tears stream from my eyes, until my skin is swollen and wailing like I am, bruised and slashed with hectic red welts. When one strand wraps around my rib cage to land solidly across my chest, it catapults me into a whole new existence, an unimaginable new dimension of anguish that can't get worse until it does. The next blow finally splits my skin, and the animal-like wail that tears out of my body shakes me down to the core. The next lash sticks to my skin, freezing in the tackiness of my blood.

He stops just as the pain reaches its peak, when I'm begging for him to stop because I'm sure I can't go on anymore. The room falls silent, except for my newly agonized sobs and his heavy, panting breaths.

"There," he gasps, coming closer to liberate me from the wall. "Your punishment is done. You're released." His fingers pop the quick-release latches inside the shackles, and he moves so carefully, he seems almost as dazed as I am. I can't stop crying, the pain is horrible and lasting and the knowledge that I disappointed him enough to make him hurt me this way is just damaging.

When he finally frees my wrists, I turn and fall into his arms, still crying pitifully. He smooths and pats my hair as I struggle to breathe calmly. He whispers sweet words of comfort to me as I feel the blood begin its itching crawl down my back.

"I'm sorry!" I cry out in between shuddering sobs. "My God, Dale, I'm so sorry!"

He shushes me with a soft kiss on the forehead, and guides me over to a wooden bench near the wall. "I know," he whispers, pushing me gently into a sit, then sliding a finger under my chin to tilt my face until my gaze meets his. "But you have to realize that I took it easy - I took you as far as I could without hitting you out of anger, or spite. If I'm frustrated with you, or angry with you, I have to talk to you, not hit you. That's not what this is about."

He takes off the hood, wiping sweat from his forehead. "They may not talk to me, but I have eyes - I know what they do. What you felt was just a fraction of the pain that Brian's boy feels, because I don't think they stop when they're angry, or frustrated. I think they go harder.

"That makes sense."

He shakes his head. "It only seems that way. Take what you feel now, and imagine how different it would be if I loved you and still hurt you that way. How much more confusing, and frightening... and sexy it would be. How we'd be so much more bound, more connected." He pats my hair again when I snifle. "Think about what it would feel like if you loved me and I lost control. Do you trust me with your life?"

I think about that for a minute, closing my eyes and looking at nothing but blackness while my breathing normalizes. The answer comes to me then, and easily. "Yes, Dale, I do."

It seems like everything.

"Ted...Jesus, Ted, how can I explain this...Brian's boy trusts him with his death. Trusts that if Brian loses control, it's for the greater good...that whatever may happen, Brian will do only what the boy needs to have done to him. The magnitude of that love, that trust..." Dale sighs seriously, seemingly searching for the right words while he rocks back and forth on his feet.

"It seems romantic, and I'll admit it has the whole Romeo and Juliet thing going for it, but that attitude is a warning sign of mental imbalance. That outright insanity... it's not unknown to us, in the community. We see it sometimes, and it frightens us. When two broken people really connect, and start digging up their skeletons... Not to say it's not a good idea, it is. Healthy. It's just a perilous road."

He sighs, and pats my shoulder again before sitting down beside me, lacing his fingers together in deep thought. "I think we all...have this pain inside of us...and we know it's there, crystallized somewhere in the bottom of our souls. It's why we do what we do. The pain exchange, the power exchange, it's all there to eroticize that ache, and make it okay... we're all just trying to reclaim something healthy out of damage that was beyond our control. Everybody wants to be nurtured when they're scared, and healed when they're hurt, so they start acting out their past injuries, trying to dig it all out like a festering sliver. They have the right idea, because pain shared really is pain released, but when those old scripts, full of abuse and intolerance and unspeakable violence, get acted out all over again in different circumstances, it's a critical time. Even with guidance, it can be hard on the conscience, and on the psyche, but when you're being guided, you always have someone with experience to talk to, to help steer you through. Brian and his boy... they've actively chosen to walk alone, without assistance or advice - walking a tightrope without a net. If one of them screams for help, I have to believe it's because they're going to fall..."

He stops again, pulling away enough so that we're nearly eye-to-eye. "I'm not explaining this well, but you need to listen hard, Ted. I've been hearing things lately, very bad things, and I think Brian and his boy are in real trouble. I don't stop being a Dom when I'm off the clock, and I don't just stop caring. I always want to nurture people through their pain, but those two have repeatedly refused to confide in me, so the best I can do is to help Brian find someone else to talk to. If Brian had discovered you were on the line, I have no doubt that he wouldn't have asked for that name... and that could have had some very tragic consequences for both of them."

My head is spinning with things I didn't appreciate before, and my peek into Dale's thoughts has been enlightening and overwhelming at the same time. "I...I think I understand now," I murmur, and he pulls me into his arms.

"Good. I believe that you do. Or at least, that you're trying. True understanding takes a long time." I sigh for a moment, and he takes my hand to lead me back to the prep room for a rubdown and some salve. I follow wordlessly, but when we get out to the hallway, a sudden thought pops into my head.

"Dale, can I ask you something?"

"Sure, shoot," he replies, not pausing in his journey.

"Why don't you ever call Justin by name? Surely you know it by now."

He turns back to me, rolling the question around in his head, and you can tell that he's thinking about how to explain something very complicated. He stops in the entryway to the blue room, a serious expression on his face.

"The boy... Justin... belongs to Brian. Brian has let everyone in town know it, and in every way possible. He's Brian's property, not mine, and it's not my privilege or my right to be so familiar." He scratches a phantom itch on his face, and continues. "I think he thinks it's his duty to shelter his boy, to protect his treasure from the world, and the boy seems content to be sheltered. I'm sure he wouldn't take kindly to the intrusion... You do understand why it would be an intrusion, right?"

Well, not completely, but I think I have the idea. Dale is accustomed to taking possession of everything and anything he wants, much like Brian. Just the suggestion that Dale might want Justin could very well push Brian over the edge, and that might have those consequences that Dale is so worried about.

I nod, and Dale smiles. "Come on, Ted, let's get you cleaned up." He takes my hand again, leading me into the blue room with a firm, gentle pull. I follow without resistance, because I think it's clear how much guidance I still need.

Chapter 13

I was a little surprised to wake up alone. I hate waking up alone; it's one of the reasons that I started letting tricks stay over in the first place. I just don't like to sleep by myself. When I do, I tend to lay in bed, drifting in and out of sleep, not being able to rest, but knowing that my dreams are partly memories as well.

* * *

When Claire and I were kids...we never slept alone. Sure, we had our own rooms, and we very properly went to bed by ourselves and at different times, but that never mattered. Midnight would roll around, and I'd sneak into her room, following the path of that awful pink night-light she bought with her babysitting money. Her room was like a fucking

suburban fairy tale, all pink shit and ruffles, and I think that I knew I hated that kind of crap even then. I hated it, but she was there, and that made it a sanctuary.

Jack used to come home so fucking late some nights, piss drunk and stinking of cheap perfume. Always looking for a fight, and always looking for me...but never looking there, in her room. Never bothering his Princess.

Until she was twelve, he never even opened her fucking door.

Claire would hide me in her bed until Jack passed out. She'd shove me into the crevice where her single bed met the wall, and sleep on her side so that if he did open the door, he wouldn't be able to see me... pushing me down and bunching that ugly girly quilt over my head until I thought I'd never breathe again. She'd rub my back and tell me stories and I'd shake so fucking hard, because if he ever found me...

It took him a long time to find me. I was nine years old, and two weeks of union work meant a paycheque bigger than he normally saw in a month. He had to work extra hard to drink that money away, and when they finally kicked his ass out of the union hall for being drunk and disorderly, he came home itching for a fight. The way he came stomping into the house, screaming my name... Well, I guess it had finally occurred to him I was too young to have really gotten away, and that if he looked around a little, he'd have someone to beat the shit out of after all.

He came stumbling up the stairs, stomping and cursing me out - not just me, some chick named Belinda, too... I guess his piece of ass on the side had finally rejected him for being a washed-up, good-for-nothing asshole. He kicked at Claire's door, screaming "BRIAN!" over and over again, and all I could do was tremble and hold my breath. Claire jumped out of bed to meet him, heading him off before he got more than a couple of feet into her room.

"Hi Daddy!" she chirped, cheerful as all fuck, and every bit as scared as I was.

"Princess," he slurred, and a tiny spark of envy lit up inside of me. What was so fucking special about Claire? What did she do? Why did he love her so much, and me not at all? It wasn't fair.

He hiccupped and stumbled. "Where's your brother?" I could hear him shuffling, his boots scraping against the hardwood floor.

"I don't know, Daddy, I was asleep," she said, all serious and innocent, and it make him chuckle. His voice went all soft and low, and I could hear him mumbling in reply.

"That's a good girl. You're such a good girl for Daddy, aren't you?" There was a pause, then Claire started to cry, and he repeated, "Yes, that's my girl. You're Daddy's good girl."

Then it got quiet. Really, really quiet, and except for his laboured breathing, I wouldn't even have sworn they were still in the room. I lifted the edge of the quilt, because I was starting to get worried about Claire, and that's when I saw her.

On her knees, in front of my father, paying for my safety.

I was so angry! Why didn't she fight him off? Why did he have to be such a bastard? Why couldn't my family be normal, instead of being this messed-up bunch of losers all the time? There were a million thoughts swirling around in my head, and although I didn't really understand everything, I was never that innocent. Even at nine, I knew enough... and I knew that it was my fault.

I put my fingers into my ears and held my breath until she finished him off. She did come back to the bed, but the second I heard him close the door to his room, I was out of there like a rocket. I know she was crying when she called my name, and I wanted to go back and hug her and tell her it would be okay...but I was hurt and angry and I just couldn't. I could never look her in the eye after that. It cost too much.

I never slept in Claire's room again, but I still don't like to sleep alone, and nobody is ever, ever going to pay my way again. Ever.

* * *

FUCK. My eyes fly open with a shuddering breath, and the pounding of my heart is enough to pull me out of the deadest of sleep. Okay, this time I'm awake, really awake, and I'm NOT going to think about that anymore. It was a long time ago, and it's over now, and that has nothing to do with anything anymore. Shit, what the hell is wrong with me this morning? It's got to be the hangover. I know I get maudlin when I'm hung sometimes... If I ever remember what I took last night, from now on I'm definitely going to leave it on the top shelf.

The smell of breakfast is in the air, and strangely enough, the idea of eating isn't unappealing. Eggs. I know I smell eggs, and that means that Justin must be up and around. Thinking about food is making my stomach rumble, so I pull myself out of bed, first unwinding the sheets pooled around my legs from where Justin threw them off.

"Morning," he says to me as I walk out into the kitchen.

Right away, I notice that the loft is quiet. He's normally got Saturday morning cartoons going at full blast, Spongebob... uh... Powerthing or whatever it's called. The first Saturday morning he turned on my fucking television to the Cartoon Network, I kicked his ass right out of the building. No goodbye, no "Later," just a pile of his shit dumped outside the door, and the bolt thrown behind him. He was pissed, but dammit, I have standards.

Then Michael started coming over to watch them too, and since they finally found a common interest that didn't involve sniping at each other and harassing me, I learned to ignore them. Pretty soon, I could tune out the flashing lights and loud noises and get my work done in the zoo. It was a sacrifice, but it bought me some time without either of them climbing up my pants for my attention.

Besides, even that was a fuck of a lot better than all the anime they rented when they were first getting ideas for the comic book. I guess that's when I completely gave in on the cartoon issue. After a seven-day Robotech marathon, in Japanese no less, a couple of hours of cartoons just weren't worth arguing about anymore.

Anyway, the room is too quiet, and it's strange not to have to yell.

"What time is it?" I ask, calling over to the couch, where he's lying on his back and staring at the ceiling. He just lies there blankly, kicking at the end of the couch, and I have to call his name two or three times before I even get his attention.

He gives me a little smile - the fake one he uses on traffic cops - before he checks his watch. "It's... uh... five minutes to eleven. We still have a little time before the appointment." He goes back to kicking the arm of the sofa... once... twice... letting his head flop back down onto the cushion. "I made myself some hardboiled eggs. There are a couple for you in the fridge."

I open the fridge, and there they are, two hardboiled eggs on a plate. I must be fucking hung over, because it feels miraculous that I'm hungry and food magically appears in my kitchen. I know that if Justin couldn't cook, I would never have kept him around this long. He just had this way of ingratiating himself, and being so fucking convenient, that after a while, I rarely went to the trouble of sending him home.

I take the eggs out to the table, sitting alone and peeling them carefully while Justin conducts his visual inspection of the ceiling beams.

We sit silently, me eating sort of self-consciously - I usually don't eat unless other people are eating too - and my eggs are finished before he finally says something.

"Michael still has the Jeep," he mumbles, sort of talking in my direction as I walk back to the kitchen. I nod, fixing my coffee in silence while he goes back to staring at the ceiling.

This whole morning has been sort of bizarre. Flashbacks, non-conversations, and awkward silences? That's Ted's morning, not ours. I'm used to Justin being a chatterbox, trying to convince me to eat a Belgian waffle in bed or something equally self-indulgent, because "it's Saturday." Well, it's not this Saturday. No good-morning fuck, no breakfast for two, no idiotic cartoons... just a bit of stilted conversation... Hell, this has got to be worse than a morning at Ted's. I always knew that having 'a relationship' would come down to this, because once you get past all the high-gloss Hallmark advertising, this is

what being a couple really is. I just didn't think it would happen this soon, and I'm surprised at how much that bothers me.

The coffee is really bitter this morning, and it needs more doctoring than usual. Memories of our evening filter back into my consciousness as I spoon in the sugar - dinner at La Mer, and the four bottles of wine we drank with the meal. The baths? Yes... no... Sounds right, but I can't remember for sure. I don't remember how we got to Woody's, but I remember being there, feeling Justin's hot tongue in my mouth as I stroked his cock at the table.

I do remember going to Babylon, because Mikey was dragging Justin along the street just like his mom used to do to him outside of school. Justin looked so fucking surprised, and I laughed so hard that my stomach hurt. Once we got inside Babylon, my memory starts to fill in a little more, but it's all very hazy and that bothers me, too.

Three blackouts in three days have got to be a record for me, and I'm thinking it's a record I don't want to beat. Just the thought of blacking out that many times... and specifically, what I've done during blackouts in the past... it makes me think that if I were the kind of person who panicked, I might be doing it now. I over-stir the coffee as if it will magically bring my memory back, and try to work backwards through the night.

There are things that I absolutely KNOW - we did some E, we danced a little, we drank some wine. Why do I remember listening to the Sap? I guess there are just as many things that aren't quite clear... did he drive, or did I? I remember getting out of the Jeep in front of the building...and then the elevator...and then we came in the door and... fucking hell!

We did it again. And again. And one more time, just to make sure it stuck, I guess. I think we even traded off this time, too. Fuck.

"Justin?" I ask, taking deep breaths and trying to stay very calm as I come over to the end of the couch. "What do you remember from last night?"

He looks up at me, his pale eyes ringed with dark circles, and that look tells me everything I need to know. I wonder if I look any better.

"Not a lot... but I remember fucking you raw, so I guess that's enough," he confirms, a look of disgust on his face.

"Shit."

"Yeah."

I look down at the couch, and he moves his legs just enough for me to sit on the third pillow, as far away from him as I can be.

"Why do we keep doing it?" he mumbles in frustration, and then resumes fidgeting as if he hadn't spoken. As if I weren't even there. I almost move to sit beside him, but three kicks into his routine, he's driving me nuts and I want to be anywhere but sharing this space with him.

"I'm going to take a shower, and then we can get the Jeep back from Mikey," I announce to the room, not really bothering to turn and look him in the eye. I see him nod against the cushion, kicking idly at the back of the couch while we're frozen in uncomfortable silence. And what could we say? There is no excuse for what we're doing.

I turn and go to take my shower without a backward glance. He doesn't join me.

When I leave the bathroom, I'm sort of relieved that he's at least moved. He changed from his sweats into shorts and a t-shirt, and he's got himself all set up in the corner, where "the light is better." He's staring off into space, sketchpad in hand, drawing broad black swoops on the paper in front of him.

"Warming up the tires" is what he calls it, like when a race car driver swerves back and forth on the track at the beginning of a race. How the fuck he knows even that much about car races, he's never told me, but he always looks so deep in thought while he's doing it. He makes the same rhythmic, lazy swoops, waiting for inspiration...or maybe just trying to look busy. Who knows.

While he's off on his own little planet, I decide that I can make my call to Mikey in relative privacy. I never used to worry about private calls, but then again, there was never anybody around to listen in, either.

I dial the number, and greet him with what's been our normal Saturday morning salutation for years now.

"You've got my Jeep."

"Yes, we do," Ben replies placidly, and I'm... surprised?... that he's the one who picked up the phone. Maybe surprised isn't the right word, but it's not our normal routine.

We've been doing this for years, after all, since we were too young to drink, but not too young to want to go out and get laid. Maybe me more so than him, but we always went out together, and always ended up together eventually. I haven't seen Mikey in a while. It's weird.

When hear my name echoing in my ear, I realize that I've been staring off into space, thinking too much about the past again. Fucking hangover.

"Brian?" Ben's tinny voice calls to me curiously, "Are you going to come and get the Jeep today or not?"

It's just a question. A simple question, but honestly, I've never had to answer it before. Mikey has always brought the Jeep back to me - he says that it's the least he can do, providing valet service after a bender. Whatever. I've never had to come and get it yet, and today is really not the day when I want to start, with Justin acting so unlike himself.

Even though my head is fucking killing me, I prepare to turn on the charm.

"Can't Mikey bring it over?" I ask, as sweetly saccharine as I can handle without wanting to puke.

Ben sees through the act perfectly, the bastard, because his reply is every bit as sickly sweet, and only a little more sincere. "No, he can't bring it over, because he's not here."

Fuck. "Do you think you could bring it over, then?"

He sighs. "Brian, the whole goddamned world doesn't revolve around you. I didn't mind babysitting you at the bar last night, because you obviously needed some help. This morning you're sober, and you don't need help, you're just being lazy. I have plans. Take care of it yourself."

Take care of it myself? He has no FUCKING idea what I'm trying to take care of by myself. I'm just about to tell him to take a fucking hike, and let him know exactly what he can do with my Jeep, when I look over into the corner and see Justin again - and goddammit if he isn't crying this time. Just looking at him makes me feel angry and so fucking helpless... and I'm not sure which is worse.

"Look, Ben," I murmur, very low, so that Justin can't hear. "I need the Jeep, but I don't have time to come and pick it up. I have to take Justin to the doctor in an hour, and... I can't leave him alone."

Ben pauses a minute, and then, very softly, "Right. Michael told me he starts therapy today."

"Yeah." His therapy... Christ, I hope it works, because I can't keep going on like this. Ben is a dangerous man to talk to, because the more he listens, the more you want to tell him what's on your mind. I want to tell *somebody* how fucking frustrating it is to be dragging a ghost around town... about the drugs, the heroin I almost didn't flush... and how it's... weird... that since we started barebacking, we can't even talk anymore... but I don't. If I started, I wouldn't stop.

I just sit on the phone, uneasily silent with the most fucking dangerous man in Pittsburgh, waiting for him to change his mind. Predictably, he does.

"All right, I'll bring you the Jeep. I'll be there in ten minutes."

"Thanks."

I hang up the phone, waiting for Justin to say something... do something... but he doesn't. He just sits in the corner, staring down at the bold black slashes on his page while tears run silently down his cheeks. It's as if I'm not even in the room anyway, so I leave.

I'm sitting outside, having a smoke or ten when Ben pulls up to the building.

"Brian, I didn't expect to see you out here," he comments, slamming the drivers' side door and coming over to sit beside me on the curb. "Everything okay?"

"Not really," I reply, already losing my battle to keep this whole mess to myself. It seems that the truth is mixed in with the smoke that slips out of my mouth.

He nods, and we sit in silence for a few more minutes. I offer him a cigarette the next time I take the pack out of my pocket, but he shakes his head noncommittally.

"Don't you have somewhere to be?" I ask him, a little annoyed that not only do I have company when I want to be alone, he doesn't seem interested in leaving.

He nods.

"Sure I do. So do you," he replies easily. "You just looked like you could use some company."

No wonder people are always harassing me! If I look like I need company now, when I've never wanted to be more alone...

I shake my head, saying, "I came out here for some time to myself," and drag deeply off my cigarette. I can't help but wonder what he wants - what his angle might be. He seems just as eager to tell me as I am to figure it out.

"Brian," he starts, but then falters and stops. "Never mind."

"What?"

"No, it's not my place. Forget I said anything."

I toss my cigarette butt into the gutter in aggravation, and light another. "Everyone else in Pittsburgh thinks they have a say in my life, Ben. You might just as well put in your two cents."

He closes his eyes, and opens them again. "Michael told me about you and Justin."

"What about me and Justin?"

He closes his eyes tightly this time, and I can see his head bobbing slightly as he counts to ten. "Don't start with me, Brian, and quit playing dumb. He told me what you're doing because he's worried about you."

"He told you because he's a fucking blabbermouth."

Ben jerks a little with the insult, but forces himself to relax. "Hey, you know he can't keep a secret any better than Justin can... Not a big one, and not when he thinks that telling the truth will help you. If you told him, it's because you wanted him to tell someone else."

"That's ridiculous," I snap, crushing out my cigarette on the concrete. "Maybe I was a little too stoned to keep my fucking mouth shut. I'm sure I won't make that mistake again."

He doesn't look convinced, so I add, "But please, don't let my disinterest stop you. Whatever question you were going to ask, or whatever lecture you were going to give, just let it all out. You'll feel better."

He refuses to rise to the bait, and I find his calmness incredibly irritating. When he does reply, his voice is low and smooth.

"No lecture, Brian, I've been there. I'm just saying that being there is what got me here, that's all."

"How very Zen of you. Here would be...?"

"Here is an illness that I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy, let alone a friend. Granted, you've both screwed me and screwed me over, too, but I think we've moved past all that, don't you?" I nod stiffly, and his voice drops into the confidential-chat range.

"I care about you, Brian. Both of you. I know there's some bad shit going on between you and Justin right now, and if you need to talk about it..."

"Not interested."

The last thing I need is a been-there, done-that, here's-how-you-recover lecture from Professor Karmic Alignment.

"All right, then." He stands up, patting my shoulder on the way. "I used to be really evangelical about all of this, you know. Used to practically chase my friends down and put the condoms on them myself." I snicker, and he smiles down at me. "Yeah, I know. I thought that if people just knew how easy it was to get infected, they'd be careful... and if they knew what I was going through, it would make them think twice. I know better now."

"Ben, I'm handling it," I grind out tersely. "I never signed up for it, but I'm handling it, and that's all you need to know."

"You're not handling anything as well as you think you are," he levels, as if that should end the discussion.

The sun is just over his shoulder, and I have to squint to look up at him. "Don't take it so fucking personally. It's got nothing to do with you, and the decisions we make are none of your business."

"Oh, so you 'made the decision,' did you? You thought it through, talked it over? Got tested, and figured, 'Hey, we're clean, and we're going to make this commitment to each other?' How stupid do you think I am?" He laughs ruefully. "It's got nothing to do with me. Right. Well, it would fucking suck if I'd had to go through all this bullshit for nothing. I don't want you to have to go through this, and that is why it's my business."

"It's got nothing to do with you!" I repeat angrily, and he rocks his head back on his shoulders, finally starting to show some aggravation himself.

"Tell me that when you finally succeed in getting sick, Brian. When you're asking me where you can pick up your meds five bucks cheaper a month... when you're trying to figure out which grocery store sells Pediasure by the case, because you can't seem to keep the weight on. Or, God forbid, if you're doing all of that for Justin." He starts to walk away, and then turns back angrily. "I'm telling you, you and Justin will sit up at night trying to figure out who infected whom, which month, which trick...looking for someone to blame. Either way, you'll lose him, because you have no idea how hard it is not to blame your lover for killing you. I won't ask if that's what you want, because you still won't admit to anyone else that you love him, but can you at least admit to yourself that you live for him every bit as much as he lives for you?"

He takes a breath, and speaks much more slowly and surely than he did before. "You'll get infected and he'll leave you, Brian, because that's the way these things work. You'll get angry, and bitter, and you WILL end up sick and alone because you've never done a damn thing for anyone without also making them afraid to love you. So don't fucking tell me it's got nothing to do with me, because you're walking down my goddamned road. It's my road, and I'm telling you to get the fuck off of it while you still can."

With that, he spins on his heel and walks away, leaving me to think about what I've done, or maybe what I'm about to do. Thinking and talking in one day is not my idea of a good time at all, and the day isn't even half over yet...but already, I feel like I'm done.

Chapter 14

I woke up dizzy, hung over, reeking of sweat and totally stuck to the bed.

Gross.

It wasn't until I looked over at Brian's still-flushed cheeks, and felt that sudden urge to climb on top of him one more time, that I even remembered just how we got so sweaty and so sticky. Of course, we could have gotten just as messy and still have been safe, but I know better - we haven't touched a condom in days. I think they're actually starting to collect dust in the little bowl on the night table. How weird is that?

It's sort of hard to understand, to explain why we're doing what we do. Funny how we keep thinking about it that way - "What we do" - as if it's a demon that you can't call out by name. I can say its name. Barebacking. Going out of our way to choose not to protect ourselves.

Even without the moral judgment involved, it still sounds like a death sentence.

It's not like we don't know it's unsafe - you'd have to live in a cave not to know that! You can't walk down Liberty without seeing the public service announcements, shouting, "Use a condom EVERY TIME!!!" Fuck, even at St. James Academy, where I think everyone still believed that storks bring babies, we got a safe-sex lecture eventually... and I really, really believed.

It never really occurred to me until we met Ben how lucky we are to be negative, though. It takes so much pressure off of our sex life to not have that mixed up in the equation. And even though I'd never once considered doing it raw until then, suddenly, it just sort of popped into my mind... like, "Hey, I could let him top me bareback... if I really wanted to." Brian smacked down that immature idea so fast that my head spun, and I got the message. Never ever. Check.

Except never doesn't last forever around here. Our lives were different then, and so were we. What worked for us then, and for a really long time afterwards, doesn't work anymore. We've felt so many things, so much pleasure and pain and this incredible bond that I can't describe... that now we know that there IS a next level, we can't turn our backs on it. We're trying to get there any way we can... skin-to-skin sex is just another checkmark on the list, there with the violence and the drugs and the stupid, petty mind games. We're looking for communion, and right now, this is how it's happening.

I know it's just a psychological thing; that having his cum inside me doesn't mean we're really more bonded. I know it only **feels** more spiritual, more pleasurable, more intimate. If I want to tell anyone that in that final moment of lust, our priorities change and safety is no longer number one... I'm not going to get any sympathy or understanding; they're just going to tell me to grow the fuck up. Maybe they're right to do it, but they don't understand! They don't understand what it feels like when he's sliding into me and I can feel his warm, wet skin instead of latex. When he's whispering to me that I'm so hot and tight and he's never, ever done this with anyone before... the spreading flush of pleasure when I feel him unloading inside me... the fascinated, rapturous look on his face when he touches his own cum leaking out of my ass afterwards. It's so close and new and it's all for us.

I could never explain what that feels like, what it means to me, and besides, they wouldn't care anyway. Condoms equal safe, and if you want to take another road, there just isn't any room for discussion. That's sort of sad, because no matter how guilty, and embarrassed, and ashamed we feel, we just can't stop. No matter what people will think, what they will say, how angry they'll be - it doesn't matter, I know all of that already, and none of that will make us stop, either. It's just too bad and good and wonderful and horrible, and so fucking dangerous, and we KNOW. That's the worst part. We know what we're doing and we keep doing it anyway.

In our defense, we never intended to be careless the first time - it was completely innocent. I mean, not to excuse us for being idiots, but we were really high and it just sort of happened. It wasn't premeditated; it wasn't a conscious decision; it was two stoners doing one more stupid thing on a day filled with stupidity. I can't excuse it, but I understand. Nobody understands needing him... wanting him... like I do.

What I don't really understand is why we didn't stop there.

If I roll over on my side, it turns me just enough to see his face smoothed out in sleep. So fucking beautiful, I want to eat him alive. I want to lean over and run my tongue over his collarbone... down the muscles in his arm, tracing over the defined curve of his bicep. I want to feel his stubbly cheek as he kisses my jaw, smell his hair, feel his fingers clenching my thighs as he spreads my legs... I want to suck on his skin, lick off the sweat and cum that's still damp on his stomach... Fuck, here we go again.

I've gotta get up, because one very demanding part of me already has, and in the morning light, I don't like what it's demanding.

Once I've moved myself out of the danger zone, and I'm laying safely on the couch, I can go back to thinking about last night...the night before... Christ, it's been two and a half days and I've already lost count of how many times we've put ourselves at risk. Every time I think about it, I feel like a yo-yo, going back and forth between my rational knowledge that it's risky, and the tingling in my stomach from the... closeness it's created.

And the fact is, there's something else going on too, too much for me to figure out on my own. As soon as we forgot the condom once, we just never picked one up again, and the amount of assfucking we did multiplied, like, astronomically. We usually don't even have anal sex that often - maybe once or sometimes twice a day, because it's us, but mostly I think we're like everyone else, and there's a lot more hand-jobs and blowjobs and whatnot going on instead. It's all fucking, it's all sex, and it's all way safer than what we've been doing. It's almost like we're going out of our way to prove a point, and I've spent so, so long trying to figure out what that might be.

Always, in the daylight, I come to the same conclusion: It's a mistake. It's a big mistake... but it's so easy to make it, over and over and over again. I hate myself for being careless, I hate myself for being self-destructive ... but mostly, I hate myself for enjoying it so

much. It's not supposed to feel all that different, and it mostly doesn't, physically... but emotionally, it's like sexual crack. I got a taste of the forbidden, and now I can't get enough.

I know we should stop, that for our own safety, we have to stop, but when it comes down to that last second before he fucks me... when he should be pulling back, and I should be saying no... for some reason, that's not what we're doing.

My stomach starts to rumble, and I can't tell if I'm just hungry or if I'm actually making myself sick thinking about it all, but either way, I have to get something to eat. The fridge is almost always pretty bare on Saturday mornings, but we started to keep a couple of things around, because I got tired of always being hungry until after lunch. I make some coffee and boil some eggs, and while breakfast is cooking itself, I work very hard at thinking about absolutely nothing. I eat, and shower, and brush my teeth like a zombie, careful to keep my mind a complete blank so that I can at least get something done.

By the time Brian wakes up, I'm lying back on the couch, stomach full, mind bouncing back and forth in the same argument I've been having with myself since Wednesday. I say good morning to him as he walks over to the kitchen, but we don't talk, not really, not until he's done eating and comes over to stand at my feet.

When he tentatively asks what I remember, I don't know how to tell him what we did. And while it's true that a lot of the night is a complete blank, I remember the part that counts. The part he's asking about. I don't want to be the one to tell him he dove into the risk pool with me, that he let me fuck him raw, too.

We weren't all that messed up by the time Ben and Michael drove us home, and when Brian shoved me up against the door and started tearing off my clothes, I knew what he was doing. When his cock trailed a cool, wet trail across my hip, I knew he didn't have a condom... let's just say that I had more than enough time to stop him. By the time he pushed his way into me, there was no doubt we both knew what we were doing. He came fast, his arms wrapped around my chest, his breath hot in my ear as he shuddered against me. It's always faster these days, and I didn't even get off before he did.

Once he caught his breath, he pulled out and just held me for a minute, shaking and whispering, "I'm sorry, Justin, I'm really sorry."

I felt terrible. I mean, he was totally destroyed, so I did the only thing I could think of. I led him over to the bed and laid him down, and just lay on top of him until he started grinding his hips against my still-hard dick. He wanted me. I know he did. He wanted me to fuck him and come in him and share with him whatever was in me. He cried out when I pushed into him, and there was fear mixed in with the pain... but he didn't say no and he didn't tell me to stop. And I hate myself for even thinking this...but Christ... it was so, so good.

If he wants me to forget that, if he wants to forget that... well, I won't, and I won't let him, either. I'll tell him the truth, just like he cared enough to tell me before.

"I don't remember a lot, but I remember fucking you raw, so I guess that's enough."

His face darkens and I know I've burst his bubble when he stomps off instead of joining me on the couch. He makes some shitty comment over his shoulder and takes off for the shower, and that gives me a chance to get dressed.

After his shower, he blows through the loft like a whirlwind - on the phone and out the door before I even notice he's gone. I'm sitting in the corner, sort of doodling, enjoying a mental white noise that's so seductive, I could stay here forever. It's not until I hear the door slam that I realize he's probably really upset... and that if I thought about it, I probably am too. I guess I've been crying without even realizing it, and if Brian saw that, then he's probably even more upset than he was before. I'd better go down and get him.

I take a few minutes to collect myself, taking big, deep breaths until I almost feel like myself again. I pick up my wallet and keys, just in case Brian is ready to go, and concentrate on acting normal for him. My normal act lasts for exactly ten seconds, because on my way down the stairs, I realize that I'm not as good at "thinking about nothing" as I thought I was - and no matter how much I try to deny it, ignore it, or cover it over, we're still in trouble. We still have the same problem we had this morning, yesterday, and the day before - somehow, we've become so self-destructive that we're hardly even interested in saving our own lives. No wonder I was crying. This is a mess.

And somehow, acknowledging just how fucked up everything has become lifts a weight off my shoulders.

When I get outside, Brian's sitting on the curb, smoking a cigarette. I guess someone dropped off the Jeep, because it's parked almost right in front of him. He looks up as I come out of the building, his eyebrows raised.

"Well, don't we look happy," he grumbles, taking a deep drag and then deliberately looking away.

"I'm going to try to be, and I mean that," I say, looking for some piece of sidewalk where I can plant my ass without worrying about ashes or half-extinguished butts. He turns back towards me with a mocking expression, but that's not exactly unusual, and it doesn't stop me from speaking my mind.

"This can't go on forever, Brian. I'm sick of feeling like shit, and I'm sick of making you feel like shit, so I'm going to try not to."

"You think it's that easy?" he marvels, taking another drag. "Out of the blue, right now, you're just going to stop?"

"Maybe," I venture. "It's worth a shot, isn't it? I mean, isn't that what the therapy is about? To at least *try* to work past all the bullshit and be happy again?"

"It's not that easy, Justin," he snorts derisively. "It never is." He flicks the butt into the gutter, and stands up, brushing off his jeans. "Ready to go?"

"I think so," I reply, a little nervously. He takes my hand to pull me off the sidewalk, and when he unlocks my door, he almost smiles.

That relaxation, those moments of... maybe not happiness, but calm, are incredibly short-lived. Brian gets more and more tense as we follow the directions he digs out of his pocket, and by the time we pull up in front of the address he wrote down, we're both a little tense. Okay, we're really tense.

"Are you sure this is it?" I ask Brian cautiously as we pull up to a large red-brick Victorian building with a whitewashed wraparound porch. "It looks like somebody's house."

"I can read my own goddamned fucking directions," he snaps irritably. "Come on, let's get this bullshit over with."

"What gives?" I demand, partly in anger, and partly in frustration. "Brian, I'm not the one who made you come here. You're the one who made ME, and you're the one who agreed to come with me, so what's with the attitude?"

He gets out of the car, slamming the door carelessly and circling behind me before I've even got my seatbelt undone. I rush to fall in behind him, and almost trip on an uneven flagstone in the sidewalk. By the time I get caught up, he's already on the porch, ringing the bell at the front door.

"You could have waited," I pant, trotting up the stairs to stand beside him.

He shrugs noncommittally. "It's twenty feet. I thought you could find your own way."

"No you didn't. If you thought I could handle this by myself, you wouldn't even be here, would you?"

"Fuck no, but you can't, so here I am." He looks at me sternly. "I could still go, so drop it."

The buzzer is ringing inside the whole time we're talking, and I can hear someone thumping around to get to the door. The house seems very nice - the walls are all old red bricks, and the dark wooden door has a shiny bevelled glass pane that glints in the sunlight. A small brass plaque beside the bell reads, "Alan Sutherland," and there's a small sign beside it, like a three-part yin-yang.

We hear more thumping, but nobody comes to the door, so I take a minute to inspect the plaque. "What does that symbol mean?" I whisper to him, and his eyes flick sideways to the symbol.

"Use your fucking head, Justin, what do you think it means?"

"I don't know what it means, that's why I asked you!" I retort. "I just wanted to know what the fucking picture meant, I wasn't asking for the combination to Fort Knox!"

Just then, the door swings widely open to reveal a tall, slim man dressed casually in grey, glossy-finished jeans and a white v-neck shirt. "It's the BDSM symbol," he offers helpfully. "The three parts stand for Safe, Sane, and Consensual."

"Oh!" I exclaim, taking a step back from both the door and the good-looking stranger. "You surprised me!"

He smiles gently. "I do that."

We all hover in silence for a moment, and I can see Brian checking him out from the corner of my eye. The man standing in the doorway is hot - tall, sandy blonde, with short hair and bottle-green eyes, but way older than Brian goes for. This guy is probably 40, which to Brian, is about five minutes younger than dead. He's not staring us down, really, but he seems perfectly content to wait silently at the door until the sun goes down. This much quiet makes me nervous.

"Hi, I'm Justin," I blurt, holding out my hand. He takes it firmly, and his grip is solid and warm. I incline my head to point to my boyfriend the statue. "And this is Brian."

"Alan Sutherland," he purrs, and squeezes my hand. I can already tell that Brian doesn't like him. "You can both call me Alan."

"Fabulous," Brian comments sarcastically, but he does shake Alan's hand when it's offered. Alan seems content to carry the discussion for now, leading us through first the front door, and then a double set of French doors just inside the entryway.

"I'm glad that we could find time to meet, since our schedules are all quite hectic, but I don't normally schedule for Saturdays, so we can take as long as we need. It's important for you to know that I'm not a doctor, or even a licensed therapist in this state," he begins. "I'm a counsellor. I have relevant experience in this area, but I can't diagnose, I can't write prescriptions, and I can't make referrals, although several psychiatrists in the area take my recommendations very seriously."

"Then what the fuck are we doing here?" Brian snips irritably.

"My guess is that you're here because you need to make use of my 'relevant experience,'" Alan comments, stopping his progress and making quote marks with his fingers as he

speaks. "BDSM Theory is a growing subset of Sexual Psychology. There are power issues and interactions unique to the BDSM community, along with a strong ritual history and an element of physical involvement that can easily be mistaken for abuse. The medical profession hasn't quite caught up with society, so every now and then you'll find someone like me, listening and giving advice. Picking up the slack, so to speak."

"So do you...?" I trail off, leaving my question unanswered, but obvious.

"Would it matter if I did?" he asks, turning to me and crossing his arms in front of him. "Would it change your perceptions to know if I'm doing it now, or if I've done it in the past? If I'm the top, or the bottom?"

I think about that for a minute, and nod, because it **WOULD** change how I thought of him.

"And that's why I won't tell you right now," he replies. "You're not quite ready to separate your perception of a person from his or her sexual practices, which is, I think, why you're here. To learn to separate what you do in bed from who you are."

Alan walks off, but I stand there, thinking about what he said. Wondering if he can really help us sort out all the things that are going wrong. Brian sighs, giving my shoulder a little shove and whispering, "Follow him. I want to get out of here." We follow him through a double doorway, and into a pretty room with wooden floors and sage-green walls.

"This is the office," Alan calls, bustling around the large, airy room, pulling books and files from several different shelves, and tossing them gently onto a partner's desk in the middle of the room. "Come on in, have a seat."

I step towards the desk slowly, not entirely sure of where to sit, and decide to wait for Brian to choose a spot. He strides past me, choosing the chair closest to the door, so I scoot in beside him.

Any idiot could tell that Brian's not comfortable, but it's not because of the office - the room isn't intimidating at all. The desk is bare, and the walls are filled with books, and not psychiatry books, either. I notice a battered, bright-green text sticking off of one of the shelves.

"A Modest Proposal: Essays and Critical Dissections of The Work of Jonathan Swift," I read aloud. "By Alan Sutherland." He smiles at me, and my eyes widen. "You're an author?"

"Not so much," he chuckles, still rummaging for papers in the cabinets beside the desk. "Just that one book, and I published it myself. I was intrigued by the number of other authors who felt the need to dissect an essay that, in its most basic elements, was deceptively simple."

"Uh huh," I reply, since AP English was a couple of years ago and I barely remember the point of the original essay... something about eating poor peoples' babies... but not seriously. Satire. Right.

"Plenty of people make things harder than they need to be. It's an epidemic in our society, to confound the simple," Alan comments, finally collecting all the material he was looking for.

"Some things are more complicated than they look..." I start, but I trail off when Brian huffs a breath. I know that noise. It means, "Shut the fuck up, Justin," so I do.

Alan smiles kindly, taking out a small, rectangular pair of reading glasses. Before, he just looked hot. Now, he looks smart and hot, and I know Brian doesn't go for older guys, but that's his policy, not mine. He opens up a black folder and scans quickly down the page.

"So, Brian, you're the Dom, right? And Justin's the sub?" Brian nods.

He may not be surprised, but I am. "People are always saying that to me! How can you tell?" I ask, and Alan laughs.

"It's actually easier than you think to figure out who's in charge, most of the time. It's not because he's older, or anything like that. I had you pegged even before you introduced yourselves, because you non-verbally ask his permission before you do anything." He flips a page in the folder, and talks while he reads. "I'm just going to start with what Dale told me, and you guys can correct me if anything isn't right, okay? I want to make sure that at least the basic facts are correct."

"Sounds okay," I reply, but Brian just grunts. He's so eloquent sometimes.

"Brian Kinney, thirty-two, partnered with Justin Taylor, twenty." Brian winces when Alan reads his age, but smirks when he gets to mine.

"Closer to twenty-one," I comment, and Alan laughs.

"I remember when being that extra year older meant so much. You have no idea how much I'd pay to give back a year or two," he chuckles. "Hey, look at those birth dates! You almost have a May-December romance! Cute."

Brian definitely does NOT think that's cute. "Can we get on with this?" he snipes angrily, tapping a finger against the side seam on his jeans.

"Sure. Sorry," Alan concedes, scanning the page again. "Referred to me on an emergency basis by Dale Wexler, for counselling related to a vicious attack about two years ago. Partners feel they cannot pursue therapy through regular channels... due to extensive

marking on submissive partner resulting from consensual BDSM play." He looks up at us. "Extensive marking? What are we talking about here?"

This is a question that obviously demands an answer, but I don't know what to say, or how to say it. I sit nervously, a cold sweat breaking out and running down my back, and I can feel Brian tensing up even more. He's so tight that if he seizes up any more, he'll break.

Alan, obviously wanting some kind of explanation and getting none, prods more deeply. "If you can't tell me how it happens right now, that's okay. I understand that there are huge trust issues involved in this, and I know we'll get there one day... but if I'm going to be able to help you, then I really need to at least see what Dale is talking about. Could you please show me, Justin?"

Brian looks away, his hand covering his mouth, and I sit as still as I can. Maybe if I don't move, I'll disappear. We wait, five seconds, a minute, two. Finally, Brian bows his head.

"Show him, Justin."

I close my eyes and lift the bottom edge of my shirt, until I think they can see the fading purple bruises and love bites Brian left there earlier this week.

"Thank you, Justin, that's enough," Alan says, very businesslike and efficient while he scribbles furiously in his folder. "Would you say that those bruises are representative of the usual results of your activities?"

"Yeah, I guess," I reply shakily.

"Great. So Dale was on the right track?"

Brian nods shortly, but I shake my head. "Sort of... but that's not exactly it... I mean, I'm not the only one who gets marked. Show him, Brian."

"Justin..." he hisses quietly, gesturing towards Alan with nothing but the twitch of one finger, but my urge to obey bangs smack into the brick wall of my own stubbornness, and I'm not ready to let it go.

"You do this every time!" I accuse him, thumping my hand against the arm of the chair in frustration. "You always act like I'm the only one who gets hurt. What about what I do to you, what I've done to you? Noooo, you're the Great Brian Kinney, so nothing fucking touches you. We get rough, and it's my problem. I get bashed, and it's my problem. Well, you're THERE, Brian, you're always there, so don't fucking tell me it's not your problem too!"

"Enough." It's an order, an order made in a tone of voice that I recognize, which has strengthened itself over these last three years. The voice that says "Do as you're told or face the consequences."

I know that voice, and apparently, so does Alan. He lays his hands on the desk, catching our attention, and interjects as calmly as he can.

"Brian, I need you to not do that in here, okay?" he starts gently. "I know that being the dominant partner is part of who you are, and you can't just check it at the door, but this has got to be a place where the truth can be spoken without fear of retribution. If I'm going to be of any help to either of you, you both need to feel free to air your thoughts. That means that I really need to hear what's on Justin's mind... and frankly, I think you do, too."

Brian nods sullenly, and Alan continues. "Okay, let's take a deep breath and calm down a little before we go on." I make a show of breathing, but Brian just pouts. Alan gives us a minute, and starts again.

"Justin, did you want to finish your thought from before?"

I shake my head. "After all of that, I can't really remember what I was going to say."

He chuckles, and even Brian snickers. "Happens all the time. Don't worry, it'll come back to you. In the meantime, I'm going to ask a couple of questions. Nothing heavy... I just want to try and better define the issues."

I nod, but even before the questions start, I know that Brian is going to be on the offensive. For a man who says his motto is no excuses, no apologies, and no regrets, he sure cares an awful lot about how other people see him sometimes... and he makes sure that other people see what he wants them to see.

Alan's voice drops onto our heads from out of the blue.

"Can you describe your relationship before the bashing?"

Brian flinches a little bit, and I have to admit that I'm sort of stunned that Alan can talk about it... the bashing... so easily, like he's asking us to describe the last time we went to the movies! Brian and I, we don't talk about it, ever. Actually, nobody in the family does. After that day when I saw Chris Hobbes at the hospice, we've really never even said the word. People wanted to forget that it happened, we wanted to forget that it happened, so for our own sanity, we all pretended to forget.

Speaking about it openly... it's just weird. It's like there's an elephant sitting in the corner that we've been ignoring for a long time, and to have someone point and say, "Hey, an elephant!" is pretty disturbing.

I go to open my mouth, but nothing comes out. I don't think Brian has any intention of saying anything at all. Once again, the silence blooms and grows.

Alan smiles gently and fingers a couple of thick folders sitting in front of him.

"Okay, I can see that communication isn't one of our strengths, but we can learn to work around that. Do you want to take a few minutes to read your files instead?" He pushes the folders across the desk, where we look at them like dirty underwear. I'm sure my double-take isn't half as interesting as Brian's, though, because his file is easily twice as thick.

"Where the hell did you get those?" he growls, challenging Alan to remain silent. "And how the fuck did you get this much information on us?"

Alan smiles serenely. "What, these? Easy. I went through the transcripts of other sessions I've conducted. Every time your names matched, or enough identifying characteristics paired up that I thought it might be you, I printed out the relevant selection. Basically, that file contains your... reputation, for lack of a better word. Ever wondered how everyone else really sees you? It's all in there."

"Why the fuck would I care about the opinions of a bunch of fucked-up fags?" Brian rejoins harshly, now looking at the files like they're a basketful of snakes. "They're self-centred, jealous, vain, intellectually stunted markdowns who couldn't measure up. Their judgment means nothing to me."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that, exactly..." Alan replies, flipping open Brian's file and skimming through the pages. "You'd be surprised how well you two are known, how often you're mentioned, and by whom. Of course, Dale was kind enough to contribute some information as well..." He pulls out a sheaf of green pages, neatly stapled in the corner. He hands the package to Brian with a serene smile. "I'd start with this if I were you. Dale's opinion means more to me than that of... how did you put it? Intellectually stunted markdowns."

Brian rolls his eyes and takes the file, and I stealthily grab my own. I start to read, and I'm surprised at how much I've been noticed, at how all these random guys have talked about me when they're already busy trying to deal with their own problems. Of course, sometimes it's not Brian and I that they're talking about - hell, I think one of the snippets is actually about Blake and Ted - but overall, Alan's clients really have been watching us.

When I look at the dates on the pages while I flip through, I notice a strange progression - I start out my career in infamy as "The Blond Twinkie With Brian Kinney." All this stuff is innocuous, dancing and drinking and making out on the dance floor before I was old enough to know better. It doesn't take me long to get through those pages.

Five or ten sections later, I'm "That Blonde Kid, The King of Babylon." It's the same shit as before, but a little cattier and mean. Actually, I kind of wish I hadn't seen those ones - it hurts a little to find out how many people thought the contest was rigged.

Maybe twenty pages later...after the bashing, I guess... I become, "Justin Taylor, That Kid Who Got Bashed." I can't imagine what Brian's file looks like, but I can't get worked up over mind, because it's pretty innocuous... people like me, hate me, or want to be me... Want to be with me, want me the fuck away from him, want him the fuck away from me. Nothing I haven't heard in person. I skim the file for a few minutes, and nothing in it bothers me, really... not until the last ten pages or so.

In these pages, I don't have a name. These are stories from men who have seen us in the back rooms of clubs that I'm afraid to go to by myself. They watched us... actually looked for us... when we were coked up and crazy, in love with the pain and the anger... with the power and the violent lust of it all... and their impressions of the things they happened upon or overheard are disturbing.

"That fucking bastard!" Brian suddenly yells, throwing the green pages back on the desk. "I am not fucking unstable. I'd never do... that..." he shudders, and I rush to pick up the sheaf, beating Alan to the pages by a finger's width. I flip to the last page, and my eyes scan the paragraph nervously.

'Brian Kinney strikes me as an unstable individual, who has repeatedly refused to commit to learning the safety procedures that ensure the safety of his partner during Sadomasochistic activities. There have been eyewitness reports of bruises consistent with breath control games, and ritualistic cuts that are likely associated with edgeplay. To my knowledge, there has also been at least one documented attempt to coerce his sub into relinquishing his safeword for the purposes of public humiliation. Reports indicate only a casual link to the Community on the part of both Dominant and submissive partners, and so my ability to monitor the mental and physical health and safety of Kinney and his sub on a first-hand basis is severely restricted. From a third-party perspective, it seems that an unplanned escalation of violence has taken place in this relationship, with tragic results becoming more likely each day. Research indicates that in this situation, many adverse effects are possible: police intervention into the relationship based on the demands of family and/or friends; a dissolution of the Dominant/submissive relationship that leaves both partners weak and emotionally damaged; wounds to the Dominant partner as a result of the sub taking unexpected defensive action for self-protection; accidental and purposeful injuries to the sub, including those of a critical or fatal nature. Murder-suicides have been recorded in extreme situations.'

While I read, Brian jumps up and moves to stand by the window. He rakes his hands through his hair, just once, as a concession to nervousness. Although he's visibly disturbed, he repeats, "I'd never do that," with far more conviction.

"Brian, I know that!" I soothe, jumping to stand by his side. He shrugs my hand off his shoulder, and I turn to Alan, earnestly. "You can't believe that bullshit! It's all lies!"

"Is it?" he replies calmly, pulling an ashtray out of a desk drawer and setting it on the desktop, near where Brian was sitting. "Here, it's one of the perks of not being a licensed

anything. I can treat this office like a home and let anyone smoke here if they want to." He glances at Brian, and starts reordering the papers. "I can tell that you want to."

I rest my hand on Brian's arm again, trying to draw him back to the chairs. He resists, so I leave him over by the window.

"Look, I don't want you to get upset, but you need to realize that if you two choose not to talk to me, and tell me the truth, then this is what I have to go on. I do realize that these are ALL third-hand reports. Dale may be a professional, but he barely knows you, Brian, and Justin, he doesn't know you at all. I wanted you to know what I know, verify the facts, and refute the inaccuracies."

"It's all inaccurate!" Brian grumbles, glancing towards the ashtray before he takes a cigarette out of the pack in his pocket.

"Is it?" Alan repeats again, getting up so he can tuck the neatened folders into a hanging file rack. He faces off with Brian across the room, crossing his arms over his chest. "So, you've never choked him during a scene, never cut him, never coerced him? Dale's making everything up?"

Brian doesn't respond, just takes a drag from his cigarette and stares out the window. Alan returns to the desk and sits before Brian does, allowing him that small bit of domineering behaviour. He picks up a pen and taps a yellow legal pad. "If I'm wrong, then you need to tell me what's right, guys, please. I can't help if I don't know what's going on, so Brian, I need you to tell me what has happened between the two of you. Tell me everything, and start at the beginning."

I glance nervously between Brian and Alan, wondering how much Alan really expects to hear. It's not like Brian's a big talker.

"I hope you're writing this down," Brian snorts, flicking the cigarette carelessly. He comes back to sit, resting one ankle on his knee and staring Alan down.

"Brian..." I whisper, placing my hand on his knee. "You don't have to do this. It's just gossip. It doesn't matter."

"Oh no, it DOES matter," Brian replies, his eyes never leaving Alan. "Alan wanted the whole story, and he'll get it."

"Oh, God..." I whisper, putting my head in my hands. This is such a bad idea.

Chapter 15

It's always a dangerous time when you ask someone to sum up a relationship - especially in a therapeutic setting. Normally, I'd avoid it like the plague, for the simple reason that oversimplifying your life doesn't help you dissect issues; it helps you paint them over.

You can't condense your whole life into a ten-minute retelling without omitting some things - and often, those things have untold importance.

But in this, as in everything, there must be flexibility. What holds true for the majority of us, who can accept that our actions sometimes have unexpected results, doesn't apply to people who live in perpetual denial. For these people, simply putting certain aspects of their lives into words often helps to unearth what's going on.

And then, of course, simply identifying that someone is concealing the truth from himself isn't the ultimate goal, it's merely the first step; but with that step comes the will to learn, to open up, to try. To trust. For their own reasons, neither of them trusts me right now, and that's fine. I don't expect someone to walk in this door and embrace my interference in his life with open arms. Not one of these people.

My clients are a minority of a minority, a unique little portion of our community whose problems are exacerbated by their innate sadomasochism, and not soothed, as is generally the case. When something goes wrong for you in a community so far from the average person's experience, there IS no one to help you, and no one who can give advice. Without anyone to turn to, there's no way not to feel abandoned and isolated.

Not everyone can cope. Those who do often develop a hard shell; tough on the outside, and broken on the inside. They mistrust, they hide, and if they happen to find a kindred spirit, they cling together in self-defence. Not always because they want to, but because they need to. Sometimes, that's the only way to make it through.

These men sitting in front of me... they think they're alone, but they're not. They're not the first to be fearful, or tentative, or lonely in their pain. They're two people having a problem, and that's not the end of the world. I hope I can help them understand that. I'm sure that there is nothing broken here that cannot be rebuilt, despite several peoples' assurances to the contrary. I talked to Robert, the security guy at The Meathook, and I know he's pretty derisive about these two. I read Dale's report, and another he sent me, that I didn't include in their files. He's not optimistic about their chances of recovery, either. I don't think anyone really is, but I'm not ready to give up before we even start the fight. Session one is far too early for that kind of fatalism.

That said, we still need to get to the truth, or a reasonable facsimile, and I'm prepared to wade through a little muck to get to it. I don't have a choice.

"Notes?" Brian asks again, and his irritated, bristling comment does exactly what he intended it to do - forces me to focus all my attention onto him, by way of a reply.

"Yes, Brian, I am taking notes," I soothe, holding up my pen in a gesture of good faith. "Don't worry about that." Of course, everything is being tape-recorded as well, but that is for the purposes of transcription and nothing more. I prefer to take notes on things that aren't discernible on the tape - body language, the positioning of the clients, nervous gestures, eye contact. The words don't always matter so much.

Justin has been cradling his head in his hands, and only now has risen to face Brian.
"Brian, please. Don't do this. Not this way."

Brian smiles, a feral, toothy grin, and nods his head towards me. "Alan wants the story, Alan gets the story," he replies firmly, causing Justin to close his eyes and take a breath. Brian lights another cigarette and begins.

"I took him when he was seventeen years old," he starts. "Picked him up off the street. I knew he was young - a virgin - but I couldn't tell how young until I got him back to the loft. I couldn't fucking believe I'd brought him home; he looked like he was twelve or something. I almost kicked his ass out."

"You did not!" Justin contradicts fiercely. "You took off your clothes, like, two seconds after we got in the door! Don't make it sound worse than it was!"

Brian snickers. "I knew what you wanted before you did, Sunshine. Such a fucking easy lay. You were a kid in heat and I took advantage of it."

"Well, you should know about being an easy lay," Justin simmers. "You've had more men than the US Army."

"Justin," I interject, "You'll have your turn, so please don't interrupt. Let him tell it his way, the way he remembers it."

He sighs, and Brian continues, seeming... not chastened, but quieted by the exchange, and not as vengeful as before.

"I don't...remember a lot," he concedes, sliding his eyes towards Justin and back, "But contrary to popular belief, I remember some things. I remember seeing him under the light, his hair glowing. I remember talking to him a little bit. He seemed... sort of charming. Cherry boys are usually either too scared to move, or so full of attitude that you don't want to get your dick within ten feet of them. He wasn't like that. He wasn't acting like anything, he was just himself. Seemed low-maintenance, so I took him home."

I note the way he crosses one leg over the other, towards Justin, and how Justin subconsciously shifts towards him in response.

"And everything went according to plan?"

Brian laughs, and takes another drag from his cigarette. "Nothing did. A lot of crazy shit happened that night. My son was born, my best friend threw a hissy fit when he saw I was still with Justin, and I got so fucked up that I trashed my loft. I'm surprised I found the time to fuck him."

Justin flushes and grins, trying to hide his reaction to Brian's comment without success.

"Justin seems to approve. May I assume that at least that aspect of the night went well?"

Brian nods, but seems surprisingly introspective. "Higher maintenance than I'd counted on, actually. I don't take a lot of virgins home...I mean, fuck, it's work. I kept telling him to relax, relax, and practically wore down the bones in my jaw rimming him, but getting him opened up still took a while. He wasn't stretching very fast. I thought he was ready, but he wasn't and he pulled away when I started fucking him. Then he looked at me, fucking crying, and asked if it always hurt. I told him it did, a little bit... but it doesn't have to and I must have been careless if it upset him that much."

Brian becomes withdrawn, his face clouding over even as Justin vibrates with his need to explain. Weighing my options, I decide to call for his opinion.

"Justin, on one hand, I don't want us to get sidetracked with this - we can always devote some time to it later. On the other hand, he's making some very negative assumptions about your physical reaction to losing your virginity, so if you can speak to that - the physical sensation - I think we can clear the air and move on more comfortably."

Justin takes a deep breath, and turns to Brian. "Yeah, it hurt. You know it does sometimes, if you can't relax, and I didn't know what to do, so that was part of it, too, but that's not the point. There was so much going on that night, and I was excited and scared and a million other good things. Not traumatized, not injured, just overwhelmed and a bit surprised when it stung. Okay?"

"Yeah," Brian exhales, and I glance down at my paper.

"Let's get back on track, then. You had sex, and this is normally when you'd ask a trick to leave?"

Brian sighs. "Ninety-nine percent of the time, but I couldn't do that to him. He was just a kid. I knew I couldn't kick him out in the middle of the night when he didn't have anywhere else to go. I was really high, but..." Brian drops his head, flicks his cigarette, puts his tongue in his cheek, all in an effort to stall for time.

"But, you let him stay..." I prompt, and he nods.

"I was high, he was a good fuck, after a while...and...we had fun."

"Fun?"

Justin breaks out in another wide smile, which he quickly hides behind his hand. I'm not sure if Brian notices or not, having taken up an intense study of the desktop.

"My night was already for shit. I was bored at the club, Mikey was tired and whiny, and I'd just gotten the worst blowjob ever. Justin... the sex was fine, better than fine, and I

didn't mind talking to him afterwards. It felt like he listened. He didn't know shit, but he was..." Brian looks up at me, with a twinkle in his eye. "He was a really fast learner. Maybe too fast."

Huh. I bet. I scratch a couple of notes, and doodle in the margins just long enough that the next question will catch them off guard. "You liked being the teacher."

"What are you saying?" Justin asks curiously. I don't answer, just wait for a response, and his eyes widen. "You don't mean..."

Brian's fingers tighten around the arm of the chair, but his demeanour is calm. "He's asking me if I got off on the fact that you looked twelve. It's a fair question. You still do sometimes."

"That's not fair, Brian," Justin replies with consternation. "It's like Bellwether calling you a pedophile all over again, and you're not. I'm tired of people assuming that I'm not a consenting adult because of the way I look!"

"But, I like it that way, Justin," he murmurs quietly. "And that's wrong."

"Jesus, Brian, if you had a choice, YOU would look my age, not me!" Brian chuckles, and Justin takes his hand. "You told me before that I'm the youngest guy you've picked up in years, and I believe you. If you get off on that, I don't care. I mean, enjoy it while it lasts, right?" Brian smiles wanly, and Justin squeezes his hand.

"This isn't about what anyone else thinks. They don't know shit about us, they have no right to judge." He turns to me, his anger rising. "And neither do you."

"Who says that I was?" I challenge. "I've dealt with real pedophiles, and I know the difference, but I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't ask. Let's move on. You had a great night. Then what?"

Brian picks up his narrative. "I never planned on seeing him again. I don't fuck anybody twice, and I told him that. Mikey and I dropped him off at school the next day, and I thought it was over." He looks entirely satisfied, as if he's delivered their entire romantic history in one prize-winning oration. And it would be more than sufficient, if they'd known each other for three days and not three years.

"Well, that's a start," I laugh, scribbling a few notes on Justin's reactions to the story. "But, obviously you did have him more than twice, or we wouldn't be here. Want to fill me in on the rest?"

They both sit quietly, not even out of nervousness anymore - more that they're unwilling to share anything further without being provoked. I wait expectantly, glancing from Brian to Justin. The second time I catch Justin's eye, he looks to Brian and begins to speak.

"Well, Brian didn't want anything to do with me after that night. As far as he was concerned, I was yesterday's fuck, and he was done... but, I wouldn't let him go," Justin says. "To me, he wasn't just a god, he was my God, and I wanted him so bad. I chased him down every chance I got until he would see me again, and then, until he was used to me being around."

Brian nods, and I find their symbiosis interesting - Brian speaks in the language of the body, with nods and gestures and slight variations in the way he breathes, and Justin translates that into something the rest of us can understand. It's a fascinating study, but one I'll have to pursue on another occasion. Right now, I have to risk shutting down their communication by soliciting Brian's opinion directly.

"Brian?" I murmur gently. "Does Justin speak for you?"

Justin looks confused, as if he doesn't realize that his own speech isn't Brian's, but when Brian nods, Justin sits back again.

"Okay, Brian, where were we? You got accustomed to his face, so they say."

He blinks, and puts his fingers to his mouth in apparent concentration. "Yeah. For a kid I'd never met before, suddenly he was everywhere. He made friends with my friends. He followed me to the clubs, to the diner. Fuck, he even started babysitting my kid! I couldn't get rid of him."

"Were you still taking him home with you?"

At this, Brian frowns. "Sometimes."

"Even though you told him you don't do repeats."

"It didn't seem to matter what I wanted!" he comments heatedly, stubbing out his cigarette. "He was always there, and everyone was always telling me what a shit I was for ignoring him. Telling me I had to go to his art show, or that I had to find him when he ran away. Suddenly, he was my problem, so I decided that if he was going to be my problem, it was going to be on my terms."

"Which were?"

"He could stick around, but only when it was convenient. I would teach him everything I know... make him the best homosexual he could be."

"Interesting. I didn't know you could take lessons," I joke, and Justin laughs. "So, how'd that work out for you?"

Brian pauses, lights another cigarette. "Fine, at first. He got into the school he wanted, made amends with his mom, learned how to get his needs met by boys his own age. Everything was going according to plan."

Justin smiles again, but Brian grunts bitterly. "But then, shit started happening. When he found out I was leaving for New York, he fucking cried." He pauses to light another cigarette, inhaling hard and fast. "I didn't want that." Justin opens his mouth to say something, but I wave him down firmly with my hand.

"Didn't want what, Brian? Didn't want him to care about you that much? Didn't want him to hurt?"

"All of it!" he exhales, the smoke billowing out in a rush. "We were done! He was eighteen years old, he'd learned everything I could teach him, and it was time for both of us to move on. New York would have been a fresh start for me. New loft, new tricks, the perfect new job... but it all fell through." He quiets considerably, seeming hesitant to speak the next sentence.

"Go on."

"Before I had time to find another job, he asked me... he...asked me..."

Brian's voice sputters to a halt, and we sit in an uneasy silence that pulses and grows until it takes on a life of its own. If I'm waiting for either of them to speak, I'll probably be waiting a while.

"What happened next, Brian?"

His eyes close, and his voice becomes faded and dull. "He asked me to his prom. He got hit in the head with a baseball bat because I danced with him, and he almost died. If I'd been in New York, the way I was supposed to be, it would never have happened."

"DAMMIT, BRIAN, IT'S NOT YOUR FAULT!" Justin screeches, bringing his hands to his head. "It's not your fault, it's not my fault, it's fucking Hobbs' fault and nobody else's, so just let it the fuck go already." Brian's head drops a little more, as if he's weathering a storm that affects only him.

I already knew about the bashing. Dale told me it was the main reason that they were having trouble in their relationship, and as a result, I made sure to find out everything that was publicly available about it...and some things that weren't. And while the whole situation around the bashing obviously needs some exploration, by my count, Dale was wrong. That's not even their biggest issue right now, it's just one item on the laundry list, and watching them rehash an obviously weathered argument isn't going to help me unearth their other problems and concerns. Sometimes it's best to open up an infected

wound and clean it out...but sometimes it's best to pass over a scab in favour of the wounds that are still oozing.

"Okay, so that's the spot in your history where the bashing took place," I comment diplomatically. "What happened next? Justin, do you want to take a turn?"

"You have no idea," he breathes, wiping some invisible sweat from his forehead. I smile encouragingly, and breathes deeply again before swallowing shakily.

"Okay. Um...I spent six weeks in the hospital, and I was having a lot of trouble when I got out. My hand didn't work, and I was scared a lot of the time, or angry, or both. Brian let me move in with him until I recovered... out of guilt, yeah, I guess that was part of it, but he said he wanted me there and I believed him. We worked through some stuff, and we figured out a relationship that works for us... sort of."

"We should all have stories that sum up so neatly," I remark objectively. "So, when did the kink aspect enter the relationship?"

"I think it was always there, a bit," Justin says, and Brian presses his lips together, but he concurs when I search out his gaze. "I mean, we always joked about it...he'd threaten to spank me, and I'd laugh, so he'd do it and I'd get horny and we'd fuck. You know, stupid stuff like that."

"That's fairly removed from those third party reports, and from Dale's observations...would you like to comment on that?"

"Dale is a sick fucking freak," Brian grumbles. Justin closes his eyes in thought, and opens them slowly, like a slow-motion blink.

"I think Dale is worried because he's a controlling guy, and it's driving him nuts that he's never seen us in action for himself. He wants us to join the community so he can tell us what we're doing wrong, and we won't." He furrows his brows defiantly, but relaxes it with effort and continues.

"I don't know what you want to hear about the...other stuff," he fumbles. "It started slow, and we eventually did more, but it seemed like a natural progression. The more we did, the more we wanted to do, that's all."

I can accept part of that explanation about Dale's "misplaced" concerns, because in my experience, even experienced Doms sometimes get frantic at the thought that there are things they just don't know. That said, it feels like a deflection, a move to direct my evaluation towards Dale's ability to judge, giving Justin time to consider how to best whitewash their activities. It occurs to me that, like most natural subs, Justin is a born manipulator, a handler of people and of information, and I'll have to stay on him.

"Let's get into that some more. Tell me about this 'natural progression' of yours."

"Um..." Again he cuts his eyes towards Brian, gauging how much he's allowed to say, trying to derive a reply that will satisfy my curiosity without upsetting Brian. I could save him the trouble - I want the truth, Brian's comfort be damned at this point - but this process says so much about them that I let it continue, just to watch.

Brian accepts Justin's searching gaze, and their communication is largely silent, kept beyond my immediate understanding. Justin takes Brian's hand, and I sit while they negotiate how much truth is too much.

"What do I tell him, Brian?" Justin whispers lowly, tracing his fingers along Brian's left wrist, eyes searching Brian's face.

"Justin..." he trails off, brushes a lock of hair from Justin's forehead. "Just... say what you need to say. What we can't tell anyone else."

Justin nods.

Brian looks up at me, feigning calm even though I can see the alarm in the tightness of his hands. "I know we agreed to the tape, but I want it turned off now. This does not leave this room, understand?" he threatens softly.

"Of course," I reply, pulling the tape recorder out from its shelf under the desk, and visibly removing the tape. Even though I'd rather not, I can do the rest of the session longhand. It won't kill me. "Go ahead. Whenever either of you is ready."

"I don't really know how to start," Justin sighs, taking up the challenge. "I know that he started to get a lot more forceful with me a couple of weeks after I'd moved in for good, but it was still... normal, I guess, if that makes any sense. We were playing rough, and... I don't know... I liked it. A lot. He didn't want to admit it, but he did too."

"Twat," Brian mumbles, but not unkindly. My hand nearly shakes with the speed I need to use to get it all written down.

"Go on."

"Things really started to... change... after they found a dead kid in a dumpster near where I work. Brian didn't really care much, but it bugged me for days. Finding a dead kid that looked like me made me feel like I'd never be safe again. Brian decided that I needed to know that safety is just an illusion, that I hadn't ever been safe, especially when I was with him. He got on top of me, and when I thought he was going to fuck me, he started choking me instead. I can't remember much of what we said or anything, it's just pictures. Feelings. I can feel his weight on my hips, the way he rocked against me like what we were doing was so natural to him." Justin looks up at me, his cheeks flushing as he places his fingers against his neck.

"I can still feel his hands on me, and how his thumbs closed over my throat so that I couldn't swallow. His fingertips pressed against my spine whenever he pressed me into the bed. I think I made some kind of stupid joke, but I was sort of surprised. At first I could breathe through my nose, but I guess he felt it because he pressed harder, and then I couldn't. No air."

"That sounds pretty frightening," I comment. "Not what you'd expect from a lover."

"That's the thing. I wasn't scared. I was so turned on I thought I'd explode. He leaned over me and licked my lips, and when he looked me in the eyes, I came. He loosened his grip for a minute, and I flipped him. He fucked me, and everything was back to normal. Or at least, I thought it was."

"What happened after that?"

"It seemed like life just...went on, you know, and then I got an email from him the next day. A one line song quote from Alice Cooper. 'I wanna hurt you just to hear you screaming my name.' It should have felt bad, and weird, and wrong to get that message, but it felt good. Too good. Real. I felt... possessed, in both ways. Not just like he owned me, but like he'd put a demon inside me. The idea of Brian hurting me again was suddenly the best idea I'd ever heard. I had to do it again, I had to feel that connection with him again...and I know he felt it, too. I know that."

"Brian?"

"I... played around with it in college, but...not like with him..." Brian mumbles, struggling to force himself to stay seated, stay in the room, stay engaged when all he wants to do is run.

I put my hand on the desk, palm down, in a pose of what I hope he'll read as understanding. "Brian, it's okay. You can tell me anything. There isn't anything you can say that will shock me, nothing you can say that will make me hate you or be angry with you. Just take a deep breath and let it go."

Still, he stays quiet, fiddling with his lighter. Justin looks at him pensively, then turns to me.

"He likes hurting me, and I like it when he does. It took a lot to get to that point. By the time we figured out that he wasn't *only* trying to shock me, and I wasn't *only* being obstinate and refusing to say no, we'd almost gotten ourselves into a lot of trouble. It turns him on, but it really scares him, too," Justin offers, tucking one leg under his body. "I, on the other hand, am not quite bright enough to be scared when I should be."

"I thought he had the upper hand," Brian murmurs quietly when Justin has fallen silent. "I thought I had to make him give in, and I tried... but he never really did surrender. I beat him, I whipped him, I cut him, I almost choked him to death," Brian's voice cracks, and

he has to clear his throat before he can continue. "I did all that and the only time he submitted to me was when..."

"When you what, Brian?"

Brian grits his teeth, and Justin rubs his leg reassuringly. We wait a few more moments, and when Brian stays brooding and quiet, Justin decides to continue the story. "He tried to kill himself...um... I guess it would be two months ago, now. It wasn't the first time, but I almost didn't make it in time. It was a really close call. Just the thought of losing him like that, the thought that I'd pushed him that far... I couldn't stand it anymore, so I said my safeword. It was my gift. I had realized that I could bear ANY pain he inflicted on me, because he did it out of love, and out of need, and I would never reject that. That word made me strong, too - when I had it on my side, I felt like I had free will for the first time in our whole relationship. But, I decided that... if it came down to a choice between my submission and his sanity, I'd give him my submission in a second... so I did. It really felt settled after that, you know? Like it was all over. We had trouble being the kinky kids in a vanilla world, we muddled through, we worked it out."

"It was the feel-good story of the year," Brian snickers, and I can't help but join him. Justin laughs with us, for a moment, but we all quiet down and I ask my question.

"But you're here, so I take it that wasn't it."

Justin takes a deep breath, and the words seem to rush out with his exhalation. "We both have nightmares. Mine are really bad, and they started after the bashing..." he looks down and the speed of his speech doubles. "...but his are worse and he's had them all his life. The kink and the violence used to work, I mean, it made them go away, but that doesn't work anymore and now we're doing drugs just to get to sleep..."

"Okay, let me stop you there. Drugs are a big red flag, and I'm sure you both know that, so let's talk about that a little. What drugs?"

"I'm not interested in any abstinence bullshit, so don't even start..." Brian starts to rant, but I hold up a hand to stop him.

"Look, I understand that you have no motivation to quit drugging right now, and believe it or not, I'm okay with that. One change at a time. You're not out robbing liquor stores to support your habit, right?"

"Right..." he replies warily.

Justin picks at the fabric of his shorts. "We're blowing off a lot of...responsibilities..." he flushes guiltily.

Brian looks stricken, but quickly recovers to say, "Yes, but we're done."

"Great, then you don't need me to tell you that." I reply gently. "Now, what drugs?"

Justin looks to Brian, slightly clueless, and Brian squints, trying to remember. "I think it'd be faster to say what we didn't do."

For one second, I stop the furious scribbling I've needed to do to keep up with the conversation. I want to make sure both of them are looking me in the eye when I say this.

"Understand that I don't condone drug use on an ongoing basis, but sporadically...well, I'd be a pretty big hypocrite to say, "Do as I say, not as I do." What I can do is give you some safe-use guidelines, if you're receptive. No crystal, ever. No heroin. Keep the synthetics to a dull roar. Try to give yourselves twelve hours in between dosing, time to recover, so to speak. If you take anything, make sure you don't drive. Sound do-able for now?"

"You're... really not telling us to stop?" Justin asks, flabbergasted, and I smile.

"Would you, if I tried? Hell, no. I'm not an idiot, I know that it has to be your decision. Don't get me wrong, I'd love for you to stop. Even cutting down would be a fantastic idea, but I won't push. I have a strict one-dragon-per-day policy, and I think we already met today's quota. Right, Brian?"

Brian quirks one eyebrow and tightens his grip on Justin's hand. "Justin," he says, "Are you finished?"

Justin looks at him. "Am I?"

Brian nods almost imperceptibly. "For today, I think."

As much as I find this transaction highly suspect, we've already been here for two hours and I can believe that they're feeling tired and drained.

Justin's eyes cloud over, but he nods and turns to me. "That's all I wanted to say."

I have to give him one more chance. "Justin, really? Is there anything else?"

He pauses again, and then looks at his hands. "I think that in any relationship, there's always something, don't you?"

"Maybe so."

"And like you said, we have a one-dragon-a-day policy."

"True enough."

"Then I think we're through for the day." He takes a breath, and then tentatively asks, "So, when do we come back?"

"You think I'm coming back?" Brian poses the question almost conversationally. "I don't remember saying anything about that."

Justin sighs the long-suffering sigh of someone in a long-term relationship, and smiles. "Ignore him. He gets cranky this time of the afternoon."

"Twat," Brian shoots back, but he's smiling.

I chuckle as I pack up my papers. "Same time next Saturday, unless there are any emergencies. Call me any time if anything happens, all right?"

"Okay," Justin agrees, and they get up to leave. They're just at the office door when I get an urge to ask something I never, ever ask my clients:

"Hey...are you guys feeling any better?"

Brian wraps an arm around Justin's waist, pulling him tighter, and Justin leans his head against Brian's shoulder. "It's hard to explain," Justin says, looking at me curiously. "Nothing's changed, but it feels better not to be alone." They turn and leave the office, leaving me with hours and hours of work in front of me, trying to find them a path.

Chapter 16

When Brian and I left the office, we were quiet... but it was a comfortable, companionable kind of silence. Not like the tortured staring and the awkward shuffling we've been doing all week, just serene, and sort of peaceful for a change. We made our way down the path like we'd walked this road hundreds of times before; his arm slung across my shoulders, mine around his waist. He lifted his fingers to graze my hair, and a wash of happiness flowed over me. I couldn't help but press myself further into his side.

"Did you want to get a coffee or something?" I remember asking him, leaning my head back into the crook of his elbow. He wasn't meeting Michael for dinner until six, and I didn't have to drop by Emmett's until five.

"Sure," he said. When we finally got to the Jeep, he reluctantly took his arm off my shoulder to unlock my door. On my way inside, he casually grabbed my jaw and kissed me so hard I felt faint. I mean, I was seeing stars, and I couldn't breathe or anything... but if I was going to die, that's the way I'd want to go. Just as fast as it started, it was over and he was already circling the car. I got in and sat down to unlock the door for him from the inside, trying very hard not to grin like an idiot.

I think that's when I asked him about Alan, you know, "So, how'd you hear about the therapist?" or something like that. I think it was pretty casual, maybe even absentminded,

because even all this time after the bashing, I still spend the first two minutes in the car worrying my seatbelt into position. I didn't mean anything by it, I was just sort of curious - Alan wasn't what I'd expected at all.

And see, this was something I'd been surprised about - not only was I okay talking to Alan, but Brian seemed to be, too. I expected another fancy shrink, an "educated" person, but that's not who we ended up with at all. Alan seemed streetwise and sort of unshockable, but still open to silly ideals like trust and communication. I think Brian might have respected that more than a hundred degrees hanging on the wall.

Brian went through the motions of fastening his own seatbelt and sliding his key into the ignition, musing about how we'd gotten referred. "Believe it or not, our good friend Theodore has connections," he snorted sarcastically, shaking his head at the thought. I feel sorry for Ted sometimes. It feels like he's always getting caught up in our dramas.

As we drove to the coffee place, I sat and played Six Degrees of Brian Kinney in my head, trying to figure out exactly how many people it took to get us into therapy, and who was the missing link. When the answer came to me, it seemed almost too easy.

"Dale Wexler, right?" I blurted, getting nothing more than a quick nod by way of reply, but not needing it, either - Ted knows Dale, and Dale knows everybody. Well, almost everybody. It drives him nuts that he doesn't know shit about us, and it makes him even crazier that it's going to stay that way. Still, I mumbled something about calling and thanking him.

"Better you than me," Brian snickered, and when I asked if he meant Ted or Dale, he replied, "Does it matter?"

We laughed, and joked about Ted and Dale and everyone else, and I swear to God that for five minutes we were completely, perfectly happy.

Did I mention that we were still ten minutes away from the diner? Did I need to?

He started getting antsy, like, out of the blue. We were fine, we were talking, and then he was practically hyperventilating. I couldn't handle it anymore, so finally, I broke.

"Brian?" I asked him, sliding my hand over his knee. "What's wrong?"

Of course, I got the standard reply, "Nothing," in a terse and uncompromising voice.

"Nothing. Right," I mumbled. I fell silent on cue, but... it didn't feel right. I don't know what was different, I just couldn't let it go. "No, not nothing, not after what we went through today. We have to stop this hiding bullshit sometime! I'm not stupid. I can tell that something's wrong."

Which, of course, he couldn't deny. Instead, he deflected the whole question, replying with a flat, bored, "What makes you think I want to talk about it?"

Yeah. Like I still fall for that one. "I don't know. Maybe because you're acting like you want to?"

He was quick with his standard response. "When have I ever wanted to, Justin? You've been hanging around Lindz and Mel too much if you think I'm interested in a fuzzy lezzie heart-to-heart. Next thing you know, you'll want babies and a cat and scented candles all over the fucking place. Forget it."

He said it really harshly, and he sounded really irritated, and on any other day that would have been the end of it. I know how he operates, and normally, I just go with the flow, because one of us storming off in the middle of the night is getting old. And it's always over stupid bullshit, too - most of the time, it's just not worth it anymore. So this time, when he tried to piss me off, I knew he was doing what he's always doing - basically, anything he can think of to avoid talking about his problem.

The funny thing is, that right after our therapy, he wasn't just obvious about it, he was completely transparent. I was torn between laughing and pushing, so I pushed. Hard.

"No, Brian. Really," I said, and not too kindly, either. "We did something important today, talking to Alan. Something has changed... it's different than before. Maybe that's why you want to tell me what's wrong."

He seemed to take half a breath, and then wrenched the steering wheel to the right, driving us right off the road and into a parking spot. Frankly, I was a little scared. He didn't say a damn thing, he just sat there and stared at the steering wheel. After what felt like an eternity, watching him watching nothing, he finally spoke.

"Mikey told me to tell you before it drove me crazy. Fucker was right, too. Asshole."

All I could think of to say was, "Huh?"

"Shut up and just let me fucking get through this, okay?" he huffed. He took a couple of shallow breaths, sort of working his way up to it, but that didn't really prepare me for what he said when he spoke. Fuck, that conversation... argument... whatever it was, it was unbelievable...

"We're broke, Justin."

"What?"

"Fuck it. I shouldn't have said anything."

"No, wait, go back. What are you talking about?"

"My bonus didn't come through. I planned on having that money, and now that we don't have it...we're fucked."

"Oh...God...Brian, don't scare me like that! It's only your bonus. Shit, I thought you got fired or something! Don't do that to me again."

"Just my bonus? Do you have any fucking idea how much money that is? How much do you think I make, Justin? We can't afford to turn down a fifty thousand dollar payday."

"Fifty. Thousand? That's... a lot of money."

"No shit, Sherlock. You wanted to be my partner? Well, listen up, because here it is. I'm at the top of my game... in Pittsburgh. That means I make sixty-two thousand dollars a year, plus benefits, bonuses, and travel expenses. The loft takes up a lot of it... it cost me more than I could afford, and the mortgage payments are still pretty high. There are other expenses, too... the Jeep... Hell, I still have student loans... and that's just me. When we add you to the mix, life suddenly gets a lot more expensive. Without that bonus money, we are two very poor people."

"Um... right, but this is just one cheque. How are we in so much trouble so fast? There... uh... there has to be something left."

"Says who? Look, Justin, broke means broke. Broke means fifty-four dollars in my chequing account. We're beyond slightly overextended. We're fucked."

"Okay, so we're short on cash. What about the savings?"

"The new fridge."

"Your IRA contribution?"

"Your tuition."

"Your credit cards?"

"Repairs on the Jeep, new shit for school, new clothes... Fuck, Justin, I know where it all went. That doesn't change the fact that it's gone and there's nothing to replace it."

"Shit. Um...wow. Okay. Well, what about MY savings? I'm not exactly sure, but I think we have a little in there. Maybe a thousand?"

"Justin, we're not going into your savings account. It's not enough, and it's not going to happen."

"Why? I want to help. I have some money. At least let me do something."

"It's my fucking problem, and I'll deal with it."

"So I get to be a partner by shutting up and never asking why we can't afford to go out, or buy shit anymore? Forget it, Brian, that's not going to happen."

"Just drop it."

"No! There has to be something I can do. Hey, I know, I can sell some of my art. I've had offers for a few pieces from school. Maybe that would help..."

"You want to help by whoring out your talent to the highest bidder? Fuck that. If you really want to help, I'll tell you how to help. Shut up."

"Stop being such a prick and listen to me, dammit! Let me do something! I'm not a fucking child anymore!!!"

"If you want to help so goddamn much, then fuck off. Go and do whatever you do with that nelly queen and get the fuck out of my face."

"Brian, don't do this! Just talk to me! We've gotten through so much bullshit, we can get through this, too..."

"Fuck your Mary Sunshine attitude, fuck those puppy dog eyes... and fuck you, Justin. I've had enough. Get. Out!!!"

"Fine. ASSHOLE!!!"

I jumped out of the Jeep and turned around to yell at him some more... but of course, he was already long gone by then...

... and by then, I'd already decided I wasn't going to let it go.

"Emmett!" Justin yells, banging on the door like he's being chased by a swarm of bees. "Let me in!"

"Coming honey, keep your pants on," I singsong, setting down the duster and smoothing down my hair. I swing the door open, and I'm greeted by the sight of one mighty pissed-off twink.

"He's such a fucking asshole!" he rages, stomping through the door and kicking off his shoes before whirling around furiously. "Why do I put up with this bullshit?"

"Hello to you too, Justin. My, you're early," I comment politely in the face of his righteous indignation. "Isn't the weather lovely?"

"Oh, fuck off," he snorts, stomping around the couch to plop himself down in the middle. He moans and whines to himself, thumping his head against the back for emphasis. "Why didn't anyone try and warn me that he's such a fucking prick?"

"Brian? An asshole? Whoever would have guessed?" I exclaim with false sincerity, finally bringing a hint of a smile to his face. "Next thing you know, you'll be telling me that the sky is blue."

"I know, I know. Don't say it," he groans, running his fingers through his hair. "It's just... I'm not used to fighting with Brian, you know? I mean, he pisses me off all the time, but... we don't argue. We just don't."

"Honey, when you love someone, arguing is just a part of life. My aunt Ida used to say, 'Emmett, darlin', sometimes living with a man is harder than trying to herd cats'..." He looks at me blankly, and I realize that at least I've finally got his attention. "Of course, we put her in the loony bin shortly afterwards so maybe that's not the best analogy."

He laughs, and I sit next to him on the couch and take his hand. "What do you want me to say, sweetie? That it's never this hard for anyone else? Well, it is, sometimes. Brian might have been yelling at you, but at least it got him talking. Isn't that a start? I mean, arguing is communication - well, sort of."

He sighs. "Yeah, but for us, it's just so... hard. Always hard. Everything's hard. It's not fair." He looks up at me, hopefully. "You've had some good relationships. Is it always like this for everybody?"

He looks so hopeful, like Auntie Em has the magic words that will turn him back into a fairy princess... but that time is long gone. Teenage first love, getting swept off your feet by the distant-but-handsome Prince Charmless... it's over. I don't need to tell him that from here on in, their life together will be something else altogether - and not something I have a lot of personal experience with, either.

I lean in really close to his face, close enough to whisper. "You know that you and Brian aren't like the rest of us, and that's not going to be easy."

He sighs and bows his head. "I know."

"You have a lot of strikes against you. Your ages are different; your lives are different... and you have this other thing hanging over your heads, too." He looks at me with confusion, so I reach out to touch the cowrie choker around his neck.

He colours and turns away, saying, "We don't fight about that anymore."

Right. "Okay, but you'll fight about other things. You're going to be immature, he's going to be a jerk, whatever. That's normal."

"Uh huh," he answers dully, as if that's not what he wanted to hear.

"But you need to hang in there a little harder, because there's a little extra going on that we don't see... am I right?"

He nods.

"So what you need to do is remember that you've been through a lot of bullshit together, and somehow made it out to the other side... and you probably always will. Now, you know you don't have to tell me," I can almost feel my eyes twinkling mischievously, "But, what exactly *were* you arguing about, then?"

His eyebrows scrunch together for a minute, and then he laughs. "Money. Can you believe it? We were arguing about money!" He laughs again. "Fuck, we must have sounded like my parents." We both have a good laugh, but just as abruptly as he started, he stops.

"I swear, Em...I mean, I just have this feeling... It's just like you said, something else was going on. We were arguing about money, but I don't think that was it."

"Do you know what it was, then? I mean, any ideas?"

He bites his bottom lip between his teeth, as if he's thinking of saying something, but then he closes his eyes and shakes his head.

"No," he mumbles. "Not... anything I can share."

"Then don't borrow trouble, honey. You'll get past it; you probably just need some time to cool off. Later tonight, you'll go home and apologize to him, and he'll perform whatever sex act he uses to say he's sorry, and you'll go on with your lives." He nods shakily, and I smile.

"Good. Now that we're healed, we can get on with the gossip." I spy our window plants - our poor, limp ivy, especially - and decide to water the blessed things before they die outright. Talking as I water, Justin and I cover an awful lot of ground pretty quickly. I almost don't hear him when he asks me to go back and repeat myself.

"Say that again, Em, I can't have heard you right."

"What, that they're closing Babylon?"

"WHAT?" he shouts, jumping up to stand beside me. "When?"

"Tonight, actually," I say, and I can't help but get a little misty. Babylon is more than just a dance club; it's our meeting place, our sporting grounds, our home. Justin hugs me close, rubbing circles on my back as I choke out the words.

"The new owners..." snuffle "...did an inspection..." snuffle snuffle "...and there are problems."

I can't keep going, so I just stop while the lump builds in my throat.

"Can they do that?" he muses in awe. "How long will it be closed? Where are we going to go? What are we going to do?"

"Three months, at least." I take a deep breath, press the back of my hand to my nose, and sigh. "They just decided this morning. I don't know where everyone's going to go. It won't be the same."

"Wow." He hugs me closely for a second, and pulls away. "Oh, shit."

"What, honey?" I ask, wiping at my eyes. "What now?"

He smiles grimly, turning to stare out the window. "If this is how we feel, what's it going to do to Brian?"

I wasn't surprised when he pulled up at the curb two hours early and honked the horn until my neighbour banged on the wall. I wasn't surprised when he leaned out of the car and yelled, "Hey Mikey, get your ass down here or I'll drag it down." Hell, I wasn't even surprised when I got into the Jeep and the CD player was blasting Guns N Roses.

I *was* surprised when he asked where I wanted to go.

"Uh, the park?" I stammer, and he drives off without another word. All the way to the park, he grinds his teeth and rocks his head to the ridiculously loud ramblings of Axl Rose, and I can't get a word in edgewise.

Finally - thankfully - the song ends and I can turn down the radio. I turn to him with a smile, and gently probe, "So, are you going to tell me what crawled up your ass, or do I have to guess?"

His answer is quick and predictable. "Fuck off, Mikey, it's got nothing to do with you."

"It's not that they're closing Babylon down for renovations? That depressed me, too."

He flinches a bit, but shakes his head no. "Nothing like that. Just... never mind."

I can't help but sigh. "Okay, so 'Never Mind' would be Justin, then. What'd he do? Hang his undies in the shower to dry? Ask to drive the Jeep?" He raises his eyebrows, and I snicker. "Oh, I get it. He asked to driiiiive."

Now, I know that's not the problem. I found out a long time ago that Brian's not the only... ahem... driver in that house; I mean, they did take me to bed and everything. I figured it out before that, though - like, the day after it happened - and I fucking swear that I knew every single time it happened for the next couple of months. Brian would walk around all blissed out for a couple of days, not yelling at anything, just quirky and sarcastic and dare I say, almost normal.

I don't think I ever accepted Justin until I saw what he could do for Brian.

Even so, I can't help teasing him about it. He's been acting like the Big Bad Wolf for fifteen years, and now that I know he has a soft spot, I can't help but poke at it. I just can't.

"Mikey, quit it," he grunts, but a hint of a smile escapes anyway. "Fishing for information is not attractive."

"He's a big boy now, Brian, you knew this day was going to come sooner or later."

"Oh, fuck off, Mikey, that's not it and you know it." He pulls his sunglasses down from his hair to land neatly on the bridge of his nose, steering the Jeep between the entry gates at the park. "I told him."

"About your bonus?"

"Yeah."

He takes a deep breath, then pulls the Jeep into a parking space and turns it off. We sit for a minute, just watching people walking by, not saying anything.

"How'd he take it?"

Brian watches the people pass by, mothers with kids Gus' age, teenage boys with skateboards, and I know that somewhere in the back of his mind, he's thinking of ways to sell them shit. That's just the way he is.

"Fine. It was fine," he breathes, exhaling a cloud of smoke from his freshly-lit cigarette. I glare at him skeptically, and he sighs. "All right. It wasn't fine."

"Not fine as in he's leaving you for Donald Trump?"

"No," he snorts, but he looks away guiltily.

"Oh. Not fine as in, he offered to help and you made him feel like shit." He doesn't answer, but he doesn't need to. "Just like I offered to help and you made ME feel like shit."

"It's my problem, Mikey, I'll handle it..." he trails off quietly.

"Right. Just like you handle your other problems so well. What about the tests, Brian? Have you gone yet? Has he?"

He bites his lip.

"Any plans to?"

Nothing.

"Christ, Brian, don't make me nag you to take care of yourself. I'm so tired of it," I comment wearily, feeling pretty bitter about the whole thing. I mean, seriously!

He's still looking out the window, and when I ask, "Have you at least stopped..." he stays perfectly still. I don't need to finish the question to know the answer, and it makes me so fucking angry!

"Asshole! You're going to get sick, and you're going to die. Is that what you want? No, wait, first you're going to kill Justin, and then you're going to die. You know that, right?" I push, and he sighs. "Tell me you know that what you're doing is the dumbest fucking move you could make. Tell me!" I grab his face, and turn him towards me. "Christ, Brian, just tell me you're going to stop!"

"Fuck off, Michael, it's none of your business," he growls, grabbing my wrist and pushing my hand away. "If you're just going to nag, you can fuck off right now."

"This isn't nagging!" I protest as he tears the keys from the ignition. "Telling you to take your vitamins is nagging! Reminding you to put money in a parking meter is nagging! This is saving your life!" He bolts from the car, and I race after him, almost running to keep up with his long strides.

"Fine, if you don't care about yourself, then think about Justin!" I yell after him, and he stops, but doesn't turn around. "Please, Brian, don't keep doing this."

"You don't know." He stands there, back turned, but doesn't walk away as I inch closer. "You don't know what it's like, Mikey. It's not that easy."

I get to his side and touch his shoulder, letting my fingers graze the ends of his hair. He's strung so tightly, it feels like he's about to snap. "It is that easy, Brian. Just stop."

He turns to me, sad, defeated. "I can't."

He believes that it's true, and I have to accept it or walk away. I know what I have to do.

"Brian, I... I can't watch you do this to yourself," I choke, tears welling up in my eyes. "I love you, Brian, I always have, and I always will..."

He closes his eyes, waiting for the inevitable 'But.'

"...But I can't watch you killing yourself anymore. It hurts too much. I've stood by while you let yourself overdose, when you drive drunk, when you wobble on the ledges of tall buildings..." I sniff back a sob, and quickly wipe my eyes. "I can't stop you, Brian, and you wouldn't want me to if I could. But you have to know that I can't let you keep hurting me like this... I can't..." My fucking eyes won't listen to me, I'm crying even though I don't want to, no matter how hard I fight to stay calm.

"Brian, I don't want to do this to you, but maybe it'll make you understand what a mess you've gotten yourself into."

He turns to me, taking off his sunglasses, and the pain in his eyes almost stops me from saying what I need to say. Almost.

"If you're sure you won't take care of yourself, then I can't stand by and watch anymore. Don't - " I start as he reaches out to me. "Please don't make this harder than it is. I love you, Brian, but I have to go."

I start walking backwards, feeling tears start to slip down my cheeks. He looked surprised, but I couldn't be more fucking surprised myself! After all this time, I finally stood up to Brian, and what did it get me? Was it worth it? I don't know. It's killing me to abandon him like this... in his time of need... but I can't watch him squandering a gift that so many people will never have again. That Ben will never have again. He's playing with his life like it doesn't even matter, which is a luxury some of us just don't have.

Yes, this is the way it has to be... maybe not for him, but for me.

Once I turn around, I walk home without looking back.

By the time he comes home from Emmett's, I'm lying on the couch... staring at the ceiling, listening to old CD's, and smoking way too much.

"I didn't expect to see you here," he says, coming through the door and dropping his messenger bag on a chair.

"I live here," I snort, blowing large, loopy smoke rings into the air.

"And I'm glad about that," he says sweetly, dropping a kiss onto my cheek, and a bag onto my chest. "A gift from me to you. Now, what's with the ode to the 80's?"

I pick up the bag - a thin glassine bag full of white powder - and ponder it absently, turning it over in my hands. "Where'd you get the money for this?"

He comes over to the couch, now shirtless, and knocks my side with his knee until I roll onto my back. He settles down onto me, his cargo shorts bunching around his ass, straddling my hips with a smile before he picks up the coke.

"No favours were traded in the purchase of this bag, if that's what you're asking. Now quit worrying and enjoy it. That's an order!" he commands, and I raise my eyebrow. He snickers.

"Or not. Whatever." He opens up the bag and dips his finger inside. "Want a taste?"

I open my mouth to accept the offered treat, but he draws it back. "Not yet. First you have to tell me what's wrong."

"Oh, fuck off, Justin," I grunt. "I've had enough of this shit today."

His smile turns to a grimace as he licks the dry, harsh dust from his finger. "Don't give me that. You had to know that when I came home, I was going to ask why you have Blizzard of Ozz on repeat. Eighties music means trouble with Michael, so just tell me what he said already."

I think about telling him for about a microsecond, but it's not really appealing. Losing your best friend because you refuse to quit breeding your boyfriend is a fucked-up situation no matter how you pitch it.

All the more reason to keep it to myself.

"Have you ever really listened to this song?" I ask, redirecting him from his irritating concern to the guitar echoing through the loft. "Ozzy was fucking inspired when he wrote this."

"Mmm hmm..." he says, scooping out a tiny bit of the surprisingly white coke and wasting no time in shoving it up his nose. His whole body vibrates with a quick, dry cough and the shudder that follows. I hold out my hand for him to lay out a line on the back, but he smirks and shakes his head no.

"I'm not kidding. You don't get any until you tell me what's wrong," he snickers, sniffing and wiping his nose with the back of his hand.

"I went into advertising because of this song," I say, snatching the bag out of his hand. He rolls his eyes and shifts back onto my thighs so I can sit up. "One person conditioned to

rule and control... the media sells it and you live the role," I quote, talking over the music in the background. "I decided I'd rather be the seller than the buyer." He nods, and his eyes are starting to sparkle, glistening with a hot slippery wetness that makes them very shiny and very blue.

I scoop out my own small bump of coke; snorting it quickly and suppressing the ever-present urge to sneeze it all right back out. He watches with fascination, his tongue touching his top lip softly.

"But are you sure that's it?" he asks confidentially, leaning forward to put his hands on my shoulders. "It's got nothing to do with the rest of the song?" And to my fucking horror, he has been listening... to it, or maybe to me... because when the next stanza comes up, he's right there with the words:

"Heirs of a cold war, that's what we've become... Inheriting troubles, I'm mentally numb," he sings quietly, his gaze locking with mine. "Crazy, I just cannot bear... I'm living with something... that just isn't fair... Yeah, that doesn't sound like you at all."

I try to shake him off, to get away from his intense stare. I want to let the high kick in and make me insensible and numb with pleasure, but I can't. There is no intellectual space between us; he's relentless, and he continues the song without hesitation:

"Mental wounds not healing, who and what's to blame... I'm going off the rails on a crazy train..." he finishes, grabbing my jaw for emphasis. I slap at his arm, once, twice, trying to gain release from the hand that's closed so fucking tightly on my face. Finally I kick him off my legs, right off the couch, and slide away. The sweat prickles up on my neck as I fight to increase the distance between us.

"Fuck, Justin. Enough!"

"So that's how it's going to be?" he rails, clambering to his feet and following after me. "Do you think I'm such a little kid that I can't stand to know that you're hurting? Do you think that I run around saying, 'Oooh, Brian is sooo great, Brian is sooo untouchable...?' Well, that's not what I think, asshole, that's what you think! I think you're my lover, my partner, and you need to talk to me when you have a problem. You are NOT fucking shutting me out again. Never again... do you hear me? I won't fucking let you."

"It's not up to you," I spit, turning to face him. "Some shit just isn't your business."

"Well, I'm making it my business, then. Starting now."

In an instant, I've crossed the few feet that separated us and pulled him close to my body. "Fuck you, Justin," I threaten coldly, squeezing his bicep tightly for emphasis. "When I want your input, I'll ask."

He yanks his arm away, rubbing at the bruise that's already swelling. "I don't fucking care whether you want my input or not, Brian. I'm over all of this shit. Over being punished for shit I didn't do. Sick of having to wonder what the hell's going on every time you walk around the house in a snit. You can't treat me like a child anymore, because I'm not your little boy and you are NOT my Daddy."

"Daddy? Wait... What did you say? A snit?" I enunciate coldly, waiting for him to back away from my frustration, my anger. "You think I'm walking around in a snit?"

"Don't act all innocent, Brian, you're the biggest bitch in town sometimes. You fight with Michael, and I take it," he mutters bitterly, taking a step closer until he's right in my face. "You have a shitty day at work, and I take it. You get a call from your sister..." he starts, grinning with cruel, feral glee at my surprise. "Yeah, I hear the calls, asshole, it's my phone too. She calls, and you can't get fucked up fast enough. I take it, Brian, I take it all and you know I fucking love it, but when the fuck is it going to be about me?"

My hand shoots forward quickly, cupping his face, too tightly to squirm, too tightly to pull away. "It's always about you, Justin. It IS you. Do you fucking understand me?" I bring my other hand up to cradle his face in my palms, kissing him brutally, feeling his lips crush and bruise against mine. His mouth opens slowly - I can feel the joints of his jaw creaking underneath my fingers - but I break through and he lets me in. Lets me taste his sweetness, the hint of bitter powder still clinging to his upper lip. And just as fast as I descended on him, I pull away, leaving him breathless, panting.

"It's you," I whisper softly, feeling him turn his head to tongue my palm. He's shaking in my hands, grabbing my shirt to pull me closer, to repeat the kiss, and this time it's his mouth that's cruel and demanding, his tongue that forces entry, his teeth that nip and bite and call me out until I have to fight back.

We kiss until my jaws are aching and sore, until I can taste salty, coppery blood in the saliva that escapes from our mouths. I kiss my way down his jaw, crushing the soft skin of his neck between my teeth until he shrieks. He struggles to pull away, winding his hands into my hair and yanking until my mouth pulls free with a wet, sucking slurp.

He jerks my head until my face is right in his, and stares, angrily, into my eyes. We share the same breath, the same furious scowl, panting into that small space that separates us, before he dips his head and his teeth fasten to the front of my shoulder and bite.

"Fuck!" I shout, drawing back, dragging his body with me. My hands close around his neck, and I squeeze... harder and harder, until his grinding suction falters and I can feel him swallowing against my tightening grip. He won't let go, and he won't relax, and when I slide down to the floor, half pushing, half dragging him, he follows me down.

We fight for the superior position, his mouth still bruising, still biting, and after a sharp crest of pain, it fades to a dull, throbbing ache. Abruptly, I let go of his throat and he

loses his focus; that lets me hook my leg under his and flip him onto his back. We grapple blindly, and I don't quit until I've pinned every inch of his body to the floor.

"Fucker. You'll pay for that," I hiss, dragging my fingernails down his body, leaving hot red scratches on his damp, pale skin. My fingers close around his nipple, rolling it once, softly, lulling his senses so that when I clamp down on it, the crushing pain forces his eyes wide open. I bow my head to his body, licking, biting, etching patterns into his skin. I tongue his nipple, and then suddenly bite down hard, forcing a satisfying wail from his lips.

His breath flows out of his body in heated gusts, followed by a moan that would wake the dead. "Brian...." he whimpers, shaking with need, arching into my body and grinding his cock against me for relief. His hands roam my back, scratching, digging for a grip, to pull me closer or throw me off.

"No," I sneer coldly, drawing back another inch. "It's not that easy. You're going to pay for what you did to me, you little shit."

"Like fuck I will," he grunts, pulling one knee up to my stomach and twisting. In a moment, he's on his hands and knees, scrambling out of the way while my hand whistles by his side... missing him by an inch, maybe less. "This isn't a scene."

"It is if I want it to be," I say, menacingly, but he shakes his head and licks a drop of reddened spit from the corner of his mouth.

"I'm not your slave, Brian. You made that decision." He takes a shuddering breath, and when I take a step forward, he stands his ground. "I'm not yours to hurt because you hurt. I have a choice about this and I say no."

I chuckle mirthlessly and take another step, but he's rooted to the floor. "One more step, Brian..." His eyes burn through my head. "Take one more step and I'll defend myself."

I nudge my toe closer to him, taunting him, and I can see the nervous energy rising in him even as he puts up his bravest false front. He clenches his fists and steels himself, saying, "If you want a fight, you'll get it."

I tense up; rock into his personal space, and just as quickly lean away, never moving my feet. He stiffens and draws away as I move, glistening with anxious sweat.

"This is killing you, Sunshine," I tease lightly, appraising his rapidly discolouring skin from my side of our line in the sand. "You could never hit me. You don't have it in you."

His fist shoots out, catching me openhanded across the cheek before I even see it coming. It's been years since the last time someone caught me off-guard like that.

"Fuck you, Brian," he growls as I touch my fingers to my hot, swelling face. "You don't know. You have no fucking idea what I'm capable of."

"Neither do you."

We mentally circle each other, looking for weaknesses, cracks in the facade, damage to exploit. And right on cue...

"You know I don't want to do this..." he says softly, his eyes pleading. "Please don't."

A tear escapes and rolls down his cheek, and it's a very convincing performance. Even I almost believe him, until I see that his fists are still clenched, fingernails digging into his hands.

"Aw, Sunshine, don't say that, you'll spoil my fun," I whisper, following my own words right up to his body with one broad step. He brings his hands up to defend himself, but my foot hooks behind one of his and I knock him right to the floor.

He goes down with a thud, surprised to even have moved, let alone fallen, but he rolls away when I drop my knee beside him. I'm still down, still off-balance myself, when he ducks his head and charges, catching me square in the stomach and knocking the wind out of me.

"I'm not that easy," he pants, his hands working at my jeans while I struggle to knock him away. "You're going to have to do better than that."

"You... are... that easy..." I gasp when my breath returns and I'm able to kick him off me. "It's... one of... your charms." He's disoriented, and I use the opportunity to pounce, laying him out so I can tear open his fly.

"Don't!" he chokes as my hand finds his cock, hot and dripping despite... or maybe because of... the punishment he's taken. "Get off of me! I fucking mean it!"

"Then act like you mean it," I snort, finally tearing off his shorts. "Act like this isn't what you want."

His elbow somehow finds my jaw, and it rocks my head back on my neck. Chuckling, I lean in to kiss him, and he spits in my face.

"Fucker," he growls. "If that's what you want, you're going to have to take it, 'cause I'm not giving it up."

"Yes, you are. You always do." I grab his hair, yanking his head back to look into his eyes. "You're such a pretty little whore," I say, both of us panting. "You'll follow your dick into anything, won't you? Just look at what you let me do to you... What a slut

you've become." The fury that boils up in his eyes is so fucking sexy, it's almost blinding. "And you're all mine."

I lean into him again, my mouth wet and open, and with my knees pressed against his armpits, he's lost all his leverage. Even though he tries to resist the kiss, I can still feel his tongue struggling against mine - in my mouth, not his. Fucking me. I shift one hand behind me, down his hot, sweaty body to his cock, and it's so hard.

He can tell me to stop all he wants - I don't believe him anymore. His words don't mean anything to me. He swears to me he doesn't want to be my slave, but then he looks at me like I need to save him from himself.

What the fuck else does he expect me to do?

He pulls back to break the kiss, gasping for air, sucking in lungfuls so big that I can feel the breeze whistle past my face. He lays his head against the floor carefully, because we really can't afford to mess with his skull, and whispers throatily, "Take off your clothes, Brian. Fuck me."

I sit back on my heels, starting to pull my shirt over my head, and without warning, he knocks me flat on my back and I'm not sure what's happening anymore. My hands somehow get trapped underneath my body, tangled in everything I was trying to take off... and I can't get them free because he's fucking on top of me, smiling that malicious, beastly smile.

"How does it feel, Brian?" he asks, loudly and cruelly. "You're my bitch now. How does it feel?"

I tug at my arms, held uncomfortably pinned behind my back by the twisted fabric. No amount of pulling moves the cloth that seems to be looped around my belt, or maybe my wrists... I can't really tell, because his weight is on me like mine was on him, and I can't fucking move.

"Justin," I hiss quietly. "Move. Now."

"Fuck that," he seethes. "This isn't a game, asshole, this isn't a scene we can end with a safeword. You forget what it's like for me, what it's like to be scared. Well, you're never going to forget this - not until the day you die."

His weight shifts, and I use it to try and twist out of his grasp. He regains his balance quickly and slaps me hard across the face, but I anticipate the shot and he just catches the edge of my cheekbone. He leans forward, hovering over my face, eyes glowing.

"You think I'm weak, but I'm not," he taunts softly. "I may not be as big as you are, or as muscular, but I can do enough damage to make you sore for a week." His eyebrows rise slightly, and I can't fucking believe he's saying what I think he's saying.

"Justin..."

"I can make you hurt longer than that, if that's what you need to gain some perspective," he threatens. "Especially if you don't want me to. NEVER forget that, Brian." He breathes softly, the puff of air blowing into my ear, making me shiver despite myself. "Any night of the week, you could wake up tied to the bed, with my dick so far up your ass you can taste it."

"Like hell," I grunt, ignoring the dripping, cold feeling flowing through my body... it's not panic, but it might be a relative of fear.

"Just think about it," he continues. "Say one night I make you a drink with something a little...extra. Maybe I don't wait for you to wake up to start fucking you."

He pauses at my grimace, and smirks coldly. "Or maybe you wake up because I forgot the lube and it feels like I'm fucking you with a blowtorch."

I grunt and throw my shoulder against him, but he feints backwards, pressing his weight just under my ribs. The room starts to swim.

"Think about how sore you'd be after that. How you'd walk, how you'd look... everyone would know that you're my bitch, Brian, everybody. Only you would know that I'd raped you... but that would be enough, wouldn't it?"

I can feel my face flushing under his hot, appraising gaze. "You know I would *never* let that happen," I challenge, praying that my voice doesn't falter.

"You really think I'm joking, that I wouldn't do it?" he marvels. "You're willing to bet your ass on it? Those are high stakes, Brian, and you're starting at a disadvantage," he warns softly. "Winner takes all... and I don't plan to stop just because you don't want it."

He pauses, then gives a faint smile, the kind generally saved for children and the feeble-minded. "Or, you can always bow out now."

"Justin, stop before you embarrass yourself. You're going to get hurt."

"Maybe," he allows. "Or maybe this time it'll be you." He shifts up a couple of inches, until I can feel him bumping his cock against my lips.

"Open up..." he murmurs. "That mouth was made to be fucked."

"Justin." Not a request this time. An order.

He hovers over my face, flushed, smelling like adrenaline and heat, a few droplets of precum collecting on the tip of his dick... it's mesmerizing, until a drop breaks away and

lands just above my upper lip. He curls his body to lick it away, and the look on his face: pride, possession, victory... fucks me up. He thinks he's indestructible. He thinks he's won.

Over my dead body.

"AHHHH!" he shrieks as I throw all my strength into pushing him backwards, and his temporary loss of balance is enough for me to shake him from my torso. Without the weight of our bodies on my arms, the shirt untangles and falls free, and I'm so relieved that I almost overlook recapturing him and making him pay.

Almost.

"You've been a very bad boy," I scold, shucking the jeans that now look more like potential bondage devices than clothing. He retreats and holds his distance, warily, knowing that the balance isn't in his favour any longer. "If you come over here on your own, I promise not to hurt you... well, not too badly."

"I... think I'll take my chances," he replies cautiously, still standing his ground, but shaky with fear.

"You do that," I murmur as I quickly close the distance between us, easily capturing him in his fearful confusion. Once I've got him within arms' reach, I grab his forearm and squeeze until he gasps.

"Do I have you?"

He may be afraid, but he's proud, and he won't give up that easily.

"Fuck you," he mumbles, jerking to free his arm unsuccessfully. Unhappy with his misplaced self-esteem, my fingers dart out to pinch one of his nipples painfully, and he screeches and shrinks away.

"I said, 'Do I have you?'"

His eyes meet mine in a baleful, hateful scowl, and he repeats, "Fuck off and die, asshole," making a spirited attempt to kick out the back of my knee. I pull him into me, suddenly, like an adult grabbing a child into a tight bear hug. He stays tense, but doesn't pull away as I lower my mouth to the space right beside his ear.

"Justin, if you don't submit to me, right this second, I'm going to strap you to the table and rape your worthless ass until you can't scream anymore. You'll bleed for a week. Got it?"

He shudders and nods.

"Good. On your knees, bitch."

He drops to his knees obediently, but in a moment, his eyes meet mine from underneath his long, dark eyelashes.

"Suck."

He immediately gets to it, licking the length of my cock with a firm, flattened tongue before taking it into his mouth. He works over every inch of my dick, until my head swims and my knees want to buckle. I grab the back of his head and shove into him in one long, hard stroke, bottoming out against the back of his throat. The cough that erupts from his throat, his queasy struggle not to gag, disgusts and horrifies me even as I get off from fucking his face.

His hand works frantically on his own cock, flying in fast, tormented strokes as I fuck his face and rain down verbal abuse that even I didn't think I was capable of. I call him every hurtful name, threaten him with every horrifying assault than I can imagine, and he soaks up every hateful word like a sponge, moaning and begging around my cock for more. In that moment, I know exactly where the term beating off comes from, because the desperation... the need... is all right there, all in him in glowing, brutally violent detail. All out in the open as he brings us both closer to orgasm.

I pull him back off my cock the second before I shoot. He looks transported, flushed, his lips wet and swollen from being roughly used. Completely debased and so fucking perfect, it sends me right over the edge. Groaning, I come hard, laying white, slimy trails of cum all over his face. His watery eyes meet mine as my fingers slide into the wetness, pushing it over the planes of his cheekbones and into his hair.

"Now, Justin. Come for me." My hands close tightly around his face while he fights to keep his eyes open, eventually failing when the waves of pleasure hit. Both hands are working furiously on his cock as he jets thick, ropy streams of semen onto his chest.

"Good boy," I soothe, stroking his hair as he struggles to breathe. I'm still panting a little myself. "Shh... That's a good boy."

He presses his sticky face against my leg, gasping for air, and my hands close over the back of his head to hold him closer.

It's just a game... isn't it?

Chapter 17

You in bed?

Yeah... Naked. Thinking about you... Are you?

Mmm hmm. Tell me something...

Anything, Brian...

Have you ever seen a movie called Videodrome?

I don't think so.

Cronenberg made it, in the eighties... You know, the guy who made The Fly...

No, I didn't see it...I was just a kid...

You should.

Why?

Torture, Justin. Brutal, disgusting, in-your-face torture.

What?

Are you hard?

Not because of that!

Sure, not yet... but you have to see that movie. Torture and murder...you know you love the idea. You know just what it's like.

I don't!

Sure you do... you think about it, and you want it because you love how it feels... In the movie... there's a show...it turns out to be real snuff, but at first, you don't know that. For a while, they're just beating these women... one after another, chaining them to a wall and beating the shit out of them...you see them shaking, and crying, and then they slump down and get replaced like dead flowers...

God. It sounds horrible.

It is. And it's so fucking hot.

That's sick, Brian.

Yeah. It is.

They beat them to death?

Slowly, yeah. They beat them, and the violence becomes the sex. There's a guy, and he's just watching, getting so disturbed and so fucking hot that he wants to climb inside the TV. He wants to feel it, all that pain dripping onto him. He wants to feel these people break...

That's repulsive...

You're touching yourself, aren't you?

Uh...no...

Liar. You are. You're pretending to be shocked and disgusted, but it's turning you on anyway.

No... I mean... It's just...

Do it, then. Stroke yourself and tell me how you're thinking of getting beaten.

I'm not...

Mmmm...yeah, you are. You're thinking of being chained to the wall, with me holding the whip... standing behind you, teasing the leather over your ass...

Fuck. Stop it, Brian...

I could stop, that's not what you really want, is it? I think you're obsessing on this movie now... pinching your nipples and thinking what it would be like to be chained up there... sliding a wet finger into your hole, thinking about it... thinking about me thrashing you and not knowing if I'd let you live or die...

God...

Would you beg me, Justin? If I started to whip you like that, if you felt the fire falling on your skin, and you knew I wasn't going to stop, would you beg me for your life, or just beg to get fucked?

Ugh... Don't...

What if you had to choose? Shove another finger up your hole and tell me which one it would be...

Shit...Brian...sick bastard...you can't ask me to choose like that...

You want to be the one, don't you? You want to be the one to walk the line. You want me to take you there.

Fuck...Brian, I'm so close...

I know...me too...Fuck...

Would you do it? Would you be the one to take me?

I couldn't...

Of course you could...you love it just like I do... you love it when the skin breaks, you love to watch me bleed...just tell me...

Knock it off...I don't...I mean, it's not like that...

Then what is it like? It's okay, Brian...just... come with me. Just tell me how you'd do it...

Justin...

Come on...I don't think you'd really beat me to death, Brian, I know you love it but that's not what's in you...you'd want to see my eyes, you'd want to see... the submission... you'd want to see me break from the pain, to... to see how scared I am, how hot and how scared...

Fuck...

Yeah, tell me, would you cut me and let me bleed out while you sucked my cock? Would you put your hands on my neck and push the air out of me when you fucked me?

Christ... Justin, stop...

I... I can't...I can't stop thinking about it now... would you put your mark on me first, a brand so they'd know I'm yours?

They'd... they'd know it was me...nobody...else...wants that from you...

Nobody else would give it to me but you... I...want it, Brian... I...I want it from you... I'd give you anything...I'm so close...

You'd... do that...for me?

Anything... whatever... you want... oh, God...

Even...Oh, fuck... Even that?

I will... if... you will...Come on... do it... take me...

Justin!

Briiiiiannnn...

When I came back from that drive to the park with Brian, I swore up and down that I would never talk to him ever again. Never ever. He would have to come crawling back to me, begging my forgiveness, congratulating me for being level-headed and caring enough to put our friendship on the line to save his life. Thanking me for looking out for him, even when he was too fucked up and dazzled by the Boy Wonder's absurdly white ass to look out for himself. Yes, he would have to be grateful for my intervention before I'd even think about taking his call. Ben listened all week while I ranted my head off, nodding and humphing in all the right places. Somehow, he even politely avoided laughing his fucking ass off.

At the seven-day mark, my stance... softened, I guess you could say. I wasn't looking for an apology, now. Brian wouldn't have to beg my forgiveness. All he'd have to do was call me and say the magic words: "I'll stop." But he didn't. In fact, he didn't call me at all, not that week, or the next, and no matter how little I would have asked of him, the phone still didn't ring.

Maybe for regular people, going a couple of weeks without contact isn't unusual. Hell, this isn't even the longest we've gone without speaking, but every other time, it was about something else - I'd get busy, or he'd get distracted, and our regular trips to the gym turned into extended games of phone-tag. But, you know, it was one thing when I was preoccupied and just hadn't gotten around to returning his phone calls, because that felt natural. Grownups get wrapped up in their own lives, or so I'm told.

This time it's different, and I can feel every single goddamned second.

So, I only lasted fourteen days before I picked up the phone and called him. Whatever. I'm tired of going for the record, and besides... he's my best friend, and no matter how mad he makes me, I can't just give up on him. I'll call, I'll tell him I'm still here, still listening, and never so angry that he can't depend on me. It's the perfect plan.

"Hello? Hello?"

Perfect except for one tiny detail.

"Hello?"

"Shit, Justin, don't hang up. I'm sorry. I just didn't expect you to be there."

He snorts. "I've lived here for years, Michael. You should have."

Why is he so fucking irritating? "Fine, whatever. Look, can I talk to Brian, or do I need a secret code word?"

"No, what you need is secret code numbers."

"What?"

"Call his cell, dummy. He's not here."

Now, I know we haven't spoken in a couple of weeks, but I really thought that if he was planning on going away for this long, he'd have mentioned it to me at some point. Or did he?

"Drumming up business, right. He mentioned he'd have to go out and make some rain. So where'd he go?"

"Where didn't he go?" I can hear Justin shuffling papers around on the other end of the phone. "Okay, here's the itinerary. He started in Akron; then he went to Cleveland, then Erie. I think he's due to move again today... he's..." There's a pause, as if he's trying to read Brian's mangled handwriting or something.

"Justin, where's he going next?"

There's a cough on his end of the line, then the papers move again. "Fuck, I can't read this at all. Anyway, he's still due to visit Buffalo, Rochester, New York... He goes somewhere new every couple of days. He does a shitload of meetings, and sometimes a site visit or two, and then he moves and it starts all over again."

God, Brian must be miserable, touring all of those one-horse towns before he gets to New York. "But, why? I mean, Brian hates those places, he always says that if you can't get away from Pittsburgh, then why leave home? Why didn't he let one of the junior execs do all of this?"

"I can't believe you just said that," he hisses. "Are you really that self-centred these days? Brian left because we need the money, asshole. He didn't have a choice. He had to go and we all have to deal with it."

"I don't suppose you're doing anything to help."

"Fuck you! I'm working on it too, but hello, I have school. Brian didn't pay all that money for me to flunk out and work at the diner. Oh, and my classes are going fine, thanks for asking."

"Sorry! Don't get your panties in a bunch. I just don't understand why he took off without telling me he'd be gone for this long! It's not like him!"

"You know that he wouldn't go if he didn't have to, especially not now..." His voice trails off, but re-asserts itself, this time very businesslike. "Call his cell or leave a message. It's up to you."

"Wait."

"What, Michael? I have homework. I have to go."

Every bone in my body, not to mention Ben's voice in my ear, warns me not to say anything, but I have to. For Brian.

"Look, Justin, just tell me one thing and I won't bother you anymore. Did you go and get the tests?"

"What?"

"The blood tests. Brian told me what happened. I can't believe what you're doing."

"No..." he trails off, his words replaced by stunned silence. I don't know if he's answering my question, or contradicting what I said about Brian, but he doesn't give me long to figure it out.

"I haven't gotten them, and neither has Brian, as far as I know," he continues. "But I'll be sure to take out a full-page ad in the paper when we do."

"You need them!" I press. "It's really important!"

"Just let it go!" he snips. "Why is everyone so fucking happy to tell us what to do? I don't know what you want from us. We're not the heroes of Liberty, and we're sure as fuck not the villains. We're just two guys trying to have a half-decent relationship. When did that become community property?"

"We're not trying to be nosy, asshole. Some of us are just tired of watching you hurting each other for sport."

"So don't watch! Change the damn channel! We need time to figure this out, Michael, and having all of you hovering over us isn't helping."

"You want me to just... look away? Let me put it this way. If I were hurting Ben, and doing something to him that might get him killed, how long would you just ignore me? How far would you let me go before you asked me what the fuck I think I'm doing?"

"That's not fair," he hisses. "I'm sorry about what happened between Ben and I. I never meant to hurt you, so don't throw it back in my face."

"I'm not doing that at all, Justin, and for the record, it's totally fair. I know that you... and he... well, never mind, I know what happened, and I'm okay with it because it's in the past. I could still be angry about it, but you know what? I don't have time to bear that grudge forever, because I don't know how long forever is. One day, way too soon, Ben will die. It will be before his time, and I don't want to think back on our relationship and say, 'Gee, look how much time we spent fighting over stupid shit.' We don't know how long we can afford to waste on childish arguments and stupid mind games, so we don't."

"Who the fuck do you think you are, Mother Teresa? 'Look at us, we're so mature, we're dealing with our problems, we're sooooo healthy.' Fuck that. You know that Brian and I are trying, and that's all you need to know. Anything else... is none of your business."

"Fine. Maybe it isn't my business, but when I see a guy trying to get pregnant to keep his boyfriend around, it makes me wonder."

"WHAT?" he shouts into the phone. I wait a beat for him to catch my drift, and then he chuckles a little, his voice filled with awe. "You're one sick bastard, Michael."

"I'm not..." I start, but he's not finished.

"You think I'm bugchasing! You really think I'm trying to get sick on purpose!"

"Maybe not consciously," I defend, "But look at it through our eyes. Brian's my best friend, but even I can't pretend he's not a slut. Then we see someone who's young, barely a man himself, choosing to have unprotected sex with the most notorious whore in Pittsburgh. Not by accident, and not when he's drunk, and not only once. It doesn't make any sense... unless..."

He cuts me off, huffing, "I'm not trying to get sick, Michael."

"So you know that he hasn't been fucking around on these trips, then? You may think it's safe to fuck him when you know he's not doing anybody else, but will he still be safe to fuck when he comes home?"

There's a pause at the other end, then a very soft, very resigned sigh. "Doesn't matter how you ask me that, it's still none of your business."

"No, Justin, it is my business. If Brian gets sick, who do you think will end up looking after him? I will. Have you thought about that? Or, what about you? You have to learn that the things you do affect your whole family, Justin. Say you're the one who gets sick. Will Brian be able to handle looking after you twenty-four hours a day for the rest of your pathetic life? I doubt it. It'll be your mom and mine who do all the work. You know that as well as I do."

"Now you're wishing me DEAD?" He sounds angry, but still in a stunned kind of way, as if none of this had really occurred to him before. "I know you've always envied me,

Michael; you've always been that way and I'm used to it, but this is fucked! You actually want me dead!"

Now it's my turn to sigh. "Calm down, Drama Princess. I don't want you dead, and I never really even wanted you gone, not like that. If Brian loves you, then obviously there has to be something there to like." My attempt at humour falls so flat that I can actually hear him breathing on the phone.

"You never stopped wanting Brian for yourself," he accuses.

"Stop being such a little shit!" I reply, not too kindly. "You know what I had to give up to accept you, and it was hard!"

"I think that's just what you tell yourself," he confides, almost like one brother to another. "You tell yourself that you love Ben, and that you don't want Brian anymore, but you'll never really be able to get past the fact that he chose me and not you."

"Right. Justin, have you ever considered WHY he picked you and not me? Given it any thought at all?" He inhales as if to answer, but I cut him off.

"Let me tell you why I think he picked you, Justin. It's because of... because of..."

There's one part of their relationship I've never questioned, and if I ever did, I didn't expect to be talking about it with Justin. He uses my hesitation to jump in.

"He didn't choose you because you could never be what he needs," he says firmly.

"You're right." I agree softly. "I could never let him hurt me the way he hurts you."

I hear another sharp sniff, as if I actually hit him in the face, but he recovers. "Maybe you can't, Michael, but I can, so why can't you just let it go? Look, I know we have problems. I know how bad it looks from the outside, but we're going to therapy. We're trying, okay?"

"Therapy," I muse. "Well, that's a start, but I think it's too little, too late. You've done nothing but hurt each other from the first day you got together. Why am I supposed to think that this time will be any different?"

"This time will be different because we both know we need to make some changes, and we know that the sex is the only thing we don't want to change! I'm telling you now, you don't understand because you can't understand. You don't know what it's like to want your lover to beat you into submission. You don't know how good it feels to dance that close to the fire, and you don't want to, so what makes you think you can judge us based on the fact that we do?"

"That's not all there is to it! Do you honestly think I give a fuck if you get off on getting bitchslapped every night? That's not my problem!"

"I'm not apologizing for wanting him that way, Michael. It was in him, and in me, too, a long time before we met."

"Maybe, but you bring out the worst in each other! Where is the Justin who used to demand the things he needed? Who had friends, and goals?"

"I have friends!" he shouts. "What do you call Daphne and Matt, chopped liver? And I still have goals, Michael. I still want to be an artist. I joined the Artists' Collective at school this year. I'm the same person I always was."

"Bullshit you are, Justin! You're not, and neither is he, and I have been worried about the two of you ever since he took you home and started playing Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. You know, when everyone else found out about your little playtime fun, they wouldn't even tell me? They were scared how I'd react. They thought I'd be disappointed in Brian, but I'm not. I'm disappointed in you, Justin."

"What a surprise," he deadpans. "Do go on."

"Don't you dare tune out on me now!" I reply heatedly. "Doing this forces him to bring out all the parts of himself he's afraid of, and it scares him. It upsets him, and fuck you for not understanding that! His Dad could be such a bastard; he's always been terrified of turning into an abusive asshole. What do you think it does to him when you beg him to hurt you?"

"Oh, I know exactly what it does to him," he snickers suggestively. "You think you know a lot, but you don't."

"You'd be surprised what I know, Justin. You're on the inside, but you don't see what I see. I watch you two sometimes. I see him stroking the bruises on your wrists, touching the places on your face where you covered up the marks."

"Enough..." he warns, but I continue.

"You know what I see on his face when he does that? He's proud, Justin, he's so fucking proud to have hurt you, and sure, it makes him hot, but it also makes him scared. I think that you of all people would understand being afraid of violence."

"You don't get it at all," he says stiffly. "That's why I'm not afraid of it. He's working on his issues with it, too. If you were really a friend, you'd be more supportive. It killed him when you kissed him off a couple of weeks ago."

"He told you that?" I ask, hurt.

"He didn't have to. I've had time to see how your relationship works, and if anything, it's at least as bad as ours, if not worse! It's so twisted. You have this love for each other, but it's so fucked. So damaged."

"Fuck you!"

"Hit a nerve, didn't I? You know that the two of you aren't right together, either, but you're determined to make him pay for that! When he's doing something dangerous, you don't help him see that he's wrong. YOU make him feel guilty for it, and fuck with his self-esteem, and then you keep twisting the knife in his guts to make him pay for not wanting you."

That little shit! "That's not true!"

"It is. You really hurt him. You need to apologize."

"Me? Apologize? What for?"

"For abandoning him in his time of need. You know how his mind works, Michael, and you can't just run out on him like that. It kills him when you guys fight."

"If he were a better friend, I wouldn't have to walk on eggshells when something is bothering ME."

"And that's why he chose me and not you, Michael," Justin replies softly. "It's not because I want him to hurt me, because the pain is fun, but it's not necessary. It's because I understand something that you don't - he's trying to change, but he's afraid of looking stupid and letting you down. Every time you fight, you're telling him that he let you down, and he can't stand that from you."

Okay, this conversation is as clear as mud. "You're saying that he loves me so much he can't be with me?"

"No, I'm saying that he's trying to love you like a brother so that you'll never be able to leave him, Michael. Call him." He sighs, and his voice drops down very low. "He needs you, Michael, in a way that he'll never need me... so call him and give him the one thing that I can't."

I go to reply, but Justin hangs up the phone without another word, leaving me to seriously reconsider my position in Brian's life - and his.

Justin's call comes out of the blue one Friday night, like an auditory hallucination from bad drugs. He hasn't called me in a long while - not since we were all together at Babylon, three weeks ago. Not surprisingly, I'm more suspicious than pleased to hear from him.

"Matt, I'm glad you're there," he says sweetly, his tone completely saccharine. "How's Andrew doing?"

As if that's all we have to talk about.

"Uh, Andrew's fine..." I reply vaguely.

"Good. That's good." We wait, liquid silence flowing through the line, until he speaks again.

"And work? How's work going?"

"Fine."

"Great." He sighs, and I can hear a tapping noise on his end that sounds like fingers drumming on a tabletop. "Um... Where are you?"

Christ. "Justin, I know you have my itinerary, and believe me, it won't be changing. The creative director of this campaign is neither creative, nor terribly good at directing... basically, I doubt this chick could direct traffic, let alone push a ten-city promotional campaign ahead of schedule." I take a deep breath, trying very hard not to let the stress of working so far from home creep into my voice. "Tell me what's wrong."

"I'm not bothering you, am I?" he asks hesitantly.

"Jesus. Fucking. Christ. Justin!" I swear into the phone. "I am NOT in the mood for this. You haven't called me in weeks, and then you just mysteriously happen to dial my number and say hello. I don't buy it. You're a great friend, and I love you to bits, but if you spend one more minute dancing around your problem, I'm going to reach through the phone and strangle your ass. Talk."

"Sorry," he apologizes, somewhat unnecessarily, since we both know I'm mostly just blowing off steam. Mostly.

"Me too. Now, are you going to tell me what's going on, because if it's between you and Brian, I wouldn't even know where to start guessing."

"Okay. Yeah. Um... Fuck. Matt, I don't know what to do."

"Could you be a little less vague? What to do about what?"

"Anything!" I can hear him taking long, deep breaths, as if a panic attack already has its hands wrapped tightly around his neck and he's working to fight it off. "It's all so fucked up!"

"What exactly is fucked up? Is it work? Brian? School?"

"All of them."

"What's going on at school?"

"School is fine, it's just... a lot of pressure. I don't want to let anyone down. It costs a lot of money to go there, so I want to do well, but then my hand fucks up, or I get tired, and the creativity isn't there..."

"That's not a new problem, you know. It's going to be like that for the rest of your life. Deal with it."

"Matt!" he scolds. "Try being supportive!"

"Relax!" I snort. "Just trying to get to the real issues, and not let you distract me with the same old crap that you're always dealing with."

He groans, and it makes me laugh. For all his strength, Justin is incredibly easy to fluster sometimes, and once he gets going, it's rough to get him to stop. "Okay, so let's move on to another easy one. What's wrong at work? You love the diner."

"Well, I guess there's not anything really wrong there," he concedes. "I just wish I could work more, you know, pay some more bills around here than I already do."

"There are only so many hours in the day, Justin. How many more do you think you can work? And, which bills are you covering now?" I prod.

He falls completely silent. I know he'd like to play it off, to pretend that they're still set for cash and he's just topping up the pile. He really doesn't need to. News of Brian's company's financial troubles eventually made it through our circle, but that topic is absolutely verboten. Nobody can get either of them to say anything more than that 'there were some problems last quarter.'

I don't necessarily need all the details, but if he wants me to help...

"Justin, there's no point in pretending. Everybody knows that you two are short on cash for the next little while."

"Shit. Brian's going to be pissed," he moans.

"Who the fuck cares?" I retort. "So what if it's not a secret? It's nothing to be ashamed of."

"He won't think so..."

"Whatever. Obviously, you came to me because you need practical suggestions; so let me suggest. You know I won't judge, given what I've done to make money in the past..."

He grunts an acknowledgement, and I continue. "Needless to say, if there's money to be budgeted, I know how to do it. Maybe I can help. Just tell me how the cash flow is working, and I might be able to suggest something."

I hear him rummaging through drawers, rustling with papers. "The problem..." he trails off, then drops the phone, swearing loudly in the background. "Sorry about that. The problem is that Brian's still away, and he needs his whole paycheck while he's on the road. He asked if I can cover the loft's expenses while he's away, and I said I could..."

"But you can't," I finish gravely, and he sighs.

"Right."

"How much are you short?"

"Not all that much..." he defends, but his voice is already defeated. "Four, five hundred."

"A month? That's not so bad. He's not gone that long, and you have savings..."

"A week, Matt. It's like, four seventy-something a week."

"Shit!"

"I know!" he mourns. "I hardly paid anything before. I had no idea that it cost this much to live here! We should move."

I can't even imagine how badly Brian would take that suggestion. His loft is his baby - it would take an act of God to pry that deed out of his hand. I think they'll have to take him out the door in a body bag.

"You can't just move, Justin, it's impractical. You'll just have to tell him that you can't cover it all. Ask him for help."

"I can't!" he protests angrily. "Brian doesn't ask for stuff like this, Matt, but this time, he did, so I have to help! Besides, he's probably got another two months left on the road; he can't afford to be spending money out there and sending it home, too. I have to do this."

His voice is rising worriedly, and we're going to be in for a full dress rehearsal of the drama queen pageant any minute now.

"Shh, okay, okay," I soothe, "So you need to cover this yourself. You have, what, a thousand in savings?"

"Fourteen fifty-seven," he replies dully. "I checked."

"It's a start. If nothing else, it'll give you a place to live until the end of next month, if you juggle. You know, pay those bills creatively," I suggest, and he giggles faintly.

"Brian would kill me if he found out I was blowing off the bills."

"Not 'blowing off'," I clarify. "Pay most of them, and let them know you'll get them the rest as soon as you have it. There's always a person on the other end of the phone."

"But that only works until the end of next month," he protests. "What do I do after that?"

"Screw 'after that,' kiddo. You need to find some more money, right fucking now, or Brian's going to lose his home."

He huffs a breath, something between a chuckle and sigh. "Thanks for cushioning the blow, Matt, what would I do without you?"

"Hey, you didn't call me for a pep talk, you called me for help. Think of it as tough love," I say. "Let's brainstorm. Is there anything you can do, anything at all, to make some extra cash?"

"Well..." he starts, but trails off. "Never mind."

"What are you thinking?" I ask suspiciously.

"Nothing."

Right. Whatever's going on in his head, I'm sure it's not, 'nothing'.

"Justin..."

"It's not an option, okay? Forget I said anything!"

"If you're thinking of taking your blonde ass out to the corner, I'm going to fly back to Pennsylvania and kick it."

"WHAT?" he gasps in horror. "You think... that I... No! Fuck no! Brian would kill me!"

"He'd have to get in line," I reply gravely. "It's a shitty life, Justin. I can't let you do that."

"Can't let me? Let me?" he shoots back petulantly, sounding ridiculously immature and self-absorbed. "You did. Why was it okay for you, then?"

"It wasn't okay, Justin, it just was, and it happened because I had no choice. I had to eat. I had to find a place to sleep. Three a.m. is so fucking cold when you haven't got a place to

go. It's always cold at night, even in the summer, and you get so goddamned tired..." I stop abruptly, slamming the door on that trip down memory lane. "Forget it."

"I'm sorry. I understand," he murmurs softly. "I'm really sorry I brought it up, Matt."

"Don't be," I huff. "It's okay. I'm past it. But look, you have a beautiful home, and plenty of places to go even if you lose it, so don't let me catch you thinking about selling your ass, or you'll have me to deal with."

"Check."

"And now that the public service announcement is over, tell me what you were thinking."

He sighs softly. "I'm not sure that it's any better."

"It has to be!" I say, a little more forcefully than I intended. "What does it involve?"

"Well, I joined the Artists' Collective at school," he starts. "It meets for an hour three times a week. I thought the sessions would take my mind off of Brian being away."

"Go on."

"At first, it was so fucking boring, no better than the Art Club at St. James. I totally dragged myself there, I swear to God that if Brian had been home, I never would have gone back after the first day."

"But you're enjoying yourself now?"

"Maybe. I don't know. It's okay, I guess. I hate the guy in charge, Professor Dennis. He's a bible-thumping asshole, and he's always saying all this weird shit about people who aren't. Last week, he kept saying stuff about 'Godless Infidels' and he looked at me every damn time!"

"Because you're queer?"

"I don't know! I don't know if it's meant for me, specifically, or if the guy's just a freak. He could be psycho for all I know, it wouldn't surprise me if some of the faculty is extra-eccentric. Too much time with the brush cleaner, you know?"

We laugh loudly, and when we settle down, I ask, "But it's basically okay?"

"Yeah. I know some of the people now. They're all upperclassmen, and getting their feedback on my work is really interesting. It feels like I'm learning something about my art."

His voice swells with pride, and I'm so happy that he's finally found an outlet for his talent that doesn't involve primary colours, comic book heroes, and weekly hits of E for inspiration. There's nothing wrong with graphic art, but he's in school to learn, not to settle into a rut.

"Justin, that's great, but I'm not hearing the money connection."

"Well, last week he mentioned something about a show, and got us all excited about it. 'Stay afterwards for more information,' that sort of thing. Anyway, it's a showing of modern *religious* art! And he made it pretty clear - no sinners need apply."

"Damn."

"No kidding! It's an art school! There might be five straight, law-abiding people in the whole place." He sighs. "Talk about narrowing the pool."

"Doesn't he need somebody to apply? Surely he can't exclude everyone."

"He can't, but since it's outside the school, the group that's running it can. PIFA does have a tolerance policy - it's weak, but he couldn't get away with doing this for a school function. My problem is that this show isn't inside the system. It's an established show, with an established committee of hardcore religious scholars as jurists, and an established group of buyers who want all their art to have a spiritual slant."

"So, don't enter the show, then! How much money could you possibly be passing up?"

"Guesstimate? Ten thousand."

"WHAT? You've got to be fucking joking."

"Not even close. That's the average sale price for the works submitted by the two PIFA students who entered last year. Guess I didn't mention that they're wealthy religious buyers."

"No shit."

"Hey, I haven't even told you the best part, because here's where it gets really interesting. I went home from that meeting totally depressed. For two days, all I could think about was how much ten grand would help us out."

"Naturally."

"But then, after the next session, Dennis approached me. Said he was very concerned about my growth as an artist, that he felt my work was becoming repetitive, and too derivative of popular culture. He wants to see me exercise my talent. Apparently, he'd like me to make a submission."

"That's... odd. Was he counseling you, hitting on you, or asking you to join his church?"

"I don't know! It felt like he might be trying to save my soul or something. You know, force me to spend more time reading the Good Book, and less time reading OUT."

"Sneaky."

"Or, he could be totally aboveboard, and just asking me to put something in the show."

"It's possible... I don't know if that's what it sounds like to me, but I don't know the guy, either. It's your call."

"You're not helping!" he pouts. "This year, there's a fucking theme, too - submissions are all supposed to be four-panel works, and in oils! How am I going to come up with four oil paintings with religious themes? Besides, I don't like working in oils, it's hard on my hand. I'm not a big fan of religion, either... well, let me clarify that. I'm not a big fan of Bible-toting Christians with a baseball bat fetish."

I can feel his anger seeping through the phone, and it makes me shiver. "Look, Justin, you have to do what you think is right. Either do the show - "

"And prostitute my talent!" he wails.

"... Or don't do the show..."

"And sell my ass instead," he sighs. "This really isn't helping, because no matter how many pros and cons we come up with, I end up right back where I started. Can we change the subject?"

"Sure. We've done school, and work, so that just leaves Brian."

"Shit. Can we go back?" he moans.

"Nope, spill. How are things between the two of you, with him out of town?"

"Weird."

"That's not new, either. Remember, I said *new* problems."

"I promise, this is weird in a new way," he replies shakily. "He calls my cell in the afternoons, and we talk about nothing. It's nice."

"So what's wrong with that?"

I can almost hear him shaking his head in disgust. "Um, hello? Nice? Since when is Brian nice? Besides, we don't just chitchat, and we never have. He hates talking about nothing, he hates talking on the phone, and he really hates doing it every day!"

"So why'd he start, then?"

"I don't know!" he rails. "The first day he called was a couple days after he left town, to ask how my bruises were doing, I think. But, you know, it's Brian, so he asked but didn't ask directly... I think that's why he called, but that's not what he said, if that makes any sense. We just talked about nothing important until I had to go to work."

"Barely, but continue." Great. More bruises. Because we all know I love hearing about that. "What bruises?"

"That's not the problem!"

"Okay, fine."

"It's not!"

"Okay, then tell me what you ARE worried about then, and while we're young!"

"It's the chatter, Matt. The daily phone calls just aren't him, especially when you compare them to the ones at night."

"Mmmm... night calls..." I snicker, rearranging myself in my chair to get comfortable. "This is getting juicy. Go on."

His voice falters. "He... he calls me when we're in bed... and I don't know how to describe it. It's like phone sex, only... it's not."

"If you're waiting for me to get upset about a little phone sex..."

His voice drops down low again, but motivated by which emotion, I can't say. "It's what we say, Matt. I don't think... that people who care about each other can say those things. It sounds right at the time, I mean, when we're saying it, it sounds so fucking hot, but... Later on, when I think back to it, it seems really horrible. Really sick."

He hesitates, as if searching for the right words. "I don't think... I understand as much about us as I thought I did. I don't know why we need to say those things."

"Maybe it would help if you told me what you say?"

"I can't," he grieves. "I want to, but I can't repeat it. It's too awful. Even for us." I hear his voice start to shake. "Please, can we change the subject?"

"I understand if you can't tell me, but, if it's bothering you this much, you do need to tell someone. Will you take this to your therapist? Please?"

"If we can drop this, then I do promise to talk to Alan about it."

"Of course, Justin. Whatever you want." I may be here to give him tough love, but I'm still his friend, and I'm not trying to traumatize him. Much. "So, now is when you're going to tell me about the bruises, right?"

He sniffs. "I thought you forgot about that."

"No such luck, Justin. Bruises. When, how... I need to know."

"Um... Right before he left... he... I... Uh, we got a little out of hand."

"Meaning what?"

"We did a little coke, we had a little fight, he hit me. I hit him back."

This is new. "Excuse me? You did what?"

"I think we needed some space," he continues, as if I hadn't even spoken, and barreling along as if the topic is closed. "I'm almost glad he left."

Worst explanation ever! "Wait, wait. Go back. Tell me more about this fight."

"I wish I could explain, but I can't. I still don't understand why it happened."

Gah! Could he be more frustrating? "You could start by telling me WHAT happened!"

"He got into a fight with Michael, so I brought him the coke as a present..."

"Hold up. Brian fought with Michael? Why? Those two are tight. They don't fight very often."

"None of your business," he retorts, and takes a breath to keep talking, but I'm not having it.

"Oh, no you don't. If it wasn't a big deal, you'd just tell me... but you're hiding something, and I think it's something big."

"It's got nothing to do with why we were fighting," he hedges.

Inhale, Matt, inhale and then exhale, and don't call your best friend a liar.

"Justin, if you're not going to be honest, I can't help you figure anything out. I can understand if you can't talk about something with me, but if you want to hide the truth from yourself, then nothing I say will help at all."

"But - "

"Fuck it. I'm hanging up. If you just want to whine, and vent, and lie, then go tell your therapist, because he's paying to listen to your bullshit. Don't bring it to me."

"Wait! Don't hang up. Please," he begs quietly. "I do need help with this, Matt. Please."

"Okay. Go. Why are Brian and Michael fighting?"

His voice drops down very low, so low that I have to turn up the volume on the phone. "Michael's angry that Brian and I haven't been... I mean, he's mad that we're..."

"That you're..."

"Barebacking."

"Oh. OH! Shit! Justin!"

"Don't start with me!" he shouts. "I know, okay! I fucking know what you're going to say, so don't even fucking start in on me!"

Breathe in. Breathe out. Don't tell your friend he's going to die. He won't listen. It won't help. Just breathe.

Just breathe and wait for a fucking explanation that doesn't come.

I can't keep waiting.

"Why, Justin? Tell me why?"

"I can't talk about that, either. Please try to understand."

"Okay, then, look at it from my perspective! My best friend comes to me, tells me that he's holding a loaded gun to his head for kicks, and sometimes he fires it, just for the thrill, but don't worry about it because nothing has happened yet! If you can walk away from that statement, you're a callous bastard. I'm not a callous bastard, Justin."

"I know."

"And it's NOT safe to fuck Brian raw. Neither of you are safe, and I want to know exactly which fairy tale you're reading to make you think you are."

He sighs dejectedly. "I told you, you wouldn't understand."

"Understand what?" I reply, venom stinging my tone. "Are you still tricking? Is he? If he said he wasn't, would you believe him? Could you believe him? When was the last time you were tested? And have you asked yourself ANY of these questions? Answer me!"

"NO! No to it all! He says he's not. He says he's too busy, and you know what? I believe him. I'm not either, and if you don't believe that, I don't fucking care." He's shouting now, self-righteously angry that I even dare to question his judgment. "He's coming back to town tomorrow, for one lousy night, and we're going for the tests on the way home from the airport. Are you happy?"

"No, Justin, I'm not," I reply sadly. "You're risking your life, and not only do you not understand why, I bet you get angry with anyone who asks. That's immature behaviour, and it worries me that both of you feel completely free to carry on with it."

"Maybe we're just tired of people underestimating us," he threatens quietly. "Maybe this is a really big fuck-you to everyone who thinks we'll never make it."

"If that's true, then on behalf of every last person who doesn't understand why the two of you are still together, I'm saying, don't make that sacrifice for ME! If you love him, and you think he loves you, then why the fuck do you care what I think? Nobody's opinion matters THAT much!"

"Well maybe we just have bigger problems!" he shouts in reply. "He's trying to deal with all this old shit from his past, stuff that I don't understand, and he won't even let me try. I'm trying to figure out why the hell I can't fall asleep without getting off on phone sex that would scare the Marquis de Sade! Compared to all of that, it's such a little thing..."

His voice hitches, followed by a quick, muted snuffle. "It's... yeah, it's probably not safe, but it's keeping us going. I'm probably gambling my life on the judgment of a man who thinks monogamous is a four-letter word. Yeah, I know that it's stupid, but I'm not going to stop. I... I need it that way."

"I'm trying to understand," I reply, wishing that I actually could.

"So am I. Look, I have to go. I have things to do before Brian gets home." He sniffs again, and I can hear the squishy liquid sound of him wiping his nose with the back of his hand. "Will you call me later?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess I will," I sigh. "We're not done with this."

"No. I know," he replies. "I think... I just think I need to talk to Alan about some of this."

"You do that. And Justin?"

"Yeah?" he says, lowly, quietly. He sounds so small and vulnerable; it makes me ache for him in a forgotten part of my heart... I'm not sure if it's just compassion, or the sickly-sweet aftertaste of a crush, but the instinct to protect him is strong.

"Take care of yourself."

"I'm trying," he says, and hangs up the phone.

Chapter 18

I missed you...

I was never that far away.

It was a bad time for you to go. I was having a hard time...

Hey, I wasn't having an easy time either.

That's not what I meant. I...just wanted to talk...I needed you here.

I'm here now. And I talked.

Not... like that.

Like this?

No, not like that, either. We have to talk about those phone calls, Brian.

I'd rather just do this instead...

Mmmm...

And this...

Ouch! I'm serious! Don't start that tonight. Please. I'm sick of always guessing what you're thinking, Brian. Listen to me, Brian, we are going to sit down and finally have this discussion.

Fuck off, Justin. Not interested.

Don't I get a say?

No. Come here, let me...

Ow! I said no, and I mean it this time.

Oooh, the little boy's got a temper... Hey! What the fuck was that for?

So you'd listen to me, asshole. We don't play because I'm little, we don't play because I'm weak, and we don't play because I'm docile. We play because we want to, and tonight, I don't... Would you just back off?!? Dammit, I said no.

Ow! Shit, somebody's growing his nails. Listen to me, little boy. I don't need your permission, and I don't need a reason. Come back here.

You talk big, but...ugh! Quit it! That really hurt!

I don't believe you.

No? Well, it felt like this...

Shit! Get off me!

Fuck you! If my no means nothing, then neither does yours.

Want to bet?

Ow! Brian, quit being an asshole! You're going to pay for that.

As if you'd really... Goddammit! If you ever hit me again...

Aw, he can dish it out, but he can't take it. Whiner.

I'll give you something to whine about...

Fucking quit it! Why are you doing this tonight?!?

Because you deserve it.

Ow! Maybe YOU deserve it! Or maybe you just want it and aren't enough of a man to ask!

I don't fucking think so... Shit, I told you to stop! Fuck you, Justin. You know the rules.

No, fuck you, Brian. You used to care about me...

Quit it...

You used to love me...

Get your fucking hands off me!

I want an answer! Do you fucking care, or are you just in it for the abuse now?

Fucker!

Brian! Stop!

Oh, fuck! Shit. Oh, shit. Justin, holy shit, I... Come back here!

Well, I guess I got my answer, didn't I?

No. It was an accident! You know I care...

I don't know shit! Look at us! Look at you. I did that, Brian.

Don't overreact... Please. Stay. Let me put some ice on that. Just don't fucking take off like this.

I can't... I can't do this anymore... it's sick, Brian, we're sick. Go take care of yourself. You're bleeding.

Fuck. Forget that, it doesn't matter... your eye...

I... I don't want to go... but...Forget it. My eye - don't worry about that. It's all right.

It's not all right...

I have to go.

Don't you fucking walk away from me, Justin!

I love you, Brian, but this... we are so sick. Take care of yourself.

Justin!!!

What can I say, Brian? If it's about winning... You don't win this time.

I can't just lie here. I have to... call someone. If I stay here, alone like this, bad things are going to happen.

The phone is up on the counter, a hundred miles away. I'm sure I can go and get it... pretty sure, anyway... but it seems like an impossible feat. If I go to the phone, I'll have to pick it up. If I pick it up, I'll have to use it. If I use it, I'll have to call someone and admit that, after what happened here tonight, it's not safe for me to be alone with myself. That's a call I just don't want to make.

When I go to stand up, my feet don't slide on the hardwood, even though it's still wet with sweat, and tinted pink from bloody exertion. I move slowly, shuffling and low to the ground, and a musky smell follows me, coppery-sharp with old adrenaline. Every now and then, something trickles down my back, sticky and crawling like defeat.

It's not defeat. I won't let that happen to me.

Never again.

My hand finally closes on the phone, and it's cold, colder than anything in this place has a right to be. After what happened tonight, everything here should be on fire, burning up with lust... or pain... or anger. I would give myself up to a fire like that. The cold isn't natural for me; it shucks me off, exists for itself and despite my efforts. It ignores me, and I can't be ignored.

The phone's in my hand, and I'd dial if I could decide which number to call. I don't really have anyone who'll understand, who will listen without prejudice... or do I? A number comes to me surprisingly easily, memorized after an uncountable number of midnight chats. Calls that I'll deny placing until my dying day, but that he would never deny receiving.

"Alan Sutherland," his sleepy voice answers after too many rings.

"Hey," I start, hesitantly. "It's Brian."

He sighs, and there's some rustling on his end. "Could you hold on a minute?"

I'm about to reply, when I hear low voices in the background, sex indeterminate. They converse quietly, and then Alan comes back on the line.

"I'm sorry about that. What do you need, Brian?"

"Did I wake you? I shouldn't have called..." I start, but he interrupts.

"I wasn't sleeping."

The way he clears his throat leaves very little doubt what he was doing. "Brian? What's wrong?"

"Why do you think anything's wrong?"

"Because every time you call me after midnight, something is wrong." Every time. He makes it sound like it happens all the... or that I constantly... Well, it hasn't really been that often. What can I say?

"I didn't mean to interrupt."

"You didn't mean to, but you did, so please make it count by telling me what's going on."

I can hear his breathing, slow and steady, and it makes me wonder exactly what it would take to rattle him.

"I don't know what to say."

And I don't. I can't explain what just happened tonight, or what's going through my head right now. I can't describe feeling helpless and hopeless and so fucking angry that I'd like to bash Justin's fucking face into the floor. So many years of not talking has made it pretty damn hard to start, but... lo and fucking behold... I think some of the shit Alan's been saying is sinking in. Like knowing when I'm more likely to put myself in danger, and recognizing the warning signs that I'm about to do something really fucking stupid. Like now.

"Brian?" he asks again. "Come on. Just let it out."

He makes it sound so fucking easy. "I... um... Something happened."

"Okay, well, let me help," he replies calmly. "Did you have a fight with Justin? Something unexpected?"

"Yeah."

"Are you physically injured?" I close my eyes at that, doing inventory.

"Some. Nothing fatal."

"Is Justin badly hurt?" Thinking about that makes me ache inside. There was no "if" in that question, no, 'Did you hurt Justin?' No, the violence is assumed, and it stops me in my tracks. Everyone always assumes I will hurt him, and this time, everyone is right. Everything we've been through just crashes into me... all the overwhelming bullshit and constant yelling and the relentless push, push, push to be the one who's taking care of him because you love him, don't you, you love him and you should be protecting him and not hurting him so why -

"Brian!" Alan's voice is harsh in my ear. "Did you kill him?"

"No!"

"Break any bones?"

"No."

"Will he live to see tomorrow?"

I don't know where he went, but I have to think he will. Have to.

"I don't know... he... he left... I don't know where he went."

"He left under his own steam? By himself, of his own free will?"

"Yes." I shift onto my hip, and the skin on my shoulders pulls and stings, but it can't compete with the crushing pain in my chest.

"If he chose to run, then you have to assume he'll be okay," he says, gently. "It's his defence mechanism. He has the right to his own feelings, and you can't control his emotions, so have the courage to give him a night on his own. Right now, you can only worry about you."

I nod into the blackness, and I think he understands. We sit quietly for a moment, listening to my ragged breaths falling into rhythm with his calmness. His question, when it comes, is focused and completely non-challenging.

"Should we be worried about you?"

I called, didn't I?

"Are you okay being by yourself tonight?"

Why does this have to be so fucking hard?

"Brian," he cajoles, "You have to vocalize this. I can't help if you won't tell me anything that's going on in your head. You really do have to make a move this time." He pauses a beat, then two, waiting for an answer that I don't want to give.

"Brian?"

"We should be worried."

"Okay." I could be wrong, but he actually sounds relieved. "Are you dressed?"

"What? No."

"Okay, do that first, then I want you to call... what's your friend's name again?"

"Michael."

"Right. Call Michael, and ask him to come over and keep you company until you see me tomorrow."

"Michael? No way," I reply, too harshly. "He doesn't want to hear from me."

"I don't believe you. The way you tell it, your life has been intertwined with his for almost thirty years! He's not going to turn his back on you in your time of legitimate need, no matter how much you pissed him off."

"I wouldn't bet on it."

"How do you know?" he replies, reasonably. "You told me you had a fight, but it doesn't sound like much more than a disagreement to me, just a little falling out. If he's been your true friend for all this time, and you, yourself believe that he has, he'll put that squabble aside when you really need him. And since you did ask me, Brian, let me assure you that you DO really need him right now. With your history, you're at very high risk tonight. It would be very prudent to have a companion."

"A companion? Fuck, you make me sound like I'm eighty."

He chuckles lowly. "Think of it this way. If you were a man without any support system at all, I'd be sending you to the emergency room and advising that you commit yourself, for your own protection."

"Commit myself? No fucking way! I'm not a headcase."

"Glad to hear it, but that's not what I meant. What I'm saying is that nobody is perfectly strong, and we all need to lean on people. It doesn't make you weak; it makes you human."

"Right - because I really want to be weak and human."

"You make me so tired sometimes, Brian. Listen to me. I think you need to call Michael. I think you need to go with your friend to neutral territory, away from the place where all of this angst happened, and talk. Or don't talk. Just spend some time with someone who will listen to everything you're not saying."

"You think... that... will help?"

"Probably not forever, but it'll get you through the night. Go call Michael, and try not to worry about Justin any more tonight. I'll see you both in the morning."

"You sure?"

"Very."

He clicks off without another word, probably hot to get back to whoever he was in bed with, and now I have to make another phone call. The phone rings through to the machine twice before a drowsy voice says, "Hello?"

"Mikey?"

"Brian? Is that you?" I don't need to be in the room to picture the events. He'll squint, look at the clock, rub his eyes, squint at the clock again. Just like he always does.

"Jesus, Brian, it's 2:21 in the morning!" Right on cue.

"Yeah." A pause, like he doesn't know what I'm going to say. "Come over."

He huffs through his nose, a sound that sounds unattractively close to a snoring dog. "No!"

If he were standing up, I know he'd be stomping.

"Brian, it's late. You can't keep doing this to me. I'm hanging up."

And I almost let him, but the alternative...

"Wait! Don't."

I hear him swallow, then surrender to his own curiosity. "What?"

His voice always softens with confusion. It's kind of comforting. It makes this easier.

"I... Alan suggested I call you."

"Who the fuck is Alan? Tonight's trick?"

The anger from earlier flashes in front of my eyes again, red like a cape in front of a bull, but hasn't got that bittersweet adrenaline high like before. I can't let it take me again, because it makes me do things I'll regret. I know that now.

"Christ, Mikey, you know I don't..." I start, but quickly decide it's a wasted effort. "Never mind. Alan is the therapist we've been seeing."

"We as in..."

"Justin and I."

"Right. I think I remember something about that."

"Whatever. Look, you need to come over."

There's a new rustling at the other end, and his voice isn't so guarded anymore. "Why?"

"Alan..."

"Jesus, Brian, spit it out! Alan what?"

One, two, three...

"Alan thinks I shouldn't be alone."

For a guy who just woke up, his reaction is damn quick, and not entirely what I expected. "Jesus! Brian, did you do something to yourself? I'm coming right over. You just stay on the phone with me, I'm going to call you on my cell and -"

"Wait."

He stops racing around, but he's still breathing hard, and I wonder how many times I put him through this, how many times I did overdose or come damn close to it... I wonder how many tricks he kicked out for me in the morning, how many nights he drove me home from Babylon when I would cheerfully have driven my drunken ass into a tree. He would never have done all of that if he wasn't a friend - obviously the best friend I'll ever have - but I've got to tell him that times have changed.

"Listen to me, Michael. I haven't done anything, and I don't really want to. Correction - most of me doesn't want to, but that tiny little 5% that does gets all the say sometimes. Do you understand?"

He huffs a little bit. "Not really."

"You're not coming to save me. You're coming to help me save myself. If you can't, I have other options... but I want it to be you."

"You wouldn't say that to Justin," he murmurs, clearly hurt.

"You don't know what I say to him. You don't know me. Fuck, Mikey... I don't know myself anymore, sometimes..."

"I do know you, Brian. I'm the one who held you all night when your dad died, and I'll do it again, any time you need me. I'll always be your best friend."

He's such a square. "It's different now."

"Of course it is," he agrees. "I changed, you changed, we all changed... but I still know you better than anyone."

I have to laugh at that. "There's a curse if I ever heard one."

"I still know that your favourite song is Piano Man..."

"Shut the fuck up! It is not!"

He chuckles an evil little snicker, singsonging, "And I know that you shaved your eyebrows off in high school and they didn't grow back for a month..."

"Liar!"

"You did, and if your drug-addled brain can think back that far..."

Five minutes ago I was ready to trash the loft, and now I'm laughing so hard I can't stop. So is he. He sniffs before he speaks.

"I'm on my way, Brian... and you know what? I'm proud of you."

"Enough with the fuzzy lezzie shit," I proclaim, but it's to empty air. He's already on his way, and it's time I got my shit together.

Jennifer

"Justin?"

Ever since the bashing, a flare of panic has preceded every observation, and every rational thought about my son. I cannot stop seeing him as my fragile child, in need of protection, and if he's not in the act of walking and talking, my heart flutters just a little bit.

So I watch.

Irritated tantrums could be a sign of stroke, of some phantom organic damage burrowed deep into his head. That tic in his eye might be nerve damage. That angry outburst could be an irrational act, and not a natural result of being analysed like a rare, fragile butterfly under glass. Then again, maybe it isn't; it might be that all of those things are just a part of him. I'll never know for sure, so I watch.

The act of observing has opened my eyes to him in so many ways, and yet... when I see him there, I'm more than a little surprised to see a grown man sleeping on my couch.

"Justin?" I whisper again. "Are you all right?"

He stirs a little, his shorts riding up a little to expose an ugly bruise on his thigh, but he doesn't wake. He must be in need of a good rest. Something I learned when he was a child is how solid a sleeper he can really be. If he's through sleeping for the night, the smell of breakfast will wake him. If not, a monsoon could hit and he'd sleep right through. That seems to be what he's doing now, and again, I think of how desperately he must need it. He and Brian have been through a lot of tough times, but he has never taken

up my invitation for unlimited, unconditional visits before. The implications of his presence, and the bruises that are visible even in the weak light, take my breath away.

I slip by him to put the coffee on and start some pancakes, hoping that he'll be awake and hungry by the time they're finished. Molly stayed at her father's place last night, and I'm thankful for the silence. Maybe I'll finally get some answers from my son.

He sleeps all the way through my own breakfast, and the front section of the newspaper, too, only making his way into the kitchen when I'm finishing up the breakfast dishes. He looks terrible. His clothes are too light for the unseasonable chill, betraying his haste in leaving the loft. I don't know where to look - at his hands, scabbed and red, his body, battered and thin, or the pattern of ugly bruises that mar his skin. The worst of all - surpassing every wound that clenches at my heart - is his eyes. Before he left us... left the safety of his home to live with his lover... there was a light inside of him. This morning it seems as though that light has gone out.

From my perch at the kitchen table, I watch him walk around the kitchen like a zombie. He doesn't say anything to me; he just helps himself to a very light coffee with a lot of sugar, and the remaining stack of pancakes still warming in the oven. He brings his plate over to the table, takes a sip of the coffee, and starts eating the pancakes one by one.

"Justin?" I prod gently after his fourth pancake. "We need to talk."

He quickly glances towards me, but sees the challenge and drops his black-ringed eyes to the table. "Can I finish my food first, please?"

"May I," I correct automatically, forgetting for a moment that I'm speaking to an adult and not my little boy. He nods wordlessly, and I allow him to finish his breakfast in silence. He puts his plate into the sink and pours himself another coffee, returning to the table, but only with a sigh. He pats his pockets for a moment, and looks up at me shyly.

"Do you mind if I smoke, Mom?" he asks softly.

"I'd prefer it if you didn't, Justin, it's a terrible habit. Very unhealthy."

He nods, but draws out a battered pack of cigarettes anyway. "I'm sorry, Mom, but it was a rough night." He lights one quickly and stealthily, as if he's sneaking it even though he's sitting right in front of me.

"I gathered that. Are you ready to talk yet?" I ask gently, rising to find the crystal ashtray that has been in my kitchen cupboards since the day after my bridal shower. It seemed at the time that shower had been made for the giving of impractical gifts, but apparently, someone in that forgotten circle of friends had more insight than I did.

He shakes his head no, exhaling smoke like a steam engine. "Not quite."

We sit in silence for several more minutes, each one announced by the ticking of the clock on the range. My patience is wearing very thin, worry overwhelming all attempts to let him take his time. He surely isn't rushing to explain his presence.

"Honey, I understand that you're reluctant to share, but you just might have to talk without being completely comfortable about it. That's just the way it is sometimes."

He drops his gaze back to the table. "I do understand that, Mom... but I can't. I can't talk to you. Not about this."

"Why don't you let me be the judge of that?" I place my hand over his, and he flinches involuntarily, as if he's resisting the urge to pull it away.

"I just can't," he replies, giving me a vague idea what this is about. It must be a sex thing.

Great.

"I think I know what this is about. I think you and Brian are having... um... intimacy problems."

His forehead wrinkles, as if shielding himself from my comment. "Mom, I'm trying to be patient. I know you care, but there are some things that I just can't discuss with you, and you have to respect that!"

He jumps up to pour himself another cup of coffee, but there's no economy in his usually graceful movements. He twists back to me several times, challenging me to speak - eyes blackened but blazing - closed off and uncommunicative and sure that I have absolutely no idea what he's talking about. Before I can say a word, he fires his warning shot.

"Besides... You wouldn't understand."

He couldn't be more wrong. I might not have guessed before now, but I know, and I do understand. I understand in that subtle way that Debbie described, the way that mothers always know their children even when their minds cannot comprehend the details. The way that parents have always known about little girls who wear their clothing too tight, and slim blonde boys who like football players more than football games.

Whether or not I can empathize with him... well, I have no answer for that. Certainly not one I can produce in the artificial time limit he marks in his head. Just like that, he turns back to the counter, and I'm dismissed. I'm sure that in his mind, it's over; I'm not a worthy conversationalist because I just don't know. How can I tell him that's not true? It makes no sense to me, neither in my heart nor in my head, but I know, and he needs to understand that.

"Justin?" I'm being ignored. I take a deep breath.

"I know he hurts you, Justin, and I know you like it."

A beat passes while he freezes mid-pour. Time lapses, but slowly. He sets the coffee carafe back in the coffeemaker after only a few drops have spilled into his cup, his back still turned. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, yes you do," I challenge from my safe haven at the table. "I already know, and I've known for some time now. Please don't insult my intelligence by trying to mislead me about it."

He grips the edge of the counter, knuckles turning white under the strain. "Who told you?" he asks quietly. "And what did they say?"

I've known for a while that one day, we'd have to have this conversation, but that doesn't make it any easier. "Justin, please come back to the table. I'd prefer not to have a heart-to-heart with your back."

Sighing, he comes back to the table, lighting another cigarette on the way. I reach across and push a lock of hair from his forehead, and he leans into my caress. His hair isn't soft anymore, not baby-soft like it was not so long ago. He seems tired, but expectant, and I'm just as eager to explain.

"I... don't know if I can describe how I know, Justin. I knew right away, I mean, I knew that Brian would hurt you the second I saw him. It's his nature."

Justin frowns, but I won't be swayed. I remember that moment, walking into the Gay and Lesbian Centre to find a man... a grown, adult man... holding my child, whispering hotly in his ear, possessive of his body in a way that left no doubt that they were intimate. My imagination went wild then, and the pictures that ran through my head... Brian teasing my baby with violence, Brian doing indecent things to my son, Brian giving Justin unspeakable pain and joy... I'm ashamed to admit it, but the simple thought of it all made me ill. Later on, I blamed my overactive imagination and tried to forget that mental picture as quickly as possible, but my heart couldn't be swayed. Once you know, you can't go back.

"His nature?" Justin's low, weary hiss escapes like a balloon. "So now it's not even his fault that he's a bad person, he's just irredeemable? Why won't anyone cut Brian any slack?" he bristles. "I don't want to hear this, I've heard it a thousand times and I'm sick of it. You don't know him."

"You're right, I don't," I agree. "But that's hardly the point. The point is that nobody needed to tell me what you... uh... what you do because YOU told me."

"I what?" he repeats dully. The wheels spin slowly in his brain as he races through all of our usual conversations, generally silly and almost meaningless in their innocence. "No, I'm sure that I didn't."

"Oh, you don't forget something like that," I respond. "It was a Saturday night, right before you left home. Your father and I were in the garage and you came strolling out, on your way to God knows where." He regards me coolly, not a hint of recognition in his face, which isn't much of a surprise. After he went down to Liberty for the first time, most of his Saturdays started like that.

"This time was different, though. Your father had just found out about Brian, and he forbade you to leave the house. He wanted to send you away to military school, to learn some discipline. What did you say to him?"

He nods gently as I speak, obviously trying to follow my train of thought. I pause for a beat, and right on cue, his face flushes with recognition.

"Do you need me to remind you? I can do that, you know, since I'm very sure I'll never forget those words. 'I know all about discipline, and you should see me take it like a man.' Now, if you heard those words from someone, what would YOU think?"

He laughs, but it's mirthless and hollow. "That didn't mean anything. I was a kid, Mom, I didn't know shit then."

"Language!"

"Sorry. I meant that doesn't prove anything."

"I don't need more proof. I don't need words to tell me what I already know."

He pauses for a moment, probably working up the courage to ask the question that's obviously in his eyes. "Mom, be honest with me. I'd forgotten that I said that, but it really didn't mean anything then. I'd never..." He flushes, pauses, starts again: "That's not enough to tell you anything for sure, but since you're absolutely convinced that you know, please - who told you?"

"Not who - what. This," I say, extending my hand halfway across the table, reaching for the sturdy-looking choker my son has been wearing without explanation for six months now. My hand has almost reached the necklace when he draws away in panic.

"Don't touch that!" he shouts, dodging my hand. I can feel my eyes open wide, and his voice drops. "Sorry... just... Don't, okay?"

"Justin, you're the one who asked. How long did you think it would be before I figured it out?"

He flushes bright red and puts his head in his hands. "God, this is humiliating. Never, all right? I thought you'd never figure it out." He starts tapping his forehead not-so-gently against the wood. "Maybe five minutes after never."

"Oh, but you're lucky I figured it out on my own, Justin," I say forcefully, trying to catch his attention. "If I hadn't, Brian would be doing time somewhere for assault."

That works. He narrows his eyes, but at least I've got his interest.

"Justin, what was I supposed to think? You started showing up with bruises on your face, on your arms, and God only knows if there were any I couldn't see. I was so worried. I tried asking everybody, but they'd just hem and haw and change the subject to something neutral. Do you have any idea how many times I ended up talking to Emmett about Barbra Streisand, for Pete's sakes? I thought you were being abused until you showed up with the choker."

He looks up in shock, and opens his mouth for the protest that I'm sure he's got ready.

"Save it, Justin. I know I shouldn't barge into your private life, and harass your friends, but I was worried. I'm your mother; I have a right to worry about you and I will continue to do so long after you think it's appropriate."

"Mom..." he whines, in a very childish and unflattering tone.

"I said save it! I was worried, and in the end, I was reduced to asking about domestic violence at a PFLAG meeting. Do you have any idea how difficult that was for me? In the last three years, I've found out that my son is gay... but not just gay, he's in love with a notorious tramp..."

"Mom!"

"...A man infamous for his, love-'em-and-leave'em, no names, no numbers, no clothing style of dating. You almost get killed, you almost drop out of school, and then... these miscellaneous bruises that you don't even try to explain. I had to have some answers, so I asked around at the meeting."

My voice almost slides out from under me. "They were so sympathetic, so ready to listen, and their sympathy... Justin, it was painful. I felt so naïve."

I look down at my hands, trying to take a deep, calming breath, hoping that my embarrassment isn't making him any more uncomfortable than he needs to be.

"I talked for an hour that day. Once I started, I couldn't stop - I told them everything I could possibly think of, about your history, you and him and everything that I just didn't understand. When I mentioned the necklace, someone finally connected the dots and explained what the choker symbolizes... What it means that you do."

The truth, lying between us on the table, is cold and awkward. He shudders a little, and frankly, so do I.

"Thankfully, someone understood. The woman who explained it to me was a PFLAG mom who... uh... participates in those activities. She'd been trying to explain her interests to her son for years, but was always too nervous. Her son felt the same way about his orientation, I suppose. As she said, 'When he came out, I did too.'"

"Wow," he whispers. I am so grateful not to have to have that particular conversation... there aren't enough Gods to thank.

"Anyway, she said the hardest thing for both of them was knowing that the other person actually had sex. Moms aren't supposed to have sex, or know anything about it. Children aren't supposed to have sex, even if they're well over the age of consent... not even if they're much older than their own parents were the first time."

He grimaces at that, and that's good. At least now the discomfort isn't all mine. He pulls back from the table in stunned silence, watching me warily. The air is heavy with knowledge, with information that I can't help but feel we shouldn't be sharing. I can't help the way I was raised, and I can't go back and change the way I raised him, either.

He was never raised to have these discussions with us, and was certainly never encouraged to be open and honest about these types of feelings. I'm just not at ease with it, and I can tell that he thinks the same way. He's fidgeting, waiting for some form of reprimand, some criticism or censure of him or of Brian that will not come. We wait together for the room to be comfortable again, and when it doesn't, he sighs.

"Look, I can't talk to you about this, okay? It's very personal. I'm just not comfortable discussing my sex life with you."

Sex life... sex life... Good Lord, I wish I didn't have to think about Justin's sex life. Most mothers get to live in blissful denial, why can't I?

"I'm not asking you to tell me everything. I just wanted to suggest that if your... interests... are causing these problems, then I think you should talk to someone about it."

"So you're suggesting another therapist?" His eyes flash dangerously. "We are walking directly into the territory of none of your fucking business."

"Justin, I am still your mother. Watch your mouth."

He grunts, and I have to take a deep breath, because this conversation isn't getting any easier. The sunrise is painting Justin with bruises, the light revealing so much of what was hidden in the shadows, and it makes me sick. It makes me want to jump up and hold him tight, and tell him that nobody will ever hurt him again. It's maternal instinct, and it's natural, but not reasonable. He's a grown man, and... no matter how much I'd like to, I can't promise that, nor would he want me to. That panicked urge to soothe his pain won't get us anywhere.

I remember that therapist I tried to take him to, right after he came out. I couldn't have chosen more poorly, and the insinuation that he wasn't whole and perfect the way he was... oh, I couldn't have made a bigger mistake. It was the wrong person and the wrong time, and I just didn't understand that my son's soul is full of land mines.

I know that now.

"I don't think there's anything wrong with you," I whisper. "I... I didn't know... I didn't know anything about any of this, about being gay and S&M and designer jockstraps... there is so much I didn't know, so how could I prepare you to know? To be okay with this? I couldn't, and so I failed - but that doesn't matter now. Now I know, and you know, and nothing that we know changes the fact that I love you, Justin. It hurts me to see you in this kind of pain. You haven't slept here in years. Are you going to tell me what's going on?"

Please. Please tell me what's wrong. Let me help.

His mouth opens helplessly, closes, and opens again, but no noises come. Finally, he chokes something out.

"I'm the one that doesn't understand, okay?!?" He puts his head down on the table, and in moments, his shoulders are shaking with sobs. "What is wrong with me? How could I do that to him? He trusted me, Mom, and I hurt him so bad..."

With that, his composure collapses, his tight control breaking into desolate cries. The rush of emotion turns him bright red as he gently rocks in the kitchen chair.

"Shhhh, baby," I soothe, instinct finally crowding out sophistication and reason. I jump up to put my arms around his shoulders, to hold him tightly and rock him like he's mine again.

"It'll be okay, honey. It will all be okay. You'll see."

Even though I don't really understand what's going on, I have to believe that this will all work out, because it's all I can believe. That's all that he wants.

Parenting Justin has never been easy.

I wish he were a child again.

I knew this morning would be long before they even sat down.

Justin came in sporting marks that any so-inclined Dom would be proud of, including a real monster of a bruise. Deep and multicoloured, it stretches clear from his left eyebrow to his jaw, and he keeps touching it gently, likely probing to make sure it's still there. At

the jawline, this brand new declaration of ownership meets up with its neighbours: the aging, nicotine-tinted bruises under his jaw that he no longer bothers to hide. From head to toe, in purples, yellows, and bilious greens, Brian has made it very clear to the world that his boy accepts kisses delivered by the fist. Justin's body is a tribute to submission itself; his very skin colour has nearly been completely altered at the whim of his Dom. Attendant with these marks are the usual black eyes, cuts, and bites, but it's that palm print on his face that we all keep looking back to. It's not my thing, but it's still sickly beautiful, and quite distracting.

Interestingly enough, today, Brian came in with some distracting wounds of his own. I don't remember him being marked at our last session, (or ever, for that matter) but in his sleeveless grey shirt, there's no covering it. Fine, fingertip bruises encircle both his biceps and his forearms. The skin on his neck and right shoulder is a mangled web of raw scratches, criss-crossing in a network of meat-red gouges that disappear under the thin material. The pattern of the marks is interesting - half look to be defensive wounds, and the other half seem to be marks of pride and possession. Needless to say, it's exceedingly rare to see these on the Dom in this type of relationship.

Make no mistake; these are not the worst injuries I've ever seen. In my eyes, anything that doesn't cause permanent, inalterable injury is pretty much okay, if it's consensual. I don't attach much personal interest to the markings, other than to comment on those of obvious artistic merit or unusually harsh beauty. I'm simply taking the time to admire the effort these two are putting into communication by cruelty, while they waste their time not communicating with me.

It's not the marks that tell me that nothing is repaired between them, or in them; it's the way they're behaving as a result of having the marks. The way they turn the worst of the damage away from me. The way they skulked into the room and sat like teenagers waiting for detention from the principal. The way that, after at least five minutes, they're still sitting together in complicit silence, scowling from the other side of my desk like high school delinquents.

In the time I've been waiting for one of them to start talking, I've alphabetized the documents in their files, played half a game of solitaire on my laptop, and picked a sesame seed out of my teeth. I get the feeling that if I don't get the ball rolling, these guys are never going to go home.

"So, it was a lot like pulling teeth to get you in here again," I start, conversationally. "You've been calling me for therapy band-aids for a couple of weeks, but once I get you in here, you do the statue act. What's going on?"

Justin shuffles and mumbles something about being busy and needing time for a project, but he's scratching at the hem of his jeans the whole time. Brian, on the other hand, quickly offers his exhaustion from travelling as an excuse.

Both of them are lying through their teeth.

In the last three weeks, I've helped them deal with so many issues, there's just no way that they can possibly be "okay." Every two or three days, my phone would ring, and there'd be a tentative voice on the other end. I helped both of them, talked and listened, and it feels like it was all a wasted effort.

"You called me, you called each other, but it didn't matter. Nothing changed." Firing those words across the desk might seem like an accusation, but it's not; it's simply the truth. "No comment?" I press.

"I don't know what you expected to see," Brian bristles. He gestures with a vague kind of awe towards Justin's spectacular bruises. "You knew this is why we had to come to you."

"You asked if anything felt different before we left the last session, Alan," Justin adds quickly, defensively. "I said it didn't."

"If you intend to tell me that everything in your relationship is the same as it was at our last session, I'm not sure I can be convinced," I reply, deftly reaching across the desk to grab at Brian's arm. He tries to snatch it away, but not before I catch it and hold it to the light, displaying several long, indented shadows that were hidden by his position - shadows that surround deeply angled claw marks.

"Defensive wounds on the Dom," I muse thoughtfully, letting Brian's baleful stare and Justin's mild horror at the discovery wash over me like sweet, warm rain. "I seem to recall bringing up this as a possibility. I also recall hearing heated promises that it would never, ever happen."

"Alan," Brian gripes, yanking his arm away with some effort. "It was an accident. I'm really not in the mood for bullshit."

"Bullshit? I don't think so," I muse. "Defensive wounds tend to result from unexpected, unplanned, or unwanted attacks. When Justin hit you, which was it?"

"He didn't..." Brian starts, but I roll my eyes and he stops. Justin touches his leg, gently.

"Brian, don't cover for me." He turns to meet my gaze, but looks down guiltily instead. "No, you're right, Alan. I did hit him." He takes a deep breath, letting his eyes wander to the curtains blowing softly at the window.

"I'd done it once before, when we were trying to teach each other a lesson in the middle of a scene. I know that it was wrong to do that, but sometimes... I just want to win, you know? He never thought I'd do it again."

"Brian? Is that true?"

He squints for a moment, breathing deeply. "I... don't know. I know that Justin has it in him. I just didn't think..."

"It was my impression that reciprocal violence wasn't part of your agreement. Was I wrong?"

They look at each other in confusion.

"This is pretty much a yes or no answer. Do you know which one it is?"

They turn to me, pained and more than a little mystified. "I don't think we do," Justin comments. "We don't have an agreement. We just go with what feels right at the time."

"And if that includes physically abusing someone with a history of child abuse..."

"It's not like that!" Justin protests loudly, and Brian grits his teeth.

"Justin," Brian murmurs. "Don't." He turns from the quaking blonde back to me. "I said that to you in confidence, Alan. It wasn't to be repeated."

"Brian, I already know," Justin sighs, exasperated. "It's not a secret that you had a terrible childhood. Everybody knows that."

Brian grumbles, "Maybe it's none of their fucking business."

"Whatever. Look, maybe Alan has a point. Maybe I need to think a little more about what I'm doing," Justin cedes. "It's something to consider."

Brian still looks agitated, as if he's preparing to tell us to fuck off and bolt out the door. And we've only been here for twenty minutes. Sounds like a change of topic is in order.

"Okay, let's put all of that away for the time being. Brian, you mentioned that you were travelling. Tell me how that's working out," I comment, loudly shuffling the notes in their folders. Might as well go slowly.

"It's... okay," Justin starts tentatively. "I'm not used to Brian being away, or being by myself in the loft, but it's not too bad."

I turn slightly to catch Brian's eye. "Any thoughts?"

He shakes his head gently. "Not really. I went home, and all my shit was still there. He didn't trash the place, either, so it's all right."

"You've been separated for how long?"

"Three weeks," Justin quickly replies. "Tomorrow, I mean. Three weeks tomorrow."

I chuckle. "Sounds like somebody's counting."

"Well, yeah," he defends. He steals a glance at Brian before returning his gaze to me. "I... don't really like it when he's gone."

"Understandable. Brian? How are you adjusting?"

He glares at me for putting him on the spot again, shifting away from me slightly, and crossing his arms in front of his body.

"It's fine."

He can say whatever he likes, that body language tells me he's trying to protect himself from me, and what I'm asking.

"I don't think so, Brian," I guess. "I don't think it's fine at all."

He shrugs and looks away, so I decide to try another tactic. "Justin tells me you call him every day. That must be helping."

"Justin," he growls, "We talked about that."

"No, we argued about it," Justin counters coolly, his discomfort betrayed only by an idle gesture towards scratching his cheek. "You said not to tell him, I said I wanted to. We didn't agree."

"Semantics," he contradicts.

"My opinion is NOT 'semantics,' Brian!" Justin spits. "What I want matters every bit as much as - "

"Guys! Please!" I interrupt, hoping to derail this minor disagreement before it picks up steam. "I'm actually glad you got into this here. The last face-to-face meeting we had was more damage control than therapy. I think I need to remind you about my role." I set down the folders, and push back from the desk slightly.

"I am here to help you learn about yourselves. We are going to use my experience and non-judgmental nature to wade through the PROFOUNDLY FUCKED UP relationship you share." Both men wince at my choice of words to emphasise.

"But I cannot, I repeat, cannot help you if you refuse to be helped. You need to be honest with me. You need to be honest with each other, and with yourselves. More than anything else, you need to understand what I can do for you, and what I can't. I cannot read minds. If you have a problem, or there's something you want to discuss, you need to actually tell me. Nod if you're listening."

They both nod, somewhat resentfully.

"Good. You also have to understand that I don't know anything about your true relationship to each other unless you tell me. What everyone else says about you is helpful, but only to a certain extent. Now that we've been introduced, and we've spoken a few times, I can already spot the discrepancies, which makes me unable to trust that information any further. That means I have to rely on you to answer my questions, no matter how much it seems like I'm prying. Still with me?"

They're still slightly on edge, but they nod again.

"Wonderful. This last point is the most important, so pay good, close attention. Ready?"

They nod.

"I AM NOT A FUCKING REFEREE!!!"

My voice echoes through my office, and the volume causes Justin to flinch involuntarily. Brian inches closer, covering Justin's knee with his hand.

"Was that necessary?" he gripes, stroking him protectively. This time, I'm the one who nods.

"Absolutely. You come to me for insight. You come into this room expecting a completely unbiased, non-judgmental opinion, which I'm happy to provide. If a disagreement crops up during a session, I have no qualms in helping to guide you through it, but I refuse to be caught in leftover games of I-said-you-said. It's a waste of my time, and yours. We need to be one hundred percent clear on that, or this is an exercise in futility."

"I understand," Justin replies, nodding slowly. Brian pats his knee, and Justin says, "We both do."

"Fabulous. Now, let's really get into it. Are we starting with old problems or new ones?"

"Both?" Justin asks hopefully.

Brian raises an eyebrow. "How long are you planning on staying?" he drawls, lighting a cigarette. "This isn't exactly how I planned to spend my day off."

"Well, you should have," Justin mutters, drawing away. "I fucking hate having to drag you to shit all the time."

"Is that true, Brian? Did he have to drag you in here?"

"No," he grunts sullenly. "He nags worse than Mikey - usually about shit I already plan on doing."

"If that's true, then why do you let him do it?" I prod, watching him squirm and try to form an ego-saving response.

"I don't do anything that I don't want to," he says, "But... I do give a shit how he's feeling. If something is really important, I'll be there. I thought he would have figured that out by now."

Justin rolls his eyes. "And that's why you call me every day? Because you're so concerned about my feelings? I don't know if I believe that. You don't call anyone else."

"You're not everyone else."

The comment hangs in the air, Justin blushing at the implication while Brian looks angry at being outed. Soon, though, he chuckles and rocks his head back on his neck.

"Alan, you're too good at this."

I smile, letting the praise go straight to my head like the bubbles in champagne. "I really didn't do a lot there, but thanks, guys. That's what I'm here for..." I bow a little bit, write some notes, and restart.

"So, to clarify, Brian calls every day, and you, Justin, are happy to get the call."

"More than once," Justin mumbles, and Brian squeezes his eyes tightly closed.

"Pardon?"

"Brian..." he says mournfully, his gaze fixed firmly on the floor. "We have to talk about those calls at night. It's... it's weird, Brian, I mean, the stuff we say, it's so bad..." He puts his hands over his face, then leans down to rest his elbows on his knees.

"Brian, can I hear your opinion on this? Bad in what way?"

His eyes shift right and left, as if to avoid the issue, or to make up a really good lie. When he finally settles on a word, I can see his whole body become still.

"Violent. Very violent."

"Your physical relationship is and has always been pretty rough, hasn't it?" I prod.

"Violence... that's not really all that new for you two."

"Not like this," Justin sighs, and Brian taps his fingers against the chair.

"Okay, so not to this extent. I take it that the fantasies are going further than reality?"

Brian's eyes lock onto mine. "I fucking hope so. Snuff is not on the menu."

"Good to hear. Justin, could I please have your attention for a moment?"

They both look at me, and I make very sure to speak slowly and clearly.

"I know that you're both new to communicating these kinds of needs to people, so I'll be plain, and forgive me for sounding condescending. The whole idea behind BDSM and fantasy play, is to push past all your physical and emotional limitations. Fantasies are stories... images that live in the imagination. It's a way for the spirit to drift outside of reality for a little while, and absolutely everybody does it sometimes. Given mankind's devotion to art, music, and literature, it's pretty obvious that we all try to spend as little time in the real world as we can manage."

They're still paying attention, so I use that opportunity to continue.

"There is nothing evil or sick in having violent fantasies. You are not responsible for where your mind wanders when you're hot and trying to get off. There are a lot of logical, rational psychological reasons why people have these kinds of dreams, these desires to annihilate and be annihilated, but we can go into that later. What you need to monitor is what you do about those violent urges. Are you acting them out safely, sanely, and consensually? Can you accept that there are boundaries that cannot be crossed? I'm not saying, 'respect the limits of the community,' because that's not realistic. I'm saying, discuss your own limits, come to an agreement to abide by them, and respect that agreement. Whatever it might involve."

"I think... that might be a conversation... that we have in here," Justin says after a moment's pause. Brian raises an eyebrow, and Justin rushes to add a comment.

"Not right now. I mean, eventually. When we're a little better at this talking thing."

"Okay," I agree. "Brian, how are you feeling about the fantasies? Better?"

"I never really felt that bad about it," he deadpans, looking out the window.

"You're not the greatest liar, Brian, you shouldn't try it with me," I admonish. "It's my job to know when something is being covered, and when to dig. The deeper you hide it, the harder I want to push to find it, so don't do it on purpose."

"Fine," he says coldly. "I was getting worried, but now, I'm not. Happy?"

"Peachy!" I smile. "Now, let's take a cleansing breath and move on. I'm assuming that's the new issue."

"No, the new issue is, 'Where did Justin sleep last night?'" Brian taunts.

"Fuck. Here we go..." Justin moans, dropping his head into his hands. "Can't you just let it go? Let me have some space?"

"Christ, how much fucking space do you need? I've been gone for three goddamned weeks!"

Justin bristles.

"Maybe, when you were gone, I started thinking about things, Brian. I haven't had space in my own head since I was seventeen fucking years old! I've been taking care of you for three years, but I haven't been responsible for myself. I don't know how I feel about so many things!"

Brian shifts away, muttering, "Like fuck you've been taking care of me."

Justin snorts. "I take care of you, you take care of me, and how well is that turning out? You said it yourself, it's time to get our shit together, and you know what? I can't do that with you hanging over my shoulder. I need time. I need space to think. I need to know if the road I'm on is the one I want to follow! The last nine, ten months of our lives has been hell, full of pretend sacrifices and hiding, so much hiding..."

"Justin - "

"Brian, it's not you. It's just not about you this time, okay? I've been hiding from myself. Did you know I have an art show in two weeks?"

"No, I - "

"Two more fucking weeks to produce four canvases, and I haven't taken the time to do it because I've been on a bender with you."

"Oh, no you fucking don't! You can't blame me, I'm never home. And I never told you not to do your project - "

"You just don't get it, do you? We have all these problems, but it's not about US. It never was, and since it's not, we can't fix them together. I think it's about you and about me, and we're never going to be able to heal if we don't take some time to work on them. Separately."

Justin jumps up and stalks to the door, turning as his hand hits the handle. "Alan, thanks for clearing up that phone call thing. It was really bugging me."

Brian turns in his seat to face Justin, his expression face granite, unyielding. Justin's isn't, and he has tears in his eyes.

"Brian... please, please understand me. You know I love you. I'm not leaving you. I just need some time, okay? Just a little time."

He leaves, and Brian moves as if to follow him. That's my cue.

"Brian, no."

He turns to me, challenging, but I don't back down. "Let him go. Stay and tell me why you keep repeating the same old behaviours, over and over again."

"What?" he asks, clearly distracted by the shadow of Justin's retreating form.

"Look, I see a pattern emerging here, and it's not pretty. It's casual violence with no sexual payoff. Abuse that has no relation to scenes."

His eyes cloud. "Are you telling me I'm abusing him?"

"No, I'm telling you that you're both willing to put up with unnecessary violence because it's easier than having long discussions. Especially about the past. It's time to get into it, or you're never going to be happy"

He nods, staring intently at the wood veneer on the desk. "I know that."

"I'll bet that a hundred people have told you Justin has post-traumatic stress disorder, right?"

He nods.

"You want to know a secret?"

He looks up, vaguely interested.

"I think you do, too."

Chapter 19

On Friday night, Brian returned from the most recent leg of his trip to find Justin eager to discuss an uncomfortable subject. After an unusually violent fight, Justin walked out. Brian called Alan in a panic, unsure if he could make it through the night with only his thoughts to keep him warm. Alan suggested Brian should call Michael for comfort and company; Michael was supportive and told Brian how proud he was of him for asking for help.

Meanwhile, Justin spent the night on his mother's couch, awaking to a curious but understanding Jennifer. To Justin's horror, his mother revealed that she knew the men

were in a BDSM relationship, and the very uncomfortable discussion after that revelation covered several taboo topics. Jennifer expressed regret for all the mistakes she'd made surrounding Justin's upbringing and coming out, and Justin expressed regrets of his own - that Brian had trusted him to be in control, and never to hurt him, and he'd betrayed that trust. He collapsed in tears, sure that he'd failed Brian in the one way he never expected to.

The men arrived at their regularly-scheduled appointment with Alan, but Alan immediately perceived that something had changed. He catalogued the extensive injuries to Justin and Brian both, and when they refused to share their feelings, he called their bluff and demanded their co-operation. Brian admitted that he hadn't really expected Justin to strike back; in turn, Justin admitted that he'd done it thoughtlessly, without considering the repercussions. Their minds were soothed on the issue of their increasingly twisted fantasies, but when Brian forced the issue of Justin's hasty departure, Justin exploded. He revealed that he'd been neglecting his own needs - denying himself for the sake of keeping Brian together. Brian defended his actions, stunned at Justin's tirade from left field. He was even more surprised when Justin asked for time to be alone, and walked out of the session. The final blow fell when Alan revealed that he thought Brian was a PTSD sufferer as well, leaving Brian in astonished silence.

Brian

"You think I have PTSD? I thought you said you couldn't diagnose," I stammer.

"I can't, but I'm not blind, Brian."

He's so calm... so fucking calm... it makes me want to shatter it with my fist. Or my mouth.

"I don't think I'll be taking medical advice from a man who isn't even a licensed therapist."

He shrugs gently. "The only reason I'm not an actual therapist is that I failed stats in college, and missed my degree. You decide if that makes me unable to read the Diagnostic Manual. When it comes to PTSD, I know the signs and symptoms, and more importantly, I recognize them when I see someone acting them out."

"I don't believe it."

He shrugs again. "Whether or not you believe it isn't up to me. Like most everything in life, that's entirely your decision, as well. I understand why you're reluctant - I'd guess it's hard to accept that you have an actual, definable illness, as opposed to... what? I don't know what you think of yourself. Maybe you think it's a quirk of your personality that you act like an asshole all the time. Maybe you think that's just the way you are, and people love you for it. Whatever. I have no idea."

This... is too much. I need a drink. I need is to get out of here. No, what I need to do is to explain to this fucker that I'm not sick. I'm not like that.

"I'm not a head case."

"I'm not saying you are. I'm saying that I think you fit the diagnostic criteria, and given what I know about your history of abuse, I can't rule it out."

I did not come to hear this. He's wrong. He has to be. "Don't tell me that because I fit some pattern..."

"Fine, I won't," he replies sharply. "We can pretend that it's normal to be transported into horrible, disjointed memories, to see and feel and smell but not remember why. We can pretend that it's perfectly fine to be unable to relax without getting wasted. We can even pretend that nobody expects to live past thirty, if you want. But you have to realize that we'll be pretending, Brian, because all of those things are NOT normal."

"Fuck normal." I shout, a little louder than I intended. "I'm just being myself."

He shakes his head and sighs. "Are you listening to me at all, or am I wasting my time?"

Do I want to sit here and listen? More importantly, do I want to go home and face an empty loft?

No.

"Fine. Go ahead."

"Okay. I'm going to start way back at the beginning. People think that your personality changes over the course of your lifetime, but at its core, that's not entirely true. Part of it is determined by genetics, the other part is environmental, and it's generally set while you are a child - a result of events that happen in your childhood."

"You're saying that people don't change."

"That's not true at all... people do change, constantly, by small gradients. Sea changes of personality can only come as a result of one of two things - conscious, ongoing efforts, or a strongly traumatic event. Like the bashing, for instance."

I could go the rest of my life without ever hearing that word, ever again. I have a mental list of things I'd rather do than talk about it, and I'm adding new entries all the time. I'd rather tattoo "I love pussy" on my own forehead with a ballpoint pen. I'd rather listen to lesbian talk shows. I'd rather go shopping for underwear with Melanie.

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Then we won't. It probably wasn't the bashing that caused it, anyway."

"No shit."

"Yeah, 'no shit'," he mocks. "You can't blame something that happened two years ago for a lifetime of poor behaviour."

"So what can I blame?" I ask with a smirk, and he replies with such a fucking benevolent grin that I want to hit him. Again. What is with that?

"Let's see," he starts, wrinkling his nose while he starts the list. "Unwanted assaults are a frequent cause: Muggings, rapes, or child abuse of any kind. Watching someone else being attacked. Anything that makes a person frightened, powerless, and unable to protect himself can potentially be the culprit. Any of that ring a bell?"

"Maybe." I'd love to shoot him with a smart-ass remark, but it's just not working. Nothing comes to mind as quickly as the truth. "I... uh... It's not me, I mean it wasn't about me, but I have these dreams, sometimes. It starts with my sister and I. We're in her room, and suddenly my father comes in drunk. He..."

I'm trying to tell him something, tell him about the dreams that just won't fucking go away, but I can't. My throat starts to hurt, and my forehead beads with sweat.

"He's angry, and I hide while they... while they... shit. She sucks him off while I'm in the room..."

I have to stop and take a deep breath, because all of a sudden, the office gets very, very tight. Alan looks at me expectantly, and I force myself to go on.

"I have the dream all the time... but I can't remember anything like that ever happening. And I think I would remember, wouldn't I?" I'm shivering, shaking off the memories crawling across my body like vicious red ants. "I would fucking remember if my father was fucking his own daughter, wouldn't I?"

Alan nods gently. "Come on, Brian, breathe. In through the nose and out through the mouth. Nothing can hurt you here, so just breathe. I won't go on until you say okay."

After a futile battle to light a cigarette, I feel drained enough to actually sit and breathe with him. Finally, I nod and he continues. "Would you remember your father abusing your sister? I can't say that for sure. Have you asked her about it?"

"Yeah," I say, kicking at the leg of the desk. "She says it never happened."

"That's one of the worst parts of PTSD," he says. "You may never remember the events that caused the syndrome to set itself up. Actually, the worst part is that the things you DO remember may not actually be true."

"Shit." What else can you say about that? "So... You're saying that I'm making it all up?"

"Not at all. You've very obviously suffered a series of traumas in your life, Brian, and I think they might have caught up with you. You've functioned passably well in public, and for a number of years, but nobody can fight something of this magnitude forever. It was only a matter of time until you couldn't soldier through on your own any longer."

"So why now?"

"I can guess, Brian, but like I said, you may never know exactly why you became symptomatic. Plenty of people don't," he says apologetically. "Look, since I've been seeing you and Justin, I've been doing some reading - it's really quite rare for two PTSD survivors to be in a relationship over the long term, because most survivors find that their symptomatic behaviour is cyclic."

"Meaning?"

"It's at its worst when you're in a stable and protected environment. The more drama in your life, the easier it is to function, because symptomatic behaviour gets suppressed when you're in a battle to keep your life on an even keel. On the other hand, when everything is calm, and you're surrounded by people who love you, there are a lot fewer distractions. You may have memories that seem as real as you and me talking here, but aren't factual. You may remember the events perfectly, but not the people who were there. All of that is normal."

"Normal? Sounds pretty fucked up to me," I say, finally lighting that cigarette.

"Normal is relative. If you think those things sound fucked up, that's because it is. It's a real disorder, Brian, a real illness that requires medical attention. I'll say one thing: the prognosis for people with untreated PTSD is pretty bleak. They tend to make a lot of suicide attempts, and I don't have to tell you that practice makes perfect."

"No, you don't." Because I've practiced plenty on my own, and I know that what he's saying is true - if I were to try it again, I'd succeed.

I can feel it, and I don't want it. "So what happens now?"

"I'll help you choose a psychiatrist, who will likely start you on medication and talk therapy. Over time, as you confront your memories, you'll work on breaking down your senses of denial and dissociation. It's pretty gruelling."

"And I'd want to do this because..." I prompt.

"I can't tell you that, Brian," he sighs. "That wanting has to come from inside you. You have to decide if you love your life the way it is. If you love yourself. If you want to

spend the rest of your life lost in your own head. I can tell you one thing, though - I don't know how you've gone on as long as you have. I couldn't do it, and I wouldn't. Not only would my family and friends deserve better from me... I'd deserve better from myself."

Later that evening...

"Justin, don't be stupid! Come home."

"I can't."

"Why?"

"Because I always do. I'm always chasing you. I'm like a junkie coming back for a fix, over and over again."

"Is that what you think?"

"That IS what I think, and it's not right, Brian. It's no way to live my life. I always wander back, I always say I'll stand up for myself and the things I need, and somehow... I don't. I don't get around to defending my own dreams! It's so sad."

"But..."

"Look... I'm not blaming you, because it's not your fault. It was different before. I was different before, but you need to understand that it's never going to be that way again, because I can't be this person. I don't know myself anymore, and what I do know, I don't like. I'm sorry. I'm rambling. I just can't keep pretending that everything is okay."

"Fine."

"Brian... Don't be like that. Don't sulk. Say something."

"What do you want me to say?"

"I don't know, say anything! Just don't sit there and pout. You have no fucking reason to feel hurt! I was hoping you'd at least try to understand what I'm doing."

"Uh... right. I'll get right on it."

"And don't be an asshole, either."

"Fine. I'll think about it. I'll have time. I'm leaving for New York in the morning."

"Have a safe trip."

"Justin..."

"I'm not coming with you."

"I didn't ask!"

"Yes you did, in your 'I'm Brian Kinney, and I don't ask for anything, but I let you think it's your idea, and benevolently go along' kind of way. What do you want from me? Do you want me to run back there and lie to your face? Pretend I'm okay; pretend we're okay? It's cowardly. I won't do it."

"We are okay."

"Don't do this to me, Brian."

"Say it."

"Brian, please... don't."

"You're the one with the words. Say it."

"We're... yeah, we're okay. You know I'm not mad at you. I'm trying to give us some space to work this out."

"Good. Did I mention that I'm taking Michael to New York with me?"

"Asshole!"

"What the fuck is wrong with that? You don't want to come, but you don't want anyone else to go either? That's fucked. Are you still mad at him?"

"No."

"Well, what then? What else am I supposed to do?"

"I don't know... I know he's your friend and all, but I don't understand why everyone always has to be in our business. Don't expect me to be happy about it."

"I don't. I expect you to understand what I'm doing."

"Don't use my words against me. It's not fair."

"Sometimes they're the only ones I've got."

"I know... Just... Let me go, Brian. I need to get to work on those canvases."

"I'm not trying to keep you from working. I never wanted to."

"I hope you mean that."

"Yeah."

"Okay... then..."

"Yeah. Okay."

"I need to go. Later, Brian."

"Right. Later."

Matt

"Justin," I call, banging on the door. "JUSTIN! OPEN UP!"

"Matt, hang on," he calls from the other side of the door, throwing the locks at high speed. "Just hold on a minute, I'm almost... there."

He slides the door open, but I don't go in. I can't. He looks like a crash victim. He has a raw, angry-looking bruise the size of Brian's hand covering the entire left side of his face. It's the colour of rotting meat, and it makes me sick, or sad, or something else that I can't easily identify.

"Please don't start," he murmurs, touching his fingers softly to his cheekbone. "Just don't."

I nod uneasily, and he smiles a brief thank-you before I come in. "Way to answer the door on time," I grumble amiably, swallowing my disgust so hard, I feel it slide down my throat. "I thought you were going to leave me out there for a week."

"Drama queen," Justin laughs shakily, turning back to the living room. "Grab a drink if you want it."

"Thanks," I say, heading for the refrigerator currently blocked by... Emmett?

"Emmett!" I exclaim, rushing over for a hug. "What are you doing here?"

He proudly holds up his hands, smudged with dried white paint. "Justin needed a hand with his canvases," he explains, "And since I have the day off, I told him I'd help."

It's only then that I realize almost the whole loft has been turned into a studio. The rug is rolled up and resting vertically against a wall. The furniture is bunched in a corner, and

draped with drop cloths; every surface that could ever remotely come into contact with paint has been carefully swathed in plastic. Sitting in the centre of this open space are four canvases, all of them in progress.

"Wow..." I breathe, struggling for the right words. "This is an amazing... mess. Brian's going to kill you."

"Brian won't know," Emmett supplies confidentially. "He and Michael are in..." dramatic pause... "New York."

"New York?"

"The last leg of his trip," Justin says, squeezing grey paint onto a palette. "Brian will be there for two weeks. I think Michael just went for the weekend." His fingers milk the tube, a little anxiously, before he sets it down. "I don't care."

"Don't care as in, 'I'm happy my partner has someone to keep him company during a difficult trip,' or don't care as in, 'The fucker can rot in Hell and take Michael with him?'"

Emmett discreetly holds up two fingers, but when Justin spins around to catch his gesture, he drops his hand and smiles innocently. From the counter in front of him, Emmett picks up a wide paintbrush, fanning the feathery bristles through his fingers. "I still don't understand why you're here and not there."

"Because I have to finish these paintings. I have thirteen days to cover all of these," he says, sweeping his hand expansively over the large canvases. "I have no theme, I'm awkward with oils, and my hand cramps up on me all the time. I may be the slowest painter in history. I can't afford to take off for the weekend."

"What'd he do?" Emmett and I reply in unison, making him roll his eyes.

"Can't this be about me?" Justin glares. "Not everything is about what Brian has or hasn't done."

"Since when?" I counter, circling the large canvases, some of which have been marked with the faintest of pencil lines. "You'll feel better if you tell us."

He picks up a tube of inky black paint from a box, and squeezes it onto his palette. "I don't really want to talk about it."

"Maybe you don't, but I do!" I sigh, coming to stand toe to toe with him. "You are NOT doing this to us again. I'm tired of being emergency counselling, without ever being allowed to tell you what I really think! You look like SHIT, Justin! Are you listening to me? He beat the living shit out of you this time, and not in that erotic but deranged way that you're so fond of."

"Matt..."

"It's sick," I spit derisively. "This isn't sex play, this is abuse, and you're too fucked in the head to figure it out for yourself."

"You should see Brian," Emmett mumbles under his breath as he slips by me, collecting up dirty paintbrushes.

"Emmett..." Justin groans, but it's too late.

"Brian? BRIAN?!? What the fuck did you do to Brian?" I rail in frustration. "You used to be such a good person. Such a strong person. Now you're whaling on your boyfriend too? Christ."

"It's not like that!" he shouts, slamming his palette onto a box he's using as a table. "I'm not an abusive person, and you know it, Matt. You know how far I was pushed."

"It's not like you didn't see it coming. And the worst part is that you knew Brian had to leave town again, so there would be no way of working it out in therapy."

He shrugs helplessly, the few patches of clear ivory skin on his face blooming into an aggravated flush. "I didn't time it on purpose!"

"It's still the weekend," Emmett says. "We can scrape up enough for a fare to New York. You could meet up with Brian, talk it out a little bit..."

"Maybe I don't want to!" Justin growls, tossing the tube of paint still in his hands onto the wooden crate as well. "LOOK at me, guys! Even I'm not stupid enough to think I know what I'm doing this time. Maybe you don't understand... Fuck, maybe I don't understand. Maybe I never did, because I would never, ever in my life have bet that I'd hit Brian. I'm not the person I thought I was..."

"You're not a bad person," Emmett starts, but Justin holds up a paint-smudged hand.

"I'm not saying that. I'm saying that I need some time to think about myself, and my life, and figure out how to get my shit together. And maybe whether or not I can even have a life with Brian in it."

"Sounds pretty serious," I say, more than a little surprised that after all this time, and everything they've been through, it's come down to this. "Is that really a decision you can make without Brian?"

"Matt, if there was ever a time to make a decision by myself, this is it. People tell me I'm young now, but I'm twenty years old, and three years in. This problem started so long ago, I don't even remember when or how anymore. I was a kid, and I knew nothing. I didn't have enough life experience to make some of the decisions I've been asked to

make," he replies angrily, gesturing toward the disgusting, rotten-meat-coloured bruise on his cheekbone. "Do I want to walk around looking like this for the rest of my life?"

"Of course you don't, sweetie," Emmett soothes. "You take all the time away from Brian you need."

I shake my head in confusion. "Maybe nobody else has been paying attention here, but I have. You can't blame Brian for where YOU are emotionally. Sure, you're fucked up, but it was a joint effort. It's not fair to blame him for all of it."

"I'm not, and I don't! I should have known better! I don't need this in my life," he mutters. "I have a chance to stop it, right here, right now, and that's what I need to think about."

I still can't look at him for very long. That bruise makes me ill. "If you want my opinion, you can try leaving him, but I don't think that will solve your problem. Look at what happened with Brian and Andrew. Brian left, and when he tried to bury his need for the power game, it fucked him up real bad. It'll do the same to you."

"I don't need it the way he does. I don't need what he does," he defends.

"No shit. You need it more than he does, and harder!"

He glares at me, but continues. "This is nothing like what happened with Brian and Andrew. James fucked Brian up on purpose. There is no third party here. Nobody is in this but Brian and I."

"Some would argue that's two too many," Emmett interjects softly, swishing the brushes in a jar of varsol.

"I'm getting ready to join that club," I agree. "What you're thinking of doing really isn't fair to him. I have no doubt that he loves you, Justin, just as much as he has ever loved another human being, and in every way that he knows how. You encouraged him to open up, and now that you've seen what's inside, and that he can't help to fix you until he fixes himself, you're getting ready to bail. None of that is his fault."

"So now you're on Brian's side?" he retorts. "Thanks. Some fucking friend you are."

"Side? There are no sides! You forget that when he used to do stuff you couldn't handle; I'm the one who got the call. Me. I know your secrets. I know how far you pushed him, and how much further you wanted him to go. Don't stand here and tell me that you're afraid of him, or that he pushed you into this when I know damn well it was sometimes the other way around."

"I'm not saying that, okay? I know it was my decision. It was always my decision," he says, thoughtfully. "But it was a decision I wasn't ready to make, and now that I've gotten myself into this mess... it's time to take a step back. Do you have any idea how many

people ask me why I'm with Brian? And you know what really sucks? I don't know! I hate myself for it sometimes. He's such an asshole, and nobody knows that like I do. He'll do anything to avoid a conversation, and God forbid someone finds out that he's human, that he hurts sometimes, too. I mean, Christ. Nobody acts like that. I want to fucking smack him sometimes."

"You did," I deadpan, and Emmett glares.

"Matt, you're not helping," Emmett hisses. "Justin... If it's so hard, then why ARE you with him, honey?" he asks carefully, selecting a new handful of brushes to swish in the jar of muddy-brown liquid.

"I love him," he replies simply, picking up his palette again and dragging a fine brush through the black. "I don't want to, you know."

He touches the brush tip gently to the palette, following the curve of a pencil mark with a delicate touch. "There's a better match for me out there somewhere, I'm sure of it."

Very slowly, the blackness begins to take shape. He paints a few strokes, switches colours or brushes, and starts again.

"Someone artistic, and loving..."

Mauve joins the black in the centre of the canvas.

"A man who remembers birthdays and anniversaries..."

Inky blue-black gets swirled around the shapes.

"Someone who doesn't fuck other guys right in front of me..."

Pale grey layers around the mauve and the black, the shapes suddenly identifiable as a person. The person.

"That's Brian," I pronounce, as if we don't know that already.

"I know," Justin sighs, picking up a wide, flat brush and blacking over the image. "That happens every single time I try to start one of these paintings. I just can't fucking stop with him, can I? When I was asking for someone to love, I didn't ask for this, but now... it won't let go. It's the worst curse ever, a love you don't want but can't let go."

"So you won't leave Brian because..."

"I don't want to."

He steps back, looking at the wide, black canvas in frustration. "And that, gentlemen, is my fucking problem in a nutshell. I love him so fucking much... and what does that say about me?"

Michael

Okay, so I'm in New York with Brian. Even though I should be running the store, even though I could be lying in bed with Ben, I'm checking into a generic hotel room with my best friend. Once again, he called, and I ran. Maybe I'll always run when he calls. Who knows? It doesn't bother me as much as it used to, now that I know I'm not being used. We both know I'm not anything more than a supportive friend, and there's a big relief in knowing where we stand.

We didn't talk about much of anything on the entire drive up here. He wanted to be quiet, and for the most part, I let him. I mean, we talked, but not about anything important. Like why I'm here. Or why Justin isn't.

It isn't until we're actually in the hotel room that I even bother starting a conversation. He's lying on his back, on the bed. Eyes closed, just breathing really deeply. It seems like a good time to begin.

Standing at the end of the bed, I nudge his knee with mine. "When do I get to know why I'm here?" I joke, and he smiles with his eyes still closed. I nudge him again, and he shifts right on the bed, leaving the left side open for me. I lay on my back beside him. The bed shakes a little when he sighs.

"You can ask whatever you want, but that doesn't mean I'm going to answer," he replies in a tired voice. "I guess I owe you for dragging you up here."

"What happened to Mister, 'You shouldn't do anything you don't want to do'?"

He chuckles softly. "I've discovered that only works as long as you don't give a fuck about anyone's feelings. Call it the unattainable ideal."

"Okay then," I agree, propping myself on one elbow so I can look at him while we're talking. "If you're offering information, I'm taking. Why isn't Justin here?"

He snorts. "More than one reason for that."

"Well, start with the easy one, then."

"He's got an art show the weekend after next, and nothing to show. He keeps telling me how upsetting it is, as if it's my fault he hasn't done anything." There's a pause, and then he sighs again. "But that's not it. He wouldn't have come even if I'd asked him to."

"You didn't ask?" I say, frowning in confusion. "Why not?"

"I don't know..." he says, almost irritated to have to think about it. "When I'm out on these trips, I do pretty fucking well without him. I'm hitting all my targets, or surpassing them. I've brought in a half million dollars' worth of new business. Why should I fuck with a good thing?"

"But don't you miss him?"

"What, now?" he hedges.

I shake my head. "Now, then, whenever. You live with him. You fuck him constantly. Don't you miss that, at least?"

"Mikey, do you understand what I do here?" He turns onto his side, facing me but staring at the wall past my head. "I work sixteen fucking hour days when I'm away. I wake up, shower, go to work, come home, and fall into bed. I don't have time to miss anyone. Anything."

"You don't trick?"

He looks at me. "I seriously don't have the time."

"Wow." My mind spins at that. Brian saying he doesn't have time to fuck is like saying he doesn't have time to breathe. "Speaking of fucking, did you get your tests done yet?"

"Yeah."

"And?"

He smirks at me. "Calm the fuck down, Mikey. They said they'd call."

"Well? Don't you feel better?" I say, parroting his condescending smirk. He laughs.

"Why, because I let them jab me? I still don't know anything."

"Has Justin?" Brian's face clouds at the mention of his name, but he answers.

"Yeah. He doesn't know yet either."

Brian fishes a joint out of his pack of cigarettes, lights it, and sits back against the headboard. We rest there, silently, watching the lights from outside reflected on the ceiling and passing the joint back and forth. At some point, I remember my original question.

"So... DO you miss him?"

"Do I miss him? No. Yes. Sometimes. I don't know."

"Well, thank you for clearing that up," I giggle, and he snorts.

"For a really long time, I never paid that much attention to him. It's like being back to that."

"Like when he first started coming around?" He nods.

That was a long time ago. So long, I hardly remember. "Weird."

"No kidding," he grunts, blowing out a thick stream of bluish smoke. "Only he's not the same as he used to be, or he says he's not." He stops, abruptly, and takes another hit off the joint. I wait for him to continue, but he doesn't, so I ask.

"Does it bother you?"

He squints against the smoke. "Does what bother me?"

"Do you want him to be the same?"

"Why are you asking?"

"Because I don't think you know what you want."

"What difference does it make?"

"How can he be what you want when you don't know what that is?" He passes me a joint, and I take a small hit off it before passing it back. "Wait, I think I just confused myself with that one. Forget it. I've got a better question - why did you let him hit you?"

"I didn't let him."

"Bullshit." I try staring him down, but the room is starting to rock gently from side to side, and it's hard to keep his gaze. "I saw the marks."

"So?"

"Just tell me what you were thinking."

"I wasn't." He sighs, and stubs out the roach in the ashtray. "It's not something I can explain."

"Well, he shouldn't have hit you."

He lays his head back against the headboard. "What we did wasn't right. By the end, we were just out for blood. I don't blame him for defending himself... I thought he might, sooner or later."

"So the best defence is a good offence? Is that how it works?"

"Don't look at me, I have no idea how it works!"

"Well, that's not how they do it in the movies."

"I know. Fuck, maybe it's really not all right, but what could I say? 'It's okay for me to hit you, but not for you to hit back?'"

"Maybe it's not right for either one of you. Have you considered not hitting him at all? You could try using your words... it works for toddlers, it might work for you too."

He snorts. "Ha ha. Funny."

I don't laugh. "I'm serious. This... you... I don't know this Brian. I'm not sure I want to."

Somehow, I've stunned him into attention. He rolls back onto his side, looking at me with those glittery, bottle green eyes, more confused than hurt. "What makes you think you get a say in any of this? Everything was going crazy. I did what I could to keep it under control."

I used to wither under his stare. He could melt me like an ice cube in Tahiti, and slurp up what was left in a single breath. I never was able to stand up to him, because I really, really thought he knew what he was doing. That he always had it 'under control,' as he says. The few times that his control faltered, I thought it was a fluke, and I was so flattered that he chose me to help him glue it back together. I regret doing it, now, because that means I hold some responsibility for how he turned out. I helped to create this monster, and just like I helped him construct it, I have to help him destroy it.

"Brian? I have an idea for you. Instead of keeping everything under control, why don't you just try to control yourself? You know, control yourself, and let everyone else do the same?"

"What?"

"Let us make our own decisions. Stop working in the background."

He squints, and then closes his eyes. "I don't do that."

"Of course you do, whether you know it or not. I don't think it's doing you any favours. You look tired."

He sighs.

"Are you tired, Brian?"

He sits, very still, breathing deeply and slowly. Finally, the tiniest incline of his head indicates a yes.

"It's okay."

Silence.

"You'll figure it out. You and Justin, I mean. You'll sort it all out."

"I'm not so sure, Mikey." The air hisses out of him, his breath held far too long. "I don't know how to get through this."

"It's different this time, isn't it?"

"Everything is different. He's different, I'm different. I don't even know if we had a fight or not."

"How can you not know if you had a fight?"

"It's complicated."

"You want my opinion?"

"Do what you want."

"You act like you don't care, and manipulate things to your benefit behind the scenes, and that's your thing. Justin goes along, but he's sort of... disapproving, I guess. Nothing's ever good enough unless it's exactly his way... and that's his thing. In a very short time, those things that used to be YOU have completely changed - you're tired of hiding everything, and he's tired of going along. No wonder you're confused... Either you'll figure yourselves out, or you won't... You'll probably stay together either way. The question is for how long."

He drops his head onto my shoulder. "You really think that?"

"Yeah."

"When the fuck did you get so smart?"

"You never listened to me for this long before." I don't know about him, but the weed was good and I feel totally peaceful. I've half-fallen asleep when I remember my question from the car.

"Justin told me you want me to be your friend because you love me and don't want me to leave you. Is that true?"

"He said that?" Brian mumbles, settling further onto my shoulder.

"Yes, he did. He told me you love me. Is that true?"

"Mikey..."

"Brian, it's time. Hell, its fifteen years past time. You have to tell me."

He yawns. "Why now?"

"Because I'm asking you, as a person who cares about you, to let me know that I haven't been wasting my time."

"Wasting your time?"

"We're just friends now, and that's cool, because I have Ben and you have Justin, though God knows why you'd want him... but that's beside the point. We're in relationships, and I'm not even going to pretend I want to be with you anymore, because I don't. I haven't for a long time... but I look back, and there were times when it felt like you did want to be with me, and that's why I hung on. So tell me if I was imagining it."

"Why does it matter now?"

"Because I'm trying to understand where all these changes are coming from. If this part of you was always there, then I'll understand... but if this loving and caring stuff is bullshit that you're spewing because you're in therapy, then I'm not sure I'm okay with that."

"Uh huh."

"And because I don't want to go the rest of my life thinking I was a stalker and a loser for pinning my hopes on a guy who never, ever cared about me."

"Oh."

"When he said you loved me, was he right?"

"There's probably some truth to it."

"Meaning?"

"I did love you... always have..."

"Always will. Right?"

"Yeah."

"I'm glad," I murmur softly. I pull the covers up over us, and brush his hair off his face. "Now you have to figure out if that's how you feel about him, because he's not going to wait another ten years to hear it."

Chapter 20

Alan revealed his suspicions that Brian also suffered from PTSD, leaving Brian reeling. Brian fought to reject Alan's ideas, but in the end, appeared to have been swayed by his logic. In a heated late-night phone call to Justin, he asked Justin to reaffirm that they were still 'okay;' reluctantly, Justin did, but he resisted Brian's efforts to take him to New York. Brian revealed that he'd be taking Michael instead, which made Justin angry, though neither were entirely sure why. The call ended with a new uneasiness building between them.

The next morning, Matt arrived at the loft to help Justin get his paintings on the go, to be confronted by Justin's terrible bruises and reluctance to discuss their origins. Emmett was present as well, and while they bustled around the loft preparing the canvases, the three men discussed Justin and Brian's relationship. Justin showed a new frustration and anger to his friends, but in the end, agreed with their assessment that things had progressed beyond blaming only one person. Justin also commented that he was angry at himself for staying sometimes, but wasn't exactly sure how to let go, or if he even wanted to.

Michael and Brian ended the chapter, the following evening. After a long, silent drive to New York, Michael finally harasses Brian into telling him why Justin didn't come. Brian mentions that he didn't ask, but adds that he probably wouldn't have come even if he had. He also said that they'd had their tests done, which gave Michael a feeling of relief, but mentioned that they hadn't received the results. This leads Brian into a revelation that he really didn't seem to miss Justin the way he was "supposed" to, making Michael observe that Brian doesn't seem to know what he wants. Michael added that he knew the relationship had become unacceptably violent. He rejected Brian's unsure explanations that their injuries result from simple self-defense and an attempt to keep things under control, insisting that Brian has to learn to control himself and let other people do the same. He also observed that Justin and Brian would probably stay together no matter what happened, but if things stayed the way they were, he doubted it could last for long, making Brian register surprise at his insight. Finally, Michael cornered Brian into finally admitting that at one time, their feelings were definitely mutually romantic. Michael, feeling relieved that he hadn't been duped into caring about Brian for all those years, agreed that their time had passed, but added that if Brian didn't work faster to resolve his feelings for Justin, another relationship would pass him by.

Andrew

"I need you to do me a favour," he says, like it's normal for him to ask things of me.

"Since when do I grant you favours?" I hum, sorting through the mail beside the phone. I can't believe the nerve of this guy.

"I know, I know," Justin gripes. "You're not my friend, you're Brian's. Whatever. I get it. I still need your help, though."

I'll say one thing for him - he's persistent. Then again, with Brian, he'd have to be. Brian was always a my-way-or-the-highway kind of guy, which drove me completely nuts when we were together. This determination thing must be Justin's natural defense mechanism. Great for him, huge pain in the ass for me! For over ten years, Brian's been my "let's go drinking" friend, my "who'd you fuck last night," friend, my "bend me over the back of the couch, for old times' sake" friend. We are not about getting into each others' business, and we sure as HELL aren't about rescuing each other from toxic boyfriends like Justin the twinkie time-bomb!

"I'm sorry, your favour account is now closed. After that stunt you pulled at Woody's a couple of weeks ago, you're overdrawn," I reply absently, frowning at my Visa bill and hoping that he'll feel suitably dismissed. "If it weren't for me, at least in part, you and Brian would be in jail right now."

"You're overreacting."

"Drunk, high, half-naked and practically fucking at a table. Oh, you're right, they were about to elect you poster children for Mothers Against Drunk Driving."

"Come on, it wasn't that bad - " he protests, but I'm not buying it.

"Not that bad? Once we surgically removed you from his dick, I practically had to carry Brian to Babylon. Forgive me for overusing a cliché, but when I do you a favour, I'm just not doing you any favours."

He clears his throat. "Okay! It wasn't our finest hour. I'll totally admit that. If you do this for me, I swear I won't bother you again."

"Too good to be true."

"What if I just need advice, will you talk to me?"

"No."

"One question. Let me ask one question?"

It's becoming increasingly clear that I'm not going to get rid of this guy, and I want to double check this Visa bill. I did NOT spend that much last month.

"You've got five minutes. Talk."

"How do you move large paintings?"

"How large?" I ask, my interest piqued.

He pauses for a minute, almost as if he's measuring something. "They're large, probably 36 by 48. There are four of them." He hesitates.

"And I have to move them tonight."

"Are they yours?"

"Fuck off, Andrew."

"I'm serious," I reply, only half-mocking. "You wouldn't be involved in anything... oh, I don't know... illegal, would you? I know you're short on cash lately."

"Do you live to give me a hard time?"

"Just a perk of our Peyton Place relationship, little one. My boyfriend's best friend is my ex-boyfriend's partner. You can't tell me you wouldn't work it a little."

He snickers. "Yeah, okay, I get your point, but don't call me 'little one!' And I swear that these paintings are mine. Now, how the fuck do I get them from point A to point B?"

I pause for a minute, weighing his options. "You know, if it weren't the last minute, you could do it yourself, one at a time, in a rented van."

"Well, gee, why didn't I think of that?" he says, sarcastically. "I couldn't move them one at a time because I didn't paint them that way. I did all four at once."

"No shit?"

"That's just how they came to me."

"Art can be a bitch," I muse, my compassion coming in tiny, grudging droplets. As much as I want to think he got himself into this mess on purpose, I know better. Anyone who has to create for a living has been in his situation - caught between failing inspiration and a deadline - and it sucks. "When large pieces have to be moved en masse, you need a properly outfitted vehicle to do it... and since it absolutely has to be done right now, I guess that means I'm doing it for you."

"I didn't mean for that ..." he falters, sounding relieved, but guilty. "I really didn't."

"I believe you, but it doesn't matter what you intended at this point. If I don't do it, nobody else will be able to. I'm probably the only person you know with a van fitted for large pieces."

"I didn't even think about it when I was painting them. I didn't know I needed something special until I saw they wouldn't fit properly in the Jeep."

He blows out a long breath, as if he's been holding it for hours. We settle into a silence that might actually be comfortable if we weren't on the phone.

"Say, 'Thank you, Andrew,'" I prod, and he laughs shakily.

"Yeah. Thanks."

"Good enough for me. Where are we taking these behemoths?"

"The show at the Berringer gallery."

"Berringer?"

"Right."

"The religious show?"

"Oh, shit, don't start..." he moans, but I'm off.

"When the fuck did you start doing religious art?" I taunt with obvious disbelief. I've seen his stuff, and it's okay - sketches of family, abstractionist pop art, life studies, that sort of thing. "I didn't think you got off on that shit."

"I don't, but we're fucking broke, okay? I'd never choose to do it on my own, but it started looking real appealing when the ATM laughed at me for trying to withdraw twenty bucks."

"So it's like that."

"Yeah, it's like that. Are you going to help me or not?"

I hesitate, not because I don't know (I mean, I already agreed, for Christ's sake) but because it's so fucking fun to yank his chain a little bit.

"Yeah, I'll do it. Am I bringing Matt?"

"I... um... yeah, if you want."

"If I want? Oh, this is juicy. You hesitated. What don't you want him to see?"

He falters. "Well... you'll see it when you get here."

"Justin..."

"Promise you'll listen to me and not interrupt."

"Wow, first a favour and now a promise. If I didn't know better, I'd swear you thought I liked you."

Maybe that didn't come out quite right - it's not like I hate the guy - I just don't trust him. He seems to be born to influence people, to wield this strange passive-aggression that I don't understand. I'm constantly on edge around him, uneasy and unsettled and feeling like I'm about to be worked over. That's why I don't like him, the feeling that if you were standing in his way, he'd go under you, over you, around you or even through you if he could find the path, but he'd never, ever ask you to step aside. It's in his voice, thick, warm and smooth; in his instant acquiescence, no matter how reluctant a normal person would normally be. It's there in the feeling that he'd say yes to anything you asked of him, take any assault, just to earn a moment of your consideration.

In fact, he doesn't even remark on my cruelly pointed comment when he replies. His voice drops down, secretive and confidential.

"I'm not looking for a pat on the head, okay? I need your eye. I've done something here, something awesome, and scary, and it's not like pissing around at art school. I see these paintings... I mean, I look at them, and it's like I'm seeing something for the first time. I think they're really good, and I've never thought my own stuff was good... you know, like real art. Not before this. I need someone who knows about this shit to look at them and tell me if I'm right."

"Why does it matter? Art has to come from the inside, Justin."

"You don't understand," he breathes. "I didn't do them for myself. I didn't need to! I can visualize each one perfectly in my own head. I close my eyes, and I can see every fucking detail, every colour and every brush stroke on every fucking inch of those canvases. I brought them to life because the pictures are so alive, and so beautiful, that I wanted other people to share those images with me. I guess I need them to. It was really hard, though, and really draining, and I need to know if all the effort was worth it. I need to see if I can bring that vision to life for other people. It's new to me, Andrew... this feeling, it's new to me. It's not new to you."

"Wait. I've had some commercial success as a photographer, but that doesn't necessarily make me a fair judge of talent. You want me to tell you if you're a good artist, and that's a big demand of someone..." I hesitate a minute, then continue my original thought, favouring honesty over a false nicety he wouldn't buy. "Look, it's a lot to ask from someone who doesn't like you that much sometimes."

The phone line rustles, as if he's nodding on the other end. "It's no secret that you think I'm a twat, Andrew. To tell you the truth, that's why I hoped you would come and look. You're not going to bullshit me."

"Well, if that's all you're looking for, why don't you ask Brian? He has a decent eye. Probably at least as good as mine, for your purposes."

"Brian hasn't seen them yet," he replies softly. "And I'm not sure he'll appreciate them when he does."

"What do you mean, Brian hasn't..." A small wash of dread flows over me, tapping at my thoughts like a gentle wave. "Oh, Justin, you didn't."

Again, the silence, which speaks more loudly for Justin than he himself ever could. When he finally answers, it's almost redundant.

"Yeah. I did," he says softly.

"You didn't paint that," I continue, incredulous.

"I did, and it's fucking amazing, Andrew. You have to see it."

"I don't have to see it, I don't want to see it, I didn't even want to know you were doing it! Don't you have any fucking shame? For Christ's sake, Justin, it's a religious art show!"

"It works, I swear to God it works. Please come and see it for yourself. Judge it for yourself."

"Justin..."

"This means everything to me," he pleads, softly, seriously. "Everything. I'll beg if you want me to."

There's that warning bell in my head again. It's manipulation. It's entrapment. And no matter how well I know these things mentally, I can't say no, because I'm not emotionally programmed to ignore the fear and desperation he projects.

"All right, I'll come, but I'm bringing Matt."

"Fine," he says, obviously relieved.

"We should arrive... um, three hours from now... well, it'll be after dinner, anyway. Get the packing ready and I'll help you when I get there."

"Thank you," he murmurs, as if I've lifted the weight of the world from his shoulders. And maybe I have, for now, but in my opinion, his problems are just beginning.

Matt

"Oh my God," Andrew stammers.

The three of us are standing in front of Justin's canvases, temporarily named one through four. Andrew is having his heart attack somewhere between numbers three and four. I'm still stuck to the floor in front of number two, looking for the right words to express my feelings.

"Brian's going to kill you!" Andrew exclaims, shaking his head in disbelief.

That'll work. "You're so dead."

Justin scrunches up his face. "I know."

"Justin, I'm not kidding!" I yell. "I don't mean, 'Brian's going to give you a spanking and take away your Playstation.'"

Andrew snickers, making me lose my train of thought.

"Do you have something to add?" I spit. "You're not helping."

He laughs, and it's cruel, but that's just his way. "Help? This kid is beyond help if he thinks these are appropriate for that show at the Berringer. They're going to laugh him out of the room, if Brian doesn't put a hit out on him first." He wipes his hands over his face. "Come on, Matt, this is going to be a disaster and you know it. It's at least a little funny."

I spare him a bitter-assed glare, mumbling "Smarten up," before I go back to scolding Justin.

"I don't agree with the smartass over there, but this is really serious. These are explicit, and gay, and last time I checked, those two elements of life weren't a high priority in religious art."

Andrew nods smugly. Justin just stares.

"So there's going to be scandal, just from the obviously inappropriate nature of the pictures..."

"I get it," Justin says.

"No, you don't get it! Brian doesn't want people to see him this way!"

"I know."

"So, don't you think he might really, really lose it when he sees these?"

Justin sighs, half-pacing between Andrew and I. "Yeah."

"Wait!" Andrew interjects, obviously confused. "Don't you care?"

Justin stops pacing. "Don't I care about what?"

"Don't you care about the rainforest. What do you think I mean, Justin? Don't you care that Brian's going to feel hurt, and angry, and invaded? Aren't you sorry that you spread this out for the world?" I say carefully, taking up Justin's habit of walking back and forth between the paintings.

"Of course I care," he pants, unfurling a roll of Styrofoam packing paper, "I'd never want to hurt Brian. But you seem to think I should feel ashamed of myself - and you know, I can't tell if I should be ashamed for doing it or painting it, but either way, I'm not. So, am I sorry? No."

"I'm going to give Brian the benefit of the doubt, just for now, and believe that he won't actually kill you, Justin," Andrew says, squinting at the fourth painting, "Though I'll bet I'm in the minority on that. He won't kill you, but I'm betting he won't forgive you, either."

"Maybe not," he concedes sadly. "But don't accuse me as if I hadn't thought about that possibility, because I did. I thought about it until it made me sick. I thought about it until I couldn't sleep, and I couldn't eat, and after a while I could barely even talk to Brian anymore because I felt so fucking guilty." He stands up, a little sweat rolling down his temples from the exertion of his argument. He wraps the paper around and around the painting, until all that remains is a foam-covered blob. "I thought about it until I realized that I had to roll the dice or I'd never feel like my own man. And maybe that's selfish, but I've felt better ever since."

"Enjoy it while it lasts," counsels Andrew, fingering a slightly raised brush stroke on the third painting. "Your life is never going to be the same after you show these."

"Probably not," he agrees, wrapping tape around the Styrofoam bundle. "But I created them, and I'm willing to accept the fallout. No matter what it might be."

"Can I talk?" I interrupt, and they both turn to face me. "Maybe I'm just being... what's that word... pedestrian? Whatever. Maybe I'm just a hick from the sticks, but Justin, I can't understand how these belong in a religious art show."

"It's the imagery," he mumbles, beginning the mummification of canvas two. "Spiritual beings, and all that. I don't want to go into it, but they asked me to write a blurb for the program, you know, introducing my own pieces. It's in there. You'll see it at the show."

"Aren't you going to be in trouble because they aren't about saints and shit?" I wonder, trying to peel a stray piece of packing tape off my shoe.

Andrew nods in agreement. "At the very least. There's a strong possibility you and your work will be ejected from the show."

"I know that too," Justin says, "but I created these with the best of intentions, and in the spirit of the topic we were given. I'll stack my work against anyone's. Whatever the consequences."

"Getting kicked out of the show?" Andrew muses, rubbing a scrap of the Styrofoam wrapping between his thumb and finger.

"Yes," he replies without hesitation.

"Scaring, or worse, disgusting your friends and family?" Andrew continues, still rubbing the foam.

"I have more faith in them than that... but if that's what's going to happen, I'm ready," Justin replies, sealing the last edge of the third painting and making his way towards the fourth.

"What about losing Brian?" I say quietly, standing between him and the fourth canvas. "I know... listen to me, Justin, I *know* that he's not going to like this. He acts tough, but he's going to feel so betrayed. Are a bunch of stupid paintings worth your relationship with your partner?"

Justin stops, blowing a hair from his forehead in irritation. "The paintings themselves? If it weren't for the money, you could toss them off the roof for all I care. It's what they represent. They're ME... well, mostly me. A little Brian too. And maybe a little of our relationship is in the paintings, frozen there until the end of time." He huffs another breath, and his bangs flutter in the breeze.

"You know how many times I tried to paint these canvases with the 'right' pictures, using the acceptable models, and I couldn't, because that's just not where I am right now. And maybe that's not all right, but you know what? It sure felt like it was when I was painting them! Maybe I shouldn't have put us in those paintings. I don't know. Maybe he can't stand it, maybe the relationship can't. All I can say for sure is that if he can't stand to share pieces of us with the world, I can't be with him, because I'm an artist. That's what I am, and that's what I do."

"Don't you think he has a right to want a little privacy? Most people wouldn't want to share this!" I say with surprise, gesturing angrily to the fourth canvas. "And especially not at a fucking RELIGIOUS art show!"

"It's who we are," he replies simply. "It doesn't make us any less spiritual, or any less human. I'm tired of hiding, and tired of feeling ashamed. I'm not going to be that person any more." He turns away from me to face Andrew. "When I called you here, I asked for a favour. An opinion. Are they any good, or not?"

Andrew brings his fingers to his forehead, as if to massage away a sudden, mysterious headache. "You know the answer to that, Justin. They're brilliant. If someone brought them to me, I would never in a million years guess that you did them."

"Thanks," he replies gratefully, moving to look Andrew in the eye. "I really appreciate it." He kisses him on the cheek, then impulsively hugs him, too. "God, I am so fucking scared."

"Everybody's scared their first time, little one," Andrew replies, rubbing Justin's back in a soothing rhythm. "I know I was. You'll go, you'll show, and that's all there is to it. It'll be okay."

"Do you think Brian will be okay?" Justin asks, his face buried in Andrew's shoulder.

"We'll just have to wait and see," he answers uneasily, but his eyes flit up to meet mine. He's worried, and that makes me worried. Justin's about to open Pandora's Box, and all that any of us can do for him is hope it turns out okay.

Chapter 21

Justin called Andrew for assistance in moving his large paintings to the exhibition space. Andrew, worried enough about Brian and Justin's behaviour to be suspicious of Justin, raked him over the coals, but the two men eventually came to an uneasy agreement. Andrew left for Pittsburgh, with Matt in tow.

Matt and Andrew arrived at the loft, just in time to be stunned by the paintings. Nobody disputed their beauty or skill, but Matt and Andrew both questioned their content and propriety for the show. Justin passionately defended his work, commenting that no matter how Brian, or even the gallery, felt about his work, he knew he'd made something real and lasting, that represented who he was as a person and an artist. The three men then packed up the paintings and left for the gallery.

Author's Note: Thank you so much for all the wonderful feedback I've received. The ending may be slow, but it's coming. I promise.

Andrew

Tick, tock.

Today is the day, and I'm squirming in my ringside seat.

In twelve hours, Justin will show his work, professionally, for the first time. In twelve hours, one of my oldest and dearest friends will be dealt a blow I don't know if he can handle, by a man who has lived such a small span of his life that he's got nothing to lose.

I've said it before, and I'll say it again: I don't like it, but it's none of my business, and it's not supposed to be. Brian hasn't been my boyfriend for almost fifteen years, and a person has to draw the line somewhere.

Even so, I've been picking up my cell phone, and setting it back down, for the better part of the morning. I want to warn Brian about what I've seen, but I'm uneasy. When does genuine concern turn into prying? Do I know for sure that Brian will be unhappy with the content of Justin's work? I think he will.

Well... I'm pretty sure he will.

Fuck it, I'm angry enough for both of us, so if he needs to borrow some, I've got it to spare. The thing is, even if he ends up hating it, would he want me to tell him about it in advance? Somehow, I don't think so.

Matt wanted us to stay in Pittsburgh last night, to "help Justin set up" and "be supportive of his work." I stayed, but I'm not happy, because I really don't want to support his work. If Matt wants to think of this as a turning point for his best friend's career, well, I'm in no position to stop him. If he chooses to see Justin as a visionary artist, and disregards the effects of Justin's betrayal on Brian... well, I can't prevent that either. I'm not Matt's father; I'm his partner. He has to make his own decisions. Of course, if I were only a tiny bit less mature or more controlling, we'd be back at the farm in no time flat, but I'm not that person. It's enough that everyone knows I think this is a disrespectful and needless invasion of Brian's privacy.

I don't need to butt in. I don't.

There's nothing to gain by holding a grudge this late in the game, and I will stop thinking that there'll be plenty of time for that after the show.

Matt worked late into the night helping Justin set up at the gallery; I read the newspaper, got dinner from room service, and took a long shower. I went to bed early, but I didn't sleep well. That thought kept circling in my mind: To tell, or not to tell? Sometime around two, I came to the conclusion that it really doesn't matter either way. If I told, I'd still be too late to save him from humiliation, and too late to save him from Justin. I'm

already years too late to save him from himself, so I have a lot of practice being a failed friend.

Morning came, as it is wont to do, and Matt bounced right back out the door, eager to help finish the job that Justin started. That left me here alone, with only my cell phone as tantalizing, forbidden company.

I've just picked it up for the thousandth time when it rings in my hand.

"Aah!"

"Andrew?"

"Yeah. Sorry. Um... hey." Of course it's Brian. Nothing else would test my resolve.

"You okay?" What a loaded question.

"Yeah, the phone just startled me. I'm fine. How are you? Wait, where are you?"

Something slams in the background. "New York. Packing."

"Right, your trip. Are you alone? Where's Michael?"

He snorts out a mildly ironic laugh full of affection. "There's a comic book store three blocks from the hotel. I can't compete with back copies of Captain Astro."

"Well, that time comes in everybody's life, Brian."

He laughs, but we quickly fall silent. Brian's already contributed most of his regular conversation, it's my end that's lacking. I just don't know what else to say.

"So... um... how are you doing? Really?"

"And isn't that the eternal question?" he says, with more than a hint of annoyance. "Just how is poor, damaged Brian Kinney doing today?"

"I didn't mean it like that."

"Yes, you did."

"You know I didn't. Nobody thinks of you as poor, damaged Brian."

"I think they do," he says. "And why shouldn't they? It's true."

"Brian, don't start..."

"It's true," he repeats flatly. "I'm fucked in the head. Don't deny it."

"I wasn't trying to... Jesus, Brian, cut me some slack. This is new."

"Hey, you don't have to do anything. Just be a friend and let me deal with my own shit."

"All right! Okay! But... look, I know it's prying, but can you please just tell me what's wrong?"

He pauses, and sighs. "Alan thinks that my winning personality includes an unhealthy dose of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. I'll be undergoing an evaluation when I get home."

"You're not serious."

"Yeah." There's an awkward silence, then he says quietly, "Look, I have to admit it. I have to own it, so don't try and take it away. It doesn't help me."

"Maybe it's not that bad. It could be... temporary, you know? Maybe they can fix it."

"Yeah. I don't know, but I'll give it a shot. Therapy. Medication... Alan says it'll take the edge off."

"Medication? Won't that turn you into a zombie?"

He hesitates. "Andrew, what are you trying to do to me? I know what can happen. Alan says some people adjust to the meds, and some never do." His voice gets very small and quiet. Very un-Brianlike. "I know I have to lay off the drugs, and the drinking, and I know that it's probably never going to be the same. I'm not happy about it, but Alan knows his shit, and he called me on mine. I had to make a decision whether or not I want to keep living, and I made it. People think it's easy, but it's not, and bullshit questions like that don't make it any easier."

"I didn't mean to... Dammit, Brian, I'm sorry. I just didn't think it was that bad."

"Well, it is, and don't fucking pity me for it. Shit happens. This is my chance to fix it."

"Well, I'm glad you are." I still want to ask about the pictures. I want to spill so badly that my teeth ache. Maybe a teensy warning won't hurt.

"Are you coming to Justin's show tonight?"

"Shit, that's tonight?" he asks. "What time?"

"Seven."

"It's two now, so if I drive straight there, I'll make it. I'll probably be there."

"Have you seen..." This isn't getting any easier. "I mean, have you talked to Justin about his pieces?"

"He doesn't talk about his work unless it's done. He never thinks it's any good."

Could have fooled me. He thought his pieces were fucking brilliant when I saw them.

"Are you worried about the show?"

"Why would I be? It's Justin's deal, not mine. Let him worry about it."

Oh God, I have such a bad feeling about this.

"Brian... when he draws... a lot of his work has you in it, right?"

"Some of it."

"What if you're in these ones? Is that going to bother you?"

He laughs. "Andrew, I don't belong within a hundred feet of a religious painting. I haven't talked to the man upstairs in a long time, I'm not going to start now."

"But..."

"Hey, Michael just came in. I've got to go. Are you going to be at Justin's thing tonight?"

"Yeah."

"Then I'll see you. Oh, and Mikey says hi."

"Hi Michael," I return, my stomach dropping. He ends the call with an abrupt click, leaving me with a buzzing in my ear and an eerie sense of foreboding. The next time I see him, we'll be at the show.

T minus five hours, and God help us all.

Chapter 22

Michael

Brian busted his ass to get back here for the show. He says he didn't, but I know that he doesn't go that fast all the time. I don't think should cost him so much to admit that he cares about Justin now. They've been through so much.

I guess old habits are really hard to break.

We're late - I kind of knew we would be - and Brian is standing in front of the door to the gallery.

"Aren't you going in?"

He rummages through his pocket for his cigarettes, then lights one, peering through the plate-glass of the door.

"There's a fucking lot of people here."

I chuckle. "Since when do you care about that?"

He snorts, blowing a stream of smoke. "I don't." He still looks a little anxious, though, so I follow his gaze through the window, looking for the source of the problem.

"Justin. He still hates crowds, doesn't he?"

Brian nods, taking another drag from his smoke.

"Shouldn't we go help him?"

I turn to Brian, expecting to see... what, exactly? I don't know. Anger at being dragged down here? Concern? Pride? I used to know. I used to understand him better than I understood myself, but things are changing, and he's changing, too. What I do know is that he doesn't understand either, and he wants to.

"Brian? Do you want to go in and help him?"

"Look at the paintings," he says quietly. "They're fucking huge."

I look through the window again, trying to sort out which paintings belong to Justin. Every wall has somebody's paintings on it, but somehow... even though I can't tell what's on the canvases, Justin's paintings are easy to pick out. They take up the entire back wall of the gallery. They're really big, and colourful, and there are clusters of people gathered around each one. In fact, most of the people in the room are either looking at them themselves, or talking to someone who is.

"How long are we going to stand out here?" I ask, rubbing the sole of my shoe against the sidewalk.

"Don't know."

"Are you coming in?"

"Not yet."

"Do you mind if I do?"

That shakes him out of whatever train of thought he was on. "No. Go in. It's fine." He takes another drag of the cigarette, and the smoke swirls around his head like a dim halo. "I'll be in."

I cock my eyebrow.

"Fuck off. I'll be in when I fucking want to go in."

"All right, all right!" I laugh, but he grabs my arm as I walk away. We stand there for a minute, until the slightest tug on my arm draws me closer. I hug him tightly, and he rests his cheek on the side of my head.

"Brian, it's going to be okay. Just take your time." He nods and I go through the door.

The room is whiter and hotter than I expected it to be. Really bright, and modern. There seems to be too many lights, because they're everywhere. Lights are pointed at the paintings. Lights are sitting on tables. There are a about a million lights coming down from the ceiling. If they were red, I'd feel like a reheated hamburger, but they're all a blindingly clear glass that makes the walls so white they hurt my eyes. Someone passes me a program or circular that I don't read, but it makes a great fan.

I pass by paintings of lots of saints - St. Sebastian, naked, getting poked, and not looking real happy about it. A whole series of Mother Teresa in a slum; some of St. Thomas Aquinas with his animal friends. I knew there was a religious theme, but I didn't expect the stuff to seem so familiar. I guess you can't take the Catholic out of the Italian.

I'm about halfway back into the room when the crowd thickens. There are four groups, the first one relatively small, the fourth by far the biggest and noisiest. I start with the smaller crowd, and bump into Emmett.

"Michael!" he chirps, holding a glass of something bubbly. It's probably not alcoholic - I mean, this is a religious thing, isn't it?

"Hey, Em. Big crowd."

Emmett does the half-turn of his head that says he sees everyone, but is pretending he's not staring. "Great turnout, and so far, so good. No problems."

"Problems?" I ask, but Emmett shrugs.

"Nothing. Forget it. Take a look at this one. It's nice. I'm going to find Ted." He slides through the crowd like a hot knife through butter, and I realize I'm finally close enough to see the first one for myself.

It's big, way bigger than any painting I've ever seen in person, and really dark. The edges of the canvas are really black - so black they look like velvet. The picture gets lighter, and some areas become buttery yellow as I look towards the middle. Before my eyes have moved very far, I can make out the outline of a street. It looks like Liberty Ave., but Liberty is never this dark.

The people are in the middle of the canvas - two brightly painted men who are unsurprisingly familiar. Justin is standing under a yellow streetlight, back to the metal of the post, looking down the street. A mist rises up from the street around his feet. Brian is walking towards him, looking younger and angrier than I remember him.

Been there, done that.

I'm about to turn away when something from the corner of my eye catches my attention. There's a shape to the darkness behind Justin, not a trick of the light or a bubble of mist, but a figure of some kind. It's almost looks like a thin man with dead black skin and red, red eyes. No, wait, it definitely looks like that.

The longer I look, the more I realize that the shape seems to be pulling Justin back against the streetlight, pinning him in a shadowy grip. He looks frightened, or frozen. And when I look back to Brian, I can see that the darkness between Brian and Justin isn't darkness at all, but another figure. Another shape, pulling Brian towards the streetlight even though his body seems to want to go the other way. Creepy.

I close my eyes, and when I open them again, someone has moved and I can see the title plaque beside the painting. "Love is a Demon," it's called, and there's a brief blurb underneath it about Justin's attempt to use Old Testament imagery to illustrate life in the modern world, blah, blah, blah. It's the picture that holds my attention; Brian's anger, Justin's fear, the grotesque figures drawing them together.

Funny how I was there and I don't remember it that way.

"Emmett," I call, not really looking to see whether or not he's there. I want to talk to someone about this. I don't feel good. I have a million questions and the first one is 'Why does this picture make me so uneasy?'

"Emmett!" I call again, and I know I sound anxious, but I don't know why.

"Michael?" A familiar voice murmurs beside my ear, and I turn to see Andrew.

"Hey!" I reply, and I'm grateful that he's there. He clasps my hand in greeting.

"Where's Ben?"

"He can't make it tonight, he's out of town on a seminar. I just got in from New York," I babble, the words coming out in a rush as the crowd eases us back from the painting.

"With Brian." Not a question, a statement, and way too tense to come from the Andrew I know.

"Yeah, with Brian." He squints a bit, and sighs, and now I know that something is wrong. "Andrew, don't do this. Tell me what's going on before something bad happens."

"What makes you think something bad will happen," he hedges, examining the toe of his boot.

"It's just a feeling."

He takes another deep breath. "Okay, but first you'd better see the rest of the paintings. I'll take you to the second one."

"You'll take me?" I wonder, and he nods. "Yeah. And maybe you should read the pamphlet, too."

"Wait. What's in the other paintings?" I worry, and he shrugs.

"You have to see it for yourself. I couldn't do it justice."

"What about Brian?" I wonder. He's still outside smoking, and if this is something he should be prepared for....

"I think he needs to do this on his own," Andrew says, putting an arm around my shoulders and leading me away. "It's time."

Andrew

I was anxious before the exhibit started. Now, seeing the reactions of so many people to Justin's paintings, I'm not any less anxious. If anything, anxiety has converted itself into a sick, damp panic that I just can't shake.

Arm around Michael's shoulder, I lead him to the second canvas, pushing gently against the neatly-dressed patrons clogging the path. They stand like statues, comical, with mouths agape, or they knit their brows and murmur unkind words to each other behind their programs. Some are just confused. I don't blame them. It's a real stretch to imagine how this painting could fit the sweetly religious theme.

Like the first canvas, this painting is very, very dark, but that's where the similarity ends. Where the last painting was lightly bathed in the yellow representing the streetlight, this one is washed in a clear, pale blue. Blue light shines from a light fixture on the wall, and slips in through the painted window. The figures have a faint bluish glow as well, almost like an aura or a full-body halo.

In the lower centre of the painting, Justin reclines, nude, on his side. Eyes closed, head thrown back in ecstasy, there's little question what is happening in this picture, and I'm quite thankful that the frame ends just above his hip. If it didn't, I'm sure some of these disapproving patrons would be found on the floor.

His skin glows very pale, translucent in the bluish lights. It makes him seem small, slim and ghostlike, almost otherworldly. The fingers of his left hand, spidery and slim, clasp at his throat. The other hand disappears behind him, to reach for Brian's hip.

Brian is, indeed, behind Justin, painted in a coordinated, burnished bronze that doesn't seem out of place in all the blue. His mouth lays a wet, open kiss on Justin's jaw, which Justin clearly appreciates. They seem quite unified, harmonious in the way that lovers are; they share a oneness that is lacking in so many popular representations of love and lust. These feelings are authentic.

Feeling that raw look pornographic on a page. If it were a picture, it would look like smut. Actually, it does look like smut on a first glance... until you really get to looking at it, because the greying black shadows behind them are alive.

Here again we find the demons from the first picture, only here they pose a much clearer threat. Where the entities in the first picture seemed content to influence, these demons intend to do evil. Their eyes, the deep ruddy colour of congealing blood, almost disappear into the black... but once you see them, they start to follow you around the room. It's happened to me three times already, that I looked over my shoulder and I swore they were looking back.

The detail of these demons is finer, as well. While clearly human-shaped, they bear a considerable number of body styles and sizes. They come from every corner and appear content to converge on the lovers en masse. Here and there, a shadow gleams too straight and bright to be pure demon, suggesting that some of these ill winds rely on glittering sharpened knives to do their bidding.

Coming back to the lovers from the background, with teeth on edge and a new perspective, Brian's posture seems entirely different. Brian is still thrown over Justin almost like a blanket on a fire, but we can now see that his body arches over Justin's protectively, as if to present a barrier to the room behind. Brian's eyes are not closed; he glances up and to the side, as if he senses the presence behind him. His hands, too, betray his worry - they're both free, and balled into fists. Not clutching Justin, but clenched tight, as if ready for a fight. His whole body is tight and tense and every muscle and sinew catches its own ray of light.

Justin, too, looks different on re-inspection. The lust that had been plain as day is tainted by something else, something much closer to terror, and his eyes are scrunched closed so tightly that the wrinkles painted on the canvas actually seem to have dimension. The fine sheen of sweat bathing both of the men could be passion, surely, but it could also be fear.

"Andrew?" Michael whispers, nudging my side. "Hey. Andrew."

"Yeah?" I whisper in reply, tearing myself away from my fifteenth analysis of the painting. "What do you want?"

"I..." he starts, then stops. "I don't know what I was going to say. This one isn't like the last one."

"I know," I nod, stepping back so a fresh wave of people can examine the painting for themselves. "This one's creepy."

"What's with Justin and the demons?" Michael murmurs back, keeping an eye out for the man in question. "Maybe he needs more therapy."

"No doubt," I laugh, "But he hadn't better get rid of these demons too quickly. They're the only thing keeping some of these paintings in the show."

"I think he's been working on the comic too long," Michael replies, eyeing the canvas. "He was always a portrait guy before. Now everything is hyper-real, and symbolic instead of representational." He nods firmly. "That's the comic influence."

"You're probably right," I agree. "It's done him good, though. His older works didn't have a lot of feeling in them, but these ones are alive."

"Do you think he's really that scared of things?" Michael wonders, his eyes flickering from the men to the demons and back again.

"I don't know. They've been through a lot," I reply carefully. "Justin has a lot of leftover feelings from the bashing, and all that."

"I meant Brian," Michael says. "If you look at the pictures, it looks like they're afraid of the same things, but people aren't usually afraid of the same imaginary things."

"Go on."

"It's like in the last picture, when the demons are pulling them together. I was there, I watched the whole thing, and I didn't see any demons."

"Maybe you're being too literal."

"No, not like that. Since when have you known Brian not to turn around and fight?"

"Well... here and there, but really only recently."

"That's the point. The demons didn't come with Justin or from Justin, and Justin's didn't come from Brian, either. I think they only see the demons when they're together." Michael cocks his head, trying to see the painting in the space between a tall woman and a guy with huge dreadlocks. "You know, if you'd asked me how Justin saw his relationship with Brian, I don't think I would have said that this is it."

"Me neither," I agree.

Just then, Matt comes up behind us. "Has he seen the next one yet?" He asks, resting one arm on my shoulder, and the other on Michael's.

"No," I say in a very negative tone, hoping to stop the conversation before it starts, but I'm already too late.

"He who?" Michael asks. "Me, or Brian?"

Matt grimaces, the recipient of a gentle kick from yours truly. "I was thinking of you, actually, but Brian would fit too. Has he seen anything yet?"

"No," Michael says, "But I think he'll be okay. There isn't anything here that's really personal, by his standards, anyway."

Matt and I exchange a look, knowing full well that the next pictures are as personal as it gets, but we stay quiet. The silence stretches out like taffy, decorated by the murmuring swell of the crowd around us. It seems more crowded than earlier, but I can't tell if more people are arriving, or if the patrons are just rotating amongst the four canvases without leaving.

"I think I'd better go get Brian in here before it gets any more busier in here," Michael says after a short pause. Thankfully, he heads straight out the door and doesn't pass last two canvases as he leaves. I really don't want to be there when he sees them.

Matt and I step back again, and then again; soon we're in the centre of the exhibit while the raucous pack swarms and orbits around us.

Somewhere in front of number three, I can hear Lindsay crying softly, punctuated by soothing noises from Emmett and Mel. Not much in the way of critical thought from that section, just mumbling sobs and soft whimpers of "Why?" that stab through the blanket of crowd noise.

If I listen harder to the sounds coming from behind me, I can hear Ted trying to do damage control with Deb in front of number four. He's desperately trying to keep her on an even keel, patiently shushing every curse word, explaining this element or that for as long as she'll let him.

"Matt, do you want to get out of here?" I ask tiredly, hoping beyond hope that he's ready to get the fuck out of Dodge before disaster strikes.

"No, I want to talk to Justin before we go," he replies, just as tired. "I think he's still around number three. In and out, I promise."

"Yeah, right," I sigh, hoping that I sound affectionate instead of exasperated. "I'll be waiting by the Mother Teresas." He pecks me on the cheek and wanders off, and I find the single unoccupied seat, sinking into it with exhaustion. As much as I wanted to make a clean getaway, this won't be over until Brian sees himself in four poses, and we all know it.

Matt

The crowds in front of Three and Four are almost equal in size, and much larger than the groups viewing One and Two. This is the first of the two "showpieces," the ones meant to hold the attention of the patrons - as well they should. This is more than just an exhibition, this is living art, and all the more because I happen to know both the models.

And it figures that I'd be trying to rendezvous with Justin as he stands in front of number three, because of all the paintings he's showing tonight, it's the one that bothers me the most. Number four is horribly fascinating, and terribly disturbing to some of the people at the exhibition, but not for me. Don't get me wrong, it makes me really uncomfortable, but it doesn't grab at my throat the way this one does. Four is so surreal that I can dismiss it, so nakedly symbolic that I don't get caught up in the details. I can't feel that way about this one, and judging from the faces around me, I'm not alone.

This one brings back some fucking bad memories.

I'm not sure if Justin's choice of colour was planned or not, but this painting isn't as dark as the others. One and Two started black, black, black, and the pictures emerged from the darkness. This one is mistier, paler; all the colours are washed with dusky purple and rusty red. It figures that the one time I don't want to look is the time when it's easiest to see.

Brian and Justin share the stage again, but... Guh, here comes the bile, sneaking up the back of my throat to remind me of that horrible day last summer. I have to turn away quickly, and count to ten, and try to forget the day I was reminded that sometimes in life, you see things that you just don't want to see. I swallow thickly and turn back to the painting.

A lit candle flickers brightly, its flame the brightest point in the picture. Slightly behind and to the right, Brian is propped against the divider in his bedroom - half against the wall, half slumped on the bench underneath. The candle has fine waxy rivers running down it, the ones that say it's been lit for far too long. Following that trail downwards, you can see that the candle isn't in a holder so much as on a wide flat tile, or maybe a

mirror. Yes, a mirror. Something that reflects the light, highlighting the bones of Brian's face, making him look too tired and way too thin. His head is thrown back, and he's resting his eyes, or maybe closing them purposely. They don't have the squinty tightness that would say that he's purposely shutting anything out... that's just the way they fell.

He has some company on the bench, Brian does, an army of loyal dead soldiers. A bottle of Jim Beam lies on its squared-off side, a trickle of amber liquid coating the bottom, too little even to spill from the spout. Also on their sides, several small brown prescription bottles lie abandoned, emptied and unable to donate any orphaned pills to the pile. Balls of paper, crinkled with light and shadow, are discarded here and there; upon inspection, only one, neat sheet can be found, marred with with loopy, unclear script. A silver pen reflects the candlelight, casting a long, dark shadow on the paper.

The shadow makes a line, an arrow that your eye wants to follow, up and behind Brian to the massive ocean of a bed. It's there that Justin lies sleeping, his body deeply in the shadows behind Brian... but there are no shadows behind Brian. Justin is weltd, bruised and bloody, and his shadows come from within.

Justin has invited us into another scene gone sideways, and it reminds me of the day I thought he was dead.

I bite my cheek against the tears that still want to spring up inside my eyelids, even after seeing this painting a hundred times. I remember that day. I remember being too fucking scared to take the steps up to Brian's bed, too afraid of seeing my beautiful friend ripped and torn beyond recognition. Too disgusted to see him tortured by lust and fear, too angry with Brian for his weakness. Then, as now, too frustrated that my friend is too stubborn to know what's good for him. I still want to yell, I still want to cry, and I still want Andrew to come and hold me and never let me go.

I don't like what I see when I look at this Justin.

The Justin in the painting bears every one of the marks of Brian's anger and his own stupid pride. His eyes are beyond blackened; they're swollen, reddened and still almost bloody. The skin of his neck is ringed with fingerlike bruises, visible even from the perceived distance of perspective. On his arms, scrapes and patches of purple swell away from the skin. Defensive wounds. Faintly, in the shape of a fist here, or darkly displaying the print of an open palm, this man has been brutalized.

The woman beside me turns to look at me quizzically, and I realize I'm muttering, "Please be all right, please be all right," just like I did a few months ago. I smile weakly at her, and shift away, continuing to fan myself with my program.

Just like the other paintings, the longer you look, the more you see. The room is in quite the disarray, with the sheets carelessly bunched over Justin's body like a tarp on a woodpile. Fainter than the bruises are pale parallel lines that trickle rusty red blood. His visible wrist is circled by a small silver bracelet that looks more like a choke-chain than a

decoration. The curve of his bent leg points back to Brian, who on re-examination, has a few welts and scratches of his own. The shadows under his eyes become bruises, no longer tricks of the light. Clutched in his hand is a familiar, sturdy-looking choker, lately seen decorating Justin's neck.

When I rushed to Justin's side those many months ago, I was sure that Justin was dead, and Brian was to blame. Looking at this, I can't tell who might be dead... and unlike then, I have no idea where to place the blame this time.

A sob rises above the crowd noise again. It's still Lindsay, and she's still crying. Emmett is trying to steer her away from the picture, but every time she looks up, she breaks into a fresh wave of heartbroken moans. Mel is alternating consoling Lindsay and staring daggers at Justin, who has just now managed to free himself from conversation with someone. I slip over to his side before someone else catches him.

"Justin," I hiss. "I need to talk to you."

He sighs wearily. "Line starts to the left, Matt. What do you need?"

For a minute, I can't remember what, exactly, I need, other than an explanation. "Um... why did you invite everybody tonight? Didn't you think that some people," gentle nod at Lindsay, "would be upset?"

"I didn't invite them," he whispers back, "But it doesn't matter. I wasn't thinking of them when I painted these." His eyes do a sweep of the room. "Still haven't seen Brian."

"He's here. Outside."

Justin's jaw drops open. "No shit."

"He's been here for an hour."

"Now I know you're shitting me."

"He came with Michael. Haven't you seen him, at least?"

"No, I'm avoiding Michael right now." Deb begins a new round of swearing behind us, and he dodges, placing my body between his and hers. "And Deb."

It's almost as if he can feel eyes on the back of his head, because he leans in closer. "And Melanie, and Emmett... and my mom... and Jesus, I think Lindsay's going to hurt me when she recovers. Matt, why did I do this?"

"Money. I'll bet that ten grand doesn't sound so hot now."

He closes his eyes. "Fuck no. I'd pay ten grand not to be going through this."

Lindsay starts to make her way over here, and I want to get the hell away, but the crowd has me penned and I'm helpless to do anything but watch. She taps Justin on the shoulder, but he doesn't turn around until the last possible second.

"Hi Lindsay," he offers weakly.

"Justin... I... Why didn't you warn me?" she says, her voice sounding suspiciously close to a wail.

"I didn't think... and they're still really fresh, the last one's still wet... and I never had time..."

"Not the paintings," she interrupts. "I meant Brian."

"Oh," he replies dully, swiveling to inspect the painting for himself. "It's hard," he trails off, staring at his remembrance of a catastrophe. I don't know if it ever really happened or not, but I know it could have, and that's too damn close for me.

Apparently, it's too close for Lindsay, too. "If Brian was..." her voice drops, "... suicidal... you should have told somebody."

"Like you?" Justin laughs harshly, turning away from the picture. "Linds, he loves you, but you're wrapped up in your own shit. And that's totally okay, because it would be creepy if you weren't.... But I can't go running to other people every time Brian gets fucked up, because *it just happens too often*."

She grimaces, and he sighs, shaking his head against her judgment. "I don't know what else to say. I'm not defending myself, because I did the best I could. So did he, in his way. It wasn't pretty, but it worked. For a long time, it worked."

His stance holds an unspoken challenge, a dare to tell him how it could possibly have been any different, any better. Their small standoff lasts but a few moments, until Lindsay caves.

"Believe it or not, I understand, Justin. I... Listen, not a lot of people know this, but I found a note when we were in college. That night changed a lot of things for Brian, and for me too." She looks around, her eyes still glistening wetly. "I just don't like to remember."

"Remembering is better than forgetting, Lindsay, trust me." They hug, and Emmett and Melanie use that as a cue to rejoin the blondes.

"I've gotta hand it to you, kid, you really know how to stir the shit," Mel grumbles, putting an arm around Lindsay's shoulders. Emmett chuckles, and so do I. Justin somehow looks even more tired, and for a minute, I'd swear that Mel is either going to hit him or take pity on him.

Thank God the pity wins.

"Justin, you know they're good," Mel says softly, stroking Lindsay's hair. "You just can't know how hard it is for some of us to see it." Her gaze snaps up, fixing on him so solidly that even I shudder. "And you and I need to have a talk about that fourth painting over there, if Deb doesn't get to you first."

Justin nods dumbly, and the space in the conversation gives Mel the time to steer Lindsay through a break in the mob.

"I sure hope Mel doesn't take her out the front door," Emmett says. "If she sees Brian out there, all bets are off. She'll vacuum-seal herself onto his back and never let go."

"Some days, she's not far from it, already," Justin says darkly. "But I'm sure Mel will get her out of there."

It's taken me a few minutes, but I finally remember what I came over to say. "Do you need me for anything, or can I go?"

"I think I'll be okay," he murmurs, looking around the room. His eyebrows rise slightly, looking over my shoulder, and I turn to see a very hot, slightly older man coming towards us.

"Justin," he says warmly, extending a hand to shake. Justin nearly collapses with relief.

"Alan. Thank God you're here," he breathes, taking the man's hand and shaking it as if he's been rejuvenated. "Matt, this is Alan. Alan, this is my best friend, Matt."

We do the obligatory hand-shaking introduction routine, with Alan's hands lingering a little too long on mine.

"I, uh, have to go, Justin," I say, trying to tug my arm back discreetly. "Andrew's waiting."

"Right. Thank him for me. You guys have been the best," Justin says, adding, "Tell him not to worry about Brian, okay?" He looks to Alan, who nods gently. "Whatever happens... we'll deal with it."

"And if Brian's not okay with any of this?" I can't resist asking.

"Then keep your porch light on," he jokes. "I have to take this all the way, Matt, you know that. Not for the money, and not for him, either. For me. I have to do this for me."

"Then you go, baby," I whisper, taking him into my arms for a final hug. "You do what you need to do."

He nods, and I leave him standing with Alan at his side. I slip into the arms of my man, and we exit by the back door, leaving the drama to the people who seem to need it the most.

Alan

"Thank you for coming," Justin says, wiping a stray hair from his forehead. "I didn't think you would."

"I'm not here in an official capacity," I clarify, neatly dodging the canapé tray hurtling toward me. "I'm here as a friend. I wanted to see your contribution, Justin. I've heard so much and yet absolutely nothing about it."

"You're not the only one," he laughs nervously, again wiping at that stray hair. "Speaking of people who don't know what they're getting into, have you seen Brian?"

"Outside. He's having some trouble coming in."

Justin's brows knit together anxiously. "What do you mean, having some trouble?"

"I mean just what I said."

"No, I mean, why is he having trouble? Has he seen the pictures? Is he angry? Is he sad? How the hell does he even know what's going on if he won't walk through the fucking door?!?"

"Hey, hey, relax. I'm sorry, but I don't know any of that stuff. I'm not a mindreader," I shrug. "He's standing right outside the door. He sees people leaving, he hears them talking, and it's probably given him some idea what's in here. You can't see the canvases from the sidewalk, though, so, no, I don't think he's seen them."

Justin is trying so hard to stay calm, but his hands give him away, flitting like birds from his face, to his hair, to land and pick at the the loose threads in his pocket. "Will he be okay?"

"I need you to calm down before we get into this. Take some deep breaths. It won't do you any good to get worked up." He complies, and we stand for a moment, watching the crowd orbit slowly around us. "I can't promise you anything, Justin. How he feels is up to him - in this, as in everything."

He nods, too distracted by his own thoughts to listen. If he weren't, he'd see how many curious looks he gets, and how people seem almost afraid to approach him... but he doesn't. He's got a one-track mind.

"Should I go outside and get him? God, I'm going to fucking puke if I don't talk to him soon."

"What did I just say? Try to stay calm. Breathe."

"What about US, Alan? Fuck. I said I thought about it, and I didn't...Do you think we'll be okay?"

Good Lord. This man. Is frustrating. In. Out. Breathe Alan. He's just nervous.

"Honestly? It could probably go either way at this point, but it's nothing to be afraid of, you know. Don't be afraid of changing. He'll get older, you'll get older, your lives will always, always be changing. Have some faith. Be strong. Isn't that what this is all about?" I gesture to the fourth canvas. "It sure took some balls to put that up in a public place."

He laughs shakily. "Please tell me that YOU know why that is here. Tell me that you read the program."

I laugh, but he doesn't.

"I'm serious, lie if you have to, and if you didn't read it, I don't want to know. I don't think I could handle it."

So often in my line of work, I'm thrown incredible challenges. It takes a certain tenacity to keep working with a sick and frightened person, only to have them disappear from your life forever once they judge themselves well. Impossible situation, really, and some cases are so hard that I can't even help at all.

This is different. This is something concrete, something that I can do right now. I flip the glossy pages of the program until I find Justin's, then meet his gaze before bowing my head to read.

Beloved of God

No area of religion, or sexuality, is more hotly debated than the relationship between homosexuality and the Church. The Church has long continued its tradition of fear, loathing, and disgust of both homosexual acts and individuals who are born to be gay. The gay community, in turn, has reciprocated with fear and loathing of its own. The party line, on both sides, seems to go something like, "Love the sinner, but hate the sin."

Very few people try to understand which is which.

Love is a Demon asks the question, "Is Love a positive force, or negative?" Jesus is generally accepted as an individual who promoted love amongst and for all people, and yet the Churches who claim to represent Him clearly believe that certain kinds of Love are dark, dangerous, and inferior. Can a man harm himself by loving, and where does that harm truly lie? Is the act of sinning, one's willing debasement, a critical element of Love itself? If it is, The Demons (the sin) are always present with the Love, but only a small minority of the population is truly punished for inviting them in.

Let Temptation Take Him In explores the relationship between love and fear. Once the transaction of Love is completed, does that make The Demons disappear? Or do they linger, feeding on the scraps of discord that fall from the table? Exalted Love, the kind that is sanctified by the Church, is a protective covenant with God...but what is granted to those for whom there can be no sanctity? Can mortals who "mis-Love" shield themselves from divine displeasure, or are the ever-multiplying Demons their own cross to bear? Can they ever be truly fearless?

A Letter To Yourself offers one poignant answer to the question previously asked in the series. A late attempt to wrestle The Demons results in an almost pathological need for control. This near-destruction of the mortal shell is little but a sad battle against anger, rejection, and pride. Unlike the great Biblical battles of record, those who are forced to live outside The Book must devise their own methods, clumsily mistaking excess for self-denial, and intensity for passion... with dire consequences.

Finally, *The Very Breath* is a provocative challenge to contemporary concepts of sacrifice. Who benefits most from Passion? When one person lessens the burden of another, are they simple helpers or mortal Saviours? Perhaps we should revisit the belief that, "That which you do unto the least of your brethren, you do unto me," in all its connotations, and reject the practice of allowing one's beliefs to be reinforced by the beliefs of others.

Written in neat, small script at the bottom of the page, I find the following inscription:

The greatest sin we committed was not loving, but hating: Hating our pasts and hating ourselves, when we had no choice but to accept that what we had done and move forward in love. --Justin Taylor

"Well?" he interjects, just as I'm finishing up. "I really worked on it. I stayed up until I got it right."

"I like it," I tell him honestly. "I didn't think you could bridge all the topics - gay sex, D/s, the Church... but it worked for me. I'm convinced." I scan the room, curiously devoid of official-looking people. "But I wasn't the one you had to sell. What did the judges have to say?"

"They weren't quite so flattering," he sighs, "And they're definitely not going to be giving me any awards. I think they argued all morning about whether or not to eject me from the show. Hell, I think they would have kicked me out of the city if they could... but that doesn't matter now. The important thing is that the pictures sold."

"Did you make out all right?"

"Ten. Grand."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. It's funny, I entered this show for the cash, and now that I have it, I almost don't care. It means nothing to me now. Besides, it's almost the end of the month."

I look at him quizzically.

"Brian gets his bonus at the end of the month. We made it. The sale price of the series is almost all gravy."

"Unless."

His eyes darken. "Yeah. Unless."

"Hey, before I forget," I stammer, sliding a hand into my back pocket and presenting Justin with a card.

"Thank you!" he breathes, so easy to please sometimes it borders on ridiculous. "Can I open it?"

"You should, it's yours," I smile, and he tears in, head bobbing gently as he starts to read the card.

"A poem? Did you write this for me?"

"Such ego in one so young!" I tease, and he smiles. "No, it's not specifically for you, but it fits. Read it."

He looks around, then starts to read, quietly and self-consciously:

*"with nothing to do, you'd waste away,
obscured, in exile
they've witnessed the times you've gone astray
and whose fault? now you're thinking*

*there's nothing to prove
snapshot from the crowd to the shore
and it feels just like heaven's coming down*

*so strange are the ways they all have changed
still life, it stayed the same
a break from the past could make it last, maybe, just a little longer*

*now there's nothing to prove
snapshot from the crowd to the shore
and it feels just like heaven's coming down*

your soul shakes free as its conscience hits the ground

*you surrender love under will
rest assured, baby, you're adored*

*and it feels just like heaven's coming down
your soul shakes free as its conscience hits the ground*

*these signs, this fate, takes a path you didn't choose
stay strong, keep faith
there's a change that's coming through"*

He trails off. "Wow, did you really write this?"

"As much as I'd like to think so, no. Just tuck it away somewhere." And he does, smiling solemnly while he shoves it deep into his back pocket.

The noise in the room has been like a wave, gently swelling and falling away, for as long as I've been here. Suddenly, the swell rises higher and lasts longer.

"It's Brian," Justin says without turning around.

"How did you do that?"

"I just know. Is he coming back to us?"

"Yes, do you want me to go?"

"Wait a minute."

Justin shields himself behind me, positioning me between himself and the door. I'm not even going to ask. Maybe it buys him ten more seconds to get his bearings - or maybe it just gives him a little peace of mind. Soon, Brian comes to stand beside us, making up the third point in an awkward triangle.

"Alan," he nods stiffly, and nods again when I say, "Brian," in reply.

"Hey, Bri," Justin says softly. "Look what I did."

Brian seems hesitant to actually do the looking, but I think he'd feel ridiculous if we pointed that out. He steels himself and starts a deliberate, silent pivot from the centre of the room.

"The first one's when we met," Justin rushes to explain, a hint of quiet desperation creeping into his voice. "You know, under the streetlight?"

I have no idea if Brian heard him or not, because his face does not move. Justin continues his breathless narration, saying, "The second one... is from after I got... bashed..." he gulps. "And the third..."

"I know," Brian says flatly when he spots number three, pausing for a good, long look. "Last summer. I was there."

They both pause, reliving the moment, and the hush in their conversation cues me to leave. When Brian sees that last painting... they're going to need some time alone.

"Gentlemen, if you'll excuse me..." I say, but it doesn't matter. I'm not here anymore.

Brian just saw number four.

Justin

Oh God oh God oh God... I wasn't kidding when I told Alan I was going to puke. I can't take the anticipation anymore.

"Brian?"

"Shutthefuckup," he hisses, and I clamp my mouth shut so hard I bite my tongue. He doesn't sound happy.

OhfuckingGodwhatthellwasIthinking...

"Briannnn..." I plead, edging closer. "Please say something. Anything."

But he doesn't. It's like I hadn't even spoken. He just looks at the canvas with a hard, angry expression on his face. I wish I could bring myself to regret doing this, it would make me feel a lot less guilty.

This painting... it's the masterpiece. It's the one. If I died tomorrow, it would be fine, because I'd know that this is the absolute best I'm capable of doing. And I'm so proud of it, too, the sin of pride must live and breathe in me because I think this picture is just too fucking amazing for words.

The first two paintings, they were dark - so dark that the gallery actually got complaints. "I can't see what's going on," the patrons would complain, and the director would sigh in relief that at least a few people hadn't realized that all my pictures were of two men. Maybe it's because both of those canvases have the demons, I don't know. The energy just got sucked right out of me thinking about those ones, and it left behind a black hole that made everything else want to be black, too.

Number three didn't need to be black, because then... the night last summer, when I almost lost him... nothing was black. Everything was alive with colours, red blood and

purple bruises and the sweet golden light of the candles, blurring around the edges as I lost consciousness. I went to sleep in a bright golden halo, and miles apart at the farm, Brian was enfolded in a suffocating, fuzzy warmth of his own. We passed through high and hectic, through exhaustion, to that place where everything feels pure and good and... love. That close to the edge, we looked inside and we felt love, love that was gilded with blood and fear and more beautifully infected with pain than I could ever have imagined. Yes, number three was surprisingly easy, because the light made it that way. Number four... not so much.

This image isn't just hard to look at, emotionally, it's just plain hard to look at. It's washed with so much glaring fluorescent whiteness that my eyes ache. So many layers of white, calling extra attention to the dirty sticky ugliness that I helped to create.

If you make it past the harsh white light, there's a dungeon underneath, a stylized dungeon full of implements of torture. Whips, crops, canes, spikymetallic pointyhard instruments of unspeakable pain and torment completely cover the back wall, and they seem at quite home. Even now, I can't pause to look at them too long without feeling a certain rush of blood to my dick. When you fetishize pain and eroticize your own torture long enough... welll... let's just say you'd be surprised what gets you off after that.

It sort of disappoints me to think that probably, nobody will ever even look at that wall - not when Brian and I are in the front, naked. Definitely more naked than in any of the other paintings; maybe even more so because of the bruises and scars you can see on our skin. Darker on mine, of course, I have so many marks that the depth of my submission almost conceals my nakedness. But there's still nudity, and it's not organic nudity of sleep, or love, this is the debased nakedness of fucking. Even though you can't see my cock or anything, I still think you can tell. And you know, I don't even think it was the naked thing that bothered the judges so much about this picture, as much as the teensy, weensy fact that I'm bound and crucified.

Not the real kind of crucified, though, with the nails through the wrists and all that, just tied that way... and for all the times Brian and I fantasized about it together, knowing that the simple act of being held upright, arms out like that will kill you soooo slowly... the Justin in the painting clearly got more than he bargained for, and it shows. It shows in the strain of his muscles, in the beads of sweat ringing his forehead, in the sorrowful acceptance in his eyes. It shows in the way that he bites his lip hard enough to draw blood. One of his hands is loosened, and offered to Brian at his feet. This Justin, the condemned and dying man, has a powerful erotic serenity about him, but it's pretty clear that his excitement is being tempered by too much pain and darkness.

But then, so is Brian's. Knelt in front of picture-me and sobbing, the man looks like he's desperate to flee and at the same time, couldn't be forced to leave. I've seen that face, and I know it well; it's usually at the other end of a whip. His mouth is open in a gasp, a single tear rolls down a face slickened by sweat, and he reaches for the picture-me with both hands. One closes over my pale, thin wrist, holding my offered arm in place, while the other draws a bloodied metal blade down my arm, cutting a streaming red trail into

the flesh. Rivulets of blood trickle down, making a fine web on my hand, and allowing several drops to stain his skin as well.

This painting still shocks the living fuck out of me, because my love for him, and his love for me, have never been so real and ready for everyone else to see. The raw need it displays hits me somewhere deep inside, twisting at my guts and taking my breath away. *That* moment, the moment when he wants to hurt me just to hear me screaming his name, is immortalized forever.

The moment when my blood flows for him, when I give something so deep and necessary just for his pleasure, immortalized. Forever.

The moment when he realizes that my pain takes away his sins... and that he sacrifices his sanity for mine...

Immortalized.

Forever.

And that's a trespass I don't think he'll forgive.

"BRIAN FUCKING KINNEY!" Deb shrieks in a noisy ambush from behind, scaring the living shit out of me. "You've got a fucking lot of explaining to do!"

He turns to her, jaw set, eyes blazing. "No. I don't."

"Like hell you don't!" she shouts, as Ted elbows his way through the crowd.

:"Guys, I'm so sorry. I thought I had her..." he mumbles, tugging at her elbow. "Come on, Deb, we talked about this. Let it go."

"I will not-" she starts, but relents when Ted whispers something in her ear. She takes a deep breath and starts again, just as loudly, but at least a little bit calmer. "Brian, I want an explanation."

"What for?" he asks flatly.

"Deb... please..." I plead. "Keep it down, okay?" I can feel myself starting to shake. Too much fucking stress in one day. I'm going to drop dead if it doesn't stop, I just know it.

"Don't you even start, Sunshine," she scolds. "We need to have a serious talk about your self-esteem. To think that this was going on right under my nose-"

"Deb, I seriously doubt that this ever happened," Ted asserts, gesturing behind Deb's back for me to put my hand in my pocket. "Artistic license is a very important part of any young artist's development, right Justin?"

I nod eagerly.

I don't have a choice.

"So Brian doesn't really beat you up?" she prods suspiciously, and Brian fakes a yawn.

"Every night before bed," he deadpans, checking his watch. "Oh look, it's almost nine. Run along, Deb, or we'll be late for Justin's punishment."

"Asshole," Deb spits. "You don't honestly think I'm letting him go home with you? You're no better than your old man."

Brian's eyes flash dangerously at the barb, but by some weird kind of transferrance, I'm the one who's really angry.

"Dammit, Deb, give it a fucking rest!" I whisper furiously, my voice straining. "It's my fault this picture is here, hell, it's my fault that you even know enough to ask questions, so don't you DARE blame Brian for any of this. If you want to know something, then at least have the decency to ask me when I'm free to discuss it." I gesture to the crowd, a few of whom are watching interestedly. "This is clearly not the time or the place."

Her face falls. "I'm just worried about you, Sunshine."

"And I'm telling you that you don't need to," I reply softly, touching her arm. "I'll come over tomorrow, all right?"

She nods, then sighs and turns to Brian. "I'm sorry."

He nods shortly.

"Ted, will you take Deb home?" I ask him. "I don't want to worry about her."

"Sure," he says, releasing her elbow - not that it really made a difference when he had it. She walks off to get her coat, and Ted furrows his brow, looking between us and the painting.

"Pretty big-league stuff," he starts casually. Waiting for me to acknowledge him, which I do with a nod.

"Pretty dangerous, too... but then, that's the point, isn't it?" he continues. "The agony and the ecstasy, as it were."

"Right," I agree somewhat suspiciously. He shrugs.

"So I care. No big deal, right?"

Brian glares. "You going somewhere with this, Ted?"

"For starters, Justin, I'd suggest avoiding short sleeves around Deb for a while, or you'll have a lot of explaining to do."

"Thanks for the tip," Brian says dryly. "Anything else?"

Ted shakes his head, and shrugs again. "Just know that I know what you're in it for."

"Which is what?" I say.

He just laughs quietly and walks away.

I turn to Brian, who looks... like I've never seen him look before.

"Am I still in it?" I ask worriedly. He exhales loudly, turning again to look at the canvas.

"I'm getting out of here."

"Will you please just talk to me?" I cry, anxiously stepping closer to him, dying for him just to touch me and let me feel like everything's okay.

"Meet me outside afterwards. I'll drive you home," he says, distantly and too coldly for my taste. He turns before I know to grab on and never let go.

The crowd closes in, and my picture mocks me with its intimacy as I ask myself for the hundred thousandth time, "Did I really do the right thing?"

Brian

"How much?" I call to him, from the alley beside the gallery, where I'm leaning against the Jeep having a smoke. His head whips up, startled.

"Pardon?" He cranes his head, trying to see into the darkness, into my darkness, but he doesn't come down the alley. "Brian? Is that you?"

As if he doesn't know.

"Don't play innocent with me. How much did it cost them to buy you out?"

He flinches, but stands his ground, backlit by the orange drab of the streetlight. "That's not fair."

"I know they sold."

He sighs. "They did."

"So, how much?" I question from the safety of the darkness. "How much for your ethics, your morals... I want to know how much you're worth."

"Brian - " he groans with irritation. "I don't know what you think I sold, but they're just paintings. That's all. I'm not doing this with you."

"Doing what? If you had nothing to hide, it would be a simple question: What's the going price for the memories of Justin Taylor?" He balls his hands into fists, and takes one more step into the darkness.

"Stop. I mean it."

"How much do I owe you, Justin?" I taunt from the depths of the alley. "Every whore needs to get paid."

"Stop it!" he exclaims, his voice sharp with hurt. "I'm not a whore!"

"Then what do you call that in there?" I hiss bitterly. "You sold something..." Something what? Something special? Private? Shameful? Fuck. I don't know. "... that wasn't yours to sell."

He steps further into the alley, far enough that his features begin to dissolve into a backlit silhouette. "And what, you think it's your place to tell me who I can share this with? Who I can tell? Fuck that, Brian. That WOULD make me a whore, your whore. And that's something that stops at the bedroom door." His shoes grind and crackle over the debris in the alley with each slow step. "Don't pretend to be the injured party here."

I take a drag from my cigarette, knowing I'm not even going to dignify that with an answer. I just glare and hope he can see it in the dark.

He remains... unconvinced. "You'd damn well better start talking, Brian, because I'm not doing this again. I'm just not. If you've got a problem, be a man and confront me about it," he shouts. "You do sick and damaged better than anyone I know, but I'm over it. Do you hear me? I'm over it!"

"Christ, not this again. Give it a rest."

"Do you know what it's like to love someone with everything you have, and never even get a tenth of it back? Do you know how much it hurts?" he gasps. "The only time you ever told me you loved me, you almost killed me! And I *liked it*, God help me, I like it so much that I still get hard thinking about it. It's just so sick..."

"It's sick? Oh, you don't say," I interrupt furiously, my voice rising despite me. "You brought your own sick fetishes to this little arrangement, you know, and you were *never* the one who needed protecting."

"That's not-"

"You've taken everything I've ever had to give and still screamed for more, you pushed so hard and so long that I went out of my FUCKING MIND, Justin! You want to know what's really twisted? You MAKE me want to hurt you. I fucking need to, I hate you so much sometimes that I want to smack that smug little grin right off your face... and I do it, Christ knows why, but I do it. And you *just fucking love it*."

He recoils from the whispered words, because the truth hurts. "No."

"You begged me to break you like a whining little bitch, and I did it. And you couldn't get enough."

He moans so quietly it's nothing more than a movement of air - just enough to know I hit the bull's-eye - but he doesn't change his mind. "I'm... I'm not sorry. The stuff in the paintings, that's not just what we do, that's what we are. I can't apologize for it, and I'm sure as hell not going to apologize for blowing our dirty little secret."

"You don't get it, do you? I'm okay with the first one, and the second, and even the third, although I'm going to need to dodge Lindsay for a while. It's the cross."

He inhales a very slow breath. "All those nights on the phone... the stuff we said to get off... that painting is tame. We wanted worse."

It's true.

"But we never did it."

"You know what they say about sins committed in the heart. There's no difference."

I can see him incline his head slightly, but only because of the pale glint of the streetlight playing in his hair. "Hey, I know what's wrong - it makes you hot, doesn't it?"

I light another cigarette, and for a moment, the flame illuminates us both. He looks more scared than I thought he would. I'm not ready to think about what I look like.

"Come on," he prods gently. "You know that I already know."

"What I *know* is that you took the most private thing about me and spread it for the whole fucking city to see. You violated me. I trusted you and you screwed me over. I don't think I can forgive that." Fuck that shit. He raped me in the only way he could, and even though we both know it, I'll never give him the satisfaction of hearing those words come out of my mouth.

"This is what a mindfuck feels like in the big leagues, Brian," he says unapologetically. "You should know what it feels like. You're usually on the pitching end."

"*But there are limits*," I say, and I'm almost knocked down by the realization. Christ. There ARE limits, and why can I only see them when they're mine? When you give a shit about peoples' feelings, there are suddenly boundaries that can never be crossed again. You don't fuck them over for sport, or to prove a point, or to make yourself feel better. Damaging other people doesn't make your own damage go away.

It sure as hell hasn't touched mine.

"Hey... don't say that," Justin says fearfully. "That's not what we're about. Are you really that mad?"

Am I? Yes. But I want to hear it from him. "What do you think?"

"I think I'm scared shitless. I don't want to lose you, but... things are changing with us, Brian. I don't know what to think anymore." He comes over and stands so that we're standing side by side, and then leans against the Jeep himself, repeating, "What do you think?"

That's a hard question, one I've been considering since the moment I saw that fourth painting. The answer, though unpalatable, is suddenly clear.

"I looked at those paintings, and I knew what was going on. I knew the kid in the first one, I knew the kid in the second one. I was even pretty sure I knew the guy in the third one. But I saw that fourth painting, and I thought, 'I don't know the man who painted this picture.' You're a stranger to me now."

"Don't say that!" he pleads. "You do know me! You know me better than anyone ever will." His voice drops down low. "You know things about me that wouldn't even be true with anyone else. There are parts of me that don't exist without you, and you know that. You know me."

"No, I don't." I reply, cutting into his plea. "Justin, listen to me. The guy I knew was a seventeen-year-old virgin who was just about to grow up; someone you used to be, but also completely different from who you've become. The paintings... yeah, they piss me off, but that's not the problem. The problem is, they're the proof."

I hear him sniffle, and he hangs his head. "So is this goodbye, then?" he says, kicking at the asphalt with his toe.

"It probably should be," I answer. "The show is over. It's time."

"But it doesn't feel like goodbye," he mourns, "And I'm not ready to let go."

"When have you ever?" I joke, strangely hoping that he laughs.

He does, and then quiets down. "You know, this is really civilized for us. Don't you think it's kind of weird?" I nod in the dark, and he feels it and continues. "I don't know a Brian who wouldn't get really angry about all of this."

"Think of him as the new and improved, Adult Brian."

He laughs again, and his voice starts to warm up. "What I'm saying is that I don't really know you, either."

"Do you want to?"

He inches closer. "I always, always have, from the first second I knew you. What about you?"

"It's a pretty big inconvenience," I snort, and he groans. "How do I know that adult Justin will be to my liking?"

"Brian, be serious."

"I am serious. I have you trained just the way I wanted, and now I'll have to start over." His face falls, and I relent. "Fine. I do."

He frowns with confusion. "Okay, so that makes us what exactly?"

"I don't know - definitely interested."

"Interested?"

"Got a problem with that?" I ask, and he rushes to say no.

Interested is good. It's a place to start. He said he wasn't ready to let go, but to tell the truth, I'm not either. He's too far inside me now, part of a chapter of my life that still isn't over, and that I still want to read. I've run out on people, and been run out on, and I know what would happen if we gave up on each other now - some part of him would haunt me for the rest of my life. I might eventually find a place where I won't see him, but I would never, ever stop thinking about him, because that's the curse of things left unsaid and undone.

It has taken me years to realize that isn't how it has to be. Once I let go enough to listen - to Michael, to Alan, to myself - I could see how people get through lives that are always changing - by always giving life another chance.

I can have another chance, too.

I'm giving myself another chance to live.

"This is something new," I proclaim, and he laughs with so much emotion, so many notes of thankfulness and joy and relief. Emotions that I can identify because I know I feel them too. "This will be something completely different."

"I like the sound of that," he says, and wraps his arms around me hotly, eagerly. "I definitely like how that sounds."

Give life one more chance. Give love one more chance. That's how people live.