**A Thousand Beautiful Things**

**&**

**Slowly, But Exceeding Fine**

**By Lemon Bar**

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Between his infuriatingly understanding therapist; 'the gang' who still insisted, despite his vociferous protests, that he was a part of them; nurses who glared at him for being such a shit, and apparently mistreating their most sacred patient (Justin, his poor mute, helpless roommate), and Justin, not to mention the nightmares he suffered nightly -- Brian severely wondered if perhaps choosing a prison sentence might have been easier on him than the fresh hell that was Liberty Hospital.

**Chapter One: Liberty**

Month One, Week One:

Brian was used to cold places. Bare concrete floors or frosty tiles, white painted walls or sometimes puce; he was used to small places too, but that was before. For Brian Kinney, there existed a very definite split in his life. There was Before and there was After, and even if he wasn't certain where the line was drawn exactly he was quite sure that this was After, and even if he might not be happier After, he at least felt safer.

“What the fuck?” Brian asked as the black bag he had been toting up the drive of Liberty Mental Hospital and through its large soft yellow hallway was taken out of his grasp. Yellow was something new. So was the space. Brian had been institutionalized before but those places had been cold hospitals in the city, or bland depressing homes on the outskirts. Liberty was a good half-hour out of Pittsburgh, located in an enclave of peace and quiet. The land surrounding the hospital was large; there were expansive gardens and a surrounding forest. The hospital itself was four separate buildings, each designed in a vaguely Victorian style, and each quite large.

“Welcome to Liberty Hospital,” the woman who had snatched his bags greeted. She thrust forward a hand and didn't wait for him to extend his, simply picked it up and shook it before letting it fall back to his side.

“Kind of an ironic name, isn't it?” Brian asked. The woman issued a loud guffaw of a laugh and passed Brian's bags to the man behind the desk. “I think I'll be needing those,” he said very slowly, because he wasn't sure of this woman's intelligence.

“Sure you will, Honey,” she said. “Vic there is going to sort through everything. We keep a close eye on what comes into this place. You get issued a uniform as well as a bracelet with your name. You get to keep your toiletries and any non-hazardous things like photographs or something that you'd like to have with you. As for the rest, well, you don't need 'em in here. But you'll get 'em back when you leave.”

“What about clothes?” Brian asked, clenching his fists and releasing them. It was a habit he had, a vain attempt to prevent himself from punching something -- which was another habit Brian had developed over the years, one that had landed him here in Liberty, in fact.

“Like I said, you get a uniform. This isn't a fashion show, Mr. Kinney.” The woman snapped her gum loudly and laughed again. “I'm Debbie, I'm one of the nurses here. Let's get you settled in.”

“Can't wait,” Brian said with a sarcastic, smarmy smile.

Debbie motioned him to a side room where his measurements were taken. He said good-bye to his jeans, his black tank top and the leather jacket he'd been wearing, and said hello to the Liberty uniform -- dark blue hospital scrubs. “The colour is so we can keep you straight. Though it's more like procedure, everyone knows pretty much everyone around here. Blue means you're in House Three. That's where all our mostly harmless patients go.”

“Mostly harmless?” Brian asked, tongue in cheek.

“Nobody's perfect,” Debbie answered. “This way.”

Brian soon discovered that the four separate buildings were connected by a series of underground tunnels, but that patients stayed in their building, and for the most part, their floor. “There's yellow, blue and red. Yellow being chronic cases -- schizophrenia and the like - that's severe enough where we can only medicate and help the patient cope. Red is for the violent patients who we keep separate for obvious reasons. Those are the two buildings in the back, by the way. In case you go stumbling into one or the other -- let me tell you, you don't need to look at the colour of the clothes to know you've hit building four.”

“Red, I take it?” Brian asked as they walked.

“We had a patient who was originally accepted into building three. He settled in nice, even got along with his buddy at first, but then he hit a wall in his sessions and turned violent. We had to move him. It happens sometimes.”

Brian didn't fail to notice that she looked at him somewhat critically after this statement, but he was distracted by something else she had said. “What the fuck is a buddy?”

“Everyone's got a buddy!” Debbie exclaimed. Brian rolled his eyes and tried very hard not to gag. “It's Liberty's policy that every patient has a buddy. It helps with the introduction process, getting new patients settled, helping them feel like they have someone they can rely on. Your therapist can't be there for you all day long for the whole week, for the entire length of your stay.” They entered the main floor of building three. Like the main building, the entrance was wide and inviting, and the wood was dark and polished. Debbie ushered him up the stairs to the third floor that was painted a soft robin's egg blue.

“Welcome to your new home!” Debbie said, throwing her arms wide. The third floor was a bit like a labyrinth from what Brian could make out. There were several hallways branching in different directions that no doubt housed the patient rooms. To the right of the main door where they were standing was the nurses’ station, an elevator and a fairly large lounge that was occupied with several patients, all of which stopped what they were doing to eye Brian closely.

“Hey everyone!” Debbie said to those seated in the lounge. “Say hello to Brian! He's new.” It was somewhat surprising to Brian that there was more than one wave in his direction, but for the most part, everyone eyed him warily. The feeling was mutual.

“This way, we'll get you settled in,” Debbie said. They made their way down the hall furthest from the lounge, and walked until the hall began to turn back in that direction before Debbie stopped by a closed door. “Now, your buddy is also your roommate. You won't have any trouble, but if something happens, there's a nurse patrolling the hall at all times and all you have to do is give a shout and someone will come running. But Sunshine's been here for almost two years, and he's one of the sweetest boy's you could ever meet.”

“Sunshine?” Brian sneered.

“Look.” Debbie’s tone was suddenly less pleasant and much sharper, she thrust a pointed, red polished fingernail in front of Brian's face and shook it. “You keep your comments to yourself with him, got it?” Brian raised an eyebrow and bit down on his tongue. She huffed at him. “Tomorrow when you meet your therapist you will also receive a bit of background on your roommate. Just like he'll be getting a bit of your background.”

“What if I don't want to disclose anything to a psych patient?”

“It's voluntary,” Debbie answered, refraining from commenting that he was a 'psych patient' himself. “But you're going to be rooming together for the next few months, so you might want to get over yourself.” She turned and knocked on the door before simply turning the knob. “Sunshine! Meet your new buddy Brian!”

'Sunshine' looked about fourteen years old. He was seated on the bed on the right side of the room, his back propped against the wall, a pencil gripped in his hand and moving furiously over a pad of paper. At Debbie’s greeting, he stopped his work and looked up hesitantly. The boy had blue eyes the likes of which Brian had never seen and for a moment, they just stared at each other before Sunshine's lips curled upward just slightly.

“Well,” Debbie said. “I'll let you boys get used to each other. Good-night!” She shut the door behind her.

A box with some of Brian's things was situated at the foot of his bed, and he headed there directly. As Debbie had mentioned, none of his clothes were in the box. He had one book, his toiletry kit, and clean underwear. It didn’t take long to put everything away, and after that all that was left to do was settle onto the bed with his book, though he didn't particularly feel like reading it. When he looked up, Sunshine was scribbling again. Every once in a while, blue eyes would flicker up to look at him, as if making certain he hadn't suddenly moved somewhere.

“What are you doing?” Brian asked. Sunshine frowned at him, assessing Brian for a moment, and then rotated the book he'd been sketching in. On the pad was the beginning of a portrait of Debbie. The artwork was quite good. “Do you sketch a lot?” Sunshine averted his eyes and shrugged, Brian could make out a faint pink tinge on pale cheeks. “Do you talk?” he asked, his patience beginning to run-out. Blue eyes darted to his face nervously and Sunshine licked his lips before he shook his head. “Fucking great,” Brian muttered to himself. “This keeps getting better and better,” he muttered. “I'm going to bed.” Sunshine frowned at him and watched him warily, only to turn his head away quickly when Brian stripped off his uniform and crawled into bed. The main lights in the room remained on as it was apparently not lights-out, but Brian could turnout the lamp by his bed, and he did.

He lay in bed facing the wall, his eyes closed but his ears straining to hear all sounds. Sunshine, however, remained absolutely silent. Minutes passed, and Brian was beginning to feel sleepy when he heard the sound of a pencil on paper once more. He fell asleep to the sound of his roommate sketching.

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He clung to his pillow in the darkness, his eyes fixed to the band of light beneath his door. He listened. He listened so fiercely that silence became a sound, a faint constant like the white noise of a television set.

Then the faint creak of the top step on the staircase and his body tensed. The light beneath the door was broken -- someone standing on the other side. His breath was unbearably loud, his heartbeat even louder. He was attracting too much attention to himself! Why couldn't he be quiet? If he could only be silent then maybe the man would go away!

Brian startled awake, his eyes snapping open and he gasped in a breath. The first thing he saw was Sunshine standing very still above his bed, his fingers pressing gently against Brian's shoulder. “Fuck!” Brian snapped at the blond. “Watch what you're fucking doing!” Sunshine did not seem the least bit offended by Brian's harsh tone, however. He withdrew his hand and dropped Brian's uniform on his bed.

The lights in the room were back on, and the view from the large window in their room showed the beginning of a bright morning. When Brian didn't seem to be in a hurry to get ready, Sunshine picked up his uniform from where he'd placed it on the bed and handed it to his roommate. When Brian had accepted the clothes, Sunshine raised his eyebrows, jutting his head forward just slightly as if to say: 'Well?” and then he turned around to give Brian privacy to change.

Brian was just pulling his shirt down when the door opened and a nurse who Brian hadn't seen the day before popped her head in, smiling and wishing them a good morning before moving on, leaving their door open.

Since this was his first time at Liberty, Brian followed his roommate through the halls -- though he made an effort to make it seem as if he were doing anything but following the smaller blond. They made their way through the halls, Sunshine nodding periodically at other patients who were also exiting their rooms, some looking more alert than others, more aware. Brian had always hated the first day at a new hospital. It came down to the presentation of the perfect image -- confident and cool -- one chink in the armour of that image and there was no doubt that you were targeted for the duration of your stay. He'd been through it before -- though admittedly it had been quite a while since he'd last been to a place like this, and even then, Liberty seemed quite different from the hospitals he had become used to.

“There you are, Baby!” a shout echoed off the walls and Brian watched as a tall, slim Queen bounced over to Sunshine and pulled him into a hug. “Ooh, and is this your new buddy?” The man turned to Brian and thrust out his hand as if expecting Brian to kiss it. He didn't. “I'm Emmett, it's a pleasure,” the man purred, seemingly unperturbed by the cool hazel gaze.

“Brian,” Brian answered, because a small crowd had congregated.

“Well, you must join us for breakfast,” Emmett said. “Wait,” he amended, turning around and waving his hands in a flurry, ceasing the movement of the small audience. “I'll introduce the gang.” That sounded slightly ominous to Brian, but then, if this queen and Sunshine were a part of 'the gang' then Brian didn't think he had too much to worry about.

“I'll assume you know Justin,” Emmett dismissed casually, but it took a moment for Brian to realize he had just learned his roommate's actual name. “This is Michael,” Emmett introduced, gesturing to a dark-haired man of average height who looked like a kicked puppy dog. When brown eyes latched onto Brian like a kid in a swimming pool would grab at a pool noodle, Brian raised his eyebrows prepared to say something scathing, but Emmett was already gesturing to a slender brunette woman. “This is Mel. She's a lesbian,” Emmett added in a stage whisper that made Brian smirk and had Mel rolling her eyes. “And you're Brian,” Emmett finished, as if Brian might not remember his own name. “Come have breakfast,” Emmett said. He talked enough to make up for the fact that two of his friends seemed decidedly mute, and Brian himself discouraging and friendly advances. “Have they given you your meal plan, yet?”

“My what?” Brian asked.

“Welcome to Liberty,” Michael said, sounding a bit like Eeyore on acid. He looked away as soon as Brian turned his attention on him.

“What Michael means is that Liberty has a funny way of dealing with things,” Emmett said, smoothing over the awkward moment. Brian had the troubling thought that Michael, clearly a disturbed man, might be developing a crush on him.

“It's a leading hospital and makes groundbreaking discoveries in the treatment of its patients,” Mel, which Brian assumed was short for Melanie, offered.

“You only say that because you're fucking a doctor here,” Emmett teased. Brian was surprised to see Sunshine -- Justin -- smile a little at that. Emmett, noticing Brian's quirked brow, elaborated on his statement. “Melanie is married to one of Liberty's finest therapists. She's a lawyer but lately has been overdoing it at work. She decided to come here to take a breather.”

“God, Emmett,” Mel said with irritation.

“Oh sue me, Honey. We're all friends here.”

“Most people go on vacation for that,” Brian said. He wanted to volunteer that he was not, nor would he likely ever be one of their friends, but at that point they had reached the cafeteria portion of the floor, which was really a large window attached to the nurses' station where several nurses were handing trays of foods and cups of what was likely medication out to those in the line.

Taking his cue from the others, Brian joined the relatively short line-up in front of the nurse's window, already doing his best to distance himself from the others even if Emmett attempted to include him every once and a while, and Michael continued to look to him like a kicked puppy. Brian had a migraine already and was flexing his hand in an attempt to keep a level head.

“A new face!” the nurse in the window said. She looked young, her skin dark and her eyes bright. She smiled broadly as if she were actually happy to see him. “A new hot face,” she added with a smile, and blushed furiously afterward but attempted to look as if she had intended to add her second statement.

“Brian Kinney,” he said in amusement, flirting only a little.

“So I take it you haven't been put on a plan yet?” she inquired.

“What plan?” he said.

“Who's your buddy?” she asked with a frown.

“I'm told his name is Justin,” he said acidly. It was ridiculous, cruel and ironic that someone who had been court ordered to find a place where they could teach him to 'cool off' was paired with a mute guide.

“No shit? You're Jus's roommate?”

“Christ, for a mute little fucker he makes a lot of friends,” Brian muttered.

“Watch it, I handle your food and your drugs,” she said, and he wasn't sure if she was serious or not. “Anyway, Liberty takes a holistic approach to healing the mind. You'll go over it in your therapy session today. You'll get a meal plan and meds to help you along, but generally we don't use the standard medications for people with problems.” Which was a nice way of saying that, at Liberty, they didn't shock the crazies. “At least, not in this building. We recognize, of course, that sometimes the more severe cases need a more complex treatment. It's usually a last resort, though.”

“That's great,” he said with false sincerity that she noted with a raised eyebrow. “Can I have some breakfast with this lecture, or is this the new holistic approach?”

“Carnivore?” she asked, he nodded and she handed him a tray.

“What, no drugs?” She rolled her eyes at him and waved him on. Not wanting to be social, he headed off back down the hall, intent on returning to his rooms. It seemed that this was the general tradition at Liberty as most of the other patients were disappearing back into their respective rooms. He'd managed to lose 'the gang', however, and the way he figured it, even if Justin did come back to the room, it would still be quiet.

Justin didn't return, however. Brian assumed he was eating with his friends and spared another moment to scoff at the blonde's abilities as a 'buddy'. Not that he would have tolerated the kid if he had been doing what he was supposed to -- actively attempting to settle Brian in. Brian didn't need settling. He had to endure this, and then he could return to his life again.

At nine, when he was contemplating venturing out of his room to see if he was allowed to do anything other than atrophy indoors, there was a light knock on the open door (a nurse had come in and happily opened it once he'd closed it. If he hadn't gotten that hint, the little rubber stopper she propped there even though the door didn't need one to stay open was a bit of a clue).

“You must be Brian Kinney.” She was tall and blond and smiled in a tight-lipped yet oddly friendly way. Clearly from a good neighbourhood and a fair bit of money. She didn't wear a doctor's coat but she did have a little nametag that had her name in bold black print: Lindsay.

“If that's what the clipboard says, then I must be,” he said, looking pointedly at the clipboard in her hand. It was obvious that she was his therapist. If her oh-so proper feigned comfort with him wasn't a clue, then the analytical look she flashed at his statement gave her away. Melanie's lesbian lover. No, they had been married, right? He could almost hear her cataloguing his various characteristics, rifling through labels and applying them to him. Brian hated labels. They were bullshit.

“I'm Lindsay Peterson, your therapist,” she said, and actually stepped into the room and offered her hand.

“Charming,” he said, even if it wasn't. He didn't make an attempt to sound sincere.

“How are you settling in?”

“Pretty fucking well considering my fucking 'buddy' is a mute kid,” Brian said.

“Justin has been here a little over two years. He's been quite effective as a buddy, we've found.”

“Are you supposed to give-out information like that?”

“It's our policy at Liberty to offer buddies the chance to give some background without having to explain it themselves. Sometimes it's easier to have a messenger to explain the tricky things. It's completely consensual, and I only ever share what you ask me to.” He snorted and she sat down on Justin's bed. “Perhaps you'd like to start there. What would you like me to share with Justin?”

“Christ, that kid goes to therapy? What does he do, mime his problems?” Brian sneered.

“Justin's case is quite complex. I won't deny that his silence does make things a bit more difficult,” she said.

“You're his therapist, too?”

“I am,” she watched him a moment, and they lapsed into silence. “You seem to have a lot of questions about him. Are you getting along well?”

“Getting along? This is like an episode of 'Barney and Friends' on acid. Next you'll be telling me it's Liberty policy to chant the damn Barney 'I love you' song before going to bed.” She continued to watch him, which was a bit unnerving. He decided to act a bit more mature. “We're getting along famously. We're the bestest of friends.”

“I'm familiar with your case, Brian. I know you aren't here by choice, but of the limited options you did have, you chose Liberty. It is still possible to change your mind.” That shut him up pretty quick. He'd been around to most of the hospitals in Pittsburgh that dealt with people like him. Liberty was the only name that hadn't sounded familiar to him and he'd grabbed at the chance to not repeat any of those other experiences. “Perhaps you'd like to tell me what you'd like to share with Justin.”

“Nothing,” Brian said.

She tapped her pen on her clipboard a moment, but nodded just the same. “Okay. That's your decision.”

“So are you going to tell me what his problem is?”

Lindsay smiled a little. “Justin has been here for a little over two years. He doesn't talk. He sketches,” she said smoothly. Brian waited a moment and then raised an expectant eyebrow. “This process is entirely consensual, Brian. I share what the patient is comfortable with sharing and nothing more; but in the end -- especially in Justin's case -- the decision of what I do share is my own. Justin has demonstrated a great deal of trust and maturity in consenting to share a good deal of his history with his buddy. However,” she added, “I have no intention of abusing that trust he's placed in me. If you decide to be more forthcoming, I might decide it in Justin's best-interest to disclose a bit more.”

“Is this how it works? I get to be mind-fucked in my own cell each day until I get released?” Brian snarled.

“I don't think it would be appropriate for me to engage in fucking a patient, even if it's only mind fucking,” Lindsay said with a smile. It actually made Brian bark a short laugh. “The first session is usually casual. I chose to conduct it in your room because I thought you'd feel more comfortable here. From now on, you'll be coming to my office at this time each morning. Since this is your first session, I have some paperwork for you to do. I'd like you to answer every question honestly, and to the best of your ability. It's my job to make sure we look after you properly.”

Brian watched as she removed some papers from the clipboard and handed them over along with a pencil. “This questionnaire is to establish what you'd prefer from our sessions.”

“What I'd prefer?” he asked, his tone making it clear that his preference was to have no sessions whatsoever.

“It's so I can establish the best course of treatment. In your case, you've been court ordered to be here for the duration of four months. I know this seems like quite a long while to you, but when considering treatment, it's not much time at all. I'd like to make certain we are using the time we have effectively.”

Brian spent the rest of the morning filling-out questionnaires that ranged in topic from health information to his favourite colour. Lindsay left him at lunch, when Justin returned to the room and escorted him back to the nurse's station for his tray, but following his meal, Brian was back with Lindsay, this time in the main building where a series of tests were run on him. Like the questionnaires, the various tests performed by the doctor ranged from actual tests Brian would have expected of his own doctor in a regular check-up, to bizarre tests which Brian assumed had to do with the 'holistic approach', which consisted of the doctor prodding his big toe with a metal wand and listening to strange bleeps and beeps and high-frequency wails in order to determine the foods that were best for him to eat.

By the end of the day, and just in time for dinner, Brian had a meal plan, prescribed pills -- though none of them, from what he could tell, had anything to do with the standard prescriptions and had more to do with general body detoxification and the like -- and he had a therapist who claimed she knew how best to work with him. Brian bit his tongue, ate his dinner, took his pills, and read his book before falling asleep.

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Brian had arrived at Liberty on Monday evening. By the hospital's standards, he'd been settled in on Tuesday -- meaning the various doctors and nursing staff claimed to know what to do with him. By Wednesday, he'd made enemies on the nursing staff -- he supposed yelling and calling them names didn't win him any points but hell, he was there as a result of his anger issue, you'd think they'd be able to deal with it when it came up. In fact, oddly enough, the only person who seemed unaffected by Brian's extreme temper was Justin. When Brian would scream and rage and sometimes throw things, Justin would just watch him with an infuriating look of patience and acceptance that only frustrated Brian all the more. The boy, despite what Brian might have imagined, did not cower, did not cry, and never uttered a sound.

It was the silence that usually started Brian on his rants when he was around Justin, it seemed almost like permission to Brian to rant -- and he did. In his session, Lindsay would sometimes make a comment about his 'episodes' and try to subtly imply that perhaps, at least when he was on his floor -- which meant when he was back amongst his blue-garbed 'peers' -- he should try to contain himself.

Brian made no effort to contain himself. He had buttons, and when those buttons were pushed he couldn't help it, he would snap. Liberty hospital proved very adept at pushing his buttons. Between the completely and infuriatingly understanding therapist; 'the gang' who still insisted, despite his vociferous protests, that he was a part of them; nurses who glared at him for being such a shit, and apparently mistreating their most sacred patient (Justin, his poor mute, helpless roommate), and Justin; not to mention the nightmares he suffered nightly -- Brian severely wondered if perhaps choosing a prison sentence might have been easier on him than the fresh hell that was Liberty Hospital.

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Hands.

Brian didn't trust hands. Sometimes he marvelled at their abilities, their varied uses, but he never trusted them. These hands were rough with calluses that rubbed his smooth skin raw as he struggled against their grip. These hands fisted and punched, they rubbed and scraped. These hands hurt.

In the end, there was nothing he could do to fight them off him. The hands grasped tightly about his neck and he couldn't breathe, could barely squirm where he lay -- prone on his bed. There was a sense of relief -- darkness would take him and it would be over, and the hands wouldn't be able to reach him anymore. Then the hands changed. No longer rough and callused. Not hurting, not choking. Soft like cashmere and steadying him as he thrashed.

Brian came awake with a gasp with one of Justin's hands grasped firmly in his own. With the other hand, Justin was holding a stuffed teddy bear. Brian fought for breath, steadied his racing heart, and tried to anchor himself in reality, in the present. In the cool, quiet room. Even in the hand he was still crushing in his grip. He spared a moment to wonder why Justin would think to wake him by holding his hand, but didn't bother. He didn't want to speak, didn't want to break the silence, and instead, felt oddly grateful for the mute, spectre-like presence beside his bed.

After a moment, Brian relinquished his grip on the blonde's hand and watched as Justin squeezed the bear very tightly to his chest and leaned one cheek against the teddy's head. Justin handed the bear to Brian.

“I'm not a fucking baby,” Brian snapped. “I don't need a teddy bear. What the hell are you doing with one?” Justin watched him steadily for a moment before he settled the bear on Brian’s nightstand. “My roommate's a mute kid who still sleeps with stuffed toys. Christ,” Brian muttered ungratefully as Justin crossed back to his side of the room. A moment later, he could hear the sound of Justin's bedside lamp being switched on, and then the sound of a pencil scratching on paper. He stayed very still, waiting to see if Justin was watching him, but his roommate seemed entirely engrossed in his sketch. Brian snaked an arm across the bed and picked-up the teddy bear, drawing it close to his chest beneath the blankets, and then he closed his eyes and fell asleep.

**Chapter Two: Violent Dreamer**

Month One: Week Two

With daily sessions that went-on for two hours it was impossible, even for someone like Brian Kinney, to fill his time with Lindsay with talk about anything except something of significance. By his second week, Brian was becoming aware of a traitorous part of himself that wanted her to understand. His sessions with Lindsay always took place in the morning, and left him a few hours to regroup before he had to seek-out lunch. It was Tuesday and Brian had missed lunch, he was exhausted and jittery, all he wanted to do was sleep forever but he couldn't seem to settle down. He'd gone for a walk in the gardens, but that hadn't settled him, and he'd finally sought shelter in his room.

Brian had grown accustomed to Justin's silence, and since the boy refused to speak he had learned other ways to keep track of him, applying some of his survival tactics from his youth for a different reason. Justin entered the room with barely a sound, but Brian knew the boy was standing over his bed just the same, relieved that Justin did not try to touch him. Instead, he heard the sound of something being placed on his dresser and then something was settled beside him on the bed. Brian kept his eyes closed, pretending to be asleep, and listened to Justin's retreating footsteps.

He wasn't surprised to open his eyes and realize Justin had tucked the bear beside him on the pillow. After that first time the blond had offered the toy, Brian had awoken slightly mortified to be gripping the stuffed teddy and had placed it back on Justin's nightstand, making no further comment about it. That night as Brian had settled into bed, however, the bear had been leaning back against the table-lamp on Brian's side of the room. As well as the bear, Justin had left Brian's dinner on his nightstand, as well as his pills.

Brian ate his dinner half-heartedly, and then tried to sleep but each time he closed his eyes an old horror would play-out, projected onto the backs of his eyelids. Lindsay had asked about his mother, his sister, about his father. Brian thought his complete avoidance of certain questions told her more than his direct answers to others. When he'd left her office there had been a condescending look of pity in her eyes - or maybe Brian imagined it there. He hated pity. He was strong, and he was stubborn, and most importantly, he was a survivor. He didn't have any need for pity, as far as Brian was concerned, he was doing just fine.

After finishing dinner, Brian managed settled down enough to read his book. A half-hour before lights-out, Justin returned to the room and seemed to instinctually know that Brian just needed his space, because the blond - usually unobtrusive anyway - seemed to be making certain he made as little noise as possible. Brian watched the blonde's nightly routine out of the corner of his eye, until Justin had settled onto his own bed with his sketchbook and pencil, flipped open to a page and turned on his bedside lamp.

Fifteen minutes before lights-out and there was a knock on their door and Debbie poked her head in. “Hey boys!” she greeted. “Room checks. Two heads, present and accounted for,” she said. “How's the sketching coming, Sunshine?” she asked. Brian watched as Justin smiled and turned his pad around, proudly displaying a picture of Emmett and Michael and Melanie. Brian noticed that there was the rough outline of another head that seemed to have a good deal in common with his own. “Wow, look at that!” Debbie said, lifting the book out of Justin's hands to look at the picture better. “Did you see this?” she asked Brian, flipping the sketch towards him. Brian nodded, pretending to be engrossed in his reading. “I'll bring up another pencil for you, Picasso,” Debbie said. “Night boys.”

When the lights went out, Brian put his book away and settled down into his bed with reluctance. As much as he wanted to sleep, he did not have any faith that he would be able to do so. He turned his back to Justin's side of the room, trying to block out the soft glow of the table-lamp, and propped the teddy bear against the wall, looking at it closely. Justin was an enigma that Brian, more often than not, tried to ignore. He'd spent most of his time at Liberty snarking at the mute boy, but for whatever reason when Justin sat down to sketch his group of friends, he added Brian among the smiling faces.

Time passed slowly and Brian dozed lightly, waking when Justin would turn a page in his sketchbook, or when the wind blew strongly through the trees and made a howling noise. At some point he jolted out of his doze and could not think of what had caused him to startle. Justin's lamp was off, the wind was quiet, he listened to the sound of Justin's sheets rustling as the boy moved in his sleep, but when he heard a small sob of panic, Brian shifted around to face his roommate's bed. The moon must have been close to full; it's light making the white sheets glow. Justin was writhing in his slumber, clawing at something fiercely and making a strangled keening sound.

It occurred to Brian, as he watched the boy grapple fiercely with demons in his dream, that he knew nothing about Justin. He had mocked the presence of the teddy bear, but had not thought to question it because Justin was still a kid - wasn't he? How old was he? Brian didn't know. He realized also that every night since Brian had come to Liberty, Justin had sat awake sketching until Brian was fast asleep, and Brian was a deep sleeper. Did Justin suffer nightmares often? Was that why he stayed awake until his roommate was asleep and less likely to be affected? Was that the reason for the teddy's presence? It wondered if the bear actually soothed Justin the way, in the passed few days, it had soothed Brian.

He watched a moment more as Justin feebly struggled before seeming to lose strength and collapsing back into the sheets. Brian plucked the teddy up from where it still lay, propped against the wall, and quietly crossed the room, settling the stuffed toy into the crook of Justin's arm. He paused a moment, watching as Justin curled around the teddy in his sleep, and then he climbed back to his own bed. When he had settled he looked across the room to Justin's bed. Blue eyes, open and glinting with the moonlight, watched him. They lay there, staring for a while, before Justin sighed and closed his eyes, tucking his cheek against the teddy and drifting off. Brian stayed awake for the rest of the night.

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The teddy bear alternated, after that, between spending the night with Brian on the left side of the room, the spending the night with Justin on the right. They didn't discuss it, didn't work-out a compromise, not that they could have really settled on something with Justin being mute; it just happened that the teddy would be sitting on the opposite nightstand at the end of the day.

Brian was finally settling into Liberty. His patience may have been thin, and he still had episodes, but for the most part he kept to himself when he wasn't being included in 'The Gangs' conversations. Avoiding The Gang was quite difficult. They seemed to be the favorites in building two, and between them, they had the majority of the Liberty staff wrapped around their fingers. Emmett might had done most of the talking, but they were the most active and social group out of all of building two's patients.

“Did you hear?” Emmett cried one morning as they all piled into Justin and Brian's room. While in the first week, Brian had been able to have quiet breakfasts in his own room, it seemed the gang had come to a mutual decision that one week of breakfast solitude was enough, and if he didn't get dragged with them to where they were eating, they followed him. “They've settled on our outing spot!”

“Our what?” Brian asked.

“We get monthly outings,” Michael mumbled.

“The nurses decide on a place, but patients sometimes fill-out suggestions and put them in the suggestion box. By mid-month they usually settled on a place, and in the last week of each month, we go somewhere,” Melanie explained.

“Last week we went to this cozy little town with lots of cute shops. They had the best ice cream in the world, didn't they, Baby?” Emmett asked, throwing an arm around Justin's shoulder, and the blond nodded enthusiastically.

“So where are we going this time?” Michael asked.

Brian had learned bits and pieces of history about each member of the gang, picked-up from bits of conversations. He learned that Michael was Debbie Novotny's son - the nurse who had introduced Brian to Liberty - that he was there because of depression and because Debbie didn't want to let him out of her sight, and also because they didn't have much money, and Liberty had offered to lower the price because she had worked there for quite a while. Michael grafted onto The Gang -- which had originally just been Emmett and Justin - because Debbie had prodded him to do so, until she had been advised to step back a bit with Michael so as not to interfere with his progress.

He had learned that Emmett had a panic disorder. That he had tried everything he could think of before he sought refuge in Liberty, and swore up and down that his doctor was a miracle worker because he was feeling so much better. Emmett had been one of Justin's buddy's, and they'd become great friends. Brian thought it made sense, since Emmett talked so very much, and Justin said not a word.

Melanie, of course, was Lindsay's husband. They were looking to start a family and between that and the stress of work, Melanie had begun to feel like she was losing it and had signed-up for a short stay in Liberty to get her bearings back. He had learned that both women had cheated on the other at some point, that they shared a little house close to the hospital and that Melanie hated the commute into Pittsburgh to reach her practice but that she hated the city even more so she didn't complain - too often.

Of Justin, he learned very little, mostly because the boy himself didn't volunteer information, and no other member of the group gossiped about the others. He had already known Justin had been in Liberty for nearly two years. He'd learned that Justin had been seventeen when his parents dropped him there. He'd been mute since his arrival, but seemingly had no trouble communicating with people, as he was a favorite among patients and staff.

As the group discussed the plans for the hike that the nursing staff had organized for the end of the month, Brian thought about the arrangements he had made with his assistant regarding work. The court order had specified four months in a hospital of his choosing, or the same amount of time in prison. He hadn't been worried about his company, Kinnetic, because Cynthia was more than capable of looking after things, and he'd made Ted Schmidt, his accountant, promise to haul his ass up to Liberty each week on visiting day - Saturday - and bring any papers or such that needed going over. Since phone calls were restricted to patients, visiting day was the only chance Brian would get to go over anything work related. This meant that Brian was expecting Ted the following day.

“Don't you have an appointment soon?” Mel asked, and Brian checked the time before he rose from his bed, collecting his tray and heading out.

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“Are you concerned about what you employee might think when he comes tomorrow?” Lindsay asked, halfway through the session, once Brian was done ranting about the stupidity of a group nature hike that - as Lindsay had described - would be filled with trust exercises and other related bullshit.

“Concerned about Theodore?” Brian asked, tongue in cheek. “No.”

“You're not worried that his opinions of his boss might be altered when he brings work for you to this place?”

“Theodore is an old … acquaintance,” Brian explained, not quite able to call Ted a friend. “He joined Kinnetic fresh out of rehab. He was a crystal queen. If he'd going to start passing judgments, I'll fire his ass.”

“Is that why you requested Theodore to bring your work out here?”

“It was either him or Cynthia. I'm sure they'll switch off,” Brian said. This would be his first weekend with visitors because last weekend, being his first one at Liberty, had been for him to get his bearings.

Lindsay asked about Kinnetic, about his work there and how he had come to start his own firm. He glossed over the debacle at Ryder where he had been accused of sexual harassment and how, even if his lawyer had proven his case, he hadn't wanted to stay at that firm any longer.

Close to the end of the session, Lindsay smiled at him and set her notebook and pen on her desk. “It's nearing the end of your second week. How are you making out?”

Brian resisted a witty comment. “Fine.”

“You have a doctor's appointment today,” she said and handed him a pink slip with a room number and time. “This is completely standard. You'll have weekly appointments for a check-up to see how you're handling the meal plan and the pills, just to make sure you're getting the best out of the program. In case there's something that needs to be added or removed from your plan.”

“Fine,” Brian said again.

“How are you and your buddy getting along?” Lindsay asked, as she did during every session.

Brian looked down at the pink slip, then over at the door, then back at Lindsay. “Why doesn't he talk?” he asked. Lindsay's smiled was sad and she looked down at her desk. “We're getting along just fine,” Brian answered.

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His appointment with the doctor was three times the length of any regular appointment with a doctor. Blake, which was the doctor's first name, refused to be addressed by either the honorary 'doctor', or by his last name. He smiled too much, he wasn't very pretty, he was very gay and very talkative, and Brian felt a headache before even five minutes had passed.

“Are you still smoking?” Blake asked, looking at his clipboard as he poked and prodded at Brian's body. He frowned when Brian said he was. “It's a nasty habit,” Blake said. “Have you thought about quitting? This is the best place to do, actually,” Blake continued.

“I haven't thought about quitting,” Brian cut the man off.

“Let me know if you do!” Blake said. “We're all equipped to handle it.” He waved some nicotine patches and gestured at some pamphlets. Blake asked questions about Brian's energy levels, his general health, and the number of his bodily functions per day. He ran a quick live-blood cell test and then poked at his big toe. When Brian left, he was on the same meal plan, but had several more pills to take. None of them were prescription.

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Brian climbed into bed that night and plucked the teddy from off his nightstand. The night nurse did room check and said goodnight, and Justin sat back on his bed with his sketchbook. The soft light from Justin's nightstand was becoming soothing to Brian, as was the sound of pencil on paper. He drifted off in no time at all.

For as long as he could remember, Brian suffered nightmares. They didn't occur as frequently in his youth as they did when he grew older, but they were there. The teddy, oddly enough, had staved off some of the more intense nightmares he suffered. He thought it might be because the teddy was a sort of gift, a symbol that someone was concerned about him in whatever way, for whatever reason, and that was something new. Still, he still dreamed, and those dreams weren't always pleasant, but when he awoke, the bear was there to remind that this was After, and After was very different from Before.

When Brian awoke on Saturday morning, he felt disoriented. He had fallen asleep with The bear and had slept deeply and relatively soundly, but now he was waking up and he was warm and there was an arm draped across his waist, and warm breath was tickling at his throat and there was a fresh scent filling his nose. He spent a moment basking in the comfort before he realized where he was and that this was not a usual situation.

Upon opening his eyes, he was confronted with the sight of Justin, who had apparently climbed into his bed the night before, lying facing him and sharing his pillow, one arm thrown around Brian's waist, and the other tucking beneath his head. Between them lay the teddy bear. Shifting slightly, Brian glanced over the blonde's sleeping form at the boy's bed. The bedding was in complete disarray, and the sheets were half-dragged off the bed. Brian surmised that the blond had been chased from his bed by a nightmare. Why the hell had he climbed into Brian's bed?

He settled back and was contemplating prying the blond off him when blue eyes opened to peer at him curiously. “What the fuck are you doing?” Brian asked calmly and quietly. Justin winced and picked up the teddy who was still lying between them. He crushed the teddy close to him and closed his eyes very tightly. It had been Brian's night with the bear, but Justin had a nightmare and needed him too. “It's not like I haven't had men climbing into my bed before,” Brian huffed to himself, and watched as Justin turned pink and looked away. He rose from the bed, shrugged helplessly at Brian, and escorted the teddy back to the other side of the room. Brian paused a moment, watching as the blond began to remake his bed. He refused to entertain the notion that he felt cold without the warmth of Justin's body. Hell, it had been two weeks and Brian hadn't fucked anyone. That was a record. Of course having another body pressed close to his would affect like that.

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Ted had a large stack of documents and nothing but good news. Clients had been curious as to Brian's extended absence, but Cynthia had cooked up a story and everyone was happy. So far accounts were running smoothly and everyone was happy.

“I think the art department in particular that you're taking some time away,” Ted joked. Brian kept his head down, signing papers and reading through the notes Cynthia had sent along to keep him filled in on what was happening. “This place looks really nice,” Ted commented. “I wouldn't mind a stay here.”

“Drugs and alcohol abuse won't land you here, Theodore,” Brian commented.

“Right, I just need to lose a marble or two,” Ted said.

“Are you looking for a pink slip?” Brian asked.

“No thanks, boss,” Ted said happily. Out of the corner of his eye, Brian noticed Justin sitting alone on the patio, sketching Emmett and one of his guests, blue eyes met his momentarily then Justin returned to his sketch.

Ted stayed for a few hours to update him and talk business, and Brian felt a bit more grounded when the man left. Kinnetic was his pride and joy; being away from it was difficult. With Ted gone, and nothing to do to pass the time, Brian missed his company, missed the challenge of a new account and proving once again that he was the best.

He stayed outside for a bit, realizing that most of the visitors were family and friends. Brian's only visitor had been someone from work. Did Theodore count as a friend? Brian had never been exactly friendly with the man. He headed back to the building when it began to drizzle and was surprised to find Justin still sitting out on the patio with his sketchbook. He hadn't had any visitors at all.

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“If his parents dropped him off here, why don't they visit him?” Brian asked.

“You seem preoccupied with Justin today,” Lindsay noted.

“He had a nightmare the other night,” he said, trying a new approach.

“Mm hm,” Lindsay commented, not looking up from her notes.

“You know, I seem to recall you saying something about getting information about your buddy,” Brian said.

“I seem to recall you being unwilling to participate in the exchange,” Lindsay said with a teasing smile.

“Couldn't this be construed as coercion?” Brian asked.

“The buddy system works because there is an exchange. I refuse to expose Justin's information to appease your curiosity.”

“You're saying I have to accept a certain level of responsibility?” Brian tried to clarify. Lindsay smiled ambiguously at him, and Brian realized that it really didn't matter. And so what if Justin knew his information? Who was he going to tell?

“You can tell him that my name is Brian Kinney. That I'm twenty-nine and own my own advertising company and that I'm damned good at what I do. I'm here because I blew up at an idiot who nearly ran me off the road and the judge thought I was out of line. I probably was. I'm here for four months to sort out my anger issues or else I go to jail. It's not a new experience for me, I've been in and out of places like this since I was twelve, but it's been a while since I've been sent to one.”

“This is quite a bit of information,” Lindsay commented.

“My father is a useless drinker who hits shit when he's angry. My mother drowns her sorrows in fine wines and pretends she's somebody. My sister is divorced with three shitty kids and is well on her way in outdoing my mom in the bitter bitch department.”

“Brian,” she said.

“You can tell him the fucking bear needs a name,” Brian said. He left the appointment, even if he did have one more hour to go. That wasn't the whole story, not by far, but it was startling to realize that his mouth was running away with him and exposing things he had spent a good part of his life trying to hide from.

It was raining so Brian took refuge in the sitting area on his floor. Surprisingly it wasn't very crowded, but there was a trashy soap opera on, and Brian paid just enough attention to realize that maybe his life wasn't so screwed up after all. It made him feel better. Michael came to collect him for lunch, but he begged off from the group and took his tray back to his and Justin's room. He was just downed his pills when Lindsay knocked on the door and stepped inside, she shut the door behind her and settled onto Justin's bed.

“Is this the bear?” she asked, picking up the stuffed animal that was sitting on Justin's side of the room. Brian watched her cautiously, feeling far to exposed. She looked at the teddy a moment, then placed it back on Justin's nightstand, ran a smoothing hand across her legs to flatten her skirt, and cleared her throat.

“He was seventeen when he came to us. His mother and his father brought him, they're exact words were they wanted him fixed. He came to us not speaking, but after numerous tests we realized it was not because he wasn't able to. He communicates quite well, despite his reluctance to speak. I've been treating him for nearly two years, and I'm no closer to understanding the reason for his silence. He'll be nineteen soon, and by rights he can leave when he wants since he's an adult now, but he doesn't seem to have the inclination to leave. It's my opinion that this has something to do with one or both of his parents, but he avoids me when I press the issue. He misses his little sister, and his dog, and for all the time he's been here with us, no one has come to visit it him.” She rose from the bed after a moment, and gripped Brian's shoulder before leaving.

It didn't answer all of his questions. It left him wondering more than he knew. It eased him, a little. To know there was someone as isolated as he was, but then he remembered the sketch Justin had done of The Gang, remembered how the boy was fussed over by a good deal of the nurses. He remembered Daphne threatening his first week there, and several nights following. He remembered Debbie's motherly pride of Justin's sketching. It seemed perfectly clear to Brian why Justin showed no inclination to leave Liberty. When it was a choice between blood relatives who sent you away to be 'fixed' and forgot about you, and entire makeshift group of friendly faces who treated you as if you mattered, it didn't really matter that you were in a hospital with your every move policed. Justin wasn't isolated at all.

As far as the other questions went, it seemed pretty clear Brian would only get his answers from one source. The question was how to go about getting that source to speak when it had been, apparently, nearly two his since he'd uttered a single word?

**Chapter Three: A Solitary Boy**

Month One: Week Three

The Monday morning of Brian’s third week at Liberty dawned bright and clear. Brian had already adjusted to the schedule, waking naturally with enough time to change and wash before the morning room\_check. The schedule was somewhat comforting but there was nothing that made the frequent room\_checks enjoyable. Brian had valued his privacy ever since he was a little boy. He’d been forced to adapt with his times in various institutions and hospitals because privacy was impossible there, but it had only made it that much more precious. At twenty\_nine, Brian was not enjoying having nurses constantly keeping an eye on him and barging in on him, no matter how big their smiles were or how pleasant their demeanor.

It was at breakfast that Brian noted that The Gang was somewhat subdued in their chatter, and there was an air of tension in the group. It was something he noticed throughout the day, though he could not determine the reason for it. Tuesday was the same, though the tension seemed heightened, and by lunch Brian had realized that for whatever reason, each member of the small group of friends seemed overly concerned with Justin.

"Hey, Baby," Emmett crooned after lunch. "Why don’t we go for a walk?" Brian watched Justin smile, just like he always did, and walk away with Emmett. He thought about asking, but then realized he was sitting alone with Michael and Melanie. Brian didn’t get along with Melanie. He enjoyed butting heads with her, and thought that he might have gotten along with her in a different world where he actually possessed more than a teaspoon of patience for people that reminded him so strongly of himself, but he didn’t live in that world, and more often than not Melanie pissed him off. Michael, on the other hand, was annoying for a different reason. Brain had learned that the man was thirty, but his maturity was that of a teenager, and when his depression was added to the mix Brian felt like clawing his eyes out. In addition, Michael very clearly, was smitten with Brian, and that was just too much to take. Independently, they irritated him, but for some reason when the entire group was together, he could bear Melanie and even Michael. That didn’t mean he was going to ask them what was going on.

"Nurse Daphne?" Brian asked, tongue-in cheek as the familiar nurse waltzed by. Some of the staff at Liberty were volunteers and even if the volunteers were regular they took shifts so that same volunteer would be on for an entire stretch and then be absent for the rest of the month. Daphne was one of the few permanent nurses at Liberty who hadn’t blacklisted Brian, mostly because she could give as good as she got, and showed remarkable talent for brushing Brian off when he was in a pissy mood.

"I’m very busy and important," Daphne teased.

"Is there any way I can get something to read? I’ve done my book to death," Brian said.

"If I smuggled in a copy of 'War and Peace’, how long do you think that would last you?" she asked.

"In this place?" Brian quipped.

"We’ve got a library," she stated, smiling at him.

"How am I supposed to know this?" Brian asked.

"Justin practically lives there. He hasn’t shown you?" she asked.

"He hasn’t said a word about it," Brian quipped. Daphne rolled her eyes and huffed at his joke, but she gave him the directions just the same.

The library was larger than he had been expecting. It was the topmost floor of the main building, and the creaking wooden staircase you climbed to reach it deposited you directly in the centre of the room. From there, it was a sea of bookshelves, with a few couches, and one dour looking woman seated behind a large oak desk, glaring at everyone in general, though it seemed as if Brian was the only one in the room.

"You can take out one book," the woman said as Brian walked by. He tried to choke down the comments he had to that statement, like that there were plenty of books and why would they need such a silly rule. Instead, he lost himself between the shelves, and spent the day reading, finally selecting a book and heading back to building two in time for dinner.

What he found when he returned to the floor was sheer pandemonium, and at the centre of it all was Justin. The pale blond boy who had seemed so gentle and quiet before was thrashing and making an awful, strangled keening sound. There were three large orderlies manhandling him, and Daphne and Debbie were close by trying to speak to him and calm him down. Emmett was in tears and was sobbing into Michael’s shoulder, and Mel was watching solemnly and patting Emmett’s back.

"What the fuck is going on?" Brian shouted at the group.

"Don’t," Melanie said, grabbing his arm as he moved forward. "You can’t do anything."

"What’s going on?" Brian repeated. He watched as Justin kicked his legs out, struggling like a wild thing to breakout of the strong grips. Daphne was urging Justin to keep still as Deb prepped a needle.

"Hold his arm," Deb instructed one of the orderlies. Justin keened a little louder, there were tears running down his cheeks, and as Debbie sedated him, Justin flashed Brian a look of desperate fear, pleading for something though Brian had no idea what that might be.

"Get him to solitary," Debbie said, as she gently wiped the tears from Justin’s cheeks. "It’s okay, Sunshine," she whispered. Brian watched the orderlies heft Justin’s limp body and carry him off to the solitary confinement rooms.

"What the fuck was that?" Brian asked.

"We don’t know," Emmett said, wiping his cheeks. "It’s something new, and we don’t --" he broke off to sob again.

"It started up within this year, and it’s like clockwork. Every third week of the month, he has a fit and no one can calm him down. Believe me, everyone has tried," Melanie explained. "He gets sedated and taken to solitary so he can get his bearings and rest-up. They run tests to try and figure-out what caused it but inevitably they find nothing. Before the week is out, he’s back in his room and it’s like nothing ever happened."

"Until the third week of the next month," Michael commented.

"I can’t stand it," Emmett sobbed, turning on his heel and rushing back to his rooms.

"That’s not normal behavior," Brian said. "Something has to be causing that."

"Brian," Melanie said calmly. "We’re in a hospital. Generally the people here are not well."

He ate dinner alone in his room and thought about how his enigmatic roommate just kept getting more and more complicated. He wondered if Justin really was simply that crazy, or if there was something else behind the behavior. Generally, even if he were crazy, there would be some sort of logic to the timing. Why every third week of the month?

"Room check!" Debbie cried in lieu of knocking as she poked her head in. "You might want to get changed, lights are out in a few minutes."

"Can you get something to Justin?" Brian asked.

"He’s in solitary, Baby," she said. It shocked Brian, it was the first time she had ever used an endearment on him. He wondered if he were growing on her, or if she were simply concerned about her Sunshine.

"I know that. It’s just that it’s his night and he’ll need it," Brian said.

"What is it?" she asked, looking curious and doubtful. Brian picked up the bear from the nightstand. "Is this your bear?" she asked him. Brian’s look was enough of an answer, she snorted in amusement. "I’ll try and get it to him. Now you get changed, you hear?" She took the bear and closed the door behind her. Brian didn’t bother to change, just threw some sheets over top of his uniform and stared at the empty bed across from him.

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Brian knew the nurses checked the rooms in the middle of the night. They had never waked him, and he’d never heard a sound from them, but he knew they checked just the same. He supposed that it made sense, that trouble could happen in the night and it was their job to make sure the shit didn’t hit the fan. It was another irritant to him, he felt indignant that he was treated like a basket case, like he was untrustworthy. Like he was unhinged. It had never actually disturbed his sleep, though, until he was startled awake by a flashlight shining into his face.

"What the fuck?" Brian asked, jolting into full wakefulness and trying to get a handle on his nerves.

"Room check," the man shrugged. His jaw was square and his hair was halfway between blond and brown. He had the expression of a dumb ox and appeared to have absolutely no remorse at having just woken Brian.

"You shine your fucking light in everyone’s face?" Brian asked.

"Just getting to know the new patient," the man said. "Go to sleep, lights out."

"Fuck you," Brian muttered.

"Maybe later," the man said before he left the room. His nametag had read 'Christopher’.

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Justin was gone all of Wednesday and half of Thursday, but he returned to their room in time for dinner on Thursday night. Brian was already seated on his bed with his tray, holding a fork in one hand and his book in the other. He looked up when Justin entered and offered a greeting but the blond walked directly to his bed, climbed onto it, and curled up with his back pressed against the wall. Brian was pleased to see that the bear was clutched in the blonde’s arms.

"Hey, Jus," Daphne said as she came round for room-checks that night. She sat for a bit at the foot of Justin’s bed, and Brian noticed that she didn’t try to touch him like she usually did. Justin was a tactile person, as Brian had noticed early in his stay at Liberty, and Daphne had always been just as relaxed with the boy. She didn’t talk, simply sat a while, and Brian wondered what she thought she was accomplishing. "I have to finish the rounds," she said after a while and stood up.

"Hey, I mentioned it to one of the other nurses -- Nancy, or Penny, or whatever the fuck; but I wanted to make sure it actually got to someone who gave a shit. The night nurse the night before last was an asshole. He woke me up and was talking shit."

Daphne frowned and turned away from the door, giving Brian her full attention. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, he shone a fucking flashlight in my face, and when I told him to fuck off, he talked some shit and then left. I don’t have a problem with assholes, I can give as good as I get," Brian said. "But I don’t know if his attitude contributes to the peaceful atmosphere here at Liberty."

She snorted at his sarcasm, but nodded her head seriously. "Did you get a glimpse of his nametag?"

"Christopher," Brian answered.

"Okay, he’s on rotation through the different buildings. I’ll make sure he gets straightened out," she assured. "We take this sort of thing really seriously," Daphne stated, clearly upset by the news. "I mean there’s trouble-makers wherever you go, and we’ve had incidents where the staff aren’t used to how Liberty handles things. Sometimes it’s hard to know what’s going on because not all the patients are as able to point out this sort of thing as you are," she said. "So, thanks for telling me."

"No problem," Brian said. He was a little surprised at how serious she sounded. The others places Brian had been to, it was par for the course getting attitude from the staff, getting attitude from the patients. He had to remind himself that Liberty was obviously a different sort of place.

"Good-night," Daphne said, and shut the door behind her.

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Brian was fairly certain that Justin hadn’t slept at all the night before, and for the first time since he’d come to Liberty, he watched as Justin distanced himself from The Gang. Justin got his breakfast tray, ate in their bedroom, and then disappeared for the rest of the day. Since his earlier talk with Daphne, Brian assumed his roommate had gone to the library but he didn’t follow him.

"We don’t know what’s behind it," Lindsay explained, when Brian questioned her. "He has a routine, though. The fits happen any time within the third week, he goes to solitary for however many nights he needs to feel comfortable again. When he returns to his room he’s quieter --" she paused, as if waiting for Brian to comment, but he didn’t. "He stays to himself and doesn’t like to be touched. Usually by the second day, however, he initiates contact and everything is as if nothing happened."

"And you don’t ever wonder what’s going on?" Brian asked.

"We’ve explored a number of possibilities," Lindsay said. "But you have to understand, sessions with Justin are incredibly difficult because he doesn’t speak. I use several techniques to make the time productive, including art therapy, but when all I have to go on are his facial expressions and shakes and nods of his head in response to my own supposition, there is only so much I can do."

As it was a Friday tradition at Liberty, Brian found himself back in Blake’s office as the blond doctor ran tests and talked Brian’s ear off. It was a change, since the week had been filled with a sort of tense silence on the part of the gang, everyone was walking on eggshells with Justin.

"We’re going to try something fun," Blake said as he flipped through the growing number of papers kept in Brian’s file. "I’m going to put you on a complete system clear-out."

"What?" Brian said. He could figure-out what Blake was talking about, and there was no way that seemed liked fun to Brian.

"You stated in your entry forms that you’ve taken recreational drugs and alcohol. There’s enough here as well for me to know that you’ve got little icky gross things in your system."

"Icky gross things? I’m glad you feel free enough to use the technical terminology," Brian snarked.

"Well, your body is my business," Blake leered, then winked. Brian tried not to wince, there was no way he was interested in Blake. Mind you, he was definitely not used to this prolonged celibacy but Brian had spotted a janitor that didn’t look too bad. "I’m switching your diet for the week. Stick with this as long as you can, but if you think it’s going to drive you crazy." Blake flashed a wide grin. "Tell your therapist and she’ll make sure you get switched back. But you have to stick with it as long as you can." Blake leaned over a piece of paper and began writing things out. Brian had learned that the table Blake was filling in was a comprehensive chart for the nursing staff, so they would know what pills and what food to give him, and when.

"There you go," Blake said as he capped his pen. "The week might be for shit, but you’re going to feel a lot better afterwards. And I put in a general detox for any metals that might have built-up from dental work, that sort of thing. It works wonders and I prescribe it to almost all my patients."

"I can’t wait," Brian said.

Blake smiled broadly and said, "Let’s see how you do."

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When Justin returned to their room for dinner he settled his tray on his bed, pulled out his sketchpad and pencils and, as if on after-thought, deposited the teddy on Brian’s nightstand. Brian pretended to be too engrossed in his book to notice, but something eased a little in his chest.

The next morning Brian awoke fifteen minutes before room-check to find that Justin was not in his bed. Instead, Justin’s bed was neatly made, and the slippers the blond wore around the floor were absent. Brian dressed and got ready, and when Daphne poked her head into the room, she seemed unsurprised to find Justin absent.

As he made his way through the hall to get his breakfast tray, Brian noticed Emmett and Justin sitting in the rec room, watching TV while they ate their breakfast. Emmett’s arm was around Justin’s shoulder, and Justin was resting his head against Emmett’s chest. "Maybe you should give them a minute," Brian said, when Michael headed into the room, carrying his tray.

"Why?" Michael asked, then glanced into the room and saw Justin and Emmett. "They’re just like that," he explained. "It’s not, like, romantic. That’s frowned on here anyway. They’re just really good friends." Michael headed into the room, and Emmett and Justin did not seem the slightest bit ashamed of their position on the couch, Michael seemed at home with the show of affection as well. Brian refused to analyze the burning in his stomach.

Brian had great plans for the rest of the day. He had intended to walk out on the grounds, visit the library and (grudgingly) hang-out with the Gang. His new meal plan with the regime of detoxifying pills Blake had assigned him had begun last night at dinner with a plate of cooked pears and apples, with a hint of cinnamon, and a small cupful of pills that, despite being gel-coated, left a funny taste in his mouth. Following breakfast, Brian realized his plans were dashed as he was reluctant to move too far out of reach of the bathroom. He cursed Blaze and Liberty’s demented treatment system, and re-read the book he’d taken-out from the library previously.

"Ooh," Emmett said at dinner, Brian was looking at another plate of cooked apples and pears. "You got that diet thing, right? Blake calls it the body-purge."

"Lovely," Brian said, viciously stabbing a pear-slice with his fork.

"That is one brutal plan. But trust me, Baby," Emmett said. "You feel so much better afterwards. You know," Emmett added, sitting back and lifting up his shirt to expose his flat stomach. "I believe I even lost a few pounds." That didn’t sound too bad to Brian, and he continued eating.

"He tried to give me that," Michael volunteered. "That diet. I lasted a day. I felt like shit." Brian snickered, and so did Emmett. Mel rolled her eyes, and Justin simply shook his head. "Blake compromised and now I just eat a lot of fiber." This news only caused the group to laugh all the more. "What? Why’s that funny?" Michael said. A moment later his face contorted. "You all hate me."

"Oh, pish," Emmett said, throwing an arm around Michael’s shoulders. "Don’t get mopey, Hon." Brian tried to conceal that he was still snickering by focusing on his plate and spearing another slice of apple, but an elbow jabbed him in the side, and he realized that Justin had caught-him out. The blond smirked a little and rolled his eyes.

It being Saturday, the Gang dispersed after a long breakfast to see if they had visitors. Brian watched as Justin returned to their room to retrieve a sketchbook before following the other patients outside where he settled into a corner, out of the way of everyone and watched and sketched.

Cynthia was leaning against the railing overlooking the grounds. She wore black pants and a blazer with a white blouse beneath and her hair was hanging styled but loose about her shoulders. She reminded Brian immediately of everything he was missing his business suits, his office, presenting to clients, the absolute certainty that he was the best. They worked out a few mishaps and discussed going after a few clients. It was a relief to be updated about Kinnetic, to know it was still his and still running well. He missed it.

Unlike Ted, Cynthia worked through the business talk quickly and efficiently, and then proceeded to regular talk. She updated Brian about the office gossip, and the gossip going on in her life. Every now and then, she’d probe into how things were going at Liberty, but Cynthia was subtle and had tact, and Brian found himself answering honestly before he even realized what he was seeing. He was sad to see her go.

"Enjoy your field trip next week. I’ll send Theodore for Saturday, alright?" she said, smiling a little, and he glared at her and watched her make her way to the parking lot. As he sat watching, something cold was pressed into his shoulder and he started, looking to see what it was. Justin was standing beside him and pressing a plastic cup filled with something that looked like a smoothy of some sort.

"What’s this?" Brian asked. Justin raised his eyebrows and tapped the cup against his arm again, then gestured behind them where Brian saw Daphne smiling and waving. "Fuck, the diet includes strange concoctions?" Justin bit his lip, clearly trying to hide a grin. Brian took the drink and then motioned for Justin to sit beside him. "What do you think is in it?" he asked. The drink was brown, with crushed ice in it. "Little birdie’s dirty feet? Percolated monkey meat?" he asked, remembering a song he’d found in a book once. Justin grinned at him and rolled his eyes. "I suppose I should just drink it." Justin held up his right hand, displaying his crossed fingers as Brian took a sip of the drink.

"Don’t be so melodramatic," Daphne’s voice carried over the distance that separated them. "It’s celery and carrot, and other vegetables, and ice. It won’t kill you."

"I wouldn’t be too sure of that," Brian muttered. Beside him Justin snickered and bumped his shoulder against Brian’s arm. "You’re not the one who has to drink this shit," Brian said. The comment only caused Justin’s snicker to escalate into a laugh. It was quiet, and the blond was clearly holding back, but Brian decided he liked the sound.

**Chapter Four: Walking Blind**

Month One: Week Four

By Tuesday morning, the fourth day of his new diet, Brian was cursing Blake up, down and sideways and wishing him fervently into the deepest layer of hell for inflicting the disgusting diet on him. The food was bland, the pills had a foul odour and a worse after-taste, and between meals the nurses tracked him down as easily as dogs on a scent to give him his ‘power drink’. Brian felt a bit more confident to leave more space between himself and the bathroom but he was still greeting it like an old friend, and the understanding though slightly amused looks The Gang gave him every time he departed suddenly were grating on his nerves. He was certain it was his idiot doctor’s plan to humiliate him into submission.

"You’ve been pretty calm the last few days, though," Daphne said with a smile as she handed him his lunch tray -- another bland and unidentifiable substance, accompanied by an overflowing cupful of pills. He snarled at her and fumed quietly to himself as her laughter followed him down the hall.

"Respect the inner temple," said Sandra, one of their shift\_nurses who everyone generally attempted to avoid because her sanity was more in question than the patients of Liberty. "Your body is your temple!" she said. "Doctor Blake is helping you polish the marble walls of your inner sanctum."

"Mm, kinky," Emmett said as he came down the hall. "Brian, Babe, come help us talk Michael out of drowning himself."

"Michael is trying to drown himself?" Brian asked as Emmett guided him away from Sandra.

"He does it sometimes," Emmett said. "He’s never really serious, he just needs the attention, and we’re happy to give it. Justin’s booby\_trapped the faucets so there isn’t any danger, anyway." Happy to have an excuse to leave Sandra behind, Brian followed Emmett to a room on the opposite side of the floor from where Brian’s was located. "This way," Emmett directed, leading Brian into the bathroom. Just like in his and Justin’s room, there was a semi-private bathroom in between rooms.

In the corner by the bathtub, Michael lay crumpled in Justin’s arms. Justin rocked them back-and-forth while Mel leaned against the wall and tried to look sympathetic. "Look who I found!" Emmett said, throwing his hands up as if to say ‘ta-da!’

"Who?" Michael grumbled, turning his head slightly. When he saw Brian he sat bolt upright and rubbed furiously at his damp cheeks. "You could have told me!" he whined.

"Are you okay?" Emmett asked.

"I’m fine," Michael said.

"Well, crisis averted," Mel said. "You can fix the faucets, Justin." Justin shook his head.

"He thinks Michael’s going to try again," Emmett offered. "Honey, it’s okay," Emmett said. Justin shook his head again. Michael’s expression suddenly grew serious.

"You have to!" he cried. "My mum is on duty today. I can’t explain how the faucets got broken." Justin raised his eyebrows and looked innocent. "Please," Michael begged. "Please, Justin. I -- I promise not to do anything this stupid ever again!" he hissed. Justin grinned and jumped up, heading over to the faucets.

"You go, Baby," Emmett said, laughing.

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"What’s this?" Brian asked on Thursday morning when the nurse doing morning room checks came in pulling a metal trolley. She checked their names off on the sheet she had on the clipboard, and handed both he and Justin a package.

"Your clothes," the nurse explained. "It’s your field trip today, and you can’t very well go out in Liberty uniform. We return your clothes for the day."

Justin was already pulling on black cargo pants and a white T-shirt, both of which complimented the boy’s physique. Then Justin pulled out a smoke-blue sweater that was stretched-out and too big. The sleeves hung over Justin’s hands, and it covered the blonde’s assets, masking them entirely. Brian thought he even spotted some dried paint.

"Hello, Boys," Emmett said, strutting into their room. He wore a button-down shirt with frills and a dizzying pattern, and tight blue jeans. Combined with Emmett’s mannerisms, the man screamed ‘queen’. "Ready for our adventure?" Justin grinned and bounced on the balls of his toes twice. Brian noted the blond wore a pair of beat-up running shoes. "That’s the spirit! You must be excited to take a break from the meal plan," Emmett said to Brian.

"What?" Brian asked, already heading out to get breakfast.

"On Field days, the lunch they bring is something special. If anyone’s on a plan, unless it’s really important, they get a free day. We can also pick\_up some treats at the pit stop. Ooh, it’s going to marvellous," Emmett said, clapping his hands together.

"The thrill of a lifetime," Brian scoffed.

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There were four yellow school busses sitting in the circular drive in front of Liberty’s main entrance. By each bus stood four members of Building Three’s staff, including two nurses and an orderly. They were all in casual dress, without even a nametag. Debbie Novotny stood on one of the decorative rocks in the garden and shouted out names, directing people to different busses. Brian couldn’t help but notice that some of the patients seemed to already know where they had to go.

"They divide us according to rooms. You go with your buddy, and travel with your section," Emmett explained. "It’s always like that, so people get used to the routine."

"Sorry I’m late," Michael said, rushing over. Behind him, Brian noticed a tall brunette whose sullen expression matched Michael’s own. He had a pink scar at the side of his cheek and there were fresh nail marks on his neck. Brian noticed no one asked the reason for Michael’s lateness.

"Finally!" Emmett said, tossing his hands in the air. "We’re on the last bus," he said to Brian as the Gang started moving in that direction.

"Michael and Melanie both room on the opposite side of the floor," Brian said.

"You didn’t think that the nursing staff would have the audacity to separate the Gang? It helps that Debbie shifts the list around. She wants to keep Michael close to Emmett and Justin -- she thinks it keeps his moods even. As for me --well, between Emmett’s loud mouth, and Lindsay," Mel shrugged.

Brian had to duck as he climbed onto the bus, but he wasn’t the only one. He hung back as Justin marched confidently (he didn’t have to crouch at all) to the back of the bus, and settled himself in a window seat. Between the shuffling, Brian ended up sitting with Michael, on the isle-side so he could at least stretch-out his legs. Emmett was in a similar position beside Justin."So the emphasis of these trips is to make everybody buddy-buddy with their buddy?" Brian asked. Besides he and Justin, none of the other members of the Gang were sitting with their roommates.

"No," Michael said. "They’re airing us out. The buddy system is to make partnering-off for activities easier for the staff."

"I don’t have a buddy at the moment," Emmett said. "He was just here temporarily. He had to get his head straight, you know?"

"Rich people do that. It’s like, crash-course therapy," Michael muttered. Melanie cleared her throat and Michael looked a bit sheepish but didn’t apologize.

The bus ride was a one-hour ride with a pit stop halfway so everyone could stretch and go to the bathroom. The staff of Liberty seemed to know what they were doing, because exactly a half-hour into the drive people were starting to twitch in their seats. When the bus finally stopped, they were in the middle of nowhere. Everyone filed off the buses and onto a large field.

The staff broke into two groups, half conducting games and amusing the patients, and the other half setting up blankets and setting out food for a picnic. Brian avoided the games, preferring to sit in the grass and close his eyes and pretend he wasn’t on a stupid field trip with the other psychos of building three. Melanie sat quietly beside him and watched the games. She didn’t participate in any either.

He watched a nurse coax Michael into a potato\_sack race, which the dark\_haired man proceeded to lose. He watched Emmett and Justin tie their legs together in order to win a three-legged race. The games were stupid, the sort of thing children played at a birthday party.

"My first field trip," Melanie said as they watched Emmett hoist Justin into the air like a trophy, both of them laughing and accepting their prizes, a small bag of real-fruit, sugar-free chewies. "I was about as anti-social as you could be. I was on a different bus, of course, from the rest of the Gang. I sat in the back and fumed." She laughed and shook her head. Brian could just imagine what a piece of work Melanie was when she first came to Liberty; but then again, he wasn’t in a position to criticize. "There was a huge picnic and I sat alone, because I didn’t want to deal with anyone who was crazy." She snorted, nudged Brian’s side with her elbow. "Justin came over and sat down on the blanket with me and when I told him to fuck off, he rolled his eyes and smiled and shared the chocolate he’d picked\_up at the pit stop with me. I didn’t know then, but that was huge."

"Chocolate lover?" Brian asked.

"Like you wouldn’t believe!" Melanie. "Anyway, I didn’t know anything about Justin -- or the others. He sat quietly, that was all I cared about. He looked so young -- I thought it was so strange, to see someone who was so young look so serious. Then the staff called the games, and I thought it was the stupidest thing I had ever seen, and then I saw Emmett pestering Justin. I didn’t know they were friends, or what they were talking about, but I watched. Finally, Emmett tied their legs together, and they did the three-legged race. They were tripping all over because Justin’s legs are short, and Emmett couldn’t diminish his stride. They looked so ridiculous." They stopped to look to where Emmett -- tall and gangly, looking outrageous in his clothes, was walking with Justin -- short and young, dressed in cargos and his ratty sweater. They looked so different from each other, but each time they stumbled, they laughed like little kids. "They looked ridiculous, but they were laughing and I thought, maybe that was the point. I mean -- to the stupid games. I would never do it, but it was sort of like, now I could appreciate why the staff offered them."

"That’s a really great story," Brian said sarcastically. "Does it come with a moral?"

"Asshole," Mel said, but there was a sort of fondness in her voice.

"Christ, don’t get all emotional," Brian said.

"Hey!" Emmett said. "We got gummies!"

"Untie your damned legs, Honeycutt," Mel ordered when Emmett and Justin stumbled again, nearly toppling onto the blanket and onto Mel’s lap.

"Yes ma’am!" Emmett said as he and Justin said on the blanket and untied the cords that kept their legs together. "Damn, you tied it too tight, Boy Scout," Emmett said as he picked at the bindings.

"Boy Scout?" Brian asked.

"He knows far too much to not have been one at some point," Emmett said, as Justin nudged his side, his cheeks were slightly flushed, but he bowed his head as he worked at the knots and Brian couldn’t tell if the flush was a result of the race, or embarrassment.

"Lunch is up," Debbie called.

It was the perfect day for a picnic, and even if the games had been stupid, and the idea of a field trip moronic, Brian couldn’t deny that he was relaxing for the first time in a long time. It was nice to have a moment to breath, to ignore responsibility and schedules. After lunch and some free time, while the area was cleaned-up, the patients were separated back into the groups they’d formed to ride the bus, and then they separated. Brian found himself following Debbie to the edge of the woods.

"We’re going for a hike," Debbie explained as she led them into the woods. The group spread out, some people walking fast, others trailing behind. The three members of staff spread themselves out, one leading, one keeping track of the middle portion, talking and making jokes with some of the patients, and one bringing up the rear.

The woods were thick, but there was a sort of path they were following. The ground was soft underneath Brian’s feet, the ground covered with old leaves and fresh moss. The air was fresh and he found himself taking deep breath of it, like he had never been able to breath before then.

After they had been walking for a ways, Debbie called a halt. "I want everyone to stand beside your buddy!" she called, her voice sounding shrill in the quiet of the woods. Everyone obeyed, and the other nurse and the orderly -- neither of whom Brian was familiar with -- grabbed a bag each and walked down the line, distributing strips of cloth of varying colours.

"Each of you," Debbie said, when the other two women returned to her side, they’re bags empty. "Has between you one blindfold. This is a special kind of hike."

"A really kinky one," Emmett whispered, causing everyone within earshot to either snicker or squirm.

"One of you will wear the blindfold, and it’s your buddy’s job to lead you on the hike, to make sure you don’t trip or bump into anything. This is a trust exercise, so no peaking!" Debbie and the other two staff walked along the line, helping people with their blindfolds.

Brian turned and looked at Justin, who was holding the brown and purple patterned strip of material. They looked at each other blankly for a moment, and then Justin sighed and tied the blindfold. It covered almost half of his face, and there wasn’t any doubt that the kid couldn’t see anything. He adjusted it a little, and held out his hand expectantly. Brian stared at it, but there was no way he was going to be able to lead Justin unless he took it.

"Ready?" Debbie called from the front of the line. "Everyone, follow me!" Brian could see the line begin to move, it was slow progress and the other two members of staff once again disbursed themselves, helping those who were having trouble.

"Okay," Brian said, when enough space was between him and the people in front of them. "Walk forward," he said and began to walk. Justin trotted by his side confidently. After a few steps, Justin tripped over a root, and Brian steadied him. "Shit," Brian said. "Okay, let’s try again." He kept an eye out for roots, steering Justin around them. "There’s a rock, so lift your leg high." Justin made a show of lifting his legs up high, and Brian snickered. "I didn’t say we had to climb."

"Hey Baby!" Emmett said as he led one of the other patients up behind them. "I’m borrowing a buddy," he said. "Ooh, that’s a pretty tree," he said. He proceeded to describe it in detail to his buddy.

"I can’t walk this fast," the blindfolded man complained. "I can’t see, why are we walking this fast?"

"Okay, don’t fret, darling," Emmett said. "Bye boys." Justin almost veered off the path, not knowing there was a slight turn.

"Hey, where are you going?" Brian asked, tugging on Justin’s arm and bringing the blond in close to his side. "We’re turning." They walked for a long while, but Brian didn’t feel the time passing. It became easier to announce the quirks in their path and alert Justin, he didn’t even have to think about it. Oddly, the walk became soothing, the voices of the other patients slurring into a low hum in the woods, overpowered or perhaps complimented by the sounds of the birds and twigs cracking underfoot.

"Alright," Debbie announced, stopping in a clearing. "Everyone take off your blindfolds. That worked great!" They had five minutes to mill around, and then Debbie ordered them to trade-up, whoever wore the blindfold on the walk over was now the guide."

"Christ, I’m going to break my neck," Brian muttered to himself, but then Justin walked over and handed over the blindfold. Brian hesitated a moment before tying, he looked at Justin, assessing the situation. Justin stood there calmly, when Brian’s eyes met his, the blond grinned, and then wiggled his eyebrows -- a clear challenge. Brian took a glimpse around, trying to memorise his surroundings, but it was futile. He tied the blindfold in place and stood very still.

Justin’s hand slipped into Brian’s own cautiously --like a skittish animal. They stood for a moment, Justin holding his hand but seemingly braced, ready to pull away at the slightest sign. Nothing happened. Brian stood completely blind and entirely reliant on his mute roommate who he had only barely known for about a month. He tried to tell himself that the nursing staff wouldn’t let him be injured too severely.

Justin tugged his hand forward, and they started walking. At first, Brian picked his feet up high, and walked slowly. Justin elbowed him in the side. Brian tried to walk normally, and thought he was doing a pretty good job. It was different to walk through the wilderness without being able to see. He became overly concerned with he path: where were they going? Were there rocks? Was he getting close to a tree? Brian had the urge to ask Justin for his opinion on how Brian was doing for his first time walking blind through the woods. He thought about Justin walking blind on the way over. The blond has seemed completely relaxed, entirely at ease, as if he hadn’t been blindfolded.

Debbie had called this a trust exercise, and it was. Brian’s instincts were screaming at him to rip off the blindfold and see where he was going. He knew he couldn’t do that, thought. Instead, Brian became very aware of Justin’s presence at his side. He could hear the kid’s breaths, thought he could even pick\_out the tread of Justin’s running shoes on the soft earth. He felt the heat from Justin’s body, soaked in Justin’s presence at his side and their joined hands. The slightest movement the blond made, Brian was aware of. He tried to interpret small movements: was Justin’s scratching his ear, one of the kid’s habits? Was he waving at someone?

Justin squeezed his hand twice. "What?" Brian asked. "What the fuck does that mean?" He tripped over a rock. "Oh." A slight tug to the right, and Brian obediently followed. He didn’t like this complete dependence on another person. The quiet hum of chatter he had been comforted by as he led Justin over now made him ache. It was too quiet. He wished Justin was talking, just because it would get Brian’s mind of things. Then again, he hadn’t spoken much to Justin on the way over, except to give directions. He thought of Emmett describing the tree to his random partner, thinking that would have helped. He would at least feel grounded, if Justin were talking about what they were passing. It didn’t help that Brian had seen it all on the way over; the point was that he couldn’t see it now.

Two squeezes again, Brian picked his feet up. He didn’t trip over anything and figured he’d avoided whatever obstacle was in their way. They started to head downhill, Brian felt Justin position himself slightly in front of Brian, it gave Brian something to brace himself with, and he was appreciative of the gesture. They reached the bottom of the slope and Justin returned to Brian’s side, their hands still joined. Now, though, Justin walked closer, their arms brushing. It was grounding in a way that a voice couldn’t be. Justin was guiding him, but their arms were practically linked and their hands joined. If Brian stumbled, his height and weight, and his grip on Justin’s hand meant the blond would be going down with him. Yet, besides that one stumble, they might as well have been walking on fresh pavement on a sunny afternoon.

"And we’re back!" Debbie announced. "Take off your blindfolds, and congratulations!" Brian pulled the blindfold off, squinted as his eyes adjusted to the sun. "Everyone back to the bus!"

"We made it," Brian said, glancing around, rather astonished he hadn’t broken any bones on that ridiculous walk. Justin had moved from Brian’s side, had begun heading towards the busses, but at Brian’s comment he turned and smiled. Brian was almost glad he was still squinting. "You’re a cheeky fucker, aren’t you, Sunshine?" Brian asked as he caught-up to his roommate. Justin bumped his hip against Brian, and then climbed onto the bus.

**Chapter Five: Windows to the Soul**

Month Two: Week One

Eric was the janitor on the afternoon shift on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. He had dark, sand colored hair and brown eyes and the physique of a Roman god. He was gay.

Brian made excuses, tried to justify it in his head. It all boiled down to the fact that he had just gone through an entire month of celibacy and that was something he couldn’t fully comprehend. Increasingly, he found himself getting hard at awkward moments -- though any moment in Liberty with a hard\_on was awkward.

He stalked Eric through building three, caught his eye on the top floor and met him in a spare room on the second floor. Brian fucked him hard against the wall, each thrust pushing the larger man into the cool painted brick of the spare room. When he came, he disposed of the condom and re\_tied his uniform pants. Not even pausing to say anything to the man he exited the room and walked right into Debbie Novotny who stood like a stonewall, her hands on her hips.

"Come with me," she said, her voice stern. She crooked a red\_painted fingernail at him, and he followed her to a small office. "Sit your butt down," she said, and Brian obeyed. "I ought to report you and have you hauled out of here."

"Go ahead," Brian said, leaning back in his chair as if he didn’t care. As if the prospect of finishing the remaining months of his sentence in jail didn’t rattle him.

"I’m not going to," Debbie said. "I’m gonna give you a choice, and you’re gonna think good and goddamed hard about what I have to say."

"Fuck that, just make the damn call," Brian snapped.

"I don’t need to read your file, or be your nurse to know you’ve got problems. Hell, I could have figured that out for myself if we were complete strangers walking down the fucking street!" she huffed. "I don’t care about what you did to get in here, or why you did it. The point is that you’re here. You chose this place -- over prison, over other institutions like it. Being here means you want to get better." Brian snorted derisively and she pointed her finger at him again. The red\_painted, claw\_like fingernail was threatening, and Brian settled down.

"I know you’re scared. I know getting better means letting go of a lot of the barriers you had to keep you safe. It means working through a lot of things you probably just want to forget about. I’m not going to give you the lecture to get over yourself, that everyone here pretty much is in the same boat, because that’s horseshit, and it won’t help you any. All I can say is you either want to get better, or you don’t. If you want to get better, that means committing yourself to this place, and to following the rules. If you don’t, I can make the call and you can go somewhere where you won’t have to deal with all this shit, and people will just leave you be -- as much as you can be left alone in prison," she said with a shrug. "So tell me, what’s it gonna be? Do you want to get better?"

Brian looked at her defiantly, but in the end, he huffed and looked away from her. "Uh uh," Debbie said. "You’ve got to say it."

He sat there quietly, trying to think that he didn’t care, that he hated this stupid place anyway, that he was fine and had always been fine. "I want to stay," he finally said, quietly.

"Good for you," Debbie said, her voice just as quiet. Then, her voice strong again, she added, "Then stop fucking around!" She ushered him out of the office, but Brian didn’t return to his floor. Instead, he headed over to the library and stayed there until dinner.

There was a certain amount of satisfaction Brian had when he looked at the steak on his plate, he didn’t care about the vegetables or the pills that accompanied it, but after the last week of bland, tasteless food, he was happy to have a meal with flavor. Blake had congratulated him on making it through ‘the body purge’ and now had him on a different meal plan. "Eat right, for your blood\_type," Blake had said, holding up the book that described the meal plan. "It does wonders." Brian didn’t care what it did, so long as he didn’t have to drink those lumpy, brown ‘smoothies’ the nurses kept bringing him the week before.

After dinner, Brian read a book in his room ignoring Justin when the blond returned and settled down with his pencils and sketchpad, and they sat silently occupied until Daphne came for room\_checks. "Here," she said, taking two sheets of paper and handing one to each of them. "It’s just been confirmed that a registered iridology expert is going to visit and is willing to do an exam for anyone who is interested. Blake is really excited about it and is highly recommending it to all his patients."

"So what’s this?" Brian asked as he accepted the piece of paper.

"That’s a little explanation about the technique. Blake spoke to all the patients he saw today, but that’s not everyone and he made\_up these sheets to give to those he won’t be seeing until later." She wished them goodnight and left.

Iridology, the piece of paper explained, was basically a technique that assessed the emotional and physical health of a person by staring into their eye. That’s what it boiled down to. Brian didn’t believe it would work, and wasn’t interested to try it. "Are you going to do this?" Brian asked, holding up the piece of paper. Justin pursed his lips and looked unhappy, but shrugged and nodded.

"Techniques like this are helpful to me when I deal with Justin, because it gives me an idea of what sort of questions to ask, what areas to probe," Lindsay explained the next morning, as Brian sat on the by\_now familiar brown leather couch.

"He didn’t look happy about it," Brian said. "We strongly encourage him to do these sorts of treatments, but it is always his decision," Lindsay said.

Brian didn’t feel like arguing. He didn’t feel like talking about Justin, either. "I’d like to tell you, Brian, that most people here are quite committed to healing," Lindsay said in a way that made him immediately realize Debbie had told her about the janitor. He entertained thoughts of yelling at the woman, but he’d done that many times already and she was never fazed. Not to mention that she’d have a ready explanation: ‘She’s your therapist, and you need to talk to her about why you felt you needed to fuck when you’re supposed to be getting better!’ He could only imagine what she’d say.

"You don’t think I’m committed," Brian asked.

"I think you’re making wonderful progress," Lindsay said. "I’m impressed by how far you’ve come in a relatively short amount of time. However, I don’t think you’ve really committed yourself, no."

"I don’t believe this," Brian said.

"You were talking about Justin earlier," Lindsay said. "Granted the situation is different in many ways, but he understands that if we are going to help him, he needs to cooperate and do all he can to help us understand."

"Is this because I don’t want to do the iridology?" Brian asked. "And don’t you think you might be taking advantage of him?" "He has every opportunity to say no," she said.

"You’re the psychologist. But with enough pressure, even a completely healthy and happy person will give in to demands," Brian said.

"The iridology is completely non\_invasive. There is no pain involved. Dr. Cameron doesn’t even need to touch her patients."

"It’s not the test," Brian answered.

"What are you afraid she will see in your eyes?" Lindsay asked.

"We’re talking about Justin," Brian said.

"Of course," Lindsay said.

"I have nothing to hide," Brian said.

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Doctor Cameron was a tall woman with grey eyes and pale skin. She wore her brown hair in a tight bun, which contrasted with her long peasant\_skirt and blouse. She wore bracelets that jangled when she moved her wrist, and spoke softly, her voice relaxing Brian without him even realizing it.

She didn’t ask him personal questions, simply had him sit in a chair and stare straight ahead, keeping his eyes open. She stared at his eyes directly for a while, and then made a picture of it that she printed out, in color, from a computer close by.

"Each time I come here," Dr. Cameron said. "I am always impressed by how healthy the patients are. Blake does a wonderful job." She looked at the printout, and then met his eyes and smiled. "Here, see here?" She explained what she saw in his eyes -- what area represented what internal organ, outlined how she knew his liver needed to be detoxed and other recommendations she would send along to Blake. "It will help him know where to focus his attention," she explained.

"I signed a release to share this information with my doctor and my therapist," Brian said.

"Yes," Dr. Cameron said with a small smile. "That’s because of the other things I see. Here," she said, and began to point to different places on the printout and explain what she saw. She said he was creative and charismatic, and determined and stubborn and strong\_willed. It felt like she was reading his mind with the various insights she had, just from looking at his eyes. "Right here," she said, pointing to a dark part in his iris. "I can also see you have been abused at one point, and molested."

Brian sat back in his chair and took a deep breath, trying not to say anything. "You don’t have to talk to me about it," Dr. Cameron said. "You are entirely safe with me right now. I’m telling you this because I will be passing this to Doctor Peterson, and she might inquire. If you have questions for me --"

"No," Brian said, getting up from his chair quickly. "I think that’s about it." The door shut quietly behind him.

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Brian had no delusions about having a quiet moment if he returned to the floor. The Gang had all agreed to make appointments with Dr. Cameron and he knew at the very least, Emmett would be talking ceaselessly about what the woman had told him. Instead, he found himself seeking the quiet of the library.

"Brian," Lindsay said quietly as she found him in a corner of the large library.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"I’ve been keeping close to the office Dr. Cameron is using in case a patient grew upset. She gave me your results. How are you feeling?"

"Brilliant," Brian said. "Fantastic."

"If you want to talk to me."

"I’m here because talking is precisely the last thing I want to be doing," Brian said.

"I’m not here to antagonize you," Lindsay said. "But I think that, given Dr. Cameron’s findings --"

"It’s not anything I haven’t told you before," Brian said.

"Brian?"

"I told you already that my dad was an abusive drunken good\_for\_nothing who used to beat me," Brian clarified.

Lindsay remembered Brian telling her something similar, wanting her to pass it on to his roommate, beyond that Brian avoided talking about his father, and his family. "Did he -- touch -- you?" she asked.

"He would have had to in order to hit me," Brian said.

"I mean --"

"I know what you mean," Brian snapped. "No. That came later."

"When?"

"The first time a judge decided I needed to be taught a lesson, and had to be institutionalized in order to learn it," Brian said. "I was twelve." He probably should have stayed and spoken with her, but Brian had no desire to talk about the past. And it was the past. He’d moved on and become a successful, independent man who had wealth and prestige and could get any man he wanted. He’d come a long way, and he didn’t need to take a walk down bad\_memory lane, there were some places you just didn’t need to go.

As he had predicted, Emmett’s session with the iridologist had gone wonderfully, and the man was eager to discuss it. "She said I have the ring of harmony," Emmett said. "That I’m creative, and I was just so surprised that she could tell that, because I love creating things!" Emmett said. Brian stayed with the Gang for dinner, but left directly afterwards to get some fresh air in the garden, walking partway with Justin who was off for his appointment with Dr. Cameron -- his was one of the last appointments of the day.

Outside, in the cool evening air Brian was able to clear his head and think. He’d told Lindsay that what had happened to him was in the past, but the truth was it would always be a part of his present because he couldn’t let it go. His mother and his father set an example to him of what it meant to be married, what it meant to ‘love, honor and obey’. He’d learned what love meant from them, and what being a parent meant, and it had screwed him up. In college, he’d tried to prove to himself that his parents were poor examples, that there were other ways to be. He’d fallen for a boy two years his senior who had shown Brian just how little words meant. In terms of his career, Mark had been a godsend. Prior to Mark, Brian had been entirely direct and honest, and couldn’t bring himself to toy with words and meanings and truth. After Mark, he’d matured a great deal, and it was exactly the push he needed to really excel in advertising. In terms of his private life, however, Mark had quickly and easily erased any desire Brian had to form any sort of equal relationship.

Brian had tricked himself into believing he had everything he wanted, but the truth was he was more and more feeling out of control. He was unsatisfied with everything, but there was no explanation he wanted to entertain for why he should feel empty. He tricked to feel in control again, to distract himself. More than being horny, that’s why Brian had pursued Eric, Liberty’s janitor. Once again he was expected to follow rules and obey orders -- he was subjected to daily probes into his feelings and thoughts, and there were no distractions except for books and the Gang.

Brian was jolted out of his thoughts when he heard the door to the patio fling open and then closed. Building three was situated over uneven ground and the large wooden, wrap\_around patio was connected to the gardens by a large wooden staircase. Brian had been sitting by the staircase and only now realized that he was hidden from view by whoever had just fled from the building. The door open and closed again, this time more quietly. He could hear footsteps.

"You can’t run from this," Lindsay said, her voice quiet. Brian had to strain his ears to hear. "Can you talk to me about it?" she asked. "Write it down." He heard paper rustling, and then the sound of a notebook hitting the floor. "You can’t hide forever. I’m trying to help you, but I can’t do all the work. Sooner or later, you’re going to have to face all of this. At least now, you have people here who can support you."

Brian waited until he was certain they’d gone back inside. He didn’t care who it was up there, though he suspected it was probably Justin. Brian was already in the midst of a really shitty week and he had decided something, when he left Liberty he was going to be completely better. That meant a complete commitment to the bizarre programs Blake concocted, and the rules, and Lindsay’s probing talks. This was it, no more treading water. That meant he couldn’t get distracted, not for anything.

"Brian!" Eric said, running up to his side. "I just got off work," he said.

"Good for you," Brian muttered, heading up the staircase. Eric grabbed him by the arm and tugged him down a step.

"Want to have another go?" he asked, tilting his head to the space beneath the patio, masked by shadows it would be completely private.

"Fuck off," Brian said.

"What do you mean?" Eric asked.

"I mean, fuck off," Brian said.

"Fuck you, Asshole," Eric snapped. "You know, you could get kicked out for what you did. I’m going to tell one of the nurses if you don’t --"

"If I don’t what? Fuck you? Go right ahead. Why don’t you talk to Debbie, she already knows," Brian said. "Now, fuck off," he said, emphasizing his last two words. Eric fumed and glared at him, and Brian felt pissed off and frustrated.

He made it back to his room, but not without being stopped by Lindsay, and then Debbie, and then Daphne who wanted to know how his session went. He’d snapped at Daphne, having lost his patience. She seemed surprised, but not offended. In the back of his mind, Brian realized that he hadn’t snapped at her, or anyone really, like that in about two weeks.

When he stormed into his room, it was to find Justin sitting on his bed, sketching as was usual, but there were tears running down the blonde’s cheeks. "Oh," Brian scoffed, noticing the tears. "You think you’ve got problems." He shut the door and ranted as he changed into his sleepwear. "Let’s see," Brian said as he yanked off his shirt and pulled on a white, long-sleeved T-shirt because it got cold at night. "Did the esteemed Doctor Cameron have visions of you getting molested? Fucking fondled by creeps? Did doctor Lindsay sit you down for a nice chat?" Brian said, sneering. He grabbed the teddy bear off his nightstand where Justin had placed it and held it up as he sat on his bed. "Show me on the bear where the bad man touched you," he said in a taunting voice.

Justin’s tears had increased as he had ranted but by the end of Brian’s rant his expression was stunned and his complexion was ashen. As Brian finished, Justin stood suddenly and hurled his pencil and sketchpad at Brian who avoided them only out of ingrained instinct to duck. By the time Brian stood upright, Justin had fled the room.

Brian felt better, having gotten his anger out of his system, but the memory of Justin’s tears and of his pale face almost gray and his blue eyes full of stunned fear made Brian feel horrible for the things he had said. He’d wanted to share the hell of his day with his roommate, but he should have waited until he was calm enough to express himself coherently.

Ten minutes before scheduled room checks, Lindsay came into the room and sat down on Justin’s bed. "I don’t know what to say," she said. Brian frowned and wondered if she was really going to pick\_up where their earlier conversation left\_off. "In the two years he’s been here, Justin has never had a problem with his roommate, and some of them have been in a lot worse shape than you." She looked away from him a moment, and sighed as if she were truly at a loss. "If you want to change rooms, I can arrange that, Brian. If you think you’d be more comfortable."

Brian entertained the idea only for a moment. "I never said that."

"Then I don’t know what to say," she said. "I’m sympathetic to your situation, Brian. I truly am. I will do whatever is in your best interest. If you are certain that being with Justin, having a roommate at all is best for you, I will trust your judgment. However, if something like what happened tonight happens again, I’ll have to make some alternate arrangements."

"Where’s Justin?" Brian asked.

"He’s staying in a different room, one of the nurses is waiting outside to bring some of his things over," Lindsay said.

"I didn’t mean to yell at him. I had a bad day," Brian said.

"Maybe you should tell him that, but do it tomorrow, he’s a wreck tonight," Lindsay said, pausing at the door to wave a nurse in. The nurse, a man, gathered some of Justin’s things quickly. "That’s his, too, right?" Lindsay asked, gesturing to the bear that was cast aside on Brian’s bed.

"Yes," Brian said, passing it over.

"Good-night," Lindsay said, waving the nurse along. When the nurse returned for room checks, the same one who had gathered Justin’s things, he set the teddy bear on Justin’s nightstand.

"What are you doing?" Brian asked.

"The kid wouldn’t take it," the nurse explained with a shrug, ticking off Brian’s name on the clipboard he held and shutting the door. Brian stared at the bear until lights-out.

Lindsay had said Justin was a wreck? Brian had yelled at Justin before, and been a good deal louder and ten times more obnoxious than he had been this time. Why would the blond be so badly affected by it now? As far as Brian knew, Justin hadn’t had a bad week. He was behaving just as he usually did, anyway. Brian had seen Justin under stress; all the blond did differently was spend more time in the library or outside sketching. Why would Brian’s bitching about his day cause that reaction in his roommate? It was the first time Justin had reacted, and violently as well.

Brian remembered the pale\_faced look of fear Justin had before he’d hurled his sketchpad. It couldn’t be the fact that Brian was yelling; it had to be what he had been saying. "Show me on the bear where the bad\_man touched you." Brian had been bitching about his day, but that’s not what Justin had heard. "Fuck," Brian said. Suddenly what he’d overheard in the garden started to make sense. Had Dr. Cameron seen in Justin’s eyes the same thing she had seen in Brian’s? Lindsay had certainly sounded upset by whatever the discovery was.

An image flashed through Brian’s mind of Justin climbing onto the bus, smiling his mischievous, sunshine smile, of Justin following him blindly through the woods. "Fuck," Brian said, again. After tonight, he wondered if Justin would come near him at all.

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Emmett and Justin arrived at breakfast together and Brian understood where Justin had spent the night. Lindsay had asked Brian what he felt was in his best\_interest, he wondered if she had extended the same courtesy to Justin, if so, the blond would likely be picking\_up the rest of his belongings.

Besides a nervous and somewhat threatening look from Emmett as he and Justin brought their trays over to join the group, nobody spoke at all about what had happened the night before. Brian assumed that no one else knew of it, it wasn’t as if it had happened in the middle of the rec room.

The Gang chattered on just as usual, and after breakfast, Justin followed him back to the room where he changed his clothes and washed quickly before grabbing his sketchbook and leaving. Brian sighed and picked\_up the bear that he had left sitting by Justin’s bed. He wondered if the blond had turned it away because it had been Brian’s night with it, or if the bear had been sullied by Brian’s comments.

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"What the fuck is that?" Brian asked, somewhat shocked and more than a little sickened by the picture he saw lying on Lindsay’s desk.

"Oh, Brian," Lindsay said, clearing the picture away quickly. "I’m sorry, I was distracted."

"What is that?" he said again, enunciating clearly and speaking slowly, his voice a little threatening. He knew that if Lindsay weren’t so clearly shaken, she would have shrugged him off, ignored his request because he certainly didn’t have a right to know.

"Justin," she said, her voice hoarse and straining. She shook her head. "We tried art therapy today." She shrugged, shook her head, and dropped the picture on her desk.

Brian picked it up carefully and made himself look down. It was nauseating, and the horror of it was such that he could not tear his eyes away. Brought to life and there in perfect detail was the teddy bear that had been hopping back\_and\_forth from his to Justin’s bed. The sketch was done in pencil crayon on a piece of rough paper. The teddy didn’t look at all like the one he and Justin had been sharing, though. This teddy Justin had sketched was missing chunks of fur, and there was a set of claw\_marks on the right side of the teddy’s chest, and on one of its legs. There was a gaping hole in the bear’s chest where Brian supposed its heart would have been. One of the bear’s eyes had been ripped out and blood was dripping on the fur of his face, down his chest and pooling at his feet. The large, rounded teddy bear ears were barely hanging on by a thread, and his little paws were shackled. In place of a mouth, Justin had drawn a zipper.

Show me on the bear where the bad man touched you.

Brian handed the sketch back to Lindsay.

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The teddy bear sat on Justin’s nightstand for the second night in a row. It hadn’t moved. Tonight, however, the bear wore a purple T\_shirt that declared it was: Queen of Fucking Everything. It also wore a pair of miniature purple sunglasses with silver sparkles. There was a daisy lying in its arms.

Brian had discovered that it paid to have friends on the nursing staff. Daphne had brought the T\_shit, which she had accidentally shrunk in the dryer and had been planning to throw\_out, and though it was a bit large on the bear, it still worked if you rolled the sleeves up a little. The purple glasses she had picked\_up at a children’s store. Brian had picked the daisy out of Liberty’s garden -- though he kept that secret as no one was supposed to pick the flowers.

Justin returned to the room before lights\_out and stopped in his tracks when he spotted the bear. He stood for a while, his blue eyes darting from the bear to where Brian lay on his bed, pretending to read. After a moment, Justin sat on his bed, picked up the daisy, twirling it a few times. His blue eyes peeked up at Brian again. Brian stayed absolutely still. Justin put the daisy down on the night table, and moved the teddy bear to sit beside him on the bed, and then he pulled out his sketchpad and pencils and began to sketch.

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Brian informed Blake the next day that he was quitting smoking, to give him gum but to forget the damn pamphlets because it was hard enough without reading shitty material that dwelled on it. He was given a new regime of pills that would support the trouble areas that had been revealed by the iridology, but mostly Blake chattered incessantly about his decision to quit smoking.

He also managed to get through a session with Lindsay in which the woman once again posed difficult questions to the point he wanted to throw books at her (she had several shelves full of some very thick hard\_cover texts), but he managed to refrain. Oddly, it was the image of Justin sitting and sketching with the newly dressed teddy bear at his side that helped him refocus each time he wanted to rant and rave.

When he returned to his room after dinner, Justin was sitting on his bed and sketching. Brian grabbed his book from the night table and noticed the bear sitting by his lamp. It wore the sunglasses -- apparently Justin had replaced them after removing them to sleep. It wore the T\_shirt. Instead of the flower, however, the teddy bear held a small cardboard sign on which was written: Admitting you’re an asshole is the first step. Brian looked at the piece of cardboard for a moment before he raised his head and focussed on Justin who was trying very hard to appear as if he wasn’t paying attention. Brian began to snicker, and Justin looked up, his bright smile in place. He raised an eyebrow, defiant and amused. Another challenge, Brian thought. He accepted it readily. Brian laughed full out and placed the sign by his lamp before settling down with his book.

**Chapter Six: Hello, My Name Is Gus**

Month Two: Week Two

It was lights-out, but as per usual Justin’s bedside lamp was on and he was sketching. Brian sat up in his bed and looked at the teddy bear. “He needs a name,” Brian said casually rotating the bear to face Justin when the blond looked-up. Blue eyes narrowed as they met Brian’s gaze, and Justin returned to his work. “You know it’s true,” Brian commented. “You probably have one picked out. What is it? I’m sleeping with someone I haven’t been formally introduced to. It’s awkward,” Brian joked. Justin shook his head, and Brian wondered if that was a blush coloring the boy’s cheeks -- but in the dim light, it was difficult to tell.

“Okay, Boys,” Daphne said as she entered the room. “Lights are out in a bit. Pleasant dreams!” she waved as she sauntered out of the room.

Brian had come to an important realization involving his roommate. After two years of steady silence the staff of Liberty, and even Justin’s friends, had come to accept his silence and accommodate it. This was completely reasonable and understandable; the staff had no choice but to work around it if they had any desire to make progress with Justin. Likewise, if Justin’s friends wanted to remain his friends, they had to understand that Justin just wasn’t going to speak. The problem came when everyone around was compensating for the blond. Justin had no reason to talk; there was absolutely no pressure to get him to do so. Brian had no idea how he intended to succeed where many had failed before. He had no special knowledge that might help him, only a determination to hear his roommate speak. He rationalized this determination with ease. When you are assigned to live in one place for four months that was regimented, stressing and also mind numbing, you needed all the distraction you could get.

When Brian awoke the next morning the first thing he saw was the teddy bear sitting on his night stand wearing it’s purple sparkling movie-star sunglasses and it’s purple shirt and holding a piece of paper. ‘Hello, my name is Gus’ the paper read, and Brian smirked.

“Gus, huh? Why Gus?” he asked his roommate. Justin was already awake, reading a book on his bed. In response, Brian received only a brief glance and a raised eyebrow. “Quit stealing my looks,” Brian said, and Justin smiled innocently.

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Brian’s intention when he had decided to quit smoking had been, firstly, to prove to himself that he was capable of it and that he was really working through the program to get better. The second reason had been that hopefully the irritation of quitting smoking would distract him from the other irritations he was enduring , such as daily sessions with Lindsay. He had not anticipated that when Blake handed over a small box of gum, that he also had a stress reliever that he could take with him into his session, and his therapist couldn’t say a damn thing about it. In fact, the only times he wasn’t chewing gum was when he was eating, or in his bedroom.

“Congratulations, Kiss-ass,” Melanie said as breakfast. To his quirked brow she elaborated. “Blake gushes all over the people who quit while they’re here.”

“That’s almost enough incentive for me to take up smoking again,” Brian said.

“You boys are far too hard on Blake,” Emmett said, smacking Mel in the arm. “He’s a miracle worker as far as I’m concerned. Why he ---“

“We know!” Brian, Michael and Melanie chorused.

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It was a relief to Brian that, after the revelations of the prior week, Lindsay didn’t press him to talk about his time spent in other institutions growing up, or those years where he had lived with his mother and father. He was aware, of course, that circuitously, that was what she was focusing on, but he found he preferred talking about the subtle affects his childhood had on who he had become, rather than focusing directly on what had been done to him. What had been done no longer mattered, what mattered was how it had affected him and it was a relief that she, for the moment, seemed to agree with him on that point.

Once or twice, Lindsay had even brought in a short story that they had read together, and then listened as Brian gave his opinion on the story and the characters, and possible motivations. Brian wasn’t quite certain what it was she was learning, though he supposed it was insight to his outlook as well as clues to how he had been affected by his life experiences.

“Does anyone in your family know you’re here?” she asked that morning, near the end of the session.

“I suppose it’s possible, but I didn’t tell them. I don’t talk to my mother or my sister, if I can help it. My father gets in touch with me sometimes when he needs money, but beyond that we never see each other.” It struck him, then that every time his father came to him, sought him out because he needed money, Brian never turned him down. Every time his mother called, he was hard pressed to even give her the time of day. Every time Jack had hit him, smacked him, kicked him, locked him in the dark basement , that didn’t compare to every time his mother had stood by, silent, and let it happen.

For all he knew his mother drank to forget her sins, and prayed to have those sins erased. Jack, however, didn’t seem to feel he’d done anything wrong at all. In the middle was Brian, who couldn’t stand to look at his mother, but still wanted so badly to make his bastard father proud.

“I’m an adult,” Brian said when Lindsay pressed him. “I no longer have to care what my mumsy and daddy think.”

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The next morning, Brian set Gus-bear on Justin’s night table, purple sunglasses back in place, holding a card: I feel it’s my duty to inform you that you snore in your sleep. When Justin saw the card he smiled and gave that soft laugh that always left Brian wondering what his roommate would sound like if he ever laughed fully and freely.

Justin didn’t snore. Sometimes he screamed, and he snuffled a little when he was falling asleep. Brian could tell when the blond slept deeply because sometimes his breath was audible from across the room , like waves. Still, Brian felt he’d made some kind of connection with his roommate, and Gus-bear would be his emissary, another battlefront in the war to get Justin to speak.

Justin flung the card, Frisbee-like across the room and rolled his eyes. “What did I do?” Brian asked. “It’s Gus’s fault.” He rose to wash and when he returned to the room, he paused, leaning against the wall at the foot of Justin’s bed. “I think Gus is gay. That is just not a manly T-shirt.” They both turned to look at Gus-bear’s purple-sparkly movie-star glasses, and the purple T-shirt that proclaimed the teddy: Queen of Fucking Everything. Justin blushed lightly and didn’t quite meet Brian’s eyes, but Brian watched the blond carefully adjust Gus-bear’s T-shirt, Brian read the words behind the movement: I don’t care, I love him, -- there’s nothing wrong with that, anyway.

“Come on, Princess,” Brian said. “Let’s go for breakfast.”

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Michael was taken to solitary mid-week because he and his roommate had a fight. Apparently, Michael was moping and it had driven his roommate (who was also moping) into a depressed sort of rage, and Brian wasn’t exactly sure how two unhappy men could find within themselves enough will to live (or even care) to fight with one another, but they did.

“My poor baby,” Debbie said as she fretted. “His roommate is going to be moved, though. There’s a new patient who’s coming in and Michael will be his buddy.” Brian never paid any attention to the new patients. Surprisingly, once The Gang had adopted him, he moved in different circles that somehow separated him from the majority of the other patients. For instance, Brian didn’t even know the name of Michael’s roommate. In fact, the only detail he could remember about Michael’s roommate was the scar on his face, beyond that, he was just another Liberty patient who had little to no significance in Brian’s opinion.

“An entire week alone!” Debbie moaned.

“He’ll be fine,” Emmett soothed the nurse. “We pop by and press our faces against that little window every so often. He’s probably happy to finally get some peace and quiet.”

“There’s a window?” Brian asked, curiously.

“Oh, sure,” Emmett said. “A little one for the nurses to use to check on the patient.” Brian filed the information away. The truth was he was aware of date, and whether he was motivated by boredom or something else, he wanted to know what the hell was going on with his enigmatic roommate.

“Maybe we should visit him,” Brian offered. It was just he and Emmett that afternoon.

“Sounds like a plan. We’ll put your mind at ease, don’t worry,” Emmett said to Debbie. Brian followed Emmett through the halls, memorizing the path they took. The solitary rooms were located in a hallway as far from the rec room and main entrance as it was possible to be. The hallway was long, lined with doors on one side and windows on the other. Brian didn’t think the floor could be any quieter, but it was infinitely quieter here. “Here we are,” Emmett said, his voice echoing. “Mikey, Babe?” Emmett asked, tapping on the glass. “You have to be quiet because the nursing staff don’t like us pestering the patients here.”

“Isn’t the point of solitary to keep the person isolated?” Brian asked.

“Well, sure,” Emmett said. “But the nurses like me.” Brian watched as Emmett pressed his face against the small square window. “Michael!” Emmett exclaimed, sounding shocked. “Oh my,” he said, though he didn’t back away from the window. “I probably shouldn’t be watching this.”

“What?” Brian asked, clearly amused when Emmett finally stepped away from the window.

“He’s, uh, he’s having a little Mikey time.”

“I bet,” Brian said with a devil’s grin.

“We should probably go,” Emmett said. He looked flustered, smoothing out his uniform and strutting down the hallway. “Oh my.”

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Thursday evening, following dinner, Emmett corralled Melanie, Justin and Brian into the rec room. “They’re showing ‘Titanic’ tonight! The whole thing , though they probably edited, the bastards,” Emmett said. “Party night!” Emmett called. The other two seemed to understand this better than Brian did. He would soon learn.

Party night, occurred whenever a movie that struck Emmett’s fancy was on TV. Apparently, it was a mandatory event as Brian learned when he tried to sneak-out. It consisted of everyone eating the candies or chocolate they had purchased on their field trip, and acting like idiots. Justin munched chocolate and held Gus-bear in one arm, and Emmett in the other, as Emmett grew emotional. Brian found, surprisingly, that it was easy to succumb to the spirit of the evening.

“Oh my god!” Daphne exclaimed when she stumbled on them sitting in the rec room with the lights off. It was a commercial break, which was the only reason why she had each of their full attention. “I’m getting a picture!” She went flying from the room and returned with a camera.

In all honesty, they likely were an absurd sight. Emmett had a ridiculously large stockpile of candied jewellery, which he and Justin wore like Mardi Gras beads. They’d even draped some of it on Brian. Melanie, a fan of liquorice, had a long liquorice rope coiled around her neck. For the picture, Justin sat between Mel and Brian on the couch; Emmett sprawled across their laps in a swoon, all of them laughing -- the sugar proving very potent after being deprived of it for so long.

Increasingly, Brian caught himself commenting on the movie, sometimes even reciting a line or two. “Honey, loving ‘Titanic’ is everyone’s guilty secret,” Emmett said, when Brian tried to say he hated the film.

By the time Rose was cornering a nervous, and clearly horny Jack in her rooms, Brian had pried Gus-bear from Justin’s grasp. “I want you to draw me like one of your French girls,” Brian said in a high-pitched falsetto drawl, as he walked Gus-bear across Justin’s legs. “Wearing this,” he yanked a candied bracelet off Emmett’s wrist, grinning like an idiot as the others laughed. “Wearing only this,” he said. “Oh Jack!” he said, making the bear swoon against Justin.

“He’s lost it!” Mel proclaimed.

“That’s what I’m here for,” Brian said.

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The next morning Brian awoke to see Gus-bear sitting on his night table. As was the tradition, he held in his paws a piece of cardboard. Instead of a written message, as was usual, Gus-bear held a picture. The sketch was of the teddy without his purple T-shirt but still wearing his movie-star glasses. The pose was a mockery of the sketch of Titanic; Justin had even included the candied necklace.

Brian tucked the sketch into his drawer where he’d put all the messages Justin had given him.

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“He’s doing just fine,” Emmett proclaimed a moment later. “Here, he wants to see you.” Emmett started pushing Brian towards the window. Brian peered into the small room, surprised that it wasn’t white, as he had expected, but instead was light, robin’s egg colour. Michael was sitting on the bed, and looked slightly stricken when Brian caught his eye. “Oh he’s fine,” Emmett said when they headed back to the main section of the floor. “He has a bit of a crush on you.”

“I hadn’t noticed,” Brian drawled.

“Really? I would have thought it was obvious!” Emmett said, not catching Brian’s sarcasm. “Michael’s a sweet-heart, but he’s really needy. You two would kill each other before the end of a week. You’d make a cute couple, though.”

“Don’t play match-maker with me,” Brian said.

“Suit yourself,” Emmett said.

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Brian wrote the note early in the morning, having woken from a dream only to find returning to sleep impossible. He wrote the message with a thick black marker without even thinking about it, but once he’d capped the pen and re-read the message, he was slightly stunned to realize he was flirting, had been flirting, in fact, all week.

Justin was not the type of man Brian was usually attracted to. He was young, blond, blue-eyed and barely muscled. He was pale, and looked like a schoolboy , hell, he was a schoolboy, if he weren’t in a hospital. True, he had a very fine ass, but when Brian tricked it was about power. It was taking someone who was bigger and stronger than he himself was, and bending him to Brian’s own will. Justin was a complete contradiction. Physically, his lithe young roommate wasn’t at all the sort of thing Brian would have entertained. Yet, the blond was tougher than any of those outwardly godlike men Brian had been taken with before. Maybe that was a bigger challenge. Or at least, maybe it was one that was more worthwhile. Brian didn’t want to entertain the other possibility, which dealt with the difference between a trick and , something else.

Like it or not, the sexual undercurrent had been present since he’d awoken to find Justin asleep in his bed. Maybe even before then. Maybe as early as when Brian had walked through the door and seen Justin sitting on his bed sketching. It was getting more difficult to ignore, though. Especially after an entire week of exchange messages that became increasingly loaded with innuendo as the days passed, using Gus-bear as their mouthpiece.

“You are one dirty, dirty bear, my friend,” Brian whispered to the teddy. He looked across the room to where Justin lay, still asleep. They had shared a bed only once, and Brian didn’t remember any of it, except how it felt to wake with the blond in his arms. They didn’t touch frequently, had never kissed, had certainly never done anything more. Hell, he’d never even seen his roommate naked. Justin always made certain to change in the bathroom, though Brian was far more casual with his body.

He set Gus-bear on Justin’s nightstand before returning to his side of the room. It would be easy to pretend he was only teasing, that Justin’s reactions were amusing. Brian didn’t usually lie, though. He picked-up his book and settled down to read.

When Justin woke, Brian watched as he found the note and read it. The blush started slowly, crept up the pale cheeks until he was a dusty rose colour. Justin didn’t meet his eyes, but there was a shy smile on the blonde’s lips. Justin sat Gus back on his nightstand, made his bed and quickly went into the bathroom to wash and change, leaving the note on his bed: Was it good for you?

**Chapter Seven: Puzzle Pieces**

Month Two: Week Three

Brian had only seen it happen once, but that was enough. He greeted the commencement of the third week in the month with a sort of trepidation, and just like the rest of the Gang, he kept a wary eye on his roommate. Justin, for his part, seemed just like he always did ; except that he blushed more, and cast shy glances at Brian when he thought Brian wasn’t looking. That had become normal, though, ever since Brian had taken their teasing notes delivered by Gus-bear to a more blatant level. ‘Was it good for you?’ and Justin had spent an entire day glowing pink and refusing to meet Brian’s eyes. He had pushed too hard too quickly, and the notes had ceased altogether, but Justin wasn’t avoiding him, exactly. It seemed to Brian as if the boy was just trying to regain his balance now that the game had moved to a different level.

“Maybe this week will be different,” Michael offered as the group watched Justin leave for his therapy appointment. Being a depressive, however, Michael hadn’t mustered any confidence in his voice as he said it, and though everyone nodded no one believed it. Justin’s strange attacks had been a regular occurrence since the beginning of the year, and though they had seemingly begun without cause, Brian found it difficult to believe they would cease altogether without help.

“The best thing you can do,” Emmett said with resigned certainty. “Is to pretend everything is just fine. I had a long talk with my therapist, and he agreed. You start getting nervous and fussing, and it just makes Justin nervous and maybe it will make it worse. So just take it easy and pretend everything’s fine.”

Still, Brian couldn’t help watching Justin. He was a ticking time bomb, and though Brian wasn’t really concerned about being hurt, he couldn’t help hoping that when Justin did go off, it would happen like it had last time ; in a large space with lots of nursing staff around. Otherwise, Brian wasn’t certain what he would do. He didn’t know what behaviour to look for, didn’t know how best to react. He hadn’t been present to see how exactly Justin moved from his quiet, relaxed self to the fighting desperate thing that the nursing staff had been forced to sedate.

Brian stuck to the belief that a reaction like that had to be caused by something. Still, what Melanie had said was likewise true. They were in a hospital, and though Brian had found a group of people who were still clear minded and coherent, for the most part, the patients of Liberty were not mentally sound, did not have full control of their behaviour.

Justin Taylor did not speak. He sketched on any surface available to him at any given time which included, but was not limited to paper napkins, scrap pieces of paper, sketchbooks that the nurses on the Liberty staff would smuggle to him, Styrofoam, cardboard and the inside cover of books he took form the library. He was eighteen years old, almost nineteen. He had a teddy bear named Gus. He was intelligent and had a wicked sense of humour. He was enigmatic and exceptionally complicated and not even his own therapist had a clue how to handle him. He’d been a patient at Liberty for nearly two years and didn’t seem to have any inclination to leave. He had a family and a dog, but none of them visited since they’d dropped him off here. He enjoyed reading. Every third week of the month he suffered some kind of fit which prompted the staff to sedate him and lock him away where he couldn’t hurt anyone, not even himself, and when he returned to his room everyone was happy to pretend all was normal. Even Justin. Brian, however, was growing tired of the many mysteries surrounding his roommate. He’d been trying to get him to speak, to no avail. This week, Brian was going to figure-out what the hell was happening to his young roommate.

Shadowing Justin Taylor was surprisingly easy. Making it appear as if he wasn’t shadowing Justin Taylor when, in fact that was precisely what he was doing was more complicated.

There wasn’t much that Brian found-out about the blond that he didn’t know already. Justin did the same things as he always did: walks in the garden, sketching, and spending long hours in the library. As the days were passing, it was looking as if, just maybe, Justin would make it through the week without incident. By Wednesday, everyone was holding their breath, and though Justin seemed a bit jumpy, his habits hadn’t altered.

“If it doesn’t happen this week, though,” Emmett said as he walked with Michael and Brian in the garden, the other two members of the Gang accompanying Brian as he shadowed Justin. “I won’t be able to relax at all. What if it just got pushed back a week, or something?”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Michael said. “My mom said that if this sort of thing happens in a pattern, then the pattern sticks. Any alteration in the pattern is like a giant red flag.”

“A red flag about what?” Emmett asked.

“I dunno,” Michael said with a shrug. After that, Brian noticed that even the nursing staff was keeping an extra eye on Justin. Even with everyone on alert, they hit Friday and nothing had happened. Brian ate breakfast with the Gang and left for his morning session with Lindsay. After a quick lunch, during which Emmett who, despite cautions against it, already daring to believe that Justin would be just fine, was extra-talkative and loud, Brian left for his appointment with Blake.

“I have to congratulate myself for your progress,” Blake said as he went-over Brian’s results.

“Don’t I get some of the credit?” Brian huffed, but Blake was ignoring him.

“How’s that anger coming?” Blake asked, finally deigning to look up from his clipboard. “Pretty good, right? Your liver is clearing out nicely. Still, I’ll give you a little of this,” he jotted something down on one of the charts that outlined Brian’s meal-plan. Brian leant against the wall as he sat on the exam table, closing his eyes as Blake mumbled to himself about the changes to Brian’s plan and the pills he was adding.

“I’m assuming the new meal plan is working for you, since I haven’t heard any complaints,” Blake asked.

“It’s fine,” Brian answered. At least there weren’t any ‘power drinks’ or particularly smelly pills. The food was normal food, if a bit selective, and there was flavour, there was no way Brian was going to complain about that.

“Excellent, we’ll keep you on it,” Blake said. He handed over one of the charts for Brian’s personal reference and placed the other in the ‘out’ pile to be collected by the nursing staff. It was routine to Brian by now. “Off you go, then.”

Brian folded up the plan and tucked it in the breast pocket of his uniform shirt and headed back to building two. He hesitated at the main door, but the floor was quiet. With a sense of relief, Brian headed back to his room, not pausing to knock.

Justin was inside, seated on his bed. His back was against the wall, his knees tucked close to his chest with his arms around them. Gus-Bear was tucked under Justin’s chin, squashed between his head and his knees. Justin’s eyes were squeezed tightly shut and his was coming in short, panicked gasps.

“Justin?” Brian asked, immediately on guard. He wondered if he should call for a nurse, but Justin was sitting quietly at the moment and Brian couldn’t get the memory of the orderlies grappling with his terrified roommate. Instead, he approached the bed cautiously. “Justin, it’s me, Brian,” Brian said. Justin kept his eyes closed, still struggling for breath. “That’s it,” Brian said, assuming the blond was focussing on continuing to breath. “Just focus on your breath.” He kneeled down on Justin’s bed, wondering how best to go about offering comfort to the boy, but Justin flinched back, his breath stuttering and holding.

“Justin!” Brian said, placing a firm hand on his roommate’s arm, hoping to jolt him out of his panic. Justin’s eyes snapped open and immediately connected with Brian’s. “It’s okay. It’s just me.” The shiver that went through the smaller frame let Brian know that Justin had been expecting someone else. Still, Justin seemed to calm after a moment, still struggling to breath, but allowing Brian to sit near him at least.

Brian ignored the knock on the door when it came, but there was no way to ignore Michael when he entered the room and stopped like a deer in headlights at the site of Justin, obviously in the grips of a panic-attack and only just managing to not teeter into unconsciousness. “Mom!” Michael yelled.

“No, don’t,” Brian tried, but Michael had already turned and was shouting for help ; from anybody, quickly, please ; and soon the nurses ; knowing what to expect ; flooded the room with orderlies behind them, and Justin wasn’t calm anymore.

“Come away, Brian. Move slowly,” one of the nurses said. Orderlies were already on the bed, reaching for the blond. Brian stayed in place, but as soon as the orderlies got close, Justin couldn’t contain his panic and he kicked out.

“God dammit!” one of the orderlies yelled, leaping off the bed and gripping his side where he’d been kicked. “Hold him down!”

“Get the sedative!” a nurse ordered. Brian was pushed aside as Justin fought and the orderlies struggled to keep him still, and the nurses offered trite, soothing words and prepped a sedative.

“It’s okay, Brian,” Michael said, and Brian realized he’d been pushed out of the room altogether and that he was rather shell-shocked. “My mom will take good care of him.”

“Yeah,” Brian said. “Sure.”

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Lindsay came by the room after dinner, two and a half hours after Justin had been sedated and removed to solitary. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“About what?” Brian asked, at a loss.

“About what happened today. Are you okay?”

“I wasn’t the one who was having the panic-attack,” Brian scoffed.

“Sometimes seeing something like that is jarring. It can affect us on a deep level and we may not realize it right away,” Lindsay offered.

“He was terrified,” Brian explained, enunciating and speaking clearly so as to make certain she understood. “He was having a panic-attack. The staff came in and drugged him and hauled him off. The only thing that was disturbing was that it seemed like he might have managed to calm down if the entire staff of the floor didn’t descend on us.”

“I already spoke to the others on the floor. They won’t behave like that again. I should point-out, though, that these attacks have been happening for some time now. People are getting accustomed to handling them.”

“So I saw today,” Brian said. “How much of it, though, is just that people think they know exactly how to handle this. I thought Liberty was all for progressive, crazy ways of treating things?”

“Liberty has a very specific code that we adhere to. We believe, in a situation like Justin’s that the best course is to give them some space where they can regain their bearings. This was by no means the first way in which we tried to handle these attacks, but we saw the fastest and the best results from this.”

“Well, what scares him in the first place?” Brian asked.

“Brian ; we don’t know,” Lindsay said. “There are so many possible things. We’re just not sure.”

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By lights-out, Brian was in bed but had no intention of staying there. He lies very still for an hour before he pushes the covers aside. He knows the perfect choreography that is the night-staff of Liberty Hospital. Room-checks at nine-thirty and lights-out at ten, how the nurses at the station don’t watch TV, but they read books, their ears straining to hear any sound. How the nurses patrolling the halls don’t peek into the rooms, but are always listening, ready in case someone needs them. Room-checks again at midnight, but until then it’s just him and the hallway, so long as he can stay out of site.

He doesn’t put on his slippers, worried that even their soft soles might scuff on the cool floor and attract attention. The quiet seemed loud ; ringing in his ears, but he crossed to the door and pushed it open slightly, peeking out. The night nurse was only just passing the door, but didn’t notice it had opened. Brian waited, approximating the time it would take the nurse to reach the end of the hall and turn before he pushed open the door again. The hall was empty.

The third floor of Liberty was full of shadows, the light coming only from the windows at the end of the hall on the left and the soft glow of the nurse’s station on the right. It was quiet and peaceful in a way that Brian had never seen a hospital be. Remembering the way to the solitary rooms that Emmett had showed him, Brian set off. He stayed close to the walls, fully prepared to duck into one of the bedrooms if a nurse turned into the hall.

There were twelve solitary rooms; only three of them were occupied. Brian knew from the Gang’s earlier visit, that Justin’s room was the fifth one down, with marigold painted walls and a white mission bed. Justin hadn’t acknowledged them when they’d peeked-in through the window. Not even with Emmett calling loudly and waving his hands. Since windows lined one entire side of that hall there was more light, which meant that when Brian turned into the hall and caught the movement of a night-nurse exiting one of the rooms, he could tell with absolute certainty that it was Christopher, the nurse who the month before had shone a flashlight in Brian’s face. And the room he was exiting was Justin’s.

Brian hid, listening to the man’s footsteps as they retreated down the hall in the opposite direction, then he walked briskly to Justin’s door and peered inside. Justin was curled-up on his bed, rocking back and forth, his eyes open wide and looking somewhat stunned. The expression made the hairs on the back of Brian’s neck prickle. He tapped on the window and Justin’s whole body jerked, blue eyes turning to meet Brian’s, but after a moment of holding the stare, Justin simply turned his back to Brian.

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Dr. Blake Wyzsecki had gloated that morning that he had been busy working miracles and had taken credit for Brian’s lessening anger, claiming it was a result of toxins in his system. Dr. Lindsay Peterson was helping him ‘work through his issues’ and had claimed that ‘facing the problem and talking about it’ was helping him understand where the anger was coming from and to cope with it productively. Brian had even noticed he’d been calmer of late. That notion changed when he realized he was barely holding back from tearing off down the hallway and bludgeoning Christopher with the flashlight the asshole carried.

Nothing was certain, though. Brian knew Christopher was an asshole, that wasn’t the issue. Brian couldn’t be definite that the nurse had done anything to Justin. Brian hadn’t seen anything except Christopher exiting Justin’s room, something the night-nurse had every right to be doing ; something he was supposed to be doing. While Justin had looked disturbed when Brian had peered into the room, it was not definitive proof. Justin had been upset since Brian had found him in their room. Brian had no proof that anything had happened at all, and if he was going to stop it from happening again, he would need to get some.

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Justin returned to their room on Sunday after dinner. Brian had spent Saturday in a distracted visit with Ted and had avoided the Gang, choosing to spend his time in the library where he tried to think of something he could do to figure-out exactly what was going on between Christopher and Justin.

Unlike the last time Brian had seen him after his release from solitary, Justin went beyond avoiding contact. He was avoiding Brian as well, something which was difficult considering they shared the room and the staff was coming around for room checks. So while Justin sat on his bed and sketched furiously, ignoring Brian, Brian sat opposite and stared at Gus-bear. It was his night with the bear. Justin seemed to need him more.

Brian guessed the reason for his roommate’s altered behaviour. Brian had seen Justin in solitary after Chris had left. The blond probably figured he knew everything that had happened ; which was untrue, but Brian had a few ideas, and that was enough. Decision made, Brian took a piece of paper from his drawer and the marker he’d stolen from the nurse’s station. He wrote his message clearly, then placed it in the teddy bear’s arms before moving cautiously across the room and setting Gus-bear on Justin’s nightstand. Justin was clearly trying to seem as if he were not paying attention. Brian returned to his bed and sat down, watching.

Justin lasted five minutes before his curiosity caused his eyes to lift and drift to where the teddy sat. The bear held the placard for Justin to see: ‘I won’t hurt you.’ Brian watched as Justin simply stared at it. For the longest time, that’s all the blond did. Lights-out came and went, plunging them into darkness save the scant light offered by a small and distant moon. Justin hadn’t moved, hadn’t made a sound. Until a sniffle caught Brian’s attention. Then another. Justin was crying.

Bravery or stupidity, or a sense of compassion that Brian had thought ; hoped ; had been destroyed ages ago, drove him across the room until he was sitting on Justin’s bed as the blond cried. He risked placing a tentative hand on the young man’s shoulder, fully prepared to be kicked or slapped away. Instead, Justin crumpled into his arms, curling into a ball, artist’s fingers clinging tightly to Brian’s uniform shirt. Justin cried as quietly as he laughed.

Brian didn’t know the first damn thing about comforting someone, but he’d done fine so far. He reached for the teddy bear, removed the sign and the sunglasses, and then pressed Gus into Justin’s arms. Justin shifted, tucking Gus under his chin, and moving so that he himself was tucked against Brian the same way the bear was tucked against him. Brian held him as he cried, his mind racing. “What the hell did he do to you, Sunshine?” Brian asked quietly. Justin didn’t say a word.

**Chapter Eight: Beautiful Things**

Month Two: Week Four

“We got some boots we can lend ya,” Debbie said as she handed a package to Brian and another to Justin. “Those shoes should be fine, Sunshine,” she said to Justin, then turned back to Brian. “We can give you some nice rain boots. Hell, I’ll go buy you some damn boots, whatever will stop the damn bitching I know you’ll gift us with if you wear those damn shoes out.” Justin snickered and Brian held up his hands. “Here,” she thrust a pair of yellow rain boots at Brian that reached about mid-calf.

“It’s not raining,” Brian pointed out.

“What part of ‘we’re going to a ranch’ do you not understand?” Debbie asked. “Put the damn things on.” Brian obeyed quickly.

Brian was certain he looked ridiculous as he tromped out to the bus, clad in black, tight-fitting jeans and a black tank-top -- both designer labels -- with yellow rubber rain boots. The smirks and smiles that he caught, not to mention Mel’s snickers and Emmett’s proclamation that he looked ‘absolutely darling’ only confirmed his suspicions. Still, he had no intention of getting crap on his expensive shoes.

“Everyone on the bus!” Daphne called.

“We’ve been to the ranch three times already. It’s one of the best activities, and the staff like it because it gets the patients interacting with horses and apparently that’s very healing,” Emmett explained.

“I just enjoy how quiet it is when we ride,” Mel said.

“I’ve never ridden on a horse before,” Brian admitted.

“That’s not a problem,” Michael said. “They split everyone into groups, and the better riders go on a different trail. But mostly whether you’ve ridden before or not doesn’t make a difference. They match you with a horse, and if you’re a beginner they’ll make sure you get one that’s pretty much going to just follow the horse in front of you.”

Brian had never ridden a horse, but he liked Westerns, and there was a sort of appeal to finally being able to ride off into the wild. It had been a dream of his ever since he was a little boy, to ride into the sunset.

The bus ride to the ranch was longer than the ride to the forest where they had spent their last field trip, but Brian was prepared for the pit stop and purchased some chocolate, and some treats that he was certain would be ingested as soon as Emmett decided it was time for another movie-night. Blake didn’t entirely approve of indulging in the treats, but as Michael had explained, the nursing staff recommended that it was a good idea to let the patients have at least one day where they could relax and be carefree. A compromise was reached, and Blake agreed to the treats so long as the staff made certain that the patients were not overdoing it.

When they reached the ranch each bus separated. There were three buses, and while one group headed in the direction of the stables, another went to the tack room and the last bus went to a grassy area for their picnic.

“Don’t worry,” Daphne said to the Gang as they headed to the picnic area. “We go in rotation so we don’t overwhelm any one area. We’re going to eat first, then go riding and then brush-down the horses. We probably won’t have anything to do in the tack room, but if to tell you the truth, I don’t much like that part.”

“You mean we’re going to be shovelling horse shit?” Brian asked. Mel smacked him and Emmett rolled his eyes skyward.

“Nope, not unless you piss me off,” Daphne retorted. “But you do have to brush-down your horse.”

They ate sitting on the grass under the warm sun, cooled by a pleasant breeze. It was pleasant to just relax; Brian was beginning to forget what the daily grind of work was like. When he’d been working, he hadn’t been able to imagine ever sitting still, but now that he had the time to do nothing, Brian was enjoying it far more than he expected. He wondered if that had anything to do with the motley crew who were sitting with him on the grass. There weren’t many people Brian called friends. In fact, before coming to Liberty, Brian avoided the term, even though now he was realizing there were several people who it might apply to. Like Cynthia and Theodore, even if he was loathe to admit he saw his opera-obsessed accountant as a friend, and Ben -- even if they’d fucked.

“Finish-up your lunch,” Mel ordered. “But don’t eat too much or your horse won’t be able to carry you!” He glared at her, but she only laughed louder.

After lunch, they had some free time to relax in the sun before the groups were getting divided again. As luck would have it -- or perhaps it had less to do with luck and more to do with the fact that the Gang scored highly in the nurses’ favour -- Brian and the others were riding together. “Anyone who has never seen, touched or ridden a horse before, follow Michelle and she’ll get ya settled. Everyone else, follow me and lets pick some ponies!”

John Revind was the owner of the ranch and had made arrangements to lead Brian’s group out on their ride. He wore dusty, scuffed cowboy boots and faded jeans with smears of dirt on the seat distinctly in the shape of handprints. His daughter, Michelle, had long black hair and wore a red bandana around her neck. Unlike her father, she did not speak in a long drawl. Brian followed her to a paddock where she clearly pointed out the basic do’s and don’ts.

When Michelle finished her lesson, she led her small group into the barn as the rest were heading out of it, with their assigned horses in tow. “And you,” Michelle said, looking Brian up and down. He’d hung to the back of the group, wanting to know exactly what to expect before he volunteered for anything. “You look like a Flower person to me.”

“What?” he said.

“Flower,” Michelle sing-songed, knocked on the wood of the barn and gestured her head to the right. Brian watched as a dapple-grey horse stepped to the front of its stall and poked its head over the door. “She’ll be good to you, don’t worry.” Michelle showed him how to affix the saddle and he bridle. “You’re set, lead her out to the others.”

Brian found the Gang with ease and towed Flower over to them with some difficulty. Flower seemed more intrigued with the grass that with the prospect of walking anywhere. “Ah, she’ll take good care of you,” Mel said as she patted Flower’s side. “She was the first horse I ever rode as well.”

“Geez, how old is she?” Brian said.

“Asshole,” Mel muttered. She stood beside a large Bay that she introduced as Crosby.

Much to everyone’s amusement, the lighter Bay that Emmett was riding was named King. “A match made in heaven,” Emmett said, batting his eyes and leaning against King’s neck. The horse looked unamused.

Michael’s horse, a beautiful palomino that Brian thought might be better suited to Justin, kept dragging the dark-headed man away towards the path, eager to start the ride, and Michael was continually coaxing the beast back.

Justin’s horse that Emmett explained was named Shamrock, was a large black beast of a horse that was intimidating to look at but was, in fact, quite sweet and affectionate. Once everyone had a horse and was mounted-up with their stirrups properly adjusted (John and Michelle went round to check) they started off on the ride. Daphne, who was one of the nursing staff accompanying them, rode-up beside Justin and proceeded to chatter ceaselessly, and Debbie came alongside Brian who was near the end of the group and smiled.

“That boy’s been riding that horse since he first came here. The first time I saw Sunshine standing beside that great big thing I thought there was no way the ride was going to end well.” Shamrock was a Friesian, and Brian imagined that was the sort of horse a knight might ride. “He didn’t have any problems though, that horse has the sweetest spirit.” They rode quietly for a while. “Uh oh,” Debbie said as she spotted of the patients ahead bursting into tears. “Got to go.” She nudged her horse into a trot and caught up with the sobbing man, pulling him and his horse off to the side to have a talk.

The ride was long and the scenery varied. The beginning of the trail took them through the field surrounding the ranch, but from there they went into a treed area where the path narrowed in some places, and took them up high hills and then down again. They passed a lake and went through another field of tall grass before Brian realized the path was turning back in the direction of the ranch.

For the most part, Brian rode quietly, at first adjusting to the new sensation of being on a horse and then getting caught in his memories, in old daydreams of cowboys and no rules and complete freedom to go wherever you pleased. Sometimes, he was just distracted by the sight of Justin riding ahead of him. Justin’s complete confidence as he rode Shamrock was alluring. He’d nudge the horse into a run or a trot, and the sight of the blonde’s rump, moving with the step of the horse caught Brian’s eye more than once. His thoughts strayed to the passed week and what he had found about his roommate.

From the very beginning, Brian had thought Justin’s behaviour during the third week of the month was peculiar, and for it to start while he was in hospital was confusing. He would have thought any strange behaviour like that would cease under the attention of the staff of Liberty. It made sense, though, if one of the staff were taking advantage of Justin, though, and that seemed to be exactly what was happening. Justin had spent the entire night in his arms, crying himself into a fitful sleep. Brian hadn’t slept at all, his head spinning. True to the pattern, Justin soon returned to his usual, stubborn, mischievous self but Brian was unable to move-on so easily.

The only good thing that had resulted from that night was that Justin seemed to be more comfortable with him now, sharing touches that previously Brian had only seen Justin share with Emmett. Sometimes Brian wondered if that was how Justin saw him -- as a friend -- a sort of panicked denial that he wanted anything else from Justin followed these thoughts. It was clear that any relationship Justin entered into would have to be a serious one; he simply was not in a place where he could deal with something casual. At that moment, Brian wasn’t prepared to deal with any kind of relationship, even a casual one.

“Be selfish,” Lindsay had advised him on Monday of that week. She had been talking about his time at Liberty and not about romance, but Brian thought it still applied. “Focus completely and totally on yourself. Whatever you need to do for you.” Blake had told him to take everything step-by-step, which seemed like good advise as well, though certainly trite, so Brian figured he’d shelve any thoughts about impossible relationships and think only of things that immediately affected him.

“Everyone dismount and lead your horses back to the stable!” John called, jarring Brian from his thoughts and making him realize that they were back at the ranch. The nurses and Michelle and John helped usher everyone to where they were supposed to go, and showed those who didn’t already know how to brush down the horses after removing their tack.

Flower enjoyed being brushed, which suited Brian’s impression of her, which was that she was lazy and spoiled. Over the course of the ride he’d become more aware that Flower was simply following the rump of the horse in front of her, and though this was likely the reason why he reached the ranch at all with the number of times he’d zoned out, it didn’t make her any less lazy.

John held a contest, the prize being a book about horses and a horseshoe, awarded to whoever brushed their horse’s coat into the glossiest shine. Debbie was quick to announce that anyone who won would have to give the horseshoe to her and she’d keep it safe for them. John looked slightly abashed, as if only then realizing the horseshoe could be construed as a weapon. Brian wondered if the man had even managed to forget for a moment, that they were all supposedly crazy. Despite the incentive of the contest, Brian didn’t brush Flower with any more vigour. He rid her of many hairs, though the horse seemed to continually have more to shed, and she looked a bit brighter when he was done.

Emmett won, perhaps unsurprisingly. He’d brushed King to a rich gloss and then proceeded to place loose braids in the animal’s mane. “He’s just the prettiest thing,” Emmett said as they were all ushered out of the barn and towards the busses.

As he took his seat by the isle, Brian was surprised to feel his body aching. He hadn’t imagined that horseback riding was so physical, but certainly it wasn’t just his legs and his ass that hurt. “Where’s Justin?” Melanie asked.

“Don’t worry,” Michael said. “He always lags behind when we visit the ranch.” True to Michael’s observation, Daphne entered the bus dragging Justin behind him, the boy’s smile lit the entire bus, and he kept smiling for the entire ride home.

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Lights-out and Brian settled into bed, his body full of the kind of sated relaxation that had the added joy of quietening the mind. For the first time in as long as he could remember, Brian’s head was empty of rushing thoughts: no worries about what he’d done that day or had to do the next; no thoughts or memories; no slogans or ad ideas; just a pleasant quiet. It was a surprising thing to realize that this was what contentment felt like. He was lulled into a relaxed sleep by the familiar sound of pencil on paper and, every so often, a page turning.

Brian awoke a little before midnight and it took a moment to realize it hadn’t been a nightmare that had woken him -- either his own or Justin’s -- but rather the sound of quiet movement. He opened his eyes to see Justin standing above his bed, backlit by the light creeping in through the window. He looked ethereal, though the eccentrically clad teddy he held loosely in his arms somewhat detracted from that thought. “Nightmare?” Brian felt compelled to ask. Justin shook his head quickly, then climbed carefully into Brian’s bed. Surprised, Brian shifted and made room without comment, until he was lying with Justin’s back pressed to his chest. Justin held Brian’s arms tightly, keeping them wrapped around his body like a blanket. Brian’s back was to the door.

They lay there quietly. Brian was too relaxed to wonder at the strange behaviour, was even a little bit used to it. Justin had climbed into his bed before on rare occasions. Yet Brian was completely awake, not certain why the warmth from Justin’s body wasn’t lulling him back into sleep, only certain that a part of him seemed to be waiting for something.

“They’re beautiful.” The whisper rent the air and it was several long minutes before Brian realized his entire body had braced, his breath holding his mind stunned. He wondered if he stayed still enough, if he’d hear it again. “The horses.” The sound of footfalls outside their door and Justin tensed in Brian’s arms. Brian tightened his embrace, took a breath wondering if he’d imagined it. He waited patiently, silently, as the footsteps again retreated. He waited a few minutes more.

The voice was soft, a child’s whisper, but rough from lack of use. It seemed to be pushed out with some effort. It was, oddly, the most amazing thing Brian had ever heard. “Sometimes I forget. But there’s so many beautiful things,” Justin said, his tone full of wonder. Brian held Justin until the blond fell asleep. He wanted to say something, but couldn’t think of anything to say and in the end they had both been silent until Justin’s familiar snuffling and then steady breath filled the room. Finally, Brian let out a long breath of his own, tucked his head, resting his forehead against the back of Justin’s neck and closed his eyes tightly, trying to process what he’d heard, what had happened. Gently, Brian placed a kiss at the base of the pale neck. So many beautiful things.

**Chapter Nine: Don't Say a Word**

Month Three: Week One

“Mm mm,” Emmett said, dropping heavily onto the couch in the rec room beside Michael. “I am the happiest person in the world!”

“Why? Did a friend smuggle in a dildo for you?” Brian asked.

“No,” Emmet said, glaring at Brian. “I’m leaving next week! Doctor Blake says I’m as good as new!” Emmett clapped his hands like a seal, accepted Melanie’s and Michael’s congratulations. Brian looked at Justin who was sitting on he floor, his legs tucked under his chin and watching it all with a frown. He waited for the blond to say something, anything, to congratulate Emmett, to explain that he’d miss the man. Justin only bit his lip, then got to his feet quickly and left the room.

Ever since Justin had spoken to him Brian kept waiting for the blond to speak again, to say something to his friends, or one of the nurses. Instead, Justin remained silent, behaved, in fact, as if nothing had changed at all. Except at night sometimes when he would crawl into Brian’s bed, tuck his body safely between Brian and the wall, holding Brian’s arms tightly around him, and only then would he whisper. He hadn’t yet spoken much, a few sentences about something safe. Brian could understand that speaking would be difficult for Justin, he could not, though, understand why Justin had spoken to him and not to Emmett. Why Justin had not said a word to the man who had been with him at Liberty for so long.

“I’ll get him,” Brian said, when Emmett looked worriedly toward the door. Michael and Melanie hadn’t noticed Justin’s quick exit, they were still caught-up with the good news, happy for their friend.

Brian found Justin in their room, sitting on his bed with his back to the wall, his knees bent before him, and Gus-bear sitting in his lap. Brian settled himself at the foot of Justin’s bed, at the blonde’s feet. The silence was companionable; Brian could understand that Justin would be upset. Emmett was a good friend, had been at Liberty for well over a year and had spent every moment of that time with Justin. If Justin had no intention of leaving Liberty, this would be how his life was spent -- growing close to people who would leave him eventually, when they were free.

“Are you okay?” Brian asked, placing a hand on Justin’s foot. Blue eyes were watering, but the tears were not falling yet. Justin huffed, his breath blowing the blond locks around his face upwards. “I didn’t think so,” Brian said, which earned him a rueful smile and a nudge by one of Justin’s feet.

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Brian looked at the sheet of paper Lindsay had handed him. “What the fuck is this?” he asked.

“I’m being unconventional,” she said. “That seems to work better with you. That’s a list of signs of post-traumatic stress.”

“That’s nice,” he said, handing the sheet back.

“Take a look at it for a moment,” she said. “How many of those can you relate to?”

“None,” Brian asked, barely glancing at the sheet.

“A longer look than that,” she said.

Brian looked at the sheet. He didn’t have flashbacks, but he had nightmares. Most of the outward signs, he didn’t have. He didn’t mind touch, had never self-mutilated and could easily regulate his basic bodily functions. The majority of the things on the list had nothing to do with him. He shrugged and handed the list back.

“I want you to see where I think some of your behaviours are coming from,” Lindsay said, accepting the list back. “Your trouble trusting people, the feelings of dysphoria you’ve spoken about that you deal with by drinking, taking recreational drugs and having casual sex.” Brian shifted in his seat, wanting simultaneously to run from the room and to hear more. As much as Brian’s instinct was kicking in, telling him to forget this, to get out of there, he didn’t need to take this; he knew that what Lindsay was saying was important to listen to. “Brian, you’ve internalized these experiences, that’s how you dealt with it. I want to tell you, though, that tucking all of this away isn’t dealing with it. It’s anything but.” He snorted and looked away from her.

Lindsay stood from her desk, pulled something from a drawer and returned. Lindsay was almost exactly what Brian expected a therapist to be like. She used phrases like ‘how did that make you feel?’ and had perfected the stilted compassion that he had always associated with someone who you paid to help you. Sometimes, though, Lindsay caught him completely off-guard, and whenever she did, he got the feeling that she wasn’t all what she appeared to be. “I have a workbook for you,” she said, pushing a booklet across her desk to him. It had a blue cover with black spiral rings holding it together. There was no title, nothing to suggest the contents. “We have them bound this way to offer you privacy. There are different kinds of workbooks, and no real reason for anyone but yourself to know which one you’re working on.”

Brian took the workbook from the desk, flipped open the cover to the front page where there wasn’t a title, but instead a quotation. “Don’t run away from it. Don’t bury it. Don’t try to produce a different reality getting all strung out on something, or eating your way through your feelings. Don’t slash your wrists. Just deal with it, because it’s going to keep coming back if you continue living anyway. It’s painful, but you just have to keep going. It’s just a part of life, really,[i]” Brian read to himself. He looked up and Lindsay smiled a little.

“You might not be ready to talk about it,” she said after a moment. “That’s okay. But I want you to work through this book so that at least you’re acknowledging it, and thinking it through. It will help. Until you feel ready to talk about it.”

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That night, Brian’s nightmares, which had abated slightly, returned full-force. He awoke not long after falling asleep with the sound of a shout echoing off the walls. The night-nurse asked if he wanted a sleeping pill, but he didn’t and said so. He held Gus-bear in his arms and thought about the blue workbook he’d shoved in the bottom of a drawer. He woke again in a cold sweat.

Justin had been asleep, but Brian’s second nightmare had woken him. Brian heard the rustle of sheets and quiet footfalls, then Justin sat down at the foot of Brian’s bed. For a moment, Brian lay quiet, feeling the heat from Justin’s body at his feet. Then, decision made, he threw back the covers and Justin slipped in between them. When Brian awoke again from a nightmare, his eyes flew open and connected immediately with blue eyes, he felt Justin’s fingers in his hair and Justin’s arm around his body. He fell asleep quickly and woke again in the morning.

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“How’s breakfast?” Brian asked, having closed the door to their room. Justin looked up from his cinnamon oatmeal and frowned. He opened his mouth as if to speak, but his eyes flickered to the door and then back to Brian, and he ended up closing it again and looking down at his bowl.

“It’s okay,” Brian said. “It’s just me,” he assured Justin. Justin glanced up briefly, his blue eyes somewhat glassy, then looked away. “You’re safe here.” Brian was struck by the irony. He didn’t talk, wasn’t much of a conversationalist. He could deliver a pitch, he could banter, he could entice, he could taunt and tease, he could make a person feel three inches tall. He was not one for interacting, though, not much for actual dialogue. Yet here was, finding that he was wanting to actually converse with his silent roommate. To talk to him.

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Justin spent a good deal of time avoiding Emmett. This afforded Brian more time to observe his roommate. He wondered why Justin would spend last week with his friend, avoiding him. Then again, Justin was likely too upset to deal with it at that moment. Brian wondered if Lindsay had given a workbook to Justin, or if Justin wouldn’t have filled one out. Lindsay had mentioned that she had several ways of working with Justin, but if the young man was willing to write things down in order to communicate it seemed likely that Lindsay would have a better understanding of what was going on than she did, and the nursing staff would have been using pads of paper to communicate with him. No, on further thought, it seemed as if Justin was refusing to talk and write.

So Brian watched Justin and realized that he really was the only person Justin trusted enough to speak to. Literally, the blond would tense whenever someone -- even one of the Gang -- came close when he had been talking. Even if Justin didn’t talk so much as whisper.

Brian assured himself that this was simply a pet-project. He spent his time after his sessions with Lindsay but before lunch sitting with Justin in their room and talking. In the hopes he could entice the blond into conversation. It seemed reasonable to think that the more comfortable Justin was talking in their room, the easier it would be to get Justin to talk outside of it. So far this plan had not been working.

“Brian, have you seen Justin anywhere?” Emmett asked, poking his head into the room Brian shared with the blond. When Brian merely shook his head, Emmett threw-up his hands and then stalked into the room, settling on Justin’s bed and grabbing a hold of Gus-bear. “I haven’t had a chance to talk to him about my leaving.”

“That would imply he doesn’t want to talk about it,” Brian said idly as he turned the page of his book.

“This is serious!” Emmett said. “We’ve been close for a long long time!” Emmett explained, as if Brian hadn’t known already. “I don’t want to leave if it’s going to upset him.”

“You can’t stay,” Brian said.

“I just want to talk to him,” Emmett said, collapsing in a swoon on Justin’s bed, still holding the teddy. “I want to explain things to him.”

“He’s not a child, he knows better than anyone how things work here,” Brian said, returning to his book.

Emmett lay there quietly for a moment before he sat up. “Could you just tell him that I was here and would really like to talk to him?”

“Sure, I’ll pass that on. Just like I’ve passed on every other message you’ve given me. And he’ll ignore it, just like he’s ignored every other message you’ve passed on to him.”

“Well, try!” Emmett said, before he turned on his heel and left.

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Brian returned from Lindsay’s on Thursday with a plan. He strode quickly through the halls, burst into the room he shared with Justin, relieved to see Justin sitting on his bed reading. Without explanation, Brian snagged Justin’s wrist, tugged him up from the bed and pulled him out of the room, back towards the exit.

Justin had first spoken to Brian in the middle of the night. He’d climbed over Brian’s body so that he could lie facing the wall, with Brian’s body between him and the door. Justin had kept Brian’s arms tight around him and even then, had only managed a whisper. In the passed week, Brian had barely been able to coax Justin to speak. Finally, Brian thought he understood what might be stopping the younger man.

It was overcast, the clouds hanging low in the sky, threatening rain. Likely because of the ominous weather, there were not many people on the patio, and no one in the garden. Brian kept a brisk pace, leading Justin down the steps until they were walking on the grass between the flowerbeds. They walked in a straight line away from Building Three, away from the all the buildings of Liberty, until they were at the spot where the garden began to slope down steeply and where the trees took-over the grass making a sort of perimeter of the grounds. Here, Brian released Justin’s wrist.

Justin’s brow was creased and he was looking at Brian with curiosity. “Do you see anyone here?” Brian asked. Justin cautiously looked around. “Anyone at all?” Justin shook his head. “Justin,” Brian said. He spoke slower, trying to convey what he meant. “There’s no one here. Do you see anyone?”

“No,” Justin said after a moment. He looked surprised as the word slipped out then he smiled. “Just you,” Justin added.

“It wouldn’t be much of a conversation if you were here by yourself,” Brian said, surprised that he was actually teasing. Justin nudged him with his arm and smiled wider.

“I don’t like talking where people can hear,” Justin said.

It seemed like an opening. Brian had questions that he could barely hold back and it seemed like the perfect segue. “Why?” he asked, cautiously. Justin shook his head quickly. “Okay,” Brian said, knowing it was hard enough for Justin without the added pressure of questions.

Brian had spent a great deal of time puzzling over Justin, and he’d realized that Justin had likely chosen to speak to him because he’d known that Brian wouldn’t push. Emmett would have been fully supportive of his friend, but he would have had questions that he wouldn’t have kept back. If Justin had spoken with Melanie or Lindsay, the expectation that he continue to talk and share things would put too much pressure on Justin, forcing him to talk about things that, at this point, Justin was still avoiding. Michael was unable to keep any kind of secret, especially from his mother.

“I want to just be normal for a minute,” Justin said. “Can we do that?”

“Sure,” Brian said, his tongue creeping into his cheek.

“Good,” Justin said. “Because then I can do this.” He grinned like the devil and pitched his body to the side. Brian watched his roommate roll down the grassy hill they’d been standing by.

“I don’t know how normal that is, Sunshine,” Brian called, Justin’s laughter drifted up the hill. It was loud and warm and the freest sound Brian had ever heard.

“Come on!” Justin called. “Roll yourself down!”

“No! That’s crazy!” Brian said.

“Well, that’s why you’re here isn’t it?” Justin called back. Brian could see Justin waving his arms, beckoning him down. “Come on Brian!” Justin called.

“Not a chance,” Brian retorted.

“Do you see anyone here?” Justin taunted, tossing Brian’s words back at him. Another challenge. Brian rolled his eyes and couldn’t help looking around. He sat carefully on the hill, and then lay down. For a moment he was still, but then he heard Justin’s voice: “Roll down!” and he twisted, starting his body on the tumbling descent.

The ground was rough under him. He hit a few bumps, scraped over some prickly spots of grass and tumbled to a stop at Justin’s feet, the blond laughing loudly. “I won’t tell a soul,” Justin promised, leaning over Brian, then offered a hand. “Come on, it looks like it’s going to ...” before Justin could finish it began to rain fiercely.

“Ah, shit,” Brian said.

“You aren’t afraid of wrecking your clothes, are you?” Justin asked whose own uniform already had mud around the cuffs of his pants. They ran up the hill, slipping on muddy patches and headed back to Building Three.

“Boys! Are you crazy!” Debbie yelled as she saw them running. She was standing under the roof of the patio, holding a stack of towels. “Get up here! Hurry!” There were others running to the safety of the building, Brian snatched-up two towels as they passed Debbie and hurried inside. They stopped at the foot of the stairs to dry off. Brian wrapped the yellow towel around his neck and grabbed Justin’s towel, plopping it over the blond head and towelling vigorously to dry Justin’s hair. When he pulled the towel back Justin looked torn, his lips working as if he wanted to speak, but his eyes were frightened.

“It’s okay,” Brian assured the blond. “You don’t need to say a word.” The gratitude that shone in the blue eyes was all the response Brian needed.

**[i] This quotation is not mine. A woman named Soledad, in a quote from a book entitled “The Courage To Heal”, said it.**

**Chapter Ten: Coping With Loss and Gain**

Month Three: Week Two

On the last Monday that Emmett would ever spend in Liberty, the staff, some of the patients, and the Gang -- minus Justin -- threw a small party in the rec room. Brian returned from the Library to dance music and cake on the third floor of the third building.

Daphne and some of the other nurses had gone all-out, getting balloons and streamers. Daphne had brought her mini-disco light and a fair number of people had packed into the small room and were dancing. Though the entire scene reminded him oddly of Babylon, Brian had no real desire to dance -- he had never been very good at it. He sat on one of the couches that had been pushed to the far side of the room against the wall to make space for the dance floor, and watched as everyone danced and laughed. Emmett had been a part of life at Liberty for over a year and a half and he had a place there. He was going to be missed.

“If you eat more than one piece I’m putting you back on the body-purge!” Blake threatened before he disappeared back into the crowd. Brian rolled his eyes, remembering a time when he would have freaked-out at the thought of eating cake in the evening. He’d lost weight since coming to Liberty; Blake assured him his metabolism was working faster than it had been. Brian had never been healthier and he was surprised to realize he was more than willing to reward himself with one piece of triple-chocolate cake.

When ‘Milkshake’ came on, Brian had to work very hard to restrain his laughter, and then had to give-in to it. Emmett had pulled three nurses, including Daphne, onto one of the tables and they were dancing. Debbie was dancing as she blended smoothies. The atmosphere was contagious and he sat with a grin, watching the chaos until, out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Justin. Justin stood at the door, peering in like an uninvited guest. He watched quietly for a moment before he backed away.

“Hey,” Brian called, leaving the party in favour of tracking down the sulking blond. “Aren’t you going to dance like an idiot at Emmett’s going-away party?”

Justin looked around shyly and smiled. “I’ll have you know I dance quite well,” he said. “I’m not going,” he added, his smile disappearing.

“He’s not betraying you,” Brian said. “He’s not even abandoning you.”

“You don’t know that,” Justin said.

“He’s going on, he’s living his life. You wouldn’t want him to do any different.”

“You’re right,” Justin said. “I’m being selfish. But excuse me if I think I’ve earned the right to wallow.”

“You wouldn’t have to wallow if you decided to do exactly what Emmett’s doing,” Brian said.

“What?” Justin asked. “Attempting to limbo?”

Brian turned around and, sure enough, Emmett was limbo-ing under a pole that two patients were holding. “Shit,” he said, unable to stop the smirk when the lanky man fell on his ass. “No,” he said, turning serious again. “Live your life.”

“It’s complicated,” Justin said.

“No more than it is for anyone,” Brian said.

“You don’t know me,” Justin said. “Stop pretending that you know everything because you really don’t.”

“You’re right,” Brian said. “I know only what you’ve told me. And when the time comes, I’ll leave, too. I have a life out there, just like Emmett.”

“And mine’s in here,” Justin said. He jerked his head up in defiance and turned to go, but Brian caught his arm, spun him around and jerked him forward so they stood close.

“The only person you’re fooling is yourself,” Brian said. “There’s nothing for you here.”

“There’s more for me in here than there is out there,” Justin said, gesturing to the windows. Before Brian could argue further, Justin had pulled away and stalked off towards their room.

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Justin had been avoiding Brian since their argument on Monday. Brian left him for a day to cool-off, but on Wednesday Brian followed Justin to the library, and when Justin settled onto one of the couches with a book, Brian collapsed on the sofa opposite. Justin glanced at him and frowned, then returned to his reading.

Brian waited a few minutes, then stretched his long legs across the gap between the sofas and kicked gently at Justin’s legs until he could stretch his own legs beneath Justin’s. It always made Justin laugh, and as Brian peered over his book he caught Justin trying to stifle a smile.

They read, pretending to ignore each other, until Brian noticed Justin was peering at him over the book, smiling slightly. Brian answered with a smile of his own. It was that easy. They were friends again.

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Brian and Justin walked back through the hall, headed to their room. As they passed Emmett’s bedroom Justin picked up speed, but Brian came to a stop. There was a lime green duffel bag on Emmett’s bed, neatly packed. The clothes Brian had seen Emmett wear on their excursions were folded beside the bag, and a different set, no less loud, were folded beside them.

“Well, hi there!” Emmett greeted when he exited the bathroom and caught sight of Brian. “Felt like a change,” he said, gesturing to the set of clothes folded on the bed. Emmett fiddled with the scattered items. With his back still to Brian he asked, “How is -- how is Justin?”

Brian smiled to himself. Emmett didn’t do a good job of sounding disinterested. “You should talk to him.”

“I can’t!” Emmett said, throwing his arms up and turning to face Brian. “He’s avoiding me. I just -- I feel like I’m abandoning him, and that’s awful.”

“He’s trying to get used to you not being there,” Brian said.

“Because I’m getting out, and he’s staying here. Is he ever going to leave? He could leave tomorrow, if he wanted! But it doesn’t seem like he ever will!” Emmett said.

“I’m not his fucking therapist,” Brian said, unwilling to entertain images of Justin alone in Liberty.

“What if he never gets better?” Emmett asked, sinking onto the bed. Brian had nothing to say. It wasn’t his place to explain that Justin was speaking, and that was a huge improvement. Instead he stayed silent. “I have no intention of abandoning him,” Emmett continued. “I’m going to come back and visit.”

“Until you get caught up with your own life and decide to forget all about this place,” Brian said.

“That’s not going to happen,” Emmett declared. Brian raised a disbelieving eyebrow but nodded his head before he left.

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“He’s not coming out, is he?” Emmett asked as he stood at the front of the main building beside his therapist, Dr. Cullen, and Blake. The Gang stood off to the side; Justin was noticeably absent.

“Remember what we talked about,” Dr. Cullen said, placing a hand on Emmett’s shoulder in a show of support.

“Of course,” Emmett said, managing a smile but clearly still upset.

“Well, come here, all of you!” he said, turning to the Gang and throwing his arms wide. Michael ran into them, already sobbing. “Oh, don’t cry! Then I’m going to cry, and we’ll just be a mess!” Emmett was already crying, but when Michael stepped away, he wiped at his eyes then fanned his face with his hands and took a breath. “I’m going to miss you.”

Melanie came forward and stuck her hand forward, but Emmett embraced her and patted her back. “You have to keep me posted about everything that’s going on. And I’ll come visit.”

“Take care of yourself, Emmett,” Mel said, smiling.

“Brian!” Emmett said, and Brian wanted to step back, to explain that he didn’t do gushy good-byes, but before he could, Emmett threw his arms around him. “Look after my baby, okay?” he said. Brian nodded and Emmett sniffled. “I’m going to miss this place so much.”

A taxi was idling patiently in the drive, Emmett’s bags already packed into the trunk. “Thank-you, Blake! You’ve worked miracles,” he said, throwing his arms around the young doctor once more -- he’d already said good-bye to each of the members of staff on the third floor, as well as anyone else who helped him during his stay.

“I’m proud of you,” Blake said.

“Dr. Cullen!” Emmett exclaimed, and Dr. Cullen laughed, patted Emmett’s back again then urged Emmett towards the cab. “Good-bye! I’m going to come visit the first chance I get!” he promised.

They watched as Emmett reluctantly headed to the cab, looking one last time toward Building Three with a heart-broken look that suddenly turned into a wide, happy grin, and he stepped away from the cab again. Brian frowned, wondering what Emmett had seen, but before he could turn and look something brushed passed him and he watched as Justin ran right into Emmett's arms, hugging him hard.

“Oh Baby!” Emmett said. “I’m so glad you came to see me off!” Justin held on harder. “I’m going to visit you, I promise,” Emmett whispered.

“Bye Emmett,” Justin whispered back. Emmett gasped, his face stunned, then he smoothed Justin’s hair back from his face, kissed each cheek once, sobbed a little and hugged Justin to his chest again.

It was a few more minutes before Emmett got into the cab, and as it pulled out of the circular drive, Emmett turned and waved through the back window. Justin’s eyes were glassy but, unlike Michael, he wasn’t openly crying. When they turned to head back to the building, Justin smiled.

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Daily walks to the hill at the far-end of the garden had made Justin more comfortable with talking. Sometimes, he even spoke inside the building. Brian was pleased to see his roommate becoming more relaxed, but following Emmett’s departure, Justin’s topics for dialogue became focussed on what Emmett might be doing, where he was going. Would he be coming back.

“He said he would visit,” Justin said.

“I know,” Brian said.

“Do you think he actually will? No one ever wants to admit that they spent time at a mental institution.”

“Emmett is different,” Brian said. “He’d probably be the one to bring it up in conversations.” Justin grinned and rolled his eyes. They were sitting at the top of the hill, Justin was making a daisy chain. “Don’t think for a second that I’m going to wear that.”

Justin looked up from his creation then smiled innocently. “I never said you had to wear it. Do you think Emmett will find that street? The one you were telling me about?”

“Liberty Avenue?” Brian asked with a smirk. “I think Emmett is already quite familiar with Liberty Avenue.”

“I wish I’d seen it,” Justin said. Brian hated how Justin spoke about the world outside of Liberty hospital. He always sounded wistful; he always spoke in the past tense, as if his chance to see it had passed. It was difficult to do, but Brian kept silent knowing that arguing wouldn’t get him anywhere. “Let’s head back in,” Justin said. He carried two daisy chains and wore one on his head, like a crown.

“Hey, Justin!” Daphne said as they walked onto the floor, Justin grinned and dropped one chain onto her shoulder, smiling wider when Daphne thanked him and gave him a hug.

“Sucking-up to the nursing staff?” Brian asked with a smirk. Justin stayed quiet, so Brian followed him to the nursing station where Debbie was arranging trays for dinner.

“Sunshine!” she greeted warmly when she noticed him peering into the small room. “What can I do for you?” Justin held out the daisy chain and grinned, putting it on happily. “Thanks, Honey.” Justin beamed at her, then headed back to their room, Brian still following.

Brian thought about the daisy chains as he and the Gang shared an uncomfortably quiet dinner. Emmett had always been talking, badgering them into conversation when they were distracted. Michael and Melanie were wonderful supports, but Michael was still unwell, and socializing with a depressive whom had a tendency to share every little thing that happened to him each day with his mother made talking with Michael difficult. Melanie, though friendly, still kept herself distant, knowing that unlike most of the patients at Liberty she was there for some peace and quiet. Once Brian left, all Justin would really have was the nursing staff, and even they were inconsistent with shifts and rotations.

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“I bet the first thing he did was to go to that club you were talking about -- Babylon? -- and go dancing,” Justin said.

“I think his first order of business would be finding some place to live,” Brian suggested wryly.

“He’d celebrate, though,” Justin said.

“Probably suck a few guys off in the backroom,” Brian said.

“What’s the backroom?” Justin asked.

“No place special,” Brian said.

“His apartment will look really great,” Justin said. “Bright and warm. He’s really good at decorating -- and throwing parties,” Justin said.

“Jesus, all this talk about Emmett is -- driving me crazy,” Brian said, managing to stop himself from saying that the conversation was making his dick soft, Justin was twitchy around references like that sometimes. “What the fuck am I?”

Justin looked up at him and smiled shyly, then stepped forward so they stood close. Brian held still and waited. Stretching up on his tiptoes, Justin pressed a kiss to the corner of Brian’s lips before stepping back, smiling still.

“The greatest thing since sliced-bread!” Justin said, breaking the intensity of the moment and becoming teasing again.

“I’m flattered,” Brian snarked, following Justin’s lead and continuing the banter. Sometimes, talking with Justin was all about knowing when to push and when to pull-back.

**Chapter Eleven: The Art of Panic**

Month Three: Week Three

In Liberty Hospital there were people everywhere, all the time. Finding a place to be alone was not impossible, but it required a willingness to relocate -- to the garden, to the library -- some place to have some time to think. This was something that troubled Brian as he sat in the library, knowing damn well what week it was, but unsure what to do about it.

In a place like Liberty, if someone was going to -- to do something to someone else -- it had to be secret, but a secret was hard to keep in a place like Liberty. It required solitude. Christopher’s goal would be to isolate Justin, to get him to solitary confinement where Christopher had every right to visit him, and where such visiting would be overlooked. Justin’s goal would be to avoid solitary. After over a half year of this, Justin would know how it worked, would know what he could do to stop it. Wouldn’t he? There was something that Brian was missing.

Unable to focus on his book, Brian went-out to the patio where he’d last seen Melanie. “Tell me everything you know about when Justin first started getting these attacks.”

“I wasn’t here then, Brian,” Melanie said. “Neither was Michael, he came a few months later. Emmett was the only one who was there.”

“Did he talk to you about it?” Brian asked.

“Of course,” Mel said wryly. Emmett talked about everything, all the time. When Brian’s expression clearly told her he was expecting more, she shrugged. “He would get himself too worked-up to really talk clearly. You know Emmett. I know when they started, but you already know that. Beyond that, I know the staff tried to different ways of handling it, but I can’t remember what they did before they settled on solitary. Sorry.” Brian nodded his head absently.

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It was easy to realize what was happening, now that he knew what to look for. When behaviour is regimented, when things become predictable, it’s easy to be trained. Regardless of how it might have begun, Justin had full-out panic attacks in the third week of the month. It could happen anywhere, at any time. Or so Brian had learned.

With the aid of the workbook Lindsay had given him regarding sexual assault and abuse, Brian could even understand the trigger. Justin had repressed everything -- maybe he even forgot about it on some level -- tucking the grim truth out of mind for as long as he could. For the most part, it would be easy. Justin had nothing to fear, really, except when Christopher was in Building Three -- always the third week of the month. And Justin knew what to expect for that week -- it was only a question of when.

Christopher, of course, played on that panic. Brian drifted out of sleep on Tuesday night to see Christopher looming over Justin’s bed, the blond quietly looking back at the nurse -- his face frozen in fear. It was little things Christopher did when he was on duty -- always at night -- that would build on the panic in Justin. Triggers the man would use, so that during the day when Christopher was off-duty, he was still there for Justin -- lurking in every corner. It was only a question of when it would be too much for the young man.

Brian had wondered about the panic-attack he had witnessed the month prior. Justin had been in their room trying his best to be quiet. He wondered what had happened the month before that, when Justin had fallen apart outside the rec room. With those two experiences to base his thoughts on, Brian realized that he’d been mistaken in his assumption that Justin wanted to be close to people -- safety in numbers. He realized Justin wanted to be as far away from witnesses as possible. The answer, too, was simple. If no one saw his panic attack -- something he couldn’t control, couldn’t help -- then no one would worry. The panic would abate eventually, or the lack of oxygen would make him pass-out and he’d wake again a little later. People, though, meant witnesses -- witnesses who thought they knew how best to help.

So Brian was pretty certain he had it all worked out, but that didn’t help him when Justin froze like a deer in headlights in the middle of the hall when one of the day-nurses knocked a flashlight off a counter. It was immediate. His breath shorted, his body tensed and he jerked as if scalded when Brian reached out to touch him. Brian had intended to pull Justin into a room where he could break-down in private, hopefully without an intruder who would unknowingly call a nurse for help and send Justin back into Christopher’s clutches. Brian’s touch, however, elicited a low, sobbing keen that caught everyone’s attention.

The staff, Brian noted with defeated amusement, handled Justin better this time. At least Lindsay’s talk had been for some good. They didn’t all flock around. Three orderlies to hold the writhing Justin still, one nurse to knock him out with a sedative. Two nurses to hold Brian back, one nurse to inject him with a mild sedative just to stop his cursing. Two orderlies to carry Justin down the hall.

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The hall was grey in the night, the stars the only thing lighting the floor. It was the quiet that unnerved Brian. He wondered, if Justin were talking, why he wouldn’t yell for help? Did he not think it would come?

When Brian came to Justin’s room -- the nursing staff always placed him in the room with marigold walls -- he peered through the window. He had braced himself, unsure what he would see, and thought he was prepared for anything. He wasn’t.

He wondered, if he had stumbled on Christopher in the middle of his abuse of Justin, if that might even have been better, but he couldn’t know. In the end, what he saw wasn’t anything at all. And it was everything. Just a pale hand gripping the sheets fiercely. Just a naked arm without the long-sleeved white shirt Justin always put on at night because he got cold so easily. And Christopher standing by the bed, his body blocking the rest.

Brian raced through the hall, back towards the nursing station, prepared to yell but knowing that if he did Christopher might hear. He found a night-nurse, pulled the young man with him, barely explaining as they walked.

“What are you doing out of bed?” the man asked, though he was following Brian.

“A nurse is abusing a patient,” Brian said. Couldn’t explain further, couldn’t describe what he thought Christopher had done. Couldn’t prove it either way.

“Where?” the man asked, moving faster. They reached Justin’s room, the nurse pushing open the unlocked door.

Christopher was standing by the bed, two fingers over Justin’s pulse looking at his watch, taking Justin’s heart rate. Justin was fast asleep. “What’s going on?” Christopher asked after he made the notions on his clipboard.

“What are you doing here?” the other nurse -- his nametag said Bernard -- asked.

“What does it look like?” Christopher asked. “I’m checking the patient. That’s my job.” Bernard took the clipboard from Christopher, looked at the marks on the page -- for each of the four patients in solitary there were the appropriate notations and time that the nurse made those notations. There was no inappropriate break between seeing one patient and seeing another. Justin Taylor was the last name on the list. “What is this about? What is that patient doing out of bed?” Christopher asked.

Bernard pushed passed Christopher to the bed, carefully leaning over and inspecting Justin Taylor. There were no bruises, his clothes and the bedding were not in disarray. There was nothing to say anything untoward had happened at all. “I want your key,” Bernard said, holding out his hand to Christopher.

“What?”

“I want the key to the solitary rooms. Give it here,” Bernard said.

“You can’t do that. Why? I have to do rounds again before dawn!”

“I’ll do them. I have every right to demand that key, I am a permanent staff member of this hospital,” Bernard said.

“I want to know why. What’s that jerk been saying?” Christopher asked, gesturing to where Brian stood in the doorway.

“Christopher Hobbes,” Bernard said sternly. “That is none of your concern. This is temporary, if the staff decides to return it to you then you will get it back. Until that time, I’m taking over your shift patrolling these rooms. You’ll take the first hallway.” The hallways were where the regular rooms were located, more than one nurse was in those halls, and those patients had roommates. Bernard wasn’t taking the chance that there might be some validity to the accusations the patient had made, better to air on the side of caution, even if it didn’t seem like there was any grounding to the claims.

Brian watched as Christopher handed over the key and walked out. When he passed Brian, he smirked. Brian stood very still and concentrated on not punching the man out.

“You should return to your room,” Bernard said.

“What happened to him?” Brian asked, stepping further into the room to look at Justin.

“Nothing, it seems. He’s just sleeping.”

“He was awake when I was here,” Brian said. “That’s an awfully short time to fall asleep.” Bernard checked Justin over again, monitoring pulse and breath but everything was normal.

“What were you doing out of bed?” Bernard asked.

“You’re turning this around on me?” Brian said.

“I’m not accusing you of anything. I asked you a question,” Bernard said.

“This has happened before,” Brian said.

“You’ve been monitoring this? What have you seen?” Bernard asked. “What did you see tonight?”

What had Brian seen? “Christopher was touching him. He didn’t have his shirt.”

“His uniform was off?” Bernard asked.

“He wears a long-sleeved shirt because it gets cold at night,” Brian explained. Bernard stepped back towards the bed and pulled the blankets down. Justin was in his uniform shirt, but the long-sleeved shirt was missing.

“You didn’t see anything else?” Bernard sighed, rubbing his brow.

“It’s obvious what’s going on,” Brian said. “I’m out of bed because the damned staff didn’t listen to me last time. These attacks don’t make sense until you add this little gem of information.”

“Keep calm, I want to get to the bottom of this as much as anyone. This is a big claim to make, Brian. I’m not saying you’re lying, but if the hospital is going to take action, there has to be solid proof.”

“What the fuck ever,” Brian said, shaking his head and turning to head back to his room. Justin was safe for the rest of the week, at least. He’d figure-out what to do next time.

“I’ll present this to the staff. We’ll do something,” Bernard said.

“Sure,” Brian said.

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Emmett stood on the patio, already waiting when the nursing staff opened the doors in the morning. Brian saw him when he stepped out to see Cynthia, watching with emotions in turmoil as Emmett’s eyes flickered from Brian to the space behind him. They both knew who he was looking for. When Emmett met his eyes again, he was plainly upset. Brian decided Cynthia could wait.

“What happened?” Emmett asked when Brian came over to him.

“You know damned well,” Brian said. He couldn’t bring himself to tell Emmett what he had discovered, how he had been ignored. There was no use Emmett fretting about it all when there wasn’t anything he could do.

“Is he okay? How is he?” Emmett said.

“As well as can be,” Brian said. He’d peeked through the window of Justin’s room that morning but Justin hadn’t met his eyes. “Tell me about when it first started.”

“It came out of nowhere!” Emmett answered immediately. They moved away so the visiting families and friends wouldn’t overhear them. “He was really sweet, and so friendly even if he didn’t say a word. Then one day I came back to our room -- we were buddies then -- and there’s an orderly in there with a needle trying to sedate him and Justin is screaming and kicking like a tiger! I was terrified! Justin was frantic! It was a mess.”

“Who was the orderly?” Brian asked.

“I didn’t look at the nametag, how could I think about something like that? And then some nurses came in and it was chaos. They tried everything. Changed his diet, changed his remedies, put him on drugs -- but that was disastrous -- and they tried keeping him in his room at first, under mild sedation so he was awake but groggy. Justin would go out for a meal though, or to the rec room and he’d have an attack. The first time they took him to solitary was because he struck a nurse right in the face! After that, it was quiet for a while. You know? It was like the eye of the storm. Justin would be perfectly calm once he got to solitary, and they’d release him. It was a couple of months later -- with that pattern -- and then solitary wasn’t calming for him, either. He’d just sit there, not acknowledge anyone, not move. It was a lot of work for Dr. Peterson to coax him to eat. He’s calmed down since then, I mean he’s more cooperative in solitary now.”

“They should have fucking looked into it,” Brian said.

“What’s going on?” Emmett asked. “What do you know?”

“I’m taking care of it,” Brian said.

“Is our baby okay?” Emmett asked, he was sniffling.

“Emmett,” Brian said, enunciating clearly, biting his words out. “I’m taking care of it.”

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Lindsay Peterson sat with the permanent nursing staff of Liberty Hospital’s Building Three. Pieces were slowly falling into place for her, and the picture they created was frightening. It made her angry, as well, because if it was true, this was something that could have been prevented. People came to Liberty for protection -- from themselves, from their fears -- they didn’t come hear to learn new horrors.

“I want something done about this,” Lindsay said.

“I checked Taylor over, there was nothing that even implied some form of mistreatment,” Bernard said.

“But if something is happening, we can’t just sit back and let it!” Daphne said.

“Damn right!” Debbie echoed. “We should let that son of a bitch go right now!”

“That wouldn’t be a problem,” Bernard said. “He’s temporary staff.”

Lindsay sat for a moment. It would be simple to let Hobbes go, but she wasn’t interested in what was easy. She was interested in what would be best for Justin Taylor in the long run. “We’ll keep Hobbes,” she said.

“No offence, Honey,” Debbie said. “But what the fuck are you thinking?”

“Sis,” Vic said, placing a calming hand on his sister’s arm.

“I think it would be best if we keep him on,” Lindsay said. “Bernard, return his key to him and tell him we’ll expect him back in Building Three next month, and keep him on his rotations throughout Liberty. I want someone watching him, though, to make sure he isn’t mistreating anyone else. And if next month Justin Taylor is in solitary again, I want two extra nurses there -- but quietly, they’re not to alert Hobbes.”

“You’re using Justin as bait?” Daphne asked.

“Justin is already bait,” Lindsay said. “If this is true, he’s been victimized by this man for too long. To let Hobbes walk away is the worst thing you could do. Nothing will happen, I trust whoever you decide to place in those halls will prevent Hobbes from doing something. But I want some damned witnesses to this so Justin has options.”

“Sunshine isn’t even talking,” Debbie said. “The thought of court would terrify him!”

“There are ways around this. Especially with Justin as a patient here,” Lindsay said.

“Well, he could sue the hospital,” Vic said. “By rights we should have been ensuring that something like this couldn’t happen.”

“And that option is open to him as well,” Lindsay said.

“This is a huge, crazy risk,” Daphne said. “If it’s going to help Justin, though, I’m in.”

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Justin returned to the room Sunday morning. He didn’t leave it. Daphne, who was on the floor that day, brought his meals to him, and he chose to read quietly. He didn’t look at Brian when the man came in and out periodically, checking on him, though Brian would never admit to it. There was a tangible tension between them, Brian didn’t know what to do. He settled for being a silent presence, a quiet pest. He sat on his bed after lunch and read.

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At night, Justin crossed the space that separated the two beds and climbed into Brian’s awaiting arms. Brian held him close until Justin’s tremors abated somewhat, and smoothed back blond hair from the pale face. “Emmett came to see you,” he said, hoping to distract Justin. Justin let out a slow breath, snuggling down further into the embrace. “He was upset to hear that he missed you. He wanted me to tell you that he’s looking for a place to stay. That he celebrated his first night away from Liberty Hospital with a cosmo and dancing, and that he’d come and visit again as soon as he could.”

They were quiet for a while, then Justin tucked his head under Brian’s chin and Brian knew the blond well enough to know he was preparing to say something that wasn’t easy to say. “He touches me, Brian,” Justin said. Brian tried to keep his body relaxed, keep any sign of his anger hidden so Justin wouldn’t have the chance to misinterpret it or be upset by it. “He touches me, and I hate it. Please don’t let him touch me anymore.” Brian held Justin close, nearly hidden beneath blankets and Brian’s own body. He closed his eyes tight, knowing he’d do whatever he could to make certain Christopher never touched Justin again.

**Chapter Twelve: Rhyme and Reason**

Month Three: Week Four

The darkness glowed with the moon’s light. Brian had fallen asleep watching the light on the ceiling, and now he awoke to it as well. He wondered what had brought him into wakefulness, until the sound of sheets shuffling alerted him to Justin’s movement across the room. Brian sighed and turned his head to see the blond.

Justin was lying in bed, blue eyes looking back at him with a fierce intensity that made the hairs on the back of Brian’s neck prickle. For a moment, when their eyes connected across the room, they simply stared, then Justin moved.

Brian had seen Justin happy, glowing in sunlight his broad smile lighting a room. Brian had seen Justin upset, tears streaming down soft cheeks, blue eyes glistening and skin glowing red, sniffling. Brian had never seen this side of Justin before, the blond moved like silk slipping to the floor. He stood; suddenly shy, by his bedside, looking down where his pale feet were nearly swallowed by shadows. Then Brian watched slender artist’s fingers move, grab the bottom of the blue hospital shirt and pull it over his head, exposing pale skin -- ethereal -- and a lithe body, slightly toned. Justin dropped the shirt to the side, stepped forward cautiously as his fingers moved to the drawstring of his pants. Brian was breathing hard, his body so ready for what he knew was coming.

Justin was naked when he reached the bed, crawled beside Brian and slowly -- all his movements were slow -- pulled back the sheets. Brian’s cock tented the pants he’d been sleeping in, but he’d left his shirt off, he wasn’t used to sleeping in clothes and the pants were as much as he could manage in respect for his roommate. Justin smiled shyly, then swung his leg over Brian so he straddled the taller man. “Justin,” Brian whispered, but Justin leaned forward, pressed an index finger to Brian’s lips and Brian knew that the only way this could happen was if they were silent.

Brian dropped his lashes, raised them again in acknowledgement, and Justin smiled, just a little, before his fingers descended again, working the knot of Brian’s pants. He slid the rough blue material down Brian’s legs and Brian closed his eyes, breathed a sigh of aching relief when Justin fitted his body to Brian’s, pressed his lips to the underside of Brian’s jaw, licked a careful path to his lips.

Brian swallowed the boy whole, rolled Justin onto his back as he devoured lips and tongue, his hands moved wanting more, wanting all of the body beneath him, his hips thrust against the warm hardness pressed to his own cock. He was ready. He was more than ready for this. Justin’s fingers clenched and the sharp tug alerted Brian that the blond had a hold of his hair. Even as he was distracted by this thought, Justin was pressing upward, flipping them back again so Brian thumped against the wall, cursing the small bed. Justin, astride Brian’s legs once more, licked his palm leisurely then came crashing forward quickly, his damp hand wrapping around Brian’s cock as Justin bit into Brian’s left nipple. Brian thought he might have made a sound, but Justin’s mouth was suddenly covering his once more.

It was frantic, Brian was hard and getting impossibly harder, and all he wanted was to sink into Justin’s body, to bite at soft skin, to mark the pale expanse and hear Justin moan, hear him gasp. He pulled his hand from Justin’s cock, not knowing when he had reached for it, and by some silent communication, Justin allowed himself to be pushed onto his back again, positioned his legs on Brian’s shoulders and ran his hands up Brian’s back pulling Brian down so their nipples rubbed against the other’s body. “Brian,” Justin whispered, he clutched at Brian’s shoulder. Brian was determined, he rocked his hips forward, felt it as Justin clenched and unclenched his body. “Brian,” Justin said again. Brian buried his head in Justin’s shoulder, turned to the side and breathed in that fresh smell that two months of close living had instilled in Brian’s senses. He pushed forward. “Brian!”

Brian’s eyes snapped open, his body acting on auto-pilot and he found himself sitting in his bed, sheets crumpled around his body, his hardness painful but at least shielded by the blankets. Justin stood back quickly from the bed, retracted the hand that had just a moment before been on Brian’s shoulder. “What?” Brian snapped, disoriented and more than a little disconcerted by the dream he had been pulled from.

“You were having a nightmare,” Justin whispered. Brian would have laughed, but there was a lump in his throat that blocked the sound.

“Okay,” Brian said. Justin frowned for a moment, his eyes raking intensely over Brian’s face before he looked away. Brian noticed the artist was fiddling with the bottom of his shirt, a move Brian knew meant the young man was nervous. But after a moment, Justin turned away and headed into the bathroom.

A glance out the window and a second glance to the clock showed that the nursing staff was about to make their rounds, pulling the carts with the packages, one for each patient. Brian turned onto his back, draping an arm across his eyes as he focused on calming his body. He stayed that way as he heard Justin emerge from the bathroom again.

“Hustle your butt!” Debbie cried as she burst through the door.

“Christ, don’t you knock?” Brian said, but had to react quickly because the nurse had tossed the package at his head. “What’s this?” Brian asked. He’d opened the package to find a pair of thong flip-flops sitting atop his pants and tank top.

“We’re headed to the beach. Those are Liberty issue flip-flops. I think I got your size right,” Debbie answered. Brian scowled at the cheap footwear but relented, they were better than yellow rain boots. He slipped one sandal on his foot and it fit. “Excellent,” Debbie said. “Hustle your butt!” she repeated. “Buses are already here.”

It didn’t take long for Brian to wash and change. Justin was waiting for him, and they joined the procession, grabbing their breakfasts that had been neatly packaged for the trip as they passed the staff.

“It’s a long bus ride,” Melanie explained, sipping at her orange juice as they walked.

“How are we supposed to swim?” Brian asked.

“They have everything to rent at this place,” Melanie explained. “But if you don’t want to swim, it’s just nice to get some sun.” Indian summers were always nice, because Brian hated sleet and snow. He had no intention of putting on a rental bathing suit, however. He’d rather swim in the nude. Though he doubted the Liberty staff would allow him to.

As they climbed into the bus Daphne stopped Justin and handed him a plastic bag. The blond looked inside and grinned. “I figure you’d need to be restocked,” Daphne said. Justin pulled out the new sketchbook and pencils as he sat on the bus and began to sketch.

The bus ride was long. Brian occupied himself with eating his breakfast and listening to Michael and Melanie chatter. He watched Justin sketch. He thought about the dream he’d had.

It would be a lie to say he’d never noticed Justin’s body. He’d noticed the moment he’d spotted the boy. He was nothing like what Brian was into, and yet he was exactly the kind of thing Brian liked. He’d dismissed his thoughts; it had been all too easy, because excuses were abundant. After all, he hadn’t gone so long without fucking since before puberty. He’d dismissed the attention he was giving his roommate -- a pet project -- but it went beyond that, and he couldn’t dismiss that anymore.

He’d promised himself he wouldn’t walk down that road again. He’d promised himself that he was through with love and all that relationship bullshit. It was especially ridiculous now because there was nothing that could come out of this. Justin Taylor had no intention of leaving Liberty. Brian planned on leaving as soon as his time was up. No relationship, no matter how star-crossed or infatuated those involved were, could survive with one person in a mental institution and the other visiting every Saturday. Regardless of practicalities -- or lack thereof -- whatever this was still existed.

“We’re here!” Daphne shouted. The bus doors open and everyone piled off. The beach wasn’t much, just a stretch of sand cluttered with potato chip bags and beer bottles, and the lake water looked dark and a bit brown, but it didn’t matter. Unlike their other outings, there were no groups. The nurses let the patients do as they pleased and while there were some organized activities -- beach volleyball and one of the nurses had a box full of pool noodles -- Brian was content to find a patch of clear sand and settle down with one of the towels the nurses had handed out.

Justin and Michael lay their towels out beside Brian and then headed to the water. Brian watched as Justin rolled the legs of his cargo jeans up and then went running to the water, Michael not far behind.

Melanie sat on a towel, separated from Brian by Justin’s and Michael’s shoes. She was watching the beach with a wistful look and shook her head. “I’m leaving soon,” she said, out of nowhere.

“Technically, you could leave whenever you wanted,” Brian corrected her.

“I wanted to stay until I got some things sorted out,” Melanie admitted. “It wasn’t just about taking a break from stress. Before I came here I was seriously considering separating from Lindsay.”

“Is it ethical for you to be telling me things about my therapist?” Brian asked.

Melanie laughed and shook her head. “There’s no rhyme or reason to love, you know? My mum used to say it all the time, usually whenever she was at her wits-end and wanted to throttle my dad. When you’re little, love is everything. It makes perfect sense -- it’s supposed to be perfect -- easy. When I was with Lindsay, that’s how it was. So damned easy. And when it got hard, when it got complicated, I thought -- maybe this isn’t right, because this is so much work.”

“So you fucked around,” Brian asked.

“I wanted it to be simple again. It was one night and I came home and I felt sick, terrified that she’d leave me. But you know, when I was there with that other woman, I didn’t stop and think about Lindsay, it was just me, doing what I wanted because I thought it was right for me. She forgave me -- eventually. At the time, I thought it was what I deserved. It was so clear in my mind, how I felt for her and what I’d learned from that affair, that I thought Ôof course she should forgive me!’ When she fucked around though, that was a different story.”

“Michael said she fucked a guy,” Brian said. Only partly listening.

“I felt threatened, I admit it. And I was mad. Like I wasn’t enough, and that pissed me off. It was one hurdle after another. And then she started talking about kids, and all I could think about were those daydreams when I was little about a calm, steady, easy love.”

“Of course, in those daydreams it was always Mr. Right,” Brian inserted.

“I had no idea then,” Melanie defended. “The only solution I could see besides breaking it off was running away. So I ran.”

“Odd that you should pick your wife’s hospital.”

“Not odd, cowardly. How could Lindsay say no if I was right here? It was postponing the whole thing, this bought me time to get my head on right, figure-out what I wanted.”

“So now you’ve had your little epiphany,” Brian said.

“Yes, and I’m going back,” Melanie said. “Love isn’t supposed to be easy. Nothing is supposed to be easy. You don’t learn when things are easy. My mom was right, there’s no rhyme or reason in love. There’s always a choice, and it’s complicated and sometimes it breaks your heart. You just need to love as it comes.”

“Christ, you should run some kind of support group,” Brian said.

“Maybe,” Mel said, humouring his snideness. “But if you think for a moment I haven’t figured out what’s going on with you, you’re wrong.” Brian kept his head turned away, pretending he was barely paying attention. “I’m just saying, whatever happens, the only thing you can do is deal with it as it comes.”

“What the fuck ever,” Brian said.

“God,” Mel said. “We’re so alike it scares me.” She smiled, patted his knee and joined Michael and Justin playing in the water. When Mel splashed Michael Justin laughed, stepped back and turned to look to the shore, his gaze meeting with Brian’s. Justin’s smile turned shy, he tucked his blond hair behind his ear before he attention was diverted back to the water fight.

After lunch, Brian walked along the beach. It was the end of his third week at Liberty. He had one month left and then he’d return to his world. It worried him. He’d changed and he liked those changes. But it was easy to be different when he had doctors supporting him, checking in on him, pestering him to do things. It was easy to be different in a different environment. It was easy to go back to how things were, too.

It was the same with Justin. He could leave whenever he wanted. His parents had checked him into Liberty when he was a minor and now he was an adult. But Justin had said it himself -- he had more inside Liberty Hospital than he had outside. Even with Christopher in here with him, Justin wouldn’t leave. Wouldn’t -- not couldn’t.

The thought struck Brian and he stopped walking. Shocked to realize what he was thinking. Was it even worth it? He was fucked up, he didn’t believe in love, didn’t trust relationships and wasn’t sure he would still be the person he had become inside Liberty’s walls when he went outside them. Justin was fucked-up too. Who the hell knew what would happen? It flew in the face of everything Brian had believed in, thought he knew, and promised himself he would avoid.

Justin’s laughter caught his attention and he looked towards the water where Michael had his arms around Justin’s middle, holding him off the ground and spinning. They lost balance, of course, and landed in the water, their clothes soaking through and laughing all the while. On the beach, Debbie laughed at them for getting their clothes wet.

“You’re going to be on the bus freezing your asses off!” she yelled, her voice echoing.

Ever since he came to Liberty, Justin had been challenging him, openly and subtly. Again and again, and Brian always rose to the occasion. What was one more to add to the growing list? And the rest, he’d deal with as it came.

**Chapter Thirteen: Speak No Evil**

Month Four: Week One

They stood in the main hall of Building Three. The woman in a navy blue skirt and blazer and the man dressed in a business suit, their backs straight, not fidgeting, and Brian knew from the way that Justin froze on the steps that they were Mr. and Mrs. Taylor.

Lindsay motioned Justin down, smiling warmly -- the only one who was. Justin moved stiffly and Brian thought he looked ready to bolt. “Justin,” Lindsay welcomed when Justin came to stand by her side. Brian, unsure why he had been called to see Justin’s parents, stayed close to Justin. “I’ve invited your parents,” Lindsay explained, which was the wrong thing to say, because Brian caught the look of shocked betrayal that flitted over Justin’s face before his face cleared of all emotion.

“We came to visit you, Justin,” Mrs. Taylor offered, her voice rushed and pleading and she seemed to think Justin would be happy by this. He wasn’t. He looked back at her mutely, his back straight, his shoulders back. Brian thought he looked as if he were bracing for battle. “Aren’t you going to say something?”

“Mrs. Taylor,” Lindsay said, and Mrs. Taylor pursed her lips, looked back-and-forth between Lindsay and Justin. Brian wondered if she had even noticed him standing just behind her son.

“You told us he was better,” Craig Taylor said, the first thing he did say, and it was harsh and he was looking accusingly at Lindsay.

“Please, come. We can talk in the Green Room,” Lindsay said. Brian felt he was transported into a different world. Lindsay, every bit the WASP Brian had pegged her to be on his first day at Liberty, led Justin’s parents -- WASPs themselves -- into the Green Room where there was tea and some kind of strawberry smoothie, which Brian presumed was for Justin. The entire set-up niggled at Brian. Justin sitting there with a large plastic cup, not offered the tea, not included as a real equal among his parents and his own therapist. He wanted to leave, hating family dramas more than anything, but Justin was sitting alone on that couch, with that stupid plastic cup, looking a little bewildered -- if you knew where to look -- and Brian had been told specifically by Debbie that Lindsay wanted to see the two of them. Decision made, he followed Justin into the room.

“Hey, excuse me,” Mr. Taylor said belligerently, holding up a hand to bar Brian’s entrance. Justin looked towards the door as if suddenly remembering Brian’s presence and seemed ready to spring to his feet and join the fray.

“Mr. Taylor,” Lindsay intervened. “This is Brian Kinney, I believe I mentioned him to your wife when I spoke with her over the phone. Brian,” she greeted, gesturing him inside. Brian took a seat by Justin and smirked when Lindsay handed him a plastic cup of his own. At least the smoothie -- some strawberry and banana blend -- tasted good.

When they were all seated, Mr. and Mrs. Taylor together on a love-seat, Justin and Brian sitting on the three-seater sofa, and Lindsay in a wing-back chair, Lindsay reopened the conversation. “I invited your mom and dad here, Justin, because I felt you were making some really incredible progress.”

“You said he was fixed,” Mr. Taylor said.

“I never said he was ‘fixed’, Mr. Taylor, I never used that term. Your son was never broken,” Lindsay said.

“Craig,” Mrs. Taylor said when the man leaned forward to argue once more. “Please, it’s Jennifer and Craig,” she said to Lindsay. “I’d really just like to know what’s going on with my son.”

“We know what’s going on with him!” Craig Taylor said.

“Excuse me, I was speaking,” Jennifer said. “Justin,” she said, turning to look over at the couch where Justin sat, staring at his plastic cup. “Honey, whatever you want to talk about with us today, that’s fine.”

“Jennifer,” Lindsay said, but Craig cut her off.

“I still don’t understand why this -- Man -- needs to be here. This is a private conversation!” Craig said.

“When we spoke over the phone,” Lindsay said, addressing Jennifer, who was certainly the calmer of the two. “I said Justin was making progress, and he is. He’s doing really well, and Brian has helped that progress along in these past few months. I thought, given that this meeting would undoubtedly be emotional, I thought it would be best for Justin to have someone totally supportive who he trusts, be with him.” Brian got the sense that Lindsay was telling him, indirectly, exactly what she wanted him to be doing. He wondered if she knew what she had gotten herself in for when she had phoned the Taylors.

“I’m sorry to have been so rude,” Jennifer said, turning to Brian. She offered a hand, held it over the distance as she perched at the end of her sofa, for Brian to take. “Jennifer Taylor,” she said, when Brian accepted her handshake.

“Brian Kinney,” Brian offered.

Craig Taylor was still looking at Brian with distrust. “He’s what, Justin’s friend?”

“Brian is Justin’s buddy and his roommate,” Lindsay explained, but on the word ‘roommate’ Craig shot his son a lethal look that Justin missed because he was still staring at his cup. “Justin has a few questions, and I thought it would be good for him to hear the answers.”

“We’ve been busy,” Craig intervened. “We’ve been taking care of your sister. So I don’t want to hear any whining.”

“Mr. Taylor,” Lindsay said, coolly. “Justin’s questions have nothing to do with your absence.”

“Go ahead and ask, Sweetie,” Jennifer said, smiling invitingly at her son.

“Jennifer, Justin still has not spoken since you brought him to us. But he’s been a wonderful part of our community, helping a lot of new patients settle in. And he communicates really quite well without words.”

“I don’t understand,” Jennifer said.

“Whatever was behind your son’s decision to no longer speak,” Lindsay said, and Justin glanced quickly to Brian before he shifted and looked back at his cup. “It hasn’t been resolved. Your son still won’t talk.”

“Whatever was behind his decision?” Jennifer asked. Craig had finally sat back in his seat, looking like the overlord of the land. Oddly satisfied with his kingdom. “We brought him here to get better.”

“He has been,” Lindsay said. “But really, we can discuss this later, over the phone if you’re more comfortable with that. Right now, I’d like to relay Justin’s questions.”

“Alright,” Jennifer said.

“He’s been wondering about his little sister. How is she doing?” Lindsay asked.

“Oh, she’s doing really well, Honey,” Jennifer answered. “She misses you. She started at Saint James this year, she wanted to go there.” Justin smiled but didn’t look up.

“Justin has a present for her, for her birthday?” Lindsay said, she sounded unsure and Brian wondered how she knew what Justin had been wondering about. Then again, with art therapy, Justin was probably sketching some things over and over, and Lindsay went through a list of guesses until she got a reaction.

“Yes, it was just last week,” Jennifer said, and accepted the sketch. Lindsay had tucked the sketch between a sheet of folded rice paper, but when Jennifer pulled back the make-shift covering she revealed a sketch of Justin and who Brian assumed was Molly. Justin was smiling, his arms draped over Molly’s shoulders, and beside them was a golden retriever whose tongue was lolling out. Tears came to Jennifer’s eyes and she covered her mouth with her hand. “Oh, it looks just like how she used to look.” Lindsay glanced warily at Justin, but Justin had caught the remark. He looked up. “Oh, I’m sorry. It’s lovely, Justin.”

“How has she changed?” Lindsay voiced on behalf of Justin, knowing he would want to know.

“Her hair is so short, and she’s dyed it. It’s not that dark blond anymore. She’s grown so tall, too. But this is beautiful. I’m sure she’ll love it,” Jennifer said. Justin held his hand out, though. Reluctantly, Jennifer handed the sketch back to him.

“And how is Tigger?” Lindsay asked. Jennifer covered her mouth as tears dropped down her cheeks.

“He’s fine,” Craig answered. Lindsay opened her mouth to ask another question, but Justin slammed his plastic cup on the coffee table before he stood, leaving the room hastily and taking the sketch with him. Brian was up and after him just as fast, he closed the door behind him and caught-up with his roommate on the steps.

“Hey,” he called stopping two steps down from Justin so they stood about equal. “What’s going on?”

“I can’t,” Justin whispered, rather brokenly, and Brian noticed Justin’s balled fists, his body thrumming with tension.

“Okay,” Brian said. Justin lurched forward and hugged him just as Lindsay opened the door, stepping out into the hallway.

“How are you doing, Justin?” she asked.

“He’s about done with all the drama in there,” Brian said. He didn’t know what the hell Lindsay had been thinking and wasn’t up to hearing her reasoning. “We’re going for a walk.” Brian pushed Justin back a little and led him down the stairs towards the door.

“Thank-you, Brian,” Lindsay said, stopping him with a gentle hand on his arm.

“What the fuck ever,” Brian said and continued out the door.

They walked in silence to what had quickly become ‘their’ spot at the edge of the gardens, by the hill. When they stopped, Brian looked around and gave the all clear, but Justin stood silently and rigidly. “Go ahead,” Brian said, taking a step back, as if giving over the stage to Justin.

“If I start, I don’t know if I can stop,” Justin said.

“Go for it,” Brian said with a shrug. Justin didn’t move and didn’t make a sound. Brian knew all about this sort of anger, how it festered just beneath the surface and grew and grew because you did your damned best to keep it under wraps. Only every once and a while it would break free, and when it did it was like acid -- erasing everything in its path, eating-up the good and the bad until it left you spent and shaking with nothing. “Tell me about the sketch,” Brian asked.

“The fucking sketch,” Justin said in a tone Brian had never heard from the younger man. “For my stupid sister’s stupid birthday. But I can’t even do that because it’s wrong! It’s all wrong. Because this is my sister two whole fucking years ago! And she’s different now. But I don’t know anything about that, because my stupid fucking parents don’t come here, do they? They don’t bring her here! So I haven’t seen her! And you know what? That’s probably for the best because what kid -- shit, she’s sixteen now -- what sixteen year old kid wants to be around her crazy fucking brother who can’t -- who can’t -- who can’t speak!” He whipped the sketch down the hill. He was pacing as spoke, his voice rising.

“It’s not my fault,” Justin said, turning to Brian, somewhat pleading. “I really can’t speak. It’s not like I -- shit, it’s not like, a plea for attention. It’s because ... because of him!” Justin gestured back towards Liberty and Brian took that to mean Craig Taylor.

“What did he do?” Brian asked.

“It’s stupid,” Justin said. “It doesn’t make any sense, and it just fucking proves that I’m fucking crazy!” Justin said. “I’m a faggot!” Justin announced, like it was something Brian hadn’t already figured out. “And he ... he ...”

“Breathe,” Brian said, watching as Justin paced and gesticulated wildly and gasped in raspy, hiccupping breaths. Watching as the younger man flew apart in front of him and worried about putting him back together again.

“I am breathing!” Justin said. “This is me breathing!” he added. His cheeks were flushed and getting darker. “You can’t keep something like that quiet, you know?” Justin said, continuing his story. “At least, I couldn’t. I was so stupid! What was I thinking? ... I just wanted to explore this part of me. Like, I figured it out, and once I did, I was so ready to be that. I was ready to be queer. But no one else was ready for me to be queer.” He ran a hand through his hair and tugged at the ends. “My dad caught me making out with a guy from school at the house. He was supposed to be at work, and my mom and Molly were out on my sister’s field trip, some stupid camping expedition. And he sent the guy home and then beat the shit out of me. And the stuff he said ... god, Brian. I couldn’t believe it. Like, I literally couldn’t process it. This was my father, who raised me and loved me and then there was this man who was so fucking enraged and he was hurting me and saying things ... and there was no way they were the same person. There just wasn’t!” Justin said. There were tears wetting his face, but he didn’t seem to notice them.

“And when it was done, I couldn’t get off the floor, and it wasn’t just because I was hurt, it was like -- like, I was in shock. And he leaned over me and wrapped his hands around my throat and choked me, and I thought I was going to die, and I didn’t care. I hardly even struggled, Brian. I hardly struggled against someone who was strangling me! I’m fucking crazy!” Justin said. “And he said, to never say a word about it. Never tell anyone about my disgusting lifestyle.”

“And you stopped talking altogether?” Brian asked.

“No,” Justin said. “I talked, just not as much. I was always waiting, you know? Like, waiting for my dad to be taken-over by that ... that other man. Just waiting. And it could happen at any moment, I was sure. So I was always -- shit, I was terrified. But I spoke when spoken to, and did everything right. Only, I was still queer, and nothing I did would ever be enough anymore, to make up for that. Because my dad knew that even if I wasn’t talking about it, wasn’t doing anything that he related to being ‘queer’, it was still there. He told me to quit art club, and kept me home from school until my bruises healed.

“And I was such an idiot, because I thought, if I could just hold on till my mom got home at the end of the week, then she’d take care of me. But the bruises healed, and my dad hadn’t changed. He would bring home the son of one of his colleagues from work. We went to the same school, but he was captain of the football team, and my dad was always going on at how great this stupid kid was and why couldn’t I be more like him? And I fucking hated him because that fucking kid was as queer as I was! Was fucking around like crazy with other guys! But my father could accept him.

“And then my mom came home and she couldn’t tell. She couldn’t tell that something was wrong, and there was no way she couldn’t see it, because my dad was terrible. And then one day I came home from school, and he had all my sketchbooks, all my paintings from school, all my art and he was burning it. Just like that. And I was so angry, so angry that I was terrified because I’d never felt so strongly about something in all my life. It was overwhelming. I locked myself in my bedroom before Molly came home because I didn’t know what I’d do, I didn’t know if I could contain it, it was so big. I stayed up all night, I was so scared, but it didn’t get any less. But I was so tired because I hadn’t been able to sleep well after what had happened. And I passed out, and when I woke up my mom was pounding on the door, calling me because it was time to get ready for school, but my door was still locked. When I opened it, I must have looked like shit, because she got all worried, and asked me what was wrong and I -- I couldn’t say anything. I just --“ Justin sobbed and curled in on himself. Brian stepped forward and held Justin tightly.

They stood like that, holding very still, until Justin calmed somewhat. “She left me for three days, just waiting to see if it would pass, if I was just being melodramatic. And then she freaked out and started taking me to all sorts of doctors. And there was nothing they could say because there was no real reason why I couldn’t talk. Until one person recommended this place, and my dad was all for having me institutionalized, and they packed my shit together and packed me into the car and brought me here.”

“Why would Lindsay bring them here?” Brian wondered.

“I miss my little sister, Brian. I miss Molly. And I miss Tigger. And Lindsay knows that, and she also wants me to realize I have someplace to go. But I don’t. I don’t have any place to go, because I can’t go back to that house.”

“We’re more alike than you know,” Brian murmured, more to himself than to Justin.

“I’m so tired,” Justin said. “I’m so tired, and I want to go home.” Brian knew that ‘home’ wasn’t a reference to the place that Justin grew-up. Brian wondered if home, to Justin, was Liberty Hospital, but he didn’t think so. Liberty had it’s own demons for Justin to deal with. It was too inconsistent to really be home, with patients who became friends who ended-up leaving eventually. It was far more likely that, to Justin, ‘home’ was a place he wouldn’t have again.

They sat at the top of the hill until the sky began to darken. Justin declared he was hungry and hurried back to the Building, leaving Brian behind. He knew this game, too. Justin had opened up a great deal, and now he was vulnerable -- so he was distancing himself again, building back the walls. Brian would give him a bit of time to adjust to the fact that something that had previously only been a secret shared between himself and Craig Taylor, was now shared with Brian as well.

Brian picked-up the sketch Justin had done of his little sister and his dog. This was Justin’s family, and even if Justin didn’t quite see it yet, this was one more thing on the steadily growing list of reasons for Justin to leave Liberty.

**Chapter Fourteen: In the Garden**

Month Four: Week Two

Saturday morning at Liberty Hospital was always loud and busy. The patients were always excited to see who might visit them, wondering if their friends or family would bring a care package or have interesting news.

Brian was always oddly excited for the contact to a life he was steadily forgetting. He never spoke about Cynthia or Ted, or his business and how he missed it, except once to Lindsay. He was the only one in the Gang who was ever -- even secretly -- excited for Saturdays. Michael’s visitors worked at the hospital, Saturday was just another day for him, one where he would sit with his uncle Vic at the reception desk and talk when they weren’t helping people. Melanie would go and talk to Lindsay in the Main Building where Lindsay’s office was. Brian wondered if they had sex, but the thought was too disturbing to entertain. Justin was never excited, because he never had visitors. A fact that made that Saturday special.

She was leaning against a beat-up blue Buick station wagon, a cigarette caught between two fingers. Her hair was short and a dark, threatening red, the sort of colour that made a lot of women look like they fell out of a vampire thriller. It made her look eccentric. Her jeans were faded and frayed, and her T-shirt was plain and blue. When she saw Justin stepping out onto the patio beside Brian, she pushed away from the car and flicked her cigarette to the pavement.

Brian had been heading out to look for Ted, who he couldn’t see amongst the crowd of patients and visitors. He stayed back though, when Justin stopped on his course to the corner of the patio where he always sat and sketch. He watched the girl and Justin stare at each other, before the girl took another step forward, somewhat hesitantly, though her manner was cocky and casual.

“Mom said you had a sketch for me?” she asked. Justin frowned, still taking in the girl before him. He reached forward slowly and she held still for him, let him run his fingertips over her short dark hair. “I got it cut,” she said with a shrug. “And dyed. Mom just about had a heart-attack.” She seemed inordinately proud of this fact. Justin tugged on one of the strands, jerking her head gently to the side. “Fuck off,” she said with a smile and a laugh. “It was time for a change. Enough with being Miss Perfect, you know?” Justin’s smile started small, but grew until it rivalled the September sunlight. “I missed you, Jester,” she said, and Justin’s eyes were tearing just as quickly as hers were. They’re hug made the edges of Brian’s mouth quirk up, something easing at the core of him. “I want my fucking picture,” the girl demanded, stepping back. Justin smiled again, grabbed her wrist and began to pull her inside, but stopped when he came to Brian. He grabbed Brian’s wrist a moment later, and dragged him along as well.

Justin led them both back to the room he shared with Brian, and released them at the door as he went over to the drawer to find the sketch that Brian had retrieved the week before when Justin had thrown it down the hill. “I’m Molly Taylor, Justin’s little sister,” she introduced, though Brian had guessed her identity.

“Brian Kinney,” he offered. “Justin’s roommate.”

“Sure,” she said. “He’s your buddy, right? I looked up all about this place on the internet. Is it helping him?”

“I don’t know,” Brian said, answering dramatically. “He still seems pretty off to me.” Gus-bear -- glasses and all -- pelted Brian in the side of the head, and when he turned accusingly to Justin, the blond merely smiled innocently, but Molly was laughing. Justin handed over the sketch he’d retrieved, and Brian watched her handle it like it was something precious. He decided he liked Molly Taylor.

She stared at the sketch for long moments of time, until Justin began to fidget with the hem of his shirt, worried about her reaction, undoubtedly. “I love it,” Molly breathed. “It’s perfect,” she said, causing Justin to turn a little bit pink. Justin reached over to Brian’s hand and grabbed it, giving it an excited squeeze. He stayed only a little bit longer, before deciding to leave the two siblings to themselves for a bit to talk. He stepped out as Molly began to describe her new school -- one Brian had leanred had also been Justin’s school. Neither of them noticed his departure.

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Brian stepped back onto the patio to find Emmett frantically pacing. “Oh Brian, thank god!” he cried. “I couldn’t find Justin, and he’s always in that corner on Saturdays. But he wasn’t today, and I searched the patio and the gardens and I can’t find him. And I couldn’t find you, and I was worried and ...”

“Take a breath, Honeycutt,” Brian said. “He’s visiting with his sister.”

“Oh, of course,” Emmett said. Then his whole body jerked and he gaped. “His sister came? Sunshine has a visitor? Oh!”

“Shit, don’t queen out on me,” Brian said.

Emmett was fanning himself with his hands. “It’s just, that’s so wonderful -- that she came. He’s always missed her so much!”

“Well, she’s here now,” Brian said.

“Oh, I’ll wait until they’re done. I can wait,” Emmett said. He seemed a bit stunned and excited.

“Well, I have to find my wayward accountant,” Brian said.

“Sure, I’ll just be right here,” Emmett said.

Brian found Ted talking with Blake on the other side of the patio. He cleared his throat and Blake smiled widely. “I was just speaking with your accountant,” Blake said. “Nice to meet you,” Blake offered, shaking Ted’s hand. Brian didn’t miss the way Ted watched the other man leave.

“Jesus, Ted,” Brian said. Ted held-up his hands in surrender, but Brian rolled his eyes, dismissing the whole thing. After Ted had proudly revealed that the good doctor Blake had given Ted his number, they discussed Kinnetic, which was unsurprisingly running smoothly, but greatly anticipating Brian’s return.

“Two weeks left,” Ted said. “How does it feel?”

“Fan-fucking-tastic,” Brian drawled. “I want arrangements made for my return,” he said. “I want my Jeep brought here, I’m not taking a cab back. And make sure you have the maid do a run-through the loft so everything’s clean. And you’ll have to move yourself out of my office.”

“Wh -- I haven’t --“ Ted said, ready to deny these accusations, but Brian smirked. “I can’t wait to have you back,” Ted retorted.

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Justin emerged after lunch with Molly. Brian had finished talking with Ted and had been speaking with Emmett before the man had run-off to find Melanie to congratulate her on her release. She was leaving Liberty before lunch the following day, and Emmett was ready to corral her into celebrating with him.

As Brian walked up to them, he caught Justin’s curious look to the blue Buick. “I commandeered my boyfriend’s car,” Molly answered, catching the look as well.

“Commandeered?” Brian asked.

“Borrowed it, really,” Molly said. “I couldn’t exactly take a bus all the way out here,” Molly said, wisely refraining from mentioning that her parents likely wouldn’t have let come if she had told them her plans. “I commandeered my boyfriend, too, though." Brian could see the figure of someone sitting in the car. "I don’t have my license. He’s only a few years older,” she said, seemingly out of nowhere, until Brian noticed the suspicious look Justin was giving his sister.

“I’ll visit as often as I can,” Molly promised, hugging her brother again. “I love you, Jester.” Justin squeezed her extra-tight, which was his way of saying 'me too’, and then she turned quickly, clutching her sketch to her, and ran down the steps to the car. Justin watched for a moment, then turned his back on the sight.

“There you are, Sunshine!” Emmett called, coming out of Building Three. “Lookie what I brought!” Emmett had a picnic basket that was full of treats and chocolate, which earned him a smile, just the same as his very presence earned him a hug from Justin.

Emmett quickly fell back to their old pattern of interaction. He was full of stories about his new life -- or the old life he had picked-up again upon leaving Liberty. He spoke about his new apartment that he’d found not too far from liberty, that he had painted with bright colours. He hinted heavily that he was looking for a roommate and wouldn’t mind if it were Justin, but Justin ignored this, eager instead to hear about Emmett’s apartment, and his job at a clothes shop, and his adventures on Liberty Avenue. Brian listened to the monologue as well, surprised at hearing the name of his favourite club, Babylon, which created a burst of longing -- not for the men and the music -- but for the freedom that place had always inspired.

When he seemed to be winding down, Emmett remembered his farewell, and suddenly recalled how Justin had whispered to him, and quickly became entirely focussed on enticing the blond into more speech. Brian’s suspicions on why Justin had never spoken to the man in the first place were confirmed.

“He doesn’t talk up here,” Brian said, which wasn’t entirely true, but was certainly true at that moment with the patio full of people. Brian wondered if he should reveal their spot in the garden, or if that would be putting undue pressure on the younger man to speak. But Justin was already getting up and heading down the stairs.

“Why doesn’t he speak up there?” Emmett whispered as they followed Justin. Brian had noted that he wasn’t heading to their spot, but rather further right. It made Brian smirk, their spot was still entirely their own for one or the other to vent and breakdown in the quiet privacy that the other always afforded.

“He doesn’t like to speak where others can hear,” Brian explained.

“He said good-bye to me not three feet away from two of Liberty’s doctors,” Emmett said. Brian shrugged. He didn’t need to spell things out, and he had no intention of doing so. He’d figured it all out on his own, or mostly on his own, and Emmett could do the same if he was so inclined.

“Mel’s leaving tomorrow,” Justin said as soon as they reached the edge of the garden.

“I know, Baby,” Emmett said. Brian glared and Emmett realized he had effectively cut Justin off. Justin didn’t have a lot of news to share but he was excited about what he did have to speak about, and Emmett realized it was best to let Justin speak about it. It was nice to hear him talking, and as far as Emmett was concerned, Justin could sing the damned 'Song that Never Ends’ and he’d be happy. Emmett wondered how long Justin had been speaking to Brian, because the other man seemed completely at ease, completely used to the sound, and seemed to know exactly how to handle everything the blond was saying.

“They’re going to have a baby. Lindsay’s carrying, because Mel is still scared, you know? But she says she’ll work with a therapist about it and if they want another, she’ll carry the next one,” Justin was saying. Emmett was slightly amazed that the little chatterbox before him had been able to keep silent for two years. Two years! Actually, it would be more, wouldn’t it? Emmett thought, because Justin had been silent before his parents had brought him to Liberty, and Emmett had no idea how long the Taylors had let their son be mute before they decided to take some kind of action.

It was getting late, and most of the visitors were heading home, and Lindsay found them on their way back from the garden. She invited Justin to have dinner with her, which Emmett thought, and Brian secretly agreed, was to make certain he had handled Molly’s visit well. Justin said good-bye to Emmett with a hug and a smile, and headed towards the Main Building.

“Does he talk to you about it?” Emmett asked, watching Justin make his way through the gardens.

“About what?” Brian asked.

“He talks so much about Lindsay and Melanie, and the baby-to-be, and Liberty gossip. He doesn’t say a word about his sister, or his parents, or anything else. For a while after I left, I wondered if it was me he was talking to? If I was the first and only one. But then I thought, no it’s not me. I’m sure I’m his best friend and I will love him as my friend always, but for whatever reason, it can’t be me, can it? And since it isn’t Michael and it can’t be Melanie, and he clearly isn’t speaking to Lindsay, I’m just wondering. Is it you? Does he speak to you about it?” Brian shrugged and Emmett smiled a little and nodded. “Well, at least it’s one of us!” Emmett said.

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Sunday morning, The Gang -- what was left of it -- escorted Melanie and her bags outside to the car that Lindsay had pulled up. Brian watched Justin, wondering if he would speak to her, but the young blond simply hugged her and smiled and stepped back again.

Melanie hadn’t been at Liberty very long in comparison to Michael and Justin. She’d been a friend, but she’d also held herself somewhat aloof. The staff had wished her well, but no one had fussed the way they had over Emmett. Then again, everyone knew Emmett, it was hard to avoid or overlook him. Melanie liked being overlooked when she was at Liberty.

“Come visit,” Michael ordered. “And I’ll be out soon!” he said, which he was always saying. It wasn’t true, but the doctors liked to hear him say it because it was something positive about the future and it showed progress. Melanie smiled and hugged him and kissed his forehead before she turned to Brian, shook his hand and gave him a Look that he chose to ignore. He’d already had that discussion with her on the beach, and he had also already made his decision.

“Well,” Melanie said as she stepped away from the group and turned to the blond woman by the car. “I’m officially not a patient anymore.”

“Wonderful,” Lindsay said. “That means it’s entirely appropriate for me to do this.” Michael’s eyes bugged-out, Justin turned his head into Brian’s shoulder, and Brian winced and looked away. Lesbian kisses just weren’t his thing, especially when it looked as if they might go at it right there.

“Well, it’s been lovely, Boys,” Melanie called, then laughed when she realized that none of them were looking at her. “It’s safe,” she said. She climbed in the car, and Lindsay started it up, and they all waved as the car disappeared down the drive.

“And then there were three,” Michael murmured. Justin wrapped a sympathetic arm around his shoulder and they bumped their heads together. Brian watched as Michael and Justin headed back to the building, and he couldn’t help but think, in a few more weeks, there would only be two, and what then?

**Chapter Fifteen: Breaking Silence**

Month Four: Week Three

“That’s what Emmett said,” Brian said as he sat with Justin in their spot at the top of the hill. It was getting chillier, and Justin was wearing the tattered, too-large sweater that Brian was sure had some sort of back-story that had not yet learned.

“Yeah,” Justin said. “So what?”

Like the staff of Liberty, Brian did his best to forget about Justin’s attacks until they were impossible to ignore. He’d put-off the discussion for one reason or another, and now there simply wasn’t the luxury. He needed to know.

“So what was going on?” Brian asked.

“I don’t like talking about this,” Justin said stubbornly.

“Try,” Brian said. “You don’t have to get specific,” Brian compromised. Justin sat for a moment quietly, focussing at a point down the hill and partway through the surrounding woods.

“Emmett was right. They tried a lot of stuff the first few times it happened. My reactions were pretty intense,” Justin said. He sounded entirely casual. “They even tried some prescriptions on me, but I was allergic and had bad reactions to some, and the others made me crazier than when I wasn’t taking them, so Blake quickly called a halt to that. They settled for sedating me and keeping me in my room. So basically I was a sitting duck, because he was new, then, and patrolling the main halls. He didn’t need to worry about me fighting him off or saying anything, because I was out of it, because I was always under mild sedation.”

“So what changed?” Something had to have changed in order for Justin to fight the sedative and turn violent.

“Nothing changed,” Justin said. “I’m not some weak little faggot, you know. Staying in my room on that week when he was there, that wasn’t working. It wasn’t safe. So I had to find a way to be away.”

“So you ... faked the attack?” Brian asked.

“Panic does a lot of crazy things to you,” Justin said. “It was about survival. So I fought through the haze, and when I was sitting in the rec room near the beginning of the week, I started pitching a fit. I tried to be as loud as I could, and the staff came running, and I just went crazy on them, and I hit one -- which I felt bad for later, but at the time it was like, like it was him or me, and dammit if it was going to be me again!” Justin shrugged. “So I went to solitary, and since I was away from where Chris did his rounds, I was safe. Solitary rooms have locks which only the patient can release, or a staff member with the key.”

“The patient can unlock their room?” Brian asked.

“Solitary at Liberty isn’t like solitary in a prison, Brian. The nurses can override the patient lock if they want, so the patient has to stay in the room. But for the most part, it’s just so the person can have some quiet space to themselves without any pressure. When the patient wants to be released, and their therapist agrees with it of course, then they return to their room.”

“This place is really weird,” Brian muttered, and Justin laughed.

“Yeah, well. It all worked beautifully until he got promoted. He’d been working there long enough that they switched him to solitary patrols, and then I wasn’t safe there. So I tried to stay out of solitary, which should have been easy, because I’d been faking attacks to get in there in the first place. It wasn’t real. Only it became real, because the panic was real, and he was so much like -- like --”

“Like your dad?” Brian asked. Justin nodded.

“It didn’t take much for him, anymore. Emmett said that his therapist said if you keep things inside too long, they don’t go away, they just build-up. And I can’t help it. The panic is real, and even though I know -- I know that if I can just stay calm, I’ll be safe. If I can just -- just not queen out just once -- I can actually have some peace. It doesn’t work. One entire week, and it seems so quick, unless you’re trying every minute of every day to suppress full-blown panic, because he never lets me be.”

“This week will be different,” Brian said. “I’m here, and I’m going to help you.”

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Justin held-out until Thursday, and Brian watched as each day it became harder to distract the blond. In the end, the attack happened at night. Four nights of nightmares left Justin awake, sitting up in bed at three o’clock in the morning, and he was already pretty jumpy because it was Thursday. Brian, who had been up each night --woken by Justin’s furious dreaming --, had finally passed out from exhaustion. In the end, the panic was brought on not by Christopher’s meddling, but by the sound of the night-nurse’s shoes on the tile outside of his room, and the quiet jingle of keys.

Justin knew all he had to do was get to Brian. Once Brian was awake, he’d know what to do, he’d make sure Justin stayed quiet. He’d managed it successfully several times already in the week. He just needed to make it out of bed and across the room, and wake the other man up. Then he’d be safe.

Justin stumbled from bed like a colt on new legs, twisted his feet in the blankets and knocked the lamp from the nightstand onto the floor. He didn’t hear it crash. He staggered to Brian’s bed and patted furiously at Brian’s arm, smacking him, really, but Justin wasn’t thinking about what he was doing, he could barely breath, he was crying involuntary tears.

Brian woke at about the same time the night-nurse made it into the room to see what was happening. Brian had wrapped Justin in his arms, had tried to explain that if the man just gave them a minute, Justin would be fine.

This time it didn’t take any orderlies. The nurse pulled out the sedative, and Justin turned into Brian’s body, trying to make himself very small. A moment later, Justin’s body was dead weight in Brian’s embrace.

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“Like clockwork,” Christopher commented as Bernard carried the limp body of Justin Taylor to the bright marigold room.

“Shut up, and open the door,” Bernard ordered. He didn’t like having to sedate Justin. He hadn’t liked Dr. Peterson’s idea, but he’d seen the reason in it, and had kept his mouth shut.

Bernard placed Justin carefully onto the bed and tucked him under the covers, checking over his vitals to make certain everything was fine before he stepped back and did the hardest thing he had ever had to do. “He’s all yours.”

Christopher smiled a little. “As usual,” he said. Bernard stepped out of the room, Christopher right behind him. As he retreated down the hall, Bernard heard the click of the lock and wondered how long Christopher would wait before he opened it up again.

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Friday morning, Lindsay sat through a session with Brian who was sullen, angry, and just about fed-up with the way Liberty was handling the situation. She endured it, though, because that morning Paul and Arlene, two of the night-nurses who had agreed to help, had both relayed that Christopher had done nothing untoward; but then again, Justin had been brought in quite early in the morning.

Following her appointment with Brian, Lindsay brought lunch to the marigold room, but Justin lay there with his back to the door, and wouldn’t look at her, and pushed the food away as if it made him sick to smell it. She recorded this, did her best to convince herself that this was for the best, and spent the rest of the session reading out loud from ‘Darlington’s Fall’ which was the book Justin had been reading before he’d been taking to solitary that week.

She tried again to coax him to eat, spared a moment to wonder if she should allow Michael or Brian in, perhaps they might be more successful, and in the end left Justin to sleep because he’d fallen asleep before she even finished one of the short chapters in the book, and by the smudges beneath his eyes, he seemed to need the rest.

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The room was quiet without Justin in it. Brian distracted himself with a book, but it wasn’t the same without the constant scratching of Justin’s pencil on paper. Daphne came around for room-checks and tried to muster a smile, but had left not long after placing the tick-mark on her clipboard. Brian wondered how he would make it out of his room that night, because there seemed to be more nurses on the floor.

He waited as the lights turned out. Tried to keep patient as the time ticked by, until he was sure there would be a chance to slip down the hall.

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Justin had slept the day away, and now he was awake. His mind raced with memories until he wasn’t sure if he was imagining other times before, or if the lock was turning in the door. He sat up, scooted to the head of the bed and tried to breath, tried to remain calm. Moments passed and the door hadn’t opened.

“It’s all in your head,” he whispered to himself, and almost laughed. Only he knew it hadn’t been. A half year taught him this wasn’t just his imagination, even if this time the lock hadn’t moved, it would. It was only a matter of time.

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Brian ducked into a patient’s room as a nurse came around the corner. The patrol schedule was definitely different that night. He didn’t stop to think about it. He was wasting time sitting in that room and Justin probably needed him and he couldn’t move because he’d be caught.

He peered out through the small window in the door and watched the nurse pass. Waited a moment more, looking at the sleeping patients, happy he hadn’t woken them, happy they didn’t need help and call nurses to them. Then it was safe to move and he was out the door again, moving down the shadowed halls.

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Arlene watched as Christopher came out of the blue room, locked it behind him and made an adjustment to the chart. He was moving quickly through the checks and she wondered if he was marking the times down correctly, or if he was messing with the information. Bernard had said that Christopher’s time sheet had seemed perfectly correct, but Christopher likely wouldn’t let something like that give him away after all this time.

Christopher paused before going into the peach room, he was fiddling with his keys. Arlene wondered what he was doing, she turned to ask Paul but the other nurse was looking at something down the hall. Without a word, he stalked down the hall away from the solitary rooms.

“Paul?” she whispered, then glanced back at where Christopher was. He was checking his clipboard. He still had two more rooms before he hit marigold. She turned and followed Paul. “What the hell are you doing?” she whispered.

“What are you doing out of bed?” Paul asked, his gaze focussed on a shadowy corner.

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Justin thought about what Brian had promised him. This week would be different. But it was already looking so much the same. What if Brian didn’t make it? What if no one listened to him, or he was found out of bed by a nurse? What happened then?

A silly question, really, Justin knew what would happen. It was the same thing that always happened. But he’d been filled with a strange kind of hope ever since hearing Brian’s promise. What if this week really could be different? Hadn’t things changed already? So much had happened in the passed few months. Good things and bad, but it was change just the same. Change was possible, even amidst such predictable days.

He smiled to himself thinking of Brian, knowing the man was coming. Knowing this week it would all change. Feeling confident, Justin sat calmly in his bed, until he noticed the lock turning.

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Christopher finished writing-in the other checks he had to do. He stepped away from the door and headed for the marigold room, his key already in his hand. “Like clockwork,” he said to himself as he opened the door.

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Brian stood up from where he had been crouched in the shadow. “What the hell?” Arlene asked.

“What are you doing out of bed?” Paul repeated.

“I’m trying to get to the marigold room,” Brian said.

“Well, you can’t.” Paul explained. “Now go back to bed or I’ll have to escort you back.”

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Christopher always seemed so much bigger to Justin, and this time wasn’t any different as the man shut the door behind him and turned the lock. “Hello, Sweetheart,” the man purred.

Justin looked around the shadows, but there was nothing there, he saw no movement behind Chris, heard no sound. Brian wasn’t there. This week wasn’t any different at all. He sat still trying to come to grips with the reality of this -- no one would come -- it was him and Christopher just like it always would be. This would happen again and again, forever and ever until Christopher had his fill, until he left Liberty, until Justin died. No one would come nothing would change.

Christopher’s hands were on him, and Justin squeezed his eyes shut. He didn’t like Christopher’s touch, he was scared and he was alone and no one was coming. Then his shirt was gone and Christopher was pushing him backward with one hand, the other going to the knot at Justin’s pants. He’d triple-knotted his pants, he wanted to keep them on, but it didn’t seem to help. Christopher had them off not long after, and Justin was alone and naked and exposed. No one was coming nothing was different.

“Shh,” Christopher cooed, and Justin realized he could barely catch a breath. “Relax.”

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Brian pushed Paul backwards and Arlene, who had been about to turn away and leave Paul to handle this and return to her task, turned back. “I’m not leaving,” Brian said.

“Brian, go back to your room. We’ll take care of this,” Arlene said.

“No.”

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Justin was tense; his eyes squeezed tight shut, his hands gripping the side of the bed. He wasn’t there. He was anywhere but there. He was at the edge of the garden, he was rolling down the hill, he was swimming in the sea he was anywhere but there.

Christopher’s tongue was on his body; the other man pried Justin’s fingers free from the bed and tugged his arm over toward Christopher’s cock. Justin didn’t want to touch him, he pulled his arm away but Christopher’s grip was strong. It was just like always, and Justin was the victim again and he could barely fight and couldn’t make a sound -- what good would it do? It would only make Christopher angry and he’d strike at him with his fists and feet, and Justin would be broken again and again. Just like always. A weak little faggot just like his father had told him he was, just like Christopher knew he was -- why else would Christopher pick him? Weak and silent. He was practically asking for it. He deserved it.

“You like this,” Christopher said. But Justin didn’t. He hated it. He hated being weak, he hated being quiet, but most of all he hated the fear that, if he spoke, the rage and anger would come out of him -- just burst out -- and it would be too much for him to control and it would take over and then Justin would really be alone. “Come on,” Christopher said, wrapped Justin’s hand around his dick and thrust forward.

Clench your hand, Justin thought. Clench your hand, bite him, scratch him, claw at him. The thoughts were circling through his head but he couldn’t move. He was working so hard to keep his rage back what would happen if he unleashed it? It was too big. He would hurt someone. He wouldn’t be able to stop it.

Christopher gripped Justin’s thighs and pushed at them. “Come on,” Christopher said. Justin couldn’t move his legs. “Open them,” Christopher said. But Justin couldn’t move them. Who could he hurt? It was just him and Christopher alone in this room. Him or me, Justin thought. He was sick and tired of it being him. “Fucking open your legs, Taylor,” Christopher hissed.

“No,” Justin said.

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“Brian,” Paul gripped Brian’s arm but Brian pulled it away.

“I’m not leaving. Get out of my way,” Brian said.

“Brian, I’m going to have no choice but to sedate you if you don’t listen to me,” Paul said.

“I’m not leaving!” Brian yelled, his voice echoing in the hall.

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“What?” Christopher asked, his face suddenly very close to Justin’s.

“No,” Justin said. “I won’t.” Christopher’s smile was as terrifying as the rest of him. Justin didn’t know what he had gotten himself into but either way it had to stop.

Christopher’s hands were around his throat in a flash and Justin was swamped in memory. Suddenly it wasn’t Christopher, but the man -- the man who had choked him before --- his father. His own father. And just like then, he was alone and he couldn’t speak -- didn’t have the air to speak. He could barely fight. Thoughts flickered through his head -- this could be it -- this could be a way out. This could put an end to it. But Justin wasn’t through, was he? He didn’t want to be through. Except what was he holding on for? It would all go away, everything would be peaceful.

Justin’s eyes were watering, he flapped a hand at Christopher but the man barely even flinched. It was useless, he was overpowered; once again, he’d been subdued -- except he didn’t feel subdued. His anger, his fear, his panic, his pain was roiling in the pit of his stomach. He was strung tightly like a bow.

“I’m not leaving!” and the words rang through his head. Everything clicked into place. He wasn’t done. He wasn’t subdued. He would never be subdued.

Justin bucked hard, throwing Christopher back. The man still kneeled over him, but had to move his hands away from Justin’s throat to grab hold of the bed in order to prevent himself from falling off. Breath flooded into Justin’s lungs and suddenly the shout he had heard, had thought he had imagined, made sense in his mind. Not alone. Not at all. This week was different.

“Get off me!” Justin screamed with all he was worth. He kicked and screamed until Christopher toppled off the bed. “Don’t touch me!”

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Brian pushed passed the nurses at the first shout, but they weren’t far behind him. By the time the second shout rang through the halls, Brian knew they’d finally processed what they had been hearing and were no longer chasing him but following. Confident they had the same goal in mind, Brian turned the handle to the marigold room, only to find it locked. He pounded uselessly at it for a moment before Arlene pushed him to the side and opened the door with her key.

Justin was a wild thing; Brian had never seen him like that before. Christopher could barely keep the younger man off him, and Justin was screaming and beating his fists against his attacker’s body. He was naked, there were claw marks on his chest and bruising at his throat, and Justin didn’t seem to hear when Paul and Arlene told him that it was all right, to relax, that he was safe.

“Justin,” Brian said. But Justin clawed at Christopher’s cheek, leaving a path of nail marks, cutting into the skin. Justin was sobbing and screaming, telling Christopher to stop, but Christopher was barely doing anything, trying futilely to hold the furious blond away.

“We’ll have to sedate him,” Paul said.

“Fuck that,” Brian said, he stepped forward before the nurses could, pulled the sheet from the small bed and threw it over Justin’s shoulders, wrapping his arms around Justin. Justin still struggled, even as Brian pulled him off of Christopher and into his lap on the floor. He stopped screaming, tucked his head under Brian’s chin, and struck out one more time with his foot, kicking a groaning Christopher in the side of the head. “I’m here,” Brian whispered so only Justin could hear. “I’m here, and you’re safe now. You’re safe now.”

Brian didn’t see it happen, he was focussing only on calming Justin and keeping him safe. Around them, Arlene called for help and doctors came to take Christopher away and tend to his wounds. Lindsay came in, but left Brian and Justin to themselves when she saw them, questioning Paul and Arlene instead. Police were called. Patients who had been fast asleep in solitary grew curious and left their rooms and the nurses had to calm them down and override their locking system because there was enough chaos without them. And Brian just held Justin close, his head tucked into the side of Justin’s neck and tried to convince himself that it was really over.

**Chapter Sixteen: Leaving Liberty**

Month Four: Week Four

Monday afternoon arrived and Brian was already exhausted. After the attack on Friday, Christopher Hobbes had been patched up by Liberty’s doctors and then given-over into police custody. With Lindsay so focussed on the other outcome of the attack -- Justin speaking -- Brian had been seeing far more of the woman than he had ever wanted. Justin refused to cooperate unless Brian was with him, so now Brian had two sessions, one privately in the morning, and the other accompanying Justin.

”Hey, Justin?” Michael asked, coming up to where the blond was sitting at the end of the couch in the rec room. “How are you feeling?”

Michael was overwhelmed with the fact that Justin was speaking, but was having a bit of difficulty understanding exactly what was going on with Hobbes. He couldn’t comprehend why Justin didn’t speak all the time. “Justin?” Michael asked, reaching a hand out to shake Justin’s shoulder. Justin smacked Michael’s hand before it made contact, and before the man could start getting worked-up, Brian flashed him a warning look and shook his head. Michael, at least, knew to trust Brian, and backed-off. Justin turned back to the wall he’d been staring at and sat silently.

“What’s going on in there?” Debbie asked when Brian left the rec room to go to the bathroom and grab their meal trays. “Michael said Sunshine smacked him.”

“Deb,” Brian said.

“I know Sunshine would never hurt my Mikey, I’m just asking how he’s holding up,” Debbie said.

“He’s still inhaling and exhaling,” Brian said. Justin had times when he simply shut down. It had happened several times in the past few days, and lasted for varying amounts of time. It was a relief, in Brian’s opinion, that Justin was at least sitting openly outside their room today. He’d been more guarded since he’d left solitary. Lindsay had wanted to leave him in solitary for a while; to give him time to adjust, but Justin had refused.

“Lunch,” Brian said as he placed the meal-tray on the coffee table. “Are you going to eat?” Justin sighed a long-suffering sigh, and picked up the tray. Brian watched the blond push the food around his plate, every once and a while lifting a bite to his mouth. He didn’t say anything.

“Justin,” Brian said as Justin sat mutely across from him. “You told me things about your parents. I think it might make more sense to Lindsay if she knew about it.” Justin looked at him back at him, hesitancy clear in his expression. “I’ll tell her for you, and I’ll tell her to let you talk about it in your own time. But in the meantime she’ll know, and it can help her understand what’s going on.” It had made a lot of sense to Brian when Justin had told him, and he wasn’t a therapist. Justin seemed to think about it, and then nodded.

“I’m not talking to her about it,” Justin said. “And if she brings it up I’ll leave.”

“Fair enough,” Brian said.

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Justin’s sessions were like dancing around an elephant. He’d vetoed talking about the attacks and talking about his parents. Lindsay concentrated on going over Justin’s options now that Christopher had been caught.

“I want to hurt him,” Justin said darkly.

“I think you’ve accomplished that, Sunshine,” Brian joked. Christopher had left Liberty with more than one cast, and too many cuts and bruises to count. Justin elbowed Brian in the side, but he was smiling somewhat sheepishly and that was better than the fury Brian had seen on his face a moment before.

“Okay,” Lindsay said. “ Does that mean you want to press charges?”

Justin was quiet for a moment. He’d already listened to Brian talking about this, and Daphne and Debbie. Everyone seemed to have their own opinion. “Will I have to testify?”

“There are ways around that, you’re still a patient at this hospital,” Lindsay said.

“Can Melanie take the case?” Justin asked.

Lindsay smiled warmly. “Sure,” she said.

“Okay,” Justin said. “That’s fine, then.”

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Melanie was there bright and early on Wednesday morning, and she and Justin reached a compromise. Justin refused to discuss the attacks but he wrote everything out. Lindsay informed Melanie and Brian privately that this was understandable, especially given the information Brian had relayed to her. Justin was scared of what he was capable of, more so now that he had attacked Christopher.

“He has so much rage inside him, he doesn’t have a way to let it out. He’s scared that if he starts talking, he’ll let it out and it will take him over, like it did that night with Christopher, and he won’t be able to control it.”

“But he’s sticking to Brian like a shadow,” Melanie said. “Like he’s scared of something.”

“He is scared -- but of himself, mostly. At this moment, he trusts Brian will be able to stop him if something happens. Brian isn’t so much protecting Justin as he is protecting everyone else from Justin,” Lindsay said.

“Shit,” Brian said.

“Don’t worry. I’m changing our afternoon appointments to private sessions with Justin. I’ll speak with him about this. You’re leaving at the end of the week, this won’t change that,” Lindsay said.

“If this is going to fuck him up ...” Brian said.

“I’ll speak with him,” Lindsay assured them.

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As dramatic as the actual final attack had been, the rest was anticlimactic. Justin contributed his written testimony, and then was left to himself. The witnesses were nursing staff and Melanie arranged to have them testify in court, but Brian was told he wouldn’t have to. He submitted his own written testimony and that was it, unless she notified him otherwise. Melanie was more than confident that everything would be settled soon.

In the meantime Justin began to settle down. He disappeared to the library again, or out to the garden to walk around. He spoke only when Lindsay or Brian were with him, but he was speaking more often and to more people. Mealtimes consisted of Justin sitting by Brian and talking up a storm with Daphne or Debbie -- whichever nurse was on duty. It was easy for Justin to trust the two nurses who had been a part of his life since he first arrived at Liberty. Soon Justin was spending as much time in the library as he was in the nurse’s station, sometimes just listening to the nurses talk and other times sharing jokes or conversations.

When Thursday came, Justin decided not to accompany everyone on the trip -- this time to an amusement park. Brian stayed back as well, even if Justin hadn’t asked him to. He had noticed the relief in the blue eyes when he had told the staff and knew he’d made the right choice. They spent the day sitting at the top of the hill in their place, not talking. When the sun began to set, Justin had sighed and then crumpled over sideways. Brian wondered if this were some new attack, until Justin’s crumpled body proceeded to tumble down the hill. It was a small thing, really, but it was a step in the right direction, at least. Justin wasn’t subdued; he was just taking a while to get his bearings.

Brian watched Justin’s progress silently. He wondered about his promise. The week before had been different, but he had almost been too late. In fact, he was certain he would have been entirely too late if Justin hadn’t decided to fight his attacker off. He felt guilty and responsible for the state in which his blond roommate was.

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“I’m too tired to do this,” Justin said to Lindsay. She frowned and looked over at him. “It’s like, I keep fighting and fighting and things just don’t change. I need a break.”

“Justin, I know Liberty has offered you some frightening fights in the past, but I want you to know that things will definitely be different. You’re going to have that break.”

“Do you think I can do this?” Justin asked, he sounded so very young. “Do you think I can get better?”

“All it takes is enough strength in your heart,” Lindsay said. “I think you have more than it takes. It won’t be easy, and it won’t happen quickly. But it will happen, just be patient with yourself. However you feel, just be patient.” Justin rested his head in his hands and let out a breath.

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Friday night Justin crept across the room and climbed into Brian’s bed. He didn’t say anything, so Brian stayed quiet, simply shifted a little so Justin could settle against his side and rest his head in that spot on Brian’s chest. The arm that lay across Brian’s stomach was holding Gus-bear as well, and Brian’s left hand was in Justin’s hair, the other hand holding Justin close.

For the longest while they just lay there very still, breathing in and out. Finally, relaxed and exhausted, Justin fell into sleep, and Brian kissed his head and sighed. Even if he hadn’t already decided, there was no way he could have ignored it, ignored the warmth of Justin’s body, and how that warmth soothed him. No matter how he labelled what he had been doing since he’d come to Liberty, it didn’t change the fact that he had chosen Justin in the beginning, and had been defending him ever since.

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Saturday before dinner Justin stopped by Brian’s bed where he had been reading. “I just want to be normal for a second,” Justin said, and Brian smiled a little.

He closed his book and stood up. “Okay.” They walked to the edge of the garden, to their place, and Brian looked at the hill remembering when Justin had rolled down and then goaded Brian into following him.

Justin paced for a moment, before he turned to Brian. “You’re leaving tomorrow,” he said, then frowned as if that hadn’t been what he’d planned to say. He breathed out a puff of air and then shrugged. “I don’t want you to say anything,” he said. “I just wanted to tell you something because I think you should know, but don’t say anything.”

“Okay,” Brian said. Justin narrowed his eyes at him and Brian laughed and held-up his hands.

“It’s completely crazy, and entirely irrational, and it doesn’t make any sense,” Justin said, the words suddenly tumbling out, as if he had only just been managing to contain them. “But I thought you should know that I can’t help it, I just like you, maybe even love you and you don’t need to say anything or do anything, it’s just sort of, like, for your information or whatever, -- you know -- that somebody really does ... love you.” Justin stopped pacing, shrugged a little helplessly. He scratched at the hair behind his ear and looked back to Building Three. “So, -- now you know.”

Brian watched Justin walk briskly back to their building trying to process the rambling words, feeling more than a little overwhelmed.

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There was a fair-sized group that walked with him out to the Jeep that had been brought up to Liberty on Saturday morning. Michael, Lindsay, Justin, Blake, Debbie, Vic and Daphne followed him out to the driveway and even if he wasn’t fond of soppy good-byes, he was hugged by every one of them. Except Justin, who despite stealing glances and offering shy smiles hadn’t said much of anything.

When Brian came to Justin, the blond held-out Gus-bear. “A souvenir!” he offered, with a smile.

“Justin,” Brian said.

“You have to take him,” Justin insisted. “He might help.” Brian wasn’t going to get into a mushy argument: ‘but what about you?’ ‘Don’t worry about me.’ There was just too much potential and Brian didn’t want to go there. Especially because he knew that Justin would milk it for all it was worth and tease him about it mercilessly.

“Thanks,” he said instead. “Hey, when do I officially become free?” he asked Lindsay.

“Liberty tradition is you’re officially free once all the papers are signed and you step-off the sidewalk onto the driveway,” Blake answered instead.

Brian looked back at Justin and stepped backward onto the paved drive. He watched as Justin tried to smile, and then as pale brows knitted when Brian grabbed a hold of Justin’s shirt and tugged him to the edge of the sidewalk. Then they were just kissing, and nothing else mattered.

Brian thought Justin tasted sweeter than he had imagined he might. Traces of the chocolate Justin had munched on that morning, and something else, something electric. Justin welcomed Brian’s tongue into his mouth, sighed a little and pressed his body closer to the other man’s. When they pulled apart to breathe, Justin was gripping Brian’s shirt and Brian’s fingers were wrapped in blond hair.

“Good-bye,” Justin said, his elated expression suddenly sobering.

Brian smiled a little; it quickly turned into a mischievous smirk. “Later,” he corrected.

Justin’s smile started small, and then grew until Brian could fully understand why Justin’s nickname was ‘Sunshine’. “Later,” Justin agreed.

Brian pulled the door closed to his Jeep and for a moment just paused before turning the ignition, looking in the rear-view mirror where he could see Daphne and Vic and Debbie, Michael, and Justin and the others. Justin was right, it was sometimes all too easy to forget, but the world was full of beautiful things. In the rear-view, he saw Justin grin a little and raise his eyebrows, knowing that Brian was watching. Brian smiled back, shook his head and turned the ignition. A thousand beautiful things.



**The End**

**Slowly, But Exceeding Fine**

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Sequel to 'A Thousand Beautiful Things'

Brian Kinney lives in the highest loft on Tremont Street. He has imported Italian fixtures, designer clothes and neon blue lights above his bed. He has also gone to bed every night for the past three weeks holding a teddy bear with movie-star glasses and a purple T-shirt, and can't help thinking the bear is just a placeholder.

**Chapter One: Honestly Okay**

Brian Kinney lived in the topmost loft on Tremont Street. He had hardwood floors and Italian imported fixtures and neon blue lights above his bed. It was his fuck-pad, his sanctuary, and lately it had been feeling a bit like his cage.

Brian wore designer clothes and spent an hour on his hair every day. He had a cleaning lady and ran his own advertising agency that was making quite a name for itself. He took his clients out for expensive dinners after he smooth-talked them into contracts and ad-campaigns, and at night for three weeks and counting, he climbed into bed missing something he wouldn’t permit himself to name, and held a brown teddy bear with a purple shirt that proudly declared it was ‘Queen of Fucking Everything’. Three weeks and counting since he had been at Liberty Hospital for a four month, court-ordered stint to deal with his anger issues.

Now it was Saturday morning, the end of that third week and Brian stepped down the stairs that held his bedroom slightly above the rest of the loft, fingers busy with the last button on his black shirt, and dropped his shoes onto the ground. He considered a time when he had worn yellow rain boots out in public because a loud woman with red hair had bent over him and wagged a red-painted fingernail threateningly in his face.

“Brian,” Ben said as he slid open the loft door.

“What the fuck are you doing here, Ben?” Brian asked, straightening again having laced his shoes.

“Hello to you, too. I brought some things for your fridge.” Brian watched as the other man dropped grocery bags on his counter and began to stuff his wares into Brian’s cupboard and fridge. “A man cannot live on guava juice alone.”

“It’s been working for me so far,” Brian said as he picked-up a large black portfolio and, after glancing around the loft, set the strap on his shoulder.

“Working?”

“It’s Saturday, Ben,” Brian said, pinching the bridge of his nose as Ben munched on a yogurt he had liberated from the now-stocked fridge.

“Of that I am aware.”

“Then what are you doing here?”

“My plan, after I put some food in your fridge, was to drag you to the Liberty Diner,” Ben explained and was ready to continue before Brian cut him off.

“It’s Saturday,” Brian said. “I already have plans.”

“Okay,” Ben said easily. Brian adjusted the bag on his shoulder and then disappeared into his bedroom. A moment later, he came out stuffing something into the bag as he made his way to the door. “What do you do?” Ben asked.

“Does it make a difference?”

“I’m just curious.”

“I go to the Baths and fuck my brains out.”

“You need your ad campaigns to do that?” Ben asked. When Brian narrowed his eyes at him Ben shrugged. “I’m just saying, since you’ve gotten back you’ve been working too hard and playing too little. We should go to Babylon tonight, when you get back.”

“Sure,” Brian said. “Now get out of my loft.” Ben obeyed and Brian followed him after setting the alarm.

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Traffic was light and Brian pulled into the driveway earlier than he had expected. There weren’t many cars yet but that would change. He wondered if he were too early, but decided that even if he were, that wouldn’t stop him. Pulling the portfolio out of the back seat of his Jeep, Brian smoothed the wrinkles from his shirt and headed towards the wooden stairs.

“Brian!” a warm and familiar voice greeted. Brian paused on the stairs and felt himself suddenly relax. Justin was leaning over the railing of the patio, his arms draped over the edge and smiling his broadest smile.

“Hey, Sunshine,” Brian greeted, his voice likely too soft to travel the distance, Justin heard it anyway. He climbed the rest of the stairs and they stood and looked at each other, suddenly unsure what they should be doing. “Daphne let you sneak out?” Brian asked.

“Debbie, actually,” Justin said. “I finished breakfast, though. She said it was okay to sit out for a bit -- that Vic would watch.” They both turned towards the glass doors and windows that showed Vic Grassi, one of the nurses of Liberty, sitting behind his desk. He waved at them and smiled. “You know the only problem with all this new attention I get on Saturdays is I don’t get as much sketching done,” Justin said.

Brian smirked as they headed to the corner of the patio that he had seen Justin sit in on visiting days. “Well, I hope you get some sketching done because otherwise I wasted a lot of money on this.” Brian dropped the portfolio off his shoulder and set it on the ground.

“Holy shit, that’s for me?” Justin exclaimed. He bent forward immediately to rifle through the bag. There were several different sized sketch pads, colour pencils, lead pencils, pencils that turned to watercolour when you brushed water over them, a few small brushes, charcoals, and one teddy bear wearing a t-shirt and purple sparkly movie-star glasses. Justin pulled out the bear and looked at Brian expectantly.

“Your turn,” Brian said with a shrug.

“I gave him to you.”

“Well, I’m giving him back.”

“You can’t do that. You can’t return a gift to someone. That’s just rude.”

“My mother always said I had no manners,” Brian said. Justin glared. “Look, take the damned bear. It’s nothing we haven’t done before.” At this, Justin smiled, finally understanding what Brian intended.

“You mean it?” Justin asked.

Brian rolled his eyes. “Shut up and take the bear.” And because he knew Justin so well, he knew what was coming.

“You so care about me,” Justin sang.

“Don’t be a shit.”

Justin bumped his shoulder against Brian’s. “Thank-you,” he said, very politely, then he leaned over and kissed Brian.

Brian wrapped his hand around the back of Justin’s head and kissed back. He was always slightly wary of this sort of contact with Justin, memories and imaginings of what Justin had gone through every month making him cautious. Justin had never pulled back once he initiated a kiss or a touch, but Brian knew sometimes Justin didn’t like touch and he was always wary of missing a cue and pushing Justin further than the blond was comfortable with. “Mm,” Justin said when he sat back; he licked his lips then grinned. “We had movie night!” he said. “It was Casablanca and totally not the same without everyone.”

“Do you have a new roommate?”

“No,” Justin said, answering so casually that Brian knew something was going on. He didn’t push.

“An entire room to yourself. My my, all that sucking-up to the nursing staff has paid off,” Brian said.

“I can’t help it if I’m young and attractive.”

“Don’t kid yourself, Sunshine. It’s that you look like you’re twelve.”

“Hey, that’s not fair. I don’t make age-cracks about you!” Justin said. Brian stared back and Justin smirked. “Okay, so I do. But you’re still just being a prick.”

Since he’d left Liberty, Brian had spent his Saturdays visiting it – visiting Justin. Their dynamic had changed, and where once Brian had been the one to listen to Justin rant, the one to whom Justin confided his fears, the separation after Brian had left the hospital meant now Justin spoke with him much the same as he spoke with their friend Emmett. It was light, it was casual – though sometimes they kissed or hugged – for the most part it was nothing like what they had been at the hospital.

“He talks with me,” Lindsay said as she walked with him in the garden once Justin had said good-bye and gone in for dinner. “He’s been doing really well.”

“What’s been going on?” Brian asked.

“That’s confidential.”

“Since when? What happened to the buddy-system?”

“Justin isn’t a part of the buddy-system anymore,” Lindsay said. Brian frowned and Lindsay sighed. “I want to thank-you for returning the bear. His nightmares have been pretty intense. I think it will help.” Brian shook his head. “What is it?”

“The only way I could get him to take it was to promise to exchange it. Back-and-forth, like before.”

“That’s even better. It renews the contact to you, not to mention, it ensures that you’ll come back,” Lindsay said with a smile.

“He knows I visit every Saturday. And if I ever decided not to, do you think a teddy bear would change that?”

“It’s little things, Brian. It just eases his mind.”

“You’re talking about him as if he’s crazy.”

“Not at all,” Lindsay said. “But he’s dealing with some very difficult things right now. Anything we can do to put him at ease and keep his environment stable will help.”

“He needs a friend in there,” Brian said.

“He has Michael, and several good friends on the nursing staff,” Lindsay reminded.

“He needs a buddy.” Something Brian never thought he would ever say, though that realization didn’t make the fact any less true.

“Brian,” Lindsay said with a smile. “I think you were an exception. The only one Justin would have reached out to like he did.” They walked in silence for a bit. “How have you been doing?”

“Fine,” Brian said. Then admitted somewhat grudgingly, “It’s hard to transition back.”

“Is that what you want to do? Transition back to how things were?”

“I’m not your patient anymore.”

Lindsay patted his arm and smiled. “I think you’re doing just fine, Brian.”

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Justin sketched Brian standing at the top of their hill, in their place. He drew himself standing beside the man, just like they had spent so many days. They were happy, they were talking -- they were friends. These were memories now. These days Justin worried about Brian getting bored, or moving on, and leaving him alone.

It was true that his sister visited once and a while, and Emmett came just about every-other week. But Brian wasn’t like family, and he wasn’t just a friend. It confused Justin, and frightened him a little, but mostly he knew with absolute certainty that he couldn’t let Brian turn away from him, couldn’t let him leave him. So Justin kept things light, kept it easy. He initiated kisses and touches and smiled and pretended that things were really okay. Brian was back in his old life, now, he had his own worries and his own concerns and didn’t have room for Justin’s any longer.

Tucking his sketch supplies away, Justin grabbed Gus-bear and removed the movie-star glasses, setting them on the night table before flicking off the light and settling into bed. It wasn’t as if he was lying to Brian. He loved kissing and touching Brian – and if he hid the times when touch scared him, tried to distract the other man while shivers went through his body at bad memories, well, that wasn’t lying. And keeping his fears and worries out of those few hours they had together wasn’t lying either. Brian didn’t tell him about what he was worried about, he spoke about work sometimes, and clients but that wasn’t the same.

Justin didn’t want to think about where it all was going. Inevitably, Brian would move on because it all came down to one thing: Justin wasn’t going anywhere, and Brian was.

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“Cynthia,” Brian barked to cut-off her ramblings. “Just get it done, please.” He might have said it with clenched teeth and with an obvious edge to his tone, but Cynthia was stunned that he wasn’t yelling, wasn’t throwing things, and had even said ‘please’!

“Uhm, sure boss.” She smiled. She was loving the changes in her boss and in her work place since Brian had returned. He was still a bear when things didn’t go his way, but he was a quieter, more playful bear. At least he didn’t maul everyone like he had done before. She hadn’t had to replace his desk lamp since he’d come back – that was a good thing. No books had been hurled across the office, either. Kinnetic was running smoother than ever, which was amazing because it had always been a bit of a well-oiled machine.

“Ben,” Brian greeted as he answered his ringing phone. “Wait, let me guess … Babylon?”

“Close,” Ben answered. “I was thinking Woody’s. We haven’t played pool in a while.”

“Fine, Woody’s at nine,” Brian said, then smirked because that sounded amusing. Ben didn’t get the joke, but he was satisfied that they had plans, and Brian flipped his cell closed and shuffled some papers around on his desk. “Ted!”

“You bellowed?” Ted asked, poking his head through the office door.

“Get in here,” Brian said. “Did you wire the money to Men’s Health magazine?”

“It just went out,” Ted said.

“Good, you can go.”

“Why thank-you,” Ted said. “Woody’s tonight?”

“Christ, what is it with everyone these days?”

“We’re just wanting you to get back to your old self,” Ted said with a shrug.

Brian frowned but waved Ted out without comment. He wasn’t sure he wanted to go back to his old self. He wasn’t sure what he wanted.

**Chapter Two: Old Ways**

Justin’s eyes flew open and he took-in the pattern of the moonlight on the ceiling, the sound of the late October wind in the trees, and focussed on smoothing his breath, calming his tense body, and putting the bad memories out of his mind.

When he was calm, Justin twisted onto his side and slipped his arms around his pillow. He stared across the room into the shadows and then closed his eyes. Sleep didn’t come to him, and he pulled back the covers and crossed the floor.

For a moment he paused, staring at the neatly made bed, and then he pulled back the covers and climbed beneath them. He stayed very still with his back to the door and recalled new memories, of when the bed on this side of the room had not been so empty. With a sigh, Justin closed his eyes. He wouldn’t fall asleep again, the nightmares still fresh in his mind, but at least the darkness wasn’t so cloying.

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Brian took him hard against the wall of the backroom, surrounded by grunts and groans and the heady thumpa-thumpa -- so loud the very walls vibrated with the sound. When the man came, he swore that Brian was the best he’d ever had, but by that point Brian had pulled out, disposed of the condom and was half-way out of the backroom.

“Can I see you again?” the man asked, Brian quirked an amused eyebrow and headed over to the bar.

“It’s good to have you back,” Ted said with a grin as he clapped a hand on Brian’s shoulder. Brian shrugged and looked to the doors of the club.

“I’ll buy you a beer,” Ben said.

“No thanks, I’m heading out,” Brian said.

“Now? We just got here!” Ted said in surprise.

“Buh-bye,” Brian said.

“Where’s he going?” Ben wondered.

“Probably the Baths,” Ted snarked.

“Ever since he got back he’s been avoiding us and Liberty,” Ben said.

“It’s probably just the transition, you know? When I kicked my drug habit, I was scared to come back to Babylon and Woody’s. But then I got used to it.”

“But you’re drug problem was directly related to Babylon and Woody’s. Brian wasn’t at Liberty Hospital kicking a drug habit; he was sentenced to therapy for anger-management. Babylon was where he would go to unwind, to stay calm. I’m worried that if he isn’t using his old methods to cope, and he hasn’t developed any new methods, then he’ll just go back to the way he was,” Ben said.

“Well, to me, Brian just isn’t Brian without the drugs and the tricks,” Ted said with a shrug.

“It was never a very safe lifestyle,” Ben said with a frown.

“Brian’s never played anything safe,” Ted said. “Except sex, then there’s always a condom, but that’s about as safe as he gets.”

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“I don’t want to cause any problems,” Justin explained. Lindsay sat back in her chair.

“What do you mean ‘problems’.”

“He has this whole life, and he’s really successful. And then he comes up here on Saturday to visit this crazy teenager who’s, like, falling apart all over the place. It’s stupid. It’s the most idiotic thing ever. But he’ll keep doing it because he feels sorry for the poor crazy kid.”

“Justin, we’ve talked about this. You are not, nor have you ever been ‘crazy’. You’ve been coping exceptionally well with exceptional circumstances. Brian knows this. He doesn’t come here out of pity.”

“But he’ll start if he knows how fucked-up I am!” Justin said.

“In any relationship there has to be trust, and there has to be communication,” Lindsay said.

“We’re not in a relationship,” Justin said. “We can’t be.”

“Why not?”

“Because he’s out there! He’s living his life -- and I’m happy for him, and it’s good -- but I’m in here, and I’m not going anywhere. Whatever this is that we do every Saturday, it isn’t a relationship, and it’s not going to last.”

“Justin, you can leave whenever you want to. I think you’re ready, so long as you keep-up with regular therapy sessions, I think --”

“It doesn’t matter,” Justin said. Enunciating in that way he did when he was agitated. “I have nowhere to go. I don’t belong anywhere.”

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Brian lay on his bed and smoked a joint. He’d considered taking a tab of E, but any pleasure he might have gotten from that was outweighed by Dr. Blake Wyzecki’s voice berating him for polluting his system. Even outside of Liberty and away from the good-doctor, Brian still had fears of the ‘body purge’. Weed might not be so good for him, but it wasn’t so bad, either.

Lately it had been difficult to go to sleep. He knew what was absent -- the gentle scratch of a pencil on paper, the feeling of warmth and the weight of a body next to his. It was silly to wish for something he couldn’t have, but lying naked in bed smoking a joint, Brian knew exactly what he wanted.

He blew out the smoke and flopped his hand to the side, feeling the stuffed bear on his bed. It was his turn with Gus-bear. The teddy, always sitting in the middle of his bed when he came home, made him smile. He didn’t want to think about what his cleaning lady thought. It didn’t matter. The bear was a tenuous connection to something unattainable -- something he wanted.

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Brian awoke the next morning and realized he was kidding himself. He’d known it would happen but he went ahead and did it anyway, but the point was he was done bullshitting himself. Liberty had done more that cure him of his anger. He couldn’t do drugs like he used to, knowing what they were doing to him, fearing only a little that they would send his system out of whack and he’d go back to raging. He looked at alcohol warily, though he still drank it liberally when he wanted. He purchased homeopathics from the store down the street and now instead of worrying about food and gaining weight, he worried about food and keeping his system in balance -- and gaining weight. Tricking mostly left him with a bad taste in his mouth and a wish for something -- else.

Work was still the same. He’d missed it when he was in Liberty, the challenge the adventure of it. It was the only thing, lately, that left him satisfied.

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This time Justin greeted him at the bottom of the patio and they headed away from where the largest group of visitors congregated, out to what had always been their spot.

Brian settled himself down onto the grass, smirking when Justin settled between his legs, resting back against Brian’s chest as if the other man was a living chair. “Comfortable?” he asked, tongue in cheek. Justin twisted around and kissed Brian’s chin.

“Lindsay said you were asking about my mental health,” Justin said.

“I’m very concerned about your mental health,” Brian added with mock-sincerity. Justin laughed and smacked his arm.

“You don’t want to hear my problems,” Justin said. “Believe me. I don’t even want to hear my problems, and they’re my problems, so ... trust me on this,” Justin said.

“Okay,” Brian said after a pause. He wondered at the change between them, and didn’t know how to change it. He knew only that he had promised himself he would accept the challenge -- over a month ago as he’d sat on a beach -- and he wouldn’t back down. “What about my problems?” he asked.

“What about them?” Justin asked with a frown.

“Can I share mine?” Brian asked. Justin looked at him as if he’d lost his mind, but nodded a little. “I’m back to living my old life.”

“Well, that’s good, isn’t it?” Justin asked. “That’s pretty much all you were wishing for when you were in here. Every Saturday you could barely contain yourself, you were so excited to hear about your work.”

“How the fuck did you know that?” Brian asked.

Justin smiled his mischievous smile and wiggled his eyebrows. “I know things.”

“Anyway,” Brian said. “The point is it’s not the same. It isn’t satisfying anymore.”

“So change,” Justin said with a shrug.

“It’s that easy, huh?” Brian asked.

“Why not?” Justin said.

“Okay,” Brian said after a pause. “You first.”

Brian had gotten up and left Justin on the hill to think about that. He’d left Gus-bear with him -- it was Justin’s turn. And because Liberty rarely changed in any core way, Brian knew exactly where he would find Lindsay.

“Brian,” she greeted. She was smiling broadly.

“What?” he asked, frowning.

“Can’t I be happy to see you?” she asked.

“No one’s that happy to see anyone,” he said.

Lindsay laughed. She sounded giddy. “I’m pregnant,” she said. “It was just confirmed last night.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that,” he said. “And you had such a nice figure.”

“Brian!” she said, but she was laughing. “I’m just so happy!” Brian wondered how Melanie was taking it, but thought that, after the lecture she’d given him before she’d left, she was probably more Zen about it than Ben who, in Brian’s opinion, was so Zen it bordered on unhealthy.

Lindsay asked him about how things were going, and shared the news from the hospital, and then went straight to the point and asked him what he wanted. “I can tell,” she said. “It’s my job.”

“I want a recommendation to a therapist in the city,” Brian managed, the words difficult to say, difficult but necessary. His therapy sessions at Liberty had both confirmed and destroyed all notions he had about the process. There was less pressure discussing his ‘issues’ with a stranger once a week at a set time, than reaching out to a friend.

“Sure,” Lindsay said. “I think this is a really good decision. I’m so proud of you.”

“Christ, don’t start,” Brian said.

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“Hey, Daph,” Justin said, lifting his head from his sketchpad and looking at the young nurse who was sitting with him in the nurse’s station. She was arranging pills in cups for the patients.

“Yeah?”

“Do you think I’m a coward?” he asked.

“No! Why? Who said that to you?” she looked as if she was ready to get up and break someone’s head.

“Nobody!” he assured her. “I’m just wondering. Sometimes it just feels like I’m being a coward.”

“Justin,” she said, then she set down the cup she had been filling, and turned her chair to face him. “Justin, you’re not a coward. There’s nothing cowardly about the things you’ve done and lived through, or the way you’ve handled things. It’s really brave.”

“But everyone keeps throwing it back at me. I’m nineteen and I’m still here, and even Lindsay is starting to push at me. Like maybe I’m hiding out, or something.”

“Hell, you’ve been through a lot this year. Liberty is supposed to be a place where you can relax and focus on getting better, but it hasn’t been that place for you, not for very long. So you take your time, and when you feel you’re ready, then go ahead and break out of here. Until then, who gives a fuck what anyone else thinks!”

“Oh my god,” Justin said. “You sound exactly like Debbie.”

“Oh shit, you think so?” Daphne asked. Justin nodded his head, and they broke into laughter.

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Following the staff meeting on Friday night, Daphne pulled Lindsay to the side. “You know I hate doing this, but Justin was talking to me the other day and I thought it was important.”

“What did he say?” Lindsay asked, concerned.

“He said that you were talking to him about leaving Liberty,” Daphne said.

“I want it to be something he’s thinking about, in the back of his mind, at least,” Lindsay said.

“Well, it’s freaking him out,” Daphne said. “You’re his therapist, I thought you’d understand more than anyone. Justin thinks of this as his home, and frankly, it is the only place he can call home. If you start talking about leaving, and putting pressure on him, than that’s like kicking him out!”

“I assure you, I’m not putting pressure on him. I’m just helping him think about the future,” Lindsay said.

“Well, maybe you should ease off, a bit,” Daphne said. “Can’t he just have a break?”

“Of course,” Lindsay said. “But he also has to realize that life doesn’t stop just because you wish it would.”

Daphne nodded, understanding Lindsay’s point but disagreeing with it just the same. She headed back to the floor to grab her bag when she noticed the flickering lights in the rec room.

“What are you doing?” she asked, noticing Justin and Michael sitting side-by-side on the sofa watching a show.

“It’s Beauty and the Beast!” Michael said. She smiled to herself, watching what remained of the Gang, Justin and Michael had gotten closer since everyone else in their close-knit group of friends had left the hospital, and the result had been quite positive for Michael.

“Can I join you?” she asked. She’d done it before, once or twice. She considered them her friends, and she was off duty. Technically there was no rush home. They grinned at her and waved her over, offered her a share of their candy stash -- which they saved specifically for movie nights -- and then turned back to the film watching raptly as another petal fell from the rose in the glass jar.

**Chapter Three: Hurtable, Breakable, Woundable**

Brian waited in their usual corner of the patio but had yet to see any sign of Justin. It had been over an hour since he’d arrived. “He’s inside,” Lindsay said, coming up to him.

“Why?” Brian asked with a frown.

“It’s been a hard week,” Lindsay said. “He’s in quite a mood. I don’t think he’ll come out today, Brian.”

“Well, what the hell were you talking to him about?” Brian asked.

“That’s confidential,” Lindsay said.

“Well, I’m not leaving until I see him,” Brian said.

“I thought as much, that’s why I came over.”

“Why?”

“Justin has spent a long time not talking,” Lindsay explained. “He’s gotten used to it, you understand? Even if he speaks freely now, when he’s upset, he reverts back.”

“So, you’re warning me because when I go in there he’s going to be like before?”

“Except before he’d be mute but pleasant,” Lindsay said. Brian snickered. He was well acquainted with Justin’s mood swings.

“This is really poor timing,” Brian said, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“What is it?”

“I have to tell him that I’ll be out of town next weekend,” Brian admitted.

Lindsay shook her head at the bad luck. “Well, whatever you do, you have to keep your schedule. Justin will be more upset to hear you’re holding back on living your life because of him,” Lindsay said.

“Are you sure about that?”

“Most definitely,” Lindsay said. “He already has concerns that you might pity him. Naturally, with you living your life outside of Liberty, he feels already as if you’ve not on equal ground.”

“That’s crazy,” Brian said. Lindsay raised her eyebrows and Brian sighed knowing that it was true. “Fuck.”

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Brian stalked quickly through the halls and stopped outside of his old room. He wasn’t sure what he should say or do to lift Justin out of the funk he was in, but after pacing outside the door for several minutes he decided he’d wing it.

As soon as he entered the room he spotted Justin lying on his bed, an untouched breakfast tray on the night table beside him. Up until that moment, Brian imagined he might find it in himself to be gentle and understanding. He forgot his plans as soon as he saw Justin.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Brian demanded. Justin turned his head and looked back, his expression clearly saying that what he was doing should be plainly obvious. “Out of bed!” Brian said. Justin turned back around to face the wall.

“Get up, or I’m dragging you up!” Brian said. Justin ignored him. “You’re acting like a child. Don’t make me count to ten like you’re in preschool,” Brian said. Brian sighed and counted, he reached ten and Justin hadn’t moved. “Fine.” Brian stepped forward, yanked the covers back and grasped Justin under the arms, pulling him up and out of bed as the blond attempted to struggle.

“I warned you,” Brian said. “Now are you going to walk with me, or am I going to have to drag you out?” Brian asked. Justin sniffed and his chin shot up in defiance, so Brian harassed Justin out of the room, and pushed and prodded and chivvied and distracted -- sometimes even dragged -- Justin until they were outside, walking in the garden. He badgered and coaxed trying to get Justin to explain the reason for his funk, until finally Brian shrugged. “Fine, you win. I give-up.”

“Fuck you!” Justin said. “You can’t just give up!” Brian almost snorted with laughter, but refrained.

“Well, I don’t know what else I can do to get you to tell me what’s wrong,” Brian said.

“God dammit,” Justin said. “Can’t I have a moment where people aren’t badgering me?” Justin said. “How do you feel Justin? Why aren’t you eating, Justin? What happened, Justin? Tell me about your family, Justin? Give me a break!” Justin plopped down onto the ground, wrapping his arms around his knees. Brian waited a moment before he sat down beside the blond.

“So what happened?” Brian asked.

“It’s just been a really fucking shitty week. That’s it. That’s all. Just, so fucking shitty,” Justin said.

Brian nodded, pulled Gus-bear from his pocket where he’d stuffed him in order to return him to Justin for the week. Perching the stuffed bear on his knee he looked at Justin seriously. “Tell Doctor Gus all your problems.”

Justin laughed, which was what Brian had been aiming for, and then shrugged. “Christopher was finally sentenced on Tuesday,” he said. Brian hadn’t known that. He was at the courthouse in the morning because Melanie had requested that he testify, but looking at Christopher sitting there as if he hadn’t a care in the world had tried his anger and so Brian had left as soon as he was able. He’d been surprised to find Emmett there, but not so surprised to see Lindsay.

“Lindsay brought in some psych evaluations she’d done, and Emmett told me that now that he knew what he had really been seeing, he remembers the first time Christopher ever --- ever went after me. I got awarded damages, Hobbes as a black mark on his record, and is out some money, and beyond that -- not a whole lot. It’s not enough, but you know. I don’t think anything would feel like enough. No matter what you do to him, he’ll still be the same, still think the same. He could do it again, he could come after me, or someone else.” Brian nodded, and Justin continued. “And Lindsay was completely obsessing about it all week. How did that make me feel? What more could I ask for? And she started drawing parallels between Chris and my dad, and goody, as if just reliving one of those isn’t enough on its own, let’s talk them to death at the same time!”

“Nothing like a trip down memory lane,” Brian agreed.

“This week’s theme was concentrating on me, on what I did during the attacks. She kept asking me, could I have done more? Could I have done more? -- I don’t know! Could I? Probably. I should have done more. But I just froze, and I couldn’t help it. So I screamed at her that no, I couldn’t. If she thought she could do better then she could go ahead and test how she handled being abused and being molested and being ... which I think was what she was aiming for. But that didn’t occur to me until I’d stormed back to my room, and it just pisses me off. I’m sick of being manipulated like that because I’m so fucking emotional about all of this.”

Justin let out his breath and Brian watched as the tension drained from Justin’s body, then the boy dropped his head to the side so he could rest it against Brian’s body. “Hi,” Justin said. “It’s good to have you back.” Brian snickered, and then wrapped an arm around Justin’s shoulders, and they just sat there. Brian knew he didn’t need to give Justin advice, the man knew what he should do, and he just needed somewhere safe to rant about it. Brian was happy that place was with him.

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“Well, thank the lord!” Debbie said when Brian and Justin returned to the floor in time for a late dinner. She handed over Justin’s tray and one of the trays they had set aside for visitors, and patted Brian’s cheek. “You did good, kiddo,” she said.

“I believe that’s your ‘kiddo’ over there,” Brian said, nodding to where Michael was sitting with Vic and Emmett. Debbie rolled her eyes and smiled. She was like that, Brian had learned to ignore it, or accept it. Either way.

Brian had explained that he had to travel to New York for a business meeting, and wouldn’t be back next Saturday. Justin had taken the news much better than Brian had anticipated. “You can’t help that, Brian,” Justin said. “I’m glad things are going well. Just come back the week after, if you can.”

Despite the calm in which Justin had received the news, after eating dinner with Emmett and Michael and Vic, Justin tugged on Brian’s sleeve and they headed back to the room.

Technically it was time for all visitors to leave, but he’d caught Debbie’s eye on the way and knew he’d be an exception. “Just till I fall asleep,” Justin said, already yawning. Brian didn’t point out the dark smudges under Justin’s eyes, but he settled onto Justin’s bed, taking Gus-bear from the night table where he’d been waiting, and waited until Justin got comfortable. “You’re good at this,” Justin said drowsily. Brian smirked and kissed blond hair.

Justin passed-out long before lights-out, but Brian stayed where he was. Finally, unable to ignore the fact that he had to drive home, and it was long-passed time for visitors to have left, Brian extricated himself from Justin’s grip and slipped out of bed, tucking Gus-bear into Justin’s arms before he left.

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Brian pulled the blue workbook from the bag he’d left it in and settled onto the sofa. He’d stuffed it away when he first received it, intent on forgetting all about it. He’d pulled it out again when desperation had him searching for any clue that might help him help Justin. Now he was pulling it out again.

He had weekly therapy sessions with Doctor Pritchard who had confirmed what Lindsay had once told him, and advised that he concentrate on himself. “It’s easy to do, given how things have worked out,” Erik Pritchard had explained. “If you want to be there for Justin, you have that time available. Tell yourself that Saturdays are for Justin, but the rest of the week is for you.” Brian almost threw a paperweight at the man, but managed to restrain himself. Erik Pritchard, like Lindsay, had a habit of sounding very much like every irritating bad thing Brian had always associated with therapists. Also, like Lindsay, Brian got the sense that this was an act that Erik was putting on. It was likely the reason Lindsay had recommended him specifically.

“Don’t think about the future,” Erik advised. “If this pattern changes at some point, naturally you’ll handle this differently, but for now, that’s the schedule. You’re not going to do Justin, or anyone else any good if you haven’t sorted yourself out.”

“I’m not in therapy for Justin,” Brian said.

“Of course not. But on some level you’re thinking this way,” Erik said. “So this is how to deal with it.” He’d continued on to explain that this was also how to deal with his problem transition from Liberty into a new life. Between a lot of psychobabble bullshit, Erik explained that Brian had to continue to pursue the path he’d been on when he’d been in Liberty, working through his issues. So Brian took out the workbook, and flipped to the first page. Pen in hand, and grimacing only a little, Brian began to acknowledge his past experiences.

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The highlight of the week happened on Tuesday when Liberty Hospital received a shipment of new chairs for the nursing staff. Justin and Michael sat on the floor in the hallway and watched the orderlies brining in the new chairs -- colourful, comfortable, and they had wheels. They didn’t even need to exchange a word, they both just understood.

They waited for the orderlies to return to their routes, and for the nurses to be distracted, wheeling the chairs to where they wanted them. Justin and Michael eyed the chairs that had been left in the hall while the nurses wheeled one at a time to wherever these chairs were going.

Grinning like maniacs, Justin and Michael shot up off the floor, raced each other to the chairs, grabbed one each and proceeded to roll down the hallway. “I’m winning!” Michael declared. Justin laughed, pushed his chair around faster. They lost control, bumped into each other and rolled into a wall before they regained control.

“Boys!” Debbie cried. Orderlies returned to the hall to see if their help was needed, but no one had the heart to stop either man. Their laughter filled the hallway as they rolled, until they’d reached the end of the hall. “You could break your necks!” Debbie scolded, but her only response was laughter. “We’re going to have to lock up these damned chairs!”

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“I got suspended,” Molly said proudly before Justin had even greeted her. He’d been sitting in his usual place, sketching. Unsure who would come, but hoping that someone would. He’d grown accustomed to having visitors on Saturday, and didn’t want to miss a single week.

“What?” Justin asked.

“I punched Marvin Haymond in the face because he called Shelley a dyke,” Molly said with a shrug. She leaned over and kissed Justin’s cheek. “Technically I’m grounded, but mom’s at work, and who knows where dad is. If they expect me to sit in my room on my own, they’re crazy.”

“They’ll be worried,” Justin said. “Wait, mom works?”

“Yeah, she’s a realtor. It pisses dad off, because now she refuses to cook dinner all the time, she insists that they split it equal because she gets home and she’s just as tired as dad is after a long day of work. You should hear them argue about it. Argue about who boils water and dumps noodles in a pot! It’s crazy.”

“Are they not getting along?” Justin asked.

“As well as they ever did. Mom’s just getting restless. I can’t say I blame her,” Molly said. “Why didn’t you tell me Saint James was full of homophobic pricks?”

“You never asked me, I would have told you not to go,” Justin said with a smirk. They ignored the fact that when Molly had decided to switch schools, Justin hadn’t been talking, and he hadn’t seen his family in two years.

“Fuck, so much for smart decisions. At least it will look good for college. I mean, Saint James is prestigious,” Molly said.

Justin berated her for using violence and getting suspended. Then he nudged her shoulder, “You hit him pretty hard, right?”

“Yeah,” Molly said with a grin, smiling again after the minor chastisement. “I broke his nose.” Justin snickered and threw an arm around her shoulder. There were times that Molly missed her brother so much it was a physical pain. This was one of those times. “You’re my favouritest,” she said in a child’s lisp, like she used to do when they were kids. Justin threw his head back and laughed, Molly closed her eyes and savoured the sound.

**Chapter Four: Every Colour of Confusion**

If there was one thing Brian hadn’t been expecting to do on the Sunday morning following his return from his business trip, it was to be sitting in church with his mother. She’d called almost as soon as he’d walked into his loft. He’d barely had the chance to drop his bags by the door and reach the phone.

Brian could admit to himself that he would have ignored the call entirely if there hadn’t been a niggling bit of worry that maybe it was Liberty Hospital, calling because something had happened to Justin. It was a ludicrous concern; the staff probably wouldn’t call him even if something had happened because he really had no ties to the young blond. Still, there was the chance that Daphne or maybe even Debbie had phoned.

He’d been unsurprised to find that it wasn’t Liberty Hospital on the other end of the phone. What had surprised him was that it was his mother, armed and ready with a fresh dose of guilt that she wielded ruthlessly until he succumbed to her wishes.

“The next time you have to go to church,” he said by way of greeting when he’d arrived at her house to pick her up. “Have Claire drive you.”

“I phoned her first, naturally,” Joan Kinney had replied. “But she’s busy with the boys today.” So Brian sat in a pew and went through the motions -- stand, kneel, sit, repeat. All the while, he was imagining the things Dr. Pritchard would say to him about this.

“You felt you had to go?” Dr. Erik asked him on Tuesday.

“I didn’t have to go,” Brian replied. “That’s ridiculous. I’m an adult. I don’t have to do anything.”

“But you said yes,” Dr. Erik said.

“It’s easier, in the long-run, to just give her what she wants. Otherwise she slings more guilt, and then moans and bitches, and she calls back for weeks following, and if you don’t answer she leaves messages. You should hear her messages, they sound as if she’s trapped in the machine.”

“What concerns me is you are becoming trapped in an unhealthy cycle with your family. It’s one that is quite common, and easy to fall into, and as a therapist my stance on it is quite uncommon. I wonder if this same treatment applies to your father. Do you help him out like this?”

“My father’s dead,” Brian said, tonelessly.

“Before his death?” Dr. Erik asked. Brian was somewhat pleased that the man didn’t offer his condolences.

“When he needed money, I always gave it to him. I would visit him about once a month, or so,” Brian admitted.

“There’s nothing to be embarrassed about, nothing to worry about. It’s natural for a child to want to please their parents, to want to make them proud. Often, the more impossible a parent is to please, the harder the child tries. In cases of abuse, this escalates even more. Your behaviour is completely understandable and acceptable. But in order to really move on, it’s time to confront your feelings about your mother -- and your father -- and perhaps come to a decision. It’s about being authentic to your real feelings.” Brian snorted, as he always did, at the mention of ‘feelings’. “For the next little while, think about your relationship with each of your parents, how you feel when they ask you to do something, and why you end-up doing whatever you do.”

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Justin sat on the floor in the rec room, his back against the wall and staring at the opposite side of the room. Daphne, who had known Justin since he was seventeen, was familiar with the way Justin’s fingers were twitching. She ducked out of the rec room, and returned a moment later to slip a pencil between his restless fingers and drop a sketchpad onto his lap.

“He hardly stops, does he?” Debbie said with a fond smile.

“Nope,” Daphne agreed. “Do you think Mr. Montgomery would agree to allow Justin to paint a mural. I mean, that walls been bugging the patients and the staff for ages. It would also give Justin something to do, you know. It might make him feel productive.” Mr. Montgomery was the founder of Liberty Hospital, inspired by his wife, whom he had loved completely who had a breakdown. The treatments they had given her had done nothing but make her worse. She’d committed suicide, which was all too common among people with mental illnesses. The system just didn’t support them, didn’t do everything it could for them.

“You could try, Honey,” Debbie said. “Might talk to Lindsay, she’d probably back you up.”

Daphne grinned and looked back at Justin. “Okay.”

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Jack Kinney had died not knowing that his son was a homosexual. Brian’s motto was that his sexuality was no one’s business but his own. He hadn’t told anyone in his immediate family based on this idea. The truth was that he was also a little afraid of how the news might be received. His mother was a firm churchgoer and had no tolerance for anything that was ‘different’. His father was as much of a red-necked homophobic asshole as you could get without coming from a hick-town. He knew how any member of his family would receive the news, and he didn’t want to deal with it. On some level, he wasn’t done trying to make them proud.

Added to that, Brian had firm ideas on how a man should behave. Mostly they’d grown-out of watching his father and coming to the conclusion that he didn’t want to be anything like that. So when his sister needed money, Brian gave it to her. When his mother needed help, Brian helped. He was head of the family, whether they saw it that way or not. Those two sides of him, the part that wanted to do-right by his family, and the part that was infuriated, disgusted and fed-up with the fa ade they all put-on, warred in him constantly. He didn’t need to ask Dr. Erik to know it wasn’t healthy. That didn’t make it any easier, either.

He flashed to a memory of Justin, standing on their hill and admitting that seventeen, he had been so ready to be queer. Once he’d realized what he was he’d embraced it. Brian had never been like that. He’d gone through a period where suspicions about his sexuality had rolled around in his head. He’d fucked around a bit in high school, his first experience being with his gym teacher. But once he’d hit college, he’d still fought it. He’d slept with several women, hoping each time that maybe he’d feel something for one of them. After that, he’d had no choice but to admit he was gay. For all intents and purposes, he’d embraced it. He’d gone through men left right and centre. He still couldn’t brings himself to tell his family. Not even when his father had told him he was dying of cancer, Brian just couldn’t do it. At the time it was because he believed so strongly that it was no one’s business.

It wasn’t anyone’s business. But the fact remained that there was a certain amount of relief, and maybe a bit of closure that could be had from coming out, and Brian didn’t have that, because he couldn’t bring himself to do it.

“Brian,” Joan called, her voice loud enough to be heard inside the loft, where Brian had been ignoring her incessant knocking. “I have your favourite, chocolate chocolate chip.”

“Fuck it,” Brian said. He answered the door and let her in. The woman was drinking herself into her grave, and he didn’t want to deal with her bible-thumping ballistics at that moment. It could wait.

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“I’m painting a mural,” Justin told Brian and Emmett happily as they sat with Michael at one of the picnic tables in the garden.

“It’s not of me naked, is it?” Brian asked.

“That was one sketch! One sketch, and suddenly your naked self is all I draw!” Justin said. Brian snickered. He’d found the sketch when he’d been looking through Justin’s work. Justin had been embarrassed, but had merely shrugged it off. Brian couldn’t resist teasing the young blond about it, however.

“It’s really cool,” Michael said. “I’m helping a bit.”

“Daphne asked Mr. Montgomery, and he was all excited. And I get paid,” Justin said.

“You’re getting paid?” Michael asked.

“Yeah!” Justin said, his excitement infecting everyone.

“Like, actual dollars?” Michael asked.

“No, he’s paying me in Monopoly money,” Justin said.

“Well, how come I’m not getting paid?” Michael asked.

“I’m doing all the work!” Justin said. Brian rolled his eyes and Emmett covered his mouth, hoping no one noticed his laughter.

“I’m handing you brushes, and collecting those popsicle things so you can fish-out your paint,” Michael said.

“Yeah, and I said I’d give you a small cut,” Justin said.

“Okay then,” Michael agreed easily.

“Anyway, I’ve been working on the sketch all week,” Justin finished. Brian found it amusing that he’d been informed of the new rolling chairs and the various adventures Michael and Justin had been on with those chairs before he’d heard about the mural, then again, with the way Justin was looking at him, it seemed to be the more significant topic, even if Justin threw it out there as if it were nothing big. So Brian congratulated him, and Justin spent the rest of the day positively beaming.

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“Brian!” Brian stopped on his way into Babylon and looked around. Sure enough, clad in mango-coloured leather pants and a white gauzey shirt stood Emmett, his long arms waving from midway down the line.

“Who’s that?” Ben asked.

“Are those paints actually mango-coloured?” David asked.

“Get your ass over here, Honeycutt,” Brian called.

“Ooh! It’s so exciting to see you here!” Emmett said as he bounced over to the group. “And you look so marvellous! Who are your friends?”

Brian smirked at David’s reaction to the vibrant man. David was a chiropractor and as reserved as you could get without becoming a redneck, Bible-thumping homophobe. “This is Ben Bruckner,” Brian introduced, Ben smiled and shook Emmett’s hand. “And his ... boyfriend ... David Cameron.” David looked a bit constipated, but he shook Emmett’s hand just the same.

“Well, I feel like I’ve known all of you for forever,” Emmett said. “I’m Emmett Honeycutt. I was at Liberty Hospital with Brian. That place works miracles. I was in there for my panic, and believe me, they just fix you right up!” Brian was snickering, but Emmett seemed right at home, falling into conversation with Ben, and they cut the line to Babylon.

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Ben was dancing with David, but he was watching Brian. Since Brian’s return, Ben had been having trouble adjusting to the new Brian. When he’d first met David, he had been attracted to the idea of a steady, stable relationship. They were the perfect match, neither one into the party-life, both enjoying a good book. Brian had rolled his eyes and made all sorts of cracks at their expense, but Ben had really believed that this was it, this was what love was supposed to be like.

Brian had returned from Liberty greatly changed, however. He didn’t do drugs, he barely tricked, and then only when he needed his needs met. He went dancing and drank with his friends and played pool. Brian’s return had coincided with Ben’s realization that while he hadn’t been into partying, he’d enjoyed casual nights out on Liberty, playing pool at Woody’s, dancing at Babylon. David wasn’t into either. And most of the time, David was cool and condescending to Brian. Ben had known Brian for a long while, and his loyalty, first and foremost, was with his friend. He couldn’t help but admit that David wasn’t quite what Ben had been hoping for. Now, though, it seemed like Brian might be.

“There’s some weird dynamic going on between you and your friends,” Emmett said, sipping at his cosmo and leaning against the bar. He raised his eyebrows at Brian, then turned his head dramatically to look to where Ben and David were dancing.

“What?” Brian asked.

“I mean, hunka-liscious over there has been making Bambi-eyes at you all night,” Emmett said.

“Ben’s a happily married man,” Brian snarked. “And I’m not interested.”

“Well, Honey, I just call it as I see it,” Emmett said with a shrug. “I don’t suppose you dance?”

Because Brian wasn’t the sort of man to say ‘Not with any sort of skill’, he said “No.” and left it at that.

Emmett shrugged. “Well, I’m going to go shake a tail-feather,” Emmett said, and pushed away from the bar. Brian spared a glance to where Ben and David were dancing. He hoped Emmett was wrong, but he thought, probably not. It was just like how his luck had been going that Ben would start trying to pick-up what they had started when they’d first met. Ben had been a trick, nothing special just entertainment when Brian had been at the White Party. Except, once he’d returned to Pittsburgh, Ben had been at Babylon and Woody’s, and had been excited to see a familiar face in a new town.

He’d moved to Pittsburgh because he’d got a job as a professor at Carnegie Melon. After bumping into each other frequently around town, Ben and Brian had become friends, but Brian had made it clear that ‘friends’ was all they were.

Between his mother playing ‘happy family’; Dr. Erik’s ‘homework assignment’; his own frustrations with the sense of something vital missing; his Liberty visits and constant worries about Justin; the last thing Brian needed was Ben trying to pursue something that would never happen. Brian wasn’t a fan of David; he was condescending, conceited and a bit of a prude. Still, Brian would rather see Ben with David that chasing after him.

His cell-phone rang, and he tossed back a Beam, flagging the bartender down for a refill as he answered it. “Brian!” his sister’s voice was unmistakable. “I need you to watch the boys tomorrow, I have a doctor’s appointment, and mom is going to a church group that’s meeting for the whole day!”

“Un-fucking-believable,” Brian muttered.

**Chapter Five: Room for One More**

Lillian Taylor-Sommers patted her tears dry with a white, monogrammed handkerchief, used big words and long explanations, and ended her veritable monologue with a pat of Justin’s hands. “She loved you very much,” she said. “And she missed you every day that you were away.”

“Do my parents know?” Justin asked, his voice hoarse from his own tears.

“No, Honey. I didn’t tell them. This is all yours, and you don’t have to worry about anyone taking it from you. Your grandmother made sure of that.”

“How’s mom taking it?” Justin asked.

“As well as she can. The house and all Marianne’s other possessions were to be split equally between the two of us. We’ve had our hands full with it, but she’s doing okay.”

“Thank-you,” Justin said, and hugged his aunt. She’d come a long way to give him the news personally. The news, and the last gift his grandmother would ever give him. He had no idea what he was going to do with it all. He certainly would never have to worry about being forced out of Liberty due to lack of funds.

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“He’s still there?” Daphne asked, peering through the small window into Justin’s room. She could see Justin sitting on the bed, not sketching or sleeping, but staring out the window. She wondered if he even saw the view.

“Yeah, we should let him be,” Debbie said. “His aunt, Lillian, said that he was really close to his grandma. It’s got to be hard on him.”

“Rose was saying that he got a lot of money,” Daphne said. “That Justin was planning on using it to leave here, get a place of his own.”

Debbie laughed, cynically. “Honey, I don’t think he’s thinking about anything except the loss of his grandma. And Sunshine’s worried about leaving this place, anyway. There’s a lot to adjust to. He’s been here for over two years now. He was living with his parents before -- a nice sheltered life -- and then he’s going to go out, on his own, without anyone around to support him. Without people looking out for his health and talking to him about what he’s thinking. That’s a big leap. If you ask me, he isn’t ready to move-out all by himself.”

“He thinks more and more about doing it, though. I mean, he talks about it, especially after Saturday and getting all those visitors. He won’t be completely alone, Emmett and Molly would definitely visit him all the time, and even if he’d like us to think otherwise, Brian would too.”

“Visiting isn’t the same as having people right there for you, available every day, whenever you need them, in a moment’s notice.”

“Yeah, I remember transitioning between staying in the dorms at school and coming home. Suddenly I couldn’t fling open my door and scream that I was going to the pub and expect a stampede of friends to follow me,” Daphne agreed.

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It was overwhelming to think about it, that his grandmother had passed away. Then again, Justin hadn’t seen her in over four years. His mother and his grandmother had a falling out, and suddenly there were no summer trips down to visit her. He’d spoken with her over the phone, but that wasn’t the same. And now she was gone.

She had been the very first person he had told when he had realized he was gay. She was supportive, and after Craig had threatened him, she had known something was happening even though Justin had never spoken a word about what his father had said or done, or about how terrified he was. She’d known, and her last act had been to finally and decisively liberate him from it.

“I can afford my own place,” Justin thought. “I can leave here.” Except the place he’d buy wouldn’t be a home. Couldn’t be one. He’d be completely independent, completely alone. He wasn’t ready for it. Being alone scared him, and he could never manage it for very long. His panic-attacks had lessened, but they were still there. He wasn’t sure that he could ever leave Liberty and be the same person he was inside.

Lindsay soothed his fears, assuring him that he could still keep-up his therapy, could still visit; whatever he needed. It wasn’t enough. He could leave, and then stop talking again, and then what? He had no control over himself anymore. The panic attacks, the way he shut down at times. And if he were alone, who was to know if something happened?

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Brian arrived late to Liberty Hospital. He made it a point, usually, to spend as much of the day with Justin as he could, however that Saturday he had been prevented by phone calls and Ben and now it was almost lunchtime. He anticipated having to track Justin down, checking the places the blond usually ate, but instead he stepped out of the car and shut the door, and then was assaulted by a force that pushed him against the Jeep and proceeded to kiss him.

“Hello,” Brian said, his tongue in his cheek.

“I’ve been waiting for hours!” Justin said. “I’m starving! Let’s go.” Justin turned on his heel and headed up the stairs and into Liberty. Brian followed at a slower pace.

He’d noticed that there were always more people there at the first Saturday of every month. Some people travelled quite a distance to visit their family member. He rarely saw anyone upset on Saturdays, everyone was on their best behaviour.

They ate lunch in Justin’s room, what had been ‘their’ room until Brian had been released. Brian watched Justin carefully, noting how he pushed more food around his plate than he placed in his mouth, and that the young blond couldn’t seem to sit still. Or keep quiet.

“Emmett already came, he couldn’t stay long because a friend of someone who works with him at that clothing store, well, they fired their wedding planner because the guy was a jerk, and Emmett had volunteered to take over. He had some crazy meeting today. The whole wedding sounds really bizarre.”

Brian listened to descriptions of the rose-themed wedding that appeared to be carried a bit far as he cleared their tray and walked with Justin out to the garden, and then to their place. Before he finally turned to Justin and raised both his eyebrows.

“What?” Justin said, halting his chatter immediately. Brian continued to look at him and Justin sighed and looked away. “It’s just that my grandma died last week. And on Wednesday, my aunt Lillian came to visit me and tell me about it.” Brian didn’t offer his sympathies, but he placed a hand on the back of Justin’s neck and sat silently as Justin described his grandmother -- the aged, but feisty woman who was nothing like the timid WASP Brian had met. He wondered how this woman Justin was describing could have raised Jennifer Taylor.

After Justin had run-out of words, or been overwhelmed by thoughts of the woman who had unceasingly supported him, Brian sat down on the grass and held Justin, as the blond buried his head in his shirt and pleaded with him “Don’t talk. Just hold me.” So Brian did.

Brian hadn’t had any family that had been there for him the way Justin had described his grandmother had been there. He hadn’t seen much of his father’s parents because they lived in Ireland. There was a vague memory of one Christmas when they had flown in, but they seemed less than impressed with their son and had left quickly. His mother’s parents had been dead since he was two. He hadn’t been old enough to remember their visits, he imagined that they were as bad as his mother and was secretly always thankful that he had not had a chance to get to know them.

It wasn’t long before Justin fell asleep, and Brian sat there trying to get his thoughts in order. He mulled over various campaign ideas, made a mental to-do list for the coming Monday and then simply relaxed before movement from Justin alerted him to the young man’s waking.

“Better?”

“Mm?” Justin asked, slightly confused, before he figured-out the question. “Oh, yeah I haven’t been sleeping much. Lindsay’s been trying to focus me on dealing with my grandmother’s loss, and developing healthy ideas on what to do with the money.”

“Money?” Brian asked.

Justin nodded. “My grandmother left it to me. All her money. I don’t see the point of it. It’s not like I really need it.”

“You might,” Brian said, speaking slowly because he could hardly believe they were having this discussion. “If you left Liberty.”

“And where would I go?” Justin asked. “I have nowhere.”

Brian grasped Justin’s chin and turned the blond to look him in the eye. “You’re wrong,” he said with absolute certainty. Justin opened his mouth to argue and then frowned, catching something in Brian’s tone, in his expression. And then they simply stared at each other.

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“It looks really great!” Daphne said when she entered the rec room. It had been closed-off to general use for some time while it got prepped for Justin’s mural. A painter had come through to repaint the room, and he primed the wall for Justin, and now the room was entirely Justin’s own. Not like anyone would want to relax there, the smell of paint was strong, even with the windows open, and all the furniture was shoved against the far wall, the floor covered by a drop-cloth.

Justin had sketched his plan roughly on the wall. There were familiar faces at the corners, making a sort of border. None of the faces were painted yet, but Daphne could still pick-out a few of the staff and some of the patients. At the centre of the mural was a sketch of Liberty Hospital drawn crudely as if done by a child, and surrounding that were smaller, detailed pictures of different scenes.

“What’s wrong?” Daphne asked, when Justin didn’t acknowledge her compliment simply stared at the mural and chewed on the end of his paintbrush.

“What?” Justin asked, turning to face her and looking somewhat surprised by her presence.

“What is wrong?” she said, enunciating clearly.

“I think Brian asked me to move in with him,” Justin said.

“What?” Daphne asked. “You think? You’re not sure? How can you not be sure?”

“I told him about my grandmother and the money, and he said I could leave Liberty. I said that was crazy, because I had nowhere he to go. And then gave me this really intense look and said I was wrong.”

“Holy shit!” Daphne said. “Brian asked you to move in with him.”

“But he didn’t really,” Justin said. “Something that important, you need to be really formal and clear about it.”

“Justin,” Daphne said.

“I mean, it’s a huge thing, and we don’t really know each other, and this is coming out of nowhere,” Justin continued.

“Justin!”

“And he’s got his own life! He can’t just take me in, I mean, I can’t just freeload on him!”

“Why don’t you ask him, then?” Daphne said.

“What?”

“Ask him. Tell him, you weren’t really clear what he was talking about,” Daphne said. “Just ask him.”

“But I can’t,” Justin said.

“Why not?”

“It would ruin the moment!” Justin said. “It was really intense. I mean, I didn’t know what the hell was really going on, but I could feel it was significant.”

Daphne was laughing and shaking her head. “Justin, it’s Sunday. The moment has passed. Now you’re confused and you need to ask him. Otherwise all this angsting and fretting you’re doing is over nothing.”

“Well, great. Now I have to wait for Saturday,” Justin said.

“Or you could just call him,” Daphne said with a shrug.

“That’s totally against Liberty policy,” Justin said.

“To hell with Liberty policy. And anyway, I’m allowed to authorize patient phone calls if I believe it to be beneficial to the patient’s state of mind. So,” she turned on her heel and headed towards the door.

“Daphne, you’re crazy!” he said. “You don’t even have his phone number.”

“But I have his record, on which he wrote his phone number,” Daphne said.

“Daphne! Daphne, you’re going to get in big trouble!” Justin said, the door to the rec room closed behind Daphne. “Daphne!” He ran after her.

He found her in the nurse’s station, which was empty because it was late and most of the nurses were doing room checks. “Okay, it was funny, you got me. Ha ha, now put the phone down,” Justin said.

Daphne grinned at him, and then cleared her throat. “Liberty Hospital calling for Brian Kinney. Oh, hello Brian!”

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Brian climbed off the bed, tossed the condom in the trash and headed to the bathroom. “Oh, we’re finished. You can go,” he said. The trick on the bed looked confused, and then shook his head.

“Well, I walked into this with my eyes wide-open. My friends told me you were an asshole, but they said you were a great fuck, too. I weighed the two and decided it was worth it.”

“Good for you,” Brian said. He was about to go for a shower when the phone rang.

“I’ll see myself out,” the trick muttered when Brian walked passed him, still naked, to answer the phone.

“Hello?” He recognized Daphne’s voice immediately, and wondered if something had happened. Maybe there was some kind of accident. Maybe Justin was hurt.

“Hold please!” Daphne said. She sounded far too chipper for it to be serious. He sighed and waited. There might have been muffled curses and banging audible on the Liberty end of the line but Brian was distracted because the trick who was now fully clothed, was sucking and licking his way down Brian’s body.

“Brian?” a voice came over the line. It took a moment for Brian to recognize it.

“We’re done,” Brian said, pushing the trick away.

“What?” Justin asked, sounding suddenly hoarse.

“Not you, hold on,” Brian said. He covered the phone and glared, pointing a finger to the door.

“Fine,” the trick said, and headed out.

Brian waited until the door had slid closed. “Justin?” he asked.

“Brian.”

“...You called me?” Brian asked.

“No!” Justin said. “Wait. Yes!” Justin said. “Well, Daphne did. I told her not to -- I’m sorry if I interrupted something ...”

“Justin,” Brian said, cutting off the young man’s ramblings. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I’m fine,” Justin said. “Why? Is something wrong?” Brian thought he could hear Daphne laughing in the background. He had to admit, he’d never heard the blond sound so scattered.

“Why did you phone? Or Daphne, or whoever,” Brian said, trying to prevent Justin from rambling some more.

He could hear the deep breath Justin took, and smiled a little. He could even imagine the bracing expression on Justin’s face. “It’s about yesterday,” Justin said.

“Okay.”

“I just don’t understand,” Justin said. “What you meant.”

“I thought it was pretty clear,” Brian said, tongue in cheek.

There was a pause, and then “Could you maybe make it clearer?”

Brian pinched the bridge of his nose and paced his loft. He didn’t like talking; he wasn’t any good at it. He nearly tripped over Gus-bear who must have been catapulted off the bed during the vigorous bout of fucking that he and the trick had just engaged in.

Picking-up the teddy bear he adjusted the purple shirt, and then scanned the floor until he found the sunglasses, placing them back on the bear’s face. “Gus is a place holder,” Brian said, thinking aloud about how he knew something was missing, but had tried to avoid putting a name to it. He’d always known, though. “There’s a place for you here.”

It was quiet on the other end of the line. Brian considered checking to see if Justin was still there, but if he strained his ears, he could hear Justin’s shuddering breaths. “But then,” Justin said, his voice coming out rushed. He stopped and was silent for a second, and then in a teasing tone, asked, “Is there enough room? I mean, you and Gus. You’re both complete queens and you take-up a lot of space.”

Brian smirked, and looked down at the teddy bear again. “I think there’s room for one more.”

**Chapter Six: Four Walls and the Right Person**

The box was a bit worse for wear, frequent handling had made the cardboard pliable, but Vic carried it through the halls like a gold medal. Pushing the door open with his foot, he entered the room and grinned when Justin smiled his sunshine smile. “Well, here you are,” Vic said as he placed the box on the bed.

“Thank-you,” Justin said as he pried open the top flaps and peered inside. He'd forgotten what he'd had when he first came to Liberty. His parents had packed his bag, since he had no idea that he was leaving. There were a few books, his regular clothes, and changes of underwear, a warm jacket and boots. The backpack it had been packed in was there, as were some of the things that had been removed from his toiletry kit. Liberty staff had washed everything, and his clothes smelled fresh. Justin smiled at Vic.

“Congratulations, kiddo,” Vic said, clapping a hand on Justin’s back and smiling. “I’ll let you pack and get dressed."

It felt unreal. As he pulled on his clothes, Justin kept wondering if maybe Brian wouldn’t show-up. If maybe this was just a trick. But then again, he trusted Brian. It was mid-October, so Justin pulled on his coat, and then stuffed everything into the backpack. He sat on his bed, wondering when Brian would come to pick him up.

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Brian had arrived early, knowing that Justin was likely anxious. He’d made it inside Building Three and was partway up the stairs before Lindsay had redirected him into one of the side offices.

She’d given him a rundown of Justin’s progress, concluding that it was a good time for him to leave Liberty, but that he would need to continue his weekly sessions. She’d said that Justin was working on the mural, and that it was far from complete. It would make sense if Justin worked-out a schedule to work weekly on the mural, and he’d have a session then, just for convenience.

All in all, Lindsay sounded like a mother parting with her child, and Brian had to explain that he wasn’t planning on neglecting anything regarding Justin’s health. To which Lindsay responded by handing over a contact to a therapist for Justin, several sheets of paper regarding ‘the care and feeding’ of one Justin Taylor. His allergies were quite the list, including Tylenol, which Brian had to admit he’d never heard of.

“He’s going to be a bit unsteady, you understand?” Lindsay said. “He’s been in Liberty for two and a half years, this is going to be an adjustment. Try to keep things steady and predictable for a while, work out a schedule so that he can relax at home. And you’re going to have to be patient, Brian, and supportive. He’s going to be thrown off by all this.”

“It’s not anything I hadn’t figured out for myself,” Brian said, finally, when it was nearing lunchtime. “I’m sure everything will be fine, but if there’s a problem I’ll call.” He took the pages and headed out in the direction of Justin’s room.

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“You ready to go?” Daphne asked, peering into Justin’s room. Justin nodded his head. “It’s kind of happening really fast, isn’t it?” Justin nodded again. Daphne crossed into the room and sat on the bed beside him. “I have a story for you.”

“What is it?”

“When my parents got divorced, I was really upset. I was little and I had a lot of trouble adjusting, and understanding it wasn’t my fault and all that. It was like, as soon as I got used to it just being me and mom, then my mom hooks-up with some new guy, and they were pretty serious. She asked me what I felt about her marrying him, and I couldn’t understand her. She said to me, a home is just four walls containing the right person[i]and that, for her, I made our house a home. I was the right person, so if I wasn’t happy, she wouldn’t remarry.”

“Did she?”

“Yeah, it was the same for me, and I knew I could adjust to Clark, because he made my mom really happy. Now, he's like, the greatest step-dad ever. The moral being, when you start feeling overwhelmed, and like maybe you made the wrong choice, ask yourself if Brian’s the right person, because if he is, then coming back to Liberty would mean leaving your home.” They grinned at each other, and hugged. “And you better keep in touch. You have a mural to finish.”

“You’re a freak,” Justin said. She grinned happily and gave him a hug before she left.

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“Ready?” Brian asked from the doorway.

“I thought you weren’t coming!” Justin said, and then turned a bit red, as if he hadn’t meant to say that.

“Lindsay, apparently, is quite attached to you,” Brian said. “That your stuff?”

“That’s all of it.” Justin’s worldly possessions fit entirely into one backpack, with the exception of any art-related things, all of which fit into the portfolio Brian had brought.

Brian sighed and decided he had to pace himself. First things first. “Well, let’s go. We’ll pick-up your first meal of non-Liberty food to celebrate your liberation. What do you feel like?”

“Pizza,” Justin answered immediately. Brian could imagine Blake swooning and throwing a tantrum, but nodded just the same. He could eat pizza just this once.

The driveway of Liberty Hospital was crowded with people, patients and staff, all of them calling good-bye. “We had a huge party last night,” Justin explained. “It was really cool.” Brian waited while Justin worked his way through the crowd, saying good-bye to everyone, and then breathed a sigh of relief when Justin was finally in the front seat of the Jeep.

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To Justin, the trip to his new home felt like the time Liberty had gone on a field trip to the forest and Debbie had them put on blindfolds while a partner led them through the woods. Justin didn’t know where they were going, except that Brian lived in the city. He didn’t know what he would find when they got there: a house? An apartment? He felt off-balance, nervous and mostly, like he had absolute trust that Brian would get him to wherever they were going, that Brian wouldn’t let him trip.

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Justin was quiet for the entire half-hour drive into Pittsburgh. He followed Brian across the street and up the stairs. At the door of the loft, Brian handed over a spare set of keys he’d had made, on a keychain that said “princess” and stepped back, allowing Justin to do the honours.

“You have a really nice place,” Justin said, gaping at the loft. He ran his fingers over the back of the sofa, touched one of the metal columns, and stared at the large windows. “I like your kitchen.”

Brian smirked. He’d heard compliments like that before, but Justin seemed really in awe of the space. “Bedroom’s through there,” he said, gesturing to the bedroom area. “And the bathroom as well.”

“There’s only one bed,” Justin said as he stood at the top of the steps.

“Will that be a problem?” Brian asked, surprised to find he was actually prepared to do something about that if Justin said it was.

Justin just grinned. “No, just checking.” He walked forward into the room, and then Brian heard his laughter. Brian smirked, knowing what the blond had found.

Gus-bear was sitting on the dresser, a dozen colourful balloons tied to his little bear-paw. Justin picked up the teddy, and freed his paw, allowing the balloons to float to the ceiling. “Where should I put my stuff?”

“The drawers,” Brian said, as if that were obvious -- which it was. He set Justin’s portfolio by the desk, and then followed Justin into the bedroom, showing him the drawers he’d cleared-out. Brian had made space in his closet as well, but it looked as if he wouldn’t need it. He supposed he could ask the Taylors for Justin’s things, but it made more sense and was easier in general if they just started from scratch.

It didn’t take Justin long at all to unpack, and while he did Brian placed the order for the pizza. “It’s so quiet,” Justin said when he came down from the bedroom. He’d pulled-on a sweater and was nervously fiddling with the edge of the sleeve.

“That’s easily fixed,” Brian commented, he turned the TV on and Justin smiled.

“Movie night,” he said.

“Except I have a bigger selection,” Brian commented. Justin settled onto the couch beside Brian, and flipped channels until they found ‘Stand By Me’. The pizza came, which they ate while watching the movie. By the time the central characters were running from the guard dog in the salvage yard, Justin was resting against Brian’s side, and when two of the boys were almost rundown by a train, Justin was fast asleep. Brian watched the rest of the movie, formulating a list of things that they had to do the following day.

“Is it over?” Justin asked, lifting his head off Brian’s chest and rubbing his eyes. In response to Brian’s raised eyebrows Justin grinned and shrugged. “I’m tired.”

“Then it’s time for bed,” Brian said. Justin had relaxed as they watched (and slept through) the movie, but he became hesitant at the suggestion. Brian got around it by ignoring it completely and behaving entirely casual. Soon Justin was standing happily beside him at the sink brushing his teeth.

At the hospital, Brian had always worn the uniform bottoms in deference to his roommate, but had left his top off because he’d never liked to sleep clothed. This was different, though, because it was home. Brian slept in the nude, that’s how he was comfortable, that’s what he did. He pretended not to notice the bathroom door close after he stepped out of it, and instead hung-up his things and climbed into bed. When Justin stepped out of the bathroom he was wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and his underwear.

Brian watched as the blond hesitantly climbed into bed and thought that it was the very first time anyone had ever climbed into his bed with clothes on. Brian flicked off the main light, but left the blue lights on, though he wasn’t sure why. Justin shifted in bed and looked at him. “It’s nice,” he said. “With the light.”

“What are you doing all the way over there?” Brian asked. “It’s not like we’ve never done this before.” Justin grinned and shifted shyly until his body was pressed close to Brian’s. Brian hadn’t ever been one to cuddle, but months ago the same blond boy that was now in his arms hadn’t given him a choice, and he’d gotten used to it.

Justin let out a long sigh, just like he always did once he’d settled-in, and Brian smirked and closed his eyes. On the bedside table, where he had been left, Gus-bear leaned against the alarm clock, his shades still in place.

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Brian awoke to the soft sound of sizzling and someone humming. For a moment, he wasn’t quite sure what was going on, but it flooded back to him quickly and he groaned. “What are you doing up?” he asked as he made his way over to the kitchen.

Justin grinned and handed him a mug of coffee. “I couldn’t help it,” he said. “They’re about to do morning checks at Liberty.” Justin was already washed and dressed, and making breakfast. He was unnaturally awake, in Brian’s opinion.

“We’re going to have to break you of this habit,” Brian said.

“You forgot your clothes,” Justin said.

“No I didn’t,” Brian said, eyeing Justin to see if his nudity made the blond uncomfortable. Justin had been fine with it last night, though Brian had to admit it was very difficult to remain disinterested with Justin pressed close to him sleeping.

“Okay,” Justin said. “Just checking. I used the last of your eggs, by the way. You don’t have a lot in your fridge.”

“I don’t eat breakfast,” Brian answered, setting his coffee down on the table.

“Really?” Justin asked, placing a plate in front of him. There was an omelette and slices of fresh pepper. Brian took one look at the raised blond eyebrows and new that this was non-negotiable. He picked up his fork, and Justin brought another plate to the other side of the table.

The table was set formally, and Justin was sitting back straight, wide-awake and eating primly in a way Brian had never seen the blond do at the hospital. He was certain he looked ridiculous, sitting naked opposite Justin, but he hadn’t had enough coffee to care, and Justin didn’t seem bothered by it. “You don’t need to make breakfast,” Brian said.

“I like cooking,” Justin said. “It’s very relaxing. And we have to come-up with some kind of payment schedule or something, so I can pay rent here.”

“What?” Brian asked.

“We split costs; I can do it, I have the money. And I don’t want to just be some kept-boy or something.”

Brian could practically hear Lindsay or Dr. Erik advising him that this would aid Justin’s adjustment, so he just shrugged and didn’t argue. He could always put the money into a separate account for emergencies. He didn’t need Justin’s money and he didn’t want to take it, but he could see where Justin would need to give it to him and stayed silent.

“This isn’t bad,” Brian said with some surprise when he actually sampled the omelette.

“I know,” Justin said with a devilish grin. “When do you leave for work?”

“I don’t,” Brian said. “Not today.”

“Why not?” Justin asked. “You don’t need to baby-sit me, I can take care of myself.”

“I’m well aware of that,” Brian said, answering cautiously. In truth, he’d taken the day off to be with Justin and make sure the blond was settling in. Apparently, though, it wasn’t wise to tell said blond that. “But like you said, we need groceries, and I haven’t taken a vacation in a while.”

“So what was Liberty?” Justin asked with a smirk.

“Court ordered holidays do not count,” Brian said.

After another cup of coffee, Brian took his plate to the dishwasher and then went to get dressed. When he came down the steps again it was to find Justin sitting on the couch sketching. It seemed absolutely right that he should be there, and any doubts that Brian had about his decision to have the blond move-in disappeared.

Of course, by the time they made it into the grocery store, those doubts began to resurface. “That’s it?” Justin asked.

“What?” Brian asked.

“You’ve put one carton of guava juice and one zucchini in the cart. And don’t think I missed that whole thing with that greasy guy over there. I know why that zucchini is in the cart,” Justin said.

Brian stuck his tongue in his cheek and picked up the zucchini. He twisted it around and inspected it. Then he smiled a devilish smile. “Well, I can chop it up and use it in a salad or something,” Justin said casually. Brian looked down at the zucchini and grimaced. Justin kissed his cheek. “Hey, there’s a sale on chocolate! I love chocolate!” And Justin was off towards the candy isle to pick-up chocolate.

He supposed it was because it had been so long since Justin could go food shopping, at least he hoped that was why they had basically cleaned-out the entire store. “I’ll pay!” Justin said, but Brian was closer to the register and had swiped his card before Justin made it out from behind the cart. Brian mimicked Justin’s earlier actions and kissed the blond’s cheek. Justin poked him ruthlessly in the side with the zucchini, and Brian vowed to never purchase zucchini again.

“Is this okay?” Justin asked somewhat nervously when they were back in the Jeep, groceries piled in the backseat. Brian was reminded of why he preferred Justin acting like a shit; at least he was relaxed when he was doing it.

Brian glanced over to Justin and shrugged. “It’s not bad,” he said, and Justin beamed at him, and then settled back in his seat.

“I’m going to make jambalaya tonight,” Justin said. “I’ve never made it before. I hope it turns out okay!”

**[i] ‘A home is only four walls that enclose the right person’ quote from Helen Rowland’s “Reflection of a Bachelor Girl”**

**Chapter Seven: The Care and Maintenance of Justin Taylor**

“Try not to burn the loft down,” Brian said, reaching across the table and snagging one of the sliced peppers Justin usually served at breakfast. Brian had soon learned that Justin liked the sweetness of the red ones best.

“Have a good day at work, dear,” Justin teased in a falsetto.

“Christ,” Brian snarked. Justin laughed and waved Brian out the door. He’d officially lived at the loft for three days and three nights, and Brian couldn’t have been happier to see Justin settling in. “Oh, that would be your babysitter,” Brian said when someone buzzed. He pressed the button to allow the person entry while Justin huffed.

“I don’t need a babysitter,” Justin said.

“After yesterday, I’m not taking any chances,” Brian said.

In an effort to find a place to store Brian’s large collection of shoes which were ‘summer wear’ apparently, he’d pulled a chair to the closet and proceeded to clear a place for the shoe boxes on the top shelf. He’d discovered a large black box pushed towards the back. Curiosity having gotten the better of him, Justin had reached on his tiptoes to pull the box out, but he’d lost balance and the box had tipped over and spilled its contents down on Justin, who had fallen onto the floor. In anticipation of Justin’s presence in the loft, Brian had cleared all his sex-toys from the drawer by the bed where he usually kept them, and it was these that now came spilling out, pelting Justin as the blond stared wide-eyed at the dildos and beads and various and sundry toys that had come tumbling out as if he’d opened Pandora’s box itself. Brian had made it to the top of the stares to see Justin laughing so hard tears streamed down his face, in a puddle of sex toys. “I can’t leave you alone for a minute!” Brian had complained. It had taken considerably more than a minute for Justin to stop laughing. He had bruises from some of the larger dildos that had fallen on him.

“Baby!” Emmett said, when Brian had pulled back the door.

“Emmett? What are you doing here?” Justin asked, running over and hugging his friend.

“Yes, yes, it’s all very touching, and we’re all so very happy. Excuse me, I have to go to work,” Brian snarked. He picked up his briefcase and stalked towards the door. “Remember to set the alarm,” Brian reminded.

“Sure,” Justin said. “Later.”

“Later,” Brian responded absently as he headed out.

“Oh my lord! I’m so excited!” Emmett said.

“But what are you doing here?” Justin asked.

“Well, Mr. I Have to Work phoned me and said that you, Honey, were in desperate need of some beautiful clothes! I’m more than happy to help, though he’s vetoed some of the stores I would highly recommend. I’m afraid we’re working with several restrictions, but I think we can manage.”

“Let me get my shoes and my wallet,” Justin said.

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They took the bus to the mall and proceeded to peruse every store -- within reason -- until Emmett declared it was time for a break. They ate food at the food court, and decided on a strategy.

They started with underwear. Justin couldn’t see how this was any of Emmett’s business, but the man kept bringing over different styles. “Ooh! These silky ones, I bet Brian would love those!”

“Why would Brian care about my underwear?” Justin asked, his face red.

“Honey,” Emmett said. “Tell me you’re not serious.” Justin turned even redder but added them to his pile.

“I think I’ve got enough,” Justin said. He’d vetoed some of the crazy undergarments Emmett had brought over, no stripes or bright colours. He stuck with plain white and plain black. They picked-up socks as well, before Justin purchased everything and they moved onto the next stage.

Justin liked the low-rise jeans they picked-out, and he picked-up cargo pants as well; and T-shirts, and plain shirts and sweaters. Because he knew he would be looking for a job soon, Justin picked-up some business-casual clothes. He was feeling very spoiled, even if he was paying for it all himself and by the time Emmett suggested they moved onto shoes and accessories, Justin was ready for another break.

“I think we’ve done quite well,” Emmett said. “And I bought you a little something special to celebrate your freedom.” They’d taken a cab back to the loft and Justin had spread all his purchases out surveying his accomplishment.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Justin said as Emmett handed him a bag. Emmett dismissed this comment with a wave of his hand and Justin opened the box. “You’re kidding, right?” he asked.

“They’ll look amazing!” Emmett said. “For clubbing! You’ve got to experience Babylon, and in this, Honey, you’ll make a splash!”

Justin pulled out the black leather pants and the sheer black shirt that would offer just a hint of the skin it covered. “Thanks Em,” Justin said, though he wasn’t certain he’d ever wear something like that out in public. He’d try it on in the bathroom and see how he looked. “I should probably put all this away before Brian gets home.”

“Oh Baby,” Emmett said. “I’m so happy for you!”

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Brian’s day had been agony after agony. Files lost by incompetent once-employees, wire transfers getting delayed because of bank issues, ad boards looking like something a baby might cough up on noodle-night. He’d yelled, he’d paced, he’d pinched the bridge of his nose. He didn’t throw anything or punch a wall out, so he was certain both Lindsay and Dr. Erik would agree he had handled his stress quite well. The point was he just wanted to go home, drink a bottle of JB and collapse onto bed after watching some bad TV.

Stepping out of the elevator, Brian had his keys ready and the loft door was open in a minimal amount of time and just as quickly he became acquainted with the irritating, grating sound of pots striking pans. He took a bracing breath, reminding himself Justin was not responsible for his shitty day. Tried to prepare himself for Justin’s running description of his own day, because Brian was certain the blond at least had a good day and was now eager to share every second of it.

When he thought he was ready he closed the loft door and stepped forward, peered into the kitchen to see only Justin’s bottom half sticking out of a cupboard. He admired the view, but it raised his spirits only slightly.

Dropping his briefcase on the table, Brian was removing his suit jacket when Justin popped out of the cupboard and sprung-up to his feet with ease, his bright smile disappearing when he noticed Brian’s face. Brian wasn’t sure what he should say, was surprised he felt a bit guilty for bringing his bad mood home because it was dampening Justin’s good mood and the blond needed good memories. Still, it was his home as well, and he’d be damned if he wasn’t going to come and go from it as he pleased.

He was cut-off when Justin stepped forward and covered his mouth with one hand and kissed his temple. Then he was pushed up the stairs to the shower. Justin grinned a little and then pulled the bathroom door closed with just dramatic slowness that Brian got the point.

He showered and tried to put the day behind him, like Lindsay had taught him. Feeling a bit better when he was done and grateful enough that he thought he might be prepared to hear Justin’s monologue, Brian threw on some clothes and stepped out to the main living space, but the Justin only glared at him when he opened his mouth to speak, and so they ate the soup Justin had prepared silently. They left the dishes on the table as Brian was once again ushered in a direction, this time to the couch. Brian sprawled out while Justin flicked on the TV, and instead of sitting on one of the other chairs, Justin climbed onto Brian’s sprawled body and settled himself. Brian felt a gentle kiss placed at his throat and then got a mouthful of blond hair as Justin shimmied down and rested his head on Brian’s chest. So JB was replaced by JT, which just might be an improvement, Brian thought.

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Justin lasted four nights, which was huge, in his opinion. Still, that was four nights of climbing into bed beside Brian and dreading falling asleep. And since Justin didn’t do anything halfway, when it happened, it happened on a grand scale.

He slid into wakefulness like a baseball player sliding into home plate. He already knew what had happened, wasn’t quite sure how Brian would take it and didn’t think he was prepared to talk about it anyway, so he kept his eyes closed, tried to breathe and tried to put the images out of his mind.

Brian touched his shoulder, likely to comfort him or to catch his attention, but coming down from the nightmare as he was, the unexpected contact made Justin’s entire body jerk so violently he almost hopped right off the bed. “Justin,” Brian said, withdrawing his hand, but Justin could feel the bed shifting and knew Brian was sitting close to him.

“I’m sorry,” Justin said, covering his face with his hands. He listened to Brian let out a slow breath of air, and didn’t remove his hands from his face.

“Every night?” Brian asked.

“This is the first time since I came here,” Justin said, finally dropping his hands. “I should have told you, but I don’t think it occurred to me. I think I forgot about it, for a while.”

Brian nodded and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “This is why you didn’t have a roommate?”

“Part of it,” Justin confessed. “I used to be able to keep awake for a while, and then if I had a nightmare whoever was sharing the room would be so fast asleep I wouldn’t bother them.”

“I remember.”

“But now, I’m just loud. I can’t help it. Sometimes are worse than others. I spoke to Lindsay about it and she said if that made me uncomfortable, then I didn’t have to share a room. So I got the room to myself. I’m really sorry.”

“Justin,” Brian said. “Don’t be sorry, not for this, not for fucking anything.”

“Okay,” Justin said.

“Can you get back to sleep?” Brian asked. Justin shifted, digging through the sheets until he liberated Gus-bear from the tangle of bedding. Holding Gus-bear close, Justin turned his back to Brian and lay very still. Brian’s hand touched his waist, then moved slowly, like a snake, until his whole arm had looped around Justin’s middle, and Justin felt his body being pulled backward until he had settled against Brian’s chest.

“I think I can get back to sleep,” Justin said, smiling a little.

“Then do it,” Brian said. Justin closed his eyes.

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Justin had decided to live off his inheritance for a while, until he got adjusted to living away from Liberty. He distracted himself with sketching, going for walks, and sometimes he’d visit the local galleries. Justin refused to tell Brian that sometimes the crowds on the sidewalk were daunting, so much so that he often ducked into a small store or coffee shop until he got his bearings.

Lindsay had already explained that this sort of reaction was to be expected, and Justin thought exposure to such environments in small amounts would help him adjust, so every day was a sort of test. He would go for a walk, see how he handled the crowds. On really good days he’d reward himself with a good book, or a video he’d always loved. On Saturday Justin had rewarded himself with ‘Yellow Submarine’, which had always been his favourite film, liking the animation as much as the music. He tried not to get lost in memories of all the times he’d watched it when he had been living with his parents as he’d walked home with his new purchase. For distraction, Justin had worked on convincing Brian that being ‘subjected to that crap’ was a good thing. He’d won, naturally, he always won; but he enjoyed the way Brian tried to resist.

Brian had brought home a black P-coat and a scarf saying it was so he would never have to look at the hideous thing Justin had been wearing up until then. It was getting cooler and Justin appreciated the warmer coat. They’d made-out after that. Justin was enjoying those small intimacies, but he wanted more so badly. Worry filled him, however, because he knew he wasn’t ready for everything. He wondered if he ever would be.

“First things, first,” Justin breathed, straightening his shoulders and heading out for his walk. He wasn’t going to let what Hobbes had done come between him and Brian. He wasn’t going to let that asshole win. He was going to get better, it wasn’t an option, it was a fact.

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A few days after Justin had moved in, Brian had purchased a drop cloth and a large easel. Justin had been sketching and using the supplies Brian had brought him when he had still been in hospital, but Brian thought Justin might want to paint. He went-up a few times a week to Liberty to work on the mural, and have a session with Lindsay. They’d gone to get the art supplies, and Brian had watched as Justin ran his fingers gently over every brushed, gaped at every canvas, handling everything with a reverence Brian had never seen.

Justin painted at odd hours, and when he did he got the paint all over himself. Brian had restricted him after the first day, to that same outfit whenever he was painting so that the blond didn’t ruin everything he had.

“I don’t even want to know how you got paint in your hair,” Brian said as Justin walked passed him, setting his cleaned brushes back in the canister by the easel.

“Shut up,” Justin said with a mock-glare. “I’m having a shower.” They’d made plans with Emmett to go to Woody’s. Brian didn’t want to jump right in and show Justin Babylon, he was still concerned about how the blond was adjusting. Justin tried to hide it, but he tensed and sometimes flinched when they were in large crowds. It made sense to go only with people Justin trusted and try something on a smaller scale. So Brian and Emmett had agreed and Woody’s was the place.

Flipping through channels, Brian finally settled on a show that he was only half paying attention to as he waited for Justin to shower. The knock on the door wasn’t entirely unexpected. He and Justin had made bets concerning Emmett, Justin convinced that he’d meet them at Woody’s as planned, Brian almost certain that Emmett would show-up at the loft to dress Justin and then get a ride over.

He had a witty comment on the tip of his tongue as he slid open the door, but he froze on the delivery because it wasn’t Emmett it was his mother. “Brian,” she greeted, pushing her way into the loft. She was carrying another cake, which she deposited on his counter. “I was just in the area and after Claire told me what you did for the boys, I’ve been meaning to ...”

“Brian! Do you think this would be ... Oh. Hi.” Justin’s skin was glistening, wet from the shower. His blond hair was tussled, and he was clad in only a towel. His right hand, which had frozen the moment he had seen their guest, was grasping one of his FCUK T-shirts that Brian would never admit to liking.

Brian watched as his mother’s eyes very slowly ran up the length of Justin’s body, settling on a very open and shocked expression that made Justin look even younger than he was. The little noise his mother made was something he had never heard, a cross between a whimper and a moan and something else, as if she were going to be physically ill right there.

Then she turned on her heel and sped for the door. “Mother,” Brian called, turning on his heel, ignoring Justin’s frantic apologetic expression.

“Don’t you dare!” his mother said, spinning back suddenly at the door. “Did your father know? Oh, Lord help me!” she moaned. “You’re going to hell for this! You’re burning in hell for this! Oh,” she seemed part enraged and part concerned for his welfare. “And with -- with that boy! -- Oh, Brian. It makes me sick. How could you? How could you?”

Brian was ready, armed with sarcasm and taunts, to carry on this grand Kinney tradition. The voice that followed Joan Kinney’s statement, however, was low and controlled, and the most threatening sound Brian had ever heard. “Get out of my home.”

“I--” Joan seemed just as shocked. She blinked and gaped slightly as ‘that boy’, still in only a towel, stalked forward, glaring. He was small, but Brian didn’t doubt that Justin would do serious damage. He could recognize the same dark expression that he had found on Justin’s face several months ago in a brightly painted room in solitary.

“Get out,” Justin said.

“Hey,” Brian said softly, intercepting Justin and pulling him close to his chest. “She’s leaving. Don’t let it throw you,” he said. Justin’s body was shaking in his arms, and he reached out with one arm to shut the loft door and lock it, his mother on the other side.

“How could she say those things!” Justin said, fighting against Brian’s embrace. Brian fought to maintain his hold, and finally Justin relaxed again and let out his breath, his body going somewhat limp. “Are you okay?”

Brian chuckled. “Nothing I hadn’t figured she’d say,” Brian said. Justin pressed a kiss to Brian’s chest, covered by a black silk shirt he’d planned on wearing out. “Come on.” Brian deposited Justin on the couch, poured them each a double shot of beam. Justin sat and stared at it a while before he knocked it back, gagging only a little.

“I’m going to go get dressed,” Justin said, his voice sounding flat. Brian watched him go. Brian had gotten used to seeing the blue, ratty sweater. He wasn’t sure of its story, but he imagined there was one. When Justin came back down the steps from the bedroom, he was bearing it, with a long-sleeved shirt underneath, and a pair of jeans. He settled onto the couch, tucked his knees to his chest and pulled the ratty sweater over his knees. Brian poured him another short, and pondered what he should say.

The buzzer rang fifteen minutes later, and Justin’s entire body, which had been relaxed, jerked in response. Brian asked who it was and it was Emmett. He let the man up, but decided not to bring-up the money Justin owed him.

“What happened to you?” Emmett asked when Brian had slid open the loft door.

“Change of plans,” Brian said. Emmett had been more than happy to sandwich Justin on the couch and watch ‘Dark Harbor’, which was playing on TV.

“This is the worst movie I have ever seen!” Brian declared, partway through.

“It’s worth it for the kiss at the end! Ooh, Alan Rickman is dreamy,” Emmett said. Brian quirked a disbelieving eyebrow. “Well, his voice his very hot,” Emmett said. “I’d do him.”

“You’d do anyone,” Brian muttered.

“I’m missing valuable plot because you two are bitching!” Justin said.

“What are you missing? Emmett already told you the ending,” Brian snarked. Justin grinned and nudged him in the side, and Brian settled back down happy that, at least, the crappy movie had distracted the both of them from the events of the evening.

**Chapter Eight: The Old Blue Sweater**

“What the fuck is that?” Brian asked as Justin came down the stairs from the bedroom dressed in cargo pants and running shoes and that ratty sweater Brian had seen him wear on the field trips at Liberty.

“A sweater?” Justin said. He looked up at Brian, oddly vulnerable and Brian wasn’t sure how to proceed. He had no idea about the symbolism of the sweater; Justin hadn’t spoken a word about it. All Brian knew was that it was too big, and too ratty, and it did nothing for the young man who wore it. Then again, Brian thought as he watched Justin fiddle with the holes in the sleeve, nervously wrapping it around his fingers and then unwrapping it, maybe it was like a security blanket.

Justin had been nervous ever since Brian had mentioned going to the Diner and meeting the Gang, Brian’s Gang, which was growing faster than he had ever anticipated. He could practically hear all the thoughts buzzing through Justin’s head, wanting Brian’s friends to like him, worried about the crowds, worried about saying or doing the wrong thing, about being ridiculed because he’d spent two years in a mental institution. Showing up in that sweater wasn’t going to do him any favours, but Brian read Justin’s body language and figured it would at least comfort the nervous blond.

Justin’s mood-swings were getting confusing. At times Justin was cocky and confident, at others he was a barely contained mess. So far as Brian could see, the best way to handle it was to ignore it. Justin usually got himself under control, and seemed more frustrated with his nerves than anything, so Brian played it cool, pretended he didn’t notice and did his best to appear as if he wasn’t watching over the younger man like a hawk. So far it was working.

“Let’s go,” Brian said, Justin smiled a little and walked quickly out of the loft. “Forget something?” Brian called, holding-up the messenger bag that Justin had taken to carrying around. It contained a sketchbook and pencils and god knew what else. Justin grinned, accepted the bag and then jogged down the stairs.

Emmett was walking into the Diner as they pulled up, and Brian was pleased to see that Justin relaxed. From previous experience hitting Woody’s together, Brian knew that for Justin heading into a new environment, having two allies was better than having one. It proved to be true once more, because as they entered the Diner Brian smirked to realize that Justin’s strutting walk was back and he followed Emmett confidently to the booth.

“Everyone!” Emmett said, taking it upon himself to make introductions. “This is Justin!” Justin grinned and waved, and slid into a new booth across from Emmett and beside Brian.

“Blake?” Justin asked, his eyebrows suddenly rising at the sight of who had twisted around to see him.

“Hi! It’s good to see you again. How have you been doing?” Blake asked, one arm slung around Ted, and the other reaching out to Justin.

Justin turned a bit red and scratched behind his ear. “Fine,” he said.

“He’s been making waves across town,” Brian answered, wrapping an arm around Justin. He ignored the slightly devoted smile Justin flashed in his direction, but he doubted that Ben had missed it if the smile the man was giving the newest addition was anything to go by.

Brian had been braced for the comments. Years of care and commitment-free tricking had made him notorious. Ted and Ben both frequently spoke about Brian’s exploits, though for different reasons. Ted always seemed a little bitter and jealous, Ben wanted Brian to convert to the Zen-life and become some celibate monk with a husband. Ben wouldn’t have brought it up at the Diner, though, in front of someone like Justin, but Brian was certain Ben spoke with David about his tricking, and David was exactly the sort of person who would bring it up.

The conversation continued, Ben and Justin getting along quite well, and not a mention was made about Brian’s exploits. He was sure that Blake’s left hand, which was not visible above the table, likely, had a grip of some part of Ted (Brian didn’t want to think about what part) in case he made a comment. And Emmett had stepped in twice to distract Justin from David’s snarking and Brian appreciated that at least there were some people willing to give him a chance.

He’d stopped tricking, after all. Once he’d invited Justin to stay at the loft, there really had been no other option. So Brian resolved to not trick until he knew exactly what Justin wanted, that way the blond had no surprises coming his way. Except that he didn’t exactly know about Brian’s past. At least, when it came-up, Brian would be able to emphasise that it was the past.

As the plates were cleared and conversation died, Ben leaned over to Justin. “We’re heading over to Babylon tonight, if you want to come.”

“No shit,” Justin, who had hung on Brian’s every word when he’d described the place, was eager to see it. “Tonight?”

“We have other plans,” Brian cut-in. “We’ll be there Wednesday, though.”

“Why did you say we had other plans?” Justin asked when they were leaving the Diner. “I want to see what it’s like.”

“I know you do,” Brian said. “And you will. But not tonight.”

“Do we actually have other plans?” Justin asked as he shut the door to the Jeep. Brian turned to look at the young man, his lips quirked, his tongue in his cheek.

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“You know what’s weird?” Justin asked. He was lying on the floor of the loft, like a starfish and when he spoke he crinkled his nose.

“People who screw metal spikes into their skull because they don’t like their hair?” Brian guessed.

“No,” Justin said. “Well, that’s weird, but that’s not the weird thing I was thinking about.” Brian handed the joint back to Justin, and Justin took a hit, holding it in like Brian had shown him. “When you wiggle your eyebrows.”

“Me?”

“No, anyone. Wiggling their eyebrows. It’s weird.” Brian waited until Justin tilted his head up, and then he wiggled his eyebrows. Justin watched it blankly, then comment. “It’s, like, really skanky,” Justin said.

“Does anyone use the word ‘skanky’ anymore?”

“I do.”

“Anyone not weird?”

“Well, if they don’t, they should,” Justin said. “Skanky is a good word. Like mewl or lethargic.”

“Lethargic?”

“It’s a good word. People don’t use it so often. They say ‘lazy’, but lethargic is a good word.”

“So’s stoned,” Brian said.

“Yeah, I like that too.” They snickered for a minute. “I’m glad we had other plans tonight.”

“What plans?”

“The other plans you said we had, that were really to just come back here and get stoned. That was a good plan,” Justin said.

“You’re just saying that because you’re stoned,” Brian said.

“Exactly.” Like any good conversation explored while stoned, theirs rambled over several different subjects each of which they discussed quite seriously, until Brian brought up the blue sweater.

“What blue sweater?” Justin asked, confused.

“The one you have on.”

Justin lifted his head off the floor and picked at the sweater. “Hey!” he said, as if he hadn’t realized what he had on. “Oh this has history,” he said.

“I know,” Brian said. “That’s why I asked.”

“Sweater history, 101,” Justin said, and he snickered. “The first boy I ever had a crush on gave it to me. It’s how I knew I was gay.”

“Because you liked his sweater?”

“We were on a field trip, I have no idea where we went,” Justin said, holding the joint between his fingers and using his thumb to scratch above his eyebrow. “Probably the museum or something. Because, you know, it was a class trip so it had to have been educational. Anyway, he was the older brother of a kid in school. Totally hot, and I’d been stealing glances at him. When we were leaving, it had gotten really cold -- because weather does that in the winter -- and all I had was my long-sleeved shirt and my vest. So he gave me his sweater, because he had a warm coat and shirt underneath.”

“Did it look like that?” Brian asked, eyeing the sweater distastefully.

“It was new at that point,” Justin said. “But I took it when my parents told me we were going on a car-ride, because it looked like it might be cold, and because it made me feel safe. It reminded me, you know? Of who I was.”

“A big queer,” Brian said.

“The biggest,” Justin said. Then he snickered, and Brian joined in, until he slid off the couch he’d been sprawled on. “Weed makes you graceful,” Justin said. Which only prompted them to laugh more.

The next morning, as he dressed for work, trying not to wake Justin, Brian eyed the blue sweater that lay on the ground. It looked as if, at one point, it might have been a dark indigo blue, now it was faded, and worn soft. There were holes in the cuffs, where Justin’s nervous fingers twisted; stretched out from all the times Justin had pulled it over his bent knees. Brian finished fixing his tie, then bent and picked up the shirt, folding it and placing it in one of Justin’s drawers.

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Justin woke-up late, and was momentarily disoriented. It had been well over two years since he had slept in. He decided he liked it. He breathed deep and yawned and stretched out on the bed. He knew Brian would have left for work already, and so he flipped onto his back, and then rolled over onto his stomach until his face was buried in Brian’s pillow and he breathed in deep. Then rolled his eyes at himself. He wiggled his toes and then rolled again, out of bed and hopped up onto his feet. He couldn’t remember how he had gotten to bed last night, but wasn’t worried, maybe Brian had carried him, or maybe they had both staggered into it. It didn’t matter. He felt well rested and relaxed in a way he hadn’t felt in some time.

With a bounce in his step, Justin ate his late breakfast, washed and dressed, and then jogged down the stairs and out into the street. He paused, waiting for the usual ripples of panic, but none came, so he picked a direction and started walking.

He’d spoken to Lindsay on Thursday and come to a decision. After the incident with Brian’s mother, Justin was worried that he hadn’t entirely dealt with his anger. The only way he knew to deal with it, besides bottling it up and trying to ignore it, was to paint until it got out of his system. Clearly, painting wasn’t enough, though. When he had attacked Hobbes there had been a sort of freedom he’d felt, just because he was finally beating the shit out of someone, just like he’d wanted to do. He’d wanted to strike back at his father those years ago, but he couldn’t because he’d still loved his father, because he hadn’t quite realized that his father and the man choking him were the same person. With Hobbes, he’d been held back by many reasons, but when he had lashed-out, he felt free and that had been amazing.

Since going around and beating people up wasn’t an option Justin liked, he chose the only other thing that made sense. ‘Street Smartz’ was a small gym two blocks away from the loft. There were large windows and a big blue and orange sign above it. Inside, the walls were an exotic blue, with mirrors covering one length of the wall and mats on the floor. The woman at the desk by the door had greeted him brightly, and happily signed him up for a course.

They taught a wide-range of things at Street Smartz from karate and tai chi, to kick boxing and regular boxing. Since Justin didn’t know anything besides the fact that he wanted to punch something, he signed-up for a general course that would teach him a little bit of everything. The group was small, and Paula -- who was the woman who had greeted him -- had nothing but good things to say about the instructor. The class met twice a week, on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

From there, Justin took his sketchbook to a park and sketched some of the children playing, and the mothers running after them, or sitting on the benches as talking. One of the children had a puppy, and Justin thought sadly of Tigger. He’d been putting it off, but he would have to return to his parents house to gather some of his things, and let Molly know where he was. He also missed his dog. Maybe he could convince Brian to let him bring Tigger back to stay with them?

He picked up some fresh vegetables on the way home and decided that he’d make a salad, he didn’t feel very hungry, thoughts of his parents usually robbed him of his appetite.

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Moby had been Justin’s reward to himself after he had stayed perfectly calm while he had walked down a busy Liberty Avenue in the evening, and suffering through an ugly man trying to pick him up. It wasn’t so much that the man had been unattractive than that he had repeatedly invaded Justin’s personal space.

In celebration of his imminent introduction to Babylon, Justin cranked the stereo as he got dressed. “What the fuck are you listening to?” Brian asked.

“Moby!” Justin said as he bopped a bit, only partly because he was slipping into a pair of jeans. “It’s really hot!” Brian tried to stifle a smile and rolled his eyes. Justin whipped the pullover he had been wearing off and bopped to the T-shirt he’d draped over the back of the sofa, tilting his head from side to side. “Woo!” he said, in time to the song.

Brian snorted and focussed on buttoning his shirt. His eyes kept skirting sideways to look at the smooth expanse of skin that was Justin’s back, or to observe Justin’s lean body as he danced and attempted to writhe his way into his shirt at the same time. He’d been reduced to jerking-off in the shower to thoughts of the young blond, and that was something he was not used to.

“Ready?” Justin asked.

“Lead the way,” Brian said. Justin turned off the stereo and followed Brian to the door. Brian had to admit he liked the robin’s egg blue shirt Justin was wearing, with the yellow edging. Justin plain enough, and yet tight enough that Justin looked delicious.

Justin was entirely excited about going to Babylon. He loved dancing, he loved music, he had not had the chance to go dancing in ages, and never at a gay dance club. He really hadn’t thought it through. He was all grins and giggles until Brian led him beyond the chain-link curtain and Justin saw the sea of half-naked men. The entire club was packed with them, they were dancing and drinking and ... Justin gaped as he saw three men practically going at it in a corner.

He gripped Brian’s arm so he didn’t lose him in the crowd, and thanked the dim lighting because Brian couldn’t see that Justin’s smile was a tense one. They made it to the bar, and Justin realized that Brian’s height had worked to their advantage because Brian had spotted David and Ben and Emmett.

“Hey, Baby!” Emmett greeted, bouncing over and kissing Justin’s cheek.

“Hi! This is incredible,” he said.

“Isn’t it?” Emmett said. “Welcome to Babylon!” He threw his arms wide.

“One day, Simba, this will all be yours,” Brian said. Justin elbowed him in the side. Brian rolled his eyes and handed over a double shot of Beam. Justin knocked it back and ordered another.

“Whoa, slow down,” Ben said, chuckling. “We’ve got all night.” Justin didn’t say that that was what he was afraid of.

“Want to dance?” Brian asked. Justin grinned and nodded. Justin kept his body close to Brian’s as they danced, knowing that Brian would keep him safe. The music was loud and thrumming, and Justin thought the music was so loud it was changing the rhythm of his heart to match the downbeat. He closed his eyes and tried to forget everything else around.

They danced a few songs and then headed back to the bar, each picking up another shot, and then Brian insisting they drink some water. “You really don’t want a hangover tomorrow.” Justin had never drunk so much in his life, and trusted that Brian knew more about avoiding the downside of alcohol, so he drank the water.

“Hey,” Ben said, “Let’s dance.” He tilted his head towards the dance floor and Brian turned to look at Justin.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Yeah, go ahead,” Justin said. “I’m fine.” Brian nodded and he and Ben were soon lost in the crowd. Justin took a breath and was surprised when someone slid close against him. “David?” he asked.

David grinned and stepped back. “Sorry, I was pushed.”

“That’s fine,” Justin said, fiddling with the beer he’d ordered.

“This isn’t really my scene,” David said. “It’s like a flesh market. People here lose sight of the other part of hooking up. Meeting someone who thinks the same, or feels the same. Finding someone who isn’t just interested in the sex.”

“Hm,” Justin said, sipping his beer.

“You don’t strike me as the sort of person who hooks-up for something casual. How the hell did you meet Brian?”

Justin frowned. He didn’t want to talk about how he had met Brian, didn’t want to discuss his history, not with David, not with anyone. “Emmett!” he greeted as the taller man danced over to them. He latched on the opportunity to change the topic.

“Hey Baby! Having a good time?”

“Yeah! Brian’s dancing with Ben.”

“He left you all by your lonesome?” Emmett asked.

“I’ve been keeping an eye on him,” David said.

“But you should be dancing, Baby,” Emmett said. “Let’s go!” Justin decided he liked dancing with Emmett, he threw his arms up and waved them around so he looked a bit like an ostrich performing a rain dance, but it was completely free and he was so clearly enjoying himself that Justin decided he liked Emmett’s ‘praise Jesus’ move.

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“Where’s Justin?” Brian asked as he returned to the bar.

“Over there,” David said, pointing to Emmett and Justin. Justin had drawn a lot of attention, and he’d been watching with some amusement as Emmett and Justin continually turned away men who wanted a piece of one or the other of them.

“He seems to be having a really good time,” Ben said.

“So do you,” David said, grinning and Ben.

“It’s nice to get out and dance once in a while, gets me out of my head,” he said. Ben was a writer, and had been working on his next book a little obsessively. He was happy to have a distraction, a reason to take a break from writing.

“I love this place!” Justin said as he and Emmett returned to the bar. Justin wound his arms around Brian’s neck and dropped his head back.

“What is he on?” Brian asked, glaring at Emmett.

“I gave him a tab of E. He’s okay, Brian, I’ve been watching him,” Emmett said.

“Has he done E before?” Brian asked.

“I don’t think so,” Emmett said with a shrug. “He needed to relax a little, let loose.”

“I feel amazing,” Justin said.

“I bet you do,” Brian muttered. “At least drink this,” he handed Justin a bottle of water.

“Kay!” Justin said

“I’m taking the princess home,” Brian said. “Say bye-bye, Princess.”

“Bye!” Justin said, waving his hand.

“I love this loft,” Justin declared as Brian pulled open the door, watching warily as Justin entered. “It’s so glamorous!” He spun a circle, and then proceeded to slip out of his shoes without undoing them, and remove his coat.

“I’m missing an arm,” he said, as he tried to pull his coat off. His left arm was stuck in the sleeve. “Seriously, Brian,” Justin said, he was walking in a circle, picking at the coat sleeve that had eaten his arm, both arms behind his back and with one shoe off and the other on.

“Christ, you’re a mess,” Brian said. “Hold still.” He slipped the coat off Justin’s shoulder and draped it over the back of the couch. “Come on, let’s get you to bed.”

“Your bed is totally hot!” Justin said, turning and heading up the stairs, Brian trailing behind him, watching in amusement as Justin, uninhibited as a result of the alcohol and the E, shed his T-shirt. His socks followed his T-shirt, arching in the air and lying in forgotten puddles on the floor, and then Justin climbed onto the bed, hopping twice before turning and grinning. Brian stood at the foot of the bed, watching Justin’s actions with amusement. “What?” Justin asked, stepping back to the edge of the bed. “What did I do?”

Brian, however, was distracted, his attention caught on Justin’s lips, on how Justin was biting one corner. He raised a hand and gently pressed on Justin’s bottom lip, forcing white teeth to relinquish their grip; then he pressed his lips to Justin’s.

It took only a moment, and then Brian came to his senses and pulled back, not wanting to push the blond into anything. But Justin, eyes closed, followed Brian’s lips blindly and pressed them together again, his lips opening in surrender and Brian slipped his tongue inside.

Justin’s arms were wrapped around Brian’s head, their tongues slow and languid in their movement. Brian stepped up onto the mattress gripping Justin’s hips, and then circling his arms around the younger man’s waist, pulling him close. He tipped them over, until they were sprawled on the bed, and Justin’s hands ran from his head down his neck and his chest. “Off,” Justin said, his fingers frantically bunching Brian’s shirt, and tugging. Brian knelt and pulled the shirt off, then leaned forward again, welcomed by Justin’s mouth and his tongue.

Justin’s breath was thick and his thoughts entirely focussed. He wanted Brian, he didn’t care how, he just wanted him. As the taller man’s fingers worked at his belt Justin bent his legs, his arms crossed over his face, unable to grasp that this was happening, his hips thrusting upwards of their own volition. Then Brian was kissing a trail of wet kisses down Justin’s chest, following the trail of gold hair beneath his navel, and then closing his lips around Justin’s arousal and sucking.

Justin’s hips lifted from the bed, his head tipping back and gasping. Smiling a little at the intense reaction, Brian grasped the slender hips; easing Justin back down before took more of Justin into his mouth. Justin’s arms flopped uselessly to either side of him, his mouth open but unable to voice anything beyond pleased grunts and gasps, and his eyes closed tight. He’d never felt anything like it before, he didn’t want it to ever end -- he needed it to end right that minute, needed to come. There was a vague knot of tension in his belly, warning him that this was too much, too soon, that he should be worried. But that vague knot was overwhelmed by the pleasure of Brian’s mouth on him, of that tongue working him, of Brian’s hands, and Brian’s body, and the E and the alcohol.

Brian was watching Justin as he sucked on him, savouring each sound his touch elicited, enjoying how the blond held nothing back. He was loose and free on Brian’s bed, his fingers tangling the sheets as he gripped them, Brian could feel the bone of Justin’s right ankle between his shoulder blades as Justin’s leg pressed gently to the back of his head, trying to press him closer, trying to get more. Pale skin was covered in a sheen of sweat, Brian had never seen anything as beautiful as Justin in that moment.

“Please,” Justin said, his voice raspy, rough around the edges like it had been that first time Justin had spoken. Brian squeezed Justin’s balls and took Justin in deeply, and Justin moaned, a low debauched sound, and then Brian was swallowing as Justin came in his mouth. When Justin’s cock had stopped pulsing Justin was totally limp, his legs dropping to the bed, his fingers relaxing, and his eyes closing. Brian sat back and eyed his work with no small amount of satisfaction.

“I love you,” Justin said quietly, still gasping. Brian looked closely at Justin’s relaxed face. He’d never opened his eyes, has only whispered it quietly, as if he hadn’t expected anyone to hear but had to say it anyway. Brian didn’t think it was just the drugs talking.

**Chapter Nine: All The Lost Things**

“Just checking,” Justin said lightly as he finished brushing his teeth. He rinsed his toothbrush then dropped it in the holder Brian had by the sink, stopping to smile at how his toothbrush looked sitting in the holder beside Brian’s.

“Why do you say that?” Brian asked as he walked into the bathroom, tying his tie.

Justin shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m trying to figure-out how things run here.”

“This is your home, they run however we want them to run,” Brian said.

“Okay,” Justin said agreeably, and smiled. Brian watched Justin as the blond headed out of the bathroom. He’d heard the phrase too frequently from Justin to dismiss it so casually. It always followed a casual inquiry into the loft set-up, or Brian’s behaviour. ‘You forgot your clothes’, and Brian would say that he hadn’t forgotten them, and Justin would shrug and say ‘Just checking’. He’d done it several times, and Brian, following a comment from Dr. Erik, was beginning to realize that it was because Justin was uncomfortable.

“Are you okay?” Brian asked, following Justin back into the bedroom again.

“Yeah,” Justin asked, scrunching his face in that way he did when he wasn’t sure what the hell Brian was talking about.

“I’ll pick something up for dinner, Tai good for you?” Brian asked, knowing Justin had learned this was his way of saying he was working late.

“Sure,” Justin said. “Later.”

“Later,” Brian said.

He thought about it on the ride to Kinnetic. The only conclusion that he could arrive at was that he was an idiot. Things had been awkward since they’d woken-up on Thursday morning, Justin slightly hung-over and both of them naked. Justin’s memory of what happened the night before was clear, however, and Brian had blinked bleary eyes open lifting his head to look at Justin, who he was partially lying on, and was immediately confronted with a frozen expression on Justin’s face. He hadn’t been able to interpret it. It was partly shock and embarrassment, but there had been fear and there had been panic as well. Brian had sat up and Justin had quickly wriggled free, apologizing for seemingly nothing at all, and stumbled to the bathroom.

Brian had known it was too fast. He couldn’t help it. He had stopped tricking, he was living with a very attractive young man who was becoming increasingly relaxed and less concerned with keeping his body constantly covered. Justin high and giddy and horny and relaxed had been too much to resist. Three days later and their conversation was down to a bare minimum, and it was always awkward.

And then there were Justin’s questions, and casual dismissals. Dr. Erik said that Justin was likely not seeing the loft as his own. Wasn’t quite used to the idea of living with someone and sharing a space. He was looking at it like he had to fit in to Brian’s lifestyle, hence the ‘just checking’. He was checking, in a way; checking to see what the unspoken rule was so that he wouldn’t make a big thing about it, so he could learn to accept it. Brian had dismissed this when Dr. Erik had said it, but now he wasn’t so certain. He walked around the loft naked, it was habit and sometimes it was also laziness. Mornings were when he usually did it, too set on the idea of his first hit of caffeine to stop and throw on clothes. Justin had seemed fine with it even after their first morning when Justin had moved in. But then again, he’d been making breakfast and had drawn Brian’s attention to his lack of clothes. He hadn’t brought it up again, but Brian had realized that neither had Justin really looked at him when he was naked.

Just like when they climbed into bed. Brian was always naked, was comfortable only when he slept naked. Justin, however, always seemed hesitant about climbing into bed with him. He also always wore clothes. The answer was obvious but it had taken Brian a ridiculous amount of time to come to it. He was parading around naked like a peacock, around a victim of sexual-abuse who was also a virgin. Consciously or not, he was making what was supposed to be their home, as in Justin’s home as well, completely uncomfortable for Justin.

“Fuck,” Brian muttered. He wasn’t prepared to change how he lived. He was comfortable this way; this is what he needed to do for him. But then there was Justin, cooking like a housewife, avoiding confrontations, following unspoken rules even when it made him uncomfortable, and now Justin was also trying to deal with the new implied pressure for sex. Brian knew just what Justin was thinking. That now their casual embraces, their kisses, their make out sessions on the couch would turn into sex, because Brian wanted it.

It was true. Brian really wanted to have sex with Justin. He didn’t, however, want to have sex with Justin until the blond was ready for it. It was all ridiculously complicated. “This is why I don’t do ... this shit,” he muttered to himself. But there was no use stepping around it, if agonizing sessions with Lindsay and Dr. Erik had taught him anything, it was that ignoring something only made it worse. “Fucking relationships.”

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Justin had resolved to not think about it. It wasn’t working very well, but he was determined to try. He tried to not think about it as he watched Brian work at the computer at night, his fingers dancing on the keyboard, his intense expression not totally unlike when he ... He tried to not think about it as he made breakfast, as he climbed into bed at night, as he went into the bathroom every morning to wash and brush his teeth. But Brian’s naked body was everywhere and it always reminded him, and even when Brian was clothed, Justin would still remember.

The truth was that Justin wanted it. He wanted Brian to touch him, he wanted Brian to be with him the way they had been that night. He didn’t want to be drunk or high to get it. That was the truth. The problem, though, was that if he wasn’t drunk or high, then Justin was too fucking terrified. It was hard enough, sometimes, to let Brian hold him, to kiss Brian. Sometimes he’d drown in a flashback, other times he was devoured by panic. “Fucking Hobbes,” Justin snarled.

After all this time, after hours of therapy devoted to talking over and over again about it, Justin was still afraid. And now that he had something he wanted, had experienced something he’d been wanting. Now he was jumpy all the time. How could he explain to Brian that it was too soon? That what they had done had been amazing, and good, but that was all Justin could give. That he needed to adjust to it, and figure things out before he even considered doing anything more, or doing what they had done again without drugs or alcohol this time.

“Jesus Christ, Taylor,” he said to himself. “It’s just sex!” He exhaled in a frustrated ‘whoosh’, and dropped his paintbrush back into the canister. He was too full of nervous energy to settle into a painting. “Might as well do something productive with all my time,” he said, grabbing his keys from the counter where he’d left them, and his bag. He’d bought himself a cell phone, mostly because Brian kept making subtle hints about wondering where the fuck he was whenever he wasn’t in the loft.

He set the alarm, locked the door, and jogged down the stairs. It was time to go home, pack his shit, and really move in with Brian.

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“Justin, Honey,” Jennifer greeted, more than a little shocked to see her son standing on her doorstep when she opened the door.

“Hi,” Justin said.

Jennifer gasped, her eyes watering, and made a little gurgling sound before she lunged forward and hugged her son tight. “Oh Sweetie!” she said. “Oh!”

“I can’t stay long,” Justin lied. “I just came to pick-up my things.”

“But ... but where are you staying?” Jennifer asked.

“Justin!” Molly called, racing down the stairs and flinging herself into his arms. “Holy shit! I was totally heading out to visit you! You prick! Why didn’t you tell me you left?”

“Molly!” Jennifer said, scandalized by her daughter’s language.

“I’m telling you now,” Justin said. “I came to pick-up my things. Where’s Tigger?”

“Oh,” Jennifer said, one hand going to her throat and she shook her head.

“Molly?” he asked, since she seemed more reliable.

“Justin, Tigger got hit by a car. Not that long after you left, he kept breaking out of the house all the time after you’d gone. I think he kept trying to find where you went, but he broke out, and Mr. Jennings down the street was backing out of his driveway,” Molly explained.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Justin asked. “And I asked when you came!” he said, turning to look at his mother. “I asked you, and you said he was fine!”

“Justin,” Jennifer said.

“I didn’t want to upset you. It was so stupid,” Molly said. “I kept knowing I should, but I couldn’t,” she said.

Justin closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “I just need to grab a few things,” he said flatly.

“You can stay for dinner, Sweetie,” Jennifer said.

“I just need to grab my things,” he repeated.

“Okay,” Jennifer said. She went to the front hall table and opened a drawer, handing him a key.

“What’s this?”

“Your father,” she said. “Well...” She shook her head and blinked. “Your father packed your things. They’re in the garage.”

“What happened to my room?” Justin asked. Molly wouldn’t meet his eyes. Neither would his mother. Pushing passed them, he climbed the stairs and found the door to his bedroom, it was closed and when he pushed it open he felt something break in him. The walls weren’t even the same colour. He’d painted a mural on one wall when he was thirteen. He made a collage above his bed. Both of those were gone. Now it was just plain beige walls and four pieces of exercise equipment. Even his curtains had been replaced by Venetian blinds.

He’d borrowed Blake’s car, and was now happy he had changed his decision to just use a cab. He’d planned to take only a few things, to leave the rest with his parents and pick it up later if he needed it. But now he opened the garage to see his life packed-up in boxes, and suddenly he didn’t trust his parents with it anymore. He hauled everything into the car, sending Molly away when she tried to help. He packed everything in, and then he stalked down the driveway.

“Where are you staying?” Jennifer asked.

“Like you care!” Justin said.

“Justin,” Molly said, her voice sounding small.

“Anywhere but here!” he said. He left the garage open. Let his father come home and see the empty space in the garage. Maybe for one minute he might remember that he had a son. Maybe for one minute, he might regret all the things he’d ever done. Maybe, but Justin didn’t think so.

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Brian got home and the loft was dark. It was also quiet. Three cautious steps in and he nearly tripped over a box. He made it to the kitchen, flicked on a light and looked closely at the stack of boxes by the front door. They smelled of dust and aging cardboard, and he worried for a moment that he might never be able to rid the loft of the smell. Then he returned to the real problem, which was how the boxes got there, what was in them, and why Justin was not anywhere in sight.

Justin’s keys were on the counter, where he always left them no matter how often Brian tried to make him leave them in the bedroom. Justin’s shoes were by the front door. Beyond that, Justin seemed completely missing. Except that the blue lights were on in the bedroom, and the comfort those lights provided Justin was one of the first things he’d learned when Justin had moved in.

Brian would never admit that he was concerned and a little cautious as he crossed the floor. He stood at the side of the bed and peered down at Justin, sprawled on his stomach, his head on a pillow, his arms wrapped around it. Even in the blue-light, Brian could make out the tear tracks on Justin’s red face. Justin had cried himself to sleep that much was clear. Brian had no idea why, though.

He slipped his shoes off and then sat on the edge of the bed, placing a hand on Justin’s back. He wondered if Justin would talk to him, or if maybe he should phone Emmett or Blake. Lately they hadn’t been saying much of anything to each other.

Lindsay had told him specifically that Justin needed a steady and relaxing environment so he could focus on more important things. Like getting used to the speed at which the world outside of Liberty moved, and the sheer number of people. Brian had fucked up, though, because he’d unintentionally made Justin’s home environment more taxing. There were dark circles under Justin’s eyes, a result of the nightmares that woke him and often made it impossible for him to return to sleep. And ever since Wednesday, Justin had seemed more cautious when Brian was near him then anything else.

Now Justin was also dealing with whatever had happened that had upset him enough to cry himself to sleep. From the sheer number of boxes in the entranceway, Brian thought he could guess where Justin had gone.

“My dog is dead,” Justin said. Brian was as startled by the silence being split by that flat tone as he was that Justin had woken and he hadn’t noticed. “He’s been dead for a while.” Brian kept his hand on Justin’s back and wondered if there was anything else. He knew Justin had loved his dog. Once Justin had started talking, he’d had endless stories about ‘Tigger’, so named because the dog would sometime hop around, and also because the honour of naming the dog had fallen to a much younger Molly.

“They made my room into an exercise room. My mural is gone,” Justin said. “I don’t exist anymore. Not to them. Any sign of me is in those boxes. I’m not real. They never planned for me to come home.” Justin was crying again, Brian wondered if he noticed the tears. He shifted his hand from Justin’s back and tucked some blond strands of hair behind Justin’s ear. Justin’s face was hot to the touch he’d been crying so hard. “My dog is dead, and I’m not real,” Justin said, and he was openly sobbing, and came into Brian’s arms like a lost child, and Brian just held on.

He held on while Justin sobbed, until Justin didn’t have the energy to cry anymore. Didn’t have the energy to do anything but lie there and breathe, though Brian wondered if maybe Justin was wishing he didn’t even have the energy for that anymore either. He tucked Justin’s head under his chin, then smoothed back the blond hair and kissed his forehead. “You’re home,” he said. “You’re home, you’re home.” Justin sighed and flopped a hand to Brian’s knee and just lay there and listened. “You’re home.” And Brian thought, he’d say it until Justin believed it, because it was already true.

**Chapter Ten: In One Ear and Out the Other**

The Monday of his third week outside of Liberty, Justin woke late and staggered out of bed. He went to the bathroom, too tired to close the door, washed his hands and went in search of coffee. He couldn’t even fully open his eyes.

He’d been in a haze since Saturday when he had gone to his parent’s house and picked-up his things. He’d been unable to focus on painting or sketching, and had been tired. Brian had dragged him out to Woody’s on Sunday, and it had been nice to get out and see everyone but he’d just felt so exhausted and finally Brian had agreed that they’d head home.

As he passed the bed, he noted that there was a vaguely Brian-shaped lump, but he passed by and navigated, mostly from memory, to the kitchen. There was a fur rug by the island in the kitchen and Justin wondered when Brian had bought that and why he’d not noticed it before but coffee was more important than examining the rug. He collapsed onto a chair, his head resting on his arms while the coffee brewed, then he poured himself a mug and sipped it right there, standing by the coffee machine.

Finally he was able to blink he eyes open a little. After another savoured sip where he thought he could actually feel every cell in his body becoming awake, he turned and headed over to examine the rug.

Justin stood there for a moment, staring at the white, furry rug. He blinked. The rug blinked back. “Brian!” Justin called.

“What?” Brian asked, staggering down the stairs, scratching his head with one hand while the other attempted to tie the drawstring of his pants. He’d been wearing those pants around the loft quite frequently, they were black and they were silk, and Brian looked devastatingly attractive in them.

“There’s a dog in the kitchen!” Justin said, turning back to the dog just to see if maybe he had hallucinated.

“Well,” Brian said, crossing around the island and filling a mug without even looking at Justin or the dog. “I’d never own a dog so he must be yours.”

“What?” Justin asked, he turned to look at Brian who was now leaning against the counter, a mug of coffee in his hand, smiling a little, looking much more awake than he had a second ago. “He’s...” Justin said, trying to piece it all together. Brian raised his eyebrows and his head tilted forward a bit, as if he were willing the connection to be made in Justin’s brain. “My dog?”

Brian smiled. “I always knew you were smart!” Justin turned back to the dog. It was a puppy, really, but was fairly large for a puppy. He was white, with dark eyes and a dark nose, and a big pink tongue. He looked like he was grinning at Justin, and Justin grinned back, dropping to the ground and scratching the white ball of fur vigorously.

“What kind of dog is he?”

“A Great Pyrenees,” Brian said. “They’re friendly, intelligent, obedient, and they don’t go stir-crazy if they aren’t walked every three minutes. This one is even house-trained.”

“I can’t imagine you buying something that might damage your loft,” Justin said, laughing.

“Take a look at all that fur, Sunshine,” Brian said seriously. “That could damage my loft, that could also damage very expensive clothes. I expect you to keep him brushed and shedding as little as possible. What’s his name?”

Justin looked back at the dog and couldn’t think of anything. “Something will come to me,” he said.

“In the mean time, I’m heading out for work,” Brian said. He’d shifted his schedule around only a little so that he could be home to see Justin’s reaction. Cynthia had been kind enough to pick-up the beast from the woman who bred and trained them, and then drop it off at the loft. Brian was feeling much better as he got dressed and ready for work. Justin had been in a funk since Saturday and Brian thought this might be the thing to cheer him up. That, and his new compromise about house etiquette, which Justin seemed appreciative of at the very least, the young blond seemed more relaxed now that Brian was naked less frequently.

“Brian!” Justin said as Brian picked-up his briefcase and headed to the door. “Thank-you,” he said, his voice soft, as if the words weren’t enough to express the level of gratitude.

Brian smirked and couldn’t resist a slow kiss, which Justin returned with equal enthusiasm. “Later, Sunshine,” Brian said. He was answered by a dog bark, and Justin’s broad grin.

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Justin made breakfast while the dog sat obediently and watched him, his floppy ears perked and looking attentive as if he were really taking in everything Justin was talking about. Justin was talking about everything.

He ate and fed the dog some scraps from the table on the condition that he not tell Brian, and then Justin got dressed and washed, located the collar and the leash for the dog, and realized that beyond that they had nothing. “We’re going to have to go shopping,” Justin said.

The dog kept wiggling out of its collar every time Justin slipped it on him, and Justin kept calling him a Silly Goose. Finally they compromised, and Justin promised he’d buy the dog a much nicer collar if the dog wore this one just until they found a much nicer one. They ran down the stairs together and Justin, who knew the neighbourhood quite well after his frequent walks, headed to a small pet store down the street.

Justin got a bit carried away. He bought lots of toys and several bones. They picked-out a nice black collar that seemed to meet the dog’s standards, and Justin filled out the forms for a license. He phoned Brian to check if the dog had been given all its shots, and Brian had said yes, and if Justin phoned again about the damned dog he’d return them both, Justin thought Brian was a bit melodramatic. He’d only called three times about the dog, and if Brian didn’t care about what he bought then that was fine.

He bought a matching water and food dish, both of which were blue, and a mat to place them on, so Brian didn’t have to worry about spills. He’d decided he was going to paint a goose on the front of the bowls, but that would have to wait until he bought the right paints for it.

Justin didn’t know what kind of food Goose would like, and Goose wasn’t helpful, so Justin bought a few small bags to try, and then he phoned for a cab and loaded his purchases in and they headed back to the loft.

Goose relieved himself at the front of the building, and then they hauled their purchases into the elevator and headed back into the loft. Once Justin had set-up the mat and the dishes and filled both dishes-up, Goose came over and inspected them quite closely, then he turned his back on them and proceeded to nudge Justin in the direction of the kitchen. “I’m not feeding you table scraps,” Justin said. Goose pawed at the fridge, and then sat and oversaw the creation of Justin’s lunch, and only when Justin was sitting and eating did Goose turn back to his own bowls. “My dog’s a freak,” Justin said.

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When Brian returned home, the first thing he noticed were Justin’s shoes. As usual, Justin had left them by the door, exactly where he had toed them off. This time, however, there was a chewed bone sticking out of the left shoe. He smirked a little, and then his attention was caught by the brand new leash hanging on a peg by the door.

“Hey!” Justin called, his blond head popping up from the sofa where he was sprawled. Brian shook his head, noted the mat with the dog bowls, and headed to the couch. He bent over the back and kissed Justin, a short peck and then a longer kiss, which was rudely interrupted when Brian felt a wet tongue that wasn’t Justin’s.

“What the fuck?”

“Mother Goose, down!” Justin said. The fluffy puppy hopped off the sofa and sat by Justin, looking repentant. “Good boy! My good by!” Justin said, scratching the dog’s ears.

“You named the dog Mother Goose?” Brian asked.

“Yeah,” Justin said. “Go ahead, try and skip a meal around him. He’s worse than Debbie was.” Brian pinched the bridge of his nose and wondered what he had been thinking when he’d bought the damned thing. Then he remembered that Justin had been in a funk. Well, that was one problem solved. Now he had a considerably more permanent one.

“Do you plan on unpacking those boxes?” Brian asked, Justin turned from where he had been scratching Mother Goose and looked at the boxes.

“Some of it is kid’s stuff. Like, when I was little. I don’t think you have space for all of it,” Justin said.

“Well, unpack what you want and then we’ll put the rest in storage,” Brian said.

“Sorry to be so much trouble,” Justin said, his face turning sombre again.

“Sorry’s bullshit,” Brian said, and Justin frowned as he watched the other man head into the bathroom.

Since he wasn’t sure what to make of Brian’s mood, Justin sat with Goose on the floor by the coffee table and sketched while the dog chewed on a squeaky-toy that looked like a big red porcupine. By the time Brian came out, dried and changed after his shower, Justin was engrossed in his sketching. Mother Goose looked up, the red toy still in his mouth, and eyed Brian cautiously. Brian looked back. When Brian made no move to join Justin, and instead headed towards the computer, Mother Goose ignored Brian and began to chew on the toy again.

The sound of Justin sketching had become relaxing to Brian, but he was fairly sure there would be nothing relaxing about the quiet squeaking. Instead, he found that both noises faded into the background and he was able to focus on his work.

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When the alarm went off the next morning, Brian silenced it quickly. Justin had woken from a nightmare at about three in the morning, and though he had brushed off Brian’s offer to stay up with him, Brian hadn’t been able to sleep until Justin had crawled back into bed around four thirty, and fallen asleep.

He yawned, stretched, and rolled over, expecting to see Justin his face relaxed in sleep and looking beautiful. Instead, his nose bumped into Goose’s and they stared at each other. “Get off the bed!” Brian ordered. “Mother Goose,” he said, though the name pained him. “Get off.”

“Goose?” Justin said, still sounding groggy. Goose perked up and looked happily over at Justin, then shifted and began to lick Justin’s face.

“He likes you better,” Brian said with a glare.

“Of course he likes me better,” Justin said, smirking a little. “I spent all yesterday walking him around town, feeding him and buying him things. Have you even scratched his ears once?”

“I bought him!” Brian said. “Get him off the bed.” Justin nudged at Goose and told him ‘Down’ and Goose hopped off agreeably, and sat by Justin’s side of the bed and wagged his tail, his pink tongue poking from his mouth. “I have fucking doggy hairs all over the sheets.”

“You change the sheets every morning, anyway,” Justin said. Until that moment, Brian hadn’t realized that changing his sheets had become a force of habit. He ignored Justin’s comment and went into the bathroom to wash. “I’m going to go through the boxes today.”

“Do whatever you want,” Brian said, this was beginning to be a bit too domestic.

“Okay,” Justin said. “And I’ll even remind you that you said that when you pitch a fit over something I do.”

“Why, what are you planning?” Brian asked, stepping out of the bathroom, the shaving cream still on his cheeks, shaver gripped in his hand.

“I don’t know, these things just come to me,” Justin said innocently. Brian rolled his eyes and headed back into the bathroom. Brian finished shaving and headed out to pick his suit, stopping in his tracks when he saw Justin drifting off to sleep, his arm thrown over Goose’s back, Goose, who was once gain on the bed.

Brian ignored both Justin and the dog and got dressed. He’d made the decision to get Goose for all sorts of reasons, after all, not all of them had to do with Justin, but his main purpose was to give something Justin that would make the loft feel like a home for him. If Justin couldn’t voice his concerns or express his discomfort at the moment, maybe he could watch the dog causing all sorts of trouble and see that Brian wasn’t kicking the dog out, and that might give him some more confidence.

“Later,” Brian said as he finished lacing his shoes.

“Mm,” Justin said, more asleep than awake.

“Ruff!” Goose called as Brian exited the loft.

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Justin was sitting on the floor, surrounded by open boxes and clothes and toys and various debris from his youth. Mother Goose had appropriate a stuffed dragon that Justin had when he was nine, and was gnawing lovingly on its head, while Justin sorted what he wanted to keep and what he didn’t; what he needed here at the loft, and what could go into storage.

At the sound of the key in the lock, both Goose and Justin perked up, their heads turning to the door expecting Brian to come through. He didn’t. Instead, Ben pulled back the door and stepped inside as if he’d been doing it forever.

“How did you get in here?” Justin asked, jumping to his feet. He was thrown-off by Ben’s presence, thrown-off that the man had come into his home so casually. Goose didn’t appreciate the other man’s presence either; he took one look at Justin’s reaction to the intruder, and growled.

“Justin?” Ben asked. “I have a key,” he held up the key. “What are you doing here?”

“This is my home,” Justin said. Mother Goose barked, clearly adding ‘mine too!’

“I don’t understand,” Ben said, his eyes scanning over the boxes that were in the middle of the loft.

“I live here,” Justin said. “Does Brian know you have a key? How did you get it?”

“Brian gave the key to me, for emergencies.”

“Is something wrong? Did something happen to Brian?” Justin asked, feeling suddenly very cold.

“No, why?”

“You said the key was for emergencies!” Justin said.

“Oh, well, I guess it was originally for that, and now it’s just for whenever I need to reach Brian.”

“He’s at work,” Justin said hesitantly. He was feeling jumpy. They hadn’t had anyone at the loft with the exception of Joan. Justin had been feeling a bit territorial, as if his space there could easily be pulled from him if he didn’t protect it. “Is there something you wanted?”

“No,” Ben said. “I’m sorry. I brought some groceries over for Brian, that’s all.”

“Leave them on the counter, I’ll find room for them,” Justin said, the cupboards and the bridge were pretty well stocked.

“I’m sorry, Justin. I didn’t know you’d moved in with Brian.”

“Yeah,” Justin said. Ben nodded and headed out again, and Justin sat heavily onto the ground, the adrenaline leaving his system. He wasn’t sure why he had reacted the way he had to Ben’s presence, it made no sense.

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Ben hurried out of the loft, part embarrassed that he’d waltzed into Brian’s loft, and part stunned and a little jealous that it was now also, apparently, Justin’s home. He hadn’t thought that when he’d met Justin. Blake had told Ted and Ben that Justin and Brian knew each other from Liberty, but beyond that, the other man had kept pretty quiet. Ben had thought of Justin as a friend of Brian’s, as a new addition to the group. He’d not imagined for a moment that Justin might actually be living with Brian.

That opened up an entirely different set of problems. Every day he spent with David he was feeling more disappointed, more distanced from his friends. David didn’t like Babylon, and Woody’s was a slum in the man’s opinion. He was snooty and steady and sometimes even predictable. He didn’t understand how every once in a while, Ben enjoyed going down to Liberty and hanging out. He didn’t like Ben’s friends.

Now Brian had returned from the hospital, and he was that perfect blend that Ben was looking for. He enjoyed the clubbing, but when he went home it was to the loft, where someone was waiting for him. The man wasn’t tricking, not anywhere that Ben would see, and the gossip about the Stud of Liberty’s absence on the tricking front was inescapable.

The point, however, was that Brian was with Justin, and Ben was with David. Whatever problems he was having with David, they weren’t Brian’s problems. And where once Ben might have pursued Brian, with Justin in the picture, he couldn’t do that. He wasn’t going to go chasing after someone and wrecking things up between an obviously budding relationship. If he was supposed to end-up with Brian, well, then he could trust that it would happen.

But Christ! Brian had even let a dog into his loft! That was completely unfathomable.

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“What are you doing here?” Brian asked when he looked up to see Ben standing in the door to his office. “Come in or get out,” he said. Ben stepped inside and shut the door.

“I called Cynthia, she said you weren’t working on anything, so I figured it was a good time to stop by and give you this,” Ben said, setting the key down on the table.

“What the fuck is that?” Brian asked.

“The key to your loft.” Brian raised his eyebrows and Ben answered the question he knew Brian wasn’t openly voicing. “If Justin’s living there then who has a key to your place should be something you discuss with each other.”

“Who told you?” Brian asked.

“No one. I went over to bring you some groceries,” Ben said.

“Let me guess. You walked right in.”

“Why wouldn’t I? If I knock and you’re there, you’re usually busy, or you ignore me, or yell at me to use the key anyway. And you didn’t tell anyone that you have a roommate.”

“He’s not my fucking roommate,” Brian said.

“Well, whatever he is, you didn’t tell him that your friends have keys, did you? You need to tell him, and see how he feels about that. He’s jumpy enough as it is.”

“What happened?” Brian asked.

“It seemed like he couldn’t decide whether to run and hide under the bed or shoo me out with a broom.” Brian snorted and Ben stood, heading to the door before he paused. “Bye the way, nice dog.” Brian groaned and dropped his head in his hands. At least it was only Ben. If it had been Ted, he would have been fucked because the man had no qualms sharing any bit of news with all of Liberty.

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Brian returned home early on Tuesday and wondered for a moment why he was greeted by an over exuberant Goose and no Justin. Then he recalled that Justin had his class on Tuesday and Thursday.

“It’s just you and me,” Brian said. Goose observed him speculatively. Brian made a peanut butter and cucumber sandwich and brought it to the sofa by the TV. He ate and sipped a beer while he watched crappy television. There had been times when he’d wind-down exactly like this before he was sent to Liberty. When the idea of heading out to Babylon and tricking took too much energy to even consider. Since Justin had moved into the loft, Brian hadn’t been heading to Babylon as frequently. He considered Justin’s confession that had slipped out, however unconsciously.

He’d considered it all once before, walking along a beech and watching the blond splashing in the water. He’d decided he was up to the challenge, wanted to see where whatever it was he and Justin were to each other would take them. Whatever it took. Now Justin had confessed something that would have previously sent Brian running. He wanted to. He didn’t know what was different. Didn’t know what had changed, but he wasn’t leaving, and wasn’t exactly fighting it, whatever ‘it’ was.

The sofa shifted and then a warm weight settled on Brian’s legs. “Goose, get off the couch,” he said. He was answered by a soft bark. “Goose!” Brian tilted his head up to glare at the dog. Goose looked back at him with puppy eyes and Brian huffed and dropped his head back on the couch.

Justin came home late, relaxed and mellow after his class his muscles pleasantly worked and found Brian and Goose both lying on the sofa, both of them lifting their heads and watching him with similar expressions. Except, where Goose bounded from the sofa and barked and wagged his tail and greeted Justin with enthusiastic kisses, Brian merely sat up, raised his eyebrows and watched silently.

Justin crouched and scratched Goose and ruffled his fur, and then he crossed to the sofa and kissed Brian before heading up to their bedroom, both his boys trailing behind him.

**Chapter Eleven: Two Wrongs and One Right**

Justin woke with a cold nose pressed to his temple and a quiet ‘ruff’ puffing warm air into his ear. “I’m awake,” he said, rubbing his eyes and trying to pull himself fully into wakefulness. Justin had very quickly gotten used to sleeping in, he’d quite enjoyed schedule-free days filled with whatever he felt like doing.

“Ruff!” Goose said.

“Okay, okay,” Justin said, yawning and stretching. Rolling over into Brian’s pillow for a moment before finally getting out of bed, as had become a habit. His job wasn’t high paying or high profile. He worked in a bookshop called ‘The Book Nook’ which sold both new and used books. It was old-fashioned in that the owner, Merrik Tidewater, stored his books in heavy oak bookshelves, and that there were so many books some of them were simply stacked in corners in piles as tall as Justin. There were plush chairs to read that Justin thought might be actual antiques.

Merrik himself was an old man with white wisps of hair and thick glasses that magnified his eyes so they looked as large as his frames. He spoke quietly, but laughed loud and rasping, and knew every book in his store. He’d taken a liking to Justin immediately and was fond of Goose, who had been accompanying Justin when he’d seen the little sign that declared the ‘Book Nook’ was looking for a new employee.

Justin pulled on a pair of jeans and slipped a hoodie over his head while he headed down the stairs. “There’s water in your bowl,” Justin was saying. “And food. I’ll come back at lunch and let you out, so don’t you dare think of marking-up Brian’s hardwood.” He poured coffee into his red travel mug, popped a Pop Tart into his mouth, picked-up his messenger bag and was out the door after setting the alarm and locking it. If he paused for even a moment, he’d start to get upset about leaving Goose all alone in the loft. As it was, he couldn’t leave without setting out the puppy’s toys and clicking on the radio.

“Justin!” Merrik greeted as Justin pushed open the door.

“Good morning,” Justin greeted.

“We have music today,” Merrik said.

“You fixed that old radio?” Justin asked curiously. Merrik was forever tinkering with an ancient radio. Justin had offered to bring in a new one, but Merrik refused to give-up on the one he had.

“Not yet, cursed thing that it is. But we have a street performer! Didn’t you hear him?”

“Not on my way in,” Justin said, setting his bag behind the cash register and checking the sheet to see if there were any shipments to prepare. They made contributions constantly to churches or children in need. Merrik left book selection to Justin, insisting he would know what the young people might want, but Justin was pretty sure Merrik would know more about some of the books than Justin did. Still, it always amused Justin (and Brian teased him constantly) that his reclusive reading in the library during his years at Liberty had actually prepared him admirably for his work.

“He must have gone to lunch,” Merrik said.

“It’s a bit early for lunch,” Justin said, smiling. Brian had met Merrik when he’d arrived at The Nook as a surprise to Justin. He’d taken to calling Merrik The Hobbit, because the man was small and oddly furry, and was quite fond of eating. Justin and Merrik got along quite well.

“It’s never too early for lunch,” Merrik muttered, heading into the back room where they stored things that they couldn’t possibly pack onto the floor. “Where is that mischievous dog of yours?”

“He’s at work,” Justin said. As had been his intention, Merrik laughed loudly, and emerged from the backroom carrying a stack of books.

“I wouldn’t mind, you know, if you brought him in. He seems quite well trained. I’m sure I could find a nice rug he could make a bed out of.”

“Are you sure?” Justin asked.

“We’ll try it out. Think of it as probation. If he behaves well, then the offer will stand,” Merrik said. “Now, if you find room for these on the floor, lunch is on me.”

Right about the time Justin found space for the third book, the music started. It was violin music, which Justin had never taken notice of before. His mother had given him a choice between piano lessons and sailing lessons, and Justin had gone with the sailing lessons. In high school his interests had been art and avoiding the general populous, so he’d never been to any of the school concerts.

He listened to it all morning, as he helped customers, organized the shelves filled-out a shipment of books destined for a woman’s church group. Merrik brought in warmed croissant sandwiches with the egg on it, which Justin loved, and then shooed Justin out to get Goose.

It was getting quite chilly, and he tucked his scarf around him and smiled when he felt the gloves stuffed in his pocket. If he ever pointed it out, he was sure Brian would stop doing it. So long as he pretended he didn’t notice, then Brian would continue. He was getting the hang of dealing with Brian’s quirks.

Goose was more than happy to leave the loft, and armed with two plastic bags just in case, Justin and Goose headed out to the Nook once again. The musician had moved to a place across the street from the Nook, and once he caught Justin’s eye, Justin couldn’t quite look away. He sat on a bench with Goose sitting by his feet, and they simply watched.

The passion was something Justin was familiar with. He felt the same way whenever he held a pencil or a paintbrush. Whenever he bowed his head over a piece of paper or a canvas and just created something. His brain wasn’t even entirely involved; it was something else, something not quite instinctual that guided his hand. This musician was the same. He played until it seemed the music he was created was in every breath, until the music became a physical thing pushing and pulling at the man’s body. It was hypnotic. It made Justin feel like they shared something, like they were equals, because clearly the man knew the same passion Justin did. As if they shared something he and Brian never could, because Brian couldn’t shut his head off the way this man did when he created ads, he relaxed and carried on with life and sometimes a slogan would come to him, but it wasn’t quite the same. It wasn’t going so deep into yourself that you forgot where you ended and the world began. It wasn’t like this.

Goose’ restless movement recalled Justin from his thoughts, and he stood up, tugging on the leash and heading back into the Nook. That man was lucky. Music was his life; he lived and breathed for it. Art, for Justin, was just a hobby.

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Justin unclipped the leash and smiled as Goose charged to the corner of the loft where he’d left his rope-toy. Justin dropped his messenger bag by the door and kicked off his shoes before heading to the shower. He used Brian’s products, mostly because Justin didn’t know where to start buying his own.

Changed, and with his hair damp, Justin headed into the kitchen to prepare dinner. He was adding vegetables into the stew he was preparing when Brian came into the loft. He didn’t say anything, but he crossed directly to the kitchen area and pressed his body to Justin’s back, his arms slipping around Justin’s waist and his lips pressed to the side of Justin’s neck.

Justin dropped the stirring spoon and closed his eyes. He loved when Brian touched him, he loved feeling wanted and desired. But then again, he’d never actually explained that he couldn’t go further. “Wait, wait,” Justin gasped. “Stop.”

“What?” Brian said, he kept his body still, and did exactly as he’d been requested.

“I just ... the stew might burn,” Justin said.

Brian was silent for a moment, knowing that wasn’t the reason, but willing to accept it if it was the only one Justin felt comfortable enough to give. “Okay.” He stepped away and headed to the shower.

“Brian,” Justin said, his voice quiet. “I just ...” He stirred the stew because he didn’t want to turn and face Brian, didn’t want to see disappointment on the other man’s face. “I don’t know if I’m ready.”

“Okay,” Brian said. He headed up the stairs, dropping his things in the hamper, and almost missed Justin’s frustrated mutter of ‘but Christ, I want to be.’ It made Brian smirk.

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They were in the Jeep, leaving Liberty Avenue after an early dinner with the Gang, and Brian was doing his best to ignore Justin, but he was fidgeting and there was no overlooking his clear agitation. “What the fuck is wrong?” Brian finally snapped.

“Nothing,” Justin said. “God!”

Brian might have laughed, but he wasn’t in the mood for it. He drove in silence, until the came to a red light and he glanced over and his blond passenger. “Well, if you pick the leather off my truck because of that great big ‘nothing’ that isn’t bothering you, than you can pay for it to be replaced.”

Justin looked at where his fingers were picking at Brian’s Jeep and pulled his hand away sheepishly, tucking them between his knees as if they needed the extra restraint to prevent more fidgeting. “It’s David,” he said. “He creeps me out.”

Brian snorted. “Did he say anything to you?”

“Nothing that I can point to and be like ‘Hey, he’s a creep.’ But he still creeps me out. And he keeps touching me, or bumping into me.” Justin bit his lip, then asked the question that had been bugging him since he’d met Brian’s friends. “Do he and Ben have an open relationship?”

“Fuck no,” Brian said.

“Well, then what’s their problem?”

“Isn’t that enough of a problem?” Brian muttered.

“I’m serious, Brian,” Justin said. “David’s acting like creep of the fucking year, Ben’s practically humping your leg when he isn’t making Bambi eyes at you, and I watch it and think, Christ, if I don’t put out where the fuck am I going to end-up?”

“What?” Brian asked, his tone flat but Justin knew it all too well. He’d never heard that tone directed at him, though.

“Nothing,” he said, recovering quickly. He turned his head to the window and stayed very still and very quiet. He thought he might win this one, because Brian hated talking, but then the Jeep swerved into a spot at the side of the road and came to a stop.

“What to repeat that?”

“No, it’s nothing. God, you’re such a drama queen!” Justin said. Brian didn’t rise to the bait, he just looked with that dangerous, intense expression, and Justin didn’t know what he’d done wrong, but he was willing to promise he’d never do it again. “It’s just something David said,” he admitted. “That you trick around.” Brian sighed and rubbed his temples. “I don’t care,” Justin was quick to assure. “It doesn’t matter. I mean, we’re not even really together until I ... well, you know.”

“Jesus Christ, Justin,” Brian said.

“No, I know. You’ve given me so much, and if this is what you need ...”

“Don’t do the fucking martyr thing, it makes my dick soft.” Justin wanted to say ‘Good. Let it be soft, because then you’re not shoving it up other people’s asses when it should be up mine!’ but he didn’t, because Brian had really done more than anyone, more than he even deserved, and Justin was willing to accept Brian in any way he could have him. He’d swallow down the hurt, he’d ignore the shattered romantic notions he’d been holding onto and accept the reality, because reality, however bitter, was a better than nothing.

“David’s an asshole, you said so yourself,” Brian said.

“Actually,” Justin said. “I called him a creep.”

“And Ben can hump my leg all he wants, I’ve had him, that’s done.”

“So it’s true,” Justin said. Doing his best to keep his voice steady and have this discussion like the rational adult he was trying to be. “Anyone once, but only once.”

“I’m going to say this once, and then we’re not doing this again because it’s ancient fucking history,” Brian said. This wasn’t how he’d seen this conversation going. Not at all. He pinched the bridge of his nose and then decided to bite the bullet. “I’m not doing any romantic walks on a beach or whatever the fuck you’re imagining. That’s not who I am. But I’m not who David thinks I am, either.”

“So he lied?” Justin said.

“No,” Brian said.

“Well then, what the fuck, Brian?”

“It hasn’t been like that since Liberty,” Brian said.

“So, you’ve been celibate for seven months?”

“Give or take,” Brian said.

“What does that mean?”

“I tricked when I got out,” Brian said. Justin remembered Brian telling him that he’d gone back to his ‘old life’. “And after the first month in Liberty.”

“You fucked someone at Liberty?” Justin asked. “Who?”

“The janitor,” Brian said.

“Bill? He’s old! And ugly!” Justin said.

Brian cringed. “Not Bill,” he said.

“Oh, the new guy. Mr. Monday-Wednesday-Friday,” Justin said knowingly. “You’re a shit.” They were silent for a moment. “But since I moved in?” he was almost afraid to hear it.

“I’m not answering that, you’re head’s going to fill-up with hot air,” Brian said.

“I’ll be absolutely silent. I won’t say a word,” Justin was quick to promise.

“No one,” Brian said. He looked sharply at Justin, but Justin mimed zipping his mouth shut. Brian looked out the front window, then glanced back at Justin. Justin was almost vibrating in his seat. Brian laughed and shook his head. “Just say it, get it out of your system.”

Justin looked at Brian with large eyes and pressed his lips together, the words spilled out anyway. “You so care about me!” he said. “You love me soooo much!”

“Fucking little shit,” Brian said, which had become a term of endearment. Justin leaned over and kissed Brian hard. “You don’t have to ... put-out,” Brian said, pushing Justin back.

“Okay,” Justin said, he leaned back in and when Brian leaned away frowning darkly Justin rolled his eyes. “It’s just a kiss, Brian. It’s not a marriage proposal, it’s not a lifetime commitment, it’s not even sex.” They kissed again, and Justin sat back in his seat. “Can I put-out if I want to?” he joked. Brian rolled his eyes and ignored the question, steering the Jeep back into traffic. “David is still a creep, and I don’t like how Ben keeps flirting. Just for the record.” Brian snorted. “Hey, Brian, this is my stop!” he said, flapping his hands. Brian pulled the Jeep to the curb again, and Justin grabbed his gym bag and hopped out of the Jeep. “Later!” Justin said, shutting the door behind him.

“Later,” Brian said, smiling as he watched Justin’s confident stride into Street Smartz.

**Chapter Twelve: Cocoa Butter Boy**

“Be careful with them!” Justin said, standing on the street in a blue rubber raincoat, and handing over a stack of books wrapped in plastic. “They’re like, a dozen little Bibles to him. I’m serious, Charlie.”

“It isn’t your head on the chop-block if they get damaged,” Charlie said as he accepted the stack and dropped them in the back of his truck. “He loves you, it’s my head I have to worry about.” The rain was coming down hard, but the books were still needed for the book club. Merrik loaned out copies to the kids who couldn’t afford their own, and Justin worried the rain would destroy them before they reached their destination.

He stood on the street, watching as Charlie pulled out into traffic, and then turned around to head back in to the warm dryness of The Nook. The only reason he heard the bark at all was because, after a month of dealing with Mother Goose, he was alert to any puppy-sounds that might indicate the dog had gotten himself into mischief.

The alley between The Nook and the coffee shop was narrow and dark, but Justin could see dark smudge scratching pathetically at the large green garbage bin. The dog was older than Goose, Justin cold tell by the size of him, but he was scrawny and there were no tags on him. The poor thing was soaked-through and clearly starving.

Decision made, Justin headed in the opposite direction, splurging on goodies from the coffee shop, and then went into the Nook. He went through to the storage room, and opened the back door, dropping samplings of the goods he’d purchased in a line that led right to the mat Goose liked to sleep on whenever he visited The Nook. Knowing that the dog was most likely skittish, Justin left the door open, set water by the mat and then busied himself.

It didn’t take long before the dog stepped inside on shaky legs, and then proceeded to spray water everywhere, before trotting nervously to the bowl and the food that was laid out by the mat. Justin grinned, but kept on task, marking the books with price tags.

When Merrik came down from the upstairs, where his personal apartment was, he saw the scruffy black dog sleeping on bed. “Pet project?” he asked, Justin grinned and Merrik left it at that.

Around mid-afternoon, Justin tackled his personally assigned task of trying to find shelf-space for all the books currently stacked on the floor. There was an old winding staircase that used to connect to the upper floor, but had since been blocked-off and Justin had made some of the steps into bookshelves.

He ignored the chimes at first because he was expecting Merrik to take the customer, but then he remembered Merrik was in the back organizing a shipment, and so Justin dusted his hands on his pants and trekked to the front of the store.

“Can I help you?” he asked as he wound his way through the shelves.

“I’m looking for ‘Notes From the Underground’” a familiar voice said.

“Molly?” Justin said.

“Justin? I didn’t know you worked here!” she said. They stood awkwardly, before Justin turned and headed back into the maze of shelves, Molly following tentatively until he snatched a book down and handed it to her.

“That’s one of my favourite books,” Justin said.

She smiled a little and shrugged. “I know.” They headed back to the cash and he rang-up the purchase for her, giving her his store discount but not mentioning it. “Look, I’m sorry,” she said.

“Sorry’s bullshit,” he told her, the reply slipping automatically from his lips and surprising him. He was angry, but not at Molly and it was unfair to let her get caught-up in it. “I’m staying with Brian,” he told her. “If you need me, you can call my cell.” He wrote the number down and she smiled as she took it from him.

“You’re my big brother,” she said. The defiance in her tone told him everything he wondered about how his parents were dealing with his release.

“Whatever you say, Mollusk,” he said casually. She grinned at him and headed out of the store with a bounce in her step. The grin was infectious, because Justin was smiling for the rest of the day.

It was the drug store that caught his eye on the walk home, and he paused out front for a while. When he had lived with his parents, he could remember how he’d begun experimenting with the products in the drug store. Mousse for his hair, or gel, the smells of the soaps he would sample. Liberty had been efficient when it came to shampoo and soaps. Each patient received the products they needed and were replenished whenever they ran out. Everyone used the same products and everyone smelled the same. It was something he had taken a great deal of pleasure in when he’d moved into the loft. Brian washed with soaps that smelled delicious. At first, Justin hadn’t been able to stop inhaling deeply whenever he was near the man.

Harder than picking clothes, had been picking soaps. Justin didn’t know why. There was something so personal about that, something unique. A smell was something arousing or deterring. He wasn’t ready to be noticed on that level, had hidden behind Brian’s smell -- used his soap and shampoo and aftershave. Now Justin found himself wandering through the isles and sniffing bottles, reading labels and wondering.

He stopped thinking about what Brian might like, and settled on something that he liked. The price was exorbitant for the shampoo and conditioner, the soaps and lotions and exfoliates he picked-up, but he was excited to spoil himself. It was another step on his path to becoming normal. Lindsay kept telling him he was ‘adjusting’. Justin thought he should have adjusted by now.

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Brian tossed his briefcase on the desk, ran his fingers up the back of Justin’s neck and into his hair and kissed the younger man’s neck. He noticed it immediately. He kissed again, took a deep breath. “You smell hot,” he said.

“Cocoa butter,” Justin said with a grin, turning around and rapping his arms around Brian’s waist. “Like it?” he teased. Brian didn’t answer, he stepped forward pressing Justin back against the table, pressing his tongue into Justin’s mouth as he pressed his hips against the boy’s body. Justin’s fingers curled tighter, clasping the fabric of Brian’s suit. He leaned his head back as Brian’s kisses trailed from his lips to his cheek and then that place beneath his ear that drove him crazy. The wet tongue traced a path down his neck and Justin moved his arm, pulling Brian’s head closer and exposing more of his neck.

There were fingers pulling at his shirt and then running up his waist, and Justin wanted to say the words ‘now do it now’ but he was barely coherent. He shifted backwards until he was sitting on the desk, hoping Brian might understand. Using his legs to pull Brian closer Justin focussed on unbuttoning the soft red shirt Brian was wearing -- not sure when Brian’s suit jacket had disappeared but happy it was out of the way. His own shirt was off, and he leaned back pulling Brian to bend overtop of him.

It was sharp and instantaneous. One moment Justin’s eyes were closed, his breath heavy, his body desperate and Brian a warm welcome presence above him. The next he couldn’t quite breath, was lost in sensations from a different time -- in fingers, kisses, bites and scrapes -- Brian kissed a path down Justin’s bare chest and Justin’s fingers clenched in Brian’s hair but couldn’t quite pull the man off of him. He knew it was Brian, knew that he trusted Brian -- but his body was lost in memory and the memory wasn’t good. His vision tunnelled, the world grey but didn’t quite become dark.

He wasn’t sure when Brian stopped, what alerted the other man. Maybe Brian was keeping a close eye on his reaction, which Justin knew the brunette did. He didn’t know, but when colour returned Justin was looking into warm hazel. “What happened?” Brian asked.

Justin sat up, embarrassed and frustrated. He wasn’t aware he was muttering, cursing under his breath, but Brian watched Justin’s agitated movements as the blond fasted his pants and snatched his shirt from the floor. “Fucking Christ,” Justin said, loud. He ran an agitated hand through his hair and then stormed to the door.

“Take your ...” but Justin thrust his feet in his shoes and stormed out of the loft before Brian could finish. Brian wasn’t going to go running after the blond and make sure he took his coat. Justin was frustrated as it was. He wasn’t the only one.

Justin kept pushing himself, Brian almost wished he wouldn’t. The kisses and touches, the few times they’d jerked each other off had been incredible, but the times Brian had been able to touch Justin and bring him to completion was far outweighed by the number of times Justin had freaked-out, had a panic attack, or gotten lost in a flashback. There wasn’t much that Brian could do except be patient. There wasn’t anything Justin could try except to take it easy and continue to push himself. Brian could have handled it, but having Justin so close and then having to stop was driving him slowly crazy.

“Fucking Christ,” Brian muttered and picked his suit jacket from the floor where it had landed and headed to the shower to jerk-off.

When Brian emerged from the shower, towelling his hair dry and wearing the pants he’d taken to wearing, it was to find Justin sitting at the kitchen table, two place settings and food laid-out, his head in his hands. The cartons from the take-out he’d picked-up were still on the counter, and Goose was sitting beside Justin, his head on Justin’s lap.

“I’m sorry I stormed out,” Justin said. “I know you think it’s bullshit, but it wasn’t right of me to do, and there isn’t another way for me to ...”

“Okay,” Brian said, sitting at the table. He was strung like a bow, his patience was thin, but each time he thought he might finally lose it he’d see Justin looking every bit as frustrated as Brian was feeling and it shut him up.

“It’s not you,” Justin said.

“We keep going through this,” Brian said. “I know.”

“Okay,” Justin said, scratching at the hair behind his ear. “It’s just, I don’t know what to do.”

“Exactly what you’re doing,” Brian said. Brian picked at his food, then eyed Justin, who hadn’t picked-up his fork. “Aren’t you eating?”

“I’m not hungry,” Justin said.

“Okay,” Brian said. “But if he spills his kibble in the bed again in an effort to feed your starving self, I’m not cleaning it up.”

“You didn’t clean it up last time,” Justin said. Goose had attempted to feed Justin his dog kibble. He’d carried his doggy dish up to the bed, leaving a kibble trail for Brian to find when he returned from work. Justin hadn’t known whether he should feel disgusted or flattered, but ended-up feeling exasperated as he had to clean-up the kibble and change the sheets. “I can’t believe I’m being blackmailed by my own dog!” he said, but picked-up his fork and began to eat.

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Justin spent the weekend worrying, but Monday morning, the dog was waiting at the side door of The Nook, as had become their tradition. Justin set food by the mat, and the dog ate and drank and slept quietly for the rest of the day.

“We need to give you a name,” Justin said as he ate his lunch sitting by the mat. The dog still looked pretty rough, but there were no cuts that Justin could see, he wasn’t defensive, didn’t growl when Justin came near and even let Justin pet him. He thought about Mother Goose alone at the loft with the radio for company. He’d tried bringing the puppy to the store, but Goose liked getting into mischief, and Justin was afraid to take his eyes off the young pup. This dog seemed to barely have the energy to take him from the door to the mat.

“You know who you remind me of?” Justin asked, scratching the dog’s head gently. He smiled a little as the dog sighed. Justin remembered reading the Harry Potter books at Liberty, and he and Emmett had watched the movies a few weeks ago when Brian had been working late. “Grimm,” Justin said, the dog didn’t make a sound, but Justin thought, he didn’t protest either. “Good boy,” Justin said.

The next day it snowed. It wasn’t surprising, it was nearing the end of November and they hadn’t had much snowfall as was usual. But Tuesday was cold and snowing, and Justin spent his lunch inside with Grimm, drinking hot chocolate and eating a sandwich as he stood by the window and watched the violinist across the street.

Every day the man was there, every day he played regardless of the weather. Every day he brought the same passion to the songs he played and Justin ached a little more each day. He finished his hot chocolate and looked back at Grimm who was nestled under an old blanket Merrik had brought down to turn into a makeshift bed. ”Stay there,” Justin said. Grimm watched him blankly.

Justin pulled his coat and scarf, smiling as once again he felt the gloves tucked into his pocket. He stepped out of the store and ducked into the coffee shop, bought two hot chocolates and headed across the street. “Sorry,” he said, when the musician stopped playing when Justin came over. “It’s just, you looked really cold. Here.”

“I’ve been watching you,” the violinist said, smiling a little, looking a bit sheepish about the admission.

“What?”

“You’re from that bookstore, right? I’ve seen you coming and going,” the man said. Justin bit his lip and shrugged. “Sorry, it’s just. You’re really beautiful. You’ve been inspiring me, every day.” Justin grinned and took a step back, leaving his hot chocolate offering by the opened violin case. “I’m Ethan,” the man said.

“I’m taken,” Justin found himself blurting. He was a bit startled by the words tumbling out like that, but it was the truth just the same and he grinned. It was sort of nice to say. The first time he’d acknowledged what he and Brian were to anyone. It had always been assumed, or implied. Here it was, plain as day. He thought he should apologize for the way he’d blurted it, but he couldn’t stop smiling and thought it might ruin the effect. “You play really well,” he said.

“I don’t suppose I could entice you to accompany be for dinner?” Ethan said.

Justin was still smiling when he shook his head. “I don’t do enticement so well,” Justin said. He wanted to say more, but didn’t. He crossed back to the store and hid himself among the bookshelves. It was flattering every time someone came onto him, and a little frightening, a little exhilarating. At that moment, he kept thinking ‘I’m taken’, and the violin music started again, and that bitter yearning roiled inside him, and he rested his head against a shelf, wondering why hearing the music made him feel such an aching yearning in him.

“Why the fuck are you telling me this?” Brian asked as he grabbed a beer from the fridge.

“I don’t know! I don’t know what my problem is,” Justin said.

“You do have a therapist,” Brian said. “Someone who went to school specifically so they could answer this kind of shit, someone who you pay to answer this kind of shit for you.”

“If I wanted to talk to a therapist, I’d have phoned Lindsay,” Justin said. “It’s just like ... he plays, and it’s incredible. It’s not even the music, it’s the feeling. He’s so connected to what he’s playing, so lost in it, like the world just falls back. But every time he plays I just feel empty.”

Brian dropped onto the couch beside Justin and sighed dramatically. “So how does that make you feel?” he said.

“I just told you,” Justin said. They paused a moment as Goose hopped up onto the sofa, and Brian did his obligatory glare-session before leaving Goose where he’d settled. “I want to be that free,” Justin said. “I want to paint. It’s the only thing I can imagine doing and being really happy.”

“Cut down your hours at the store and paint,” Brian said. "Get whatever transcipts you need in order and enroll in art school." He sipped his beer and Justin settled against his side.

“It’s that easy, huh?” he asked.

“If you want it to be,” Brian said, smirking a little as he threw-back Justin’s words from a time before. They were silent a moment, sitting there on the couch. The TV wasn’t on, there was no radio, just a pleasant quiet, and comforting warmth of their shared body heat.

“Can I say something?” Justin said quietly.

“Can I stop you?” Brian teased.

“I know you hate it, but I liked that we talked,” Justin said. “My parents -- I couldn’t talk with them. There was all this stuff that just went unspoken, and half the time I wondered, if I said anything ... sometimes I was as worried about how my words could change things, as I was that they wouldn’t change anything at all. I just ... I guess I just wanted to say thanks.”

Brian kissed Justin’s temple, which was as much of a response as Justin needed. He’d been sitting in the bookstore and listening to Ethan play, and out of habit had been choking down what he’d been thinking. But Brian, once again, had proven that where they were living now was a thousand times different from where Justin had been living before, from where he’d grown-up. He’d spent so much of his life wishing fervently for something different, wondering if something different even existed and doubting it a little more every time he saw a movie or read a book, or heard the stories that the patients at Liberty sometimes shared. To finally have it, it seemed infinitely more precious. He tucked his head against Brian’s chest and breathed deeply, closed his eyes and held on. Unaware that Brian was thinking the same things.

**Chapter Thirteen: Mother Goose and Grimm**

When Justin returned from Street Smartz he was wired and exhilarated and couldn’t quite sit still. Brian was sitting on the couch, sipping a beer and reading, and Justin climbed into his lap, pressed his body close and nipped at Brian’s lip, pushing his tongue into the older man’s mouth. He didn’t give himself time to think, while his mouth devoured Brian’s, strayed from Brian’s lips down his neck and to his exposed chest -- Justin had undone his shirt in record time -- Justin’s hands had slipped lower, had unzipped Brian’s pants and slipped inside, grasping him firmly.

Brian grunted and dropped his head back against the couch while Justin stroked him, licked and assaulted one nipple before moving onto the next. He wasn’t quite aware he was doing it, but he was pressing his hips against any part of Brian he could come into contact with, rubbing as he brought the other man to climax, and when Brian finally came, Justin ground down into his lap and followed him over the edge before he bent and licked Brian clean.

“Have a good day, dear?” Brian drawled. Justin grinned and hopped off Brian’s lap.

“We finished our self-defence unit. We had the test today. You should have seen it. Kevin wore all this padding, and the final part of the test, he said do whatever we had to do, but the goal was to just get passed him. And I kicked him, really hard; he got pushed like, ten feet, and then fell onto his back. He couldn’t get-up either, the suit was so big it was like watching a beetle flat on its back,” Justin said as he grabbed his bag and brought it into the bedroom. He unloaded his gym clothes into the hamper and then went in for a shower.

When he exited the bathroom he noticed the soft suede pad that lay by the bed. Goose, who had followed him to the bedroom, pawed at it then whimpered. “Guess he got fed-up with waking-up to doggy-breath. Sorry,” Justin said, sitting on the bed and scratching the dog. “I’ll still sneak you up here,” Justin whispered when he saw Brian climbing the stairs.

“I heard that,” Brian said, glaring. Justin grinned and flopped back on the bed. He hadn’t put on his nightclothes yet, but he was so tired. He lay in the damp towel until Brian blocked the light by standing over him. “You’re making the sheets wet. Go change.”

“Okay,” Justin said. He pulled the blankets over himself, and when Brian’s glare escalated but just before he opened his mouth, Justin tossed to the towel out in the general direction of the hamper.

Brian tried very hard to remain casual. “You’re such a slob,” he said, and put the towel in the hamper. He crawled into bed, likewise naked, and lay still. Since Justin had moved into the loft, there wasn’t a night that passed when Justin didn’t press their bodies close, or snuggle into Brian’s arms. Brian had even taken to dragging Justin closer if the blond didn’t initially move. But now they were both naked, and Brian wasn’t sure how Justin would react.

A moment passed. Then another. Justin shifted, wiggling until his back was pressed to Brian’s chest, he lifted his head-up and snatched Brian’s arm, dragging it over him like a blanket, and then settled back onto the pillow. They stayed quiet. Brian thought maybe this called for some kind of comment, maybe he should do something? The bed shifted again. Justin’s body tensed a little as if he were bracing for something, and Brian frowned. He lifted his head and realized Goose had settled into the space Justin had left on the bed.

“I bought him a suede, designer doggie-bed,” Brian muttered.

“He’s feeling left out, all alone on the floor,” Justin said, Brian could hear the smile in the blond’s voice.

“Twat,” Brian said.

“Twat lover,” Justin shot back after a beat. Brian snorted and Justin snickered. Whatever lingering tension there had been was diffused, and they settled in to sleep, Goose in Justin’s spot on the bed.

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“Forgetting something?” Justin called from his spot at the table. He was holding a mug of coffee and reading the paper and didn’t even look-up when Brian strode down the steps.

“I better fucking not be forgetting something,” Brian snarked. He dropped his suitcase on the floor and patted his pockets, pulled out his wallet then returned it to the pocket.

Justin looked up from the paper and lifted his eyebrows. Brian smirked and crossed to the table, he pushed Justin’s head back and kissed him deeply, then snagged an apple from the bowl Justin kept stocked on the counter and picked up his suitcase again.

“Call me if your plane crashes,” Justin said, trying to be light.

“If the plane goes down, you’ll be the first to know.”

“If I’m the first to know, then your pilot’s a fucking idiot,” Justin muttered.

“It’s not going to crash, I’ll be in New York for three days at most, don’t burn the loft down, and if Goose pees on anything ...”

“He’s house trained!” Justin commented. Goose barked an indignant bark and returned to the bone he had been previously gnawing. Brian patted the dog’s head and left the loft.

Justin didn’t work on Sundays, so he took Mother Goose out for a long walk and then lost himself in painting for the rest of the day, having only stopped for lunch when Goose had started barking ceaselessly. He’d grabbed an apple, let Goose outside, and then returned to his painting. At eight, however he was interrupted by Emmett, thee man had brought movies over and suggested a pizza party.

“Oh my god!” Emmett cried. “Is that your dog?”

“Yeah, Mother Goose,” Justin introduced. Emmett fussed over the dog and laughed when Goose made himself comfortable on the couch. Justin had told Emmett about Goose, of course. The Saturday following Goose’s introduction into the household Emmett had joined Justin out at Liberty, and Justin had described how he’d found the dog to Michael and Emmett and they’d spent the day talking while Justin painted the mural.

Emmett ended-up spending the night on the couch, and they walked over to the Nook the next day for Justin’s morning shift. Mondays were one of the days Justin had arranged to leave work early and head-out to Liberty. Sometimes Brian would drive him, but most days he would make a huge fuss about scratches and car accidents and irresponsible people and then loan Justin the Jeep. He’d yet to relinquish the keys with at the very least a glare.

“Make me look more buff,” Michael said. Justin was painting one of the smaller scenes and while he’d rinsed his brush Michael had moved in to get a better look.

“Yeah?” Justin asked, smiling a little. “More buff? I can put your phone number in, maybe a little painting with ‘for a good time call’” Michael started tickling him and Justin squawked and batted him away. “You’re not a superhero, Michael!” Justin said.

“Fine,” Michael sulked. Justin shook his head and moved back to the painting. “How are things?”

“I’ve been trying to spend more time painting, but it’s hard, you know?”

Michael nodded his head vaguely. “Have you had sex yet?”

“Why do you always ask me that?” Justin asked.

“Because if you have, I expect you to tell me in detail,” Michael said with a shrug.

“Why, so you can drool over Brian? I don’t think so,” Justin said. They talked and joked around, and when they stopped for lunch, Justin doodled a sketch of Michael. He was super-buff wearing a super hero’s suit with his arms held up showing off his biceps. Beneath the sketch Justin had written: For a good time, call. Michael had laughed, and they’d made jokes about being ‘faster than a speeding bullet’ for the rest of the day.

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One Tuesday there was a snowstorm. Merrik had called and told Justin that he wasn’t opening the store that he wasn’t well and didn’t think they’d do much business because of all the snow and the fact that the snowploughs hadn’t gotten to their neighbourhood yet.

Justin sat with Mother Goose and read his book, but kept glancing outside and feeling worried. Before noon, Justin gave-up. He grabbed the keys to the Jeep, herding Mother Goose into the car and drove to the Nook. He brought soup to Merrik, and then checked the alley, which had been what had been bothering him all morning.

Grimm was hunkered down in an old cardboard box. He yipped pathetically when he saw Justin, and didn’t quite know how to respond when Justin tried to coax him out into the snow. Finally, though, Grimm stepped out on shaky legs, and followed Justin hesitantly to the Jeep. Mother Goose didn’t quite know what to make of the other dog, but they weren’t growling at each other.

It was slow going, but Justin drove to the veterinary clinic that he used for Goose, and took Grimm in to be checked over. Besides the malnourishment, Grimm wasn’t too bad. Surprisingly, he didn’t even have any fleas. Justin thought that might be because of the flea medicine he’d been adding to the dog’s food each time he visited the Nook, but made no comment. He had had dark visions of picking-up fleas from the stray dog and bringing them back to the loft and the conniption Brian would have.

With Grimm relatively healthy, and Goose seeming more mother-hennish than ever and not at all territorial, Justin took both dogs back to the loft. He fed them and then corralled Grimm into the shower where he washed the dog vigorously. It was a very good thing Brian was out of town, because Grimm did not enjoy the shower and had broken loose from Justin several times, leaving streaks of water on the floor, and soapy footprints. Still, Justin managed to clean the dog up and dry him off. Then he cleaned the loft before he himself went for a shower. Bathing Grimm had left him soaking wet and smelling of damp dog fur.

By the time Brian phoned on Tuesday night, Justin was half-asleep. He’d tried to stay-up, tried to ask Brian about what was going on, but Brian had told him to go to sleep after the third time Justin had zoned-out.

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Brian hung-up the phone, smirking and shaking his head. He wondered what Justin had done all day that had exhausted him, considering the snow had pretty much restricted the blond’s movement. It wasn’t so very late, and Brian was restless. He’d finished prepping his pitch on Sunday, and made the presentation on Monday. Tuesday had been spent entertaining the client, which was, to Brian, the most tedious aspect of his job.

He changed quickly and hailed a cab. Brian wasn’t fussy where he ended-up, clubs were a dime a dozen and in truth they were all the same. The lights were bright, the music loud and the men tall, dark and half-naked. Brian drank JB and watched the lights illuminate the flailing, thrusting bodies. He wasn’t much for dancing, but he took a hit of E and forgot that he couldn’t quite dance well.

The body was hard and warm and Brian smirked. Never fails, he thought. The man ran his hands under Brian’s shirt and kissed his chest. “Come on,” the man invited, smiling slyly and tugging Brian in the direction of what Brian assumed was this club’s backroom.

Brian went a few steps, and then tugged his arm back. “Fuck off,” he said. He didn’t stay at the club long. In Pittsburgh he hadn’t noticed so much, there were other things to do, or more exactly there was always one of his friends at Woody’s or at Babylon. Since Brian didn’t dance, and wasn’t tricking, clubs really didn’t have much of a purpose if he was alone.

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Brian stepped out of the cab and grabbed his bags from the trunk, setting the bag on his shoulder and heading into his building. When he pulled open the door to the loft, he almost called out, but stopped himself. Instead, he dropped his things by the front door and greeted Goose, who was very eager to meet him. “Where’s Justin?” Brian asked the dog, but was answered a moment later by the sound of sniffling.

“Justin?” Brian asked following the sound and finding both Justin and Emmett crying, sitting with their backs against the sofa and sharing a blanket.

“Brian?” Justin asked, wiping his face and looking pathetic.

“What happened?” Brian asked.

“He’s dead!” Justin said.

“Who?” Brian asked, feeling oddly cold.

“Angel,” Emmett explained.

“I knew it was going to happen!” Justin said. “Why the fuck did you bring that stupid film here?”

“What the fuck are you watching?” Brian asked.

“I brought the movie ‘Rent’ over,” Emmett explained.

“It’s a really good movie,” Justin said, sniffling.

Brian rolled his eyes and pulled Justin off the floor. “Don’t I get a welcome back?”

“Hi,” Justin said. Brian tickled Justin’s sides. “Welcome back!” Justin said with more enthusiasm.

“That’s better,” Brian said. “Christ, have you left the loft at all?”

“Yes,” Justin said indignantly. “Excuse me, you’re the one who refused to let me drive-out and pick you up at the airport.”

“The road conditions are for shit. Even the cab driver was having issues,” Brian said.

“I’ve been keeping a close eye on Sunshine,” Emmett said.

“Have you moved in?” Brian asked, noticing the lime green bag by the couch.

“He slept over last night,” Justin said with a grin.

Brian nodded and brought his bags into the bedroom. “Christ, Justin, there’s dog hair all over the bed.”

“Uh,” Justin said.

“On my side,” Brian pointed out.

“I was about to change the sheets,” Justin said, jogging up the steps and pulling fresh bedding from the closet. Before he could pull the old bedding off, Brian wrapped an arm around Justin’s waist and pulled them together for a kiss. “I missed you.”

“Hm,” Brian said, smiling. He kissed Justin again, and then smacked his ass. “I’m not sleeping in those sheets.”

“You know there’s just going to be more hair on the sheets tomorrow.”

“There wouldn’t be if you kept your dog off the bed,” Brian said.

“So now he’s my dog,” Justin said, speaking in a falsetto. “Whenever he does something wrong he’s mine.” Brian rolled his eyes and smacked him again, and Justin laughed.

“You two are adorable,” Emmett said.

“Fuck off,” Justin and Brian said simultaneously.

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Brian returned to the loft the next day to Justin making dinner. “La vie Boheme!” Justin said, an entire chorus accompanying him. He was shimmying his hips and stirring something in a pot, Goose was barking along to the CD.

“Do I want to know?” Brian asked.

“Hi!” Justin said. “I bought the soundtrack from ‘Rent’ because I couldn’t get that song out of my head.”

“How did that work for you?” Brian asked.

“I haven’t been able to stop singing along to it,” Justin said with a grin. “I’m making pasta! Bisexuals, tri-sexuals, homo-sapiens, carcinogens!” Justin sang. Brian stuck his tongue in his mouth tried to mask the level of his amusement. He kissed the bouncing blond head as he passed it and went for a shower. Brian left the door open and could hear Justin singing. “To so-odomy! It’s between Go-od and me!” and he couldn’t help snickering.

“Emmett’s a bad influence,” Brian said as he towelled his hair dry.

“Why?”

“You spend three days with him and when I come back you’re singing show tunes. If I leave again he’ll have you in drag,” Brian said.

“I could look pretty hot in drag,” Justin purred. “But that’s not my thing. Anyway, the music is catchy,” Justin said.

“It’s better than Moby,” Brian said.

“Secretly, you love Moby,” Justin said, waving he stir spoon at Brian. “I’m onto you.”

**Chapter Fourteen: Mollusk**

Brian smirked at Justin’s sleeping form as he passed the bed. The phone had been ringing while Brian was in the shower, and it hadn’t even made the blond rollover. Brian was pleased with Justin’s new sleeping patterns, deep restful sleep, without the old rules of Liberty waking him at odd hours, and with fewer and fewer nightmares.

The red blinking message light caught Brian’s attention and he pressed the button to hear the messages as he gathered the things he would need for work. The last person he expected to hear leaving a message on the machine was Jennifer Taylor.

“Justin?” she said, her voice raw as if she’d been crying. Brian could hear her sniffling. “It’s your mom. Oh, I’m -- I didn’t know who else to call. Honey, your sister she’s ... god ... Molly’s missing.”

“Justin!” Brian said, crossing back to the bedroom and shaking Justin’s shoulder.

“Mom?” Justin asked, rubbing his eyes blearily.

“Hardly,” Brian said.

“I thought I heard her ...”

“You did, she left a message on the machine, Molly’s gone.”

“What?” Justin asked, suddenly completely awake and sitting up, his expression worried, his hair tousled.

“How does your mother know this number?”

“She doesn’t,” Justin said, but Brian gave him a look. “I only gave it to Molly if she needed to get in touch with me and my cell was off. I guess my mom found the number in Molly’s room.”

“You didn’t give her the address?”

“Fuck no,” Justin said. “I have to call Merrik, and Liberty, can I borrow the Jeep? Wait, did my mom say if she phoned the police?”

“Sit down, sit still,” Brian said, tugging Justin back onto the bed. The blond was on the verge of freaking-out. “Get dressed, I’ll call Merrik and let Lindsay know.”

“She’s going to try and make me go out there and talk about how I feel about this,” Justin said.

“Probably,” Brian said.

“Tell her I have a really bad head-cold. I can fake-cough in the background,” Justin said as he reached over to the night table for his cell phone. “Dammit, the battery’s dead.” Brian snatched the phone and dropped it on the recharger, then got up to make the calls.

Justin was dressed in record time and Brian thought, just this once, he’d ignore the fact that Justin’s socks didn’t match. “Merrik says to take as much time off as you need,” Brian said, heading back to the bedroom.

“Where are you going?” Justin asked.

“To get changed. I’m not searching for little-girl-lost in fucking Armani,” Brian said.

“Brian,” Justin said, but when Brian turned to look at him his eyebrows raised, Justin just smiled.

Armed with the in-car cell-charger and his cell phone, Justin sat in the front seat of the Jeep and tried to think of places where his sister might hangout. Brian didn’t complain when they hit the mall, even if he thought it was a bit far-fetched.

“Christ, I barely know her,” Justin said after they’d asked the desk to make a mall-wide announcement for Molly Taylor to come to the information desk. “Where would she go?”

“Do you know her friends? Who would she trust?”

“Clarice is her best-friend, but the girl’s mother is a control-freak and Molly hates her. If she ran away from home she’d want someplace where she could stay, for a while at least. ... God, the only person I can imagine her calling is ...”

Justin’s cell rang and he tensed a second before he picked it up and flipped it open. “Hello?” he said, expecting his mother. She’d called once already on his cell in an effort to have Justin return to the house. Apparently having Molly go missing made Jennifer Taylor want to keep a pretty damn close eye on her other child.

“Fucking hell, Jester! You give me this number for emergencies and what, ignore it?”

“Molly!” Justin said. “What the fuck is wrong with you?” he asked. “Are you crazy?”

“No, why?”

“Why? You’ve got police after you, and mom and dad are freaking out. You left my number out for them to find and they’re phoning me like crazy! And I --”

“Bitch her out later, Princess. Where the fuck is she?” Brian said.

“Where the fuck are you?”

“I went to the Nook. Merrik called the loft but you weren’t there, but he let me use the phone to call your cell.”

“Don’t move,” Justin said.

“Yeah, like, where would I go? Hurry up,” she said.

“Unbelievable!” Justin said, flipping his phone closed. “She practically orders me to escort her royal ass home. She’s so ... so ... fucking spoiled!”

Brian remained stoic as he turned the Jeep towards the Nook, trying very hard not to laugh or openly display his amusement. Justin bitched the entire way, he was still bitching when he got out of the Jeep and headed into the Nook. Brian watched, alloqing himself a small smirk as Justin emerged with Molly rolling her eyes and following Justin still, apparently, bitching.

“Alright!” Molly was saying when Justin opened the door to the Jeep. “I get it! Alright!”

She climbed into the backseat, and Justin sat in the front. Brian was silent as he pulled out into the road, waiting for one of the two siblings to break the silence. Neither one did. Instead, Justin’s stomach took-over the conversation.

“You’re always hungry,” Molly muttered.

“Fuck you, I didn’t get a chance to eat breakfast,” Justin said.

“Why not?”

“Because I was looking for my idiot little sister!” Justin said.

“Really?” Molly asked after a minute.

“Yes,” Justin said. His arms were crossed; he was slouched in the seat and glaring. A second passed, then Brian heard the click of a seatbelt and caught sight of Molly’s arms wrapping around Justin like squid tentacles wrapping around a ship. “I can’t breath, god, get off me! You're such a freak,” Justin said.

“I love you too, Jester,” Molly said.

Brian took them over to Liberty, and they trekked to the Diner. “Was that a guy, or a girl,” Molly asked.

“It’s rude to point,” Justin said.

“This place is so cool.”

“We’re never going to get her to leave,” Justin said to Brian.

"I'm sure your parents would love that," Brian drawled, wrapping an arm around Justin’s shoulders as they opened the door. They were greeted by the clank of plates and loud chatter, and an immediate and welcoming blast of warm air that smelled faintly of grease. Molly scooted into a booth and flipped the menu over.

Brian was prepared for Justin to launch into an interrogation of his sister, to try to figure-out what she thought she was doing and why. For all Justin’s bitching, however, he stayed completely casual; and throughout it all, Molly had seemed relieved to see her brother, amused and oddly flattered by his tirade, and now both Taylor offspring were poring over the menu. When the waitress came, they placed almost identical orders without having consulted the other once.

Justin talked about the Nook and Merrik. He relayed a funny story about Emmett’s attempt at throwing a bat mitzvah, and somehow roped both Brian and Molly into a debate about the ‘Lord of the Rings’ films-- which Brian quickly learned Molly absolutely adored. Justin never mentioned where Molly might be going to after lunch, or what she was planning, or his parents or the Taylor home. Molly seemed to have no intention of going anywhere and once lunch was finished and Justin casually picked-up her backpack --a gesture made to look simply like good manners, but neither Brian nor Molly were fooled -- Molly followed them out to the Jeep and climbed into the backseat without comment.

There was really little question as to their destination. Justin needed a quiet, private place to talk to his sister. Molly might need a place to stay. The loft was the only logical conclusion, and Brian headed there without consulting anyone or being given directions. As they pulled onto Tremont, Justin dropped a hand onto the stick-shift, settling on top of Brian's hand, and he squeezed once, his head turned to look out the window. It made the idea of their home once again being invaded sit a little easier, knowing that Justin appreciated the support, was aware of it.

When Justin pulled open the door to the loft, Molly dropped her bag and it hit the floor almost at the exact moment her mouth did. “Holy shit!” she said.

“Watch your language,” Justin said. “Fuck, Goose!” he said when the dog leapt up, bracing his front paws on Justin’s legs, his tail wagging so fast his hips were wiggling along with it.

“Watch your language,” Molly drawled. “And isn’t he the cutest thing I’ve ever seen!” she said. “What’s your name, handsome boy?” She looked at the tags on Goose’s collar and laughed. “You’re both just way too weird.”

Justin ignored her and headed over to the kitchen. “Hey,” Brian said, snagging the back of his shirt. “You okay?”

“Sure,” Justin said. “I mean, we found her, that’s the only thing I was worried about. The rest, I’ll just have to talk to her about.”

Brian could tell Justin and Molly needed some sibling time, but Justin didn’t want to kick Brian out of his own home. “I’m going to head back to work, I don’t trust Theodore with the Kettchum account,” Brian said, Justin bit his lip then smiled.

“You were going to let Ted handle one of your biggest accounts with one of the biggest assholes?” Justin asked. Brian lifted his eyebrows, which earned him a kiss. “Is this one of those ‘do whatever I want’ moments?” Justin asked.

“Within reason,” Brian said. Justin grinned, and wiggled his eyebrows “That’s skanky,” Brian said, and Justin laughed.

“Later.”

“Are you two done necking over there?” Molly asked. She’d been entertaining herself with Goose, but couldn’t help taking glances at her brother and Brian out of the corner of her eye.

Once the loft door had closed behind Brian, Justin grabbed two bottles of water from the fridge and headed to the couch. “You and Brian are really good for each other,” Molly said, standing up and following him.

“Hm,” Justin said.

“Look, I’m sorry, okay? I tried to call you but your cell was off. I figured you’d be at work, and that’s where I headed.”

“Without telling anyone, or calling the loft,” Justin said.

“I wasn’t thinking, okay?” Molly said.

“Why? What happened?”

“I can’t stand mom and dad!” she said. “I can’t stand how they treated -- screw that -- how they treat you! I can’t stand what they did!”

“You have a different relationship with them, Molly. Don’t ruin that over something you don’t understand.”

“Oh, give me some credit, Jester!” Molly said. She was pacing and flailing her arms. “I know what they did. They found out you were gay and freaked-out. When you stopped talking, they shipped you off to a mental hospital and tried to forget all about you,” Molly said. Justin tried very hard to stay calm, to not show the emotion that was roiling inside. “And now you’re out, and talking, and they’re freaking out again. I know what happened.”

“No,” Justin said. His voice flat and quiet, and with such an edge that Molly went absolutely still and looked at her brother who was still seated on the couch. “You don’t.”

“Then tell me,” she said.

“No,” Justin said. “Whatever happened between mom and ... And dad and me. It doesn’t matter, Molly. We each made choices and that’s it. But you’ve got your own choices and I don’t want you making the wrong ones because you’re trying to defend me. I don’t need to be defended.”

“I’m not defending you,” Molly said. “You were perfect, Justin. Or don’t you remember? You got straight A’s, you went to stupid Saint James and dressed like a good boy, and were polite -- a parent’s wet-dream! And look what that got you? One mistake -- something that isn’t even really a mistake at all, something that you couldn’t even help -- but they kick you out and it’s like you never existed.”

“Is that what’s going on with the hair and the clothes?” Justin asked. Molly’s hair kept changing colour -- her fingernails were always painted ink blue, her clothes were looking less and less attractive. “You’re trying to see how far you can push mom and dad without being kicked-out?”

“You make me sound like a nutcase,” Molly muttered.

“Try enduring daily therapy for two years, and then complain to me about sounding like a nutcase.” Molly smirked and grabbed her bottle of water from where Justin had set it on the coffee table. She collapsed onto the chair and looked at her brother.

“It’s more than that, too,” sheadmitted. “Dad comes home whenever he wants, he’s home late all the time. He treats mom like shit, and only remembers me when he wants to badger me about my marks or my clothes or who I’m hanging out with. It’s the same god damned lecture all the time. And mom’s working, she’s doing really well, and sets down perfectly reasonable rules and he won’t follow them. He won’t help around the house; he won’t take over some of the driving. And instead of saying something to him, mom just backs down. It’s not right. What kind of example is that for me? They’re so preoccupied with each other they barely remember I’m there.”

“They remembered today,” Justin said. “They were frantic.”

“They called you,” she said.

“Happily, I didn’t answer the phone,” Justin said. Though he had spoken with his mother. There’d been no choice, he needed to find out what was going on and if the police had been called. He’d lucked out at the Diner when he had called to let them know Molly had been found and got the machine. “Look, Molly. Running away isn’t going to solve anything, especially when you’ve got no money and nowhere to go.”

“I can stay here!” she said.

“You’re counting on freeloading off of me?” he asked.

“I can’t stay there, Justin. I just can’t,” she said.

“Okay,” Justin said. “The couch is open here whenever you need it, for however long. But think for a second about why you’re running away. Are you just frustrated and pissed off with mom and dad -- or do you really and truly believe that you’re done with them, that you’re ready to sever ties. ... do you feel like you’re in danger?”

“No!” Molly said, Justin nodded, relieved.

“Think about it,” he said. He brought down a blanket and pillow, although it was too early to go to sleep. She rapped the blanket around his shoulders and tucked her feet close to her on the couch and flipped through channels. Justin worked for a bit on calculating his options. If she decided she couldn’t possibly stand to go back, he’d have to support her until she changed her mind. And he was pretty sure she’d change her mind. Neither their mom or their dad had done anything to Molly, hadn’t hurt her hadn’t said anything harsh. They lectured, but what parent didn’t? Molly still needed her mom and dad, and what was more important, having them was still an option for her. Justin wasn’t going to let her ignore that.

Talking about his parents had made him tired, but he was too upset to sleep, so instead Justin picked-up a brush and painted. That’s how Brian found them when he returned with a bag full of take-out Thai. Molly sprawled on the couch, clearly too lost in thought to know what she was watching. Justin covered in paint, barely noticing Brian’s return.

“Molly, food,” Brian said, watching as the young girl slowly got up from the couch and, still wrapped in the blanket, made her way to the table. He headed for the bedroom. “Justin,” he said, stopping by the easel.

“Yeah?” Justin asked.

“Dinner’s on the table.”

“Oh,” Justin said. He dropped his paintbrush into the can of water and actually started to head to the table.

Brian snagged the back of his shirt, and grimaced as he got paint on his fingers. He didn’t even want to know how Justin could get paint on the back of his shirt. “Not dressed like that,” he said. Justin looked down and then met Brian’s gaze sheepishly.

“What did you two decide?” Brian asked as he took-off his suit.

“She’s thinking,” Justin said.

“What’s to think about? I’ve had parents, it’s a fate worse than --”

“Not my parents,” Justin said. “My parents are good parents,” he said. Brian looked at the blond somewhat cautiously and Justin frowned and scratched behind his ear. He shook his head. “They are for Molly. She’s pissed off and frustrated, and yeah, she needs a break, but they’re good for her.”

“Are you sure you’re not patching them up because that’s what you want? Secretly wishing they could be your parents again so easily?”

“Don’t psychoanalyze me,” Justin hissed. “I told you, she’s thinking. It’s her decision, and I left her to make it. I can support her until she decides to go back.”

“Or she could ask your parents for money, she gets along so well with them,” Brian snarked.

“You don’t know anything, Brian,” Justin said. Both of them were trying to keep their argument quiet so as not to disturb Molly.

“So you keep telling me. But I know what they did to you, and I wouldn’t just stand around and give them the opportunity to do it again.”

“It will be different with her,” Justin said with simple certainty.

“How so?”

“She’s straight. She’s a girl. She isn’t crazy. My parents love her. Pick one,” Justin said. “I’m going to get this paint off,” he said, and shut the door to the bathroom.

Brian pulled on his shirt and headed out to the kitchen. He found Molly holding a carton of Thai, eating with chopsticks and standing on the drop cloth, looking at the painting on Justin’s easel. “What did they do to him?” she asked when Brian came over. Justin’s painting was dark and chaotic -- like a fire, like menacing shadows looming over something -- someone -- very small. There were reds and blacks and blues, and Molly was hypnotized. Brian too.

Brian ignored her question and answered a different one that went unspoken. “Going home isn’t betraying Justin.”

She bit her lip and then turned back to the table. When Justin came down he was wet and dressed in sweatpants and a pullover, and clearly still upset. “I’ll go home,” Molly said. “But you’re not rid of me. I want to be able to visit,” Molly said.

“I always said you could,” Justin said.

“Okay then,” Molly said. “Now can we watch a movie?” Justin smirked and, grabbing a carton and chopsticks, strutted in that familiar stride to the TV.

**Chapter Fifteen: In Motion, Beautiful**

Molly had eaten breakfast with them, and they’d driven her home. Justin had hugged her tight, but hadn’t stepped out of the car. He’d watched the house in the rear-view until Brian had turned onto a different street. By the time they cleared suburbia, Justin had pulled out his phone and was telling Merrik he wasn’t feeling well.

“Do you want to go back to the loft?” Brian asked.

“What?” Justin asked.

“You said you didn’t feel well.”

“No, it’s fine,” Justin said. The more they drove, the more agitated Justin became. Brian didn’t want to leave him by himself, but he’d shifted his morning meetings from the day before over to the next day and he had work to do. He let Justin off at the loft, then drove out again.

Brian called the loft to check-in at midmorning. Justin was out of breath and said he’d just got in from walking Goose. He was distracted. “I’m gonna go over to the gym, okay?” Justin asked.

“Sure,” Brian said, wondering why Justin asked. It was something Justin might have done in the beginning, when he hadn't been used to living together. He checked-in all the time and asked permission. It had been a relief to Brian when Justin had stopped asking and wondering without Brian having to have some sort of talk with him about it.

“Okay,” Justin said, and then hung-up. Brian frowned at the receiver.

When he returned from work, Goose practically pounced on him and it took a moment to realize the reason for the dog’s exuberance was because he really needed to go outside. Brian took Goose out, and then checked around the loft. There was no sign of Justin anywhere. Since the last place the Justin had said he was going had been Street Smartz, Brian headed there.

Justin was in black sweats and wasn’t wearing a top. The boxing gloves on his hands looked strange -- he looked small and fragile beside his opponent -- but he was moving like lightning. There was a sheen of sweat on Justin’s body, Brian watched as he licked his lips, braced his body and took a punch, then struck out just as fast.

It was a dance Brian had never seen before. Had never pictured Justin partaking in. He knew the young man was graceful, knew he balanced like a cat on a guardrail. He knew Justin was strong, knew he was tough. Had never envisioned him beating someone twice his size with determined efficiency. It scared Brian, because it seemed entirely too clear to him that Justin wasn’t seeing his opponent at all, but was lost somewhere else -- was fighting someone else.

The two men moved in the ring, Justin striking hard coming like an avalanche at his partner, until the other man struck out and landed a lucky punch to Justin’s head, ad Justin fell over.

“Fucking hell, Charlie!” Justin cursed.

“Sorry man,” the other man, Charlie, said. “I had to land you one for lying to dear old Merrik. You should be at work.”

“So should you!” Justin said, taking off the gloves, still glaring.

“Yeah, but you were beating the shit out of me already, man. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Justin said. “Fuck off.”

“Hey,” Brian said, catching Justin as he came down from the ring.

“What are you doing here?” Justin asked, the earlier anger Brian had seen not visible any longer. “What time is it?”

“It’s late. Get changed, I’ll give you a ride back.” Justin showered in the change room and dressed quickly, meeting Brian at the front of the gym. “Feel better?”

“Lots,” Justin said, smiling broadly, his fingers tapping on the door handle. Brian glanced over and watched the fingers tap and nodded.

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“Where have you been?” Jennifer cried when Molly stepped inside.

“Out.”

“For an entire night?” Jennifer said. “Without calling and letting anyone know where you were? I’ve been worried sick!”

“I was never in any danger. And I’m home now, so you can stop worrying,” Molly said.

“What’s going on with you? What’s happening?” Jennifer asked.

“Why do you want to know? So you can try to fix me? If I’m too broken, will you send me away too?”

“Molly, your brother was very sick,” Jennifer said.

“Says you! You don’t even know what was wrong with him. Did you even ask? He won’t tell me. Nobody tells me shit.”

“You watch your language in this house,” Jennifer said.

“Dad swears all the time, you gonna yell at him, too?” Jennifer pursed her lips. “Didn’t fucking think so,” Molly said and climbed the stairs to her room, slamming the door.

"Molly!" Jennifer called.

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Justin returned to the Nook to work his usual morning shift. Merrik greeted him warmly, and didn’t pester him about how he was feeling. Grimm greeted him happily when Justin headed into the storage room. After the snowfall, with Brian’s imminent return, Justin had made arrangements with Merrik to keep the dog at the Nook.

Since no amount of working out at Street Smartz had quite settled him, Justin took to sorting the shelves, organizing everything. He worked without stopping, even when Merrik pestered him about eating. Finally, the other man left him to it, and by the time Justin had to drive out to Liberty, the Nook was in perfect order.

Justin took Grimm with him out to Liberty; the black ruffled dog sitting happily in the front seat of Brian’s Jeep as Justin drove. Justin didn’t trust himself alone. He’d started freaking out the other day once Brian had left for work. It wasn't like the sort of panic attacks he had become accustomed to following his father's mistreatment of him and Chris' attacks. This was something else.

Lindsay didn’t have any helpful advice. “Just relax and take it easy on yourself. Talking and thinking about your parents is hard. Dealing with your sister was even more difficult because it underscored the differences between you and your sister, and how your parents treat you both. Give yourself time to adjust.”

Except Justin couldn’t sit still. Kept wanting to fly apart into a million tiny pieces. He worked on the mural, Grimm adding coloured Doggy footprints onto the drop cloth after he got into the paint. Michael talked incessantly which kept Justin’s mind off of everything else.

He stayed late, and by the time he reached the loft. Justin felt tired and exhausted and couldn’t do much of anything except peel off his clothes and slump into bed. Brian, who had been working at the computer when Justin had come in, watched as the blond man collapsed into sleep, and sighed. It was a step-up from painting through the night. Then he frowned.

Goose was happily sharing his food bowl with a scrawny black dog that Brian had never seen before. “Justin,” Brian said, closing his eyes and shaking his head, fingers pinching the bridge of his nose.

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Justin seemed completely normal the next day, and Brian observed him closely as the blond man made omelettes. “I was wondering where the little black hairs came from,” Brian said casually.

“What little black hairs?” Justin asked. The dogs barked, and Justin turned his head to where Goose and Grimm were sitting side-by-side, pink tongues hanging out of their grinning mouths. “Uhm.”

“You didn’t think I’d notice little black doggy hairs all over the loft?”

“I vacuumed,” Justin said defensively.

“That’s not the point. What the hell is that?” he pointed to the black dog.

“Goose has been really lonely. We’re both away for so long, and the radio can only do so much. It's got to be boring. I found him on the street. He doesn’t have fleas,” Justin was quick to assure Brian. “I took him to the vet and he’s healthy -- well, as healthy as you can get for a street dog. ... You bought me a dog, so I bought you one,” Justin finished.

“I bought you a purebred, trained, polite little dog that had white fur that wouldn’t stick-out like a sore-thumb when he sheds on the couch. Not a street dog.”

“He’s as unique as you are,” Justin said, then kneeled down and draped his arms over Grimm. “Can we keep him?”

“Justin,” Brian said.

“You can’t return a gift, that’s just bad manners,” Justin said.

Brian snorted. “This is a trial period,” Brian said. Justin grinned and kissed him hard. “I didn’t say it was definite!” But he wasn’t fooling anyone. Even Grimm was yipping and dancing around his feet. “Get him a different food dish, I’m not having him eating out a bowl with a fucking goose on it.”

“I can paint a little black dog on his bowl,” Justin said.

“Why, what’s his name?” Brian asked, a look of trepidation on his face.

“Grimm,” Justin said. Brian covered his eyes with one hand and shook his head.

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“How do you seduce someone?” Justin asked Emmett over lunch at the Diner one week after Molly had returned home.

“Who are you trying to seduce, Baby?” Emmett asked. Justin gave him a look, and Emmett clapped his hands. “Ooh, do you need help setting the scene?”

“I don’t want to go over the top,” Justin said. “We’ve been taking it slow -- because -- well, we have. And I don’t want to make this huge production and then, if it doesn’t work or something.”

“Honey, it will work just fine,” Emmett said. Justin didn’t want to explain more. Both Emmett and Michael were all too happy to forget what had happened at Liberty, but Justin could never forget Chris, and as much as he wanted Brian, he was worried. “I’ll pick-up all sorts of romantic things!”

“Don’t get carried away,” Justin warned.

“Absolutely not,” Emmett said. “And you don’t have to use everything. Sit tight and finish your lunch, auntie Em will be right back with your bag of goodies.”

Justin was almost worried about that, but he smiled and watched Emmett leave, and then pulled out his sketchbook. He sketched the waiters and waitresses, a table-full of a smiling friends, and was in the middle of a sketch of the growling cook who he could see from his booth when a woman bent over his shoulder.

“That’s lovely,” she said.

“Thank-you,” Justin said, somewhat hesitantly.

“I’m sorry, my name is Fran. I’m doing some work over at the GLC -- may I?” she asked, gesturing to the sketchbook. Justin allowed her to look through the pages, flattered when she handled the book with such care and pored over each sketch. “I hope I’m not being too forward. But would you consider contributing some of your work to the show we’re running?” She rifled through her purse and handed over an official-looking sheet of paper that explained about the show and the kind of things they were looking for.

“You’re asking me to show my work?”

“Well, yes,” Fran said. “It’s not much. A few pieces, and there are many artists contributing. The proceeds go to charity, of course.”

“I’d love to,” Justin said. Fran gave him the details of where to submit his pieces, and they were just finishing up when Emmett returned.

“Who was that?”

“I’m going to show my work over at the GLC,” Justin explained.

“My, my, things are looking up for you on all sorts of levels,” Emmett said, dropping a large back on the table. “Now, you take those home and do something romantic.” Justin grinned and took the bag, tucking his sketchbook back into his messenger. He was about to get up when Emmett grabbed Justin’s wrist. “You be careful, Baby. Some people around here, they’re not so sold on the idea of their stud being a one man kind of guy all of a sudden.”

“Some people around here don’t know Brian, or me, or what goes on at our home,” Justin said.

“Ooh, I’m so happy for you,” Emmett said. Justin blushed and rolled his eyes and hurried home.

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Justin emptied the contents of the bag, worried about what he might find. He wanted something simple, but romantic. He had no idea where to start. Emmett had started him with candles. There were all sorts, different sizes and smells. Justin picked the less obvious smells, and settled for the large vanilla candles.

He set them on the counter, on the table, on the floor, and then frowned when he eyed the dogs. Both Mother Goose and Grimm were sitting side-by-side and looking at him. “This is just too much,” Justin said. He snapped on their leashes and caught the bus. Emmett was more than happy to baby-sit, though he laughed at the idea. "Not in front of the kids, hm?" he teased. Justin ignored him.

On his way back to the loft, Justin stopped into the store and picked up some ice cream, and then finished setting up. With everything ready, Justin grabbed the icecream and ate some in an attempt to settle his nerves. It didn't quite work. As it got later, he showered, lit the candles, and then paced. He wasn’t sure how to do this. Should he be naked? Should he sit on the reclining chaise, or at the table? On the table? Justin snickered, and shook his head.

He paced until he heard the key in the lock, and then he threw himself at the chaise.

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“Justin?” Brian called when he stepped inside. The loft was dimly lit, there were candles everywhere and it smelled like vanilla. He stepped further inside and saw Justin sitting on the chaise.

“Hi,” Justin said.

“Hi,” Brian greeted. He bent down and kissed Justin. He'd meant it to be quick but Justin wrapped a hand around the back of his neck and pulled him down into a deeper kiss. Brian felt Justin’s hand guiding his own until it stopped at Justin’s groin. “Justin,” Brian gasped.

“Come on,” Justin encouraged, shimmying back onto the chaise and tugging Brian further on top of him. Justin was thrusting up into Brian’s palm, which he still held in a firm grip.

Brian tried to clear his thoughts. “Wait,” Brian said, pulling back and getting off the chaise. Justin stayed in place, his legs spread obscenely, his hair already ruffled and his eyes looking worried.

“You want me,” Justin said, not sounding as certain as he wanted to.

“That’s not what’s been holding us back,” Brian said.

“I’m not fragile,” Justin said. “You can’t treat me like I’m going to break!” He was off the couch, walking passed the candles towards Brian.

Brian turned quickly and pulled Justin roughly to his chest. His hands gripped Justin’s shirt, keeping him close, and he used his lips and tongue to pry Justin’s mouth open, devour him with a strong kiss.

When they stepped back to breathe both of them were dishevelled. They looked at each other and then came crashing together again, Brian's handsgoing to Justin’s shirt and unfastening the buttons, while Justin freed Brian of his tie and suit jacket. They kissed ferociously, still ridding the other of their clothes as Brian stepped them backwards towards the bedroom.

At the base of the stairs, Brian released Justin’s belt and smirked as he discovered Justin wasn’t wearing anything underneath. Justin kicked off the cargos and pulled Brian close again. “Don’t stop touching me,” he pleaded.

Brian picked Justin up, the young man wrapping his legs tight around Brian and pressing his arousal against the other man’s bare abdomen, his mouth occupied with Brian's earlobe as the older man carried Justin onto the bed and then dropped him down, pressing their chests close as he kissed the blond’s sensitive neck, bit at his collarbone. Justin’s fingers scratched at Brian’s back and he pressed his hips upward, spread his legs wider.

Brian licked his way down Justin’s pale skin, avoiding the long length of Justin’s cock, and then flipped hip over, and repeated the same procedure down Justin’s back, except he pressed his tongue into Justin’s ass, flicked it around his opening.

“Oh fuck,” Justin whispered like a prayer. Brian smirked, teased with flicks and gentle circling, and then pressed his tongue into Justin, loving how Justin’s hips tilted making his entrance more accessible. Brian rimmed the blond until he was shivering and panting, then he turned Justin over again, and knelt up above his body, looking down at ruffled blond hair, dazed blue eyes, pink lips glistening in the blue light, and the smooth pale skin beneath him.

Justin dropped his hands to Brian’s thighs, squeezing slightly. He was nervous, Brian could tell, but that was overlayed by lust and wanting. “You have to talk me through this,” Justin said, looking somehow even younger as he asked.

Brian ghosted his mouth over Justin's hear, flicking his tongue along the shell of his ear as he reached for the lube and a condom. “Put it on me,” Brian said, pressing the condom into Justin’s palm. Justin took a shuddering breath, then shifted upward so he could reach Brian’s cock. He tore the packet open clumsily and rolled the rubber onto Brian’s arousal, while Brian flipped the cap open on the lube and warmed it between his fingers.

Brian pressed his fingers passed the ring of muscle as Justin finished rolling the condom on and the sensation of being penetrated sent Justin's eyes closing tight and he flopped back onto the bed, his hand going to Brian’s upper arm, following the motion. He kneaded Brian’s arm as Brian stretched him.

“Puts your legs on my shoulders,” Brian said, slipping his fingers free and guiding Justin’s legs into place. “Just relax,” Brian said. “I’ll get you there.”

Justin braced himself, wrapped his fingers in the sheets and took a breath to relax. Brian held Justin’s gaze and began to push in. Justin’s body arched this time with pain, but he rode it through, gasping when Brian was fully seated. He felt stretched and full and was trying desperately to keep his mind in the present, to stay with Brian where it was safe.

Brian waited, wondered if it had been too fast. Justin’s gaze kept flicking away, and every time he closed his eyes, Brian worried about losing him to a flashback. But then Justin’s hand gripped his arm again. “Move,” Justin ordered. “God, you have to move.”

So Brian moved. Each time Justin broke his gaze he moved faster, thrust hard, more deliberate, skirted over Justin’s prostate and took the flashback away, overrode it with pleasure until Justin couldn’t think, couldn’t do anything but breathe and form unfinished words, issuing them like prayers. “Bri ...”

The sensation was unlike anything Brian had felt before. He was gasping and couldn’t think of anything except the sensation, except that he was with Justin, was inside Justin. That it was happening, that it was real. He was getting close, was trying to hold out and make it last longer, but each grunt, each mewl, each unfinished word that Justin made was an electric jolt that ran down Brian’s body. When Justin came his body tensed, bowed upwards pressing into Brian’s. Justin bit at Brian’s neck and mewled and gripped Brian’s cock inside him. Brian’s senses overloaded, carried over by the pleasure and the pain, and he came hard.

He collapsed onto Justin, barely managing to brace himself on his arms. He looked down at Justin, but the blond seemed completely content, lost in a blissful afterglow. “Don’t move,” Justin said, holding Brian still when Brian tried to pullout.

“I won’t,” Brian said.

“Just stay with me,” Justin said, still a bit incoherent.

“I’m here,” Brian said, dropping his body down over Justin’s.

Justin turned his head into Brian’s neck and kissed him. “God,” he breathed. “Just stay.”

“Okay.”

**Chapter Sixteen: Only Words**

Justin woke to the sensation of fur against his naked skin. He smiled, remembering his night with Brian, savouring the slight burn he could still feel. His smile disappeared as he blinked open his eyes and realized he was sandwiched between Mother Goose and Grimm. “You just let them in?” he asked when he noticed Brian standing at the foot of the bed.

“Yes,” Brian said, his expression clearly reading ‘duh’. “Emmett was just here to drop them off.” His smirk let Justin know that Brian was both amused and flattered at the planned seduction. Justin’s smile returned.

“I’m gonna have a shower,” Justin said. He forgot about modesty and hopped out of bed, still naked and trying to ignore two sets of doggy-eyes that were watching him. “Want to join me?” he asked, flashing a coy smile at Brian.

Brian let his eyes drift slowly up and then down Justin’s body, before he turned back to head down the stairs. “The mutts have to be fed.” Justin rolled his eyes and headed into the bathroom, part disappointed and part relieved. Brian had been amazing, and Justin had never felt closer to anyone before, but his old insecurities would not release him. As much as he wanted to be close to Brian again, and soon, there was a part of him that needed a moment to adjust to the idea of someone else getting so close to him – sharing his body for however long.

Under the warm water of the shower he replayed the night, from Brian’s entry into the loft, to the time they passed-out. They’d made love more than once, and each time had been something new. The first time had been intense. Justin had been expecting the pain but was unfamiliar with the pleasure, it had felt like a struggle to keep himself from flying apart and by the time they had climaxed and Brian had collapsed on him, Justin was embarrassingly emotion. He didn’t cry, he didn’t say much of anything, but there was little doubt that Brian knew and understood.

The next time had been slow. Sated caresses and idle touches had slowly grown until Brian was slipping inside him again. Justin had known what to expect completely then, and he hadn’t felt so overwhelmed and they’d moved so slowly with each other. They’d done it two other times, and Justin was strangely proud that he had managed to quell any flashbacks. There had been flickers of memory, but each time he fought to focus on Brian, and seemingly the older man could read minds because he would kiss or touch him in a way that he forgot all about Liberty Hospital and what had happened there.

Justin didn’t realize he’d been touching himself until a larger hand enclosed his and took-up his pace. “Hi,” he said, leaning his body back against Brian’s, letting his hand be guided. He came not long after, savouring the feel of Brian’s hand on him, of warm water on his chest and Brian’s breath in his ear.

“What are you doing?” Brian asked when Justin turned around and pressed Brian back against the shower stall.

“Returning the favour,” Justin said with a grin. He stroked Brian’s cock slowly, his mouth tasting the water on Brian’s skin, exploring this new ability to forget – or at least set aside the bad memories. He smiled when Brian came in his fist, and there was a sense of satisfaction that had him grinning and with a bounce in his step before he even had any coffee. Brian laughed at his antics but didn’t openly comment.

The buzzer sounded as Justin was pouring dog kibble into the bowls. Brian took the mug he’d been filling with him. “Yes?”

“Brian? Hi, it’s Molly. Is Justin there?”

Justin stood and brushed his hands off on his pants, shrugging at Brian’s inquiring look. He hadn’t been expecting his sister. Brian buzzed her in and waited before opening the door, approximating the time it would take for Molly to reach the top floor. “Christ,” Brian said as he opened the door to see Molly standing there. Justin was by his side in a moment.

“I told dad I was a lesbian,” Molly said.

It was silent until Justin found the words. “He hit you.” It wasn’t a question, and the tone sent warning flags-up for Brian, he glanced to the blond but Justin didn’t look to him.

“Come inside,” Brian said, taking charge of the situation. Molly seemed to be relieved to be welcomed inside, and followed Brian to the kitchen as he wrapped ice in a towel for the bruise on her cheek.

“Did he hit you anywhere else?” Justin asked.

“What?” Molly asked, seemingly confused.

“Dad. Did he hit you anywhere else? What did he do?” Justin asked, his tone startling even Molly.

“No, god, he just freaked for a second and slapped me. We were having a fight and I was looking to piss him off. He didn’t mean it. Dad wouldn’t smack me around,” Molly said. Justin scratched at his ear and then turned on his heel and disappeared to the bedroom. She watched him go and it dawned on her slowly. “Holy shit.”

“What?” Brian said, his tone warning.

“He – that’s what. Jesus,” Molly said.

“Don’t swear,” Brian said idly, handing over the ice even if the bruise wasn’t very dark, before following Justin to the bedroom.

“I’m fine,” Justin said as soon as he saw Brian. He looked anything but, pacing back-and-forth, his hair ruffled and eyes wild. Brian knew the look for what it was, anger and fear.

“Come here,” he said, watching closely as Justin stopped his pacing and walked slowly over. Brian gripped the back of Justin’s head, his fingers threading into soft blond hair and pulled Justin into his chest. “Just stand still a second.”

They were quiet, Justin trying to calm down and Brian listening closely as Justin’s breathing slowed. “I’m always the one falling apart,” Justin said. Brian stuck his tongue in his cheek and Justin rolled his eyes. “She doesn’t know,” he said. “Not about any of it.”

“Does it make a difference?” Brian asked.

“Probably not.” Justin turned and went back out to where Molly was standing by the counter, staring at the icepack in her hand. She saw him and started to say something but stopped when he hugged her tight. “Are you okay?”

“I didn’t know,” she said.

Justin hadn’t wanted his sister to ever find out what his father had done, but if she had to, he wouldn’t have wanted it to come-out like this. He had never once thought that Craig might do to her what he’d done to Justin. “Are you okay?” he asked, emphasizing the second word.”

“He hit me,” she said.

“It wasn’t right,” Justin said. “It doesn’t matter how angry he was, or what you were saying, he shouldn’t have done it. Not ever.”

“He did it to you.”

“It was wrong then, too.” Justin tried to believe it, but there was still a part of him that kept second-guessing, wondering if it was something he’d done, or said, if there was anything he could do to make it better.

Molly cried, but not for very long, and when she was done she wiped her eyes and seemed to shake it off as if deciding that it was time to move on. So Justin moved on. “You told dad you were a lesbian?” he asked, trying to picture it.

“Yeah.”

“Are you crazy?”

“That’s what mom said,” Molly smirked.

Justin paused a moment and looked at his sister closely. “Are you?”

“No. It was a show of solidarity, you know?”

“Don’t do shit like this because you think you owe it to me,” Justin said. “You don’t owe me anything. And whatever happened between mom and dad and I – it’s our problem, and we’ll deal with it. Don’t let anyone make it your problem.”

“I hated them before I even really knew,” Molly said. “What they did, I mean. Dad’s been acting so bad, and mom just takes it. Just all the time, she just does whatever he wants and he’s being an unreasonable ass. I hate her for always letting him get his way. She should make him change; she shouldn’t just bow to his whims! And he should know better!”

“Mollusc,” Justin said. “Mom’s doing the best she can.”

“What about dad?”

“No father has the right to hit their kid,” Brian said. He’d taken his laptop into the bedroom in an attempt to give the siblings some sense of privacy, but knew where this was going and thought he’d step-in before the question arose. He dropped a blanket and pillow on the couch and headed to the kitchen, fishing out the takeout menus and dropping them on the table.

“Brian,” Justin said, frowning, but Brian shot him a look that very clearly said to wait and ask later.

They ordered Thai and Brian and Justin ate with chopsticks, Molly periodically attempting to perfect her technique and always returning to her fork. She settled down on the couch, and Brian and Justin settled into bed. “I don’t feel right about this. I can afford a hotel or something,” Justin said.

“Then who would watch the brat?” Brian asked.

“I would stay with her.”

“Then who would watch me?”

“You’re all grown-up,” Justin said with a smirk. They kissed a bit, and Brian slid his hands down Justin’s smooth back, appreciating it more than ever that Justin was now both used to sleeping nude and also used to touch.

“Hm,” Brian said, taking Justin’s hand and sliding it down to prove just how ‘up’ he had grown.

“My sister is right there,” Justin said.

“What, you want to call her?” Justin scrunched his face up and Brian smirked, taking advantage of Justin’s distraction to flip the younger man over.

“This is just wrong. She’s already been traumatized once tonight.”

“I bet she’d think it was hot,” Brian said, kissing his way down Justin’s exposed chest.

“She could hear.”

“She’ll have sweet dreams,” Brian said, smirking.

“What if she comes to see what’s going on?”

“She should know better,” Brian said, his hands coaxing Justin’s thighs apart as his tongue laved a nipple.

“She’ll ask what was going on,” Justin said, his fingers tangling in Brian’s hair and his voice becoming increasingly breathy.

“She’s not five,” Brian commented before dipping his tongue into Justin’s belly button. Justin thrust his hips up involuntarily.

“I’ll tell her to ask you,” Justin threatened.

“I’ll say we were dancing,” Brian said.

“Dancing?”

“Hm. The horizontal tango,” Brian said. Smirking as he kissed lower, one hand grasping Justin’s cock as the other stroked up and down his thigh. After a moment, Brian lifted his head up and raised his eyebrows. “Well?”

“What?” Justin asked, his eyes glazed. “I’m out reasons.” He shrugged. “I must be a bad brother.”

“I’ll still give you a gold star,” Brian said with a smirk.

Justin leaned up, pressing his mouth close to Brian’s ear. “I can think of something else you can give me.” He closed his eyes and lay back, surrendering because he needed the bad memories to be chased away and he trusted that Brian could do it. He held Brian close, gripped his arms, his hair, his hips. He took Brian in, again and again, and wished he could keep him there, wished it could last for longer – forever. Wished everything that existed beyond their bed away so they would never have to leave their makeshift sanctuary.

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Molly had coffee ready by the time Justin woke, and Brian was sitting with the paper open at the table. Molly smirked when she saw him coming down the stairs, adjusting his sweatpants and tugging the T-shirt he’d thrown-on further down. Her eyes looked him over pointedly, and flicked to Brian and then back. Justin glared and her smirk turned to a full smile.

“Hmph,” he said, collapsing into a chair, unable to make the several extra steps to the coffee pot. He snatched Brian’s mug while the man was distracted and took a long gulp before placing it back. Molly snickered when Brian glared at the almost empty mug.

“Unbelievable,” she said, grabbing another mug and bringing that and the coffee pot to the table.

“Milk?” Justin asked.

“Get it yourself!” Molly said. Justin glared again and then settled for drinking his coffee black. After the first cup, he felt resuscitated. He and Brian had been up late, and his night hadn’t been restful. Rather than enduring nightmares, Justin simply hadn’t been able to close his eyes, his mind was racing with images of Craig hurting Molly the way he’d hurt Justin. There wasn’t a clear solution in any of this mess. Justin still thought his sister needed to be with her parents, but Justin couldn’t let her go back to that house knowing what he knew.

The thought of food was too much; he drank the coffee and let the dogs out while Molly put away the bedding and Brian got his suitcase together. It was a weekday and Justin had work and Molly had school. “I’ll be here when you get out,” he said, trying to ignore the large familiar building looming across the street. Brian, his shades on, was tapping his fingers on the steering wheel. Justin wondered if maybe they were making Brian late.

“Justin …”

“I’ll be here,” Justin said.

“I need to pick-up my stuff from home,” Molly said. She was wearing her clothes from the day before but she kept her uniform in her locker, refusing to wear it more than was absolutely necessary.

“Then we’ll stop there on the way to the loft,” Justin said. Brian’s eyebrows drew together and his fingers stilled. “We’ll figure something out,” Justin said, at once conscious that Brian wasn’t going to let him go back to his parent’s place alone and also that Brian and he both had to get to work.

“Thanks,” Molly said after a minute. Justin watched her head across the street to Saint James Academy, and then settled back into his seat.

“I’m sorry for all this drama,” Justin said as they headed towards the Nook.

“That’s what you get when you bring home a Princess,” Brian drawled. Justin snorted and then broke into laughter. It was like a dam breaking. He was fairly certain he was laughing so hard because he knew if he cried he’d never stop.

“I should probably head over to Liberty,” Justin said when he’d caught his breath. “Are you sure you don’t want me to find a hotel or something? I don’t know what I’m going to do. I don’t want her going back to … it could be a while.”

“Parents shouldn’t hit their kids,” Brian said, his voice tight, and Justin knew Brian had his own dark memories. He wondered if maybe Brian was being so supportive about this for his own reasons, and not simply because he was helping Justin. This struck Brian close to home as well. “You’re not fucking moving out of your home over this. She can take the couch. We’ll figure something out,” Brian was saying. The Jeep stopped by the curb outside of the Nook. Justin didn’t say anything. He grabbed his bag and unlocked the door. With his hand on the door handle he turned to Brian and stretched across the gap between them, kissing Brian’s cheek, then his lips when he turned to face Justin. Justin knew Brian wouldn’t hear the words, but he heard this Justin could tell by the way Brian’s eye softened briefly. Then Justin hopped out of the Jeep and shut the door, heading into the Nook, feeling Brian’s eyes on him the entire way.

**Chapter Seventeen: Jester**

His head was tipped-back braced against the back of the wingback chair, his hands covering his eyes. “Justin?” she asked.

“It’s just,” Justin said. He sighed and dropped his hands, tilting his head back to look at the floor, the bookshelf, the desk in front of him. He turned to look at the window in the office. “She never did that for me,” he said. Lindsay frowned at looked at him closely. They’d been speaking for over an hour and she’d have to call a stop soon because she had another patient, but Justin was very clearly upset. “I should be happy, right?” Justin said, shaking himself out of his thoughts. “It makes everything simpler.”

“You can’t deny how you’re feeling about this, Justin,” she said.

“Well, I can’t just –“ he was interrupted by a knock on the door, and a moment later her secretary poked her head into the room.

“Just another moment, and I’ll be right out,” Lindsay said, watched as her secretary nodded and closed the door. “What were you saying?”

“Nothing,” Justin said. “I should go.” She tried half-heartedly to call him back, but she knew all-too well that Justin couldn’t be made to sit still and speak if he didn’t want to. In the time he had been her patient, she had always had the sense that he was constantly realizing things about himself, and not sharing them with her. She didn’t mind that, so long as he kept realizing those things.

“That took a while,” Michael said. He was in the rec room on a sofa that had been covered with a drop cloth. It had quickly become a tradition that Michael should spend the days that Justin came for therapy and to work on the mural with him in the rec room where they could visit and talk.

“Bad week,” Justin said with a shrug. He hoped to leave it at that, but Michael was half Italian and half drag queen, and pretty soon Justin was waving his paintbrush as he paced and explained the whole thing.

“So, your dad hits your little sister, and your mom is divorcing him?”

“Yes,” Justin confirmed, finally coming to a halt and facing Michael with a solemn look.

“And you’re upset because … she didn’t do that for you?”

“I don’t know,” Justin said. “I should be happy because I know that Molly would have probably moved into the loft if my mom didn’t do this. And I love her, but honestly I think it would drive Brian crazy even though he’d be the one insisting on it. And it would definitely put a limit on our sex-life.”

“So then what’s the problem?”

“He smacks Molly and that’s the final straw. But he … he hurt me,” Justin said.

“Well, you said your sister got smacked when your mom was right there. Maybe she didn’t know you’d gotten hurt before,” Michael reasoned.

“I’m not prepared to give her the benefit of the doubt,” Justin said. “She wasn’t there for me, that’s the real issue.” Michael just stared at him until Justin fidgeted with the brush, scratching behind his ear and leaving a smudge of paint on his cheek and in his hair before he turned back to the wall. “So what’s been going on here?” For a moment Justin wondered if Michael would push him, but with a look of understanding in his chocolate eyes, Michael began to relay the various dramas at Liberty.

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Justin wasn’t home when Brian got back. The dog dishes had been topped-off, and neither Mother Goose nor Grimm seemed overly anxious to go outside though Brian took them out just to be certain. In his bedroom he found the drawers that had become Justin’s pulled open, and several shirts were hanging over the side of the drawers as if they were trying to escape. A closer look at the shirts and Brian knew where Justin was.

He had a quick shower and changed quickly into a pair of black jeans and a black tank which Justin was particularly fond of before he grabbed his keys and headed back to the Jeep.

Ben was standing out-front of Woody’s and smiled a little when Brian greeted him. “Do I want to know what happened this time?” Ben asked.

“What?” Brian asked, not having to feign his incomprehension.

“Nothing,” Ben said, he’d been trained to play this game and threw his hands up in surrender. “You’ve just go your work cut-out for you.”

Brian wouldn’t say that this statement concerned him. He had been anticipating some sort of reaction on Justin’s part to the news of his parents divorce but had been secretly hoping that Lindsay would be able to diffuse the ticking time-bomb that Justin had become when Molly had told them. Instead, Brian climbed the steps with some trepidation and opened the door.

Brian did not anticipate finding Justin drunk and tweaked out and standing on the makeshift stage of Woody’s with a microphone in his hand. Emmett was in the front row, of course, and Brian assumed (and hoped) that he was the source of whatever drugs Justin had taken. His arms were in the air as Justin sang.

“I want you to want me!” Justin sang. “I need you to need me! I’m begging you to beg me!” His shirt was unbuttoned and – Brian noted with faint humour – belonged to Brain, it was his favourite black sheer button-down shirt. Justin’s jeans were riding low and the sheen of sweat that covered his pale chest made him glow in the lights.

“Welcome to karaoke night,” Ben said, clapping Brian on the shoulder.

“Since when does Woody’s have fucking karaoke night?” Brian huffed, winding his way through the ground.

“Oh didn’t I, didn’t I, didn’t I see you crying!” Justin sang. “Hey Brian!” he said, and then his demeanour changed, practically purring as he dropped onto the stage and began to crawl over to where Brian had reached Emmett’s side. “I want you to want me. I want you to want me.”

“How much has he had?” Brian asked Emmett.

“He’s feeling no pain,” Emmett said.

“I can see that.”

The song ended and Justin tossed the mike at the next volunteer and hopped off the stage. “Did you see me?” he asked, his grin wide and his eyes bright.

“Hard to miss,” Brian said, adjusting the black shirt to cover Justin’s shoulders again.

“I’m having so much fun!” Justin said. “This was such a good plan, it totally worked,” he said to Emmett. Brian glanced over and Emmett stopped flailing his hands in shushing gestures and pretended to be scratching his neck. “Have you come to take me home and fuck me?” he asked Brian as he nuzzled his neck. Justin’s arms were around Brian’s shoulders, and Brian was relieved that he seemed to be able to stand on his own, but Brian kept his arms around the younger man’s waist just in case. “Because I could go for that.”

“You could go for that?” Brian asked with a smirk.

“Mm hmm,” Justin said, his nuzzling had become kissing had become a rather determined licking.

“Works for me,” Brian said. “Gentlemen,” he said as Ben and David walked up. Emmett waved them off.

Justin was happy and chattering on the ride home, and Brian listened dutifully but was forced to shut the blond up in the elevator on the way up to the loft, which he did by pressing Justin roughly against the wall and overtaking the blond’s mouth.

“Let’s do it right here,” Justin said. Brian’s tongue crept in his cheek but his amusement died when Justin voiced what was likely at the source of this binge. “Don’t you want me?” he asked. Justin’s voice was breathy and his mouth demanding, his fingers already liberating Brian from his shirt, but Brian knew what his lover was likely thinking. “Come on,” Justin urged. It wasn’t a hardship, and if it would sooth some of Justin’s fears …

Brian pulled the condom from his pocket where he kept it having realized that being prepared was not only necessary when you could bump into a trick at any moment. He tore the wrapped and spat the side as his other hand pressed the emergency stop on the elevator. Justin groaned a little in anticipation before he turned around, working his own jeans and easing them down just enough.

“Take me,” Justin was urging. “Come on.” And the words of his song earlier kept echoing in Brian’s head and they kissed as Brian used a packet of lube to prepare his young lover, working his fingers inside slowly. Justin was groaning against his mouth and even as their need for breath grew they couldn’t quite separate. Their kiss became sloppy, wide parted lips gasping in oxygen as tongues breeched the scant distance between them and Justin pressed his hips back into Brian’s hand and Brian replaced his fingers with his cock and pressed forward.

“God,” Justin sobbed, turning his head away and resting it against the cool metal wall of the elevator. “Move,” he ordered. And then they were kissing again and Brian grew drunk off Justin’s mouth and forgot about everything except Justin’s hot wet mouth and tight ass and smooth skin and the desperate mewling sounds he made and how he pressed back into Brian every time – every singly time.

When he came, Brian thought he heard Justin breath the words “keep me” into their kiss but his vision had white mist around the edges and he was cumming and his vision tunnelled for a moment and he couldn’t be certain.

When the doors opened onto their floor, Justin’s hair was tussled and his lips were dark, his eyes still glazed and his clothes in disarray. Brian hadn’t even bothered to do-up his own pants, and they stumbled into the loft. Justin ignored Goose and Grimm’s eager greetings and made his way to the bed.

“Hey,” Brian said as he dropped a bottle of water onto the bed where Justin had sprawled. “Drink that.”

Justin groaned and uncapped the bottle. “Next time,” he said, once he had drained the bottle. “You can freak out. It’s your turn.”

“How magnanimous,” Brian said. “Get some sleep.

“Hm. Can we fuck again?” Justin asked.

“Later.”

“Can we fuck in the elevator again?” Justin asked, oddly sounding more awake.

“Sure,” Brian said, his amusement showing through again.

“A really long one, and we’ll move the entire ride – take us to the top – above it all,” Justin said, drifting off. Brian brushed the blond hair out of Justin’s face and kissed his temple before getting off the bed to change for sleep.

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Jennifer sat in the living room, her head in her hands, her daughter’s words ringing through her ears. She thought about how she had stood there, listening to Craig as he and Molly had argued, both of them stubborn and refusing to hear the other one. Molly clearly rebelling – and then she’d said she was a lesbian. Just like that. And Jennifer had stood there and watched Craig hit her.

It had been the last straw, the final thing in a growing list of grievances Jennifer had against her husband. She had overlooked his long days at work that she had slowly come to accept for what they were – a sign of his having an affair. She had put up with his tirades and his bitching about her work and refusal to take over any responsibility with the upkeep of the house. But striking her child had been it. That was unacceptable, and she could admit she’d grown afraid because she couldn’t do anything to protect Molly except this, except severing the ties with this man who she had loved once, but no more.

And Molly had stood there on the landing and thrown it back in her face. Reminded her of something else. Of Justin. But Molly couldn’t know for certain, there was no way that Justin would tell his younger sister something like that. But still, there was something in Molly’s eyes following Craig’s slap that she had seen in Justin’s eyes those years ago when she had returned from Molly’s school trip. And she hadn’t protected him then. He’d slipped away from her and she had been right there, only she hadn’t known, hadn’t understood – hadn’t wanted to see.

“Justin,” she breathed and sobbed. What was the greater sin? To strike? Or to allow him to be struck? To stand by and for whatever reason, not do a thing. What was the greater wrong? What would it take to make it right?

**Chapter Eighteen: Mentally Unstable**

Gus-bear lay on the bed, his furry body pressed between Justin and Brian as they slept. He spent most of his days overseeing the sleep habits of the two men from the dresser on the side of the bed, but every now and again one of them would reach for him. Tonight it had been Justin, half-awake, who had groped in the dark for the bear on Brian's behald, knocking the clock over while he tucked his body tighter under Brian’s arm, and then pressed Gus underneath the brunette’s other arm, offering doubel the security and comfort. Brian had smirked, and then had pulled Justin even closer, and Gus had tumbled down towards the bed.

“We need a bigger bed,” Brian commented when he noticed Justin’s nose wrinkling in that way it did when the blond was waking. Justin lazily raised his head from Brian’s chest and surveyed the bed. They lay, their bodies pressed together. Mother Goose and Grimm had, at some point in the night, helped themselves to the place that Justin had vacated on the side of the bed, and Gus-bear too had made a space for himself. Brian smirked as Justin laughed.

“I like it like this,” Justin answered, dropping his head back to Brian’s chest.

“At least you’ve gotten over your shyness in front of them,” Brian said, laughing when Justin’s body tensed. The blond still knocked Gus-bear from his position overseeing the bed ‘accidentally’ whenever he and Brian were having sex on the bed, and Brian had caught him glancing around to make sure the dogs weren’t watching when they were on the couch once. He was happy both Goose and Grimm showed enough sense to remain in a different part of the loft when Brian and Justin were having sex because Brian thought if they didn’t Justin might actually call a halt to it.

Overcoming his embarrassment, Justin leaned up and looked closely at Brian. “Feeling better this morning?” Brian had been woken by a nightmare. They’d become a rare thing for which Brian was very grateful. There had been a time when he couldn’t imagine sleeping a night through soundly. He kissed Justin’s temple and Justin nodded, understanding all at once what Brian was saying. He replied by dropping a kiss to Brian’s chest, and then climbing out of bed. “I have to get ready for work.”

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Michael stood in the parking lot of Liberty Hospital and stared at the black Jeep with a sort of relief mixed with undying gratitude. “It saves me a very long and very emotional ride back with my mother.”

“No problem,” Justin said with a laugh.

“What are you two ladies prattling on about?” Brian asked, leaning out of the Jeep.

“He’s cranky,” Justin said. Michael nodded his head. “Come on, I’ll get your bag.” Michael climbed happily into the backseat and craned his neck around as they began to pull out of the driveway.

“It’s hard, isn’t it?” Justin asked when Michael lapsed into silence.

“I didn’t think I would miss it so much,” Michael admitted.

“You won’t. Everything that matters is outside those walls now,” Justin said with certainty. “All your friends are out here, now.” Brian drove in silence, but Justin’s statement made him smile. Something eased inside him. They’d been dealing with Molly and the Taylor-crisis – which sounded like a bad rock band – and sometimes Brian wondered if Justin regretted leaving Liberty. He could remember those first few weeks where Justin was hesitant and nervous about everything. Justin had never openly voiced his feelings about leaving the hospital, which had been his home for almost three years, and it was good to hear that he didn’t regret his decision.

Michael nodded and then smiled. “You’re right.”

“The Gang’s expanded, though,” Justin said. “I’ll introduce you to everyone. It’s going to be awesome. We’ll hit Babylon this weekend. You’ll love it.”

Michael was staying in his mother’s house until he got things organized and found a place to stay on his own. Justin had laughed when Michael had relayed the news that he wanted to move-out of his mom’s house as soon as possible, and proceeded to outline the various things Debbie would likely do should Michael actually move before she was ready to see her baby go.

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Justin dropped his messenger bag by the sofa and pulled his sweater over his head as he strode directly to the easel. He’d met with his sister after work and they’d had lunch at the small Irish pub on the corner of the street by the Nook. Molly was eager to talk to him about what was going on in her life, happy to have someone who could give her sound advice and a shoulder to lean on. Justin, however, found it difficult to remain helpful and supportive when he still felt all-over the place in regards to his parents’ divorce.

He turned the music loud and lost himself in his painting, not even realizing when Brian returned from work. By the time he stepped away from the canvas, he was emotionally spent and covered in paint. He turned at the sound of crinkling paper and was surprised to not only find it dark outside, but to find Brian unpacking Tai food from paper bags. Justin hadn’t even heard the deliveryman.

He took a quick shower and threw-on some sweats before heading back out to the kitchen. “Michael wants me to show him around Liberty,” Justin said as he picked-up his chopsticks. “I was thinking we should take him to Babylon this Thursday.”

“Thursday?” Brian asked.

“It’s really crowded there on Friday nights,” Justin said with a shrug. “He’s already complaining about Deb,” Justin said with a laugh. “Can I have the Jeep tomorrow to head out Liberty?”

“Tomorrow’s Tuesday,” Brian pointed out.

“I want to go work on the mural,” Justin said with a shrug.

“I can drive you out,” Brian said.

“It’s not a big deal. I just want to paint,” Justin said. He felt an itch that painting on canvas hadn’t been able to satisfy. A part of him wondered if attempting to paint the mural, which was more detailed than what he usually ended-up creating, might be a mistake when he felt positively wired – like he absolutely had to be painting.

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Babylon was thrumming with energy and pulsing with a deep beat as they stepped inside. “Wow,” Michael said, and Justin wondered if the dark-haired man realized he had inched closer to Brian and Emmett, as if shying away from the wild spirit of the club. In the beginning, Justin had felt exactly the same. Now, however, he just wanted to dance, to get out into the thick of it and surrender to the pulsing beat.

They headed to the bar where Ben was already waiting for them. David, however, had been unable to come, something that Justin was slightly relieved about. The man still made him leery. “Hey Ben,” Justin greeted. He’d gotten used to the other man. He was friendly and easy to talk to, and even if sometimes Justin still found him eyeing Brian, Justin felt he could trust Ben not to get in the way of things. “This is Michael,” he introduced.

There was a brief moment where Michael and Ben seemed unsure what to do, but then Ben stretched out a hand and Michael smiled and shook it, and the moment passed, but Justin hadn’t missed it, and a brief glance at Brian showed that his lover hadn’t missed the moment either. Justin grinned. He liked Ben, and he thought Michael could use someone; they’d be good for each other. Better than David and Ben, Justin still couldn’t figure-out how that had happened.

“Come!” Justin demanded of Michael after they’d downed two shots of Beam.

“Ooh! Yes! Let’s dance!” Emmett said. Brian and Ben followed them out, and Justin grinned to feel Brian’s arms dropping over his shoulders. He pressed his hips back and let his head rest against Brian’s chest as their bodies fell into synch.

“Um, Wow,” Michael said, his eyes unable to move away from Justin and Brian who were completely wrapped-up in their own groove, Justin’s right arm stretching behind him to hold the back of Brian’s head as Brian kissed up and down Justin’s neck, they’re bodies still keeping the beat of the music.

“Yeah,” Emmett said. “Don’t mind them, Honey. You get used to it.”

“What did we miss?” a new voice interrupted.

“Teddy!” Emmett greeted, at the same time Michael gaped and screeched: “Blake?”

“Hi!” Blake said. “I’m just going to pop over and get a drink. Do you want anything?” he asked. Everyone shook their heads and Blake headed towards the bar.

“I can’t drink anything even if I wanted to,” Ted muttered. “Blake put me on some hideous diet … “

“The purge,” Emmett and Michael answered at the same time.

“You’ve heard of it,” Ted agreed. “I’m not enjoying it.”

“Nobody does,” Emmett said. “Oh, this is Michael. Michael this is Ted, he’s Brian’s accountant and, as you might have guessed, Blake’s hubby.”

Ted scoffed at the term, but shook Michael’s hand. “Nice to meet you,” Michael said.

“And now you’ve met the new and expanded Gang,” Emmett said.

“With the exception of David,” Ted volunteered.

“Who’s David?” Michael asked.

“Ben’s partner,” Emmett said. Ben was dancing not too far from them with another man, and Michael glanced at him.

“Oh,” he said. He couldn’t help feeling disappointed. Everything was a bit overwhelming since he’d left Liberty. His mother still had work every day, which at least gave him some peace and quiet, but she made-up for it when she and Vic returned from Liberty by rarely letting Michael out of her sight. As much as Michael wanted to find his own place, he liked having his mom and uncle there when he needed them. Justin had shown him around Liberty, and that had been exciting, because Michael had never had the courage to go there before. It was a new world.

“Are they at it again?” Blake asked as he returned to the group. Ted rolled his eyes and Michael followed their gaze to Justin and Brian. They had attracted a good deal of attention.

“I think it’s sweet,” Emmett defended.

“I’m going to go say hi,” Blake said.

“Ha, good luck,” Ted scoffed. “They won’t even know you’re there.”

“I’m going to go over to the bar,” Ben said, as he was passing by.

“I’ll come,” Michael said, jumping at the chance. Truth was, Brian had caught his eye when they had been at Liberty together, but Justin had left and moved in with him, and Justin’s stories more and more revolved around he and Brian – even when Brian wasn’t directly involved, even when Brian’s name wasn’t mentioned – and it became impossible for Michael to nurse the fantasies he’d cultivated in those four months when Brian had been at Liberty, or the Saturdays that followed. And then a long session with his therapist and he was realizing he just wanted someone for himself. Someone that could be entirely his that he could talk about in the same way that Justin talked about Brian. He couldn’t understand how Emmett could stand it. All his friends, until Michael had joined the group, were paired off, and happy. Michael had barely been with them and he was getting caught-up in how much he envied them. Yet Emmett seemed the same as he ever did.

“So what do you do?” Ben asked as he handed over a beer.

“I haven’t got a clue,” Michael admitted. Right, he thought to himself, first things first. It was one thing to want something, but maybe he was getting ahead of himself. He didn’t even have a job. He had no idea what he was going to do with himself now that he had been released from Liberty. He’d spent most of his first week of freedom hiding in the bedroom he’d been raised in that was still covered with wallpaper displaying motorcycles, staring at a corkboard stuffed with childhood memories.

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Justin set the canister on the ground and sighed. “Don’t just stand there!” Michael said, and he thrust-out a scraper. “I’ve rented this thing,” he kicked a foot in the direction of a little machine. “I want it all off.”

“This is so exciting! I have so many ideas for this room!” Emmett said.

“Scrape!” Michael demanded. Justin waited as Michael picked-up the steamer and proceeded to steam the wallpaper off the walls, and then he began scraping the remnants. Emmett paused to put on some music and then spent his time avoiding work by dancing and cheering them on, but Justin forgave him because after he disappeared for an hour, returned with a positive feast for them when they stopped for lunch.

Justin could see where Michael’s impulse to change the room was coming from. He could also understand that this was a positive step for the man, but in his mind, he couldn’t quite understand why Michael wasn’t moving out. The man was thirty-two, and instead of looking for a place to stay on his own, he was redecorating the bedroom in his mother’s house.

Then again, Justin wondered where he would be if Brian hadn’t offered the loft as his new home. Likely, he would have stayed in Liberty. He hadn’t wanted to be alone, even sharing a loft with Brian, those first few weeks, the quiet alone had been disorienting. But then, Emmett had offered a room in his apartment.

“I want to do this entirely on my own,” Michael had declared. Justin had wondered later how staying at his mother’s house could be construed as independence in Michael’s mind, but Brian had told him to stop sticking his nose in other people’s business. Well, he hadn’t used those words, but the message was essentially the same.

Justin preferred other people’s problems, though, because they distracted him. Distraction was a good thing, in his opinion. “I want a mural over there, on that wall,” Michael said. “Something like the one you’re doing at Liberty.”

“How about a motorcycle?” Justin suggested.

“Fuck off,” Michael said.

“How about all of us?” Emmett asked. “Like a photograph?”

“No,” Michael stated with certainty. “I want a superhero.” He pulled an old comic from the nightstand they’d pushed into the centre of the room. “Like Captain Astro.” Michael stared at the comic in his hand. “But not Captain Astro. Someone original. Can you do that?” he asked with a frown.

Justin looked at the space on the wall, and then peered over Michael’s shoulder at the comic and shrugged. “I can try.”

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It was late when Brian finally pulled-open the door to the loft. A client had decided rather last-minute that they were not satisfied with an ad, and Brian had been busy modifying it. He had known that Justin was spending the day with Emmett and Michael as they overhauled Michael’s childhood bedroom, but he had not expected for all three of them to end-up at the loft. He certainly hadn’t expected to find them all stoned, either.

Justin was situated on the sofa, poised as if he were a blond-Buddha, with the dogs on either side of him, a joint smoking in his hand. At his feet, Michael and Emmett were reclining, snickering.

“Hey,” Justin greeted, craning his neck to see Brian as he tossed his coat aside and headed into the bedroom to change. Brian was exhausted, as not in the mood to join the others. He was even mildly irritated to find them in the loft, obviously winding down after an amusing and productive day. He nodded idly in Justin’s direction as he headed in for a quick shower before bed.

“Hey,” he heard Michael ask. “How do castrated things pee?” Brian rolled his eyes and yanked his tie off, before working on his shirt buttons. The question was answered by peels of laughter from Justin and Emmett. “What?” Michael demanded. “It’s a serious question!” The laughter continued, and Brian thought he heard a thud, and one of the dogs barked. “You don’t know, do you?” Michael cried when the others only laughed harder. Huffing, Brian tossed his shirt in the hamper and closed the bathroom door.

The water was warm on his skin, and it eased some of the tension from his shoulders. Feeling better, Brian dried off and then headed back out to the bedroom, hoping he wouldn’t have to bodily remove Michael and Emmett from the loft. Instead, he found Justin on the bed, the blue light glowing softly, and both the dogs curled on their respective beds. The loft was quiet, and Brian wondered how Michael and Emmett were getting home. He hoped they’d had the sense to get a cab.

“Mm,” Justin greeted drowsily when Brian slid into bed and they settled into their usual sleeping arrangements. Brian didn’t want to spare a thought to the fact that he had grown accustomed to falling asleep with his arms around Justin, or Justin draped over him in some fashion or another.

The loft grew quiet as Brian listened to Justin’s breath, and the dogs. The remnants of the day’s stress that had withstood the shower finally drifted away and he let his eyes close. “Brian,” Justin’s whisper broke the quiet a moment later, and Brian could feel Justin perching his chin against his chest. “Are you awake?”

“Hm?” Brian said, not willing to make the effort to form an actual word or sentence.

“How do castrated things pee?”

Brian snorted and then laughed before he pressed Justin’s head back down. “Go to sleep, Sunshine.” And Justin’s quiet, steady breath answered him, the blond having already fallen asleep.

**Chapter Nineteen: The 'Q' Stands For...**

In theory, Justin knew about the backroom at Babylon, just like he knew about the Liberty Baths, and what exactly went-on in the basement of MeatHook. Justin had listened avidly to Brian’s stories when they had shared a room at the hospital. He’d heard the gossip when they shared breakfasts at the Diner. It was hard to spend any regular amount of time on Liberty Avenue and not pick-up that sort of thing.

He hadn’t seen it, though. Whenever they’d gone to Babylon Justin might offer, but Brian always pulled him out of the club and they’d drive back to the loft to have sex. Justin knew it was a concession on Brian’s part, he was an exhibitionist at heart, but Brian knew Justin wasn’t comfortable with that sort of thing. Sometimes it was hard enough just to focus on Brian, and even though things had gotten better, every now and then dark shadows would creep through Justin’s mind.

He wasn’t sure he understood the draw to fuck in public in a dark and grimy hallway, which made the fact that he was walking carefully through the backroom all the more curious to him. Justin couldn’t make himself turn around and leave, though; his curiosity kept drawing him in deeper.

Groans echoed off the narrow walls, dim light lit body parts -- a smooth cheek, a hand pressed to the wall fingers spread wide, an eye, the back of a neck. Shoulder blades, hips in motion, and Justin’s eyes took it all in, ate-up the caresses of coloured light on glowing skin, the groans of dozens forming a discordant choir. Justin didn’t know why he’d ventured back there, didn’t know why he couldn’t turn around, but it was beautiful and made his skin hot just to be there, even as it made the hairs on the back of his neck prickle and make it seem as if the walls were closing in.

“Did Alice get lost in Wonderland?” a voice asked, and Justin turned to see a tall man, so tall the light hit the base of his thick neck and left his face in darkness. “I can help you.”

Justin raised his arms and pushed away from the wide chest and turned away, stumbled further into the forest of thrusting bodies. “Justin,” a familiar voice asked, and Justin was relieved at the familiarity.

“Ben!” he greeted.

“What are you doing back here?” Ben asked, taking Justin’s elbow and already turning to guide them out before Justin could answer. “Never mind, let’s go find Brian.”

Justin resented that, as if he were a lost pet that needed to be returned. He jerked his arm away and walked out on his own. It wasn’t as if he’d been back there fucking. The light dawned and he looked sceptically at the taller man beside him. What had Ben been doing back there? He and David were in a serious, not to mention monogamous relationship.

Brian was sitting with Michael and Emmett at the bar, and Justin waited a moment, wondering if Ben would mention where they’d come from, but he didn’t. “Let’s go,” Justin said, pressing a kiss to Brian’s neck.

“But we’re celebrating,” Brian said, tongue-in cheek. “Michael’s wonderful success.” Justin knew better, instead of saying anything he nipped lightly on Brian’s earlobe then ghosted his lips downward, leaving a path of moist heated breath along Brian’s neck, feeling a faint shiver beneath his lips. “See ya, Boys,” Brian said, standing and wrapping an arm around Justin’s shoulders.

They stumbled out into the cool night air, Brian fumbling for the keys as they kissed. “Liked what you saw?” Brian asked, his voice a mere whisper against the back of Justin’s neck.

“What?” Justin asked, innocently.

“The backroom,” Brian said. Justin tensed, wondering if Brian might start asking to fuck back there – as arousing as it had been, Justin wasn’t prepared to do that. “Shh,” Brian whispered. “Tell me what you saw.”

They stumbled into the Jeep, reluctant to let each other go for too long, which resulted in Justin climbing in after Brian and directly onto his lap. They kissed, and Justin reclined the seat, pressing their cocks together and grinding his body down. “Bodies,” Justin whispered, his fingers working the buttons loose on Brian’s shirt. “The light highlighting their skin – a hand here, a back. The nape of a neck.”

Brian smirked, how like Justin to focus on the artistic picture. He wondered if his blond lover had noticed the gang-bang going on in the corner with the man in a sling, or the three-way at the back of the hall. Brian wouldn’t be surprised if he hadn’t, it was enough that there had been light highlighting pieces of men, perfect pieces, and it hadn’t been the anonymous sex, or the positions or the activities of the men that had gotten Justin into this frenzy, it was the light. Brian could understand why Justin had fallen into such quick love with Brian’s loft – and the blue light above the bed.

Brian’s hands were in Justin’s hair as Justin reached a hand back and fisted Brian’s cock – he’d liberated it from the jeans the brunette was wearing – and then a moment later, Justin was rolling a condom down Brian’s length.

“Fuck,” Brian breathed. Justin settled himself on Brian’s cock, shifted his weight – testing -- and Brian gritted his teeth. Justin shifted a bit more, and Brian knew the blond was teasing him now, he growled and gripped Justin’s hips, forcibly raising him up, then lowering him back down his length. Justin’s mouth dropped open and his body bent forward, his forehead resting on Brian’s chest as their hips worked.

They lay there for a while after they both came, regaining their breath, coming down from the orgasm. “We should go,” Justin said. Brian raised his eyebrows. “You have to fuck me in the shower,” Justin said, like it was a social engagement that had slipped Brian’s mind.

“Ah,” Brian said. “Of course.”

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Michael had been working there for three days and it didn’t feel any easier than his first day. The Big Q had been the only place to respond to his application, and Michael had been happy to have a job. When he’d been preparing to leave Liberty he’d known it would be all too simple to fallback into old habits and let his mother take care of him. She’d been doing it for ages, and it made things simpler. Debbie was a demanding woman who was only now making some progress with seeing her son as an adult. And even then, it was an upward battle.

The first step, he knew, was getting a job. Kiki, a waitress at the Diner, had offered him a chance, but after a day testing it out, Michael decided it was too much too fast and he couldn’t keep-up. The Big Q seemed perfect. Except that he was sorting stock, and putting-up with his homophobic co-workers. Some of his co-workers made attempts to invite him out, to get to know him, but Michael couldn’t tell them that he was gay, they wouldn’t understand, and not being able to tell them left him feeling depressed, like a liar. Everyone assumed he was straight he hadn’t openly lied, but it was implied, because he let them believe.

“Heh, look at those faggots,” Bill, one of the Big Q employees muttered to Tony. “The ladies section is that way,” he said, and snickered. Michael watched the two men pretend not to hear, used to hearing these sorts of whispers, it just rolled-off their backs. Michael wondered if it still hurt, and decided it must, it’s just they had more nerve than to sink to Bill’s level and make an issue of it. Michael wondered if what he was doing could be thought-of as the same thing.

“Novotny, did you see those fucking faggots?” Bill said.

“Yeah,” Michael said.

“Makes me sick,” Bill said.

“They’re customers, keep your voice down,” Lana said as she passed by the isle. “One of you help me with these boxes of baby-wipes.” Bill was off his feet, flirting shamelessly as they pushed the cart-full of boxed baby-wipes. Michael decided he wasn’t anything like the two men who’d walked past. He was a coward, and he was in hiding.

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Justin pulled the Jeep to the curbside and laughed as he saw Emmett running out from the store he’d been in and waving his arms. “I’m sorry!” he shouted as he pulled open the passenger door, huffing dramatically as he tossed several bags onto the floor and settled himself in. “I was running late. I just couldn’t decide between the bright-blue net shirt and the mango T. I got both.”

“It’s okay,” Justin dismissed. He’d picked-up the Jeep from Brian because this was one of his days to drive-out to Liberty for a session and also to work on the mural. Emmett had been more than happy to offer company, and they had plans to abduct Michael. They’d each been busy with work, and hadn’t had much chance to talk, but ever-since Michael had got his job, Emmett had been wanting to drop-in and surprise him. Their plan was to abduct him from work, since he should be finished his shift soon, and then they’d have a chance to talk while they drove out to Liberty, and also while Justin painted.

“I’m so excited!” Emmett said, clapping his hands. “I can’t wait to see his face.”

The Big Q wasn’t exactly a highbrow job. Michael wasn’t a manager or anything particularly special, and whatever discounts Michael got, it wasn’t like either Justin or Emmett would be eager to benefit from them; still, neither of them could have possibly been more happy for their friend, or more proud. Which made Michael’s reaction to their visit all the more upsetting.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Michael said in a furious whisper, enunciating his words like he did when he was particularly upset.

“We came to visit you, Baby!” Emmett said.

“Keep your voice down!” Michael said, made ‘shushing’ hand motions and pulled Emmett and Justin into a different isle. He was glancing around nervously.

“Michael,” Justin said. “What’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong is you barging in here, where I work and causing a scene,” Michael snapped.

“We’re just saying ‘hello’,” Emmett said, frowning.

“Well, could you say ‘goodbye’?”

Justin glanced around, confused by Michael’s intense reaction. Things dawned slowly, and admittedly, made Justin feel a bit nauseated. “We didn’t mean to upset you. Come on, Emmett,” he said, grabbing Emmett’s arm and tugging him away.

“What was his problem?” Emmett asked. Justin shook his head and they left hurriedly.

On the drive back, Emmett had a lot to say. He wasn’t sure what offended him more, being treated that way by a friend, Michael hiding the way he was, or Michael attacking them like that because they weren’t afraid of who they were. “It wasn’t like this back at Liberty,” Emmett said. Justin agreed, but he thought that maybe, that was the whole point.

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Justin kicked and punched and dodged until his skin was shining and his breath was coming in short pants. He thought about silence. He thought of being so ready to be exactly who he was, ready to embrace it, express it. He thought about fists and hands. He thought about harsh words and dark tones. He thought about how a single sound, a single word could shatter worlds.

He thought that maybe, even if he didn’t agree with Michael, he could at least understand him.

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“I’m not out at work,” Michael said, although it wasn’t a revelation. He scratched his arm and tugged at his jacket and tried to avoid Justin’s steady gaze. “It’s just … It’s not a place that I can …”

“Okay,” Justin said, leaning against the fridge, tapping his opened water bottle against steel. “You’re not out at work.” Michael nodded while he inspected the surface of the counter. “You could have told us. You didn’t have to make us feel like shit when we were only trying to support you.”

“I didn’t have a choice!”

Justin snorted harshly. “You always have choices. So you’re out, or not at work. Whatever. That’s a choice. We’re your friends, Michael. Emmett and I are both gay and we choose not to hide that fact. If you have a problem with it, let us know.”

“I don’t have a problem with it! I’m gay, too!”

“If our choices are interfering with your, let us know. Don’t tear us down like we’re nothing. Like we’re idiots.”

“I’m sorry,” Michael said, finally looking up to meet Justin’s gaze.

“Okay,” Justin said.

“Okay?” Michael asked. “Just like that?” Justin shrugged and quirked a smile. Slowly, Michael smiled back.

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The television flickered, casting moving shadows around the darkened loft. Brian tossed his coat on the counter and glanced towards the sofa where he could distinctly see a familiar blond head. "Hey," Michael said, stepping down from the bedroom, presumably on his way back from the bathroom. "I was just on my way out."

"Okay," Brian said, already dismissing the brunette as he headed towards the couch. Michael paused on the step watching with curious eyes as Brian picked-up the chips and popcorn that had been left on the table. For a moment, Michael considered offering to help clear things away, but there wasn't much and Brian had already cleared most of it.

He wandered to the stool by the kitchen where he had left his coat and keys, and pulled his coat on slowly, watching as Brian smirked and tugged-off the sock that was hanging from Justin's foot, the other having already been lost. The smirk vanished, though, as Brian pushed back the blond hair.

"Hm?" Justin said, still more asleep than awake.

"Move to the bedroom," Brian said, his soft voice and the movement of his thumb across a pale cheekbone belying the harshness of his words. Michael paused, waiting as Justin made his way clumsily up the steps and disappeared into the darkness, Brian not far behind. He could make-out their shadows, once the blue light had been turned on, as Brian stripped the smaller man, Justin lying on the bed, already fast asleep.

Michael was building his life, that’s what he kept telling himself. That he was building his life and getting himself in order, but increasingly it felt as if maybe he was building on the wrong foundations. Before he’d left the hospital, as his conviction in his decision to leave only increased, Justin had said that Liberty was predictable, routines that were so easy to fall into, and there was a certain amount of comfort to be taken in that. Michael had been told that he was ready to leave Liberty, but now he had to question how ready he really was. He’d thought about embracing change and being independent. How much of that was hanging on to the familiar? How could you find yourself when the better part of your day was spent keeping yourself hidden?

To be continued...