

Deconstructing Brian & Reconstructing Brian

By Randall Morgan

DECONSTRUCTING BRIAN

SESSIONS 1-2

by Randall Morgan

Doctor's Notes: Recap, Session 1

Brian Kinney (BK), 31, W-M, self-identified homosexual. Advertising Executive. One son, aged 2, lives with mother and her same sex domestic partner in Pittsburgh. Son conceived via sperm donation.

BK was referred by a personal friend who practices psychiatry in Pittsburgh, but has never treated BK.

BK has been in New York City for approximately one year. He complains of sleep dysfunction. He has difficulty falling asleep and staying asleep once he does begin to doze. He claims erratic sleep pattern causes fatigue, loss of mental acuity, confusion, inappropriate anger and lack of energy. This condition has persisted since shortly after his arrival in NYC.

At my request, BK underwent a complete physical workup with Dr. Cohen. I wanted to ensure there were no underlying physical causes for his sleep disruption. The complete results are in the file. The following dictation is Dr. Cohen's summation:

"BK is 74 inches tall, 172 pounds, a sexually active homosexual male. He has a mesomorphic physique, strong skeletal frame and well developed muscle mass, evidencing a strict routine of aerobic exercise combined with weight training. His resting body temperature is 99 degrees, which he describes as normal for him. His resting pulse is 69, low/normal, indicating his athletic regimen. BP is 120/76, also low/normal. EKG normal, indicating maximum circulatory efficiency. EEG shows no evidence of brain function abnormalities. Blood screen shows all levels within normal range. No evidence of glucose intolerance; HIV-negative.

Urinalysis, normal. Prostate, normal, unswollen. Testicles, normal, fully descended. No evidence of STD's.

Surgical scar on left knee from repair to cartilage following a high school sports injury. No other surgeries, or scars. Small mole above third rib, right side. Normal in appearance, but suggested removal to avoid future problems.

Risk factors: Works 10-12 hours a day in high stress job. Smokes one pack of cigarettes a day. Father died of lung cancer at age 55. Admits to occasional use of alcohol and "recreational" drugs he failed to identify. No drug screen was ordered. Engages in frequent sexual encounters with other men. Claims consistent use of condoms during high risk activity and that he does not act as the submissive partner during anal intercourse.

BK is in good health, with no significant physiological conditions requiring treatment. Refused offer of prescription to help end nicotine addiction."

BK arrived on time for his first session. He was impeccably groomed, and I suspect he is obsessive about his appearance. His demeanor was calm, although he manifested behaviors that point to agitation and even cynicism. He seemed annoyed when I explained he couldn't smoke in my office. He has never undergone analysis, and he expressed a certain disbelief in its efficacy. I asked why bother coming here, and he said he was desperate to find a fix for his sleep problems. I asked what remedies he's tried. What follows is an excerpt from the transcript of our first session:

BK: Everything. Over the counter sleep aids, prescription sleep aids, which made me too groggy, alcohol, sex, exercise, reading, television, sex, cold room, warm room, sex, new pillows, new mattress, sitting up, sex, warm baths, food, fasting. Nothing works. Not even sex.

Doctor: What is a normal night for you, Brian? Describe your sleep routine.

BK: I usually don't even try to go to sleep until after midnight, later on weekends. If I'm dressed, I take off my clothes. If I have a trick, I ask him to leave. I don't like them to stay over. I have these blue neon lights over my bed. They put out a soft, kind of soothing glow. Sometimes I leave them on, sometimes not, doesn't seem to matter either way. I toss, I turn, I get up for awhile, maybe work on my computer. I go back to bed. Same routine. Sometimes I go to sleep, but within an hour, I'm awake and can't go back to sleep. Usually around three, I'll finally crash, but then I'm up by six. Can't sleep in. It sucks.

Doctor: Do you nap during the day?

BK: (chuckles) I've been known to doze off during boring meetings. No, I don't nap.

Doctor: What do you do for recreation?

BK: I work out. I go to clubs. I fuck.

Doctor: What kind of clubs? Health clubs?

BK: Well, Doc, they do promote a certain good and healthy feeling. Gay clubs.

Doctor: And what do you do there? Meet up with friends?

BK: I only have acquaintances in New York. My friends are back in Pittsburgh. I go there to kick back. I like to dance, but the main reason is to cruise.

Doctor: To pick up men?

BK: For sex, yes. I'm not looking for Mr. Goodbar.

Doctor: Is that where you meet your sexual partners?

BK: That's one place. I also meet them in baths, at parties, in straight bars, working behind the counter at Bloomie's, in ad campaigns, at the gym, on airplanes, walking down the street, delivering pizza, in theaters, men are everywhere.

Doctor: And you have no trouble attracting them, right?

BK: I've always been able to pull the best tricks.

Doctor: Why do you think that is so, Brian?

BK: (clears throat, laughs uncomfortably) My Irish charm, I guess.

Doctor: Your looks?

BK: I guess so.

Doctor: Are you uncomfortable about your looks?

BK: No. I work hard to look good.

Doctor: Do you worry about aging and losing your looks?

BK: I hope by then to be so rich, it doesn't fucking matter. I can pay for what I want. I don't see myself getting old.

Doctor: What's the alternative?

BK: Death.

Doctor: You think you'll die young?

BK: I always thought that, but I guess I'd better hurry or it will be too late. No one ever says "live fast, die middle aged and leave a well preserved corpse."

Doctor: Do you have thoughts of suicide, Brian?

BK: I saw a play last week that made me want to slit my wrists. Couldn't wait for it to end.

Doctor: We'll make much better progress if you leave your sarcasm at the door. Answer my question.

(Long pause.) BK: Sometimes.

Doctor: When was the last time?

BK: An hour ago? I don't know. It's not a constant, Hamlet kind of thing. Sometimes I just wonder if it's really worth it, and who would really care?

Doctor: Have you ever attempted suicide?

BK: Not seriously.

Doctor: Tell me the un-serious attempts.

BK: When I was thirteen, I downed a bottle of aspirin.

Doctor: What happened?

BK: I hurled them up before they could do any damage.

Doctor: Why did you do that, Brian?

BK: I had a weird home life.

Doctor: Tell me about that.

BK: What's the point? It was years ago. How does this hit on why I can't sleep?

Doctor: We won't know that until we explore it. Were your parents divorced?

BK: Unfortunately, no. They stayed together in hell until death allowed my old man to finally escape.

Doctor: Why hell?

BK: They hated each other. He was drunk and abusive. She was cold and mean.

Doctor: Was he physically abusive?

BK: He could be. If he was drunk enough. I got the back of his hand more than once. So did she.

Doctor: You have an older sister, right? What about her? Were you close?

BK: Never. Clare was an hysteric. She made me crazy with her drama queen antics. The old man left her alone. She was always in screaming fights with my mother.

Doctor: Did your mother try to protect you from your father?

BK: (Silent, then coughs) Not too long ago, she told me she did. I guess I never saw that as a kid.

Doctor: Where did you go for shelter?

BK: Mainly to my best friend's house, Mikey. I spent more time at Mikey's than I did at home.

Doctor: What kind of home did Mikey have?

BK: Quirky. They had a lot less money than us, and we were barely middle class. His mom is a Vietnam widow, or so she said, and she worked long hours to hold things together. His uncle is an AIDS patient, and came to live with them when he got really sick. It wasn't a fancy house, or even a peaceful house, but the love was there, and I felt safe.

Doctor: Are you still close to Mikey?

BK: He's still my best friend.

Doctor: Does he know you're gay?

BK: He's gay too, and no, we're not lovers.

Doctor: What happened when you were thirteen to cause you to want to die?

BK: I don't want to go into that now.

Doctor: Why not?

BK: Ancient history. I just don't want to, okay?

Doctor: Okay, Brian.

End of excerpt from transcript.

My preliminary view is that BK is depressed, possibly suicidal, with his depression rooted in denial of events not yet revealed. He exhibits classic indicia of low self esteem masked by superficial arrogance. He resents any sign of weakness in his empiric view of himself, and he places high value on his sexual attractiveness as a validating factor. I prescribed low dosage anti-depressants, which he resisted taking, but finally relented. I intend to see him weekly at this stage of his therapy.

Doctor's Notes: Recap, Session 2

I wondered if BK may not return for a second session, but he was on time, again. He seemed very agitated and looked drawn and tired. He claimed to be working on an ad campaign that was sapping all his energy. He

complained that the anti-depressants did not help him sleep. I explained they weren't specifically intended for that purpose. However, once the drug was present in his bloodstream in sufficient quantities, he may be better able to sleep, as his emotions would be more predictable.

He was silent and quietly hostile, refusing to make eye contact. I asked him if he had taken any drugs today and he glared at me as he responded: "Two Advil. Is that okay with you, Doc?"

I asked why Advil, he said he had a headache.

Transcript excerpt:

Doctor: You ready to talk about that episode when you were thirteen?

BK: No.

Doctor: Does your friend, Mikey, know about it?

BK: Not about the aspirin, no.

Doctor: Let's talk about sex, Brian.

BK: (laughs) How much time do we have?

Doctor: When did you first suspect you were gay?

BK: I've always known it.

Doctor: How did you know it?

BK: Even as a kid, the guys in movies and on television interested me a lot more than the women, and not just for their heroic deeds. In real life, I got crushes on older boys at school, when I was little. As a young teenager, girls were all over me, and the other boys envied me, but I found their attention boring. I think it was that aloofness that made them interested.

Doctor: At what age did you become sexually active?

BK: I used to play with myself long before I could do anything about the feelings it generated. When the hormones kicked in, I turned into a masturbation machine.

Doctor: Who inspired your masturbatory fantasies?

BK: At that age, a turnip could be inspirational. Guys on television, in magazines, bodybuilding magazines and trading cards were a turn on, pro athletes, I didn't know about gay porn until much later. The internet wasn't as developed as it is now, and we didn't even have a home computer. Patrick Swayze was a favorite.

Doctor: What about people in your everyday life?

BK: Yeah, a couple of the guys at school and the coach.

Doctor: When was your first sexual encounter with someone else?

BK: When I was fourteen, I seduced the coach. He was taking a shower. I joined him.

Doctor: Did that continue?

BK: He was married. It was complicated. We did it a couple more times, then he moved, took a job as assistant coach at a university in Kansas.

Doctor: Were you in love with him?

BK: Shit no. He was hot. It was just sex.

Doctor: How far did it go?

(Long pause) BK: He busted my cherry.

Doctor: Does that mean anal intercourse?

BK: Yeah. The last time we were together, he fucked me.

Doctor: How do you feel about that event, Brian? How did you feel then and how do you feel about it now?

BK: It was hot. It still is.

Doctor: Painful?

BK: Physically, it hurts the first time some man rams his hard cock up your ass, yeah. But you play through the pain. It gets better.

Doctor: Is that your preferred method of sexual release? Anal intercourse?

BK: It's all good, Doc. But I'm a top, have been for years. I inflict the pain, not receive it. (Hesitates) B-but that's not my goal. I give them pleasure. I'm not a pain freak. It's just that the simple act of doing it is somewhat painful.

Doctor: Did your family ever know about this relationship with your coach?

BK: Shit no! My old man would have busted his balls, and my mother would have sent me away to some fucking Seminary!

Doctor: When did you come out to your family?

BK: I told my dad shortly before he died. I told my mom after that. My sister's known for awhile.

Doctor: How did they take it?

BK: They didn't rent the Goodyear blimp to advertise their happiness to the world.

Doctor: How did that make you feel?

BK: Validated. If my parents don't like something, that something has to be good. It's a universal law.

Doctor: Is Mikey your only gay friend?

BK: All my friends are gay.

Doctor: Why is that?

BK: I don't trust straights. There are only two kinds of straights. Those who hate you to your face and those who hate you behind your back.

Doctor: Have you been a victim of any hate crimes, Brian?

Doctor's note: At this point in the session, BK grew tense. His eyes closed. He looked pale, as if he might be ill. He withdrew. His voice cracked with emotion when he finally spoke.

BK: Next question.

Doctor: Brian, answering hard questions is how we get to the core of your problems.

BK: (hostile) What the fuck does any of this have to do with my inability to sleep?

Doctor: We won't know that until we explore it.

BK: I can't do this right now. I can't talk about that...that incident.

Doctor: Alright, Brian, we can defer it along with the aspirin incident, but not indefinitely. These are the issues we need to address.

BL: Maybe later.

Doctor: Not much later, Brian.

BK: I understand.

End of transcript excerpt.

Doctor's notes: BK's extreme reaction to an inquiry about a hate crime suggests he was either the victim of or the perpetrator of such an event. His abuse at the hands of a sometimes violent father and a cold, dismissive mother is a classic root cause for feelings of inferiority and unworthiness to be loved. His superficial arrogance and promiscuous sexuality are common signs of acting out to conceal and deny self esteem deficiencies. He finds validation through attracting sexual partners, and yet the emptiness of such encounters confirms his self image as an unworthy love interest. BK has spent years building these protective walls and now some undisclosed event or events have begun to weaken the foundation of those walls, and he is experiencing fear and anxiety as he sees himself becoming defenseless and vulnerable, like a child again. It is imperative that we reach past his denial and explore the causes of these longstanding emotions.

DECONSTRUCTING BRIAN

SESSIONS 3-4

by Randall Morgan

Doctor's Notes: Session 3

We came very close to a breakthrough today. BK exhibited his usual defenses, so I assumed an attack mode and told him if he wasn't interested in therapy, he was taking up my time and some needy patient's space. He didn't seize that opportunity to "fire" me, instead he opened up slightly. Suicide came up again, and he flatly denied a serious attempt. I decided not to remind him of what he said earlier about the aspirin overdose when he was 13. He is not ready to probe that issue. I suspect he would have said it was not serious, therefore it doesn't count as an attempt.

When we were discussing his promiscuous activities, he showed what has become his anticipated arrogance. He exhibits narcissistic qualities, suggesting sex to him is a quest for personal pleasure with little attention given to whether his partner is equally satisfied. I predict his strong identification with his sexual aggressor mode requires him to be at least a competent lover, for he would find a suggestion that he was less than adequate in that area intolerable. I then asked if he had ever been in a relationship, which he skirted. Later, he offered me a diatribe on why relationships are useless. He ended with, "Who needs that shit?"

I responded, "I don't know. You maybe?"

He suddenly became quite emotional, to the point that tears formed, which he quickly brushed away. I tried to convince him to let go, assuring him he was in a safe place, but he responded with, "Big boys don't cry, Lydia." And the opportunity passed. His reaction and self protection suggest there is a failed relationship behind at least some of his pain, perhaps a catalyst for his seeking therapy and a cause for his sleep dysfunction. I told him to consider his reasons for seeking therapy between now and his next session.

Because BK was very agitated when he left here, I called him at home that evening. I wanted to ensure he was coping and taking his medication. He was uncommunicative on the phone, but I expected the same. The next session is critical. I intend to press the issue of revelation. If BK can't make that breakthrough with me, I will suggest another therapist, perhaps a man. He must feel comfortable and trusting enough to permit himself that freedom. If not with me, with someone.

Doctor's Notes: Session 4

BK arrived on time for the session looking relaxed and dressed in casual clothes, for the first time. He has never been so physically comfortable in my presence. He leaned back in the chair, his body stretched out, instead of tightly folded. I looked for signs of a manic episode, but his mood does not appear to be that extreme. He brought a large container of coffee with him, and sipped from it as we talked.

Excerpt from transcript:

Doctor: That's a big shot of caffeine.

BK: It's cha. Chinese sweet tea with milk. I don't think it contains any caffeine.

Doctor: Good choice. You seem chipper this morning. Any reason for that? Taking a day off?

BK: How can you tell?

Doctor: No Italian designer suit.

BK: (laughs) No, just Levis. I am taking off. A friend of mine is in town.

Doctor: Ah. Mikey?

BK: No, not Mikey.

(Doctor's note: BK blushes at this point in the conversation, smiles slightly, looks away from me, and out the window.)

Doctor: Brian, is this friend a lover?

BK: Former lover (paused, smiled). Yes, a lover.

Doctor: Tell me about him.

BK: Better yet, let me tell you about my sleep.

Doctor: Okay, tell me about your sleep.

BK: I've slept like a baby for several nights. I've been up late, but when I want to go to sleep, I do. And I sleep straight through to the alarm. I haven't felt this good in a year. Maybe it is those anti-depressants, I don't know. Maybe I'm cured.

Doctor: Cured of what?

BK: The reason I started coming here! Insomnia.

Doctor: I see.

BK: (smiled) Don't look worried, Lydia. I plan to continue my sessions.

Doctor: Why is that?

BK: Because the fact that I'm coming here may have turned around the whole thing with Justin.

Doctor: You'll have to lead me through that, Brian. Who is Justin? What "thing"? And why is your coming here important to him?

Doctor's notes: At this point, BK gave me some background on a lover named Justin Taylor (JT) who is twelve years his junior. His demeanor changes dramatically when discussing JT. His features soften, he smiles often, his palms are open and outreaching as a gesture, suggesting comfort associated with this person. He describes a physically handsome, blond, youthful man with a strong artistic ability, which appeals to BK's creative skill set. JT appears to be open with his emotions, while BK is tightly closed. This would create an obvious tension between them. JT is described as extroverted and charismatic. They met when JT was 17, and a virgin. BK was 29. BK was his first lover. The sex was fully consensual. After describing that much, BK suddenly stopped himself and became pensive.

Doctor: Brian, you weren't completely honest with me when you said you've never been in a relationship. You obviously have a relationship with Justin.

BK: (his mood abruptly shifted; he suddenly appeared cautious and melancholy.) Past tense.

Doctor: I'm confused. He's here now, right?

BK: Just visiting. He lives in Pittsburgh.

Doctor: Yes, but...

BK: With another man. (His gaze became fixed on the window again. He nervously drummed his fingertips on his thigh)

Doctor: I see. How long has he lived with this other man?

BK: I can tell you in months, days, minutes. Which would you prefer? Let's just say about a year.

Doctor: Is that why you left Pittsburgh?

BK: It's one reason, I won't bullshit you about that. But it's not the only reason.

Doctor: What were some other reasons, Brian?

BK: Career progression, I've always wanted to live in New York. I've already fucked everyone in Pittsburgh.

Doctor: So Justin was a 'trick' as you put it. When and how did it evolve into more than that with you two?

BK: (He crossed his legs, began to fold in again, protect himself.) I'm not sure. At first he just irritated me. I couldn't get rid of him. He was like a little groupie. Sure, he was hot, but I felt like I had adopted a kid.

Doctor: Did you try to get rid of him?

BK: Only about a thousand times in a thousand ways.

Doctor: Brian, you seem very direct to me. I'm sure Justin isn't the first 'trick' who fixated on you. Have you had this problem before?

BK: No, I just tell them to fuck off.

Doctor: But you didn't with him.

BK: Well...yeah. I mean, I TRIED to tell him to fuck off, he just didn't hear me. And...well, I did try. Strange circumstances. He had family issues.

Doctor: And then?

BK: One night, after I tried to put some distance between us, I went to Babylon, this dance club where we all hung out. I went after this hot guy I had been cruising all night. Finally cornered him. We were moving towards the conclusion I was hoping for, when I saw Justin come in with his friend, Daphne. He stripped off his shirt. He was every fag's twinkie dream. They were all over the boy.

Doctor: How did you feel about that?

BK: I don't know how to explain it. The hottie I was dancing with even went over to dance with Justin, which kind of pissed me off and kind of amused me. Justin was sandwiched between another guy and him. Something just kind of snapped in me. I thought what bullshit. I went over to them and put my arms between Justin and the two men. I pulled him into my dance. I embraced him, kissed him. I knew he was playing me, but I couldn't resist his game.

Doctor: What happened next?

BK: I took him home and fucked him. From that moment on, it got murky.

Doctor: Explain murky, Brian.

BK: Confusing, unclear, muddy.

Doctor: For you or for Justin?

BK: Both, I think.

Doctor: Tell me what it was like for you, Brian. Was this the first time you felt this way about someone? "Murky", as you put it?

BK: Since college, yeah.

(Doctor's note: We need to explore the college reference, but for now I wanted to keep him on track.)

Doctor: Were you afraid of your feelings for Justin? And what exactly did you feel for him?

BK: (Leaned back and stared hard at my face but failed to make eye contact.) I don't know how to answer that.

Doctor: Why not?

BK: I don't know how I feel about Justin.

Doctor: Don't know or can't admit?

BK: Admit what?

Doctor: Well, Brian, the empiric evidence suggests you fell in love with this young man. Is that so impossible to consider?

BK: (Leaning back, smiling, shaking his head.) Ah, the "L" word. Most overused word in the English language. 'I love chocolate. I love to ski. I love a fast bike. I love Calvin Kleins. I love Hong Kong action movies. I heart New York.' Love is a completely devalued commodity. As we say in the advertising game, the brand has lost its punch from overexposure. It's become generic.

Doctor: Love is just a word, Brian. It connotes an emotion. It's the emotion I care about here. If you don't want to use the word love', then choose another word to describe your emotions for Justin.

BK: Ok, Lydia. Here's one for you: complicated.

Doctor: How so?

BK: In every way. I tried with Justin, I really did. It just wasn't enough. I couldn't be the kind of lover he wanted me to be. So we bombed. I have enough feelings for him that I want him to be happy. I want him to have what he deserves. But...

Doctor: But what, Brian?

BK: (hesitated, expression tense and gaze directed at the wall behind me.) It hurts.

(Doctor's Note: This admission of pain associated with an emotional attachment is significant. BK protects himself by refusing to acknowledge pain, and views such acknowledgement as a weakness. The fact that he can do so now, in a session, is indeed progress.)

Doctor: Did you try to stop him from leaving?

BK: No.

Doctor: Why not?

BK: Why would I? If he wants to go, go. I'm not begging him to stay! Fuck that. Besides, he's better off with the one he chose.

Doctor: Why is that?

BK: He's the kind of guy who buys flowers and takes him out for romantic dinners and writes him love notes. If that's what Justin wants, then he was right to go, because I can never be that man.

Doctor: Do you honestly believe he left because he needed those trappings, Brian?

BK: He left because I couldn't tell him 'I love you'. Not in words, anyway. Because I couldn't be monogamous. Because I couldn't be Ozzie to his Harriett.

Doctor: Why couldn't you do those things if it meant preserving your relationship, Brian?

BK: (Scrubbed hands over face, as if suddenly tired, and leaned back with a sigh.) I don't know why. I guess that's one reason I started coming here to see you. You asked me to tell you what my goal is for these sessions. I think my goal is to understand why I can't feel things the way other people do. If I do feel something, why can't I express it? Doctor: Bravo, Brian! That is exactly the answer I was hoping for. First of all, you do feel things. No two people experience emotion in exactly the same way. But if you didn't feel something, you wouldn't be tortured by these emotions. Your instinct is right, however. You disconnect between the feeling and the expression of that feeling, and that's one thing we will work on together.

BK: Lydia, what good will that do me? I mean, why go through all this? I guess I'm having a hard time seeing the benefit.

Doctor: If you were satisfied to live in emotional isolation, I may agree with you, Brian. Because the process is painful. But you're not satisfied. You're questioning, you're worried, you're sleepless. You lost someone you love due in part to this disconnection. Think of these sessions as chemotherapy for your psyche. It's painful, it's unpleasant, but in the end, it may well save your life.

BK: (Met my eyes, his expression haunted.) You don't think it's too late for me?

Doctor: Brian, you're a young man. Of course it's not too late. Even if you were an old man, it's not too late. Everyone is entitled to peace, at any age. But don't do this for Justin, or for any reason other than because you want to understand yourself a little better and exorcise some demons. If that makes a difference with Justin, fine. But the person we want to help is Brian Kinney.

BK: (spoke softly) First, you have to find Brian Kinney. I lost track of him years ago.

Doctor: Really? Who is Brian Kinney to you?

BK: He was this goofy little kid. He had a dog named Rex and he liked to ride a bicycle and fish with his grandfather. He dreamed about being an astronaut. He spent summers on his grandparents' farm in the heart of Amish country in Pennsylvania, although they weren't Amish. Brian thought the Amish people had the right idea. Everything was simple and natural. His grandmother told him, "But Brian, you'd have to give up television and soccer and Coca Cola." (laughing) She could always put things in perspective for me.

Doctor: You were close to your grandparents?

BK: Yes, very. Happy with them, on that farm.

Doctor: Are they still living?

BK: (hesitantly) No. She died when I was thirteen. He died the next fall, broken hearted.

Doctor: How did that loss affect you?"

BK: (He grimaced, tears formed in his eyes, and he looked away. He blinked, causing the tears to streak his cheeks. I handed him a tissue that he accepted and was silent for a moment. More tears, silence, then he wiped his cheeks and inhaled deeply before he spoke.) That was the last of Brian Kinney. I lost the one place where I could truly be myself, and where I was accepted unconditionally and loved unconditionally. From that moment on, I began to build the walls.

Doctor: Why, Brian?

BK: To protect myself from the pain.

Doctor: You were thirteen. That's the same age when you took the aspirin. Were the two related?

BK: Not directly, but I believe if my grandparents had been alive, I would have run away to them rather than swallow a bottle of aspirin.

Doctor: What caused you to swallow a bottle of aspirin, Brian?

BK: It seems silly now, in retrospect.

Doctor: Don't judge it or censor it. Just tell me.

BK: I overheard my parents fighting one night. They were arguing about money, a common complaint in our house. My old man was drunk and he was bitching about the fact my mom bought me a new pair of soccer cleats. They had recently bought me a pair, and I went through a sudden growth spurt and couldn't wear them anymore. My father said I was a drain on their finances. He told her if she had listened to him, she would have had that 'fucking abortion', and the problem would be solved.

Doctor: What did your mother say?

BK: Some religious dogma against abortion, and my old man said, "Then let the god damned church buy his fucking shoes! He should never have been born!"

Doctor: How did that make you feel?

BK: Like I wasn't supposed to be alive. Like my father hated me so much he didn't even want me to be born. Like my mother only had me because her church was down on abortion. Like I was better off dead. Maybe then they'd be at peace. Happy.

Doctor: So you took a bottle of aspirin in some desperate attempt to bring harmony to your family?

BK: I guess you could say that. Stupid, huh?

Doctor: No Brian, it was the act of a bleeding, unhappy, rejected child. Not at all unpredictable. After you swallowed the aspirin, what did you do?

BK: I ran out of the house. Hopped on my bike. Rode to this rural area behind our subdivision and sat down under a tree and cried. I felt bad about Mikey and I felt bad about my dog, Rex. But I thought I would be reunited with my grandparents in some half-ass kid's view of heaven. Then I started vomiting. The tablets were still whole in my spew. Probably no more than two or three had dissolved.

Doctor: How did that make you feel?

BK: Like I couldn't even kill myself properly. I was angry, but I was also relieved. Death is pretty scary.

Doctor: Brian, it's very important that you find that young Brian Kinney again and welcome him back into your life. Only after you're able to do that, will you be a whole person. Right now, you're a shadow in search of your substance.

BK: Well, this is fucked up. I came into this session, feeling really upbeat. Now I feel like shit. Tell me again why this is good for me?

Doctor: I don't have to tell you, Brian. You're a smart cookie. You've already figured that out, or you wouldn't be here.

End of excerpt.

Doctor's Notes: Significant progress was made today. The reappearance of JT in BK's life has instigated a renewed effort on his part to find a way of dealing with his emotions. I suspect he is hopeful that he can attract JT back into a relationship. But I also suspect he fears if he is not better able to express his emotions and make a commitment to this lover, he will lose again, probably irrevocably. I don't know whether JT has any plan of leaving his current

partner for BK. If not, I anticipate a serious backstep for BK. His discussion of his suicide attempt at thirteen was revealing. He has a framework for accepting love and feeling worthy of love due to his relationship with his grandparents, now deceased. Bringing him to a state of acceptance for his parents' rejection and bringing out those long suppressed feelings of worthiness are critical to his recovery. These next few weeks, as influenced by outside events in his life, are key.

DECONSTRUCTING BRIAN

SESSIONS: Unscheduled Emergency

by Randall Morgan

Sometimes analysis can be painful as the layers are peeled back. This is an emergency session with Brian as he begins to deconstruct.

Doctor's Notes: BK called my office, demanding an unscheduled appointment, three days after his last session and four days prior to his next scheduled session. He insisted it was an emergency. I agreed to meet him after normal hours, and he arrived early. He was very agitated, pacing my office, fuming.

Doctor: Sit down, Brian.

BK: I don't fucking want to sit down!

Doctor: I don't hold sessions with tall, angry, volatile men pacing back and forth, working into a rage. Either sit down and calm down, or go home.

Doctor's note:(His eyes were blazing with anger when he focused on me, but he finally slumped into the chair and glared straight ahead, his jaw clenched tightly.)

Doctor: Why are you angry, Brian? Who are you angry with?

BK: You!

Doctor: I see. Why me?

BK: I thought this shit was supposed to help people! Well, it sure as fuck has not helped me! It's worse than not being able to sleep. I have nightmares when I do sleep, and when I'm awake, I feel angry and sad and miserable. I can't think of anything but myself, which is boring. I'm making everyone at work nuts with my mood swings. Fuck you very much, Lydia!

Doctor: First of all, this is normal. Relax.

BK: If I could relax, I wouldn't be here!

Doctor: Give me your hands.

BK: (Tucked hands tightly under crossed forearms.) No!

Doctor: (Holding out hands to him.) Give me your hands, Brian.

Doctor's note: (Reluctantly, he extended his hands to me, and I held them tightly. They felt hot and a little sweaty. He is suffering from great anxiety. His hands vibrated with tension under my grip. I held them tightly for a moment without speaking. This is a calming mechanism that often works well.)

BK: If you ask me to give you my dick next, I'm filing charges, Lydia. (He smiled slightly at his little joke.)

Doctor: (Squeezed his hands.) Look at me, Brian. (Met my eyes) That's good. What you are experiencing is absolutely normal. You're early in your therapy and you're beginning to open doors that have been shut for a long time. Those walls you've built over the course of years are crumbling, brick by brick. You feel vulnerable and scared. You translate those feelings into anger and anxiety. All this means is that you're making progress.

BK: I hate it! I hate being out of control! I hate revealing myself to anyone, even to you! Even to me!

Doctor: (Released his hands as he began to relax.) I know you do, Brian. But the fact that you've found the courage to do so is critical.

BK: I need a cigarette. Please let me have a cigarette, Lydia.

Doctor: If you must, go out in the hall and smoke. I'll wait. But I'm not inhaling your second hand smoke.

BK: (Sighed.) I'll wait. What about water? Is water forbidden?

Doctor: (handed him bottle of water from private stock.) Is Justin still in town?

BK: Thankfully, no.

Doctor: Why 'thankfully'?

BK: He doesn't need to see me bouncing off walls. Can't you give me valium or something?

Doctor: Valium would interfere with your anti-depressants. Let's try to get through this crisis without sedation, Brian. Where did you and Justin leave it when he left?

BK: This isn't about Justin.

Doctor: I didn't say it was, but you must admit the timing is coincidental. He leaves, your worst fears return with a vengeance.

BK: (Staring hard at the label on the water bottle.) I asked him to move here. Move in with me.

Doctor: Why did you do that, Brian?

BK: (Shrugged.) Lonely, I guess. I miss him, okay?

Doctor: Did you tell him that?

BK: No, but he can piece it together since I asked him to move in, right?

Doctor: Sometimes people appreciate it when you state the obvious and confirm what they are thinking.

BK: I'm more of an action guy than a verbal guy.

Doctor: What was his reaction?

BK: He said he would go back to Pittsburgh and talk to his boyfriend about it. Owes him that much, he said.

Doctor: How did that make you feel?

BK: (Hesitated. Smoothed palms up and down thighs, stared out the window at the night.) Frankly? Nervous.

Doctor: What makes you most nervous, Brian? That he'll choose his current boyfriend, or that he'll choose you?

BK: (Met my eyes and held my gaze) Very clever, Lydia.

Doctor: Answer me honestly, Brian. Which do you fear most?

BK: (long pause) I don't fucking know.

Doctor: Does that ambivalence concern you?

BK: It confuses me. For a year now, I've missed him. I've wished he were here. But now that I have a chance, I'm feeling very cautious about him.

Doctor: Why 'cautious'?

BK: Because he...he...(Stopped. Searching for a word. He looks anxious and frustrated.)

Doctor: He what, Brian?

BK: He fucking HURT me.

Doctor: Good, Brian. You admitted it. You were hurt. BK: He left me for another man! Hell yes, I was hurt! I'm not a god damned robot! I have feelings.

Doctor: Is it that you want him back or is it that you want to know you have the power to lure him away from this rival?

BK: I was happy when he was here. I'm just afraid of what it means if he moves back in.

Doctor: What are your fears?

BK: That we'll slip into that same pile of crap.

Doctor: Describe that crap.

BK: If he resents the fact I'm not a romantic fool, bringing him flowers and chocolates. If I start to feel cornered. If we're both fucking around. If no one is really happy.

Doctor: Do you see an alternative to that outcome?

BK: What do you mean? That we become gay heterosexuals, living in some monogamous denial, recreating the nuclear family on Planet Men Only?

Doctor: Is that how you view the alternative?

BK: I don't believe in monogamy.

Doctor: Why not?

BK: It's not natural. Men need multiple sexual outlets.

Doctor: Why is that?

BK: It's the herd instinct. The male has a herd of females. No one finds it strange that the lion fucks the whole pride or the stallion fucks the whole herd. With humans, we've been boxed into believing one by one is the way. It's not true of 'hets' and it's damned not true of gays.

Doctor: It's not true of you, specifically, Brian.

BK: That's right.

Doctor: Is it true of Justin?

BK: Obviously not. He fucked around on me and now he's fucking around on his present lover with me.

Doctor: So you get great joy out of promiscuity, is that it?

BK: (Silent.) I get off on it.

Doctor: Not talking about an orgasm, Brian. I'm talking about satisfaction of your sense of self, your larger needs.

BK: I can't answer that.

Doctor: Why not?

BK: I don't know the answer.

Doctor: I think you do, but we'll come back to that. Are you afraid if Justin comes back to you that it might not work out and that this time he'll leave you forever?

BK: Yes.

Doctor: Suggestion?

BK: Okay.

Doctor: Let me talk to Justin, have a session with him, get his point of view. And then the three of us will meet.

BK: (Looking startled by this suggestion.) You can't tell him any of this!

Doctor: Of course not. I am bound by professional ethics to never repeat anything we discuss, Brian. I want to listen to him, not inform him. The analyst often talks to those closest to the person undergoing therapy.

BK: (Relieved.) I don't know if he'll want to do that.

Doctor: I suspect he will. If he can't come here, which I think is best, we can do it over the telephone.

BK: I don't know, it makes me uneasy.

Doctor: Get over it, Brian. It's all part of treatment.

BK: (Met my eyes and laughed.) I'll ask him. I wouldn't mind flying him in for a meeting. But it may be moot. He may have already made his decision and I lost.

Doctor: If so, we'll deal with that, Brian.

BK: (Looks surprised by that statement.) It would be the first time I didn't have to deal with something on my own.

Doctor: That's why you pay me the big bucks.

BK: (laughed.) Okay, you made me feel better. Thanks, Lydia.

Doctor: Let's get this straight, Brian. I'm not here to be your new best friend. I'm not here to soothe you, empathize with you, tell you everything will be alright. I'm here as a professional, to help you help yourself. To help you recognize your issues and learn how to cope with them. You understand the difference?

BK: I understand. You don't give a shit about me as a person, it's your job.

Doctor: That's untrue. I do give a shit about you as a person. I give enough of a shit that I want to see you well and functioning at full capacity. But the happiest I will ever be with you is when I can tell you, 'Brian, you don't need to come here anymore'.

BK: (Nodded.) I get it. Thanks, doc.

Doctor: Think about having Justin talk to me. If you decide to do it, set something up with Delores. I'll tell her to work him in.

BK: I'll think about it.

Doctor: See you in a few days, Brian. If you start to crater before then, call.

BK: I'll be alright.

Doctor: Don't be falsely brave. Call. I mean it.

End of transcript.

Doctor's Notes: BK is experiencing a common stage of therapy in which he feels great anger and anxiety over the systematic destruction of his defenses. This is a positive progression. These feelings are complicated by his ambivalence over the reappearance of his lover, JT, in his life. While he desperately wants a relationship with JT, he senses he is not emotionally prepared at this stage to change the behaviors that drove JT away earlier. Therefore, he intuitively believes a reunion would end in disaster. Worse for BK is the thought that such a destruction could be permanent. I suggested a meeting with JT. I would like to gauge both his maturity level and his commitment. JT needs to understand the mechanics of analysis and go into this relationship, if he so chooses, with his eyes open. No miracle transformations are around the corner. BK is considering that meeting. Unless JT is fully committed to this course of treatment for BK, the chances of success for them as a couple are reduced.

BETWEEN THE SESSIONS

(before Session 4, Emergency session)

by Randall Morgan

Here is the gapfiller I promised you to lead up to session 4 of Deconstructing Brian and to lead up to the Emergency session. I'll try to more orderly interweave the sessions and the gapfillers if this exposition appeals to you guys. Let me know. Randall

This is to give some story to what is happening with Brian Justin, before Brian goes to the session number four (where he starts out quite happy) and also before he asks for an emergency meeting with the doctor.

You may recall, after episode three, Brian found Justin in New York, and they spent the night together. (This is all written in Blue Lights II). This installment would fill in what happened after that reunion and before Brian went to his fourth session, then pick up again before Brian called the emergency.

Brian awoke to a gentle caress against his neck. He smiled against his pillow, not opening his eyes. He felt so good, he didn't want to interfere with the sensation. The lurid relaxation of solid sleep combined with a feather light sexual stimulation was almost unbearably delicious.

"Briiiiiiiian," a voice whispered against his ear. "Wake up!"

"Ummph," he responded ambiguously and the voice persisted.

"BRIIIIIAAANNNNN."

Brian flipped over on his back and pulled the persistent blond on top of him. "What is your fucking problem?" He asked with a smile and Justin licked his cheek before responding.

"You are. You're sleeping more than my grandma and she's half comatose."

"I've been sleep deprived," he responded, looping his arm behind Justin's neck and giving him a bump with his hips. He couldn't believe how well he had slept since Justin's arrival in New York. Sleep made an incredible difference in his life. He was less grumpy, far more creative and much less depressed.

"Yeah, well I've been Brian deprived, so which is worse?" Justin teased, knitting his fingers together on top of Brian's head. Brian reached up and kissed him, letting his hands travel down his smooth body to rest on the rounded curve of his rump.

"What are the symptoms of Brian deprivation?" He asked as Justin smiled and wiggled his pelvis against Brian's stiffening cock.

"Besides a lack of aggravation?"

"Very droll," Brian pinched his ass. Justin laughed and went on.

"The main symptom of Brian deprivation is a localized swelling right here," he put Brian's hand on his cock. "Followed by a sense of emptiness, here," he put his other hand on his ass. "And finally an annoying itchiness on the tongue because it wants to go here." He slipped his tongue in Brian's mouth. Brian sucked it down deeply and set about making all of Justin's other symptoms disappear.

Pouring through the old vinyl in Bleeker Bob's Music Store in the Village, Justin looked over at Brian's profile, and announced. "The gallery owner who wanted to see my shit said I should move to New York. She said this is the art center and that I was being wasted in Pittsburgh."

"Everyone is wasted in Pittsburgh," Brian said cautiously without looking up.

"She wanted to put me in a gallery show with some other promising young artists, but she said it almost wasn't worth it unless I was here to do the promo work."

"I hope she has a big enough place for you and your husband, or wife, or whatever the fuck he is."

Justin insinuated himself between Brian and the record bin, forcing him to meet his eyes. "I've had a wonderful time these last few days with you, Brian. It was almost like the old days when we were first together."

"You mean when you stalked me?"

"Be serious for once."

Brian moved away from him and left the store, lighting a cigarette as soon as he hit the street. Justin followed, looping his arm through his as they walked. "I brought the sunshine with me. Remember how hard it was raining when I first arrived here?"

"Yeah, its called Indian Summer, Justin. Get over yourself."

"Are you mad at me all of a sudden?"

"No, I..." Brian stilled another sarcastic rejoinder. He thought of what Lydia had told him about repressing his emotions. He decided to respond honestly. "I don't appreciate being played, Justin."

"Played?"

"You come here, you get rid of your Brian deprivation, you go back to your boyfriend. I don't need that shit."

Justin suddenly grabbed his arm and slammed Brian's back up against the brick wall of a nearby brownstone. Brian held his hands out, laughing at this sudden assault. Justin wasn't laughing. He knew Brian could easily overpower him, but he pressed in, one hand flat against Brian's pectorals as he said, "It's not a game. And Brian deprivation is not a joke. It's a disease."

"How flattering to be called a disease."

"It's always been a three way with my lover and me, Brian. The two of us and the ghost of you."

"So what happens next? We make pottery together?"

Justin placed a finger on Brian's lips. "No joking. No sarcasm. Okay?" Brian nodded. "Good. Now tell me what you want?"

"I don't know what I want," Brian said softly.

Justin took a step back and sighed. "When you figure it out, give me a call."

He started walking and Brian watched, then trotted to catch up to him. He took his arm, but Justin pulled free. He grabbed it more firmly and Justin stopped to glare at him. "If the Steelers had your blocking game, they'd be in the Super Bowl every year." Justin snapped and Brian chuckled.

"You're making a sports analogy?"

"Shut UP!" Justin repressed a smile as Brian released his arm as they began walking again.

"Justin, I'm working on it. I'm seeing a shrink. I'm trying."

"I know Brian. That's why I'm still here."

"I honestly don't know what difference it will make, if any. Maybe it wont. Maybe this is just how I'm supposed to be."

"Are you happy this way?" Brian shrugged, lit another cigarette. "Sometimes. No, not really."

"Well then..."

"Well then nothing. I'm working on it. I'm doing it for me, not you, not anyone else. Me."

"That's how it should be."

Brian glanced at Justin's watch. "In fact, I have to be there in a half hour. Before I go I need to know one thing."

"What?" Justin asked, smiling as Brian pulled him into his arms. It was the Village, after all. The tourists would just have to get over it.

"Will you be there at my loft when I come home from Lydia's?"

Justin smiled and kissed him gently on the lips. "Of course I will be. After all, we have theater tickets for tonight."

"Bitch!" Brian said with a laugh as he slapped his ass, and released him from his embrace, holding onto his hand as they walked back to the loft.

Brian attends Session 4 with Lydia, which you can read in the Deconstructing Brian series. This next section picks up a day after session 4 and before Brian calls and demands an unscheduled emergency meeting with Lydia.

Brian watched the other patrons in the King Cole Bar at the elegant St. Regis Hotel watch Justin cry. Under the Maxfield Parrish mural of King Cole and his minions, Justin looked impossibly young and innocent and he knew the glares directed at them were all for Brian. He was the monster who said something to make this beautiful blond boy weep. Brian was uncomfortable with emotional public displays, especially in heterosexual territory. He didn't even want to go to this fucking bar. He often met important clients there, and he always considered it a work stop, not for pleasure. But Justin read about it in New York Magazine, so he just had to see the mural and the ambiance.

Brian downed his neat scotch and ordered another. The waiter glared imperiously at him as he offered Justin a linen handkerchief and walked away. "Would you fucking STOP it?" Brian finally whispered through clenched teeth and Justin shook his head.

"I c-c-can't!"

"Why n-n-not?" Brian mocked him and Justin smiled through his tears and tossed the soggy handkerchief at him. Brian deflected it and let it fall to the floor.

"I just didn't expect it!" Justin reached across the table to cover Brian's hand with his own, and Brian let it stay there, despite the murmurs among the heterosexuals observing them.

"How could you not expect it? We've spent the last week locked at the hip. I even took off work a few days. We've fucked like rabbits," he raised an eyebrow at the waiter, who left his drink, leered, and moved on. "How can it be such a surprise?"

"I don't fucking know, but it fucking is, okay?"

"Okay, okay, don't turn on the waterworks again! Look, you've dropped more hints than Hanzel and Gretel dropped bread crumbs. Isn't this what you wanted?"

"To move in with you? Well, duh!"

"Then...?" Brian shrugged and Justin sighed.

"It's not that easy, Brian."

"Why isn't it?"

"There's another person involved. Back in Pittsburgh. I've lived with him for a year now. I can't just... I owe him some kindness at a minimum."

Brian slipped his hand out from under Justin's and leaned back in his chair, lighting a cigarette. A cold rush of fear began to filter through him as he considered the fact he could well be setting himself up for yet another rejection by Justin. Once wasn't enough. Give him another chance to gut him. Maybe he misread the signals. Maybe Justin was just hot for him, and wanted a little stray sex before he returned home to his safe life with another man. Maybe he was being used the way he had used so many others. His defenses, weakened by Lydia's sessions, flared.

"Look, fuck it. It's a dumb idea anyway. Just forget I said anything."

Justin narrowed his eyes at him, blinking away the last traces of his tears. "Fuck you, Brian. Don't run for cover just because I mentioned the obvious fact that I have to consider how this will impact my lover and whether I would be happier with you. It's a risk, I understand that. Step up to it."

"Fuck YOU," Brian responded calmly. "You think you're the queen of the hill, and you get to sit up there and do eenie meenie with people's emotions? If you didn't know what you wanted, you never should have thrown me those broad hints!"

"I never said I don't know what I want. I know exactly what I want. I want what I've wanted since the night I met you. But that's a fantasy. What I'm weighing is the reality. I can't go back to how it was, Brian. It wasn't working for me."

"Not for me either."

"Then what are we talking about?"

Brian hesitated, then shrugged. "Truthfully, Justin, I'm not sure."

Justin leaned back in his chair and sighed. "That's not very comforting."

"It's the truth."

"Well, what do you want, Brian?"

"I don't know exactly what I want. I only know one thing."

"What's that?"

"I want you in my life."

Justin met his eyes and smiled sadly. "That sounds so good, considering the source, but Brian...it's just not enough."

"Maybe not, but right now it's all I have to offer."

"Will you want to go hunting together? Pick up tricks like we used to do? Fuck them together?"

"Is that what you want?"

"I never did. I did it because that was the game. That was the only way I could have you."

Brian shook his head, focusing on the mural, then back at Justin. "I don't want some ritualized set of rules, Justin. That was stupid. I want to play it out, see how it develops. I don't want to rub your nose in my wandering, but on the other hand, I don't know how to do monogamy, and I don't want to be ragged every time I stray."

Justin rolled his eyes in frustration. "If you want to fuck around, why do you need me?"

"I'm not saying I do want to fuck around. I'm just saying I can't promise monogamy and I don't want to be punished for doing what I think is natural for gay men."

"Is that your way of saying you're willing to try?"

"I don't know. Is it?"

"Brian, can I strangle you? I think no one on any jury would ever convict me."

Brian smiled wryly. "You and what army?"

"I can be formidable when I'm mad."

"Yeah, I remember."

"Let's go to dinner. We have a reservation in fifteen minutes. Let's just table this for now."

Relieved, Brian waved for the check, charged it on a platinum card and left with one over the shoulder smirk meant for everyone in the joint.

Sensing something was wrong, Brian woke up abruptly at three am, and found the bed empty. "Justin!" He called out, and a soft voice responded from the sofa in the next room.

"It's ok, Bri. I'm here."

Brian pulled on a robe and walked into the open living area, sitting beside him and pulling him into his arms. Justin snuggled against his body, his soft blond hair tickling Brian's strong chin. "What's wrong?"

"I woke up."

"I see that. That's supposed to be my trick."

"I'm going back to Pittsburgh in the morning. I've already made my airline reservation."

Brian tensed, willed himself to be cool, betray no pain. He felt the pain however. He felt it begin like a clamp being twisted closed on his entrails, then doused with fuel and lit with a torch. He released Justin, and walked over to the bar. He felt strangely numb in his extremities, only his torso seemed to be aflame. He poured himself a drink and downed it in one gulp. "Have a safe trip," he said softly, his own voice sounding strained and alien.

"What's wrong?" Justin asked. Brian walked over to the window, opening the blinds to look out at a rain slicked street and no traffic. He supposed Justin was taking the sunshine back with him to Pittsburgh. He wanted to say something smart, but he couldn't find the words. He couldn't find any words at all.

"Brian," Justin came up behind him, looping his arms around his waist, feeling his tension. "I'm not going back to him. Not really. But I am going to talk to him. I need to make sure. This is a big decision."

Brian relaxed, but only slightly. This was a delay of the death sentence, not a commutation. "Fine."

"Don't be this way, Brian. I can't just make the call without even talking to him."

"I don't give a shit what you do," Brian said, leaving his arms. He sat down heavily in the chair, wishing he had poured himself another drink.

"Yes, you do care, god damn it. If you didn't care, I wouldn't be facing a dilemma."

"You do what's right for you. I'm going to bed."

Brian dropped his robe and fell face down on the mattress, even though he knew sleep would be impossible. Finally, Justin stretched out beside him, gently stroking his back.

"I'll always love you, Brian."

Brian squinted his eyes closed. Those were the words you said to a former lover. He knew sex was his weapon. He knew how to ring Justin's bell better than anyone. Hell, he invented those bells. He should seduce him, remind him of how it was between them, make him scream for more. But he couldn't. All he could do was lie there and not give in to the pain. Justin sighed and kissed his neck, before he finally rolled over and fell asleep. Brian listened to him breathe, aching to touch him, but determined to maintain the dignity of his solitude.

Two days later...

Brian swiveled from his desk to the window of his office, overlooking Madison Avenue in midtown Manhattan. Below, a conga line of yellow cabs snaked slowly along rain clogged streets and people hid beneath black umbrellas like trolls hiding under bella donna toad stools. He drummed a pen on his thigh, trying to find some reason to keep from flinging the chair out that plate glass window and following it with his body. He was in chaos, although externally he appeared glacier cool and calm. He hadn't been able to sleep since Justin left. If he did fall asleep, he was plagued by nightmares, and his only thoughts seemed to be about himself.

He couldn't work.

Sex had proven less than therapeutic.

Drugs and alcohol had no effect.

His emotions were on some fucking roller coaster that never seemed to end. They would double loop back again and then leave him hanging upside down, contemplating a jump from fifteen stories up.

He didn't really want to die.

But he didn't really want to live.

He had no idea who he was, anymore.

He sure as hell wasn't Brian Kinney.

Who was to blame for this destruction of his personality? Was it Justin? He wasn't pleased with Justin right now. He spoke to him every day and Justin assured him he was closer than ever to making his decision, but Brian had lost patience and was sick of the whole drama. Was it himself? Was he angry that he made a fool of himself with Justin and now what? Was he furious that he set himself up for more pain, walked right into the lethal blond's velvet trap?

No.

He was mad at Lydia.

The doctor from hell who peeled back his skin in layers, leaving him raw and unprotected. Lydia, with the x-ray vision who could see through all his best bullshit. The cool bitch with all the right words and none of the answers. The source of his pain, the one who failed to cure him, the know- it- all woman who knew nothing about helping him. Lydia sucked. He never wanted to see Lydia again. He was through paying her a fortune for pain. If he wanted to pay a woman for pain, he could hire a dominatrix and at least get his rocks off as part of the bargain. He was through with her and he would call and tell her so. And why. The fucking fraud. The faker, the snake oil saleswoman.

He punched her number on his speed dial. Delores, her efficient assistant, answered immediately. Brian froze. "Hello?" She said, and he sighed.

"This is Brian Kinney."

"Yes Mr. Kinney."

"Let me talk to her."

"She's with a patient."

Fine. He would fire her by proxy through her assistant. He didn't even have to see the bitch again. "May I help you, Mr. Kinney? Is this about your next session?"

Brian closed his eyes. He drew in a ragged breath, then forced composure.

"I have to see her now!" He heard himself say, and Delores sounded perplexed.

"She's fully booked, Mr. Kinney."

"It's...it's an emergency. Please. I have to see her today. Ask her. Please, I'll hold."

"I can't interrupt her."

"JUST FUCKING ASK HER!" He raged, then sighed, searching for a calm he didn't feel. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I can't...I can't breathe. Please, ask her if she can see me."

She placed him on hold. It seemed an hour passed before she came back on, but he knew it was only minutes.

"Mr. Kinney? Are you still there?"

"Yes."

"Tonight at seven." He closed his eyes, feeling relief roll through him in waves. "Thank you. Really, thanks."

"Will you be alright until then?"

"Fine," he lied and hung up. He glanced at the clock on his computer.

It was almost four. He had three hours to kill. He thought of places he could go, without glass windows overlooking streets far below, without drugs to numb a phantom pain, without telephones and deadlines and people clawing at him to produce. His secretary seemed relieved to see him go. He knew he had been a bear to her over the last couple of days. He would make it up to her later, if he ever felt normal again.

He hailed a cab and gave the driver an address. He watched the city crawl by in late afternoon bad weather slow motion. Windows full of fashion he liked to buy. Handsome men sprinting for cover, men he would like to fuck. Money being made in every square inch of this town, power being exchanged. The world he wanted, sought, worked to achieve. And yet he had never felt more outside than he did at that moment. He arrived at the address he gave the driver, walked inside and sat down on a marble bench in the foyer and stared at the ornate pattern in the granite floor. Lydia's building. He would sit there as motionless as street art, waiting until it was time to go up, holding onto his composure by a slender thread of pride.

Next scene is his Emergency Session with Lydia. See Deconstructing Brian, Unscheduled Emergency session.

DECONSTRUCTING BRIAN

SESSION with Justin Taylor

by Randall Morgan

Doctor's Notes: Justin Taylor (JT) is the only person I know of thus far who has been a love interest for BK, or perhaps he still is. He is a youthful looking twenty year old white male. Given BK's ego and deep investment in his own appearance, I anticipated JT would be physically striking, and he is. Despite his youth, he displays a level of apparent maturity and obvious intellect. He is composed, concerned, curious. He sits in the chair with one leg tucked under him in a very boyish pose, yet his gaze is intensely inquisitive. He opens the session with a question.

Excerpt from transcript:

JT: Do you like Brian?

Doctor: Why do you ask that?

JT: Some people are put off by his sarcasm or his looks or his attitude about life. Does it bother you that he's gay? Most women resent the fact he's gay. They look at him and want to convert him.

Doctor: First of all, I don't view Brian as a potential mate, Justin. Let's start with the fact I'm a straight woman, and he's a gay male. Then there's the issue that I'm twenty years older than he is, and happily married. Finally, my professional ethics forbid it, and my personal ethics would never even go there. His sarcasm is a defense. I know that. It's not important whether I like Brian. What is important, is that I can help Brian.

JT: It's important to me. I want you to admire things about him that make him unique. I don't want Brian to change completely because of therapy. I love him as Brian. I'd just like to see some edges smoothed out. You see what I'm saying?

Doctor: It isn't like that, Justin. This isn't a bakery. You can't come in and order a cake exactly the way you want it to be. Brian is his own person. He will deal with his issues. What changes he makes because of that, if any, are up to him.

JT: I guess I didn't think of that.

Doctor: Have you ever been through analysis?

JT: No, amazing as that may seem. My Mom took me once, but it was a joke.

Doctor: Why amazing?

JT: I'm a perfect candidate to have my head shrunk.

Doctor: Why is that?

JT: I come from a broken home. My father hates me and probably left my mom because of me. I'm gay and have been out since I was seventeen. I'm a victim of a gay bashing. And I'm in love with Brian Kinney and have been since I was a kid. If that doesn't qualify me for therapy, what would?

Doctor: (laughed) Did Brian know you when you got bashed, Justin?

JT: (narrowed his eyes at me suspiciously) You really don't know?

Doctor: Know what?

JT: Brian was there when I got bashed.

Doctor's note: I recall a reaction from BK when I mentioned gay bashing. I will pursue whether this event caused that response at our next session.

Doctor: What was his reaction?

JT: (Shrugged.) How do I know? I was out cold. I got hit in the head.

Doctor: Can you tell me what happened?

JT: Backing up, Brian showed up at my senior prom. I wanted him to come, but he refused. I remember when he walked in, how hot he looked, so incredible! The rest of it got blurred by the bashing, but people have told me.

Doctor: What did they tell you, Justin?

JT: That Brian led me out on the dance floor during a slow song. We danced in front of everyone. They say everyone in the room stopped and watched us. One of the students, Chris Hobbes, must have been really interested. He hates me.

Doctor: Why is that?

JT: Probably because I gave his homophobic penis a hand job in the locker room one day, so I know how much he liked it!

Doctor: He attacked you on the dance floor?

JT: No. Apparently we walked out to Brian's car after the dance. He kissed me goodybye. When I turned to wave at him, Hobbes came out of nowhere and bashed me in the head with a baseball bat.

Doctor: Where was Brian?

JT: In the car, I guess. I don't know. He tried to stop him. He took the bat afterwards and creamed him with it. The next thing I remember is waking up in the hospital. Weeks later. I'd been in a coma. After I woke up, I had to spend more time in the hospital while I stabilized and began physical therapy.

Doctor: How did Brian react to your injury?

JT (shrugged.) He was Brian. At first, I thought he just didn't care enough to even come by and check on me. But later I found out he came by every night, after everyone was gone, and watched me sleep.

Doctor: How do you feel about that?

JT: I wish he came in while I was awake so I could talk to him. I thought I had lost him. I'm an artist. As a result of the injury, I lost function in my right hand. I thought I'd never paint again. I lost Brian, I lost my art, I was miserable and angry.

Doctor: Understandably. Did you get that function back?

JT: Most of it, but Brian turned me on to computer enhanced art, and I really love that medium. I work in that mode almost exclusively now. The first thing I ever painted on the computer was a sketch of Brian stretched out on his bed, eating an apple.

Doctor: What else do you recall about Brian's reaction to your injury, Justin?

JT: When Brian showed up at the prom, he was wearing this long, white silk scarf. He put it on me some time in the evening, and when I got hit, I was still wearing it. I guess my blood soaked into it. I found out later, he wore that scarf under his shirt the whole time I was in the hospital.

Doctor: How did you find that out?

JT: Much later, when we were together again, we were preparing to make love. I unbuttoned his shirt and I saw it.

Doctor: What did you say?

JT: Nothing. I just slipped it off of him and dropped it on the floor. It was my way of saying, let it go.

Doctor: Very wise, Justin. So you got together with Brian again after you were released?

JT: Yes. He helped me overcome my fears and was very sweet to me.

Doctor's note: (At this point, Justin teared up, cleared his throat, regained his composure.)

Doctor: How did it go?

JT: Good at first, but life intervened.

Doctor: What does that mean?

JT: Brian really pressured me to remember that dance. I'm not sure why. He really wanted me to know how it was between us before Hobbes hit me with a bat. He did all sorts of things to remind me, but nothing worked. I tried, I really did, but it's just a blank. Finally, when he accepted I may never remember the dance, he changed a little.

Doctor: How did he change?

JT: He became less like this newer, more considerate Brian, and more like the old Brian.

Doctor: Describe the old Brian.

JT: Fucks around, sarcastic, pretends to feel nothing, narcissistic.

Doctor: Narcissistic is an interesting word. Why say that?

JT: Not so much vanity over his beauty, but always putting himself first. His needs. His view of how a relationship should go. His view of queer life and the perfect homo.

Doctor: What is Brian's view of the 'perfect homo'?

JT: One who rejects everything heterosexuals embrace. Like monogamy, family, commitment, things like that. Live for the thrill.

Doctor: Is that why you left?

JT: I didn't see how anything was going to change with Brian. I didn't want to be a thirty year old guy hunting strange dick in clubs with my forty-two year old lover. That would be so pathetic. I believe two men can have a committed relationship. That it can mean something.

Doctor: Did you give Brian an ultimatum?

JT: You don't know him very well, do you? Giving Brian an ultimatum is like putting out a fire with gasoline. It's counter to your goal.

Doctor: I see. So what did you do?

JT: I started seeing someone else. Someone who shared my belief that commitment is not just for the insane.

Doctor: You left Brian for him?

JT: Yes, I guess so. (Frowned.) Sounds funny to say that.

Doctor: How did Brian respond?

JT: Outwardly? Not at all.

Doctor: So you think he felt differently inside?

JT: I know he did. I know how badly I hurt him.

Doctor: How do you feel about that?

JT: (grimaced, inhaled sharply and sighed.) Terrible. I loved him. Even then. But I was looking at the rest of my life and I wanted more. What else could I do?

Doctor: Your current lover, how is that going?

JT: It went. It's over.

Doctor: You've left him?

JT: I'm moving to New York. I'm going to live with Brian.

Doctor: Ready for that?

JT: (Laughed.) Is anyone ever really ready for Brian Kinney?

Doctor: You tell me.

JT: I love him. I'm hopeless. And the things I don't love about him, you're going to fix.

Doctor: Stop there, Justin. Brian is not seeing me to get 'fixed'. I'm not a vet. You decide to move in with Brian, it should be with the understanding that the way things are now is the way things may always be.

JT: (Looking contemplative as he hesitated.) Then why should he bother coming here week after week?

Doctor: I'm not saying he won't be helped. He will be. But how he responds to treatment is up to him. He may understand himself better, be more comfortable in his skin and go on exactly as he was going before, but with more inner peace.

JT: I have to take that chance. I tried to make it without Brian. But I thought about him all the time. I wanted him. I fantasized about him. I missed him. I may as well live with him and be miserable, but have his body! (Laughed.)

Doctor: What do you want from Brian, Justin?

JT(Thinking quietly.) Everything.

Doctor: Meaning?

JT: His love, his sex, his happiness, his sadness, his ups and downs, his anger, his jealousy, his beauty, his sweetness, his sense of humor, his brilliance, his success, his failure, his life. I want to share his life, Doc.

Doctor: For better or worse?

JT: Til death do us part.

Doctor: You ready for that? You're quite young.

JT: I'm a very old twenty.

Doctor: And Brian is a very young thirty two.

JT: I know. I'm the grown up in our relationship.

Doctor: How about the promiscuity, Justin? You mentioned it.

JT: I don't want an open relationship.

Doctor: What does Brian say about that?

JT: I think he understands. We're still talking about it.

Doctor: Can you afford to live in New York on your own?

JT: Why should I? He has a huge loft in Soho.

Doctor: Do you think it makes some sense to move here and live separately while you see if it's going to work out for you? Perhaps de-emphasize the sexual aspects of your relationship?

JT: (Laughed.) Doc, that's like asking minks not to make coats.

Doctor: I see. Will you do this, then?

JT: What?

Doctor: If you reach a pressure point with Brian, before you take any drastic action, will you come meet with me first?

JT: I guess. Why?

Doctor: The problem may have a root in his therapy, so I might be able to head off an unnecessary drama. Perhaps not, but I'd like to have the opportunity.

JT: That's cool.

Doctor: You're a remarkably poised young man. You've been through a lot, and yet you seem to be very aware of yourself and what works for you.

JT: (Grinning.) Is that like a shrink compliment?

Doctor: Maybe its as close as we can get.

JT: Doc, am I good for Brian?

Doctor: Do you think you're good for Brian?

JT: Yes.

Doctor: Then you probably are.

JT: Can I tell you a secret?

Doctor: Of course you can. But as I said at the outset of this session, I'm here to help Brian, not as your therapist, so I need to be free to use things you tell me in his treatment.

JT: I don't care if he hears this. Brian Kinney is the most infuriating man on earth. He is cold and remote and egotistical, but he also is sweet and loyal and courageous. He has great fears about himself, and yet he displays more

self confidence than anyone I know. He's smart and talented, and yet he downplays his professional success. He never wants credit for the nice things he does, and he always accepts blame personally. He's funny, yet worldly wise, and he's a snappy dresser, but he looks perfect in jeans. He's the best fuck on the planet, and he's never a selfish lover. He's worth it. This time we have to make it work.

Doctor: Thank you for your time, Justin.

End of transcript.

Doctor's notes: JT is a mature, self-actualized twenty year old gay white male. He has been through traumatic events, and has perhaps an obsessive attraction to BK. Undoubtedly, BK makes him feel protected. He brought up several issues that will require discussion with BK: the importance of the dance to BK. (Note: JT appears to suffer post traumatic stress syndrome associated with the dance and the aftermath. This should be dealt with by a competent therapist who can help him uncover those locked memories and deal with the associated stress.) Whether this is important to BK because it occurred just before the bashing, or whether it was an emotional venting for him, it needs to be explored. The bashing itself and his guilt over it should be discussed. BK's wearing of the bloody scarf, any residual fears, are also important topics. The impact of promiscuity on his relationship with JT is another aspect to unravel. Why he feels compelled to seek other sexual outlets if he loves this young man? Why he fears monogamy? Why he risks the love of the man he cares about so deeply? Finally I would like to discuss JT's father, whether BK knows him, has any issues with him. Whether JT is putting him in the role of his absentee father, as protector and advisor. I predict some dysfunction ahead as they try to reestablish a relationship, and I hope that JT will take me up on my offer when that occurs. I will set up a meeting with both JT and BK, together, in the near future.

BETWEEN THE SESSIONS

(Following the session with Justin and Lydia)

by Randall Morgan

This is what we are loosely calling a "gapfiller" which occurs after Justin has his session with Lydia to discuss Brian. (See DECONSTRUCTING BRIAN, Session with Justin).

Justin was mildly surprised to find Brian waiting for him in the lobby of the building where Lydia had her offices. He had been outside smoking, in a light rain, and the drops darkened his burgundy silk shirt in a random, scattered

pattern, as if he had been hit with the arc from a severed artery. His expression was intense as he took Justin's arm and asked, "Well?"

"Well what?"

"What did she say about me?"

Justin laughed. "Why is it always about YOU?"

Brian met that facetious question with a glare, and Justin shrugged. "She didn't say anything about you. Just asked some questions about us."

"What kind of questions?" Brian persisted as he hailed a cab and slid inside, pulling Justin in behind him.

Justin wished he had a camera to capture the images he was seeing, for many of them should be memorialized in a painting. The man with the dreadlocks standing under a rainbow umbrella and selling a variety of electronic knock offs. An older lady in a raincoat struggling with two feisty poodles striving mightily to find out if division can truly lead to conquest. Three small girls, one black, one white, one Asian, linking arms and skipping from puddle to puddle. The ugliness that could be this big city had gone into hiding, despite the rain. At least, that's how it appeared to the eye of an artist.

"She asked about our past, what the future may hold..."

"She's a fortune teller now?"

"No, Brian, she was just trying to understand you better."

"Like you know," he huffed, staring out the window. Justin rested a hand on his thigh and felt him tense.

Justin had arrived in town early that morning. Brian had a meeting at work and sent a car to pick him up at the airport. When Justin walked into Brian's suite at the advertising agency, he was greeted by his assistant. She invited him to wait in Brian's office while he finished his meeting in a distant conference room. She brought him a

Mountain Dew, glowing like nuclear waste, in a crystal glass. He stood in the center of the room, taking in the improved circumstances of his lover. No more the small interior office he had in Pittsburgh. He was a partner now, despite his relatively young age, and in the home office of the ad firm. This office had two glass walls, with a panoramic view of Madison Avenue and beyond that, the park. The walls were painted a flat taupe with oyster white trim and the furniture was as sleek and Italian as what he had in his loft. A less than fully realized ad campaign for a wireless phone company was displayed on storyboards spread out on a glass conference table. Justin critically surveyed the art, decided he could do better, then sat in Brian's swivel desk chair and spun around twice, careful not to spill the acid colored soft drink on the pristine white carpet.

He came to rest facing the desk, which was well organized, typical of Brian's obsession with order. He lifted a framed photograph of Gus, taken on his second birthday. He smiled at the beaming baby who had his father's handsome features. Another photo was behind it in a matching frame. Justin picked it up and sighed. It was of him, with Brian, taken before they broke up. They were lounging on the sofa together in Debbie's living room, holding hands, his head on Brian's shoulder. Brian looked half asleep, and Justin felt his stomach tighten with emotion as he wondered what Brian thought, looking at that shot, during all the days they had been apart.

"Make yourself at home," Brian said with a sarcastic sneer as he entered the office. He wore a charcoal gray suit with his burgundy shirt and a burgundy and gray silk tie. He looked like a GQ layout and Justin felt shabby and immature in his jeans and thermal turtleneck. He crossed his ankles on the edge of Brian's desk only to have them knocked off with a sweep of Brian's arm. "Get the fuck up," Brian groused, and Justin stood, stumbling, as Brian crinkled his shirtfront in his fist and pulled him against his body. He kissed him squarely on the mouth, not breaking the kiss when his assistant walked in, or when she made a hasty exit.

"You've been outed," Justin teased when he finally let him go. Brian smiled, hanging his jacket in a closet as he took Justin's place in the desk chair. Justin propped himself on the edge of the desk, facing Brian.

"I never was IN," Brian responded, carefully replacing the photograph to where it had been when Justin picked it up. Justin took in his need for precision and smiled.

"Control freak."

"Slob."

They stopped and exchanged a smile. "Thank you for doing this, Justin. I don't know why she wanted this meeting but it seemed important to her."

He shrugged. "All expense paid trip to New York? Why not. Besides, we need to talk."

"About?"

"About your offer. About living together."

"Oh THAT," Brian said with a studied yawn. Justin glared at him. He was fooling no one.

"Yes, Brian. THAT."

"Let's not talk about THAT until after you meet with her."

"Why not?"

"Let's just don't."

Justin shrugged, playing along. "Ok by me."

Brian pretended to be seriously interested in a stack of phone messages. "We have time for lunch," he offered and Justin shrugged.

"Then we have time to fuck."

Brian met his eyes and smiled, taking him by the hand and leading him out of the office, instructing his assistant to call him on his mobile if she had to speak with him.

They took a cab to a hotel in Soho. Small, discreet, European. The staff, who were dressed in Italian designer fashions, knew Brian by name. He was given a card key to a room without even having to register. Justin offered him a wilting glare as they rode up in the small, polished mahogany elevator. "Trick here often?"

"Don't be a child," Brian said coolly. "My firm keeps a suite here for out of town VIPs."

"So?" Justin insisted and Brian just laughed as they entered a room at the end of a short hall. It was a Brian kind of place. Spare, but elegant. A king sized bed backed a tufted leather wall, the linens were plain but high quality European, even the pillows were clad in down. There was a fancy electronics system that played DVDs and CDs and a view of a row of trees and refurbished brownstones outside the windows.

"Nice pl..." Justin started to say, but Brian cut him short, throwing him back on the bed with a hard shove. As Justin scooted up the mattress, Brian threw off his coat and climbed on top of the blond, like a drowning man scrambling onto a life raft. Justin gasped as he felt Brian loosening and removing his clothes, seeking his flesh. He shoved his tongue into his mouth and probed while Justin opened Brian's belt and crammed his hand down his pants, stroking his erection.

"Don't...don't..." Brian cautioned him, not wanting to be stimulated any more than he already was, desperate to possess him. The penetration was quick and animalistic, their clothes not all the way shed, the condom making a late and perfunctory appearance just before the point of no return. Justin felt the burn of their bodies joining as it built into extreme pleasure. He reached orgasm a split second before Brian, and then they collapsed together, breathing audibly, a sheen of sweat gluing their bodies into one muscular mass.

Brian finally rolled over and sighed, throwing his arm across his eyes as he waited for his body to return to his control. Justin finished stripping and peeled off the rest of Brian's clothes with great tenderness. He began kissing his neck, his pectorals, running his tongue across his nipples, and down the centerline of his flat belly. Brian moaned softly, criss crossing his fingers in Justin's flaxen hair. "Are you trying to kill me?"

"With kindness."

"You've used that line before."

Justin smiled as he began his knowing fellatio. Within minutes Brian was ready to go, the fellatio only firming an erection that never completely subsided. This time the lovemaking was more leisurely than the first time, rediscovering all the delicate hot spots that fueled the fire in their bodies.

Later, while they basked in the warm ennui of the afterglow, Justin whispered to him, "Don't you want to know what I decided?"

Brian moved out from his embrace and went towards the bathroom. "I'm taking a shower. You may want to consider it too. Lydia doesn't need to be assaulted with the funk of our fucking."

Justin rolled his eyes and followed him into the shower, finding his lack of curiosity annoying. Dressed and respectable, again, they returned to the front desk, and dropped off the key to a handsome, leering clerk whom Justin winked at as they left. Brian was silent as they took a cab in the rain to Lydia's office. He told Justin the floor, but stayed in the cab.

"What do I do when my time is up?" Justin asked before he got out and Brian shrugged.

"We'll figure it out. Go."

"Brian, how much do I tell her?"

"Whatever she asks, answer her honestly. Tell her whatever you want. Don't pull any punches."

"But..."

"Just do it," Brian said, then pulled the door from his grip and closed it. Justin watched the cab disappear into traffic, before going into the building for his meeting.

This is where DECONSTRUCTING BRIAN: Justin's Session fits in

He wasn't expecting to see Brian when he came out of the elevator after talking with Lydia. Even more surprising was Brian's insistence that he divulge what was said. In the cab, Justin finally exploded at him. "Brian! Stop! This was supposed to be a confidential meeting between your shrink and me. You didn't tell me I was gonna get the third degree when I came out!"

Brian sighed and leaned back against the seat. "You're right. Forget it. What time is your flight back again?"

"I don't have a flight back."

Brian stared hard at him. "Why not?"

"Because I'm moving in with you."

"Just like that?"

"Are you taking back your offer? Since I already broke up with my boyfriend in Pittsburgh to move here, it's more than a little awkward."

"I'm not...it's not that. Did you tell Lydia?"

"Yes."

"What did she say?"

"Not to over sexualize our relationship at first, which I told her was impossible. She suggested I get my own place for awhile, like I can afford that. She also thought she should talk to us together."

Brian told the driver to divert to the hotel where they had sex that afternoon and Justin stared incredulously at him.
"What are you doing?"

"The hotel is just a few blocks from my loft. I'm putting you up there for now."

"Why?"

"I have an appointment with Lydia in a couple days, and I'm going to call and tell her I'm bringing you to the session."

"Brian, you can't let your shrink run your life! Don't you want me with you?"

Brian frowned. "I want it, I want it more than anything. But I want to make sure it's right. If Lydia has some ideas, I want to hear them. It's only a couple days, Justin. I'll stay with you at the hotel most of the time. Or you can walk to my loft. It's not a big fucking deal."

"Why does it feel like a big fucking deal?"

"Because you're queening out."

"I'm not queening out! I thought we understood each other!"

Brian smiled. "Since when?"

Justin had to laugh. He began to relax a little as he tried to adjust to this version of Brian Kinney. "Good point. Do I get room service privileges?"

"Yeah, but only the menu, not the waiters."

"Forget it then," Justin joked, staring out the window. He tried to believe this was a sign of progress, not a step back.

Brian watched Justin watch New York pass by, admiring the way his sunny features and pale hair captured the fading light and held on to the last ray of sunshine that peeked through the clouds. He wanted to take him in his arms and hold him tightly against his body. He wanted to kiss him and thank him for coming back home. But he was scared of the implication raised by Justin's commitment, and he wanted to be sure this was handled appropriately for both of them, not just for himself. He trusted Lydia, and valued her insight. He reached out and closed his hand on the back of Justin's neck, massaging it gently. He could feel his tension relax. He leaned into his caress, his eyes closing. "Thank you, Justin," Brian said softly and Justin smiled without opening his eyes.

"For what?"

"For giving me a chance."

Justin moved over to rest the back of his head against Brian's chest for the remainder of the drive. He had waited this long for a new and improved Brian Kinney, what harm could come from a few more days?

Brian appreciated the weight of Justin's head against his heart and felt a blessed sensation as the cab slowly wound its way through the traffic. Brian felt sleepy. Better than that, Brian felt as if he could sleep. The one sleeping aid that worked for him was Justin Taylor. He would tell him so, if he didn't worry whether Justin might find it insulting. There was a lot he wanted to tell Justin, and maybe someday, with Lydia's help, he could.

DECONSTRUCTING BRIAN

SESSION with Brian and Justin

by Randall Morgan

Doctor's Notes: I believe it is premature to meet with both BK and JT as a couple. We are still early in BK's analysis and have just begun to scratch the surface of his emotional issues. However, circumstances have intervened. After a separation of over a year, in which JT was living with another man, they have decided to move in together in BK's home here. BK obviously has some insecurities about going back into a relationship and it seemed an effective use of his pre-scheduled time to discuss their fears about this arrangement.

They arrived on time. BK was dressed in a business suit, JT in jeans and a sweater, thus increasing the age gap between them, based on appearances. BK seemed tense, JT, relaxed. They sat facing me in separate chairs rather than side by side on the couch. BK exhibited indicia of his unease by tightly folding up, legs crossed, arms crossed, shoulders slightly hunched forward. JT was at ease, one leg thrown over the arm of his chair, his palms open and resting on his thighs.

Excerpt from transcript:

Doctor: Brian, why did you want to include Justin in this session?

BK: I thought you had some concerns about our moving in together.

Doctor: My concerns? No, Brian. That's a personal decision for you two to make.

BK: Obviously, but...Justin said...

JT: (Interrupted) You mentioned meeting with us together.

Doctor: Eventually, yes. But you're both here, so let's not waste the opportunity. How many days have you been living together?

Doctor's note: The two men exchanged a glance. BK started to talk, then JT, and finally BK answered my inquiry.

BK: We're not technically living together yet.

Doctor: What is the technicality?

JT: He stashed me in a fancy hotel.

Doctor's note: BK cast a glare in the direction of JT, then returned his attention to me.

BK: I just thought since I was meeting with you soon anyway, I'd put Justin up in a hotel and give you a chance to tell us what you think about this living together idea.

Doctor: What I think is unimportant. It's what you think that matters, Brian. And Justin, of course. What are your concerns?

BK: (Shrugged) None, I guess.

JT: Bullshit.

BK: (Glanced at JT) What do you know, Sunshine?

JT: I know you. I know you're worried. I know you have second thoughts.

BK: Maybe you're the one with second thoughts.

JT: Maybe now I am. Now that you're so fucking worried about it.

BK: Maybe you wish you hadn't left your hubby back in Pittsburgh.

JT: Maybe I do! At least he believed living together meant occupying the same space.

BK: So get your pink ass back to the Pitt! No one's stopping you!

JT: Maybe I will!

Doctor: Stop. I'm stopping you, Justin. And you, Brian. Just stop. (Both men grew silent and glared at me) Brian, do you regret that you asked Justin to move in with you? Was it a mistake?

BK: (Glanced at the other man, then at me. His body language softened slightly, he leaned forward, towards me, his forearms resting against his knees, which he uncrossed.) I don't want to fuck it up.

JT: Too late.

Doctor: (Held up a hand to silence JT.) Go on, Brian.

BK: I...I remember how it was before. I don't want to repeat that pattern. I want it to work. If we're going to do this thing, we should do it right.

JT: If I stay in a hotel down the street from you, we'll never get the chance. BK: You don't understand, Justin.

JT: So make me understand.

BK: When you left me before, I found out what it means to be truly alone. I thought I liked being alone. I don't. I can't imagine myself sharing space with anyone else. I have this desperate sensation that it's you or no one for the rest of my life and if you go this time, you won't ever be back.

JT: (Reached across the gap between them and offered BK his hand. BK glanced at me, then took it and squeezed it gently and didn't let go.) I didn't agree to make this big change in my life with the idea that I would turn around and leave you. I love you, Brian. That's why I'm here. I want to make my life with you.

BK: I know, and that scares me. Because you have so much power over me, and I don't like that one fucking bit.

JT: Tough shit. Being in love is partly about giving over the power to wound to someone else. You have to take that chance. You have to trust me a little.

BK: Do you understand how hard it is to trust you after you broke... after you left?

JT: Do you understand why I left?

BK: (Shrugged, nodded.) Sure, I guess. The other men. The fucking around.

JT: No, Brian. That was just a small part of it. I left because I feared I would never receive reciprocal feelings from you, nothing like the feelings I felt for you. I would bang my head against a wall for years hoping to get deep enough inside your shell to hear you say you love me, or allow yourself a little romantic gesture.

BK: Little romantic gesture? Fuck you! How can you say that to me? Fuck your little romantic gesture! Like what? Buy you some roses? Cook you a candlelight dinner? I gave you the most romantic gesture I'll ever be able to give anyone and you don't even fucking remember it!

Doctor's note: (Stunned silence. BK released his hand and stood, walking over to the window, his back to us. JT started to follow, but I placed a hand on his arm and shook my head. BK needed this moment of solitude to gather his composure. This is how he works.)

Doctor: Sit down, Brian. It's alright. You're safe here. Sit down.

BK: (Shook head, did not turn around) I don't want to finish this session.

Doctor: I know you don't. But we will. Sit down. Do you want Justin to step out?

BK: No. (returned to chair. Stared straight ahead, and avoided JT's attempt to take his hand with a flinch.) He can stay. I'm okay.

JT: Why are you so mad at me? Is this about that dance again?

BK: What dance?

JT: Stop it, Brian. You know what dance.

BK: It wasn't just a fucking dance, Justin! It was so much more than just a dance!

JT: I want to remember, Brian! I just can't!

Doctor: Brian, tell us what the dance meant to you.

BK: (Sighed, shook head) What's the point? Futile.

Doctor: Nothing this important to you is futile, Brian. Explain.

BK: (Keeping his gaze lowered, his voice subdued.) I turned thirty years old that day. I felt like my life was over. In the gay world, thirty is ancient. I knew it was just a matter of time until I was some pathetic gray ghost trying to find someone to suck his cock in the backroom of a club full of chickens. They'd laugh at me and someone would say I used to be quite the stud, and god forbid they'd end up like me. I fucked and fucked and fucked for days leading up to that birthday, cramming in all the tricks I could attract.

JT: (Laughed) That's true. No one heard from him for days.

BK: Anyway, I bought this scarf on the day of my birthday and decided to do a little magic trick with it. It was also the night of Mikey's going away party.

JT: The white scarf?

BK: (Nodded)

Doctor: Where was Mikey going?

BK: He moved out of state for awhile with his then-boyfriend. It didn't work out. He came back.

Doctor: How did you feel about his leaving?

BK: I felt if that's what he wanted, he should do it. Frankly, I never liked the guy, but it was Mikey's life.

Doctor: So, to set the stage, your best friend was leaving town, you celebrated a monumental birthday, your lover was making a demand you couldn't satisfy. Interesting time. What was the trick with the scarf?

BK: It's called scarfing, Lydia.

JT: (Wrinkled his nose, confused) What is that?

Doctor: Is it auto-asphyxiation while masturbating?

BK: (Nodded)

JT: (Makes gesture of 'over my head' by swiping palm above his head) What, again?

BK: (Patiently) You use a belt or a rope or a scarf or something and loop it over a beam or some strong structure and put it around your neck. As you jerk off, you tighten the noose until you slowly cut off the oxygen supply to your brain. The combination of oxygen deprivation and masturbation produces an intense orgasm.

Doctor: Often rapidly followed by death.

Doctor's note: (JT looks shocked while BK just grimaces and shrugs.)

BK: That's the kind of thing straight people say to scare you.

Doctor: Brian, straight people do it too. Often with a partner. The man will cut off air flow to the woman by tightening his hands on her throat. Unless you are an extremely skilled medical professional the chance that you know when to stop short of severe brain damage or death is slim. And if you passed out while standing on a stool or chair and fell, you could easily hang yourself.

BK: The point of using a silk scarf is that if you pass out, the weight of your body would pull the scarf down or tear it, so you would be alright. It's more dangerous with a rope or leather.

JT: Are you fucking NUTS?

BK: You're too young to understand.

JT: I understand stupidity!

Doctor: What happened Brian?

BK: Just before I got off, that stupid ass Mikey came in and pulled me down.

JT: Remind me to thank Mikey!

BK: You can't say a word to Mikey, Justin. Not a word. Doctor: What was Mikey's reaction?

BK: He was mad. And then he told me I was beautiful, would always be beautiful. Mikey has a gift for knowing what to say to me.

JT: Yeah, since he's been in love with you since you were kids.

Doctor: Is that true, Brian?

BK: (Shrugged, uncomfortable silence.) He loves me and I love him. It's complicated.

JT: No, it isn't. You love him like a brother. He loves you like I love you.

BK: Shut up, Justin. You don't know. Just shut up about Mikey.

Doctor: We'll explore that relationship later, Brian. What happened after Mikey found you and talked to you?

BK: I remembered Justin wanted me to go to the prom with him. He went with his friend Daphne, but he wanted me there, to make a statement to the others and to share the night with him.

JT: True, and he said he would rather be dead than be stuck in a room full of eighteen year olds.

BK: Yes, but after Mikey left, I began to think about all the reasons why being thirty and continuing to live may not be so miserable. One of the main reasons was you, Justin.

JT: (Stared at BK.) You never told me that before.

BK: I'm telling you now. So I dressed up, put on the scarf, went to the prom.

Doctor: How did you feel walking into that room?

BK: Terrified.

JT: He looked like a deer in the headlights, Doc. But a beautiful deer.

BK: (Smirked at him) Anyway, I walked over to Justin and Daphne, aware that every little geek in the room was staring at me.

JT: This is where it gets hazy for me. I kind of remember that conversation, but not really. I do remember the impact of seeing you walk in. What a thrill that was! But the rest of it....

BK: I know, it's lost.

JT: Not on purpose.

BK: I know, Justin, I know.

Doctor: You remember it, Brian. Can you tell us why that dance is so important to you?

BK: It wasn't the dance itself.

Doctor: What was it?

BK: It was a proclamation. It was taking this beautiful guy into my arms in the heart of a straight function and leading him into a sexy, intimate pairing that was all about affection and caring and...not just about sex. It was the perfect rhythm of two bodies becoming one, sex standing up. Complete intimacy. And then we kissed, not planned, not to show off, but because we HAD to kiss, you understand? We had to have that connection. I've never felt so completely connected to anyone, not before or since. It was ridiculously romantic. And it is completely forgotten.

JT: (Left his chair to stand in front of BK, resting BK's forehead against his chest and stroking his hair softly.) I'm so sorry, Brian. I'm so sorry I can't remember it. (Brian's arms went around Justin, and he held him there for a silent moment)

BK: (Whispered voice) It's not your fault.

Doctor: Justin, do you want to remember?

JT: Of course I do!

Doctor: Think about that very carefully. Sometimes the mind protects us by forgetting. You not only forgot the beauty of that moment with Brian, but you also forgot the horror of the assault. You can't have one without the other.

BK: (Gently urged JT back to his own chair.) Then forget it. I don't want him to relive that horror. Not for anything.

JT: It's my decision, not yours, Brian.

BK: Don't do it. Please.

JT: I find out that in one day, you contemplated killing yourself and you also realized how much I meant to you? You tell me that dance was your way of saying "I love you" in front of all those people, because that's what it means, don't deny it. And then you tell me don't try to recapture that memory? Bullshit. What do I have to do, Doc?

Doctor: We can discuss that another time, Justin. Let's stick with this current discussion. Brian, was that your way of saying you love Justin?

BK: (winced, shrugged) I don't know.

Doctor: Don't know, or can't say?

BK: I don't know. Maybe.

Doctor: There's another way, you know. One he can remember from now on. You can tell him how you feel. You don't always have to act out. You can say it.

BK: I told you before, love is an overused word.

Doctor: You make your living with words, Brian. Find some to tell Justin why you want him to move in with you.

BK: (Long pause. Finally, he took Justin's hand and held it firmly in his as he met his eyes) I know I'm no prize, Justin. I'm obsessive, I'm completely self-involved, I'm selfish. I put my own ego and pleasure first. I'm addicted to sex. I can be very superficial.

JT: (smiled) You're turning my head.

BK: (Smiled back) I want you in my life because you make me a better person than I am. You make me want to be better. I like myself better when you're around. You make me happy. You make me feel like I'm worth something. Without you, I'm incomplete.

Doctor's note: JT left his chair and BK stood to embrace him. They held each other for a long silent moment. The affection between them is apparent. Finally, they kissed, then sat down again.

Doctor: Justin, why are you willing to take a chance on Brian?

JT: Did you hear what he just said? He is infuriating. He can be an impossible egomaniac, cold as ice, and then he does something like that. The something like that makes it worth waiting out the bad times.

Doctor: What do each of you hope to get out of this arrangement?

BK: He's looking for free rent.

JT: (Laughed) See what I mean?

BK: And free food. Believe me, he may look small but he eats like a horse.

JT: (Punched his arm) I do not! And I plan to be a very successful artist who can pay my own damn way!

BK: Yeah, and I plan to be fifty someday. The two should coincide.

JT: I want to watch Brian grow up. I want to see what kind of adult he becomes.

BK: (Laughed) Good luck.

Doctor: Okay, so have you discussed the parameters of this relationship?

BK: We decided not to impose rules. That was pathetic. We're not going into it with the idea of fooling around a lot, but we're gay. The one riot one butt ranger heterosexual rule is equally pointless. We're just going to see how it goes.

Doctor: You agree with that, Justin?

JT: If Brian said we were never going to sleep with other men, I'd be okay with that. I found out I can be faithful, and that I even prefer it.

BK: Bullshit.

JT: What?

BK: You cheated on him with me!

JT: That's different.

BK: How is that different?

JT: Because it's you, not some trick.

BK: Everyone was a trick once. Including you. And if you think you can fuck your ex whenever you get the yen, you're wrong. If you still want to fuck him, don't move in with me.

JT: Who said I want to fuck my ex?

BK: I was your ex. You fucked me.

JT: Again, that's different!

Doctor: Brian, do you think you should have veto power over any extracurricular lovers Justin takes?

BK: Is he taking any?

Doctor: You tell me.

JT: That's not my goal. I was a virgin when I met Brian. It would have been weird to go my whole life and never know what it's like with another man. Since then, I've been around. I've had the hunt, the conquest. I know I can get

other lovers without much effort on my part. But I keep coming back to where I began. Brian Kinney. He's not only the best lover I've ever had, he's the one who creeps into my mind when I'm with someone else.

BK: I do that too. I think about you when I'm with a trick. I turn them into you in my head. But of course, the feeling is never the same.

Doctor: Sounds like you both got what you want.

BK: Does anyone really know what they want, Lydia?

Doctor: How are you sleeping, Brian?

JT: I can answer that. He stays over at the hotel with me and people in the next room complain about the noise. Not from our fucking, but >from his snoring!

BK: (Chuckled) He's lying. But I have been sleeping well. I sleep very well when he's around.

Doctor: Why do you think that is?

BK(shrugged) Dunno. He keeps the bed warm?

Doctor: Try again.

BK: I feel at ease when he's there.

JT: (Raised BK's hand up to his lips and kissed it gently. BK blushed, smiled at him.) Me too.

Doctor: Don't expect perfection, guys. Expect bumps and craters and rough roads. But remind yourselves about the way you feel right now, and you'll get through it. Brian, you'll have highs and lows while going through therapy.

Expect that. It's not easy to uncover old fears and emotions. Justin, you should expect that, as well, from Brian. I'd like to see you guys together occasionally, and if you hit a wall, give me a chance to meet with you both.

JT: Doc, how can you help me recover that memory?

Doctor: It wouldn't be me, Justin. I don't want to treat both you and Brian. But I can refer you to someone competent.

BK: I won't have him recall the horror of Chris Hobbes.

JT: Brian, I have to make that decision for myself.

BK:(Started to speak, grew silent.)

Doctor: Call my office tomorrow, Justin. My assistant will have some names for you. Brian, we'll work on your fears about Justin's recovering that memory.

End of excerpt.

Doctor's Notes: The emotional bond between BK and JT is complex. Love and desire are balanced by fear of abandonment and a subtle struggle for domination. BK's insecurities about being left by JT are only partly caused by their earlier breakup. These fears are deep rooted in his self portrait of unworthiness and inability to express emotion for fear of being rejected or ridiculed. His description of a second "inadvertent" failed suicide attempt at age thirty underlies his belief that all he has to offer JT or anyone is his youthful good looks and his financial success. His promiscuity is fed by his constant need to validate that he is still attractive and desirable. Now, he must also deal with the fact that seeking that validation with others may destroy his relationship with the one man he loves. He will need help realizing that same or stronger validation can come from a partner in a monogamous relationship. I anticipate this decision to live together at this stage in BK's analysis will create interesting emotional challenges for both partners.

BETWEEN THE SESSIONS

(After Brian and Justin session)

by Randall Morgan

Boxes were piled upon boxes, stacked beside boxes, next to emptied boxes. These cardboard cubes littered the floor and every open surface in Brian's orderly loft. Justin was moving in. The chaos was distressing to a man who demanded that his environment be carefully controlled. He didn't remember Justin having this much junk. Where was it all going to go? How would it affect the balance of his décor? In the midst of this misery, the buzzer rang, and Brian answered it, leaving Justin to his unpacking.

"Yeah?" He said gruffly, expecting no one and prepared to turn away any forgotten boxes retrieved by the delivery service.

"Brian, it's Lindsay. Buzz me in."

"Lindz?" He said with surprise. "I'll meet you there and bring you up."

Dressed only in a wife beater and faded jeans, his feet bare, Brian took the stairs. That route was faster than the creaky freight elevator, and he winced at the chill blast of air as he opened the front door to Lindsay, Melanie and Gus. "Daddy!" Gus beamed, reaching for Brian, who took him into his arms and swung him around until he squealed with delight. At two, Gus was much heavier than Brian remembered. He squirmed to get down, no longer content to be held. Brian held to him anyway as he escorted them into the elevator. The women seemed tense. "Things are a little hectic," he said, giving Lindsay a belated kiss and smiling wanly at Melanie. "Justin's shit arrived today and the place is a mess."

"I'm so glad you and Justin put it back together, Brian," Lindsay said with an earnest smile. "We'll miss him, but it's so much the right thing for you two." Gus watched the floors creep by through the open slats of the elevator and giggled when they arrived. Brian pulled open the gates.

"Deja vue," Melanie remarked as he slid open the metal door of the loft. She was referring to his place in Pittsburgh. Once they entered, she realized how wrong she was.

"My god, Brian! It's huge and gorgeous!" Lindsay remarked as he put Gus down. The baby stood there for a minute, getting his bearings, then spotted Justin and ran to greet him with the toddling gait of a walker not yet fully acclimated to his legs. Justin scooped him up for his second spin of the day, and then came over to greet the women.

For the first time, Brian realized the only luggage they had was Gus's oversized diaper bag and a colorful roll aboard suitcase that was used for his things. He slouched on the leather sofa, watching Justin chase Gus around the boxes as Gus laughed. Two kids, he thought to himself. Both mine. He suppressed a smile and glanced at the women. They stood together tensely, and then Lindsay said,

"Something's come up."

"Go on," he prompted, and Melanie slipped her hand in Lindsay's as she continued.

"Friends of ours suddenly got word that they were given the use of a house in the Hampton's for a long weekend. They've invited several of us to join them."

"Not exactly beach weather," Brian remarked, gazing out the window at the promise of sleet. Maybe even snow.

"We're not going there for the beach, Brian," Melanie said. "It's strictly for recreation, the camaraderie of women together and..."

He held up his hand to stop her. "Please. You're filing my head with images of muncher orgies. I'll never get hard again."

"That'll be the day," Justin quipped and Brian tossed a ball of packing paper at him.

"Enough from the peanut gallery," he returned his attention to the women. "So, ladies, I congratulate you on your lesbo retreat. What does any of this have to do with me?"

Melanie exchanged a sidelong glance with Lindsay, who said, "We were going to bring Gus with us, then Mel thought you may want to spend a little time with him. Since we were so close, we decided to just stop by and ask."

Brian reached into his jeans pocket and removed his tiny cell phone. "Ever heard of these? Remarkable invention. They really work. They can be used to give people advance warning."

"It was spur of the moment, Brian," Lindsay said, and Melanie frowned.

"If you don't want him, fine. We just thought since you haven't seen him in awhile, you may want to spend some time with your own son. However, we should have realized he would be an unwelcome intrusion into your perfect little life."

Lindsay tried to quiet her with a gentle squeeze of her hand, but Brian just smiled slightly.

"Yeah, you can see how perfect my life is right now. It's like living in the storage room of the Big Q. Don't get your balls in an uproar, Mel; I didn't say I wouldn't like to spend time with Gus. But don't yank my dick. This has fuck-all to do with your wanting to give me time with my son. This has to do with you guys wanting to be alone to lick and tickle or do whatever the fuck you munchers do to each other at these lesbianic fuck fests. So let's be real clear about that."

"That would describe your experience in the Hampton's, Brian, not ours," Melanie huffed. He shrugged.

"If you say so, Mel. When will you be back? I have a big meeting on Monday. I can't babysit."

"I can, if you decide to stay over!" Justin volunteered, ignoring Brian's withering glare. Justin was on his hands and knees now, eye level with Gus, who was entertaining him with an empty box.

"We'll be back to pick him up Tuesday," Lindsay said, and Brian shrugged.

"Tell you what. I'll make a deal with you."

"What kind of deal?" Melanie asked suspiciously. Brian ignored her.

"Not you, her. If I keep Gus all weekend, I want you to go somewhere with me on Tuesday, Lindz. I want you to talk to my shrink, Lydia."

"You have a shrink?" The two asked in unison.

He nodded. "Yes, I know. Long overdue. I wouldn't want you to stay long, but she wants to interview people close to me. She's had a couple meetings with Justin. Since you're here, it seems too perfect to pass up. You can talk to her alone, and then I'll take the rest of the session."

"Lydia is totally cool!" Justin intervened and Melanie looked confused. She couldn't imagine Brian getting the help he so desperately needed nor could she imagine him seeking out a female doctor.

"Oh baby, I'd love to!" Lindsay gushed, ignoring Melanie's warning glimpse as she kissed his cheek. "I'm so proud of you!"

"Whatever. My appointment is at four. Sharp. So plan around that."

"We'll have to change our flight," Melanie complained and Lindsay shook her head.

"Doesn't matter. Of course we'll change our flight."

Lindsay went over Gus's eating and sleeping schedule with both Brian and Justin. She gave them his dietary preferences, the numbers where she could be reached, the contents of his luggage, and told them how to operate the portable crib Melanie went down to retrieve from the waiting cab, and the umbrella stroller. "Does he use the toilet yet?" Brian asked hopefully and Lindsay sighed.

"We've tried, but he's not ready. The doctor said not to force it. Afraid it's still diapers, but I packed plenty of them."

"Swell," Brian responded, sharing a grimace with Justin. Now that Gus was eating more food, diaper changing would be worse than ever.

Getting Lindsay out the door, past her last minute tears over leaving Gus, and her momentary apprehension was increased by a responsive wail from Gus, who held out his arms to her and pleaded, "MOMMY!" as if being abandoned to the Huns. Between Melanie and Brian, she was finally pried away from her baby. As soon as she was out of sight, Gus stopped wailing and was easily distracted again by Justin.

"Make sure there is nothing in a box that is low enough for him to reach that could hurt him," Brian insisted, starting to remove his breakable artifacts from low surfaces. His loft was so spare, childproofing it didn't take long. He and Justin carefully inspected the boxes, segregated items that were suspicious and realized what a challenge a totally open living space was with an inquisitive two year old. Brian's hopes for a romantic weekend of fucking his new roommate blind had morphed into an entirely different scene.

He scattered Gus's toys in hopes of interesting him in something constructive and safe, but the little one was far too fascinated by his unfamiliar surroundings to have any interest in these same old toys. Brian sighed, likening that fickle attitude to his own view of sexual partners. New toys were best. Except everyone had that one favorite, comfortable, necessary toy. For Gus it was a battered, slobber stained stuffed dog with most of its acrylic fur rubbed off, and its stuffing flattened by the weight of a sleeping baby. He called it "Poo" for reasons understood only by his two year old mind. Brian's "Poo" was Justin.

By four in the afternoon, Brian knew they had to get out of the loft, no matter what the weather. The boxes had lost their fascination for Gus. He was too over-stimulated to nap, and he was beginning to realize Lindsay and Mel were not around the corner, and he didn't know "Daddy" all that well.

"Where can we take him?" Brian asked, watching Justin futilely try to interest the baby in some of his pastels and a large sheet of drawing paper. Gus viewed the interesting colored chalk as something good to eat and when discouraged, he didn't take it well.

"Zoo?" Justin suggested.

"Too cold."

"Bloomingdale's?" Brian glared at him. "Never too young to learn to shop," Justin defended his thought. "Mars?"

"Can you be serious?"

"I am serious! I mean that restaurant Mars where they dress up in alien costumes and you take a rocket ride to reach the place."

"He's too young for theme restaurants, thank god."

"I give up. This is your town."

Brian sighed. He was a rotten father, had no natural instinct for it. He couldn't keep a two year old happy for a couple hours let alone a couple days. Justin smiled at him. "Get dressed. We'll think of something. I'll bundle Gus up and get his stroller out and pack his bag." Brian did so, then came back into the main room to find a down encased Gus settled in his stroller with his diaper bag stored beneath. Justin, on the other hand, was still in his t-shirt and jeans.

"Why aren't you in your shoes and coat?" Brian asked, zipping up his leather jacket.

"I'm not going."

"The fuck you're not."

"I'm going to stay here and finish unpacking while you spend some time with your son."

"ALONE?!"

"Yes, alone, Daddy. I end up being the caretaker, the mommy, when we have Gus. I love him and I don't mind it, but you need to see that you are perfectly capable of handling him alone. And it will be good for him too."

"Justin...I..."

"Go," Justin was herding him towards the door, pushing the stroller along with them. "Have fun, relax."

"But..."

Justin kissed Brian on the lips, then leaned down to kiss Gus's forehead. "GO!"

Only when he was in the cab, after fumbling with the fold up mechanism on the stroller, was Brian able to come up with a destination. On the way to his address, Gus was restless, trying to struggle off of his lap, whining and beginning to cry as Brian paid the fare. Holding a twisting baby with one arm, unfolding the stroller with the other, the diaper bag thrown over his shoulder, Brian cursed Justin as the weather turned worse and Gus began to wail.

"Let me help you," a man's voice. Brian didn't care if it was the ghost of Jeffrey Dahmer. If he could do something useful at that moment, he would be grateful. The man was close to Brian's own age, handsome, dressed similarly. He had a baby in a stroller much like Gus's, only she was obviously a girl, since every aspect of her attire incorporated the color pink. When Gus saw her calm, pretty little face, he grew quiet, as if not wanting to be shown up by a competing, behaving toddler. The man soon had the stroller open, the bag underneath and he helped Brian lower Gus inside and secure him with security straps.

"Thanks a lot," Brian said, heading towards the Natural History Museum, situated in a dour old building in Central Park. The man walked along with him.

"No problem. I know how it is. How old is he?"

"Little bit over two."

"So is Hannah."

"This is Gus. I'm Brian, by the way," he held out his hand.

"Jeffrey."

When Brian laughed, the other man looked confused. "Sorry, I was just thinking if Jeffrey Dahmer offered to help, I'd let him."

"No relation, thank God!" He said with a laugh and they entered the vast lobby of the museum together.

They took time to unwrap their babies from the bulk of their protective clothing so they would be more comfortable and Brian noticed Hannah had a mop of platinum hair even though Jeffrey's hair was dark brown and wavy. His eyes were also dark, like melted chocolate, and his features were finely honed.

"Your wife must be very fair," Brian said, noticing he wore no ring.

"I'm not married. Hannah is adopted."

"Really? I thought it was almost impossible to adopt Caucasian babies. Especially if you're single. Is she Russian or something?"

Jeffrey removed his leather jacket and slung it over the handle of the stroller. He had a lean torso, well displayed in a snug cashmere sweater. "You're right about how hard it is to adopt. Hannah was a special circumstance. My younger sister found herself in a situation. She wasn't ready for a baby and I was. By blood, she's my niece, but I've legally adopted her. Is Gus your only one? He looks just like you."

"He's it. He lives with his two mommies in Pittsburgh, so I don't get to see him as often as I'd like."

"His two mommies? Lesbians?"

Brian nodded, tensed, prepared to defend. Jeffrey just smiled as they walked past the dinosaur bones in the foyer, entering the main halls of the museum.

"I'm gay, Brian. I don't have a hang up, so don't look as though you're ready to punch me out if I say something right wing."

Brian laughed. "I'm gay too. Gus was a sperm donation."

"I've thought about that, but there's no woman I'm close to for such an intimate combination."

"I was lucky. One of his mommies has been my friend since college."

"That makes it easier. I was going to take Hannah to see the butterflies."

"Me too!" Brian insisted, not admitting the butterfly exhibit was something he had always wanted to see himself.

After buying tickets for the exhibition, Jeffrey suggested Brian remove Gus's sweater, because it was warm and humid inside the glassed in conservatory where live butterflies flitted from plant to plant. They left their strollers at the exit and held their babies, informed they couldn't let them down in fear of their innocently crushing fragile insects in tiny fists. They stood in an anteroom for a moment. The double door system prevented stray butterflies from escaping when the doors opened for visitors. Inside, Brian was knocked back by the humidity, but Gus's giggling fascination with the brilliantly colored, graceful angels of the bug world countered his own discomfort. A monarch landed on Brian's shoulder, and he contained Gus's grabby hands in his own watching the majestic insect spread and flatten its black and orange wingspread.

"Monarchs are drawn to the beauty of a flower," Jeffrey said with a smile. "This one knows his beauties."

Brian met his gaze. It was kind of nice to be unexpectedly cruised at a butterfly exhibit.

After walking through most of the museum, the babies were drifting off, and the daddies decided cappuccino was a good idea. They went down to the modern cafeteria in the bowels of the museum, and Brian bought the coffee, insisting it was his payback for Jeffrey's earlier assistance.

"What do you do?" Brian asked when they found a quiet booth where the babies could sleep and they could converse in private.

"I recently completed my residency. I'm a pediatric oncologist."

"I know pediatric is kids, but I thought oncology was cancer."

"It is," he met Brian's stunned expression with a sigh. "As sad as it is, children get cancer. They have special needs. My job is to treat those needs, and hopefully get them past the crisis to lead normal lives."

"But don't you...don't many of them..."

"Die? Yes, Brian. Many of them aren't going to survive, statistically."

"How can you deal with that?"

"It's never easy. The family is devastated, the child is a terrible loss to the world, and I mourn every one of those tragedies in my heart."

"So how do you keep doing it?"

"Because of that one little person with no hair, whittled down to skin and bones by chemo, seemingly without hope, who somehow, miraculously, pulls through. Getting one kid on his or her feet again is worth all the pain and the inevitable sense of failure. Plus, we make new strides every day in this battle. My dream is to be put out of business by scientific advances. What do you do?"

Brian frowned. How did he tell Albert Schweitzer he was in advertising? He sold people products they neither wanted nor needed. Jeffrey smiled.

"I know what you're thinking. After what I just said, no matter what you do, you think it will sound less socially redeeming than my job. Don't worry, Brian. I get paid for what I do. Paid very well. I'm not a saint, volunteering my services. I have six figures of student loans I'm repaying."

Brian relaxed slightly. "I'm a partner in a Madison Avenue advertising firm."

"Wow. Young, aren't you?"

"I work hard."

"I'll bet," Jeffrey stirred his coffee, and then glanced at Brian's handsome face. "Do you have a partner at home?"

Brian sighed. "If you asked me that a week ago..."

"I'm asking that now," Jeffrey persisted.

"Yes, someone I was involved with before has come back into my life. He's in the process of moving in with me."

"I see," Jeffrey's disappointment was apparent, but he smiled quickly. "Congratulations."

"Thanks, I hope it works this time. Do you have a partner?"

"No."

"Why not? You're handsome, nice, a doctor."

Jeffrey wrinkled his fine nose that Brian noticed for the first time was lightly dappled with tiny freckles. "I had a partner. He couldn't reconcile having Hannah in our lives. He left."

"I'm sorry."

"No, it was for the best. We had drifted apart."

"I'm not sure I could live with a baby full time," Brian said, not wanting to appear martyred.

"I have a full time nanny, so she's really no trouble. I see how you are with Gus. I suspect you underestimate your parenting skills. You're a very giving man."

"Quite frankly, Jeffrey, I'm a slow to reform disco slut. My kid has given you a picture of me that isn't accurate."

"Hum," Jeffrey said with a smile, leaning back against the booth. "I wonder how accurate your internal eye really is. Even Monarchs like you, Brian, and they are notoriously shy."

Brian laughed. "I make a good first impression. It's the second one that sinks me."

"I doubt that. Where are you living?"

"Soho. You?"

"On Fifth, right where it meets Washington Square."

"Not too far from me. Condo?"

"Yeah. Loft?"

"Yeah."

Jeffrey got them refills and Brian tried not to stare at his ass in his fine wool trousers as he walked away, but he failed. Nice ass, too. After two cups of coffee, and a long chat, the bathroom was inevitable. One man, and then the other, volunteered to watch the babies while they took turns at the urinals. When Brian returned to them, Jeffrey slipped a card into the pocket of his jeans. "This is my office number, but I wrote my home number on the back."

"Uh..."

Jeffrey pressed a little closer to him, talking in a low voice. "I'm not trying to interfere in your relationship, Brian. But it's nice to meet someone my own age with a child, with similar issues. I was a disco slut once. I see no reason why we can't be friends."

Brian saw a very good reason why they couldn't be friends. Jeffrey made his dick hard, and he presumed he had a similar impact on Jeffrey. "I don't know."

"Just keep it. If you want to have dinner sometime, go to the theater, just talk about our kids, give me a buzz. No expectations. No pressure. Just friends."

"Okay," Brian gave him one of his own cards. He hesitated about writing his home number on it, not wanting Justin to pick up that call. That concern irritated him, so he finally wrote it on the back in easy to read numerals, along with his cell phone number. "Friends are fine. I don't really know many people in New York."

"Well, now you know me."

They bundled their babies up and walked out together to hail separate cabs. They decided two tall men and two babies and all the paraphernalia was too much for one cab. Brian let Jeffrey have the first cab, and waved as he rode away. He took the card he gave him and glanced at it. Jeffrey Walker. He slipped it into his wallet and told himself he had no intention of calling him as he held a somnolent Gus against his chest all the way to Soho.

Gus slept peacefully in his portable crib, behind a rice paper and ebony lacquer screen while his father forcefully fucked Justin in the bed, not far away. Afterwards, Justin kissed his neck and whispered, "What's up with you? You've been quiet since you came home. Are you mad at me for not going with you?"

"You should have gone," Brian said ambiguously.

"You guys did fine," Justin curled up beside him.

"Yeah," Brian turned on his side, prepared to sleep, forcing any thoughts of Jeffrey Walker out of his head.

On Tuesday, Melanie and Lindsay showed up at the loft looking rested and refreshed. Justin was there to greet them, and Gus ran to them as soon as they entered the room. "Brian's going to swing by to get you for the session with Lydia, Lindsay," Justin said. "Mel and I can stay here with Gus."

"I still don't see why you should talk to his shrink," Melanie grouched. "Why take up a precious moment of the time he so obviously needs?"

"Honey..." Lindsay said, and Justin laughed.

"Lydia wants to talk to everyone who is close to Brian. It's all part of his therapy."

"I could tell her a thing or two," Melanie insisted, bouncing Gus on her knee. "Well, you guys got the place all cleaned up. No boxes." Lindsay changed the subject.

"You know how Brian is, everything in its place."

Brian entered the loft, smiling as Gus tumbled off of Melanie's lap and waddled over to him, arms outstretched. Melanie was less than pleased by his defection. "Are you ready, Lindsay? I like to be on time," he said as he leaned down to hug Gus warmly.

"Ready," she said, rolling her eyes at her lover as she kissed Gus and handed him back to Melanie. After they left, Justin glanced at Melanie.

"What's an oncologist?"

"A cancer specialist, why?"

Justin went pale. "What is a ped? A ped Oncologist?"

"Ped? I have no idea. Do you mean PET? I know certain vets specialize."

"No, p-e-d, ped."

"Oh! I'll bet it's pediatric."

"Kids?"

"Yes. Why are you asking all this, Justin?"

"Why would Brian call a pediatric oncologist?"

"He may have the maturity of a child, but a pediatrician wouldn't touch him, and he doesn't have cancer, Justin. So....?"

"He got a call confirming a one o'clock appointment with Dr. Walker tomorrow, and the caller ID said Ped. Oncology LLP."

"An LLP is a professional limited liability corporation," Melanie explained, falling back on her law degree. "It can't be about Gus. He just had a check up and is healthy as can be. I don't know, Justin...unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Nothing."

"Unless the doctor is a trick?"

She met his eyes and sighed. "You know Brian, honey. He's an animal."

Justin shook his head. He had thought of that, but that was not how Brian worked. Brian never gave out his number to tricks. Brian never saw tricks more than once. And Brian's idea of a trick was not some staid doctor. No matter how he sliced this information, Justin didn't like any of the possibilities. He got down on the floor to play with Gus, determined to confront his lover with this knowledge as soon as he was home and the women were gone. Something about it made Justin uneasy, and he wanted to resolve it before it was allowed to fester.

"Flutterbye," Gus said of a drawing Justin had absently sketched while allowing his thoughts to run the gamut, and he smiled at his mispronunciation, momentarily distracted from his concern by the sweet innocence of the baby.

DECONSTRUCTING BRIAN

Lindsay Interview and Session 5

by Randall Morgan

Doctor's Notes: Lindsay Peterson (LP) is a striking 32 year old woman who has known BK since college. She is the biological mother of his son, and shares parenting duties with her life partner, Melanie Marcus. The two women went through a commitment ceremony just over one year ago. Lindsay has a quiet, patrician composure, and speaks in a soft voice, that is not for effect. She projects a calm that the turbulent BK must have found soothing. I asked BK to wait in the anteroom so that I could talk to Lindsay privately.

Excerpt from transcript:

Doctor: Are you nervous about coming here, Lindsay?

LP: Not at all. I'm thrilled that Brian is seeking help for his emotional issues. I'll be glad to help anyway I can.

Doctor: Why don't you tell me about when you first met Brian?

LP: (Laughing) We were in an art history class together at Penn State. I was an art major, but he was a business school student. He was only taking the course for what he thought would be an easy elective credit.

Doctor: What was your first impression of him?

LP: (Coloring slightly) Well, he's absolutely gorgeous, isn't he? I guess that was my first impression of Brian. The same one everyone gets when they first meet him. He's beautiful. Wasn't that your first impression?

Doctor: Brian is very handsome, yes. And your second impression?

LP: He had a wicked sense of humor. He was not like the other boys, who were all hands and sexual pressure. I never suspected he was gay, at first, but then I didn't suspect I was either.

Doctor: You became friends?

LP: (Squarely meeting my gaze.) We became more than friends for awhile.

Doctor: You were in love?

LP: We were lovers.

Doctor: Are you making a distinction?

LP: Oh yes, I think so. I adored him, but there was always that barrier between us, a gate that kept us from going too far, emotionally.

Doctor: What was that?

LP: We were both gay.

Doctor: Yet you had a sexual relationship?

LP: Briefly.

Doctor: Had you admitted your sexual orientation to each other before you became intimate?

LP: We hinted at it. Look, it was lovely. Brian was a thoughtful and tender lover. I thought he was divine. I even permitted myself to fantasize that I might have a future with Brian. Although he never intimated such a possibility. But I was young and relatively inexperienced. One afternoon, he said he couldn't have sex with me anymore. It wasn't fair to me, he said. He told me that he was gay, he was certain of it. No offense to me, but even though he thought I was wonderful, he knew who he was, and he didn't intend to live a lie. He also said I should examine my own orientation, without fear.

Doctor: How did you feel about that?

LP: At first, I was hurt. But later, I was glad. His honesty allowed me to be honest with myself.

Doctor: So you stopped having sex?

LP: Yes, but we remained great friends. I think I understand Brian more than most people. He's been able to show me his sweet side, perhaps because I'm a woman, and thus non threatening. I don't wear blinders, I know his faults, but he can also be a loving, giving man.

Doctor: Is that why you chose him to be the father of your child?

LP: When Mel and I decided to have a baby, we hotly debated who the father should be. She has never liked Brian.

Doctor: Why is that?

LP: Frankly, she's jealous. It's silly, but she is. She dislikes other aspects of Brian's character, but the jealousy is her main driver. Anyway, there's no other man I even considered. Brian has great genes, he's tall, beautiful and smart. He's also ambitious and driven. I think I smooth out some of his worst traits, just as he smooths out mine. Perfect genetic match.

Doctor: Was he enthusiastic about it?

LP: (Laughed.) At first he acted as if I asked him to donate one of his balls instead of a little goo. But I wore him down.

Doctor: So now you have a son.

LP: A beautiful wonderful son.

Doctor: What kind of father is Brian?

LP: He loves Gus very much.

Doctor: I'm sure, but what kind of father is he?

LP: It varies. He tries to do the right thing, but he can be irresponsible. He's always supported him financially. And when he's with Gus, he's quite loving. He's just absentee, so it's hard. And he signed over his parental rights to Melanie, so he has no real claim on Gus.

Doctor: Did you ask him to do that?

LP: It was very important to Melanie. Brian finally decided he wanted Gus to have two parents who loved him and who loved each other. So he signed.

Doctor: But you've permitted him to remain part of Gus's life.

LP: Of course! Gus loves Brian! I'd never keep them apart. The other is just a legal technicality.

Doctor: Do you know Brian's family?

LP: (Wrinkled nose distastefully.) I've met them, yes.

Doctor: Tell me about them.

LP: His father was an old leech and a drunk. He was horrible to Brian. His mother is a cold and remote religious fanatic. She acts as if she couldn't care less if he lived or died. She can't accept his homosexuality. His older sister, Claire, is an hysteric, and is very bitter about life. My parents are less than sterling, but compared to what Brian went through as a kid, I was lucky.

Doctor: What do you think is the greatest general misconception about Brian, held by others?

LP: That he's unfeeling, uncaring. He's truly very sensitive. He just shows his emotions in non-traditional ways, hiding behind his sarcastic bravado.

Doctor: And his best attribute?

LP: Loyalty. Brian is fiercely loyal to his friends.

Doctor: Lindsay, since your brief affair in college, have you been lovers with Brian?

LP: (Smiled wanly.) Never. And we never will again.

End of excerpt

Doctor's Notes: BK seemed remote, withdrawn as he followed LP into the session. He was slow to begin. I had to prod him to start talking at all.

Excerpt from transcript:

Doctor: Brian, what's on your mind today? You seem preoccupied.

BK: Do I?

Doctor: Problem?

BK: Tired, I guess.

Doctor: Sleep disruption?

BK: Yeah, it's called caring for a two year old terror.

Doctor: I see. How did your visit go?

BK: Mostly good. It was great to spend time with Gus. He's grown a lot, changed.

Doctor: How is it going with Justin sharing your space?

BK: Hectic, but calming down. Moving in is traumatic. (Stared out window at rainy day, paused.)

Doctor: Traumatic in what way?

BK: Just so much clutter. I guess I remember how it was when he moved out before. All his clutter went with him. I felt stripped. I'm still not one hundred per cent sure about this whole thing. I don't want to be on pins and needles with him. I know I shouldn't be thinking about the end at the beginning, but I don't ever want to feel that way again.

Doctor: So, if you hold back some of what you're feeling for him, it is less likely he can hurt you so badly if he decides to leave. Is that the plan?

BK: (Smiled wanly.) I don't know. It sounds so lame when you say it.

Doctor: It's not at all an unusual reaction in a reconciliation, Brian. The person wants their lover back, but at the same time, fears the pain of the rejection that broke them up. You just have to recognize that's what's happening, and we'll deal with it.

BK: Okay, I guess that makes sense.

Doctor: Is there something more, Brian?

BK: (Paused.) No, I guess not. Well, maybe...

Doctor: Tell me.

BK: I met this guy.

Doctor: I see. Trick?

BK: No, not a trick. I was out with Gus and he was out with his kid and we just started talking. We walked through the museum together, had coffee. It wasn't sexual.

Doctor: What troubles you about that meeting?

BK: (Frowned.) I don't know, really. But...something does. I've found myself thinking about him often. He's a pediatric oncologist. Can you imagine that? Works everyday with kids dying from cancer.

Doctor: Why does that fact interest you, Brian?

BK: I guess it made me wonder what the hell I've contributed with my own fucking life. Nothing. We're about the same age, but he's so much more the grown up. His daughter lives with him, he has this incredible profession...he saves young lives. He made my problems appear so high school and trivial.

Doctor: What's his name?

BK: Jeffrey, as in no relation to Dahmer. (Smirked at his joke.)

Doctor: Is he gay?

BK: Yes.

Doctor: Are you attracted to him?

BK: (Met my gaze.) Would I fuck him? Sure, I'd fuck him. He's hot.

Doctor: That's not what I asked.

BK: I don't know any other way to answer your question.

Doctor: Have you seen him again?

BK: Not yet.

Doctor: But you plan to?

BK: He called me. Wanted to have lunch tomorrow. I said no at first, but he persisted. He knows I'm in a relationship with Justin, he's not interfering with that. He just wants to be friends. Nothing wrong with that, is there?

Doctor: Are you feeling unfaithful to Justin?

BK: (Chuckled.) Straight world values, Lydia. I don't think in those terms.

Doctor: Tell me what you're thinking.

BK: I don't know. I guess I'm thinking I had friends in Pittsburgh as well as Justin, so I should be able to have friends in New York, too. I like Jeffrey. Why shouldn't we have lunch together?

Doctor: Yet you seem apprehensive.

BK: It's funny, isn't it? I've been on my own in New York for over a year. Lonely, bored. Justin finally comes back into my life and almost on the same day, I meet this guy. My life is a continuing source of humor for the powers that be.

Doctor: Did you tell Justin about Jeffrey?

BK: No, and before you ask, I don't know why. I think I just preferred to keep him to myself for awhile. Are you going to tell me I shouldn't see him?

Doctor: Of course I'm not going to tell you that, Brian. You have to run your own life. I have no intention of interfering in decisions you make concerning your friendships. I can only help you have some insight into those decisions.

BK: (Smirked.) That's a shrinkish kind of cop out.

Doctor: I'm a shrinkish kind of person.

BK: I don't even want to worry if I see Jeffrey or not. It's my decision. I'm not some suburban husband, pondering whether he may be tempted to cheat on wifey. I don't need this overhang of guilt or whatever it is. I'm Brian Kinney. I'm free to make my own choices.

Doctor: Then why are you so defensive about Jeffrey?"

BK: (Changed subject.) So what did you think of Lindz?

Doctor: She's a lovely woman. How do you feel about her?

BK: Lindz? Oh, I totally love Lindsay.

Doctor: Why is it so easy for you to say you love Lindsay and even Michael, but not Justin?

BK: That's a very good question.

Doctor: I know. What's your answer?

BK: Different implication, I suppose.

Doctor: Which means you don't view your feelings for them in the same way. Correct?

BK: Of course that's correct! Justin is my lover, not Mikey or Lindsay. I don't even feel the same way about Mikey and Lindz. Is it wrong to compartmentalize feelings?

Doctor: Feelings are neither right nor wrong. They are just what they sound like, feelings. Acting on certain feelings is often wrong, but what you described is essential to society, Brian. We have to compartmentalize love. We don't love our parents the way we love our spouse, or our spouse the way we love our children. It's healthy. What I'd like you to think about is how you can believe the "L" word is overexposed and meaningless when you use it so easily to describe how you feel about certain friends. And yet, not at all to describe what exists between Justin and you.

BK: (Paused, wove his fingers together over one knee in a thoughtful gesture.) I see your point.

Doctor: Any immediate reaction?

BK: No.

Doctor: Fine, just think about it, Brian.

BK: I will.

Doctor: So, tell me about your relationship with Lindsay.

BK: (Looked cautious.) Why? What did she say?

Doctor: Doesn't matter what she said. What do YOU say?

BK: We have as good a relationship as two people can have when the partner of one of the people despises me.

Doctor: Why does she despise you?

BK: Jealous that I had Lindsay, and that Lindsay still feels something for me.

Doctor: What does Lindsay feel for you?

BK: (Winced.) I don't know. I think she just...has fond memories of... we're good friends.

Doctor: What are your memories of Lindsay?

BK: I sat next to her in some dumb art class when we were at Penn State. She was hot. All the men on campus wanted her, so her remote attitude intrigued me. We laughed together a lot, and eventually, we slept together.

Doctor: Why did you sleep with her, Brian? Were you unsure about your orientation?

BK: No, that was a given.

Doctor: Then what motivated you?

BK: I was younger. I was curious. Girls had been coming on to me my whole life. I wanted to know. Lindz wasn't my first woman, but she may as well be. The others were just experiments in groping and coming. She's a great beauty. It wasn't difficult.

Doctor: Were you in love with her?

BK: (Smirked) Your favorite word again. I love Lindsay. Loved her then, love her now. Nothing's changed. Except we don't fuck each other.

Doctor: Why did you stop?

BK: What did she say?

Doctor: This is no time for gallantry, Brian. I'm not asking out of prurient curiosity.

BK: I felt like Lindsay was getting too deep in the affair. I viewed us as loving friends. I think she was beginning to look for more.

Doctor: More than you were willing to give?

BK: More than I could give, Lydia. I'm gay. I never wanted to live some closeted straight life with wife and kiddies while hunting for dick in the clubs when I traveled. I'm not that hypocritical. And so it wasn't fair to her. She didn't really want it either. She's gay too. But she was less certain at that time.

Doctor: So you let her down easy.

BK: I tried.

Doctor: What was your reaction when she asked you to father her child?

BK:(Laughed.) At first, I was appalled. I had no intention of being saddled with a child, and I never wanted to fuck her again. Especially not with her mate hanging over me with an ax aimed at my cock.

Doctor: Why did you change your mind?

BK: Lindz can be more wearing than water over rocks.

Doctor: So you donated sperm?

BK: With the explicit understanding the spawn was all hers, not my responsibility.

Doctor: And in fact you signed over legal rights to Gus?

BK: (Frowned.) That was a tough decision, but it was the right thing for Gus.

Doctor: It sounds as though you've remained actively engaged in his life.

BK: Yeah, as much as I can from New York. I support him, but everything I do is voluntary.

Doctor: Do you enjoy being a dad?

BK: You know, I have it easy. The munchers do all the hard work with Gus. I just swoop in, feed him, entertain him, take him out and drop him off when I'm done with him. They make it easy for me, and yeah, I like it fine.

Doctor: Do you want more children?

BK: Depends on Lindsay. No, not really. But if she asked me, maybe.

Doctor: What about a child that you would raise yourself? Perhaps with Justin?

BK: (Shakes head.) No, that's not my dream, Lydia. I don't need that, don't want that. Gus is enough on a part time basis.

End of excerpt

Doctor's notes: LP and BK share a child, and thus a lifetime link. Their underlying relationship is multi-faceted, complicated by a youthful sexual involvement. I infer that LP is more attracted to the idea of that involvement today than is BK. BK is conflicted about his attentions to his son, whether they are sufficient, and yet he is wary of forming a strong bond with no role model of a father in his own life. His own father was abusive, and his father

substitute, his coach, abused him sexually. Therefore he is uncertain how he is supposed to act and feel with his own son, although he appears determined to try. BK is also continuing to experience insecurity about the permanence of his relationship with JT. He wants to allow himself to commit, but he lives in fear of being rejected by JT, again, and that fear creates significant barriers between them. The timing of his attraction to a man named Jeffrey, may well be an attempt to shatter his relationship with JT before they get started. Not only would he free himself of the fear of abandonment by JT, but he would resolve the issues encountered in pursuing this relationship. This is an early critical juncture in that relationship.

BETWEEN THE SESSIONS

(After session 5 and Lindsay's session)

by Randall Morgan

Brian glanced at his watch, then at the door of the small café. Located off a less hectic side street in midtown Manhattan, Brian chose it for its proximity to his office and relative obscurity. Jeffrey was ten minutes late. Brian's caffe latte was growing cool before him, as he twisted the cowry shells of his bracelet, his totem for agitation. Today, that act failed to soothe him. He snapped open his cellular to phone Jeffrey's office, ignoring the glare of diners seated two tables away. He got enough shit from the sphincter police for his smoking habits. He wasn't about to let them decide when he could or could not place a phone call. No one died of second hand mobile conversations, no matter how annoyed they may be because of the intrusion. In a concert, in a movie, maybe even in heavy traffic, yes, but in a noisy little café, fuck it. Just as the phone rang at the office, Jeffrey came in the door of the cafe. Brian snapped the clamshell phone shut, hanging up on the receptionist's cheery greeting.

Jeffrey had thrown a tan overcoat over mint green scrubs, a mask still dangling at the base of his neck. He wore running shoes and he looked exhausted, a double day's growth of beard shadowing his handsome features. "I am so sorry," he said quietly, slipping into the booth and looking wistfully at Brian's lukewarm coffee. Without being asked, Brian slid it across the table to him and watched him gulp it down in three long swigs. Afterwards, he leaned back, closed his eyes and massaged his eyelids with his fingertips, under the wire frames of his glasses. Brian wondered if he had ever seen anyone look more tired. And yet, the short sleeves of his scrubs revealed strong biceps and the drawstring pants were not unflattering to his tall, lean frame. He had to make time to work out, regularly. That much was obvious. Jeffrey combed through his dark hair with his fingers, and then stared blankly at the menu.

"What are you having?" He asked Brian, who sighed.

"Don't know. You want to skip this?"

"No, no," he shook his head as if to snap himself out of it. "Sorry... I...can I just sit here a minute?"

"Sure," Brian ordered two more coffees from the bored waitress, and then let Jeffrey sit in silence, staring at the top of the table as if it were the Rosetta Stone. Brian finally reached over and covered one of Jeffrey's hands with his own, to gently solicit his attention.

To his surprise, Jeffrey trapped Brian's fingers by covering them with his free hand, holding it there. Brian felt uncomfortable with this unexpected, public intimacy, but instinctively, he knew not to try and withdraw. The arrival of the coffee was his impetus to break the hold Jeffrey had on his hand. As Brian added sugar packets to his drink, Jeffrey excused himself and went in search of the bathroom.

"This is going well," Brian thought sarcastically to himself, but his Irish instinct told him things were not as they appeared. After what seemed too long a period for Jeffrey to be gone, Brian went after him. The unisex bathroom was a one-holer and the door was locked. "Jeff, it's Brian, open up."

His waitress passed by and gave him a wilting look as if certain he was up to some gay hi-jinx in the john.

"I'll be out in a minute, Brian," he finally responded in a soft voice.

"Open it, or I'm leaving," Brian insisted impatiently.

He heard the lock turn and he pulled the door open, finding Jeffrey seated on the tile floor, between sink and toilet, resting his forehead on the heels of his hands, his elbows against his raised knees. Brian closed and locked the door, sitting on the toilet seat as he stared at Jeffrey. "Are you on drugs or something?" He knew doctors were notorious for becoming addicted to drugs, partly due to the easy access they had to a garden variety of delights. Jeffrey looked up at him and smiled wanly. He placed his glasses in his pocket and sighed, massaging his temples.

"We called time on the Robinson kid a half hour ago."

"Time?"

"Time of death. He was three. Three years old, and the last eighteen months of those three years have been spent in excruciating agony. Chemo infusions, spinals, shunts, radiation, a horror story of poisons and big needles and vomiting and high fevers and no hair and no energy and bone pain and fatigue and depression and fear. Top it off with constant diarrhea, edema, thrush, morphine, and oh yes, all of these noble efforts sapped the life savings of a young couple and probably put their marriage on the rocks due to the strain and the terror, and it all culminated in his death from fucking measles."

"Measles?" Brian repeated through the suddenly tight stricture of his throat. Jeffrey nodded.

"It's called an opportunistic infection. He was neutropenic which meant he had no immunities due to the bombardment of his body with our so-called cures. Someone carried something in somehow and of course his body took it on full bore. He had no defenses, none. Even the antibiotics worked against him. He tried, the poor little soldier, he really..." Jeffrey stopped talking, and shook his head.

Brian was unsure what to do. He felt his pain, he felt his own pain and he didn't even know the child. He could only imagine the feeling of defeat had he been fighting for the boy's life for months. He was not good at this touchy feely stuff, but he was human and he had to do something. He closed a hand on Jeffrey's shoulder, and Jeffrey rested his cheek against it, wetting it with a flow of warm tears.

They sat there, with Brian verbally turning away people who knocked. Slowly Jeffrey was regaining his composure when the lock turned, and the barrel chested manager stood there, dangling a key. "You faggots take this perverted shit down to Chelsea! I got paying customers who want to use the toilet...so..." he exhaled sharply as Brian grabbed his greasy shirt front and threw him up against the far wall.

"Who are you calling a faggot, fat boy?"

Terror replaced smugness for the manager, who stumbled over an apology. Brian relaxed his grip when he felt Jeffrey rest a hand on his back. "It's ok, Brian, let's just go."

Brian stuffed a twenty dollar bill in the man's gaping mouth as he said, "Buy yourself a clean shirt. You reek. And don't fuck with faggots who don't want to be fucked with. You get it?"

"Sorry sir," the manager mumbled after spitting out the currency. Brian just glared at him as he and Jeffrey left the bathroom and the café, walking west.

"That was not what you needed after what you've been through. Sorry," Brian said to Jeffrey. He lit a cigarette to calm his nerves.

"Strangely, it is what I needed. Anger is often a leveling response, even if it's not my own. I appreciated that flare up. I vented, vicariously."

"I don't mean this in a critical way, Jeff, but shouldn't you be with the family right now? That little boy's parents?"

"The family doesn't want to see me, Brian. I failed them. They hate me right now. I completely understand that. It's to be expected. They have grief counselors with them. I was there all night as the crisis worsened, that's why I look like such a wreck."

"Jeff, we could have cancelled."

"No, I wanted to see you. It...it just took longer than I thought it would for him to let go. They're tiny, but they're such incredible fighters."

Brian impulsively reached down and took Jeffrey's hand, squeezing it gently. Jeffrey held to it as they walked, more for support and humanity than for romantic reasons. Brian dared anyone they passed to threaten the two men with a disapproving glare, but this was New York, and they walked on unbothered. "I think I can eat now," Jeffrey said after they traveled several blocks in silence. "If you don't have to get back to the office, that is."

"Fuck the office," Brian said, and they turned off and entered a pizzeria, the overpowering scent of garlic, cheese and fresh pastry reminding them they were both ravenous. Jeffrey hadn't eaten since the morning of the previous day, and he packed in several slices, causing Brian to smile.

"You're going to sacrifice your twenty eight inch waist."

"I sacrificed that two inches ago. You eating that?" Brian pushed his plate to him, watching him wolf down the last slice of his pepperoni special.

Sated at last, Jeffrey leaned back and smiled, his first smile of the day. "I'm so sorry, Brian. I'm really not a drama queen. You had the misfortune of meeting with me on one of my blue meanie days. I hate death. I despise death. I

think of death as some horrible fairy tale hobgoblin, scratching bony fingers on the window panes of children's rooms. I'm supposed to keep the monster at bay. And when I fail, I experience that failure very deeply."

"What do you do to feel better?"

"It depends, really. But the one sure fire cure is to go home and grab my healthy little girl in my arms and hold her until she begs me to let her go. And then I feel guilty for the empty arms of the parents I disappointed."

Brian glanced at him and sighed. He wanted to kiss him, to touch him, to make him feel pleasure, not out of some overwhelming desire, but because sex was his one unfailing gift, the one thing he could offer as comfort. Surely even Justin wouldn't begrudge this once, this attempt to make a man like Jeffrey feel at ease.

Brian slipped his hand under the table and spread it on Jeffrey's firm thigh. He slid it up, and Jeffrey met his gaze with a smile. "As much as I would like it, Brian, I can't accept a mercy fuck."

"Who says it's a mercy fuck? You're a handsome guy."

"So are you and I'm struggling against my attraction to you, but you have a boyfriend. I like you very much, but I'm not in the business of causing pain, despite what I do for a living. This would be painful. For you, for him, eventually for me. I know why you're doing it, and I really appreciate it, but no. Let's not muck it up with mercy sex."

Brian withdrew his hand and frowned, feeling rebuffed and a little silly for that reaction. "Then what is it you want from me?"

Jeffrey got the check and insisted on paying, then winced. "I left my wallet locked in my locker."

"If I had a dime for every time I heard that one," Brian smirked, fishing out some cash from his own wallet.

"The answer to your question is I would like to be your friend, Brian. I like you."

"I like you too, Jeff. But let's face it, there's a lot of sexual chemistry between us."

"True. Does that preclude friendship?"

Brian thought of Mikey and his friend's long held crush on him, then smiled. "Guess not."

"Good. So tell me about your lover," Jeffrey insisted and to his surprise, Brian heard himself doing just that.

"I ordered pizza for dinner," Justin said when Brian came home that evening.

"I wish you'd ask me first."

"Why?" He followed him into the bedroom, insinuating himself between Brian and the closet to seek and receive a kiss in greeting. "You love pizza."

"Had it for lunch."

Brian let his hands rest at Justin's waist, touching his forehead to his. "We can put it in the fridge and go out," Justin offered, parting his lips for Brian's inevitable kiss. He stroked his tongue with his own, feeling the fire ignite. When the pizza man rang, the bell didn't get answered. Brian had plowed his way deep inside of Justin's tight, rounded rump and nothing could make him budge until their mutual satisfaction was complete. An empty charge to his credit card would commemorate the pizza place's dissatisfaction with his lack of availability.

Afterwards, lying side by side, sharing a joint, Justin propped himself up on one elbow and asked, "What's wrong, Bri?"

Brian didn't turn his head as he said, "I was just wondering how I could get over it if something terrible happened to Gus. I know Lindz would be devastated, but how would I cope? How does anyone cope with the death of a child?"

"Why are you thinking such morbid thoughts? Gus is fine!"

"I know, I just..." he sighed, closed his eyes.

"Is this about that pediatric oncologist?"

Brian's eyes fluttered open. He turned to look at Justin. "What do you know about him?"

"His office called yesterday to confirm your appointment at one today. I was going to mention it after you saw Lydia, but we got involved with other things and I forgot."

Brian smiled as he remembered those "other things" they got involved with. Freed by Gus's departure they had sex in random places in the loft, giving in to their frustration over having their experimentation together subdued by circumstances.

"So, is there something wrong? Something you're not telling me? Are you sick?" Justin demanded. Brian laughed.

"Yeah, Sunshine, but only a LITTLE sick, so I'm seeing a doctor who specializes in LITTLE people. Christ, Justin, he's a pediatrician!"

"You don't have to be an asshole about it. Explain!"

Brian sighed, wishing he could put this off, because his feelings about Jeffrey were too ambivalent to be easily explained to anyone, even himself. "He's this guy I met when I took Gus to the museum. He helped me with him. He has a daughter Gus's age, so we pushed the strollers around together like a couple of suburban house fraus. We're about the same age, we just hit it off. I liked him. Before you go off on me, it's not about sex. He knows about you. He respects that."

"What did you tell him about me?"

"All of it, in the five minute Cliff Notes version."

"Did you tell him we were a couple?"

"He can do the math, Justin. He's a smart guy."

"Is he with someone?"

"Not right now. Broke up."

"Beautiful fucking beautiful. Is he hot?"

Brian shrugged. "Yeah, he's plenty hot in a bookish, intellectual sort of way."

Justin grew quiet and Brian sighed. "Look, kid, I'm not saying I wouldn't nail Jeffrey, but he has scruples. He wants to be friends, and I'm willing to give it a try. Mikey and I have managed to be friends for a hell of a long time."

"You don't want Mikey as a lover."

"No, it's not that I don't want him, it's that I know it wouldn't be the right thing for us to do." Justin left the bed, and began dressing. "What are you doing, drama princess?"

"I'm hungry," he said tensely. "I'm going out for a burger."

"Justin, I'm not going to ask your permission to have a friend." "I get it."

"Do you?" Brian rolled off the side of the bed and to his feet, grabbing Justin's arms firmly in his. "Let this go. This isn't about us."

"Whatever, Brian. Every man who comes into this relationship is about us. We just don't need this complication right now when we're adjusting to living together again. "

"It isn't a complication. Give me a minute to get dressed and I'll go with you."

Justin sat on the edge of the bed, watching Brian pull on his clothes. When the phone rang, Justin answered it. Brian stared warily at him as he heard him say with a smirk, "No, this is MRS. Brian Kinney, who is this?" He dangled the phone at Brian who snatched it from him as Justin mouthed the words, "THE DOC."

"Hi, Jeff." Brian said, glaring at Justin's all-knowing face.

"Brian, I'm sorry to bother you at home in the evening."

"No problem. Justin and I were just going out for a burger."

"Sounds good. I won't keep you. Hannah's asleep, so I just wanted to take a minute to apologize for this afternoon."

"Apology not accepted," Brian sat on the bed to pull on his boots. "You did nothing wrong."

"Except thrust you into the depths of depression along with myself. I don't always over react like that. This was a particularly bad one because the cancer seemed to be stabilizing only to be overtaken by that fucking infection. The irony is perverse."

"Why don't you join us for a burger? You can meet Justin," he said, ignoring Justin's adamant head shaking. Brian had to cajole Jeffrey to leave Hannah with her nanny and come out, but he finally gave in.

The rain had stopped. While it was cold, it was not miserable, and Brian and Justin walked to the place Brian liked best for burgers, midway between his loft and Jeffrey's condo, in the Village. Justin was quiet, but he looped his arm through Brian's which made Brian hope he was over the worst of his insecurity.

In the small restaurant that specialized in classic American home style cooking, and thus vaguely reminded Brian of Debbie's diner in Pittsburgh, they took a back booth and slid in on the same side. Jeffrey came in moments later, and Justin zeroed in on him like a laser site as he approached their booth. His stomach tightened with tension. Jeffrey was too tall, too fit, his hair was too thick, his features too elegant, his eyes too kind. He dressed in chic, but not flashy clothes, and he had a beatific smile that was almost impossible to resist. Justin hated him on sight. More so when he kept his eyes fixed on Brian as he slid into the booth and only then looked at Justin.

Brian made the introductions, and Justin noticed Jeffrey's hands were smooth and strong as they exchanged a ritual handshake. Jeffrey shook his head slightly, smiling wryly. "Brian said you were a blond beauty, but I think he

downplayed that a little. If you had lived when Botticelli was painting, we'd see your face over the arches at the Vatican."

Brian rolled his eyes, but Justin had to smile. Even if it was a line, it was a good one.

"You've been to the Vatican?" Justin asked and Jeffrey nodded, glancing at the plastic encased menu. "When was that? When they declared you a saint?"

Brian elbowed Justin in the side as Jeffrey looked over at him, surprised.

"No, I think they're waiting for my death before they do that. What brought that on?"

"He's a rude little brat I can't take out in public," Brian said with a glare at his lover and Justin glared back.

"The way Brian described you; I figured a halo was in your closet."

Jeffrey glanced at Brian, and then laughed. "If so, it's so deep in that closet, it hasn't been found yet. Never subscribed to the doctor- as-godlike theory myself, Justin. Went to too many parties with med students, I guess. Scary bunch."

They ordered and the first portion of their order to come out was three old fashioned milkshakes. After taking a long draw, Jeffrey sighed. "This is just what I need. Sugar, fat, chocolate, a perfect concoction for the blues."

"You still feeling bad?" Brian asked gently and Jeffrey shrugged.

"I'm making it, over the worst of it, but yes, it will haunt me for awhile."

"Jeff lost a patient today," Brian explained to Justin who wrinkled his nose.

"That must happen a lot."

"It happens," Jeffrey responded. "But not as often as you think. I never seem to be ready for it emotionally when it does happen."

"You should have gone into dermatology or something," Justin observed. "You just tell patients to lay off chocolate and go play in the sunshine until their skin clears up."

Brian sighed, but Jeffrey smiled at that suggestion. "Actually, sunshine is no longer considered good, even for acne."

"Sunshine is a real pain in the ass, today," Brian said ambiguously, referring to Justin's nickname. Justin stuck out his tongue at him and Jeffrey didn't inquire.

Just before the burgers arrived, Brian made Justin slide out so he could go to the john, nervously leaving him alone with Jeffrey. As soon as he left, Jeffrey smiled at the reticent blond. "I sense a little unease, Justin. I'm not after your boyfriend, even if he were interested, which he isn't."

Justin leaned back against the booth and nodded. "Yes you are, Jeff. I can see it in the way you look at him. You may be telling yourself you're not, but you are. You'd like nothing better than to take Brian home and fuck his lights out."

"That's not true. Do I find him attractive? Yes, who wouldn't? If he were free, would I hope that we had a chance at something more than friends? Yes, I think I would. But I'm not in the home wrecking business, and Brian has made clear his relationship with you. I'm also not into numbers, so getting a roll from him is not my fantasy, either. "

"What is your goal with Brian, then, Jeff?"

"I have no goal. I hope we can be friends. I enjoy his company. I hope you and I can be friends too, Justin. It would make it a lot easier for him, wouldn't it?"

Justin narrowed his eyes at the other man. He was trying to suss him out, get behind this impenetrable façade of niceness and responsibility.

"I don't know if you're shitting me or if you're shitting yourself, or both, but I don't buy it, Jeff. Ever since I've known Brian, I've had to endure his best friend, Mikey. Mikey was around long before me, so I had no choice. And Brian feels it would be a disaster to their friendship if he slept with Mikey, so there's a barrier there. But I often got tired of Mikey's mooning around Brian, waiting for him to change his mind. Sometimes he looked at me as if he hoped I'd walk out in front of a bus and clear the field. I was thinking to myself, being in New York now, it's going to be nice not to have Mikey and his unrequited angst in my face. I'm not that interested in a New York version of that problem."

Jeffrey smiled. "I don't know this Mikey, so I can't comment on him, but I do know myself, and mooning around someone, suffering unrequited desire, has never been my thing. I'm a little too old to change my stripes now, Justin. I can't wave a magic wand and make you believe me, but hopefully in time, you'll relax."

"Maybe, but until then, I'm not stupid, and I'm watching."

Brian returned at that moment, sensing the tension as he slid in beside Justin and cast a glare at him. "What?"

Justin shrugged, but Jeffrey answered. "Justin was just telling me about your old friend in Pittsburgh."

"Which old friend?"

"Mikey."

"Mikey?" Brian sighed as he flicked Justin on the temple with his index finger. "Why are you talking about Mikey?"

"Just explaining to Jeffrey that the role of unrequited friend is also taken in your life."

"Twat," Brian said as their food arrived, distracting the conversational flow.

On the way home, Brian smoked in silence. Finally, Justin spoke. "Why are you so pissed?"

"You acted like a total twat with Jeff tonight. It was embarrassing."

"You're the one who should be embarrassed. You acted like a groupie!"

"The man lost a patient today, a three year old kid. Do you think you could show a little compassion?"

"I am compassionate towards the child and his family. But it wasn't Jeff's kid. He's a cancer doctor. Don't you think he should be a little more hardened to it?"

"I know if my kid was sick, I would want a doctor who feels as deeply as Jeff does."

"Well, your kid isn't sick, Brian, so quit making him into some kind of hero!"

"You quit making him into some kind of rival!"

"Is this payback? Because if this is payback, why did you ask me to move in with you?"

"Payback? For what?"

"For what I did in Pittsburgh."

"Jesus Christ, it's not exactly tit for fucking tat, now is it?"

They entered the elevator in Brian's building and rode in silence, resuming their conversation when they were inside the loft. "Let's compare," Brian said, throwing off his jacket as he paced the main room and Justin leaned against the bar, arms folded over his chest. "In Pittsburgh, you started going out with this guy behind my back while we were still living together. You carried on this affair until it reached the point where you chose him over me and moved out. Much to my surprise."

"Because you were being a total prick, fucking everyone in sight and making no progress in moving our relationship along."

Brian shrugged. "Revisionist history. We had a deal, and I was playing within the bounds of that deal. You were the one who made your own rules and played me for an idiot. "

"I wanted romance, Brian. I wanted commitment. Sue me for looking for that when you were absolutely dedicated to keeping it out of our relationship."

"Then you should have had the balls to tell me. Did you ever think that maybe I was fucking around so much because I KNEW what you were doing and I was in pain? That I was trying to convince myself it didn't fucking matter to me?"

Justin sighed. "I see Lydia is rubbing off on you."

Brian paused. He realized Justin was right. He was not only examining his behavior, but he was commenting on it. He felt strangely empowered by that realization. "Well, that's what happened, isn't it?"

"Brian, you never even asked me to stay?"

"What would have been the point of that?"

"I might have read it as a signal of how much you cared. I might have stayed."

"That was then, this is now. Now I met this guy I like, and I told you about him almost immediately. It's a friendship, not fucking, and he understands that. So help me, here. How is this payback?"

"He wants you, Brian and you want him. It's obvious. I don't care what you guys say about being friends and respecting our relationship. The fact is, he wants you."

"Ok, he wants me and I want him. Nothing weird there. You know how I am. The weird thing is that I'm willing to hang with him even without sex. I genuinely like the guy, Justin. I admire him. Let me have this."

"I can't stop you."

"I mean let me have it without making my life miserable."

Justin sighed and walked into his arms, kissing him gently. "Ok, Brian, I'll be nice to Jeff if you promise me one thing."

"What's that?" Brian asked, looping his arms around Justin's waist and pressing his pelvis tightly against him.

"When it goes from unrequited to requited, you'll tell me."

Brian laughed and kissed him again, his hand sliding inside the back waistband of Justin's jeans to spread across his bare ass. "It isn't changing."

"Promise me," Justin persisted and Brian pushed him back on the sofa, standing over his prone form and unbuckling his own belt as he promised he would, prepared to distract him from such concerns in the one way they both found irresistible.

Justin allowed his mind to switch off as he melted into Brian's touch. Slowly, he surrendered to the heat. He enjoyed it much more without worrying about handsome, heroic doctors. A man Brian's age, a man Brian LIKED. He closed his arms around Brian and moved against him, feeling his lover respond to the brush of his body. He drifted his fingers down the bumps of his vertebrae, feeling the bliss begin and reaffirming this was not something he would concede without a fight. They had been through too much together not to grab a chance at happiness and hold tightly to it.

"You're hurting me, King Kong," Brian whispered against his ear in a joking manner. Only then did Justin realize just how tightly he was holding on.

DECONSTRUCTING BRIAN

Session 6

by Randall Morgan

Doctor's Notes: BK arrived on time, as usual. He appeared distracted, twisting the shell bracelet he always wears. I used that as a tool to draw him out.

Excerpt from transcript:

Doctor: Did you know that the cowry shell has an historical meaning to Africans?

BK: No, what is it?

Doctor: It symbolizes fertility, the halves of the shell mimicking the labial folds of a vagina.

BK: (Winced.) Great, I've been wearing pussies around on my wrist. There's some irony in that.

Doctor: Does that imagery repel you?

BK: I might as well wear a twat. I'm certainly living with one.

Doctor: You want to elaborate on that remark?

BK: Justin is being a child over my friendship with Jeff.

Doctor: Stop there for a moment, Brian.

BK: (Looked surprised.) What?

Doctor: DO you realize I've had as many sessions with other people or with you and another person as I've had with you alone?

BK: So?

Doctor: At our last solo session you told me a very personal remembrance of when you were thirteen and attempted suicide. Then the barriers came out. You have your friends running interference for you, Brian. And you have Jeffrey running interference in your relationship with Justin. This is your defense mechanism. You are a master manipulator of people. That's one of the reasons for your professional success. Advertising is all about manipulation. But you use it in your private life as a shield. Were you an athlete?

BK: I played soccer.

Doctor: Defense or offense?

BK: Defense. I was a stopper.

Doctor: You learned your game plans well. But here's the deal with us: you can't do this, Brian. It's not helpful to you and I can see straight through it.

BK: Look, Lydia, you said you wanted to talk to those closest to me. Justin and Lindsay both fit that description.

Doctor: I do and they do, but I also want to talk with you, Brian. You're the patient. If you don't want to do this, stop coming. Don't try avoidance. It won't work. Just stop.

BK: (Smiled.) You're always trying to get rid of me.

Doctor: Not so.

BK: Am I that much of a challenge?

Doctor: I'm a woman of color of a sufficient age to remember bad old times, and I have a professional job traditionally peopled by white males. Challenges R Us.

BK: So, you don't want me to talk about Jeff?

Doctor: I do want you to talk about Jeff, if Jeff is paramount in your present anxiety.

BK: It isn't Jeff. It's Justin's reaction to Jeff.

Doctor: Do you consider his reaction unreasonable?

BK: Yes.

Doctor: Why is that?

BK: Because I'm not fucking Jeff.

Doctor: Which means what?

BK: He's no threat to Justin.

Doctor: Why does one follow the other?

BK: (Exasperated) Because it's not cheating if you don't fuck.

Doctor: That's a remarkably naïve statement for a man with your sophistication, Brian.

BK: Why do you say that?

Doctor: Because you use sex as a sedative and a stimulant and a band aid. Sex is meaningless to you in almost every context. You couldn't list your lovers. You couldn't describe a thing about them, for the most part. For you, sex is one of the least intimate methods of interaction with another person.

BK: You don't know that.

Doctor: Tell me where I'm wrong.

BK: Well, with Justin, for one thing. Yeah, he started off as a trick, but the sex between us changed as the relationship changed. It's very intimate now. I do things with him I'd never do with a trick.

Doctor: That's Justin. Name another.

BK: Lindsay.

Doctor: Think of someone you've been intimate with in the last decade.

BK: (Frowned.) I don't know. Some are more memorable than others. Ok, what's your point?

Doctor: My point is, Brian, Justin would probably fear sexual intimacy with Jeff less than he fears an emotional connection, because you don't do emotional connections very often.

BK: I don't know why people say that about me. I have plenty of emotional connections. Mikey, for instance. We don't fuck, yet we're close.

Doctor: When did you first meet Mikey?

BK: I was still thirteen, and he had recently turned fourteen.

Doctor: Was he new in town?

BK: No, I was the new kid. I went to parochial school before that. Catholic. I got kicked out.

Doctor: For what?

BK: (Smiled.) Let's just say one of the nuns rapped my knuckles once too often with a ruler.

Doctor: What did you do?

BK: I super glued her fat ass to her desk chair. It's a little trick I've used more than once for mild revenge. Anyway, the Bishop had no sense of humor, so I was exiled to be educated with the heathens.

Doctor: Was it difficult, coming into a new environment at that painful age?

BK: Most of the students had gone to school together since first grade, so yeah, it was a little tough. It was also the first time I went to school with girls.

Doctor: How did you cope?

BK: (Shrugged.) I was a big kid. No one was trying to smack me around. I was good looking enough that the girls chased me. And I was a very good soccer player, so the coach scouted and protected me.

Doctor: The same coach who later molested you?

BK: It wasn't like that with him. It wasn't child molestation.

Doctor: Sure it was, Brian. Consent doesn't change that fact.

BK: I started it.

Doctor: You weren't of a sufficient age to make the decision to "start it" with a grown man, Brian. The law is very clear about that.

BK: Anyway, I coped.

Doctor: How did you make friends with Mikey?

BK: (Smiled.) Mikey's cute now, but he was a total geek then. Hornrims, bad clothes, short, well, he's still short, totally uncoordinated on any playing field. He was pathetic. Worshipped comic book heroes like a first grader.

Doctor: Then how did you two put it together?

BK: One day after soccer practice, I was walking home, and I passed this music store on my way. I noticed Mikey is in the doorway, with a bag from the store, and these two assholes from school were hassling him, pushing him around. They called him a faggot and took his tapes out of the bag and threw them back and forth. One of them took off Mikey's glasses and smashed them under his heel. Mikey was crying that he couldn't afford new glasses, and I thought what the fuck.

Doctor: You intervened?

BK: (Shrugged) I walked over and leaned in the doorway, asking the biggest one of the two what was up. He tried to fuck with me so I dropped him with a punch. I learned how to punch from my old man. I also learned how to take a punch from him. This guy fell like timber and they split. I helped Mikey retrieve his tapes and his glasses, and told him to stop sniveling like a girl and learn how to defend himself.

Doctor: (laughed.) That was sensitive.

BK: (Smiled.) Jesus, he was such a mess. He asked if I would walk home with him in case they were waiting for him. Since it was on my way, I said yes. Mikey loves to hear himself talk, so on the way, I heard the whole Mikey Novotny story. 'Dad killed in Vietnam before I was born, Mom is a waitress in two different places in order to support us, and my uncle Vic is a famous pastry chef in New York City. I collect comic books and my fave is Captain Astro, who I am convinced is gay.' (Laughed.) What a loser! I asked him, "What are you? Some kind of

homo?" He looked right at me and said "Yes." I knew then, for all my tough guy shit, Mikey was one of the bravest people I had ever met.

Doctor: Did you have thoughts about your own sexual orientation by then, Brian?

BK: Not just thoughts. I knew. But I was convinced I was the only person on the planet who felt that way. And I would never tell anyone, even myself.

Doctor: Did you tell Mikey?

BK: Not at first. Not in so many words. But I did kind of befriend him. I protected him and tried to make him a little cooler than he was. I convinced him to work odd jobs in his neighborhood to pay for contact lenses and I helped him pick out some clothes that were a little less lame than his then-current wardrobe. However, I consider Mikey a failure on that front. He still has no taste in clothes.

Doctor: What drew you to Mikey?

BK: Besides the gay thing? His sense of humor. But also, he was so obviously, unreservedly and openly crazy about me. That fed my ego. No one had ever felt that way about me before.

Doctor: Not even a girl?

BK: (Shrugged.) I never got close enough to a girl for that to happen. I kept them at arm's length.

Doctor: Why, Brian?

BK: Because, even then, I knew it was going nowhere. I didn't want to play that game.

Doctor: What game is that?

BK: The let's go steady and let her wear your letter jacket game.

Doctor: How did the girls react?

BK: It seemed to me, the more disinterested I acted, the more interested they became.

Doctor: Why do you suppose that is?

BK: Because people always want what they can't have.

Doctor: What did you want at that age, Brian? Did you know?

BK: I just wanted peace and quiet and some stability at home.

Doctor: Things were that bad?

BK: (Winced, shrugged, finally nodded.) Yeah.

Doctor: Mikey became a haven?

BK: I guess. I spent a lot of time at his house. His mom worked a lot so we had it to ourselves most of the time.

Doctor: What is his mother like?

BK: (Laughed.) Picture a big, frowsy drag queen, in full over the top regalia, then slap a red fright wig on him and some bad clothes and unfunny badges and you have Debbie. She's a drag queen trapped in a woman's body.

Doctor: Is she gay?

BK: Debbie a dyke? No, she likes dick, just like the rest of us. But I think she'd love to be a gay man. She has her nose so far up our culture, she may as well be.

Doctor: So she was tolerant of Mikey's orientation?

BK: Tolerant? Shit, she worshipped it! Her brother is gay, and, as it turns out, Mikey's real father is a drag queen, not a Vietnam war hero. Of course, her son is gay. She's like the Good Witch of HomoLand. Everyone she touches turns rainbow hued.

Doctor: I sense some tension.

BK: Debbie and I have a love/hate relationship.

Doctor: Explain.

BK: She says when Mikey first brought me home, she thought I was trouble. She could see that he had a crush on me and I guess she sensed I wouldn't return his affection in that way. So she believed he was set up to be disappointed. She thinks I'm promiscuous, irresponsible, cold.

Doctor: Where does the love come in?

BK: She sheltered me and fed me and never quizzed me about my situation at home. She understood about my feelings for Justin before I did, and she called me on them. She made me face up to them. More than once, she reminded me of priorities and she has come around to believing that I do love Mikey and want the best for him. It was my gift to him that funded his comic book store. I was right about that asshole chiropractor she thought was so fucking perfect for him. And when Justin left me, Debbie showed up alone at my place with chicken soup and a soft shoulder. She's the closest thing to a mom I've ever had.

Doctor: That's quite a testimonial.

BK: She's quite a lady.

Doctor: When you were a boy, was she affectionate with you at all?

BK: (Sighed) Once, when I had known Mikey for about six months, I went over there late one night and Debbie intercepted me in the living room before I could sneak up to Mikey's room. She turned on the light and was prepared to bitch me out, until she saw I had a black eye. And there was blood on my shirt from my nose. She sat me down and washed it off and put an ice pack on my eye. "Who did this?" She asked. I made up a lie. She shook her head and said, "Your father did this, didn't he?" I wouldn't confirm. She sat beside me and tried to convince me to tell the authorities, but I told her I would lie. I would never tell the truth. I would never let them break up my family, as weird and dysfunctional as it was. She offered to kick his ass, and she was mad enough that she may have been able to do it. But I wouldn't let her confront him. I assured her it would make things much worse.

Doctor: All the classic signs of an abused child protecting an abusive parent, Brian. Then what?

BK: She hugged me. I grew very tense. I wasn't accustomed to any overt affection. She said...(hesitated as he struggled against an emotion) She said I always had a safe place in her home. And that I wasn't a bad kid. My father was the bad one, not me. No matter what he said, the problem was his, not mine.

Doctor: How did that make you feel?

BK: Like I had a place to go. Can we talk about something else now?

Doctor: Not yet, Brian. Hang in there. How did your relationship with Debbie mature?

BK: Deb always viewed me as her other son by a different father, and oh yeah, by a different mother, too. But I made really high grades and she saw a potential in me that no one else seemed to notice. She encouraged me to get a college scholarship. She said I could have an unlimited future. Mikey was never a high achiever. Debbie couldn't love him more, even if he were Bill fucking Gates, but she held out hopes for me that she didn't realistically have for her own son. When it all derailed, it was Deb who stuck up for me.

Doctor: What happened?

BK: I was a senior in high school. I had an almost straight A average, and high SAT scores. So, I had been offered a scholarship to Penn State. But in the last six week grade period, one of my teachers was threatening to give me a failing grade because he claimed I made a stink bomb in my advanced chemistry lab class.

Doctor: Did you?

BK: (Shrugged.) Not exactly. (Ambiguous smile.) Anyway, if he failed me, I'd lose my scholarship. I was moping around Mikey's room, waiting for him to come home, when Deb came in instead. She pulled the story out of me, and then she said she was getting an appointment with the teacher. I told her she couldn't do that, and she said, "Watch me."

Doctor: And did she?

BK: Oh yeah. Next afternoon, after classes. He was this supercilious little fag who hated me for being tall, handsome and smart. Maybe he sensed I was gay and that I would be the kind of gay man he could never have. He asked Debbie who she was and how she was related to me, and she said, "I'm someone who cares what happens to this kid. Isn't that supposed to be your job, too?" (Laughed.) Anyway, she ripped him a new one. No matter how dumb a prank it was, she said, it did not warrant destroying a young man's future. No one got hurt, it was silly and immature, and punishment was called for, but not to this extreme. I had A's on every test and every assignment. I should get detentions, but not a failing grade. She didn't think it was 'legal'.

Doctor: I like Debbie. What did the teacher do?

BK: He told her tough shit. In so many words. She said she would take it to the school board. He said go ahead. She said they might like to know how one of their teachers is spending his spare time on Liberty Avenue picking up boys for sex. I stared at her in wonder, and he turned as white as a sheet. She worked in a diner in the Pink Ghetto, so she knew everything. She was totally into gay rights and yet she was blackmailing him with his homosexuality. For me. He backed down and I got an A in his class. When we left the school that evening, Deb whacked me on the butt with her purse. When I asked why, she said I made her act like a fucking bigot and torment this man with his personal behavior, and that made her mad.

Doctor: What did you say?

BK: I asked why she did it, if she felt that way about it. She said my future was worth more than her ideals, and besides, he was a cheesy old chicken hawk who didn't tip worth a shit! (Laughed.) That, in a nutshell, is Debbie.

Doctor: And you love her very much.

BK: (Shrugged.) As crazy as she makes me, I would do anything for her, I guess.

Doctor: Including sparing her precious son from the evil Brian Kinney sexual machine?

BK: (Laughed.) I don't think that's why we never...why Mikey and I haven't...

Doctor: Become lovers? Ok, Brian, I'll bite. Why have you never have sex with Mikey?

BK: It wasn't any big monumental decision. In fact, we almost did, once. We were kids, and we got hard looking at a picture of Patrick Swayze. We were going to jerk each other off.

Doctor: What happened?

BK: His mom walked in on us. After that, we've played around a little, kissed each other a lot, flirted, but it never feels quite right. Mikey's more like a brother to me. He held onto the sexual attraction a lot longer, but I managed to give him a dose of reality not too long ago, and that seems to have smoothed things out between us.

Doctor: What did you do?

BK: I pressed in on him. I made it clear that if he really wanted to do it, I would.

Doctor: What happened?

BK: He backed off. You see, it's not what he really wants, either.

Doctor: What if he took you up on your offer?

BK: (Shrugged.) Who knows? He didn't, so why go there?

Doctor: Brian, do you feel you can't have sexual feelings for someone you really love? That the two are mutually exclusive? That one contaminates the other? Do you think that may be one reason you are having problems reconciling your feelings for Justin?

BK: Because I want him?

Doctor: Because he's the first person you've loved, romantically, but also wanted sexually. And acted on those desires.

BK: (Contemplative.) I don't know.

Doctor: What is it you don't know?

BK: I don't know...I just don't know.

Doctor: If you love him?

BK: (Staring hard at hands. Nods.)

Doctor: What do you think love is, Brian?

BK: Frankly, I have no fucking idea what love is. What it means to other people.

Doctor: What does it mean to you?

BK: I...I'm not sure.

Doctor: What would you LIKE love to mean?

BK: Tranquility. Emotional tranquility.

End of excerpt.

Doctor's Notes: BK has transferred many of his needs for maternal nurturing from his own cold, unfeeling mother to Debbie, the warm and ebullient mother of his best friend, Michael. He has assumed the role of the older, high achieving brother in that family dynamic even though he is younger than Michael by several months. He portrays Debbie Novotny as a woman who loves him, but who is not blind to his faults. His relationship with her seems to be grounded outside of his relationship with Michael. He has a fear of disappointing and disillusioning her. I suspect one of the barriers that has prevented him from pursuing an intimate relationship with Michael is this sibling dynamic that they have perhaps subconsciously developed, although BK openly describes his feelings for Michael as fraternal. He presented additional evidence of physical abuse at the hand of his father, and of his pointless efforts to protect his family from the justice system. Much of his internalized rage and feelings of worthlessness can be traced to his father's abuse. Significantly, he describes love as "emotional tranquility". BK is a man in desperate search for a safe haven and until he finds it, it will be difficult for him to fully realize his emotional completion.

BETWEEN THE SESSIONS

(After session 6)

by Randall Morgan

Brian threw his jacket over the back of a bar stool as he entered his loft in Soho. He was tired. The session with Lydia had been emotionally exhausting. He winced at the sound of some new group he felt he was too old to appreciate blasting from his five thousand dollar sound system. He spied Justin, stretched out on the chaise, sketching an image in his tablet, oblivious to Brian's entrance. Brian picked up an orange from the glass bowl on the counter and threw it at him, hitting him squarely on the left temple. He silently congratulated himself on his perfect aim as Justin yelped and glared at him. Brian made a slash signal across his throat and Justin dutifully turned down the volume with the remote control.

"That hurt!" He complained, rubbing his temple briskly. Brian poured himself a scotch and sat down heavily on the sofa.

"Don't be such a big baby."

"Look who's talking..." Justin came over to him, crawling onto his lap. Brian smiled slightly and kissed him on the mouth.

"Why aren't you dressed?" He asked, pulling at the waistband of his gray sweats and peering down to see what he could find inside. Justin laughed.

"Stop it! I'm not going."

Brian let the pants snap back with a pop against Justin's belly. "What do you mean? Of course you're going."

"Nope," Justin left his lap and sashayed into the kitchen, staring at the contents of the refrigerator that he had recently stocked with goodies. "You go. He doesn't want me there, anyway. Why be fake about it?"

Brian downed his scotch and walked over to him, slamming the refrigerator door shut and glaring at his lover.

"We accepted a dinner invitation. The two of us. You can't just cancel this late. It's rude and petulant and you aren't getting away with it. It's in his home, Justin. He cooked. It's not as if we were going out to a restaurant. You're going, so get your fine pink ass into some decent clothes and do it now."

Justin's blue eyes shifted into a flinty shade of gray. Brian knew that color well. He tensed as Justin said, "You aren't my father. Don't tell me what to do like I'm some naughty child. I'm not going, so fuck off!"

"What is your damage?" Brian insisted. "You're the one I'm in love with, not Jeff!"

The silence stretched between them for what seemed an eternity. Brian felt his face grow warm beneath a blush as Justin's expression morphed from anger to wonder. "What did you just say?" Justin demanded.

Brian turned away and walked towards the bedroom, unbuttoning his shirt as he went. "Fuck it. Go, don't go. I don't give a shit what you do."

Justin followed, overtaking him to stand in front of him and block his way. "What did you say in there?"

"I said I don't give a shit what you do!" Brian pushed past him and threw his shirt on the bed. The suit pants came off next but before he could reach for a pair of jeans, Justin stopped him.

"You said you were in love with me."

Brian met his eyes, then sighed and sat down on the edge of the bed. His long, bare legs stretched out in front of him. He looked up at Justin and shrugged. "You doubt it?"

"You've never said it. Never. Except sometimes when you're coming and that doesn't count."

"Yes, I have. You just haven't heard me. There are many ways to say 'I love you', Justin, and I think I've said it a thousand times."

"Yes, but when you never hear the words, it becomes easy to convince yourself you're living in a fool's paradise. Brian, say it again." Brian looked up at him, then smiled. "No."

"Why not?"

"You can't solicit it. Just let it go for now, okay? I'm mad at you. Let it go."

Justin pushed him back and stretched out above him, pinning his wrists to the bed as if he had the strength to restrain Brian. Brian let him, smiling up at his flushed face. "What are you going to do now? Rape me?"

"I love you, Brian Kinney."

"I know you do, Justin Taylor. So?"

"So, fuck me."

"We don't have time."

Justin reached inside Brian's briefs to fondle his already stiffening penis. "Make time." He kissed Brian's neck, his collar bone, his pectorals, spending a moment at each hard little nipple. He drug his kisses down his belly, slipping his underwear down and flicking his tongue across his cock, feeling it lengthen and fill under his manipulation. Brian moaned and closed his eyes, freeing one of his hands to place it on the back of Justin's head, separating his pale hair between his fingers.

Justin raised himself on his knees and pulled off his shirt and sweatpants, feeling Brian's gaze burn through him. He never tired of the way he felt when his lover admired his body with such blatant lust. Brian grabbed him and flung him back on the bed, covering him with his own body, filling his mouth with his tongue as he ground his erection against Justin's hard cock. Justin wrapped a leg over him, his heel anchored in a dimple above the rise of Brian's buttocks, molding his body even closer. The heat enveloped them like an August afternoon, breaking out the sweat and pumping up their heart rates. As Brian continued to kiss him, humping his pelvis in an instinctive motion, Justin reached down and positioned Brian's erection against the portal to his most intimate recesses. Brian pushed, Justin bore down, and the penetration was swift, unlubed, and raw. For the first time, they made love without the interference of a condom, and the sensation was not lost on either of them.

Just as Justin felt the hot release of Brian's passion, he also heard him moan, "I love you," into his ear, and this time, he knew he meant he loved HIM, Justin, not just his tight ass or the relief he offered him. He held tightly to Brian, his own orgasm fading into normalcy as he contemplated what they had just done. Right or wrong, it was too late to go back. If there was a risk, it had been assumed. "I love you, too," Justin whispered, and held Brian as long as he would allow him to maintain the embrace.

Jeffrey's condo was in a corner of a good building where Fifth Avenue met the Village. His windows overlooked Washington Square on one side, the busy traffic of Fifth on the other. He opened the door, greeting Brian and Justin with a smile and waving off their apologies for being late. He noticed the languid affection between them, their interlaced fingers and easy intimacy. Immediately he understood the reason for their lateness. The stab of envy he experienced was troubling to him.

"Your timing is perfect. I just got the little monster in bed for the third time. Zeka, her nanny, is off tonight. Bad planning on my part. What is it with kids? You can get them in bed, but you can't make them stay."

"I know what you mean," Brian said drolly, glancing at Justin, who beamed back at him.

The large airy rooms were decorated in what Brian thought of as old money shabby chic. Chintzes and Chippendale overlooked by portraits of family members painted by John Singer Sargent. Jeffrey may be paying off student loans, but Brian suspected there was a trust fund lurking in his bank. A grand piano graced one corner, the top littered with photos of friends and relatives in gleaming sterling silver frames. An Asian man came from what had to be the kitchen, his dark clothes covered with a cotton canvas chef's apron. He had a goatee and his thinning black hair was buzzed short. He was fashionable and slim, but not the man Brian pictured as a potential lover for Jeffrey. He watched Jeffrey taste the sauce the man offered him on a wooden spoon and comment that it was perfect. He then introduced him to the others.

His name was Leo Chang. Jeffrey described him as a force in the art world of New York, president of the Artists Association of Soho and owner of three important galleries in Soho, the Village and mid-town. Brian exchanged a glance with Jeffrey, realizing this guest had been included for Justin's benefit. "I also make a mean Peking duck, which is why I get invited to dinner parties and told to bring my apron," Leo quipped and Jeffrey laughed.

"You volunteered! Leo, Justin is the young artist I was telling you about. Why don't you two talk and Brian can help me get the food transported to the table?"

Justin was truly interested in talking to Leo about the art world in this city, and Brian smiled wryly at Jeffrey as he followed him into the kitchen that was filled with the delectable aromas of Leo's cooking.

"Why do I sense a hook up, Jeff? Strong arming your friends into meeting promising young artists?" He hefted himself to sit on the edge of a clean countertop as Jeffrey transferred food from cooking pots to white porcelain serving dishes. He glanced over his shoulder at Brian and smiled.

"Leo was more than happy to do it. He's always on the lookout for fresh new talent."

"Just so he understands the only thing Justin is peddling is his art."

"Don't worry about that. Leo is good and married to an anesthesiologist named Bill with whom I've worked often. Bill would be here too, but he had a surgery scheduled. Leo's a powerful man on the art scene, Brian. He could do Justin some good."

"Okay, in that case, thanks. What smells so good?"

"Peking duck, green beans with shredded pork, dumplings and homemade hot and sour soup. By the way, how do you feel about Chinese food?"

"Hate it," Brian said, then smiled and shook his head when Jeffrey looked startled. "Kidding."

"You two seem...happy."

"You should have seen us a little earlier."

Jeffrey turned to face him. He was wearing his glasses, and he crossed his arms over his chest as he smiled slightly. "I'm not sure that would be kosher, watching you guys in bed."

Brian met his gaze with a smile. "Before that."

"Ahh, makeup sex. I remember it well. Why were you fighting?"

"Because he was being a twat. It's not important."

"I'm jealous, you know."

Brian's stomach tightened. "Uh oh."

"No, relax, not for the reasons you think. Not because he has you. Well, maybe a little because he has you, I'll admit that. Mainly because I envy the affection you feel for each other. The being part of a couple. I miss that."

"It's not as if you couldn't have that if you wanted it, Jeff. You're gorgeous, rich, stable, a frigging doctor. Every gay boy's dream."

Jeffrey shrugged and tapped the handle of a serving spoon against Brian's denim clad thigh. "It's not that easy. All the good ones are taken, it seems."

Brian wrapped his hand around the stem of the spoon as he met Jeffrey's eyes. A moment of intimacy passed between them, then Brian sighed.

"Better get this shit on the table before it gets cold."

Jeffrey smiled and nodded, handing Brian bowls of soup and following him into the dining room with two bowls of his own.

Dinner went much better than Brian anticipated earlier that evening. Leo and Justin talked art and artists, lost in minutiae that neither Jeffrey nor Brian could follow, but that obviously fired the two of them. Brian had resolved not to be jealous of Leo, based on Jeffrey's reassurance, which allowed him to relax and enjoy the fact Justin was so enthusiastic about something in New York, other than Brian himself. He and Jeffrey spoke quietly about a new play they both read about in the Times and wanted to see. Jeffrey suggested putting a group together to go, and Brian said he would see if he could wrangle free tickets out of his agency. The tickets were usually used to entertain clients, but Brian was high enough on the food chain now to occasionally claim them as a perk. The food was perfect. Over dessert, that was a double chocolate flourless cake from a bakery in the Village, which Brian refused, obsessive about his waistline,

Justin suddenly asked, "You okay with that, Bri?"

Brian looked up from his black coffee, surprised by the inquiry. "Okay with what?"

Justin rolled his eyes. "You ever listen to me?"

"Not when I have alternatives," Brian said with a smile. The others laughed, including Justin, who then said, "Leo invited me to go to his gallery in Soho to have a preview of his new show and then he'll drop me off at the loft. Is that okay?"

"Assuming you and Jeff don't want to go, of course," Leo added, and the others nodded their agreement. They did not want to go.

"If you're asking me if I can get home all by my little self, I think I can manage. If you're asking my permission...why?"

Justin smiled and walked over to kiss him gently. "Okay, then I'm going."

"Have fun. See you at the loft."

Leo and Justin both thanked Jeffrey who laughed and reminded Leo he did all the work. When they were alone, Jeffrey offered Brian a brandy which they carried into the living room to sit before the fire. "He's happily married, right?" Brian asked, exhibiting a hint of insecurity that he found annoying. "Leo?"

Jeffrey smiled. "Totally. Not that it would matter. Justin is obviously mad about you."

Brian shrugged. "You'd be surprised," he said ambiguously and Jeffrey didn't inquire. After a moment of silence, Brian asked, "Who is this playing on your sound system? I like it. Kind of Latin, but danceable."

"It's tango music. Todo Tango. You like to dance?"

"I do. But never tried the old tango."

"You're kidding."

"No, is there a club here where the tango is big?"

"There are tango clubs, Brian!"

"Gay?"

"Mixed."

"You tango?"

Jeffrey got up and retrieved a photo from the piano. He handed it to Brian, who focused on two men in a hot embrace. Both wore dark suits, and were handsome and lithe. He recognized Jeffrey after a minute, but he also recognized the other man. He was a prominent model, appearing in a Ralph Lauren campaign as well as promoting many other products with his perfect features and lean physique. "Isn't this what's his name? That Ralph Lauren guy?"

Jeffrey laughed. "How he loves to hear himself described as 'that Ralph Lauren guy'. His name is Friedrich Bauman."

"German?" Brian took in the blond hair and icy blue eyes, a striking contrast to Jeffrey's all American brunet good looks.

"Oh yes, a transplant from Frankford. The Aryan Ideal personified. Except for that little homosexual issue."

"He's drop dead gorgeous."

"Yes, Freddie is a beauty. The original beautiful bastard. He's my former lover."

Brian considered that, then held up his palm for a high five. Jeffrey laughed and slapped his hand.

"Believe me, he doesn't rate a celebration. I've been so much happier on my own. I'll never go through that again, just because someone looks the way Freddie looks. Not worth it."

Brian shrugged and handed the photo back. "Worth it for one night."

"True, it was the 1094 other nights that were the problem."

"You were together for three years?"

"A little longer than that, I guess."

"You ever see him? Outside of GQ?"

"Only if we happen to be at the same function. Rarely he will call, always because he wants something from me."

"Like?"

"Usually free medical advice or a prescription."

"Will you do that?"

"Absolutely not, but he still asks."

Jeffrey grew quiet, staring into the flames, his brandy balanced on one knee, supported by his palm. Brian studied his delicate profile and felt a stab of sympathetic pain at what he viewed as Jeffrey's silent sadness over his failed relationship. He stood and offered his hand to him, which Jeffrey stared at with a look of confusion.

"Teach me how to tango."

Jeffrey laughed. "Are you serious?"

"Dead serious. Come on, I'm a fast learner."

Jeffrey stood and together they moved a few pieces of furniture towards the wall, to clear a space to dance. "You're going to have to be the girl," Jeffrey said with a grin. "I don't know how to do it any other way."

Brian laughed. "Fine, I know how to roll over and take it. Let's go."

"Ok, this is the Argentine version of the tango, which is the only one I know. And I don't do any of the really fancy moves. First, we determine our dancing frame, which is very important in the tango. You move within your space, and I move within mine."

"Didn't Patrick Swayze say that to Jennifer Gray in 'Dirty Dancing'?" Brian quipped as Jeffrey took his right hand in his and motioned for Brian to place his left hand on Jeffrey's opposite biceps. Jeffrey's right hand rested lightly in the small of Brian's back. They were both acutely aware of their proximity.

"Never saw that movie," Jeffrey finally said.

"Oh god, Jeffrey, how did a man your age and GAY miss that movie?"

"Just lucky I guess. Now concentrate. Visualize yourself as a great jungle cat, huge and smooth and feline. Keep your weight on the balls of your feet, not your heels, and mimic the way a cat walks, like feathers on silk."

Brian fixed his gaze on Jeffrey's, thinking of them both as sleek leopards on the Serengeti, all muscle and lethal grace, as if they hid no skeleton. Jeffrey went on.

"This hold we're in is called the abrazo or embrace. In the tango, you never release your partner. First, we'll just walk together along the perimeter of the dance area, which is called the line of dance. The walk is known as la caminata. You look right, I look left, and I'll walk you backwards. Take long strides, with your weight forward."

Brian waited until he felt Jeffrey's lead, then he stepped back. Their knees touched a few times as they became accustomed to the dance, but soon they were walking in perfect harmony, and Brian felt that strange union of two dancers becoming one creative force. Their shared height made them beautifully symmetrical, and after they walked the perimeter, Jeffrey said, "Now we reverse. You walk forward, I walk back."

"Isn't this kind of like the Texas Two Step?" Brian asked. "Yee-haw!"

Jeffrey smiled. "I thought so too at first. It quickly diverges, though. Feel the rhythm in your heart, Brian. Move to that beat."

They walked the line of dance several times, each pass becoming more fluid, more harmonious, until Brian no longer thought about what he was doing, moving from instinct.

Jeffrey showed him a couple basic variations. The el paseo, or stroll, was a stylized walk, and la cadencia was the el paseo while standing in place, marking time to the music without making any forward progress. Brian found that move extremely hot, moving in sync with Jeffrey while standing in one place. It was as if they were making love, zipless. Jeffrey showed him how to pivot using la cunita, or the rock step, which was athletic as well as sensuous. They were both breathing a little harder from the exertion and the excitement, when Jeffrey impulsively pulled Brian up against his body. Brian felt the thrill flood him with adrenaline. "You're invading my dancing frame," he whispered as Jeffrey tightened both arms around his waist.

"You move like a panther. You're beautiful, Brian."

"You haven't seen my best moves," Brian replied, unable to deny the heat that flowed between them like an unbroken electrical current.

Just then, a thin, wailing sound emanated from behind the sofa. Both men turned to look as the noise intensified. Jeffrey heaved a sigh and released Brian, walking over to pick up a small device. "Baby monitor," he explained. "Hannah."

Brian nodded, relieved by the intervention of the baby. What was **WRONG** with him anyway? Just that night, he told Justin he loved him. He did love Justin. There was no question that he loved Justin. So what was this shit? It was as if the sensual dance had overcome his good judgment. He couldn't write it off as the momentary sexual attraction he felt for a trick. With Jeffrey, it was more than that. But what was it? Why was he so drawn to him and what did it mean for his relationship? Brian grimaced as he wondered if he was being so engulfed by Jeffrey because he feared abandoning his freedom to Justin? Is that what Lydia would tell him? Since when did he even give a shit about this kind of self-analysis? And if he wanted Jeffrey, why was he being so reluctant to satisfy that desire?

Jeffrey re-entered the room carrying a sleepy Hannah, who was resting her head against his shoulder. She was dressed in footed pink fleece pajamas, her eyes half closed in slumber. "Is she okay?" Brian asked and Jeffrey nodded.

"Bad dream, I think. Or maybe Justin has her on his payroll. Sorry that got a little intense at the end, Brian."

"Me too."

"It's just a very sensual dance."

"Yes. Can we have another lesson some time?"

"If you think we should."

"Why not? We're adults. I'm going to go, Jeff. It's late."

"She'll be going down again in a minute. Sure you can't stay? I promise to be good."

"Being good is not the issue. I'm not sure what's happening here, but I don't think we should keep telling each other its JUST FRIENDS. I have friends. This is not just friends."

Jeffrey looked into his eyes and nodded. "I understand. I feel the same way. I've tried, Brian, and I'll keep trying, but...I'm so attracted to you."

"I feel the same about you."

"Tonight, when we were dancing, I realized something for the first time."

"What's that?"

"Your eyes aren't brown. They're a dark, muddy shade of green. Like moss on a rock."

Brian laughed, pleased by the tension breaker. "Your point would be...?"

"No point. Just a fact. You are incredibly beautiful."

"Stop it. I'm not Freddie."

"No, and that's another point in your favor, but you're every bit as beautiful as he is, without all the self obsession."

"Jeffrey, I love Justin."

"I know you do. He's delightful. But..."

"But what?"

"But he's a kid. A smart and lovely kid, but you are so much more worldly. And...shit. Listen to me. I'm stopping now. I like Justin. I can't dis him. He's done nothing wrong. I have no right to feel this way for his lover."

"Maybe we should cool it for awhile."

Jeffrey was silent for a moment, then sighed. "Maybe that's best."

Brian hated the thought of a separation, and that fact reinforced his belief that he should put some distance between Jeffrey and himself. "I don't want to fuck this up with Justin and you could never be just a trick to me."

"I don't want to be just a trick to you and I don't want you to fuck it up with Justin, either, believe it or not."

"Okay, then, we'll cool it a little."

"Sure, not goodbye, but later, right?"

"Right. Thanks for the dinner and the tango lesson." He patted Hannah gently on the back, but she had fallen asleep and was oblivious. He leaned over to kiss Jeffrey's cheek. Jeffrey turned and caught Brian on the lips, a soft, sweet kiss that was just slightly heated with passion, but was such a strong connection that Brian felt it more rabidly than almost any kiss he had ever experienced.

"Shit," he said, taking a step back and shaking his head. Jeffrey smiled wanly.

"Don't give up on us, Brian. Let's find a way to make it work without causing any collateral damage. I like you too much to lose you." Brian met his gaze with a sigh. "I don't know if that's possible, Jeff. I like you too much to be your buddy."

"I know, but let's try."

He nodded and gathered his jacket, leaving the apartment without further conversation.

Brian walked all the way back to the loft. He wanted the time alone to clear his head and put his emotions in some kind of perspective. He was in love with Justin. More than ever. Yet he had conflicts about him, insecurities caused by their breakup, baggage from the past, uncertainty about what Justin felt for him. He couldn't imagine anyone else occupying his home and his life the way Justin did. But he was overwhelmed with unfamiliar emotions towards Jeffrey. He admired him. He liked him. He was comfortable with him, and yet he was also strongly attracted to him. He wasn't sure what it was he felt, but he knew it was important and dangerous. Brian Kinney, the iceman, had just found himself on the horns of an emotional dilemma, and he didn't like it one little bit.

DECONSTRUCTING BRIAN

Session 7, and Session with Joan Kinney

by Randall Morgan

Doctor's Notes: Brian arrived early, and seemed impatient that he had to wait for his scheduled time. He appeared agitated and was eager to initiate the session.

Excerpt from transcript:

BK: My life has officially passed over into Stephen King territory.

Doctor: Dead cats coming back from the Pet Cemetery to annoy you? Evil clowns appearing in gutters?

BK: Worse. My mother is in town.

Doctor: To visit you?

BK: Yeah, right. She wouldn't visit me when we lived in the same town. Not after she found out about the BIG SECRET.

Doctor: Your homosexuality?

BK: Right.

Doctor: So her reaction was less than accepting?

BK: Before or after she told me I was going to hell?

Doctor: So why is she here?

BK: Religious Fanatics Convention. Something her church is sponsoring, I don't know.

Doctor: She obviously contacted you about the fact she's coming here.

BK: She's terrified of New York. She thinks rapists and muggers are on every corner. She was quizzing me about this hotel they had her booked into, she asked me about the convention center, she asked me about cabs, and she asked me about terrorists. The woman lives in a bubble.

Doctor: Will you see her?

BK: Sure, she wanted me to get tickets to the Lion King for her and some of her cronies.

Doctor: Are you doing it?

BK: (Shrugged.) No big deal. I can get them free through the agency.

Doctor: Will she visit you and Justin?

BK: She tries not to expose herself to alternative lifestyles and points of view. But I'm bartering those tickets.

Doctor: How do you mean?

BK: I'm going to make her come here to see you.

Doctor: Make her? That doesn't sound very propitious, Brian.

BK: She wants the tickets; she can damn well give you an hour of her precious time.

Doctor: I suspect she's down on psychotherapy, correct?

BK: I'm sure she'd overcome her voodoo bias if she believed you could cure my hunger for dick.

Doctor: I hope you don't tell her that. I don't want her to think I view your homosexuality as something to be "cured".

BK: She thinks it is, so she'll just presume any right thinking person would agree.

Doctor: Are you asking that I use this time with your mother to help her understand what it means to be gay? To enlighten her?

BK: (Met my eyes, sighed.) I guess that's not possible, right?

Doctor: It's not impossible, but it's not probable that I can change her fear and prejudice in one session. I'm sure she has deeply rooted ideas about this volatile subject, especially where you're concerned. Were you ever close to your mother?

BK: (Winced.) Yes, when I was little. She was my protector, in her eyes. She carried me and gave birth to me, despite my old man's objections. She claims now that she even took his violence to keep him off of me, but I never saw him hit her and I got it plenty of times from Jack.

Doctor: You don't believe her?

BK: (Shrugged.) I don't disbelieve her. I just think she utterly failed in her obligation to protect her children. In my view, if a man hits a woman, or a child, more than once, he's out. You move your child out of that dangerous situation. That's how you protect someone who can't protect himself.

Doctor: Why do you think she stayed?

BK: Inertia. Easier not to make waves than to have to start over. Also her church doesn't believe in divorce. And she'd have to get her ass out there and work, rather than stay home and be the little woman. Maybe she liked it. There are women who get off on that kind of abuse.

Doctor: Do you believe that?

BK: Not really. Anyway, she waited him out and after Claire and I left home, I think they reached this cold détente. He stayed out with his buddies, drinking, whoring and gambling, and she stayed at the church. I think the violence died away, along with all vestiges of passion.

Doctor: How do you feel about your mother today, Brian?

BK: (Exhaled slowly.) That's loaded.

Doctor: I know.

BK: I have mixed feelings about her. I want her approval. I want her to tell me I'm successful and smart and that she's proud of me. At the same time, I hate her for her rejection of the fundamental person that I am. I didn't become gay to piss her off or thumb my nose at her church. Life is a lot easier for non gays. We have all the same problems as straights plus the overlay of being despised by many just because of who we fuck. I'm gay because that's how I was made. Either at birth or somewhere along the line, I got bent in this direction. It's not a choice. I would like her to understand that fact. I choose what color shirt to wear in the morning. I do NOT wake up and decide, 'Hum, I think I'll be queer today'.

Doctor: You are absolutely right, Brian, but that's a very difficult concept for less knowledgeable straight people to understand.

BK: I'm her only son, Lydia. Can't she try to make that extra effort to understand me?

Doctor: That's a fair request. How are other things, Brian? How are you sleeping?

BK: Mostly well. I told Justin I love him, sort of. That should make you happy.

Doctor: It's not about making me happy, Brian. Did it make you happy? Why did you say it?

BK: It wasn't planned. It slipped out. I said "I'm in love with you, not Jeff." We were sort of arguing. He seized on it, however.

Doctor: Do you regret it?

BK: (Shrugged.) No, it's just stating what's been a fact for a long time.

Doctor: Was it a relief?

BK: I don't know. Maybe. I didn't obsess over it. It's just words.

Doctor: You were arguing over Jeffrey?

BK: Yeah.

Doctor: Is that still a problem?

BK: (Tensely.) Define problem.

Doctor: You tell me.

BK: I like Jeffrey. A lot. We've decided to cool it, though, Jeff and me.

Doctor: Meaning what?

BK: You know, not see each other for awhile.

Doctor: Why is that, Brian?

BK: Things were getting a little too intense.

Doctor: In what way?

BK: In every way, I guess.

Doctor: Are you sleeping with him?

BK: No, oddly enough.

Doctor: Why oddly?

BK: That would be my usual M.O. I fuck him, I move on.

Doctor: But not here. Not in this case.

BK: No.

Doctor: Are you attracted to him?

BK: (Smiled wanly.) Horribly.

Doctor: Then...?

BK: I'm afraid of him. I'm afraid of what might happen if I fucked him.

Doctor: Brian, are you in love with Jeffrey?

BK: (Frowned, crossed legs tightly, shook his head.) I love Justin.

Doctor: So you say. But does that preclude you from falling for someone else? If so, you're remarkably unique.

BK: I like Jeff a lot. I think he's a fine human being and a lot of fun. I can talk to him for hours. About real things. I think he's a beautiful man, elegant and classic. He's sophisticated and intelligent. He's compassionate and feels very deeply about things. He's humanitarian and charismatic. He has many traits that I lack and admire. He is all of those things without being smug or fake about it. We just click, for some reason. He was teaching me how to tango.

Doctor: Ah, a lovely, sensual dance. What happened?

BK: We danced, we held each other, we knew. We were getting deep into something that neither of us was prepared for. We shared a kiss and it was better than fucking. Hotter. I haven't talked to him since then. It's been a week, today, and everyday I struggle against calling him, and hope he will call me. I feel a hole in my life without him.

Doctor: What do you plan to do about that hole?

BK: Be strong, I guess.

Doctor: How is it affecting your relationship with Justin?

BK: It isn't. We seem to be getting along very well. The sex is hot, as always, and we argue less. He met this art dealer through Jeff and the guy has been very helpful in getting Justin established in the art scene here. That's taken up a lot of his time.

Doctor: Does that bother you?

BK: No, I've always been a great supporter of Justin's artistic genius. I want to see him get the recognition he deserves. I have a demanding career of my own, so my tolerance for his dedication to his art is quite high.

Doctor: Will you talk to Jeffrey again?

BK: I want to. (Paused.) I want to talk to him very badly.

Doctor: But will you?

BK: I...I'm not sure. I'm resisting.

Doctor: Brian, it might be healthier if you dealt with these feelings for Jeffrey rather than denying them altogether. You could be setting yourselves up for an inevitable and explosive reunion.

BK: Can you help me with that?

Doctor: I can try, but you have to be honest with yourself in order for it to work. Brian, I'll ask you again. Are you falling in love with Jeffrey?

BK: (Looked away, stared out the window, his face set in a pensive mask.) I'm calling time on this session.

End of excerpt

Doctor's Notes: BK finds himself in an unfamiliar dilemma. He has long protected himself from emotional connections to other men, and suddenly he finds himself in love with one man, with whom he is living in a committed relationship, and falling in love with a second man, which he is trying to avoid. His denial is a treatment issue, because it prevents us from fully exploring his feelings for Jeffrey. I am unsure if he is truly enamored of Jeffrey, or if Jeffrey is a shield to keep him from abandoning himself to his relationship with JT. However, these deep emotions could be sincere, and if so, then he is in for some interesting emotional challenges as he must eventually decide which direction to take. On a different note, he wants me to meet with his mother, towards whom he still harbors feelings of anger, rage and betrayal combined with a desperate need for her approval. Should she call, I will work her in because her insight into BK's youth and upbringing will be invaluable to his treatment.

Session with Joan Kinney

Doctor's Notes: Joan Kinney is a 55 year old widow, with two children, Claire, 34 and Brian, 31. She also has three grandsons, two >from Claire and one from Brian. She was asked to attend this session by her son, who is undergoing therapy. She was reluctant to do so, and I suspect he pressed her heavily to come. She began the session by expressing her belief that analysis is an unproven science and is the epitome of self indulgence. She appears to be a tightly controlled, emotionally remote woman.

Excerpt from transcript:

JK: I'm surprised that Brian would put any credence in this profession of yours, but if he did, I'm even more surprised that he would choose you as a therapist.

Doctor: Why is that, Joan?

JK: You're closer to my age than his, you're a woman, and you're black.

Doctor: Help me understand why you think each of those accurate observations would be negative to Brian.

JK: He has no patience with people older than himself, never has. He fears aging and believes we know nothing. He was always so much smarter than his father or me, or so he believed. As for the black issue, he just hasn't spent that much time among your people. And as for the other, what does Brian want with a female therapist? He dislikes women intensely.

Doctor: Why do you think he dislikes women, Joan?

JK: He hasn't told you?

Doctor: That he's gay? Yes, of course he has. But what does one have to do with the other?

JK: What use does a gay man have for women?

Doctor: Every use except one. You know he has close relationships with women, don't you?

JK: With whom? Certainly neither with me nor with his sister.

Doctor: Lindsay Peterson, for one.

JK: (Raised a single brow as if questioning that name.) Oh yes, Lindsay. The girl who claims that Brian fathered her son.

Doctor: Do you believe that fact is in question, Joan?

JK: (Shrugged.) Who can tell? The child was not conceived as God intended. Anything could have happened.

Doctor: Actually, that's not true, Joan. Unless other men mixed their sperm up with his, its indisputable that the child is Brian's. He has no doubt. I understand the boy resembles him physically. Have you expressed your doubts to Brian?

JK: I don't recall if we've ever discussed that child.

Doctor: Have you seen Gus?

JK: No.

Doctor: You don't consider him your grandchild?

JK: No.

Doctor: Why not if Brian considers him his son? Because of the way he was conceived?

JK: He doesn't live with Brian. There's no relationship between Brian and his mother. The whole thing is disgusting and unnatural. She's not even a normal woman. What kind of home is that? Two women living together as if they were a couple.

Doctor: You do know they underwent a commitment ceremony?

JK: Meaningless drivel. Not an accepted sacrament.

Doctor: I see. Joan, when did you discover Brian was gay?

JK: Recently. A little over a year ago. I'm the last to know, as always. Name another woman he's close to? You made it sound plural.

Doctor: Debbie Novotny. He loves her very much.

JK: (Visibly disturbed by that name.) That trashy woman has been a thorn in my side for years!

Doctor: Why is that, Joan?

JK: Always butting in on Brian's life. Giving him unsolicited advice and imposing her ridiculous views on him when he was at an impressionable age. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if that son of hers was the one to lead Brian down the path he's taken.

Doctor: You mean the fact he's homosexual?

JK: Yes, her son is too, and she wears that fact around as if he won the Nobel Prize!

Doctor: Joan, Brian is very clear that he and Michael Novotny are friends, not lovers. Michael wasn't the cause for Brian's homosexuality.

JK: I'm sure you think it's my fault then. That I emasculated him in some way. Isn't that what you people always think? A domineering mother is behind every gay son?

Doctor: Of course it's not what 'my people' think, Joan, although that can be a factor. The most widely held belief is that most people have their gender orientation set before they turn five years old. We're still not sure of the cause, whether there's a genetic coding or if it's based on events that happen to the child, or even what those events are. But approximately ten per cent of all men are gay, and that has been a rather steady number for generations. Bisexuals increase that percentage slightly. There has never been a time we didn't have homosexuals, but the environment has imposed more or less visibility upon them. You never suspected Brian could be gay as he was growing up?

JK: Why would I suspect that? He was a normal boy. Beautiful, smart, athletic. He did normal boy things like sports and bicycles. He was never a sissy.

Doctor: Is that what you think most homosexuals are like? Sissies?

JK: I don't think about them at all.

Doctor: When Brian got older, did you never question why a handsome boy like Brian didn't date girls?

JK: He was popular. Girls called him all the time. But he was raised with strong Christian principals and I believe he had no interest in being promiscuous with those pushy girls.

Doctor: Alright, Joan. So you found out recently he was gay. How did you respond to that important fact?

JK: I am sickened by it.

Doctor: Why?

JK: It's a sin. An abomination.

Doctor: According to your religious beliefs?

JK: According to God's law. Brian is damned.

Doctor: You believe your only son is condemned to hell for his attraction to his own gender?

JK: For acting on that attraction, yes.

Doctor: What would you have him do?

JK: Pray for help from God to live a normal life with a wife and family.

Doctor: In other words, live a lie. Marry a woman when he is oriented to male sexual partners. Bring children into that false union and live a life of quiet desperation.

JK: Yes, he wouldn't be alone in that. Homosexuals are not the only ones who are often forced to live a lie.

Doctor: Were you forced to live a lie, Joan? To remain in a loveless marriage with an abusive man because that was imposed on you by your church and by society?

JK: (Coldly.) I have no idea what you mean.

Doctor: Do you resent Brian for being true to himself even though his is not a life accepted by the majority of society?

JK: What has he told you about my marriage? Why do you even ask that?

Doctor: He told me you tried to protect him from a father who beat him with some regularity and who was verbally abusive when he wasn't hitting him.

JK: I see.

Doctor: Is that not true?

JK: Jack could be abusive when he drank, true. Brian was often the focus of that abuse because Jack never wanted him to be born.

Doctor: But you did.

JK: A child is a gift from God, even when unplanned.

Doctor: Then isn't Gus a gift from God despite the method of his conception?

JK: (Reflecting.) What do you want from me?

Doctor: Joan, I want nothing from you. It's Brian who needs you.

JK: Brian needs no one. Never has.

Doctor: Do you honestly believe that?

JK: He's very self sufficient.

Doctor: Do you know whether Brian's contemplated suicide?

JK: Suicide? Of course not! Why would he? It's a mortal sin, and he's a beautiful successful man.

Doctor: Do you know the depths of the depression he's been in for the last year and why?

JK: Why should Brian be depressed? He got this big job, big promotion. He gets to live in New York, which he's always wanted. He's young, healthy and free. Why should he be depressed?

Doctor: Because he lost the one man he's ever allowed himself to love? Because he feels unworthy of having anyone love him? Because he is blocked from being able to express his emotions to someone he cares about? Brian was on the verge of complete nervous and physical exhaustion when he started seeing me. He was desperate. Did you know that, Joan? Did you know he would go for days, unable to sleep? Did you even know that Justin Taylor broke his heart by leaving him for another man? A year ago?

JK: (Leaned back, exhibiting a crack in her calm, some evident anxiety.) He never tells me anything.

Doctor: When was the last time you asked?

End of Excerpt.

Doctor's Notes: JK is an emotionally remote and inexpressive woman, although I suspect at least one reason this remote behavior was developed was to protect herself emotionally from a volatile and abusive husband. She finds her solace in strict religious dogma, but cannot apply Christian principals to her own family, outside using the letter of the gospel as her shield. She disapproves of BK's homosexuality which she seems to regard as a lifestyle choice. She still defends her deceased husband and exhibits jealousy and anger towards Debbie Novotny, BK's substitute mother. She disapproves of BK's friendship with Lindsay Peterson, and with the way they conceived their son through artificial intervention. I suspect she views BK's homosexuality as her own failure to control his life. JK is seriously in need of analysis and anti-depressants. It would be extremely beneficial to BK's low self image if I could assist him in becoming closer to his mother. I am going to suggest she seek counseling with someone I recommend in Pittsburgh, but I suspect she will not. Her inability to get help will continue to complicate BK's treatment.

BETWEEN THE SESSIONS

(after session 7 and Joan Kinney)

by Randall Morgan

The two women clasped hands on the table for a brief moment as they shared a silent prayer before delving into their early dinner. Their table in the coffee shop of the hotel offered a close up view of Times Square. Once a sordid wonderland of sex shops and hookers, it had been sanitized to welcome families to Broadway. It even boasted a huge Toys R Us, large enough to house a Ferris wheel. These two women could not have stayed in this hotel before the clean up. Even now, they found the fashion ads and mainstream entertainment billboards that lit the area with neon to be garish and suggestive. The lively atmosphere that was New York was subtly threatening to them. Once again, they questioned why the national council for their church was being held in this city.

"I hope you don't mind my asking, Barbara, but you're the only person I know who has an admittedly gay son," Joan Kinney said in a hushed voice, staring earnestly at her old friend.

"Joanie, I've been waiting patiently for you to ask me, but I never wanted to impose. If you didn't know the truth about Brian, it wasn't my place to tell you."

"How long have you known about Kent?" She deliberately deflected the discussion from her own son. Barbara shrugged, taking her time with the best Reuben sandwich she had ever tasted. "Since he was a child, at least I feared it. He told me point blank his first year in college. You know how long ago that was, since he's Brian's age. They did go to school together until Brian...well, until he was asked to leave."

"How do you cope with it?" Joan asked, ignoring the reference to Brian's less than stellar parochial school experience.

"I pray every day for his immortal soul, and for him to find his way back into the light and live a normal life with a wife and family."

"Do you think he ever will?"

"Joanie, he's been with Roger for six years, now. I'm afraid Roger is as close to a wife as Kent will ever know." She sighed. "But then, I guess it could be worse."

"How could it be worse?"

Barbara hesitated, then sighed and patted Joan's arm gently. Joan withdrew from her solace, uncomfortable with any form of touching. "Joanie, at least Kent is in a stable relationship with one man. I know you must be terrified about Brian, about the way he lives."

Joan drew up at that remark. "What do you mean?"

"I mean the promiscuity, of course."

"Are you suggesting Brian is promiscuous?"

Barbara's slight smile infuriated Joan. She found it oddly superior. Her competitive spirit revived, and she was compelled to defend her own child against an unflattering comparison to someone else's spawn. The irony of defending her gay son was not lost on her. "Kent has said that Brian is, as he put it, 'the biggest stud in Pittsburgh'. That he went to those gay clubs to pick up a different handsome boy every night, at least until he moved. He has quite a reputation as a heartbreaker in that world, Joanie. I guess in that way he's not unlike how your husband, Jack, was. They just hunted in different fields. Since Kent has been with Roger, I never have to worry about his being beat

up or murdered by some stranger he chooses to have anonymous sex with. Not to mention the increased chance of disease."

Joan Kinney offered her friend a glacial smile, then called the waiter over, signing for her meal. "No, I guess you don't, Barbara. But then, as homely as Kent is, I hardly think he would be able to find handsome men interested in sleeping with him every night. In that way, he's so like your husband, Ron, who is not likely to wander very far since women would show no reciprocal interest." She stood, her regal bearing edged in ice. "Brian on the other hand, was always so handsome and charming, he could have his pick of the girls he met, and, so it would seem, the boys, as well. Beauty and charm are indeed burdens that do not weigh heavily in your family." She walked away, out of the hotel, and hailed a cab, giving the driver an address in Soho.

"Forget your key?" Justin teased as he slid open the heavy door leading to the loft, expecting to find Brian on the other side. No one buzzed from the street, suggesting they knew the entry code. What he didn't expect was to find Brian's mother standing there, and she seemed equally surprised to see him.

"I, uh, walked in with another resident of the building. Is Brian home?" She explained the mystery of the entry code without being asked. Justin stepped aside and invited her to come inside. She hesitated a moment, then followed him in, flinching as the door slid shut with solid finality. He quickly muted the television, and then stood nervously in the center of the main area, looking impossibly young in jeans and a long sleeved t-shirt.

"I don't understand," Joan Kinney said uneasily. "I thought you left Brian for someone else."

Justin felt his face color. "Did he tell you that?"

"No, but so I was told."

"It's not that black and white, but all that really matters is that we've put it back together again, despite the cautionary tale of Humpty Dumpty."

She resisted his blazing smile, causing him to flinch. "Where's my son?"

"He should be home any minute. Please sit down. Want a drink? Um, a Coke? Something to eat?"

Joan declined his offer and sat down primly on the edge of a Barcelona chair, her knees tightly pressed together, her hands resting on her handbag. She deliberately avoided looking at the garish and obscene portrait of an ugly naked man. She couldn't help but find it bizarre to be talking to this pretty and terribly young man who was living in sin with her son. She tried not to think of them as a couple, but her mind was filled with unbidden images. "Your name is Justin, isn't it?" She asked as he sat across from her on the sofa, nervously jiggling the one bare foot he didn't tuck under him.

"Yes m'am," he suddenly felt twelve under her school marmish gaze. He could see a faint physical resemblance to his lover. She was the source of Brian's beautiful eyes, and perfect nose. He supposed he should be grateful to her for that. While Brian never talked about his childhood to Justin, he knew there was pain and misery there, and he tried not to resent this woman who chilled the loft with her disapproval. She was his mom, after all, and Brian had put up with a hell of a lot from both of Justin's parents. "You want me to phone him on his mobile?" He asked hopefully, dying for Brian's interruption of this heavy silence.

"No, I can wait. How long have you been in New York...Justin?"

"A few weeks."

"What is it you do?"

"I'm putting together a portfolio for an exhibition of young undiscovered artists at a Soho gallery. And I'm trying to transfer into the Fine Arts program at NYU."

"I see," her eyes scanned the naked man painting. "Is that your work?"

He suppressed a smile. "No, but I did the one over the fireplace."

Joan walked over to stare at the abstract splash of colors and form. She was always dismayed by Modern Art, unsure what she was supposed to be seeing. She supposed she could see that this painting was visually interesting if incomprehensible. "It's different," she said coolly and he smiled.

"It's not a recent work. Brian didn't tell me you were in town."

"No?" She turned, taking in the huge loft. "I don't know how you can live comfortably in a place with so few walls and doors."

"We both like the freedom of it."

"I see. This place must be very expensive in New York. I've heard the apartments here are quite small. Or is this a bad neighborhood?"

"No, it's a great neighborhood. The loft is very expensive, that's true. Brian is doing very well, Mrs. Kinney. You should be proud of him. I am."

"Yes, Brian has many good qualities," she said ambiguously, causing Justin to wince. What the hell did she mean by that? "Are you his... what would you call it? Boyfriend?"

"You can call it boyfriend. Partner. Lover. Whatever makes you happy."

"I'm a little surprised that you have this relationship with him after what happened to you. You must blame him for that."

Justin sat down heavily on the couch again, beginning to be annoyed by her, rather than intimidated. "You mean the bashing? Why would I blame him for that? He rescued me."

"His coming to the prom set it off, according to the newspaper reports."

"It wasn't the first time Hobbes hit me. It was just the worst time. And it wasn't Brian's being at the prom that did it. It was the fact that I'm unapologetic about being gay while Hobbes is in the closet and always will be."

"Did you ever think that may be the best way to go? To remain in the closet?"

"No," he said simply. "Why would I want to do that? I'm not ashamed of being gay."

"Perhaps you should be," she said with an arctic smile, and Justin smiled back, equally cold.

"Why? To make intolerant bigots more comfortable? I'm afraid they're just going to have to deal with it."

"Brian's remained closeted until very recently."

"No he hasn't, Mrs. Kinney. Only with his family. At work and in his private life, with his friends, Brian's very open. He was just trying to protect your feelings. But when Mr. Kinney became ill, he decided he should tell him the truth."

"But not me, his mother."

"He didn't think you would understand. Which you don't."

"I understand, Justin, I simply do not accept it as normal."

"What is normal, Mrs. Kinney? A heterosexual couple who live in misery? Cheat? A single mom abandoned by her husband? A widowed dad raising kids alone? For every so-called nuclear family, there are probably four alternative combinations. One of those is a gay relationship. But it's no more or less normal than any other variation."

"Well, it's very convenient for you to believe that, isn't it?"

Justin exhaled slowly, seeing for the first time a glimpse of the childhood that made Brian the emotionally stunted man he was today. His heart went out to him in a way he had never felt before. "Your big, tall, handsome son is gay, Mrs. Kinney. But he's still your son. He still needs you. He didn't do it on purpose, you know."

"He chose this life."

"Chose it? No. That's just not true. Did you choose to be straight? It's the same way for us. We are what we are."

"You don't have to act on it."

"Why wouldn't we? I love Brian. I don't have to be a woman to fall in love with your son."

"Did you seduce him?"

Justin stifled a grin. The idea of his seducing an innocent Brian was so laughable, he could barely contain it. "Are you asking if I was his first or if I moved on him first?"

"I...I don't know. Both, perhaps."

"It was mutual. And he was my first."

"You were a minor at the time?"

Justin sighed and rubbed the back of his neck pensively. That issue always annoyed him. "Just barely. Almost eighteen."

She shook her head. "Let me apologize on behalf of my son, my family. That is so wrong."

"Never apologize to me for Brian. I made up my mind to lose my virginity that night. I'm just so lucky it was with him. He was experienced, thoughtful and just happened to turn into the love of my life. How lucky is that?"

"Virginity?" She looked surprised by his use of that word. "How does a man call himself a virgin?"

"To me, it signifies the fact I had never had sex before. Not with another person. There's no cherry, I guess, like with a girl, but it's still a virgin encounter."

"How could he do that to an innocent boy?"

"Mrs. Kinney, I may have been young, but I was not innocent."

"He took advantage of you."

"No way! He gave me exactly what I wanted and much more."

"Why did you leave him if he was so special to you?"

Justin retrieved a cold Mountain Dew from the refrigerator and drained part of it as he walked back to her. "That's very complicated and private. It doesn't really matter now that I'm back."

"Was it his promiscuity?"

Justin looked at her, glanced away. "I don't think we should be having this conversation."

"What conversation is that?" Brian asked tensely as he entered the room. He glanced from his mother to Justin and back again. "When did you get here?"

He threw his leather overcoat across a chair and then poured himself a drink as he yanked at his tie to loosen it. His mother stared at him, taking in his expensive suit and elegant demeanor. What a dreadful waste, she thought to herself. Here was a man who could have made an advantageous marriage. Instead he was living in sin with a young boy. Wasteful and wrong.

"The first thing you do when you get home is pour yourself a drink, Brian?"

"When I see my mother and my...roommate... facing off, yeah. It seems the right thing to do. You're Catholic, Mom. Not Baptist. There's no ban on alcohol."

"You saw what it did to your father. You'd think you could learn from that."

Brian crossed over and lifted Justin's chin on one hand, leaning down to place a sound kiss on his lips. Justin slipped his hand into Brian's and they sat down on the sofa together, still holding hands. Brian stared defiantly at his mother as she glared at the couple. "What were you talking about when I came in?" He demanded and she answered.

"I asked Justin whether he left you because of your promiscuity."

Brian made a sound like a laugh, bereft of humor. "What did you say, Sunshine?"

"That it's private."

"Tell her the truth. Tell her you left because I'm too emotionally fucked up to be able to offer you any proof of my feelings for you, or to even act as if those feelings exist. Tell her that, Justin. It's true, isn't it? I'm incapable of love, unworthy of being loved, using promiscuous sex as a substitute for the real thing. Is that what Lydia told you, Mom?"

"It's not true," Justin said quietly and Brian stood, releasing his hand as he paced over to the window and back.

"Sure it's true. And what a surprise it is not. I was raised by wolves, what do you expect? A Pekingese?"

"Stop it, Brian!" She snapped, but he glared at her.

"No, Mom, you stop it! Don't come into my home and put my lover on the spot with your disapproval and your hatred towards me and what I am. You can despise me all you want back in Pittsburgh. You can dispatch me to hell with your religious dogma. But this is my town, my home, my relationship! I don't need your fucking poison infecting this environment!"

"Why are you so angry, Brian?" She insisted coldly and he shook his head.

"Why am I so angry? Where do we start? I'm angry about the fact that when I was in the second grade, you wouldn't let me see Star Wars because you thought it had secular and dangerous values. I'm angry that you never attended a single one of my soccer games because you were too busy with your church activities. I'm angry that when I asked if I could have a birthday party when I was nine, one lousy birthday party in nine years, you told me the only personal celebration worth recognizing was achievement."

Justin cut him a look, but Brian went on, oblivious.

"Then, whenever I achieved something, whether academic or athletic, it was never enough to warrant a fucking cake from you, but you could bake a cake every other day if someone at the church had a milestone or needed cheering up. I'm angry that I always had to make up shit at school about why I had a black eye or a cut lip, rather than tell them my drunken old man was beating the shit out of me while my mother looked the other way. I'm angry that I had to grow taller than Jack and stronger before I was finally able to stop his violence towards me."

"You can't blame me for your father's cruelty!"

"Why not, Mom? What did you do to protect me from him?"

"I did plenty! You don't know everything that went on! I was a victim of his cruelty too."

Brian sighed and shook his head, his tone becoming softer. Justin had to struggle not to give in to tears that were beckoned by Brian's heartfelt recounting of his childhood. "You were a grown up, Mom. You had an obligation to protect me. I'm angry that when I was six years old, your sainted brother, the priest, grabbed my balls and when I told you about it you called me a dirty little liar."

"Brian, people didn't know about those kinds of things back then. It seemed so fantastical, that it had to be a malicious lie. I do regret that now that the truth has come out about my brother."

"The truth came out about your brother when I was six, Mom, you just didn't want to know. You made me feel dirty and ashamed when I did nothing wrong. And don't go telling yourself that's why I'm gay now, because truthfully, of all the crap I had to put up with as a child, that one seems almost minor."

"So you had such a terrible childhood, is that it, Brian? Was your father right? Would you have been better off if you were never born?"

"You think I haven't thought about that? You think I haven't viewed death as a welcome visitor on more than one occasion? You think I don't wonder every day if my being born has made a rat's ass in this world?"

"Stop it," Justin said quietly, walking over to Brian and encircling him with his arms. "Don't say that. Where would I be without you?"

"Truthfully, Justin, you'd be better off. You'd either be in a relationship with someone who deserves you and who can return your feelings or you'd be on your own, exploring life. Either alternative beats this one."

Justin stared up at him and shook his head. "You don't get it, do you? Any life that you're not in is not a life I want to lead."

"You're right," Brian said softly. "I don't get it. I'm damaged goods, Sonny Boy. And all this expensive therapy hasn't made one damned bit of difference." He released Justin and went over to swoop up his coat, pausing at the door to look straight at his mother. "Go back to Pittsburgh, Mom. There's nothing to see here. The debris has already been cleared." He closed the door behind him, and Justin leveled a glare at Brian's mother, not yet ready for her to go.

Brian had never felt more out of place than he did in the Children's Hospital where Jeffrey worked. The walls were painted with happy murals. All the colors were bright and primary, rather than hospital green or white. Furniture was scaled down for smaller occupants and an extensive video library offered every children's movie made. Even the meals on trays being delivered to rooms reflected young appetiteshot dogs and pizzas and French fries. But just so no one ever forgot this was a place where children came to fight for their lives, he saw the patients with their smooth domes, bloated or pinched faces, drained of color and energy, and hooked up to scary machines and indecipherable tubes. Eyes made wide by early struggles seemed impossibly big as they watched him walk past open doors, while parents smiled sympathetically, assuming he was one of them.

He was searching for the common area known as the Circus. The aide told him he couldn't miss it, that the walls were painted with depictions of big top features from lion tamers to acrobats. Jeffrey was supposed to be there, and when he found the room, he stopped to watch. Several children in wheelchairs, and others who arrived under their own steam, together with a handful of parents, were watching the good doctor animate a children's book with colorful finger puppets that decorated each digit. He was wearing his street clothes and a white lab coat festooned with bright palm prints applied and signed by various patients. Each puppet had a different nuance to its voice. Brian was pretty sure he liked the pig best, since Jeffrey gave a Maurice Chevalier French touch to his dialogue. When the story was over, several children came up to hug him, and he returned each embrace with a smile as his audience began to disperse.

"So, you've been lying to me all along. You're no doctor. You're the story lady," Brian said when they were alone. Jeffrey shed the puppets and returned the book to a shelf, smiling at his surprise visitor.

"Story MAN, if you don't mind."

"Oh sure, go gender sensitive on me."

"God, it's so good to see you," Jeffrey said, embracing him warmly, noticing Brian held on a little longer than he normally would. Jeffrey moved him back to arm's length, reading the turmoil in his eyes. "What's wrong?"

Brian turned away, suddenly dying for a smoke. "Where can I light up?"

"Outside, if you really must."

"I really must."

"Come on, I'm finished for the night," Jeffrey left his lab coat in his locker and they left the hospital together. They sat on a stone bench in an enclosed tranquility garden and Jeffrey didn't scold as Brian lit a cigarette, his hand quivering slightly. He let him inhale and exhale a couple times, and then rested his hand on Brian's thigh. "What's wrong, guy?"

"Does something have to be wrong?"

"I've missed you like hell. I'll take you any way I can get you, but you seem distressed."

Brian glanced at his profile. "You haven't even called."

"You asked me not to call. I honored that request, but it was never easy, Brian."

"For me either."

"So here we are. Have you eaten? I'm starving."

"I'm not eating in the hospital cafeteria."

Jeffrey laughed. "Food here is quite good, but no, I have another idea, let's go."

In a small Italian café in Little Italy, over red and white checkered tablecloths and candles in Chianti bottles, Brian began to relax as he sipped house red and let go of some anger. It was a mixed crowd, gay and straight, but unlike some of the main line cafes in Little Italy, this one was at least gay friendly. Jeffrey reached across the table and interlaced his fingers with Brian's without fear of reprisal.

"Tell me."

"It's boring. Let's talk about something else."

"You're never boring to me, Brian. Please. What's on your mind?"

"World peace and who is likely to win the World Cup?"

Jeffrey yanked his hand slightly. "Stop it. I'm a good listener. Talk to me."

Brian sighed. Jeffrey had an amazing ability to cut through his defenses, much like Lydia, but with a twist. "Are your parents still living, Jeffrey?"

"Yes, both of them. Yours?"

"My Dad died a couple years ago."

"I'm sorry."

Brian shrugged. "He was a bastard. What is your relationship like with your folks?"

Jeffrey smiled and stroked Brian's palm with his thumb. They continued holding hands.

"Typical East Coast WASP family. My father is a doctor and a professor of anatomy at the medical school at Harvard. My mother comes from money, has been spoiled her whole life. My father is a bit distant and disapproving, although he pretends as if he's totally fine with the gay thing. He's not. He's mystified by it. My mother is sweet, an eternal debutante, but she drinks a bit too much, lately. I have an older sister who is a well known thoracic surgeon, and my younger sister is a flake. Still finding herself. Wants to be an actress."

"She's Hannah's mom?"

"Yes. Well, she bore her. She's never been a mother to her. What is your relationship like with your mom, Brian?"

"My mother is an Irish Catholic religious fanatic cunt," he said bluntly, and Jeffrey laughed.

"Tell me how you really feel."

"Sorry, I know it's un-American to rag your mom."

"I wouldn't want to hear that about MY Mom, but I don't know YOUR Mom. It may be balls on accurate about her."

"Trust me, I'm being kind."

Over a shared platter of crab claws and garlic bread, they discussed Brian's tortured history with his parents, but he left out some of the more sordid details, concerned that Jeffrey would think badly of him.

"Brian, you're doing the right thing in seeing Lydia. Working out these issues. Dealing with your anger and betrayal. Unfortunately, that's probably all you can do, is let therapy run its course and give you the tools you need to live with that baggage. And of course, as your friend, you can talk to me as much as you want about any of it and it will never go any further."

Brian leaned back with a smile as the first course was cleared and salads were delivered. Plump green olives and green banana peppers glistened on a bed of lettuce drenched in oil and vinegar and dotted with shredded parmesan.

"I feel bad staying clear of you for a week and then running to you when I hit a wall with my mother. Doesn't seem fair somehow."

"You should feel bad staying clear of me for a week. I know I do. I owe your mother one if she inspired you to break the fast."

"Lydia asked me if I was falling in love with you."

Jeffrey looked up, his fork pausing midway to his mouth. "What did you say?"

"I said I love Justin."

"Right answer," Jeffrey countered with a weak smile.

"But she wouldn't let me off the hook."

"How do you mean?"

"She pointed out that one does not preclude the other."

Jeffrey reached out and closed his hand on Brian's wrist where it rested on the table. "Don't be coy about this, Brian. What did you tell her?"

"Nothing. I called time on the session."

"Why is that?" He tightened his grip on Brian's wrist until the cowry shells bit into his flesh. He didn't flinch.

"Because I don't know the answer."

Jeffrey sighed and released him, leaning back in his chair. "I understand. I don't either."

"I watched Justin standing up to my mom today and was reminded of how brave he is, and how much he loves me. I've never believed in love. Until I met him. And now I have this fucking complication with you. Me, the great uncaring bastard, Brian Kinney. It's almost a farce."

"Except it's not funny. We're all real people. We can each be hurt."

"I know."

"So what do we do, Brian? The gentlemanly thing for me to do would be to bow out and let you work through your relationship with Justin. He beat me to the punch, after all. He staked his claim first. That's what I'd like to see myself do."

"Well, that would settle it, because I'm no chaser."

"Unfortunately, I don't see myself being the hero here. You've become very important to me. I'm not sure I can walk away. I think I may have to take a chance and compete, and if I lose, I lose."

Brian ordered espresso, while Jeffrey gave in to tiramisu after they devoured their pasta in virtual silence. "It's no competition, Jeff," Brian finally said, chasing the lemon peel around the edge of his saucer with a tiny spoon. "I'm living with Justin. He's in my life. He gave up his lover and his whole life in Pittsburgh to move here and be with me."

"I see. Are you asking me to butt out? Because I'm not a stalker."

"No. Yes. No," he shook his head slowly. "I don't know."

"Look at me, Brian."

He looked up, staring into Jeffrey's dark eyes, which picked up a cognac hue in the flickering candlelight.

"You know we're perfect for each other, don't you?"

Brian shrugged. "Why?"

"Same age, same goals, same drive, same interests...if Justin were NOT in the picture, would you be hesitating?"

"Yes, because I'm still adverse to relationships."

Jeffrey smiled wryly. "I can get you comfortable with that. I have no illusions. I'm not an unrealistic romantic."

"For all I know, you're shitty in bed," Brian teased. Jeffrey laughed.

"Let's call Mario over. He's that good looking waiter you've been ogling, and he can testify to my prowess."

"You nailed him?" Brian asked, turning to focus on the tall, handsome young man with a mop of curly black hair and classic Roman features.

"He was alone and so was I. Shit happens."

Brian exchanged a high five with him, and then sighed. "I've missed you."

"I've missed you too. You call it, Brian. You're the one with the complicated life. I can be patient."

"Let me have a bite of that dessert."

Jeffrey fed it to him across the table, on his fork, and used his finger to wipe the crumbs from Brian's lips. Impulsively, Brian grabbed his hand and pressed his lips to his palm, causing Jeffrey to moan and close his eyes.

Brian released him with a sigh. "I need to get home. It's getting late."

"This is on me," Jeffrey volunteered to pay and they walked out together, pausing on the street in front of the café. "Call me, Brian. I still want to teach you to tango."

"I still want to learn. I'll, uh, I'll call." He was hesitating, not wanting to separate.

"Brian?"

"Yeah?"

Jeffrey pulled him up against his body, holding tightly to him as he kissed him hard on the mouth. Brian felt the heat course through him like an electrical storm, wild and undirected. His tongue slipped into his mouth, his dick was pressed tightly to Jeffrey's groin. They were oblivious to the stares and comments they drew from passersby. They were only aware of each other. Reluctantly, Jeffrey released him. He held on to his hand for a moment, and then released that too. He waved goodbye, as he walked away, and Brian watched his retreating figure grow smaller with distance. He waited for his body to come back to him, feeling as if Jeffrey still had possession of it. Finally, he sighed and took the long way home, using the time to buy Justin a sub sandwich and a packet of fries, finding that gift so much easier to bear than a simple bouquet of flowers.

BETWEEN THE SESSIONS

(after session 7 and Joan Kinney, part II)

by Randall Morgan

When he opened the door to the loft, Brian heard the unexpected sound of jazz on the sound system, something that he seldom heard unless he put it on himself, usually when Justin was out. Justin was lying on the couch, wearing Brian's navy silk robe, his skin still damp from a shower. When Brian tossed him the bag containing the sub and fries, Justin peered into the sack then sat it on the floor.

"I've eaten," he said coolly, and Brian nodded, walking into the bedroom where he undressed and pulled on a pair of sweat pants. Justin's anger was heavy between them, outweighed only by Brian's guilt.

Brian opened a bottle of water from the refrigerator, then went over to his computer, logging on, his back to Justin. He could feel Justin's eyes boring into his back. "Thanks for abandoning me with the hydra."

"I just couldn't take her shit tonight, Justin," he said without turning around. "I'm sorry."

"Where did you go?"

"Does it matter?" He logged onto his email and saw he had fifteen messages. He opened the one from CPTASTRO first. That was Mikey's email moniker. It read:

Get out your red carpet! And kneal on it, LOL!!!! (Mikey could never spell.) I know how well you do that, or so I've HEARD! I think I may be coming to the Big Apple soon for a Comics vendor convention. KEWL! Of course I plan to stay with you and J and save money, it that's ok. Or even if it isn't! LOL! Promise to look the other way when U 2 start pawing each other. RETCH! Ben is not coming with me, has to work. I expect you to show me the very hottest clubs in town while I'm there even if you are a boring old couple! CALL ME ASSHOLE!! You owe me a call. M.

Brian responded:

M, ASSHOLE. You said to call you ASSHOLE, so I just did. The keyboard has a comma, Mikey. Use it. You know you are always welcome to stay with me, but can you give me a better idea of when than SOON?! As for the clubs, we'll see. I've kind of outgrown that scene, believe it or not. But I can tell you where to go, as I have been doing for YEARS. Tell Ben and Vic and your Mom and the others hello. Guess who visited my home today?? The WARDEN. Kill me now. B.

He trolled through the ads for Viagra and porn and penis extenders, wondered why his spam filter wasn't working and what the hell kind of lists he was on, then paused at one from a sender who called himself, DocWalk. Dr. Jeffrey Walker. "Hi Brian, this is Jeffrey. If this is not Brian Kinney, please delete. I had to recall this addy from memory, so here's hoping. Brian, do you want me to be the first to say it? Jeff" Brian hesitated, then responded: "To say what? B." An icon glowed in the corner of his screen as a message came back telling him Jeffrey wanted to chat with him. He accepted the message and a new screen popped up.

Jeffrey wrote: What do you mean? To say what? You know what!

Brian: What is what?

Jeff: You know what.

Brian: Goodbye?

Jeff: Goodbye??! AARRGGHHH! Do you have any ego at all??!"

Brian: Some people tell me I'm all ego.

Jeff: Some people don't know you. Can you call me?

Brian: Not right now.

Jeff: Understand. Ok, here goes. Last chance.

Brian: For...?

Jeff: To stop me.

Brian: From...?

Jeff: Saying it first.

Brian: STOP!

Jeff: Scared?

Brian: Maybe, I don't know what it is.

Jeff: Yes you do. That's why you're scared.

Brian: Quit saying I'm scared! I'm not scared, I'm confused!

Jeff: Are you really confused or are you trying to put me off?

Brian: Both.

Jeff: Ok, here goes. I love....your eyes. Muddy green. Great eyes. Great eyelashes.

Brian: LOL! Shut the FUCK up!

Jeff: I love...the way your lips part and you look like a mouth breather when you start to get a little turned on.

Brian: I'm warning you...

Jeff: I love...the way you kiss.

Brian: Yeah? What do you love about the way I kiss?

Jeff: Your tongue, your lips, your passion.

Brian: Keep going.

Jeff: I love...your long, bony fingers.

Brian: That's not the long bone you love.

Jeff: Promises, promises.

Brian: Yeah? Don't believe me? I can get affidavits.

Jeff: I believe in a more direct evaluation.

Brian: Promises, promises.

Jeff: I love...your fashion sense.

Brian: Good. I spend a lot of money to be loved for my fashion sense.

Jeff: Ok, here goes. Brian, I love...

"What the fuck are you doing?" Justin asked. Brian immediately sent the computer into sleep mode, losing his screen.

He swiveled to face Justin, his heart hammering. "Don't sneak up on me like that!"

"Why are you so jumpy? Like I care if you're on a porn site or something?"

"I wasn't on a porn site." Brian stood, walking over to the kitchen, wondering what the last words were that Jeffrey was typing. "Don't interrogate me. I'm not in the mood."

"First you leave me with your bitch mother, then you stay out, then you come back after a nice dinner without me, and don't deny it, you reek of garlic, and as soon as you get home, you bury yourself in your computer and ignore me. What the fuck is going on? Where did you go?"

"Out," Brian said coolly. "OK? Out."

"Did you see Jeff?"

Brian picked up a green apple and bit into it as he walked past Justin and turned on his treadmill, fast walking while he ate. "I haven't seen Jeff in a week."

"Until tonight?"

"Yeah, ok, until tonight."

"Why now?"

"Why not, Justin? He's a friend."

"Did you call him?"

"I went to the hospital. His service said he was there. We decided to get a bite to eat in Little Italy. Is that alright with you?"

"Not really," Justin stopped the treadmill, and Brian rode it backwards and then stepped off, sitting down heavily on the sofa and finishing his apple.

"Not when I'm stuck here alone, knowing you're upset and not knowing where you went. And then I find out you ran to HIM. How is that supposed to make me feel?" Brian sighed. "I came home to you, didn't I? We just had dinner, Justin. That's all. Dinner, and we talked."

"I want to be the one you talk to when you're feeling bad, Brian. I want to share that dinner with you. I'm your lover. I want to share your life."

"You live with me. You eat all your dinners with me, every night. You fuck me. You shower with me. You send me off in the morning and you call me ten times a day at my office. Don't smother me. Allow me to have a friend."

Justin sighed and walked over to the bedroom, dropping the robe and climbing under the duvet. "I'm not worried about your having a friend, Brian. I'm worried about that friend being Jeffrey. Because whether you admit it or not, he's a hell of a lot more than a friend to you, and we both know it. I don't know if you're lying to me or lying to yourself, but you better figure it out before this whole thing turns to shit." Brian frowned and walked over to the bed, staring down at his prone figure. "What does that mean? Is that some kind of threat?" Justin raised himself to one elbow to look up at him. "No, Brian. That's the likely outcome, isn't it?"

"This whole thing is pretty funny, considering what you did to me, to our relationship, while I just played the stupid fuck and let you fall for someone else," Brian said bitterly. "How long are you going to punish me for that? Because if that's what this reconciliation is about, we're doomed." Justin retorted. Brian combed his fingers through his hair and sighed. He stripped off his sweatpants and climbed in beside him, stretching out next to his body, feeling him tense.

He put one arm over him and Justin turned his back to Brian. Brian frowned and fell back on his own pillow as he said, "I hate angst."

"Why? You do it so well."

"Fuck you," Brian said with a chuckle, and Justin sat up to glare at him under the glow of the blue neon.

"I'm serious. When we were together the first time, it was other men and never telling me how you feel about me, and making sure things never got too romantic. Then, when we broke up, it was the big move to New York, and then you couldn't sleep, followed by late night phone calls and misery. So I came back. Now its perfect doctors with perfect looks and perfect lives and perfect ages and perfect kids and a perfect condo on Fifth Avenue. You're a drama queen, Brian. You thrive on conflict. You're like Goldilocks. Nothing is j-u-u-ust right." Brian sat up, lit a cigarette, shook his head. "You're calling me a drama queen? I am the least dramatic person you will ever know."

"Don't confuse your image with the real you. I've learned the difference. Why can't you?"

He glared at Justin. "Maybe that's why I'm going to Lydia."

"Not a moment too soon."

"Why are you being such a little twat?"

"I love you, Brian. Look at me. I'm here. I'm yours. Let it happen."

Brian shook his head. "I thought it was happening."

"Is it? I think you're still running, only this time your game is a lot more dangerous than before. Before it was always running after a piece of ass. The piece may change, but it was always sex. This time, you're toying with love, with someone's heart. As well as mine and your own. You got the sex thing down cold, Brian. Hat's off to you, you're a genius at it. But when it comes to love, you're a rank amateur, so you better be careful or you'll ruin everything and yourself in the process."

"I'm not looking for that, Justin. I just...I don't feel safe with you yet."

"Safe? Did I give up everything to come here and be with you? Did I take that chance? Did I break someone else's heart to heal yours? Yes. Why? Because I love you. What more security do you need?"

"Justin, I don't know," he said softly. "If I knew, it wouldn't be a problem."

"Is it because I left you?"

"Yes. You have no idea the damage that came from that. I'm not placing blame, I'm not saying you were wrong and I was right. I'm just telling you, I took a serious burn over that, and the scars are still fresh."

"And the good doctor has some kind of miracle cure for that, does he?"

Brian fell back with a groan, covering his eyes with his forearm. "This is not fucking about Jeffrey!"

"No, I agree with you there. It isn't about Jeffrey. It isn't even about me. It's about you. It's all about your figuring out what the hell is important to you and why!" Brian got up, pulling on clothes as he encountered them. His sweatpants. Justin's discarded t-shirt that fit him like second skin, his socks and Prada boots. He topped it with his leather jacket and grabbed his wallet and cigarettes. "What the fuck are you doing now?" Justin insisted as Brian crossed the room and paused at the door.

"I'm going out."

"Dressed like that?"

"Fuck it!" He slammed the door closed behind him, and Justin sighed and shook his head.

"The Queen Mum is dead," he murmured. "Long live Brian."

Joan Kinney hesitated when her phone rang, noticing by the clock on the television that it was almost eleven.

When a man's hoarse voice said, "What's your room number?", she was appalled.

"How dare you!" She said, and then he cut in with, "Mom, it's Brian, give me your room number!"

Minutes later, she was tying on her robe as she went to answer the incessant knocking at her door. She looked through the peephole to confirm his identity and was surprised by how shabby he looked, so unlike his usual perfection. He walked past her, opened the blackout shade to see her view of the neon of Times Square, and then crouched before the mini bar, removing a tiny bottle of Jim Beam. "Brian! Do you know how expensive that is?"

He threw a twenty dollar bill on her bed and sucked the bottle dry before leveling a glare at her. "That ought to buy me a couple belts."

"Are you drunk?" She asked, watching him seek another bottle and empty it just as rapidly.

"Not yet, but I plan to be." He shrugged off his jacket and then reached towards her to guide her into the chair. She flinched as if he was going to strike her and he withdrew. "What's wrong with you?" he insisted, wondering at her skittishness. She met his eyes in silence and then sat down on the chair, saying nothing. Brian sighed. He knew at that moment her claims to have been the victim of his father's violence were true.

"Mom, I'm not Jack. I don't hit."

"I never thought you did."

"And I'm not drunk." He sat on the edge of the bed, facing her. He looked down at his too tight t-shirt and grimaced, futilely tucking it into the waistband of his sweats. "I had a fight with Justin. I need to talk to you."

"Why me?"

"Because, for better or worse, you're my mother." She looked at him and for just a moment, saw a child version of Brian. The messy hair did it. His hair always gave in to cowlicks. She used to fight a continuing battle to keep it tamed. She thought he had overcome it, but now she realized it was just an expensive haircut and one windstorm away from chaos. He always had those large, Keene painting eyes, soulful and riveting, even as a boy. He could express volumes without speaking, and he still had that ability to wear his emotions in his gaze. All he lacked was a spray of tanned freckles and a band aid covering some latest scrape or scratch. She resisted the urge to smooth his hair off his forehead and tell him everything would work out as she fed him a favorite chocolate- chocolate chip cookie. Unfortunately, he was long past the age when he could believe such advice, or be placated by sweets. Looking back, even as a child, he had a sad, cynical air.

"Why did you never love me, Mom?"

"How can you even ask me that, Brian? I've always loved you."

He shook his head, looked wistfully at the minibar, decided not to seek out more alcohol. "That's not true. That's just what you think you're supposed to feel."

"Brian, you've managed to block out certain truths as you built your case against me. I've thought long and hard about what you said to me at your apartment. Some of it, if not all of it, is valid. But it's only part of the picture."

"Fill in the blanks."

"It's true that your father never wanted another child. He viewed himself as a Peter Pan, handsome, virile, never growing old and burdened with responsibility. Sound familiar?" Brian shifted his weight uncomfortably as she continued. "He used other women to validate that he was still a contender, and he used alcohol to blur the truth. But when I became pregnant with you, I was glad. I wanted Claire to have a sibling, and I thought a child might ground Jack. I was wrong about that. He only got worse. But from the moment they handed you to me in the hospital, and I looked down into that beautiful face, I knew you were special. Claire was such a homely baby, difficult delivery, misshapen head, red and bawling. You were quiet, like a little old man, and perfect in every detail."

Brian thought of Gus. How perfect he seemed when he first saw him. He urged her to continue, without saying anything. "Jack accused me of favoring you, and I suppose I did. You were easy to favor. You were a gorgeous child, smart, well behaved and solicitous. Everywhere I went with you, people stopped me to comment on your beauty and your sweet nature. I said you were a gift from God, and I meant it."

"When did it change?"

"It never really changed, Brian. But Jack said I was spoiling you, turning you into a sissy. When you were old enough to play sports, he suddenly took an interest in you. You had a natural grace as an athlete, something he lacked and envied. You accuse me of never going to your soccer games because I was working at the church. The fact is, I never went because Jack would be there, and I couldn't stand to hear him yelling at you, berating you in front of everyone, even when you were the star. Your best was never good enough for him. If I complained, he hit me. Even worse, he would often hit you."

Brian winced, remembering his shame and horror when his father would stand on the sidelines of a game and loudly criticize his every move. "Why did you let him hit me? Hit you?"

"Because I was brought up to accept that kind of behavior as the norm. I saw my father do it to my mother and to my brothers. I believed it was what it meant to be married. And I believed in the absolute sanctity of the marriage union. There was no escape from it."

Brian never knew his mother's father, dead before he was born. He faintly remembered his maternal grandmother as a frail, silent specter. He thought of his father's parents and their peaceful farm in Amish country. If Joan learned to be a doormat from her parents, did Jack learn violence from his? Brian grimaced, unable to imagine the grandparents he adored ever raising a hand to their son in anger. "You never did anything to stop him, Mom."

"That's not true. I threatened, I cried, I fought back. I spoke to the priest about him. I even locked Jack out of the house more than once when he was very drunk."

"He hurt me, Mom."

Her eyes filled with tears. "Brian, do you remember your fifth birthday?" He shook his head, too emotional to trust his voice. "I had a little party for you. All of your friends from school and church were there. Your father came home drunk. He raged about spending so much money to celebrate your birthday when you should never have been born. You ran and hid, in terror, and I had to get everyone out. He threw your cake against the wall, and kicked around your gifts. He told me I was a bitch for rubbing it in his face that you were born. After that, I was terrified of celebrating your birthday. I never knew what Jack might do. And if we couldn't celebrate your birthday, we weren't going to celebrate anyone's birthday, so I established the rule that we only celebrate achievement. Even then, I was cautious with you, because of his rage."

"I never knew that."

"You were too young to remember."

"He hated me that much?"

"It wasn't hate, Brian. It was envy. You were so clever, so attractive, you were going to be everything that Jack thought he should be, but wasn't. He envied you for that. Envy is a terrible, terrible thing."

Brian stood, paced, reconsidering this version of his family dynamics. He recalibrated and reapportioned blame, like correcting pie charts in a presentation to a client. "You didn't make me queer, Mom. It wasn't your spoiling me, as Jack put it, or being cold to me, as I remember it. It wasn't even being fondled by my uncle, the faggot priest. If you feel guilt over that, forget it."

"What did, Brian? It wasn't that you couldn't have a girlfriend. All the girls were crazy about you."

He smiled slightly and opened the drapes, leaning his back against the cool glass. "I know."

"When did it happen?"

"It didn't 'happen', Mom. It always was. I tried it with girls. I wanted to be 'normal'. But that's not 'normal' for me. It felt very abnormal and wrong. The only thing that felt right was for me to be with other men."

"Do you think it has anything to do with trying to find a man unlike your father to love you?" He smiled slightly. "I doubt it."

"Was it that Novotny boy?" Brian laughed and lit a cigarette, inhaling deeply. "Mikey is my friend, Mom, not my lover. Never was, never will be."

"I just don't understand, Brian. Sex was always so difficult for me with a husband. I can't imagine being...different."

"For me, it isn't 'different'. It's the only way."

"What about AIDS?"

"What about it? I'm negative. I test twice a year, even though I don't engage in unsafe sex."

"But you are promiscuous, are you not?"

"Who told you that?"

"Does it matter?"

Brian inhaled the last puff from his cigarette and stubbed it out, smiling as he solved the mystery. "Of course, it was that fat little sissy boy, Kent Loomis. His mom, Barbara, told you, didn't she? He told her he saw me in the clubs. Well, I saw Kent too. He may as well have worn a sign that read 'Leper'. No one came near him. So he hooks up with some other loser and they become the poster couple for ugly homos. I won't lie to you, Mom. I've been promiscuous, if you want to label it that way. I've had plenty of one night stands. Before I met Justin, that's all I had."

"Why?"

"Because I liked the hunt, the conquest. Because relationships are hard and boring. Sex is easy and fun. Because I believed no one could ever really want me for more than my body and my sexual expertise, since I had no emotion to offer them. I knew I was incapable of love."

"And now?"

"I met this blond kid one night, and he changed my worldview. Not all at once. It was a very painful transition. I'm not even sure when it happened, but we went from lovers to being in love, and while I still fooled around, it was with a lot less enthusiasm and frequency."

"You fell in love with him?"

He shrugged. "Yeah, I guess that's what it is. As close as I'll ever come to it, maybe."

Joan smiled slightly and stared up at him. "He adores you, Brian. After you left tonight, he read me the riot act."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, he very politely but firmly, explained to me how damaged you are by your childhood and how you're paying for it now, and so is he. He told me how you were his hero, the bravest man he has ever known."

"He said that?"

"There's more. He said you were the moral voice of your friends in Pittsburgh, that you never judged, but you did call them on, what he called their 'bullshit', and told them they were fooling no one. He said your cynicism about the straight world has not prevented you from beating them at their own game in business, and how hard fought your financial success is, in part because you are openly gay."

He shook his head slightly, his guilt returning in a rush. "Justin is the brave one."

"Don't lose him because you can't let yourself love him, Brian. He's perfect for you."

He looked at her, shocked by that statement. "Why do you say that?"

"I'd prefer that your perfect mate be female, of course, but if that's never happening, Justin is an ideal man. He's sweet and beautiful, but more than that, and essential for you, he's strong and he's loyal and he's devoted to you. You need someone who will tell you over and over and over again that he loves you, no matter how often you test him. Eventually, you may begin to believe it. But even someone as loyal as Justin can be pushed too far. Don't do that, Brian. Don't sacrifice your happiness because you don't think you deserve it. You DO deserve it. In fact, it's long overdue."

Brian turned towards the view of the Square as his eyes brimmed with tears. He tensed when he felt her hand on his back, rubbing slow circles, and he finally turned and took her into his embrace, holding gently to her for a long and silent moment. He backed off reluctantly, regaining control, and removed something from his wallet that he left on her dresser. "Lion King tickets, Mom. Have fun. You kept your end of the bargain. This is mine."

"Can we get together for dinner before I go back?"

He smiled and nodded. "Sure, I'll set something up and call. I'll take you somewhere fancy that you can brag about for weeks."

"I love you, Brian. I pray for you every day."

"Okay, Mom, if that makes you feel better. But I'm still gay at the end of your prayers."

"And I'll pray for more understanding of that fact on my part."

"That's all I can ask." He hesitated, then impulsively kissed her cheek, smiling as she spread her fingers on his cheek, still feeling her gentle touch right where his father often struck him as he left her room and went back out into the night.

Justin moaned as Brian awoke him with cold fingers on his warm skin. He turned over, squinting up at him. "How's Jeffrey?"

"I went to see the warden, Justin." Awake now, Justin watched Brian peel off his clothes and asked,

"Your MOM? Why?"

"To set a few things straight."

"And did you?" Brian nodded, naked now, as he crawled into bed. He took Justin's penis between his thumb and forefinger, gently stroking the flap of skin beneath the head, then rubbing the flat of his thumb over the tip, feeling him stiffen. "Touch me, baby," he whispered into his ear, and Justin reached for his cock, not surprised to find it was already hard. Justin met his eyes and smiled, turning on his stomach at right angles to Brian's body as he took his erection in his fist and began sucking it vigorously. Brian closed his eyes, giving in to the bliss that was unique to the intimacy they shared.

Sated, Justin slept soundly, looking like a child against the pillow, as Brian quietly left the bed and pulled on his discarded navy silk robe. He went over to his computer and turned on the monitor, watching the flat screen come back to the last box viewed when he shut it down. He picked up his chat with Jeffrey, now frozen in time. At the top of the box, he was reminded that DocWalk was offline. He could send no further messages to this chat. But he could read what Jeffrey last wrote. Brian had said, "Good. I spend a lot of money to be loved for my fashion sense." Jeff responded: "Ok, here goes. Brian, I love..." that was when Brian turned off the screen. Now the whole sentence became clear. "Brian, I love you." He winced, leaning back in his chair as he felt a combination of joy and fear over that proclamation. He then saw that Jeff wrote: "Brian? Did I scare you off?" This was followed by, "Brian? Don't make me feel like a fool. At least say something." Finally, his last entry was, "I guess I can take a clue from your silence. Sorry, I didn't think it would be such a surprise. Well, have a good life anyway. Goodbye, Jeff."

Brian started to send an email, then sighed and pressed his palm flat against the screen, his eyes closing as he imagined how rejected and embarrassed Jeffrey felt. He would have been devastated by a silent response to such a brave declaration. As he turned off his computer, he wondered how a man like Jeffrey could love him, and why he felt such an overwhelming desire to ensure Jeffrey understood exactly why he didn't respond.

DECONSTRUCTING BRIAN

Session 8

by Randall Morgan

Doctor's Notes: BK arrived five minutes late, which is a first for him. He is always punctual. He looked tired and emotionally flat. He drank his Chinese tea from a tall Styrofoam cup and avoided eye contact.

Excerpt from transcript:

Doctor: You were late.

BK: Sorry.

Doctor: More interested in why you were late. It's not your style.

BK: I decided to quit coming in.

Doctor: I see. But here you are.

BK: I thought I should tell you in person.

Doctor: Why, Brian?

BK: I appreciate your help up until now. I know you've tried... I think maybe...I guess I'm hopeless.

Doctor: In what way?

BK: This hasn't helped. If anything, it's made things worse! I sleep, but I guess that's really due to Justin's being in my bed. Otherwise, I think I'm worse off than before.

Doctor: Tell me how things are worse.

BK: I confronted my mom, we had a little scene, and that was really painful.

Doctor: How long overdue was that?

BK: (Met my gaze.) Maybe so. She told me some things I didn't know or didn't remember. It's caused me to reconsider my view of my childhood slightly.

Doctor: Is that bad?

BK: It's not good, really. I found out abuse is multi-generational in my family.

Doctor: It often is, Brian.

BK: It made me wonder about my grandparents, the ones I was very close to as a child. Did they mistreat my Dad? Is that why he was such an asshole?

Doctor: Possibly. But sometimes a child can be spoiled into becoming completely narcissistic, which makes them impervious to the feelings of others. Perhaps he was adored too much, or perhaps he was just a son of a bitch.

BK: (Smiled.) Can you say that?

Doctor: I just did. Do you feel closer to your mother?

BK: I feel as if I understand my mother a little better. I still feel a lot of resentment, however.

Doctor: Natural. We can deal with that. Oh yes, you're not coming in anymore. What else is not being addressed?

BK: This whole love thing. This relationship thing. I once believed if I could tell Justin how I felt, then all the bullshit would go away. He'd know, it would be cool, end of story. So I told him. It's still a problem. We still fight. I'm still conflicted over Jeffrey, who, by the way, told me he's in love with me.

Doctor: Let's break that down. First, you thought telling Justin you love him would somehow settle the relationship issues and you could just coast?

BK: (Grimaced.) Kind of. Yes.

Doctor: Brian, that was just the BEGINNING of the relationship issues. If there were no issues, wouldn't it be so boring, that no one would want to be in a relationship? All your declaration did, was to open you both up to honest discussions.

BK: It sure didn't seem to shut him up about things. He's jealous of Jeffrey and...

Doctor: He's jealous of this man who tells you he's in love with you? Do you find that unreasonable?

BK: No, I...I know what you mean. You don't have to hit me over the head with it. Justin doesn't know that Jeffrey said that.

Doctor: He wouldn't say that unless your relationship with him has progressed. Want to tell me about that?

BK: I thought I was quitting you.

Doctor: Brian, you're not required to come see me. But what you are feeling now is a very natural fear of the fact we have opened feelings within you that you've kept tightly bound for years. You think if you stop coming here, you can tie them up again. Maybe you can. If so, you lose. You wanted help to become a fully functional, emotionally capable human being. There were reasons you wanted that, and ask yourself if those reasons have mysteriously disappeared. If you fail to bind them up again, which I anticipate, then you can't afford to do this on your own. You'll become confused, panicky, angry and all of your relationships will suffer for it, but you will suffer most of all.

BK: I'm suffering now, Lydia.

Doctor: Tell me about that pain, Brian.

BK: I feel like I'm being unfair to Justin. I want him. I want him more than ever, and I don't want him to leave me. But at the same time, I really feel drawn to Jeffrey. I don't know why. But I am. So I feel bad for Jeffrey, because I know I have no intention of letting Justin leave. They are so different. How can I be so drawn to two such opposite men?

Doctor: You can be, but let's talk about their differences, Brian. How different are they, really? I know there's a difference in age and in what they do professionally, but let's look at them as people. Are they both direct?

BK: Yes.

Doctor: Are they both in tune with who they are?

BK: Yes.

Doctor: Are they both clear about their feelings towards you?

BK: Yes.

Doctor: Can you talk easily to both of them?

BK: Yes.

Doctor: Do you feel sexually attracted to both of them?

BK: Yes.

Doctor: Do you feel emotionally secure with them both?

BK: (Hesitated.) No.

Doctor: Explain.

BK: I don't feel emotionally secure with either of them.

Doctor: Why not?

BK: Justin left me. For another man. He cheated on me behind my back. He cheated on that man with me. That scares me.

Doctor: And Jeffrey?

BK: He's too perfect. He's a saint. He's rich. He lives with super models. I'm not in his league. I know he would see through to who I am sooner or later and leave.

Doctor: Listen to what you just said and then tell me you don't want to keep coming here.

(Played back segment of transcription.)

BK: (Frowned.) I am so fucked up.

Doctor: Why so, Brian?

BK: I have two guys, both of them hot, smart and good people, who say they are in love with me, and I can't allow myself to believe either of them is serious about it. I feel as if I've successfully hidden >from them the train wreck that I really am, but I can't continue do so forever.

Doctor: Maybe you're the one with a skewed self image, Brian. That's what we're working on here. Your view of yourself.

BK: (Sighed, brushed fingers through hair.) So what do I do?

Doctor: Exactly what you're doing. You come here, we talk, you take your anti-depressants. It's not like swallowing a course of antibiotics and the sore throat disappears. This takes time.

BK: What do I do about Jeffrey?

Doctor: What do you want to do about Jeffrey?

BK: I don't know.

Doctor: What do you want to do about Justin?

BK: I don't want to lose Justin.

Doctor: You view Jeffrey as a threat to that relationship?

BK: Well, duh.

Doctor: Well, then, there's an obvious solution. What about that one?

BK: Getting rid of Jeffrey?

Doctor: Yes.

BK: It's not that easy.

Doctor: Why isn't it?

BK: I don't know. For one thing, I can't find Jeffrey.

Doctor: What do you mean?

BK: I had to hang up on an internet chat, the very one in which he was telling me he loved me. Since then, I've tried to talk to him, to explain, but he was tied up at the hospital at first, and now he's on vacation. They won't tell me where. I just feel bad that he thinks he poured his heart out to me and I didn't even respond to him. That sucks.

Doctor: Sometimes a little distance helps everyone. It provides a clearer perspective. But if you really wanted to lose Jeffrey, you would.

BK: I don't want to send it to him in an email, or leave a message. That wouldn't be fair.

Doctor: What does Jeffrey offer you, Brian? What do you find unique about him?

BK: He's a calm center for me. We share experiences Justin is too young to have lived through at this point in his life. I admire Jeff's accomplishments and enjoy talking with him. What amazes me is that a man like Jeff is interested in more about me than just my dick.

Doctor: Which validates you beyond your sexuality.

BK: Yes. He's interested in my work. He likes to discuss how office politics function, and what it's like to be a rainmaker, bringing new business into the agency. He even likes to hear about the creative side of what I do. Justin, on the other hand, views my job as a hindrance to our time together, something that competes for my attention.

Doctor: Is that a function of his youth?

BK: Probably.

Doctor: Speaking of Justin, how are you dealing with the fact that he's meeting with Dr. Burns today? I know you had some initial concerns.

BK: With whom? What are you talking about?

Doctor: Regression therapy. He starts today. He didn't mention it?

BK: What is that? Who is this Burns?

Doctor: Hypnosis to help him recover his memory of the dance. Edmond Burns is one of the most respected practitioners of that therapy.

BK:(Suddenly agitated.) He'll also recall all the details of the bashing? No wonder he didn't mention it. I didn't want him to do this.

Doctor: It's his call, Brian, not yours. His memory.

BK: You don't know how bad he was when that happened! I don't want to see him hurt again, scared, angry. He got some of it back at my son's first birthday party, and he was devastated. He virtually collapsed.

Doctor: I understand your concern, but again, he has to make that call. You just need to be understanding if he reacts. And he probably will react.

BK: One more stress...

Doctor: Yes, Brian. It is stressful. But he's in good hands. Burns is the best at this.

BK: (Paused.) I need to remember to sign Justin up for domestic partner benefits.

Doctor: Your company recognizes that perkquisite? Wherein a same sex partner can have equivalent health plan benefits and other security as does a spouse?

BK: It's one of the issues I pushed when I was made partner. Why should gays be treated as second class citizens and why should their relationships be relegated to the meaningless heap because they share a gender? It's bullshit.

Doctor: That's quite brave. Not a popular agenda in corporate America.

BK: I feel very strongly about it, even though I had no partner at the time.

Doctor: But you do now?

BK: (Met my gaze and smiled.) Yes, I do now. And I want to make sure he's protected.

Doctor: You have to register officially as partners with the state to ensure that these benefits will be given.

BK: I'm aware of that fact. So?

Doctor: So nothing, Brian. Bravo.

BK: (Smiled.) Big step?

Doctor: I think so, yes. Congratulations. It's a statement not only to officials, but to your co-workers. Ready for it?

BK: I think so.

Doctor: Despite the turmoil?

BK: Yes.

Doctor: Good for you, Brian. Will I see you again?

BK: (Smiled coyly) Now you sound like a trick.

Doctor: I'm trying very diligently not to be insulted by that remark.

BK: (Laughed.) Don't be. And yes, Lydia, I'll be here. Same bat time, same bat station.

Doctor: You won't regret it, Batman.

End of excerpt.

Doctor's Notes: I anticipated that BK would attempt an early retreat >from therapy as his issues surface and require his attention. He has had the comparative calm of keeping everything he feels at arm's length for many years, thus avoiding the pain of interaction and rejection. As a hard driving executive, he is accustomed to identifying problems and finding a quick and permanent solution before moving on to the next challenge. He is discovering it is not that easy when dealing with his own scars and emotional roadblocks. As he exposes a nerve, he has to work through the pain. He finds himself in a dilemma involving his partner, JT, and Jeffrey, a man who surfaced early in his sessions, and who has become progressively more important to him. Jeffrey has declared his love for BK, but instead of causing him to run, which would have been his response prior to beginning these sessions, BK is struggling to understand exactly what he feels for Jeffrey. At the same time, he professes he's in love with JT and does not want to threaten that core relationship. BK is incapable of juggling two emotional commitments, at this phase of his therapy, too inexperienced with strong emotion and too fragile and insecure about his own self worth. In future sessions, we will concentrate on helping him clarify what he wants, who he wants, and why. If it comes to a choice, he needs to be sufficiently self- aware that he makes the decision that will provide him with a maximum shot at long term happiness. Until then, it's a matter of damage control. He could easily find himself with no one to choose if he stumbles along this treacherous path he currently travels.

SESSION WITH JUSTIN TAYLOR, Dr. Edmond Burns

Justin was referred to me by Dr. Lydia Monroe. He is a twenty year old Caucasian male who suffered a traumatic injury approximately two years ago. Justin was struck in the head with a baseball bat wielded by a fellow student, following his senior prom. The assailant objected to Justin's dancing at the prom with Justin's older, male lover. Justin suffered severe injuries, including skull fracture and concussion. He was in a coma for several days, and endured an extended rehabilitation. He lost some motor control on his right side, and has suffered a memory lapse

that covers the night he was injured from the time his lover arrived at the prom. He has recovered partial memory of the attack, spontaneously, but only in flashes that he describes as nonsensical images and emotions.

Physical therapy has succeeded in returning most of his mobility to his right side, although he still suffers occasional tremors of his right hand, especially when fatigued. He experienced a common aversion to touch and intimacy and minor agoraphobia following his release from the hospital. He credits his lover for having helped him overcome most of these symptoms. He has nightmares that he attributes to the attack at the rate of approximately one or two per month, but he says they are inspecific.

He wants to recall the night of the attack for several reasons. First, his relationship with his lover has only recently been recovered following a separation and a brief association with another man. Justin feels his lover is insecure about Justin's commitment, in part because he has been unable to remember what his lover believes to be a seminal emotional moment between them, prior to the bashing. Justin feels his relationship with his lover would be strengthened by their ability to share the memory of that moment. Second, he wants to recall the full force of the attack. He wants to have real fear and pain to vanquish rather than feeling as if he is always fighting phantoms that are loosely related to his bashing.

Justin has never been in a hypnotic trance. He has never been through analysis, although his lover is Dr. Monroe's patient, and he has participated in his therapy. He has a strong sense of self, is unafraid of the process, and does not appear to be overly suggestable. He is open to the therapy and is not cynical. He is in good physical health, takes no drugs, other than occasional smoking of marijuana. Except for the injuries described herein and some allergies, he is in excellent health. We will complete a psychological evaluation at this session, and after analyzing it to ensure this therapy is recommended for Justin, we will begin the hypnotic sessions next week.

BETWEEN THE SESSIONS

(after session 8)

by Randall Morgan

Leo Chang leaned back in the booth and watched Justin struggle with chopsticks and a slippery dumpling. He smiled and shook his head as the dumpling slithered past Justin's plump rosy lips and into the security of his mouth, leaving a slim trail of sauce on the front of his shirt.

"Good!" Justin exclaimed, trying to snare another off the communal plate. Leo grabbed one with an elegant maneuver of his own sticks, and extended it across the table to the younger man who smiled and then snapped it like a baby bird feeding from the beak of its parent.

"If you weren't so adorable and talented, I'd let you starve," Leo teased, and Justin beamed at him.

"If you would let them bring me a fork, it wouldn't be a problem."

"Don't be vulgar. You may be Anglo, but you needn't be a VULGAR Anglo!"

"Never that," Justin insisted, swigging a long draw of Tiger beer, straight from the bottle. He loved the authenticity of Chinatown, especially with someone like Leo along, who not only spoke Cantonese, but also knew which hole-in-the-wall had the best food.

Over the course of introductions to people in the art community, selecting work from his portfolio to be displayed in Leo's gallery showing of undiscovered, young artists, and working through Leo's connections to get a leg up on the NYU fine art program, the two of them had become fast friends. Age and cultural differences didn't pose a deterrence. Leo was cool, elegant and connected. Justin was talented, charming and hot. Both were gay. Both were involved in relationships, so the sexual pressure was off. It was a match made in Soho Heaven.

"Why didn't you ask Brian to join us for lunch?" Leo asked casually as the next course was served. Justin shrugged.

"He's out of town on business. Where's Bill?"

"Passing gas, again." That inside anesthesiologists joke always brought a naughty smile from Justin.

"What exotic locale drew the handsome Brian?"

"I don't know how exotic it is, but he's in Boston for a couple days."

"Boston?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Interesting."

"Since when is Boston interesting?"

Leo looked pensive, and then became very engaged with his food. Justin moved in with laser dexterity. "What's wrong? What's in Boston?"

"Not what. Who."

"Ok, who?"

"Jeffrey. He's from Boston. His family is there. He's visiting."

Justin frowned, placing his chopsticks on his plate. "Of course. Jeffrey. Are you sure he's there?"

"Let's confirm, shall we?" Leo flipped open his mobile and punched in an auto dial number. Justin tried to stop him, but Leo waved him away like a pesky insect. After a couple rings, he said, "Laura, darling, it's Leo Chang in New York! How the heck are you? How is your handsome husband?" He rolled his eyes at Justin who smiled tensely. "Yes, and I've heard it rumored that it's going to be placed at auction at Sotheby's, but so far, no luck. I'm watching every catalogue that comes out of any major auction house and will let you know at once! Listen, I heard a rumor that you have New York family visiting you, is that true?" He nodded at Justin, who sank against his seat. "But the lovely Hannah, as advanced as she may be, didn't come there alone, now did she? Oh, I see. Well, aren't you wonderful grandparents? Where is our dear boy?" He shrugged and Justin perked up slightly. "How mysterious. He must have a secret rendezvous planned. Alone? Are you sure? How sad. When does he retrieve his daughter? Um-hum. No, don't even bother to tell him. I'll see him when he gets back to the jungle. You take care, now, darling. Tell hubby I said hello and kiss Hannah for me. You bet. Bye-bye." He ended the call and sighed.

"Strange. He dropped off Hannah with his parents in Boston and said he just wanted to be alone for a few days. She said he went somewhere inaccessible, but I have the feeling she knows how to reach him." "At least it isn't Boston. And Brian is in Boston. I talked to him at the Ritz Hotel last night. Besides which...do you think I need to worry about Jeffrey, Leo?"

"Worry? Why worry, doll? What do you gain from that? But would I be very cautious of Jeffrey? Well... he's one of my oldest friends. I adore him."

"But?"

"The man is a saint, great father, generous friend, and a healer of children..."

"But?" Justin persisted.

"Jeffrey wants what Jeffrey wants and Jeffrey always gets what Jeffrey wants."

Justin met his eyes, trying to peer beyond that forced Asian inscrutability that was so much a cliché and yet not entirely untrue.

"He says he doesn't want Brian as anything more than a friend."

"How old are you, baby blue?" Leo teased.

"Older than I look," Justin said with a frown. "It's no shock to me, Leo. I told Bri from the very beginning that Jeffrey was after him. I saw it, and I told Jeffrey I was on to him the first time we met."

"Brave boy."

"I've fought long and hard and been through an incredible load of shit to be where I am now with Brian. I'm not giving him up to some so-called saint with a stethoscope. If he wants Brian, he'll have to pry him out of my cold dead hands. I'm through playing the free choice game. He's mine. I earned him. I put up with his crap. I finally got him to tell me how he feels about me, and no one, NO ONE, is coming between us now. Period." He sighed, suddenly deflated. "I really love him, Leo."

Leo smiled and touched his own beer bottle to Justin's, in a salute. "Of course you do, darling boy. My money's on you, kid. I would love to see Jeffrey bested at his own game by a blond twink. No offense."

"No offense taken. This blond twink exterior conceals the heart of a damned mean brunette!"

"Poor Brian," Leo said softly, shaking his head. "Solomon's proclamation will have nothing on this struggle and he's the baby in question."

Justin just smiled, strangely relieved to have his worst fears about Jeffrey confirmed by someone who knew him. He had been wondering if he was wrong about Jeffrey and whether he was being unreasonable to question their friendship. Now he knew his initial instinct was accurate. He could fight what he understood. It was tilting at phantoms that was so difficult to do.

Brian was exhausted. He finished his meeting mid-day and immediately left Boston for Stockbridge. It wasn't easy getting from Jeffrey's receptionist that he left his daughter with his parents and was staying at the family's rustic retreat in the Berkshires. She knew Brian's name from setting up various meetings between Jeffrey and Brian, and he used that to build a credible story that Jeffrey was expecting him and that Brian had misplaced the location and was unable to reach Jeffrey by phone. She explained there was no phone and that there was no mobile service where he was, but that his pager worked. He dissuaded her from paging, but took whatever he could get from her by way of specifics, and planned his journey accordingly. Beyond the name of the town, his directions were scant.

He set up a meeting with a Boston client because he needed to pitch to that client, but also because it was the perfect cover. He rented a car on his second day in Boston, and then drove three hours in dismal, sleety weather towards the border between New York and Massachusetts. The drive gave him time to consider what he was doing, but he was no happier with his actions, upon reflection, than he was when it was just an impulse. Brian Kinney didn't chase. And what was this if not a pursuit? He told himself it was to clarify things with Jeffrey, to reassure him he hadn't callously blown off his declaration of love. He wanted to explain why it was impossible between them, because of his strong feelings for Justin, and how he hoped they could remain friends. He never wanted to cause Jeffrey any pain. These were the things he wanted to say, or so he told himself, as the scenery changed from urban to suburban to rural.

The signage to Stockbridge was well marked. It was a tourist Mecca, an historic village preserved in time in the heart of the Berkshire mountains, and home of the Norman Rockwell Museum. He was told to go to the general store, once there, to get directions to the Walker cabin. When he arrived in Stockbridge, it was hardly a one horse town with a general store. In fact, he saw nothing that passed for a general store in this elegant village of upscale restored homes and art boutiques. He pulled into a gas station to fill up. His heavy sweater over jeans, topped with a long leather coat, hardly felt warm enough in this icy wind, laced with occasional pellets of sleet. He filled a tall Styrofoam cup with bitter self-serve coffee from a bar near the register, and then approached an older man cleaning the floors with a dirty mop.

"Excuse me, but are there vacation cabins around here?"

The old man stared at him as if he were from Mars. "There's hotels, young man. Can't miss `em. Across the street."

"No, I'm looking for a cabin belonging to the Walker family."

"Lew Walker?"

Brian shrugged. "Maybe. Where is that?"

"On Elm Street, big white house with red shutters."

Brian sighed. "No, it's a CABIN. Rustic. On a pond or a stream or something. In the woods."

"In Stockbridge?"

"Yes," Brian said with forced patience. "In Stockbridge."

"Nothing like that here," he paused. "You mean the other Stockbridge, mebbe?"

Brian glanced over his shoulder as if expecting to find Abbott and Costello lined up for the next comedy routine. "There's another Stockbridge?"

"Yup."

"In Massachusetts?"

"Yup."

"On the map? Because I looked at the map and there was only one Stockbridge."

"Mebbe on the map as West Stockbridge Center."

Brian smiled tensely, forcing a calm he didn't feel. He was tired. He was stressed. He didn't need this shit. "I see. Can you tell me how to get there?"

"Can't get there from here."

Brian narrowed his eyes at him. Did he have sucker stamped on his forehead or what? "Why can't I? Is it Brigadoon? Does it disappear into the mist, only reappearing on certain pagan holidays?"

"No need to get mouthy with me, young man."

Brian stopped, recalibrated his approach. "Sorry, I'm just tired and frustrated and my wife is waiting for me there. I'm late, and she'll be worried." An easy lie, calculated to elicit the old man's sympathy. "Your wife, eh?"

"That's right."

"You sent your wife to a place and you don't even know where it is?"

"It's her family's place. I've never been there," he couldn't believe he was making up a fantasy world just to get this guy's assistance.

"Shoulda got directions, son."

"Please. There has to be a way to get there from here. Give me some guidance, will you?"

Armed with directions more complex and confusing than the Normandy invasion plans, Brian returned to his rented SUV and left civilization on a quest. Paved roads gave way to dirt roads that gave way to ruts in the grass that became miraculously paved again, later. He was surrounded by pine trees that loomed dark and foreboding, an endless army of conifers stretched all the way up the mountainside. He passed neither cabin nor trailer nor other vehicle, and just when he was ready to give up, he came across a general store in the middle of absolutely nowhere.

There was no reason this store existed that Brian could see. Its weathered exterior and ancient Coca Cola tin sign indicated it had been abandoned long before he was born. Smoke curled from the chimney pot, suggesting life huddled within. There was an old pickup and a rusted Ford Fairlane parked out back. He got out of the SUV, stretching his cramped limbs, and ducked inside the store quickly to escape the cold. He felt as if he had walked onto a John Ford movie set, and the stage coach was overdue. Creaky hardwood floors complained under his weight and a black iron potbelly stove was providing the smoke he saw from the outside. Barrels held provisions, and behind the long, scarred wooden counter was a floor to ceiling shelving unit stocked with canned goods, medical supplies, pet food and other necessities.

Bolts of fabric leaned against the counter, and fishing gear and farm implements took up most of the floor space. Two men, seated at a rickety table, sipped hot coffee and played chess. Brian looked for a sign marking the way to a bathroom, but saw nothing. So he decided to take care of that on the road. God knows, there was no one around to see him do it. "Excuse me, but..."

"Lost?" One of the men smirked.

"Not sure, I..."

"You're lost alright. If you're here, you're lost."

"Ok, maybe so. I'm looking for the Walker cabin."

"They expectin' you?"

"Yes," he lied, relieved that the man at least knew what he meant.

"Then why didn't they tell ya how ta get there?"

"Ok, look. I am lost. Can you help me?" There was no room for pride in this backwoods.

"Don't know no Walkers."

"But... please. I'll pay."

The men exchanged a look, then laughed. The other man spoke up.

"Don't want your money, sonny boy."

Brian tensed at his use of a nickname his own father called him. He almost asked, "What do you want? A blow job?" But he thought better of it. He was at their mercy.

"Most cabins owned by city folk are up near Camp Kingsmont."

"Where is that?"

"Up in the hills. High."

"Which hills? Where in the hills?"

"Half mile from the New York border."

"Which is WHERE?" Brian asked, exasperated, and the man shrugged.

"Only one way ta get there."

"Could you share that one way with me?" Brian had learned there was a peculiar rhythm to getting directions around here.

"Drive straight on til you reach that cabin that used to be painted red, then turn left."

"Wait. If it used to be painted red, what color is it now?"

"Why, it's gray of course."

"Naturally. Go on."

"You'll be on Wilson Road. It's the only road, but its not marked. Just drive up that road til you see the small lake. Cabin is on far side of the lake, if it's the one I'm thinkin' of. Up a long dirt driveway. Has an iron stake on one side of the road that holds a sign sayin', `Private Property, No Trespass'. I think that may be the Walker place."

Brian sighed, combing through his hair with his fingers in a nervous gesture. "Thanks. Do you have wine?"

"Boxed wine over there. White or red."

Brian saw that he didn't mean a box full of wine bottles. He meant boxes containing bulk wine.

"Anything in a bottle?"

"Beer."

After buying two six packs of beer, Brian set out on the last leg of his journey, feeling as challenged and adventurous as a pioneer.

When a lake finally came into view, placid, dark and still, he began to relax, at last. Hardwoods ringed the banks of the water, their limbs stripped bare for winter. He imagined it was beautiful here in the warmth of summer, with a canopy of leaves to provide shade. He was so engrossed in the scenery, he almost passed the drive. He braked sharply and read the no trespassing sign before turning onto the dirt driveway that stretched far up the hill, with no house immediately in sight.

Finally, the structure emerged from a brace of evergreens. An unimposing cabin with weathered, shingled siding and a wrap around porch offering views of the lake on one side, the mountains on the other, was fronted by a shiny BMW SUV. Brian parked his car, hesitated, looking back from where he came. Night began to cover the view like a big black blanket being drawn across the skies. He knew, no matter what happened now, he could never find his way back in the dark. He was trapped.

Picking up the beer, he climbed the steps to the porch, hearing the strains of tango music coming from within. He knocked on the door that was painted a fading shade of blue. The old rockers on the porch, straight backed with rope seats, looked strangely comfortable and inviting, if not for the frigid weather. Finally Jeffrey responded, standing there in a heavy flannel plaid shirt over a thermal undershirt, worn jeans and hiking boots. He was in need of a shave, and his hair was rumpled. Brian thought he had never looked more handsome. After recovering from his initial shock of seeing Brian standing there, he stepped aside, motioning for him to enter.

The main room of the cabin was just as Brian pictured it. Scuffed wide plank wooden floors, paneled walls, high beamed ceilings and a central stone fireplace. The open kitchen area was rustic, with a cookstove large enough to accommodate both Hansel and Gretel, and a parson's table with benches for seating. A rough textured leather sofa and oversized chairs clustered around the fireplace. He could see Jeffrey had been stretched out on the couch under a plaid afghan, reading a book, a glass of wine on the floor beside him while music played on a portable sound system. Above the fireplace was a huge, mounted wide mouth bass with a brass plaque crediting its captor, "Jeffrey Walker, August 8, 1979."

"Surprise," Brian said with a tense smile and Jeffrey nodded.

"Big surprise. How did you ever find me?" He took the beer and placed it in the mud room off the kitchen. It would stay cold in that unheated space. The tiny ice box in the kitchen wouldn't hold a couple six packs and much else.

"Frankly, Jeff, I don't know how I found you. It's a modern day miracle. This cabin gives Butt Fuck, Idaho cosmopolitan status."

Jeffrey smiled and hung his leather coat on a hook near the door. "It is a bit remote."

"Yeah, like Neptune is a bit remote," he warmed himself at the fire, glancing at the framed family photographs on the mantle. Jeffrey, his two sisters, his parents, at various ages. Attractive waspy family, with two brunette children who resembled the father, and one blonde, Hannah's biological mother, who resembled the mother. "I'm surprised you have electricity up here."

"We didn't, for years. Now we have a generator. Runs on gasoline. I turn it off later and get by on lanterns and candles. Reminds me of my childhood."

"Don't you freeze?" Brian noticed a couple small space heaters, and Jeffrey shrugged.

"By then, I get under the eiderdown and there's a fireplace in the bedroom."

"Sounds cozy."

Jeffrey sat on the couch, staring at Brian as a silence stretched out between them. Finally, Brian sat beside him and sighed, beginning to relax from the tension of his trip. Jeffrey poured him a glass of red wine and returned to his prior seating.

"Brian, why are you here?"

"I had to talk to you."

"Now? Here? It couldn't wait until I returned to Manhattan?"

"No, it couldn't wait."

"Then here we are."

Brian glanced at Jeffrey's classic profile and sighed. "When we were in that chat, when you told me...what you said, Justin came up to me at that moment. I had to hang up. He was already pissed at me and I was in no mood for a fight."

"I understand, Brian."

"No, you don't. Look, I didn't want to just drop you an email or leave you a message. I know you've been avoiding me. I know I hurt your feelings. I had to talk to you face to face. To tell you...to say how much it meant to me, what you said."

"Did it?"

"Yes, Jeff, of course it did. You know how much I like you."

Jeffrey reached over and covered Brian's hand with his. Brian didn't withdraw, acknowledging the little thrill he got from this contact with a frown. "Did you come all this way to tell me you were in love with someone else and there was no future in it for us but you hope we can continue to be friends?"

Brian's eyes widened with surprise. "Yes. Exactly."

"Brian, you don't fly to Boston and then trek into the wilderness for hours to kiss somebody off. No one is that considerate, and you definitely aren't. What you would do is let even more time pass, and then, one day, in Manhattan, you'd ask me to lunch and we'd both act like it never happened. That's what you would do."

Brian smiled slightly. "Actually, the old Brian would just never call you again at all. But I've been in analysis, as we've discussed, and I'm trying to become more human. Admittedly, it's been a struggle. I'm like a colt learning to walk, wobbly and unsure."

Jeffrey stood and offered Brian his hand. "Let's dance."

"Seriously?"

"Yes, the music is perfect, the tension is thick, let's see how much you retained."

Brian stood, helped him slide the couch back, creating a line of dance. They clenched each other and moved into the sliding embrace of the tango. The feel of Jeffrey's body so close to his own, of their thighs performing an intricate entrechat as they walked, was exhilarating. Brian closed his eyes and let the sensuality of the dance engulf him. When Jeffrey finally stopped him by pulling him up to his body, Brian met his gaze with a tense smile. "How did I do?"

"You're a natural." Jeffrey kissed him and Brian let him, relaxing his lips and admitting his tongue into his mouth. He felt Jeffrey's hands wander down his back, over his buttocks, cupping his ass and pulling him against his pelvis. Brian encircled his neck with his arms and deepened the kiss, realizing only now how hungry he had been for his touch. They kissed for what seemed an eternity, then Jeffrey broke it off, took his hand, led him into the bedroom. A fire burned in the stone hearth and the antique brass bed was tall and piled high with pillows and a thick eiderdown duvet.

"Jeff, I...I don't know," Brian heard himself say, unable to believe he was questioning whether to proceed with a sexual encounter, especially when he was so hot for his potential partner. Jeffrey smiled and sat on the edge of the bed, reaching out to hook his hand in the waistband of Brian's jeans and pull him forward.

"Yes, you do know, Brian. This is why you're here. This is what you want. We both know it." His smooth hands reached under Brian's sweater, slipping up and down his taut abdomen and over his hard pectorals. Brian sighed, eyes closing, head back. Jeffrey unbuttoned his fly and reached inside, freeing Brian's cock from the cover of the denim. He was already semi-erect and as Jeffrey stroked him gently, admiring the look of him and watching him fill and expand, Brian let go of his inhibitions towards Jeffrey and moved into the familiar role of sexual predator.

"Suck it," he whispered hoarsely, and Jeffrey looked up at him and smiled.

"Don't rush it. I intend to savor every second of this, Brian. I want to worship your body. I want to memorize it. I want to make you feel like you never have before."

Brian smiled. "I don't think that's possible."

"We'll see." Jeffrey threw off his flannel shirt, followed by his thermal. His torso was cut and smooth. Brian was a little surprised by how toned he was, knowing he had scant time to work out. Jeffrey then unzipped his jeans and stepped out of his boots and socks, sliding off his pants. He wore nothing underneath. He stretched out on the bed, propped up on pillows, his engorged cock resting against his groin. It was big enough, Brian noticed, plump, with full, high testicles, smoothly shaven. "Get naked. I want to look at you," Jeffrey demanded, stroking his cock in a leisurely manner as he watched Brian take off his clothes. "I love your body," he coaxed him. "Tall and slim and elegant. I don't like muscle queens. You're beautiful."

Brian smiled and stretched out beside him, covering Jeffrey's hand on his cock with his own, joining him in the stroke. "So are you."

"And your cock is gorgeous."

"So is yours."

With that, Brian leaned over him and kissed him, the feel of his naked flesh against his own inflaming his passion. He climbed on top of him, the gentle beginning of their touching quickly becoming more heated. Brian was driving towards a familiar goal now. His body took over for his mind. He was aching for release, shuddering as Jeffrey unrolled a condom onto his straining erection. Brian penetrated Jeffrey swiftly, painlessly, anchoring his legs over his shoulders and driving his cock in as deep as it would go. He became like an animal, fucking him and fucking him, searching for that shattering moment of release. When it finally hit, he shot so hard he cried out as if in pain, then collapsed above him, gasping. He felt the warm silkiness of Jeffrey's ejaculate gluing their bellies together, not even aware of when he came.

Within minutes, Jeffrey was urging him over on his back, kissing him, titillating nerve endings that still tingled from his orgasm. Brian smiled, pleased by his hunger, and Jeffrey smiled back, then thrust his tongue into Brian's mouth, initiating round two. They moved so they could suck each other simultaneously, and after they were both fully aroused, Jeffrey gently turned Brian onto his stomach, kissing his back, his shoulders, and his spine. He dipped down to the curve of his ass and traced the tight crevice with the tip of his tongue.

Brian moaned into the pillow and parted his thighs so Jeffrey could access his hole, feeling the waves of pleasure roll through him as the rimming began. When he was so excited he felt on the verge of another orgasm, Jeffrey stopped and Brian heard the condom package rip. He looked over his shoulder as Jeffrey slipped the latex over his dick. Jeffrey met his questioning look with a smile. "My turn," he whispered, and Brian hesitated only a moment. He seldom allowed himself to be topped, almost never in recent years, unless Justin felt a sudden urge to assert himself in that way. It wasn't that he disliked it; in fact, the pressure of a hard cock against his prostate and filling up his body was exciting. His reluctance was purely mental. Brian knew he had just a moment to decline, and he let that moment pass, crossing his arms on the pillow and resting his forehead against his folded arms as he braced for the inevitable moment of discomfort.

Wrapped in Jeffrey's Indian blanket robe, Brian was alone as he sat on the couch before the fire in the main room, the afghan covering his bare legs and feet. He smoked a cigarette and held a beer, but didn't drink from it. His hair was mussed, and he had slept some, so he had no idea what time it was. He had that languid, almost liquid feel he got when he was fucked out, but the pleasant ennui was edged by feelings of guilt and anxiety. Jeffrey was sleeping peacefully when he left the bed, and Brian was careful to cover him with the duvet as he went, to keep him warm. He listened to the absolute silence outside the cabin, only the crackling of the log fire inside providing some noise. Like in the old movies, he thought it was quiet, too quiet. Just as the sex had been good, too good. And he liked Jeffrey a lot, too much. But he loved Justin completely. And now he had definitely put that relationship at risk. Not just because he fucked Jeffrey, Justin could roll with his occasional infidelities. But because he liked Jeffrey and pursued Jeffrey and now he was intimate with him on a deeper level. He closed his eyes and thought of Justin alone in the loft, under the blue lights, trusting him to be in a hotel in Boston, sleeping by himself. He thought of his sunny

smile, his brush of pale hair, his beautiful eyes and skin. He thought of how lonely he had been without him, of how his life changed immediately when Justin returned to him.

"What the hell are you doing?" He thought to himself, and then picked up Jeffrey's discarded book: Ulysses by James Joyce.

"Ever read it?" Jeffrey's voice startled him. Brian looked up to see him leaning in the bedroom doorway, cocooned inside the duvet from the bed. Brian nodded, leaning back as Jeffrey climbed onto the sofa with him, stretching out above his body and covering them both with the duvet. His naked body aroused Brian more than he cared to admit. Brian sighed and allowed his hands to wander over Jeffrey's firm skin.

"I read it years ago. I thought it was overly complex. Depressing as hell. The masturbation scene was no great shakes, and the rest of it was obtuse. Even the brothel was boring."

Jeffrey laughed. "It's a masterpiece. You should re-read it, now that you're a grown up. How old were you when you first read it? Justin's age?"

Brian met his eyes. "Ouch."

"Am I not allowed to speak his name?"

Brian slipped out from under Jeffrey and crossed over to the fireplace, tying the sash of his robe. "Nothing has changed because we fucked, Jeff."

"Sure it did. Everything changed."

Brian shook his head. "No, Justin's still my partner. Things are no different. I'm suddenly hungry. Is there anything to eat in the kitchen?"

Jeffrey watched Brian escape the room, and smiled. Despite Brian's skittish reminder about Justin, Jeffrey knew he was right. Everything had changed. In fact, everything changed before their phenomenal fucking. It changed when Brian showed up on his porch. No, it changed when Brian decided to drive to Stockbridge to find him. When Brian didn't respond to his declaration of love, Jeffrey became depressed. He was miserable, and he felt foolish. He had never been drawn to a man the way he was drawn to Brian. When he first saw him outside the museum, with Gus,

he was instantly attracted by his tall, elegant form. He presumed he was straight, and when he found out he wasn't, his attraction to him deepened. It wasn't just sex. He liked Brian. He admired his quick mind, his searing ambition, his biting wit. He felt challenged by him intellectually and he loved their playful word games.

Teaching Brian to tango was a lesson in love. Their intellectual mutuality extended to the physical similarities between them. They were perfect dance partners, perfect sex partners, perfect life partners, of that Jeffrey was convinced. When he met his rival, Justin, whom he privately referred to as the "Boy Toy", he was surprised. He thought Brian would have a more substantive boy friend, not some flashy blond twink. Talking to Justin made Jeffrey realize he was no ordinary twink, but he had no doubt he could take him. Until Brian withdrew. Until his heartfelt computer message went unanswered.

Jeffrey retreated to Massachusetts when he began to realize he couldn't control his feelings of loss over Brian's distance. He needed to regain perspective. The cabin held many sweet memories of his childhood. It always renewed him to go there, especially if he went alone. He was amused that he picked Ulysses to re-read on this trip. Irish author, Irish setting and the principal character sold advertising, strong clues to where Jeffrey's mind was anchored. Unfortunately, his depression seemed to expand in the forced isolation and the density of the novel. And then there came a knock on the front door, and the lover of his dreams was on the other side.

"I made you one," Brian handed him a ham sandwich, and Jeffrey thanked him and bit into it. He kept his eyes trained on Brian's handsome face, determined to handle this critical juncture in their relationship with appropriate finesse.

"Brian, I'm not crowding you. I know Justin is your partner. You can relax with me. I'm not in the business of causing trouble." Brian smiled and nodded, reassured by the angelic face of the noble young doctor.

"Thanks, Jeff. I don't want to mislead you. I like you too much to do that."

"And I appreciate your honesty," Jeffrey insisted. He opened his arms to Brian, smiling as he rested the back of his head on Jeffrey's chest while he finished his sandwich, content in his embrace.

Jeffrey finished his own while absently rubbing Brian's biceps with his free hand. In a few minutes they would be aroused again, and headed back to bed. Brian would convince himself he had controlled the situation, and that it was possible to have Justin and Jeffrey both intimately involved in his life. Jeffrey would let him believe that, nurture that confidence, waiting patiently for the time when Brian could be shown there was really only one choice to share his life, and it wasn't the Boy Toy from Pittsburgh.

The fire was flickering out in the hearth, leaving behind ash and a few glowing shards of wood. The heat seemed to have been transported into the men as they filled their hands with each other, stoking the smoldering sexual embers into flames.

"Let's go to bed," Jeffrey whispered and Brian agreed, content that they both understood exactly where they stood with each other.

Justin had warned him he had the sex thing down cold, but he was an infant when it came to relationships. Unfortunately for Brian, his hearing was selective when the words analyzed his character. He was still several sessions with Lydia short of understanding who he was, and what he wanted. Perhaps that explained why he couldn't have been more wrong about what was happening in that cabin in the wilderness on that night, and the impact his miscalculation would have on his future.

BETWEEN THE SESSIONS

(after session 8, part II)

by Randall Morgan

Brian was surprised to enter his loft and find that Justin was not alone. Leo Chang and some young, punk looking kid, wearing a nose stud and an eyebrow ring, were there with him. Justin's artwork was displayed on almost every available surface. They were eliminating contenders for the gallery show, and placing the winners in a large leather document carrier. Justin was in his element, enthusiastic about Leo's interest in his work and self-critical about how deserving a certain piece was for display. He barely looked up when Brian entered the room, and Brian thought the one glimpse he did get was chilly. Or was that his guilt coloring his response? Brian acknowledged Leo's greeting with a perfunctory grunt and dropped his leather garment bag on the bed, too tired to unpack. He sat down on the edge of the mattress, kicking off his shoes and staring at the floor as he waited for an energy surge that never came.

"He's hot," the punk kid, Leo's assistant, who called himself Mars, even though his real name was Marshall, said about Brian in an appreciative aside to Justin, who glared at him.

"Yeah, he thinks so too."

Leo giggled at that remark. "Boys, come on, let's get this done. I have dinner plans and I'm sure Brian and Justin would like to be alone."

Justin rolled his eyes and helped finalize the choices. Leo called a brusque goodbye to Brian as they left with a full portfolio. In the hallway, Leo kissed Justin on both cheeks and said, "Don't blow it, baby. I know how you feel right now. You want to kill him. But that's just what Jeffrey is hoping you will do. That you'll make it impossible for Brian to stay home. Suck it up and don't make it easy for him."

"You're right, Leo. I want to kill him. Even more than I want to kill Jeffrey."

"Understand. But it's exactly the way we discussed, baby boy. Either you kick his skanky ass out and let the good doctor have him, or you fight to keep him. If you decided to fight, which you say you have, then be smart about it. Trust me, Jeffrey will be smart. He'll play him like a violin."

Justin smiled at Leo's unknowing reference to another dark chapter in the story of his relationship with Brian. "I'll try, Leo. I have to win this one. I gave up a lot for Brian. I don't intend to be left at the doorstep."

"You go, boy."

Justin watched him leave, and then took a moment to steel himself before he went back into the loft.

Brian had stripped down to his jeans and an undershirt, smoking a cigarette and sipping a whiskey as he perused a pen and ink drawing spread out on the dining room table. "Why didn't you include this one? It's good."

Justin shrugged, stacking the rejected art into a loose pile, adding the drawing Brian was admiring to the heap. "I only have ten slots. It's not that good."

Brian looped a finger in Justin's waistband and pulled him closer. "Don't I even get a kiss?"

Justin sighed and pecked him on the lips, then moved away and returned his work to the large box where he stored it. Surprised by the coolness of his greeting, Brian stared at him in wonder. "What's your problem?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you call that a kiss?"

Justin turned to look at him. Brian looked weary, a little pale. Was it the long trip or was it something else that zapped his energy. "My mouth, your mouth, yeah, Brian, that's a kiss," he said, trying not to think of where Brian's mouth had been.

"Whatever!" Brian responded, frustrated, going over to his computer and snapping it on with a flourish. He went to email and opened the latest from Michael.

CPTASTRO: Ass hole! LOL! LOL! You STILL haven't called me! Is Justin not giving you my msgs or what?? He was in a pissy mood. Trouble in paradise? LOL! So anyway, I get in on FRIDAY. That's THIS CUMMING FRIDAY! I forgot exactly when, but I'll look at my ticket and tell you later. Remember when we went to NY to find Justin when he stole your credit card and ran away? Who would think you two would be living together there now! Of course, who would think you two would be doing anything together, now? Romeo and Romeo, what a love story! LMAO! The great Brian Kinney is not even CLUBBING??!! When I told Em that, he spit out his coffee! He didn't believe me. I don't believe me. That is, I don't believe YOU. Vic and Mom say hello and ask when are they invited to visit? LOL! CALL ME COMMA ASSHOLE!! M.

Brian glanced at the phone, but before he could pick it up, a message bubble appeared. He had mail from Doc Walk. Jeffrey. He confirmed Justin was busying himself in the kitchen, and then opened it.

Jeffrey wrote:

Hi, baby. Did you make it home safely? We did. I already miss you and it's pure torture knowing how close you are, and yet how far away. It was magical, the time we had together, Brian. Total magic. You are a sexual shapeshifter, an erotic marvel. I know we've both been around, but my God, that was cataclysmic! I can close my eyes and taste you, feel you, smell you. I can still feel your touch on my skin, taste the salt of your cum, experience the sweet pressure of your lips. I miss you even though it has only been hours, not days or months or years. Why does it feel so long ago? Now, turn your head and close your eyes and put your fingers in your ears and don't listen to this... I absolutely adore you, Brian. Goodnight, Sweet Prince, Jeff.

Brian started to hit the delete button, but he couldn't. He copied the message into a file, then deleted the original. Why did he do that? He wasn't sure. He just knew he would read it again, someday. He couldn't send it to cyberspace purgatory. After a brief hesitation, he wrote to Jeffrey:

Hi, Jeff. I made it home safely. I'm dealing with a lot of internal confusion right now. I need a little space. You were wonderful. That's the problem. I know what you're feeling, believe me. I'll call you. Love....delete delete delete delete...

He signed it just as "B." with no final salutation.

He sent it, signed off, having lost his interest in his other mail. He noticed Justin was rooting around in his garment bag and he walked over to him, grabbing his arm to get his attention. "What are you doing?"

"Unpacking. I'm going to do laundry later. I thought I'd get your dirty clothes." He picked up a book. "Ulysses? You're reading about Greek gods?"

Brian took the book from him and put it down on the table beside the bed. "It takes place in Dublin in the early twentieth century. It's a classic."

"La dee da," Justin quipped, and then held up a turquoise box tied with a white satin ribbon. "Tiffany's? What's this?"

Brian sighed and fell back on the bed, his arms crossed behind his head. "It's for you, brat."

"No way."

"Way."

"You bought me a present? From Tiffany's?" Justin's smile was chilling. "Guilty conscience?"

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"Let me think, the last time you bought me a present...oh yeah, that would be the hooker for my nineteenth birthday."

Brian sat up, grabbed the package out of his hands, carried it into the kitchen and threw it in the trash bin. He then opened a bottle of water and drained it, refusing to meet Justin's eyes as he followed him and retrieved the box from the trash. "Why are you being such a DQ?"

"Why are you being such an ungrateful brat?"

Justin bit his inner lip to keep from asking how grateful he should be when Brian comes home from shagging some fucking doctor for two days. He was playing it cool, as Leo suggested. But he felt anything but cool at that moment. Instead of blowing up, he untied the ribbon and opened the box, removing a smaller velvet box that was nestled inside. He snapped it open, looking first at the contents, and then at Brian, who shrugged. It was a small sterling silver perpetual calendar. The month of December was showing, and he picked up the card that read, "December 23-January 4th. Save these dates. B."

"What does that mean, `save these dates'?"

"You never got that trip to Italy that Emmett wanted you to have. So I thought we'd see it together. Rome, Venice, Florence, Amalfi coast, Portofino, all of it."

"You're taking me to Italy for a couple weeks? You're taking off work that long?"

"I haven't had a real vacation in...well, never, really. Yes, I'm taking off work. They can survive without me for awhile. And Christmas season is slow. All the hype goes in before the holidays."

Justin was too stunned to respond at first. Finally, he said, "What about school?"

"I checked. NYU is on break until the thirteenth which is when the new semester starts, so that's when you will be starting. Plenty of time to recover."

Any other time, Justin would have been thrilled by this gift. Beyond thrilled. Not only to see Italy, but to see it with Brian. Right now, it felt like guilty reparation which made him feel sad and scared. His eyes filled with tears that Brian misunderstood, thinking he was touched by his thoughtfulness. Brian took him in his arms, felt his back stiffen. When he bent to kiss him, Justin turned his face away.

"What is wrong with you?"

"I can't do it," Justin said, blinking, a tear tracing his cheek. He left Brian's embrace and sat down on the couch, staring at the fire in the hearth. Brian followed him over there, confused.

"Can't do what? Go to Italy with me? Why not?"

"I can't play it cool. I can't act like nothing's wrong. Leo's right, that's exactly what I should do, but I can't, Brian." Brian felt an instinctive tightening in his gut. "What does Leo have to do with anything?"

"Nothing, really. He's just been a friend to me. He's trying to help. Level with me, Brian. How was your little rendezvous with Jeffrey?"

For a split second, Brian considered lying. He weighed his chances of getting away with it and decided not to even try. He was a lot of things, but a good liar, he wasn't. He poured them each a drink and handed one to Justin before sitting in a chair facing him, one long leg thrown over the arm of it as he struggled to find words that didn't seem to matter. "It wasn't planned. We didn't put our heads together and decide to meet each other out of town."

Justin said nothing, using the alcohol to steady his nerves and wiping his tears on the sleeve of his shirt. Brian was wrenched by the pain on his beautiful face, pain he created, but he knew better than to try and comfort him right now. "It started before that, when Jeffrey said something to me on the computer and I never responded."

"What did he say?" Justin asked numbly, and Brian sighed, staring down at his bare foot where it tapped a nervous rhythm on the hardwood floor.

"That he loved me."

Justin winced. "You said you would tell me if it changed."

"I'm telling you now."

"Why didn't you respond?"

"I didn't know what to say."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm in love with you, Justin."

Justin smiled sadly and shook his head, getting up to refill his empty glass and picking up a napkin to use as a handkerchief, unable to stop these fucking tears, despite his struggle to do so. He sat down again, staring straight ahead. "Man, those words would have been like music to me not long ago."

"And now?"

"And now I wonder why you didn't just tell him that, Brian? Why not just say, sorry, Jeffrey, baby, but I have a lover!"

"I did tell him that, Justin."

"When? With your cock down his throat or up his ass?"

Brian sighed, lit a cigarette. "I went there to tell him that in person."

"So you didn't have a business meeting?"

"Yes, I did have a meeting, but I also planned to see Jeffrey, to explain why I was not responding to him."

"Why couldn't you tell him that when he got back to New York?"

Brian shook his head. "I don't know. I just knew I had to do it right away."

"What bullshit."

He nodded. "Maybe. Maybe it is. But that was my motive."

"That's what you told yourself. Your motive was to find him and fuck him, which you've been wanting to do since you first met him! Are you going to sit there and tell me you never fucked him?"

Brian lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply. "No, Justin. I'm not going to tell you that. I did fuck him."

"Finally! The big unrequited passion is satisfied! How was he? As good as you thought he would be?"

Brian shook his head. "Don't do this."

"Do what? Express anger over my lover fucking this cocksucker who has been after him from the very beginning, just as I knew he was? You kept telling me you were 'just friends'. What bullshit!"

"We were friends, Justin. We are friends. The sex was a mistake."

"Oh, it was a really big mistake, Brian. Almost as big as the mistake I made in moving to New York and leaving my boyfriend for you! Because you made it seem as if you couldn't live without me! Now, I'm not even here for a month, and you're screwing around with someone you have feelings for! You have feelings for him, Brian! If he was some trick, I wouldn't feel this strongly about it. I know how you are. But he's no trick, is he? He's meaningful to you. Where the fuck does that leave me? What the fuck am I doing here? What role do I play?"

Brian's hand vibrated nervously as he took another draw on the cigarette. Externally, he appeared perfectly calm. Internally, he was fragmenting.

"Justin, nothing has changed. I want you here, with me. I love you. I want to make my life with you. I'll admit I have feelings for Jeffrey. What they are, I'm not sure. But I did tell him I loved you and that you were my partner. That the fact I fucked him changed nothing."

"Swell. And what did he say to that?"

"He said it changes everything."

"You know what, Brian? He was right. It does change everything." He stood up and walked to the bedroom, stuffing random clothes into a nylon athletic bag. Brian followed him.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm not staying here."

"Don't be melodramatic, Justin. It's late. We don't have to talk. I'll sleep on the couch. Just stay and calm down."

"Fuck you, Brian!"

"Where will you go?"

"What business is that of yours?"

Brian felt panic grip his gut in a vise. He could scarcely breathe. He was shaky and his heart was pounding at a sickening rate. "Please don't do this, Justin. Let's talk."

"I have nothing to say and nothing you say will make a fucking bit of difference."

Brian felt his lower lip quiver, his eyes fill with tears. Then it happened. The ice began to flow. His ancient protective device kicked in and began filling his veins with cold, soothing ice water. His heart rate dropped. His face cooled. His jaw set in a hard, unyielding line. The emotion behind his eyes went flat, as if he had flipped off an energy source and replaced it with numb neutrality. He could not allow himself to lose control, to display his vulnerability. He had to feel nothing at all, that was the only way he could cope. He learned this defense as a boy, and he used it often over the years. Emotions were bad. Feeling nothing was good. No pain, no panic. Ice.

"In that case, you'd better go," he said coolly and Justin looked up and saw the mask of the old Brian, handsome and impenetrable.

"Tell me something, Brian? Was this all about revenge? Was it your plan to pry me away from the man who stole me from you? Once you had me, you planned to fuck me over? To show me how much it hurts? Because if that was your plan, bravo. You win."

Brian raised a single brow, his only change of expression. He said nothing.

Justin grabbed his coat and left, slamming the door shut behind him.

Brian sat there for a minute, then stood, feeling his protective shell of ice shatter, as if hit by a mallet. He lurched into the bathroom and threw up everything he had eaten that day, sinking down to the cold tile floor. He just sat there; one arm thrown over the porcelain can as he began to weep silently, unable to stop the emotions that he had tried so valiantly to contain.

"Brian?" Lydia's voice was like a life preserver tossed out on a surging sea. He grabbed at it, trying to form a cogent sentence, feeling completely out of control.

"Help me..."

"That's why I'm calling. I got the message from my service. What's wrong?"

"Can't...breathe...sick...shaking."

"Ok, Brian, calm down. It's an anxiety attack. Do this. Sit down in a comfortable chair. Lean back. Close your eyes. Feel the muscles of your face start to relax. Your forehead smoothes out, your eyes are lightly closed. Your lips are

parted slightly, but relaxed and long. Feel your chin grow slack. Breathe deeply. Let it out. Breathe again. Let it out. Unclench your fingers and feel this calm move through your whole body. Your heart begins to slow down, beating softly, steadily but slowly. Your stomach expands, relaxes as your ribs lift and make room for it. Your abdominal muscles grow soft, responding to gravity. Let your body sag. Breathe. Relax. Let go of the tension. Picture that farm in Amish country, your dog, and your grandparents. Feel safe and loved and innocent." A few moments passed in silence, and then she said, "Can you talk to me now?"

"I think so," while he wasn't the iceman, the frenetic panic had subsided. Brian had been terrified by it, never before experiencing such a breakdown of control. Being out of control was his greatest fear. He had no choice but to seek help from the one person who might understand what was happening to him.

"Did something occur, Brian, or is this an anxiety attack without apparent cause?"

"Something happened."

"What?"

"Justin left."

"Why did Justin leave?"

"Because I fucked Jeffrey."

"He caught you?"

"I told him the truth."

"How long has this been going on, Brian?"

"It just happened."

"Have you chosen Jeffrey?"

"No! He left me! I didn't want him to leave!"

Lydia sighed. "Ah. That's more complex than it may seem to you right now, Brian. But first things first. Are you suicidal?"

He started to express anger over that inquiry, but reconsidered and simply said, "No."

"Are you drinking?"

"I had a couple, but I'm not drunk. I threw it up, anyway."

"Is there an all night pharmacy near you?"

"At the end of the block, yeah."

"I'm going to call in a prescription. I'm only giving you two pills, because I'm not confident in your state of mind. But it will be enough to calm you down and let you get through the night. I'm moving some appointments and I want to meet with you first thing in the morning, okay? Be there at eight thirty."

"Lydia, I can't handle this," he said softly, rubbing his fingers through his hair as she sighed.

"Yes you can, Brian. We'll handle it together. Now get me the number for that pharmacy. When you get the pills, take both of them with water, no more alcohol, and go straight to bed. They'll knock you on your ass. Set your alarm to be sure you get up for our appointment."

Brian gave her what she needed, then hung up, pulling on his shoes and coat as he prepared to walk zombie like to the corner and retrieve the drugs that he hoped would send him into instant oblivion.

Leo Chang opened the door to his swank Tribeca duplex, surprised to find Justin standing there, looking all of twelve, gripping his gym bag in both hands. "I didn't know where else to go," he said softly, then began to cry. Leo sighed and ushered him inside, handing his bag to a quietly inquisitive Bill as he embraced Justin with paternal tenderness.

"You came to the right place, kid. The play it cool thing didn't work out, huh?"

"I tried!"

"Of course you did." He led him into the main room dominated by a Blue Period Picasso that was hung over the fireplace as bold as a print, which it decidedly was not. Bill poured Justin a drink, and then left them alone, accepting a silent plea from his lover for a little privacy. Once Justin was calm, he told Leo everything that transpired between Brian and him. Leo sighed and shook his head. It was easy to counsel cool, but it was difficult to achieve it, especially when one was only twenty.

"Justin, you are more than welcome to stay with us tonight. But darling, I think it's a strategic mistake unless you intend to scrap the relationship altogether. You're leaving the field open for Jeffrey, and you're doing it when Brian is most vulnerable. Are you good and over him?"

Justin sighed, feeling as if he suddenly weighed a thousand pounds, all of it on his chest. "No."

"But?"

"Tell me something, Leo. Why are you rooting for me instead of Jeffrey? Isn't he your friend?"

"Ok, follow me, goldilocks." Justin trailed him into the kitchen which was two stories tall with cooking surfaces a chef would envy and a glassed in cabinet of Leo's favorite, often rare, herbs. "We're going to talk turkey, so we have to nosh."

"I'm not in the mood for Chinese," Justin grumbled and Leo smiled.

"I'll write that off to your temporary insanity. Of course we're not having Chinese. We're having the Feldman family remedy, Jewish womb food."

"Who is the Feldman family?"

"Bill Feldman, my partner!"

Justin sat on one of the tall stools fronting a granite counter. He watched Leo remove some cheese blintzes from the refrigerator, explaining Bill prepared them earlier in the evening. They were his one good dish as a chef. Leo warmed them and covered them with a strawberry puree. Justin wasn't planning to eat, certain he couldn't keep anything down, but after one taste, he cleaned his plate and asked for more. As they munched a second serving, Leo said, "Look, here's the thing about Jeffrey. I first met him before he was with Freddie."

"That model you told me about?"

"The same. Bill and I had been together for almost ten years at the time. We were very happy, but like any couple, we had our moments. Along comes Jeffrey. He was an intern, rotating through Bill's specialty. He's beautiful, brilliant, talks Bill's coded language, and just happens to be gay."

"Uh oh. He did Bill?"

"Not exactly. But Bill developed a little crush on Jeffrey. He would deny it to this day, but he did. Every other word was Jeffrey this or Jeffrey that. I was working with Jeffrey's parents on some major art acquisitions, thanks to Bill's entrée, so I had to be nice."

"You hated him?"

"Let's just say I wished he would be a brilliant and handsome young doctor on another continent. Preferably one without phones."

Justin smiled and ate the remains of a blintz that Leo abandoned, after receiving the nod from Leo to go ahead.
"What happened?"

"I finally called Jeffrey on it. I said it would appear Bill was infatuated with him. What did he intend to do about it?"

"What did he say?"

"He laughed. He said he knew Bill had a case on him, but I didn't need to worry about it. Bill was not hot enough to interest him on a purely physical level, and since Jeff wanted to go into pediatric oncology, Bill could do him no professional good. So, I should relax. My man was safe, and the crush would pass."

Justin exhaled slowly. It seemed like a shitty thing to say, but he wasn't sure why. "Did it?"

"Oh yes, Bill recovered his senses soon enough. Bought me that Picasso as a peace offering. Who can be angry with that kind of man? But I always resented Jeffrey's sense of absolute entitlement to Bill, if he so wanted him. It was only the fact that he didn't want him that saved my ass, I suppose. Obviously I had no hope of competing. The worst part of it? His arrogance was valid. If he felt differently about Bill, I most likely would have lost him. And then where would I be? I can't imagine my life without my lover."

Justin leaned back on the stool, suddenly sated. "The difference here is that he DOES want Brian."

"Yes, a very big difference, dear. But there are two other factors here: first, you are a major beauty. There is no man you can't compete with one on one in the looks department, including the lovely Jeffrey. Second, you and Brian are still new. You haven't hit the doldrums yet. You still have that hot to trot thing going on and also he adores you. If anyone could defeat Jeffrey at his game, it's you, Justin. Question is, is it worth it to you?"

"You mean is Brian worth it to me?"

"Yes, that's what I mean."

Justin winced, feeling tears threaten again. He blinked them back, determined not to give in to his emotions. He wanted his head clear as he considered the question Leo posed to him. He wasn't sure he knew the answer, not now, not when his emotions were so raw and he felt so betrayed.

"Take your time," Leo insisted. "It's a big decision." He began loading their dishes into the dishwasher.

"I guess I should sleep on it if you're sure I can stay here."

"Of course you can, Justin. My pleasure. Come on, I'll show you to a room." Leo had no problem playing host to Justin, but he hoped that Justin's painful ambivalence was not going to render his decision moot. Knowing Jeffrey the way he did, leaving Brian alone and bleeding for just one night may be all it would take for the tenuous arc of a relationship balance to tilt precariously out of Justin's control.

DECONSTRUCTING BRIAN

Session 9

by Randall Morgan

Doctor's Notes: BK phoned my service last night while he was suffering from an anxiety attack. He attributed this attack to the departure of his partner, JT, following the revelation that BK had been intimate with another man. I have been treating BK for approximately eight weeks for depression, anxiety, insomnia and other psychological issues. (See history, and see medications prescribed.) I spoke with him last night and discovered he was suffering the classic symptoms of an anxiety attack: Shortness of breath, panic, nausea, heart palpitations. I conducted a bio feedback calming exercise over the phone, and prescribed light sedation so he could sleep. We agreed to meet this morning. He arrived on time, but uncharacteristically disheveled. His jeans appeared slept in, his shirt was untucked and wrinkled. He was unshaven and wore dark glasses that I asked him to remove. These are manifestations of his psychic break, because he is fastidious about his appearance. Fashion precision supports his self-image as a man always in perfect control.

Excerpt from Transcript:

Doctor: Taking the day off?

BK: Yeah. Slow week.

Doctor: How was your night?

BK: (Voice flat and without emotion.) Not so bad.

Doctor: I see. When did it improve?

BK: I guess your medication did the trick. It knocked me out. Thanks. I'm not sure why I felt so, uh, anxious last night. I think I was just overly tired. I drove a long way to Boston in bad weather, caught a flight to New York, hit traffic over the airport and on the ground...long night. And I didn't sleep much the previous night, either. I get kind of crazed when I'm that tired.

Doctor: Are you suggesting your anxiety was caused by fatigue?

BK :(Shrugged.) I suppose that aggravated everything.

Doctor: By "everything" do you mean the fact that Justin left?

BK: That was part of the problem.

Doctor: What was the other "part", Brian?

BK: What the fuck are you doing?

Doctor: What do you mean?

BK: I was starting to feel better about things, calmer, and now you're trying to upset me again. Why?

Doctor: Brian, you know what happens when you cut your finger and it gets infected? Sometimes your body will skin over the wound, but all that really does is seal in the toxins. The infection grows and soon you're in a crisis situation. The same is true of your emotions. When you are wounded, emotionally, your protective instincts kick in and attempt to seal over the open wound. You don't heal, you just let the hurt fester until a serious break occurs. I

want to prevent that. I want to deal with your current wound, clean it out, give you a chance to heal. First we have to deconstruct your careful defenses so that we can get to the heart of the wound.

BK: What if I don't want to be deconstructed? I spent a lot of years building these defenses. I've also found out that all the emotional crap people carp about is a load of bullshit. It's painful. Who needs it?

Doctor: If you didn't want to know your own emotions, Brian, you wouldn't have come to me.

BK: I came to you because I couldn't sleep!

Doctor: And your insomnia is caused by your emotional trauma. It's all connected. So let's put away the denial card and use this time wisely. Recap what happened.

BK :(Delivered the events leading up to the call in a smooth, uninterrupted monotone. Looked up at me when he finished.) That's it. The whole sordid story.

Doctor: How do you feel right now?

BK: Numb.

Doctor: Talked to Justin?

BK: No.

Doctor: Plan to do so?

BK: Up to him. He's the one who left.

Doctor: So it's like that?

BK: It's like that.

Doctor: He's at fault?

BK: No, Lydia, of course not. I'm to blame. I'm always to blame. Justin leaves me for another man, it's my fault. I'm a heartless bastard. I wasn't romantic enough for him. I put my job over his needs. I fucked around, tricked. He had every right to leave me for someone who would be all the things I was not. He's the angel, I'm the bad guy. I know all that.

Doctor: Brian, that was when Justin left you the first time. The circumstances are entirely different now.

BK: I know that! But if I was to blame the first time, I'm surely to blame now!

Doctor: Ok, Brian, let's examine that first time. When did you know something was wrong?

BK: I don't know. Ever since the bashing, things had been different. On my birthday, on prom night, I felt as if we shared something big. We reached an understanding. Fates being what they are, he got bashed and forgot all about the dance, the kiss, and the feelings that we shared. Erased. I was at the hospital every second for that first critical week. After that, I came late, because of my job, and watched him sleep. When he got out, I tried to help him remember, I tried to give him back his spirit, his confidence. His mother asked me to leave him alone, so I did. Then she asked me to help him, so I did. He did come back, slowly. When he couldn't draw, I got him a computer. When his father crapped out on his tuition, I paid it. When he was afraid to be touched, I eased him into it. When he wanted a commitment from me, I moved him into my home, my life. I fed him, I dressed him, I educated him, and I fucked him, I...I loved him. But it was never enough.

Doctor: Explain, Brian.

BK: When I was aloof, tricking constantly, trying to get him out of my loft, he couldn't get enough of me. When I tried to have a relationship with him, I was constantly being judged. He set the rules for our relationship, no kissing, no second date, no spending the whole night out. I lived by those rules, even when he didn't. Which I don't think he ever did, truthfully. The rules seemed to change somewhere along the line, but no one told me.

Doctor: What do you mean?

BK: He started sneering at me, judging me quietly for doing what I thought we agreed to do. He didn't come to me and tell me we needed to change the rules. Instead he treated me like a shit for doing exactly what we said we could do. I was the beast. He wanted this and he wanted that, but did he tell me? No, he told other people and pouted. He punished me but I was never sure why. I just know he stopped approving of me somewhere along the line, and that made me feel like shit. Once I was his hero. Then I was beneath contempt. And that was his chance to leave me.

Doctor: He was seeing someone before he left, of course.

BK: Yes. I didn't know it at first, but yes.

Doctor: And how did it hit you?

BK: From all outward appearances? Not at all. Inwardly, it hurt. If that was the kind of man he wanted, why did he waste time with me? And why did he come back to me now? I'm still the same jerk I was when he left me.

Doctor: Are you, Brian?

BK: I guess so.

Doctor: I disagree. You're seeing me, and not just to sleep better. To understand yourself, why you're so blocked, what you can do to change. Why you're unhappy. That's not a man satisfied with the status quo. Why do you think Justin came to New York to live with you again, Brian?

BK: (Coldly.) Maybe he wanted a free place to stay while he launched his art career.

Doctor: Ouch. You believe that?

BK: (Sighed, ran fingers through his hair) No, not really. I'm not sure why he came back.

Doctor: Because he loves you?

BK: Me or some fantasy of whom he thinks I should be?

Doctor: And who would that be?

BK: Looks like me, smells like me, walks like me, lives in my loft, but has the personality of June Cleaver.

Doctor: (Laughed.) Plausible?

BK: I don't know. I never said I could be faithful. I said I would try to be, I said I loved him and I do. I did try, I met Jeff. I didn't plan on meeting Jeff.

Doctor: And how do you feel about Jeff, Brian?

BK: I'm not sure.

Doctor: What do you think?

BK: I admire him, I like him, and I'm comfortable with him. I'm attracted to him.

Doctor: Why are you comfortable with him?

BK: I don't know, but I can tell you what I think. I think it's because, in some ways, he's like Mikey. My old friend. Mikey gets mad at me and bitches at me, but he never judges me. I always know that, underneath it all, he loves me. Warts and all. He never looks at me as if I have shit streaking my forehead. When I fuck up, he tells me and then he forgives me. I don't have to try and guess what he wants or what I have to do to make him happy. Jeff is nothing like Mikey in most respects, but he is in one very big way: he accepts me for who I am.

Doctor: Brian, does he know who you are? Do you?

BK: Good point, but he seems to like what he sees. I don't wear any facades with Jeff. What he sees is the real me.

Doctor: And Justin?

BK: I think he still sees who he wants me to be. I thought we were over that, but no more. I see the fantasy still rules the relationship with Justin. Maybe it's because he's so young.

Doctor: With Jeff, were you at ease sexually?

BK: Yes, it felt very natural. It was easy, exciting but not competitive.

Doctor: What do you mean by "competitive"?

BK: Sometimes tricks have to assert themselves, to show they can be the BOY.

Doctor: Explain.

BK: You know, they want to top you or make you suck their dick, just to show you they aren't submissive.

Doctor: Does topping mean being the active partner during anal intercourse as opposed to the passive partner?

BK: Yeah, Lydia. (Laughed.) I'll make a fag out of you yet.

Doctor: Do you usually take that role?

BK: Usually, yes. Especially with tricks. I lost most of my interest in being the bottom after I outgrew my twink years. But sometimes, with someone I trust or whatever, sometimes, it's nice to roll over.

Doctor: Do you ever roll over with Justin?

BK: Yes, sometimes.

Doctor: And Jeffrey?

BK: (Hesitated.) Yes, we switched off.

Doctor: Does that surprise you?

BK: Frankly, yes. A little.

Doctor: Why is that, Brian?

BK: It was our first time to fuck. Can't remember the last time that happened on an initial bout of fucking.

Doctor: Does it concern you?

BK: (Laughed.) It's just sex, Lydia. I don't lose sleep over that kind of thing.

Doctor: Would Justin?

BK: Probably, since everything seems to bother him lately.

Doctor: Brian, you are still very, very angry at Justin for when he left you the first time. Do you realize that?

BK :(Frowned.) Why do you say that?

Doctor: I don't say that. You do. In many overt as well as subtle ways. In fact, I think you're feeling a lot of rage over what you view as his betrayal. Rage you've never allowed yourself to express, rage that is now coming back to poison the relationship you are currently attempting with the same man who betrayed you.

BK: That's not true.

Doctor: Isn't it, Brian? Were you not angry at Justin when he left you?

BK: No!

Doctor: How could he do that? He was the first person you ever cared about romantically. How could he just walk away? Did he not see how hard it had been for you to open up as much as you did? Didn't he realize you had done as much as you could do to be a good partner to him?

BK: Stop it...I deserved what happened.

Doctor: Why didn't he tell you what you were doing wrong before he just left you? Why didn't he give you a chance to change things? How could he overlook what you had done for him?

BK: I was a terrible partner, I screwed anything that moved...I gave him a hustler for his birthday.

Doctor: You walked into a room full of eighteen year old kids, all staring at you and giggling and whispering, your nightmare, and you did it for him. You took him in your arms and you led him through a beautiful dance, leaving no room in the universe except for you two. You did the one thing you swore you would never do. You gave your heart to someone in front of a room full of witnesses. And then... and then he simply forgot.

BK: (Winced, exhibiting extreme pain.) Not his fault, he got hit... almost killed.

Doctor: And he left you because you were not romantic enough, even though you had given him the most romantic moment of his life, and the memory of it was locked away in some obscure corner of his mind. He made you feel unworthy of his love. He made you feel as if you didn't deserve to share his life. That there was something wrong with you. You, the man who wore his blood soaked into a scarf against your heart until he was safely home from the hospital. You were not romantic enough to deserve his love?

BK: Yes, god damn it! (Stood, paced over to the window, turned to face me, his features drawn with pain.) That's right! No one could love him more! No one! He was the only person I had ever allowed myself to love, the only one

I let inside, and he owed me something for that, Lydia! He owed me something for that. I didn't know how to do it, I had no role models growing up to teach me about love and respect, I could only operate on pure emotion. If I wasn't doing it right, he could have told me, showed me. I was trying! I was learning! I was attempting to hold onto some shadow of my own self image while becoming a different person for him, and he left me while I was in the middle somewhere, no longer Brian, but not yet evolved. He cut out my heart and left me standing there like a fucking idiot!

Doctor: And you were hurt.

BK: Yes!

Doctor: And you were angry.

BK: No...ok...yes! Yes, I was angry! Happy? I was fucking angry and hurt and miserable and sad and ashamed and scared. Is that what you want to hear? He ripped me up! And no one could know how I felt because Brian Kinney is not allowed to bleed. No one could help me, comfort me. Brian Kinney is not allowed to feel pain. No one could sit up with me at night, because Brian Kinney is not allowed to cry. The iceman suffers alone and in silence and keeps it hidden.

Doctor: There is no iceman in this room, Brian. And you're permitted to express any emotion you may be feeling. And no one will ever know.

BK: (Met my eyes, his realization melting the mask of his features.) Christ, is he right, Lydia? Did I lure him away just to hurt him? To pay him back? Am I a complete sociopath?

Doctor: You're no sociopath, Brian. And I honestly believe you have strong feelings for Justin. But you also have a residual rage that you have to resolve. Unless you do, you're doomed to a cycle of punishment and retribution.

BK: (Rubbed his closed eyes with his fingertips.) I don't believe it. I love him. I didn't do this to get back at him. I never planned on Jeffrey.

Doctor: It's not about Jeffrey, Brian. If it hadn't been Jeffrey, it would have been another catalyst. You had to vent that rage, your psyche demanded it.

BK: And in true Brian Kinney fashion, my retribution hurts me more than anyone. I lost him.

Doctor: You haven't lost him yet, Brian, but you certainly might. Ask yourself this, are you happy with him? Does the good outweigh the bad? Is this someone you want in your life on a daily basis?

BK: (Sighed.) I already know the answer to that. Yes.

Doctor: And Jeffrey? Are you willing to sacrifice that relationship to the good of your partner? Are you ready to walk away from Jeffrey?

BK: (Hesitated. Grimaced, shook his head.) I don't know.

Doctor: Brian, that's a question you need to be able to answer.

BK: Can't we go back to being friends?

Doctor: Can you?

BK: I would want to try. I don't want to lose him altogether.

Doctor: How honest are you being now?

BK: About?

Doctor: About how important Jeffrey has become to you.

BK: (Long pause.) I am so fucked up.

Doctor: You are deeply conflicted.

BK: Shrink speak for "fucked up". What do I do now?

Doctor: I suggest I meet with Justin alone. In the mean time we work on your issues of rage and your confusion regarding Jeffrey.

BK: What would you tell Justin?

Doctor: Only that which is within the four corners of the release you will give me in order for me to talk with him, Brian. Nothing more.

BK: Lydia, it wasn't Justin's fault. I have no right to be mad at him for leaving me. Not the first time, not this time. My rage, as you put it, is my own fault, not his.

Doctor: Brian, the truth is somewhere in the middle. As big a surprise as this may be for you, the bad guy is not always Brian Kinney. Sometimes there are no bad guys, only unhappy people.

BK: It's too late anyway. He's gone.

Doctor: I think you're being overly pessimistic. Let's just see, shall we?

End of excerpt.

Doctor's Notes: BK experienced a major breakthrough today after I relentlessly confronted him about his repressed rage towards JT's first exit from their relationship. He finally admitted that anger existed. He has spent over a year denying he was angry or hurt or lonely, taking all the blame for their fragmentation and feeding his image of low self esteem. He still has a long way to go before he can understand every relationship issue does not have a clear hero or villain. He must deal with his longstanding rage before he can hope to repair his relationship with JT. If, in fact, that it his goal. His ambivalence about Jeffrey suggests he may be experiencing a significant fissure between his feelings of love for JT, and his desperate need for emotional security. Jeffrey has come to symbolize emotional stability and safety to BK. While the road he faces is long and torturous, he has at least taken an important step towards self-realization.

BETWEEN THE SESSIONS

(after session 9)

by Randall Morgan

Brian couldn't move. Movement started the razor blades that sliced like a rotor through the center of his brain. No noise. No light. He was immobilized by the worst headache of his life, and he couldn't even blame booze or drugs as the cause. The sudden sound of the downstairs buzzer announcing that someone at the front door was seeking him, hit his brain with the impact of a Teflon bullet. He stumbled over to the intercom and leaned his palm on it as he growled, "Shut the fuck up!"

Laughter. "Hello to you, too. It's Jeff." Brian released the door and sank down to the floor after unlocking the entry to his loft. He sat with his back against the wall, his face in his hands, his elbows on his raised knees. He was trying very diligently not to throw up. He heard someone enter, presumed it was Jeffrey, and winced when the door slammed shut.

"What the hell, Brian?" Jeffrey squatted beside him, resting his hand on his shoulder. He had brought a bag full of food and a bottle of wine with him, and the smell of the food increased Brian's nausea.

"Headache, bad," Brian responded through gritted teeth.

Jeffrey forced his hands away from his face and squinted at him. "Drugs?"

"No, Advil, didn't help."

"Do you get migraines?"

"No."

"Are you nauseous?"

"Yes."

"Your muscles are like twisted steel. Let me help you up. Come on," he gently assisted him to his feet and kept an arm around his waist. "Where's the bed?"

Despite his pain, Brian had to smile slightly. "Animal."

"Shut up!" Jeffrey said with a laugh, following his instincts and leading Brian to the bedroom area of the loft where he instructed him to stretch out, face down, on the mattress.

Jeffrey straddled his hips and began massaging his shoulders and neck, extending his hands to his temples and applying acupressure to his pain sensors. At first, Brian thought he couldn't tolerate his touch, any touch, but slowly his body responded to the soothing, knowledgeable massage, and the pain began to recede. Jeffrey could trace the retreat of the misery as Brian's muscles softened. His breathing became deeper, more regular, and the grimace that held his features in a mask of pain went away, returning his face to what was normal and handsome. Jeffrey continued to massage him, lengthening his strokes to his torso and sides, and within minutes, Brian was fast asleep.

When Brian finally awoke, he was disoriented. He didn't remember going to bed, he just remembered the pain, and he was relieved to find that all that remained of it was a dull throb. Had Jeffrey been there or did he dream him? He knew Justin was gone, that was a nightmare he was living. He sat up slowly, not wanting to risk the return of the pain with sudden movement. Nothing. He made his way through the darkness to the bathroom, and relieved his bladder. He then went into the main area of the quiet loft, only to find Jeffrey dozing on the leather chaise, an empty wine glass on the floor beside him. The massage came back to him, and Brian smiled, grateful for his intervention.

He moved Jeffrey's leg aside so he could sit on the edge of the chaise and peered down at his elegant features. He removed Jeffrey's glasses and folded them into his shirt pocket, then kissed him gently on the lips. Jeffrey moaned, deepened the caress, resting an arm around Brian's neck. Brian enjoyed the kiss for a moment, then withdrew, causing Jeffrey's arm to slither down his shoulder. "I don't know what you did, but thanks. I thought I was having a stroke."

"Your muscles were so tight the blood flow to your brain was being affected and the stricture inflamed the membranes. If that kind of headache happens again, take a muscle relaxant and get in the Jacuzzi. No alcohol."

"It's never happened before, so I don't see why it would happen again."

"You have every right to feel tense, Brian. I heard what happened with Justin. I'm sorry."

"How did you...? Oh, Leo."

"Yes. If I played a part in it, I deeply regret it."

Brian stood up, the misery he had blocked with pain and sleep returned to nag at his composure. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Of course. Are you hungry?"

"What time is it?"

Jeffrey glanced at his watch, a slim Patek Phillipe. "Almost two- thirty. Dinner will be late tonight," he teased.

Brian grimaced. "I don't feel like going out. But I am hungry. I don't think I ate at all today."

"No need to go out," Jeffrey insisted, walking over to the kitchen and opening the sub-zero. Brian smirked at him.

"Nothing in there but Evian, beer, and whatever junk food Justin left."

"And a little coq au vin, fresh asparagus and wild rice soufflé," he took several storage bowls from the rack and put them in the microwave. "I brought it with me. My mother always taught me that when a friend is in need, bring food."

"I thought that was supposed to be a casserole or something."

"We're faggots, darling," Jeffrey teased. "We don't do casseroles."

Brian was amazed by how hungry he was as he devoured the meal, even going after seconds. Sated, he leaned back and smiled across the table at Jeffrey. "Did you cook that?"

"Yes."

"Will you marry me?"

"Yes."

Brian laughed and carried a stack of dishes into the kitchen. Jeffrey followed with the rest, and they put them in the dishwasher and cleaned up the rest of the debris. Order was always important to Brian, especially when he was distressed. He sensed Jeffrey had the same hang up. Even living with a toddler, Jeffrey's home was carefully ordered. They emptied the remains of the wine bottle into their stems and returned to the main area, sitting on the leather couch, facing the waning fire in the hearth.

"I haven't had a chance to tell you how beautiful your loft is," Jeffrey finally said. "It's so you."

Brian glanced at him and smiled slightly. "Is that a cut?"

"No! You know, it's sleek and stylish and cool. Like you. Opposite of my place, isn't it?"

"It's just another way to slice the Architectural Digest layout. My place would be called, "Urban Chic in Soho". Your place would be called, "Elegance on Fifth Avenue". Both are valid."

Jeffrey smiled. "It would be interesting to see how the two would blend."

Brian glanced at him. "They wouldn't blend."

"I know you asked for space, Brian. But when I heard about Justin, I couldn't just leave you here alone. I had to come over."

"I'm glad you did. I don't know what I would've done if that headache continued."

"You have to eat. You have to take care of yourself. You'll get through this. He's young. He just needs some time to work things out in his mind. He'll be back."

"You don't know that. You don't know what's happened with us in the past, or how we both feel now. It's about a lot more than my spending the night with you in the woods."

Jeffrey sighed, nodded. "That's fair. I don't know. I just know you're in pain, and I hate that and want to help."

Brian frowned. He stared at his wine glass as if all the answers were waiting to be revealed in the dark maroon of the merlot. "I think I lost him for good this time, Jeff."

"Over one mistake? If you can call our wonderful night together a mistake, and I'm sure Justin would. He's not that unforgiving, is he?"

"It's deeper than that," Brian placed his glass on the table, closing his eyes and rubbing his eyelids gently with his thumb and forefinger. Jeffrey moved closer to him, and put his arm across his shoulders.

"Let me hold you, baby."

"I'm okay," Brian said softly, but he went into Jeffrey's arms anyway, holding tightly to him.

Jeffrey could feel Brian's tension vibrate in the intensity of his embrace. He felt as if he was the rope lashing Brian to the side of a cliff above a deep chasm. The extent of Brian's emotions for Justin didn't please Jeffrey, but Brian's trusting him enough to show him some emotional weakness did. "Let go of it, Brian," he whispered softly. "I'll never tell."

Brian felt the threat of tears, an impossible expression for him, and he considered dropping his defenses and letting them flow, but caught himself. Instead, he kissed Jeffrey hard on the lips, reverting to a more familiar escape from pain.

Jeffrey pulled Brian on top of him, flattening his hand on Brian's ass, pushing him closer to his pelvis. Brian ground against him, feeling them both grow hard, as if combining into a single massive erection. Brian shuddered as Jeffrey pulled off his shirt, exposing his skin to the night's chill. The momentary cold was soon replaced by the warmth of Jeffrey's other hand moving across Brian's back and shoulders. Passion intensified, and then Brian paused, raising himself on his arms. He peered down into Jeffrey's face as he said, "This thing with Justin is not over. I'm not giving up."

Jeffrey smiled sweetly. "I understand, Brian. I'm not trying to take advantage of your unhappiness. I just want to help you get through this in any way that I can. If it works out with Justin, fine. I know he has priority with you. But if it doesn't, I intend to be the first in line."

"Do you understand that 'working it out' with Justin may mean I can't see you again?"

Jeffrey reached up and ran his fingers through Brian's hair and then rested his palm against his flushed cheek. "Is that what you want?"

"You know it's not what I want," Brian whispered, pressing his erection against Jeffrey's answering hardness. "But I'm being realistic."

"What's realistic, Brian?"

"I hope it's realistic that we can be platonic friends if we have to... if this ends."

"So you've capitulated your private life to Justin?"

"I don't want to lose him."

"You're not a domesticated animal, Brian. If he thinks you are, he doesn't know you at all. The wildness in Brian Kinney is one of your traits that I love most. He should treasure that feral quality, not try to emotionally blackmail it out of your soul."

Brian sighed, moved by that declaration. "He may be able to tolerate my tricking occasionally, but he can't tolerate my being with you because he knows how much I like you. You threaten him. You're pretty overwhelming."

Jeffrey moved his hand down Brian's flat belly to slip inside the waistband of his jeans. His hand squeezed his hard cock, and Brian exhaled slowly. "Brian, I don't give a shit about the effect I have on Justin. I only care what effect I have on you."

Brian kissed him, wanting to take Justin out of their conversation, away from the heat that bubbled between them, safe in some secret corner of his heart.

In bed, Brian's frustration, fear and anguish took the form of a sexual frenzy. He couldn't reach satisfaction no matter how hard he fucked Jeffrey. Only when Jeffrey took control of the scene did that change for him. Jeffrey bound Brian's wrists with Brian's black Prada tie, and then anchored them to an exposed support post of the loft with a leather belt. He insinuated himself between Brian's strong thighs, spreading out against his back and lubricating his ass with his greased up fingers. Bound and helpless, Brian was able to surrender enough control that he found a shattering release under Jeffrey's relentless fucking.

The Next Morning...

Justin experienced that strange weight that first came over him in Leo's kitchen on the night he left Brian. The pressure returned the moment he entered the building where Brian's loft was located. He bypassed the elevator, trudging up the stairs, hoping the exertion would clear his troubled mind. He had a meeting with Lydia in an hour, and he wanted to talk with Brian first. He was shocked when Brian's assistant informed him Brian had taken a couple days of vacation. Justin felt a surge of guilt over causing this lapse in Brian's workaholic tendencies. He used his key to enter the loft. Brian was leaning into the open door of the sub zero, reaching for something on a back shelf. Justin noticed Brian was wearing the navy silk robe Justin frequently usurped. A rush of longing overcame Justin's anger, and he had to flatten his hands on the countertop to keep from walking over and resting them on Brian's ass. Just then, Brian straightened up. Not Brian at all. Jeffrey. Jeffrey in Brian's robe. Unshaven, bed hair, at ease in this place that Justin considered home. Their eyes met. Justin's hands balled into fists, while Jeffrey smiled serenely.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Justin insisted. Jeffrey shrugged and filled a tumbler with orange juice that he poured from a glass pitcher.

"I'm having some juice. Care to join me?"

Justin walked past him to the bedroom. No Brian. The bathroom. Nothing. He returned to the kitchen. "Where's Brian?"

"He went down to the deli to get us some bagels. Why not stay and have one with us?"

"You're inviting me to stay for breakfast in my own home after you spent the night fucking my boyfriend?"

"Temper, temper," Jeffrey said calmly. He checked the progress of the coffee brewing in the German coffee maker, mumbling audibly, "I hope he remembers half and half. I hate coffee without half and half."

Justin was enraged by this little domestic scene Jeffrey was exposing him to. In his own home. "How can you be so cold blooded?" Justin demanded. He was amazed by the good doctor's transformation into Mr. Hyde. Jeffrey smiled at him, his handsome features suddenly looking very wolf like and predatory to the younger man.

"You're the one who decided to take a hike at the first sign of trouble. You left the door open, biscuit. When you do something like that, you never know who might slip in while you're gone."

"You phony bastard!" Justin instinctively lunged for Jeffrey. His arm accidentally swept the pitcher off the counter and it shattered on the terrazzo tiles with the damaging force of a nail bomb, sending splinters of glass flying in every direction. Jeffrey cursed, his bare feet and legs pelted with the tiny spears, each drawing a bead of blood like hungry transparent mosquitoes. Justin shoved him backwards with the force of his hands flattened on his chest. Jeffrey slipped on the spilled juice and came down hard on a chunk of glass that became lodged in the ball of his foot. Blood mixed with the juice and Justin stared at it as a glimmer of a memory came to him, then quickly disappeared. Blood on cement.

"Stop it; I've got a huge piece of glass in my foot!" Jeffrey pleaded, but Justin came at him again, prevented from reaching him by a steely grip on his wrist.

"Justin, calm down," Brian held tightly to him until he grew still. Only then did he release him. Justin twisted away from him, watching Jeffrey dislodge the glass from his foot, unleashing a torrent of blood.

"What the hell?" Brian demanded as Justin glared at him.

"Just an accident," Jeffrey said coolly, pressing a paper towel to his feet. The paper immediately turned crimson.

"How could you?" Justin turned his ire on Brian. "The bed's not even cold yet and you have HIM staying over? You really don't give a shit if I stay or if I go!"

"That's not true," Brian defended calmly. "You're the one who left. You gave up your territorial privileges to my bed when you left."

"No one has territorial privileges in that bed, Brian. There's too much traffic to claim it!"

"Justin..." Brian tried to put an arm around him, but Justin pulled free. "Look, Jeff came over here because he heard what happened with us and he was trying to be supportive. He brought dinner."

"What did you do? Eat it off his dick? You two deserve each other!" He stormed out the door. Brian started to follow, but Jeffrey stopped him.

"Brian, wait!"

Brian paused impatiently, wanting to stop Justin before he got down the stairs. "What?"

"I think I need to go to the ER. It's deep, I can't stop the bleeding. I need stitches. You're going to have to help me. I'm sorry."

Brian looked at the growing wad of red paper towels and winced. He remembered blood on white, a tuxedo shirt, a silk scarf. Justin. He glanced towards the door, mentally running after his lover so he could make the hurt go away. But he knew what he had to do.

He retrieved a towel from the bathroom, helped Jeffrey hobble over to a chair, and wrapped his bleeding foot, with extra pressure on the ball of it. He then helped him dress and called for a car. Only when they were in the town car, headed for the Emergency Room, was Brian able to relax enough to think of Justin again. Recall his look of anger and betrayal. The guilt washed over him like acid. He stared out the window, gnawing on his thumbnail, unaware of Jeffrey's penetrating gaze. Jeffrey knew Brian's thoughts were with Justin. He resented that fact, but also knew he had to play it cool and sympathetically. The little bastard had done it now. Not only did he ruin their perfect morning with his melodramatics, but he succeeded in physically hurting Jeffrey. Before, Jeffrey's only goal was to wrench Brian away from the Boy Toy and claim him as his own. Now it was personal. Now he wanted the Boy Toy to

experience a little pain along the way to losing the love of his life. And Brian was the weapon to inflict that pain, Jeffrey realized. He slid his hand onto Brian's thigh, smiling as Brian automatically covered his fingers with his own, never breaking his gaze from the window.

Doctor's Notes: Today, I met with JT, domestic partner of BK. I have met with JT before, see notes. When he arrived for our meeting, he was in a much different state of mind than at our prior sessions. It was immediately apparent that he had been crying, and he was agitated and angry. See releases in file, signed by both JT and BK to permit my meeting with both.

Excerpt from transcript:

Doctor: Thank you for coming to see me, Justin.

JT: (Shrugged.)

Doctor: Mad, huh?

JT: (Shrugged.)

Doctor: You can say it.

JT: I hate him!

Doctor: Brian?

JT: Him too! But especially that asshole, Jeffrey Walker!

Doctor: Tell me about that, Justin.

JT: I saw who he really is today, when Brian wasn't there. He's a predator. A wolf. He will do anything to protect his kill. Get rid of anyone in his way.

Doctor: And Brian is his "kill"?

JT: Yes, he is.

Doctor: Did something new happen?

JT: I went over there this morning to talk to Brian. Jeffrey was there. Wearing Brian's robe, the one I always wore. In my kitchen, using my refrigerator, just making himself at home. Brian had gone out for bagels. I'm not gone two days and Jeffrey is moving in!

Doctor: Literally?

JT: May as well be. I broke the juice pitcher and he cut his foot and I stormed out, so I don't know what happened after that. Brian didn't even follow me out. He stayed there with Jeffrey.

Doctor's Note: Justin began to cry. I gave him a few minutes to recover, and then he said:

JT: I told them they deserve each other.

Doctor: So you left the playing field?

JT: Yes! Fuck! I don't know!

Doctor: Are you surprised that Brian resorted to sex for comfort?

JT: No. But did it have to be with Jeffrey?

Doctor: Why does that bother you, Justin?

JT: Because Jeffrey is out to get him and Brian is too stupid to see it!

Doctor: Why do you think that? Brian's been around.

JT: Jeffrey is a master mind fuck. He plays Brian's vulnerabilities. He wants him and he intends to get him.

Doctor: And you intend to let him?

JT: (Glaring.) What can I do?

Doctor: Let's consider the possibilities, Justin. First, Jeffrey loves Brian, Brian loves Jeffrey, and then frankly the only thing you can do is exit the relationship. It's over. Second, Jeffrey loves Brian; Brian is ambivalent about both you and Jeffrey, uncertain. You can clear the way for Jeffrey to fill the void, or you can fight for Brian, your choice. Third, Jeffrey loves Brian; Brian is attracted to Jeffrey sexually, but is still in love with you. That's more problematical, isn't it? Even if you clear out, Jeffrey still has a long way to go to get past Brian's emotional defenses. Fourth, Jeffrey loves Brian; Brian is a confused raging mass of conflicts and has no idea what he wants or how he feels about anything. He is in pain, is terrified, is lost. Fifth, Jeffrey is using Brian. Brian is a confused raging mass of conflicts and has no idea what he wants or how he feels about anything. Brian is porked.

JT: (Smiled slightly.) Sounds like four or five are more likely.

Doctor: Can I debate that with you?

JT: Okay.

Doctor: Brian is indeed confused and conflicted, but he does know that he loves you, Justin, and he does know that things are falling apart and he is terrified. He is unclear about Jeffrey and let me give you a spin on this situation that may or may not be accurate. Brian was devastated when you left him. No, don't argue with me on that point, it's not even open for debate. He was emotionally devastated. I'm not placing blame. I'm just telling you the result.

JT: He left me no option.

Doctor: No doubt you believed that, Justin. As the devastation faded, he tried to make sense of it, but Brian lacks the coping tools to assist him in that evaluation. He is an absolute beginner when it comes to relationships. Clueless. He used sex and drugs. His usual painkillers, but the agony was always there. And so he became angry.

JT: At what?

Doctor: At you, Justin. You left him.

JT: No, he never acted mad at me. He was always totally cool.

Doctor: Not an inch deeper than his skin, Justin. He was seething. In his mind, he had let you get closer to him than anyone, ever. You were his "partner", this man who took no partners, made no commitments. He believed he had made big concessions to your relationship. You can argue that he gave up very little. You're both probably right. What seemed small to you loomed big in his emotional makeup. Neither one of you was right or wrong, you just came at this thing from very different emotional perspectives. You wanted the romance. He felt as if he gave you the big gesture, and that should be enough. He was enraged that you opened him up and then left him there, exposed and alone. Intellectually, he understands what you were missing. Emotionally, he is devastated and angry.

JT: (Paused) Still?

Doctor: Yes, Justin. Deep down, buried in denial, still.

JT: Shit. I was right? He wanted me back as payback for what I did to him? To get even with me?

Doctor: Not that simple, Justin. I think there is an element of revenge at the back of his anger, but his vulnerable self resists that losing endeavor. Consciously, he loves you very much. He can't tolerate the idea that anyone, especially himself, would hurt you. He's angry at himself for being what he perceives as weak and unworthy. His subconscious tells him you will leave him, inevitably. You will see him for the flawed creature that he is, and leave. Enters Jeffrey. JT: Yes, the asshole.

Doctor: Judgments aside, Justin, Jeffrey is Brian's age. Like Brian, he already has earned a large measure of professional success and reward. Jeffrey is handsome, wealthy and sophisticated. If someone like Jeffrey can be

interested in him, when he hasn't thrown out any barriers and facades, then maybe he's not irredeemable. With you, Brian is mentor and to a certain extent, corruptor. With Jeffrey he is at best an equal, and more likely with Brian's ego issues, he probably believes Jeffrey is somewhat dominant. That dominance permits Brian to erode a little of his binding control.

JT: So I'm dead in the water.

Doctor: Not at all. Do you believe Jeffrey has Brian's best interests at heart, Justin?

JT: I believe he has no heart. To him, Brian is a trophy. He's gorgeous, successful, sexy as hell and glib. Jeffrey likes to picture himself with a man like that, not seeing all the insecurity beneath Brian's surface. It took me a long time to see it, myself. How fucked up he really is.

Doctor: Justin, you're hurt and you have every reason to be hurt. And angry. You and Brian have many big issues to wade through before you can have a successful relationship. But you love each other, and that emotion is not easily found and easily maintained. It's rare and it's precious. Only you can decide if you're up to a fight, and if it's worth it to you, and whether you really want Brian, should you happen to succeed. If you chose to bow out and make your own way without him, most people, if not all, would reassure you it is perfectly understandable. But your relationship is not like most, and no one can tell you how to feel. If you choose to surrender, given Brian's present state of mind, I can promise you he will be living with Jeffrey within the month. From everything I've heard, Jeffrey has plotted a brilliant takeover campaign and Brian is oblivious to it.

JT: Even if I did fight for him, why would I win? How can I compete with Jeffrey?

Doctor: You're young, beautiful, sexy, and Brian adores you.

JT: When he isn't resenting me and hating me?

Doctor: Never said that. Never said hate. Anger, yes. Resentment? Probably. Hate? Never. But it won't be pretty, Justin, these things seldom are. My advice to Brian will be to pull back a bit from you both and try to get his own desires sorted before he proceeds. I'm not a matchmaker. I won't promote you over Jeffrey. I can only promote that Brian make sure he's in tight with his own emotions before he makes any big decisions.

JT: I don't know if I have the stomach for it.

Doctor: Understandable. You're the only one who can answer that question, and whatever you decide, it's perfectly fine, Justin. There is no wrong decision here unless it's to do nothing, when action was what you truly desired.

JT: (Smiled slyly.) Will you give me an insanity defense if I end up killing Dr. Dread?

Doctor: Now that you've said that, I'm afraid you may have a premeditation problem.

JT: (Laughed.) Shit! There goes my game plan. You like Brian, don't you, Lydia? He's gotten to you with that Kinney charm.

Doctor: Of course I like him, Justin. He's a likeable, bruised, vulnerable man. But understand this. I'm not his friend. I'm his doctor. I'm not trying to tie his life up with a satin bow so he can live happily ever after. I'm trying to help him face certain truths and learn how to cope. Many of those truths are not pleasant. They are painful. So hurting Brian is something I may do more often than he'd like, but it's a technique that works well with people with his problems.

JT: You could write a book about him.

Doctor: He may show up as Mr. X in a treatise someday. When is your next appointment for the regression therapy?

JT: Next Wednesday. Should I move back in with Brian?

Doctor: What do you think you should do, Justin?

JT: I'm not sure.

Doctor: There's your answer.

End of Excerpt

Doctor's Notes: JT is a very self aware man, especially for one so young. He has been dealt an emotional blow, but he sprang back quickly during the course of the session and is obviously ready to deal with his issues of whether it is worth it to him to fight for BK's affections. I made it clear this is not a struggle with a predictable outcome. No matter how hard he fights, he can't rig the resolution. BK is undergoing intense internal scrutiny and it's complicated by his ambiguity about Jeffrey. BK's therapy might progress more smoothly if JT decided to leave, as he would be forced to relinquish the past and move on to the new. However, the ease of his therapy is a small consideration compared to the conduct of his life, so it would be inappropriate for me to urge JT in either direction. I would like to meet Jeffrey. I have some fear he is a manipulative personality, which is counter intuitive for someone with BK's current ego fragility. I suspect, as a medical doctor, he would resist this meeting. If he takes the meeting, I would be prepared for major games playing and subtle challenges. I will spend some more time with BK before suggesting this meeting. Time, and JT, will have an impact on Jeffrey's campaign that will challenge BK. My goal is to assist BK in knowing and following his own emotions as he is presented with a series of difficult decisions.

BETWEEN THE SESSIONS

(after session 9, part II)

by Randall Morgan

Justin couldn't sleep. He was comfortable enough, in the guest room in Leo's duplex, lulled by the traffic noises that perpetually droned in this Tribeca neighborhood, but sleep was proving impossible.

Wearing his gray sweatpants and a t-shirt advertising Babylon, he went into the kitchen, thinking a snack might help. He was surprised to find Bill seated there, at the counter, on one of the tall stools. He was eating a sandwich, still dressed in street clothes. He smiled at Justin, looking up from the Wall Street Journal.

"Did I wake you? Sorry, kid."

"No, I just can't sleep. What are you doing up?"

"Called out on an emergency surgery. Just got home."

"Is it hard, what you do?" Justin was making conversation, not really interested, as he slapped together a sandwich for himself.

"It's an art. What you're doing is poisoning the patient. Paralyzing them. You have to give them enough to send them under, but not so much that you kill or maim them. A delicate balance. If you ever have surgery, take a close look at your gas passer. He or she is more likely to kill you than your surgeon."

Justin laughed and sat beside him on a companion stool. "I hope I never know."

"I hope so too."

"Thanks for letting me stay here, Bill."

"No problem," he glanced at Justin's profile. "I'm sorry I mentioned you were staying here to Jeffrey. I didn't mean to set events in motion."

"It's okay, Bill. He would have found out soon enough."

"Leo read me the riot act. But Leo is so...touchy...about Jeff." Justin glanced at him and decided not to mention that Leo had told him the story of how Jeffrey was the focus of Bill's crush for awhile. Bill was such a sweet guy, Jeffrey's shabby treatment of him made Justin even angrier. "I guess I don't understand why they're friends."

"Keep your friends close, your enemies closer. Plus the fact, Leo does a lot of business with Jeff's folks and in those WASP elite circles."

"Yeah, that makes sense, I suppose. The business end of art is mysterious to me."

"Don't make the mistake of underestimating Jeff, kiddo."

"I never underestimate Jeff. I've seen the face beneath the mask."

"Scary, isn't it?"

"Scary? I thought..."

"What? That I think Jeff is perfect? No, my little infatuation with Jeff taught me better than that. When I mentioned to him that you were staying with us, it seemed innocuous at the time. I forgot that nothing is really innocuous with Jeff. He has a mind like a steel trap."

Justin frowned. Jeffrey WAS a steel trap, and Brian was caught in his razor sharp teeth. "Why did you tell him?"

"We had lunch in the hospital cafeteria, as we do occasionally. I asked him about his vacation, he said he had a pleasant surprise when Brian showed up, and I said unfortunately it was not so pleasant for Brian's partner, Justin."

Justin winced. "True. Thanks, Bill."

"He asked me how I knew and I said you were staying with us for awhile, to give yourself a chance to sort things out."

"Whoops."

"So I hear. Can an old Jewish mother give you some advice that you should feel free to ignore?"

"Sure." Justin found that he missed Debbie's unsolicited advice. Beyond their gender differences, Bill couldn't have been less like the flamboyant Debbie.

"Go home."

Justin glanced at Bill, his expression quizzical. "To Pittsburgh?"

"No, to Brian."

"I don't think I can."

"Either call it quits, or go home, immediately."

"Am I wearing out my welcome?"

"Has nothing to do with that. I could have a pretty blond twink stay in my place forever, great eye candy. But you're making a strategic error. Leo knows it too, but he has that Asian sensibility, doesn't think he should interfere. I'm a New York Jew. Direct. You're leaving Brian open and vulnerable to Jeff. Unless you are over him, that's just plain dumb, kiddo."

Justin frowned, considering Bill's wisdom. "Jeffrey's probably over there."

"So ask him to leave."

"Just like that?"

"Sure. Say you need to talk to Brian. Trust me, Brian will back you up on this."

"Not sure if I'm ready to confront him, Bill."

"Justin, you wait until you're sure, and Jeffrey will have Brian so confused, you may not be able to straighten him out."

Justin grimaced, considering that possibility. "I don't know what to say."

"Baby boy, don't plan it out. Let your heart lead you. You don't have to resolve anything tonight. Just do what feels right. Sometimes no words are needed at all. Actions can be far more powerful."

"You mean fuck him? I'm too mad to fuck him."

"I mean do what feels natural at the moment. If sex feels natural, do it. If snuggling feels natural, do that. If just sleeping in the same bed is natural, do it. Justin, don't let your anger and pride keep you apart from the man you love. If you don't love him anymore, then tell him that and let you both start over."

"His shrink says if I leave, he'll end up with Jeffrey."

"Honey boy, if you leave, it's no longer your issue who he ends up with."

Justin met his eyes, strangely jarred by the idea that he could ever be in a place where what happened to Brian was none of his business.

The loft was pre-dawn quiet, pre-dawn dark. Justin felt like a burglar as he let himself in and crossed the main area to the bedroom. The blue lights were on. Only one body was in the bed, thank God. Brian's body. He was sleeping stomach down as he usually did, and Justin sat on the edge of the bed, staring down at his handsome profile. What was he doing here? What did he intend to say to this man? He wasn't sure what he wanted for himself, so why confront him now? Damn Bill, anyway! Why did he listen to him? He started to stand, when he felt Brian's hand close over his arm, holding him there.

"Don't go."

Justin sighed. "How long have you been awake?"

"I haven't been asleep. I heard you come in. I just didn't say anything."

"Why not?" Brian turned over on his back, one hand folded behind his head. In the blue light, he looked ghostly pale, almost delicate. He was apparently naked, as he usually was in bed, but only a single taut brown nipple was exposed by the sheet.

"I didn't know what to say," Brian admitted.

"I don't either."

"So here we are. With nothing to say."

"How is Jeffrey's foot?"

"He had a couple stitches. No big deal."

"I didn't do it on purpose."

"I know that, Justin. But you were mad, that was clear." "Yeah, I was mad. Are you in love with him?"

"I'm in love with you."

"Then what do you feel for him?"

Brian sat up, scrubbing his fingers through his hair, trying to shake off his blues. "I don't know."

"He's out to get you. Do you understand that?"

"Yeah, Justin, I've been around enough to know that."

"Really? Other than me, what relationship have you had?"

"As a matter of fact, I had a relationship in college." Justin looked surprised. "You mean with Lindz?"

"God no, I mean a real relationship. Not some desperate last grasp at heterosexuality."

"With whom?"

"Does it really matter?"

"It's just a shock to me. You've never mentioned anyone. Who is he? Do you still see him?"

"I don't want to talk about it, and he's dead. I was a kid. Younger than you. I had no clue. Just as you have no clue."

Justin bristled at that remark. "Bullshit, Brian. I know my own mind. I'm not a typical person my age. I've been through a hell of a lot. You grow up fast."

Brian rested his hand on the back of Justin's neck, stroking it gently. "I know you have, Sunshine. But I also know that you haven't." Justin relaxed under his tender caress, his eyes closing.

"What are you saying? I'm too young to know my own mind? To know what I want?"

"Maybe."

Justin turned, faced Brian, stretching out one leg beside him, the other tucked under him. "Brian, you're the one who doesn't know what he wants. Not I."

"I know what I want," Brian said softly, his hand moving up Justin's thigh. "I want everything."

"Sometimes you can't have everything," Justin said, his eyes closing as he felt the heat begin, even against his conscious will. He missed Brian's touch almost as much as he missed Brian.

"Why not?" Brian responded, grabbing Justin's shirtfront in his fist and pulling him on top of him. "I want what I want." He kissed him deeply. Justin sucked his tongue into his mouth, relenting to the passion, trying not to think about the pain of the other man who so recently excited this same response in his lover.

Brian stripped off Justin's shirt and rolled him beneath him, kissing him again, with greater force, stretching Justin's arms out on either side of his head, flat against the bed, and restraining his wrists with his fists. He arched over him, pulling back to stare down at his face, that was flushed with anticipation. "Tell me," Brian said in a harsh whisper, moving his erection against Justin's groin, the motion inching his sweatpants lower on his hips.

"Tell you what?" Justin responded.

"You know what."

"How much I'm hating you right now?"

Brian smiled. "Yeah, tell me that."

"I hate you."

"Do you hate this?" Brian ducked down, circling Justin's nipple with the tip of his tongue.

"Yessss," Justin said with a sibilant "s", like steam escaping from a valve. He buried his hands in Brian's hair pushing gently downward as Brian kissed his stomach and licked the overhang of his lowest rib.

"How about this?"

"Hate it," Justin said, squirming under his touch. Brian plunged his tongue into his navel and drew it out again, causing Justin to writhe with pleasure. Brian yanked his sweatpants down his hips, exposing his cock. He glanced at the stiff erection, then up at Justin's face.

"I can see how much you hate it."

"I know. Make me hate it some more."

Brian smiled and ducked down, sliding Justin's erection into his mouth and gliding his lips down the shaft, stroking the underside with his tongue as he went. Justin moaned and bucked his pelvis upward to meet the caress, striving to plunge it even deeper into Brian's mouth. Brian pulled up, sucking hard on the tip, swirling his tongue around the head counterclockwise, lapping up the pre-cum as it bubbled to the surface. "Hate me now?"

"Despise you," Justin moaned, moving his leg against Brian's erection, teasing him with his thigh. "Don't stop."

Brian pulled Justin's sweatpants all the way off, prying off his shoes but leaving on his white socks. For some reason, he found the glistening white crews against the soft blond fuzz on Justin's legs to be a turn on. He reached for his lube and a condom, asking, "How much would you hate it if I fucked you?"

Justin smiled slightly. "It would be horrible, I would never forgive you."

Brian nodded, stretching the thin latex over his throbbing erection. Even that much contact threatened his control. He was sizzling hot for Justin, feeling as if they had been apart for months. He looped his arms under Justin's thighs and hauled him up, admiring the curve of his ass as it was fully revealed to him, the bulge of his ball sac, the weight of his legs against his shoulders.

"I'm gonna make you hate the hell out of me, boy," he growled, lubing Justin generously with his forefinger and thumb before he positioned himself for penetration.

"Fuck you," Justin said softly, anticipating the pressure of his hard cock with tremulous desire. "I do hate you right now."

"Hate THIS," Brian entered his body with a smooth thrust, bracing himself on his arms on either side of Justin's torso as he went deeper. "And THIS, and THIS..." he began to fuck him with an intensity that informed him of how much he missed this sensation.

"Yes, I hate it, I hate it...!" Justin reached down and grabbed Brian's face in both hands, forcing his lips on his, sucking Brian's tongue deep into his mouth. Brian continued to drive into him, feeling the sensation build and overtake him. Just before he had to let go, he felt Justin's release jet against his belly, greasing their bodies with a slick layer as Brian placed one hand on Justin's pectorals, the other on his shoulder and arched his back as he ejaculated. He then collapsed above him, spent, and Justin held tightly to him, basking in the pleasure generated by their little game of "hate".

Justin opened the door to the loft and leaned in the threshold, wearing Brian's navy silk robe, a smile, and nothing else when Jeffrey walked up. He heard Jeffrey's voice on the street intercom and released the lock, without saying a word. Jeffrey was carrying a bag from the deli and his smile froze as he focused on Justin.

"Where's Brian?"

"Was he expecting you?" Justin said coolly and Jeffrey glared at him. "I thought I'd surprise him with his favorite bagels."

"Well, he had an early meeting at work today, so he had to make do with a high protein breakfast." Justin's smirk was not lost on Jeffrey.

"I see," Jeffrey walked past him through the main room, slamming the bag down on the kitchen counter. "When did you come back?"

"In the nick of time. How's the foot?"

"Healing, no thanks to you. Another part of my foot and I might have had tendon damage. It's still quite sore."

"That's why your mama tells you to wear shoes," Justin teased, making a show of tightening the sash of the robe Jeffrey had worn. His own feet were bare.

Jeffrey glared at him. "This changes nothing. I wouldn't be so smug if I were you."

"I'm not smug. I'm content. He was an animal last night and an angel this morning in the shower. Brian can never get his fill of me."

"Don't be too sure. You're incapable of giving him what he really needs."

"What's that, Jeff? Confusion, interference and a load of trouble?"

"Understanding, maturity and acceptance. You're a rash, Justin. Prevalent, demanding of attention, and a little itchy, but transient. Rashes go away and no one even remembers having one."

"If I'm a rash, you're the bubonic plague. Hideous, painful and terminal."

"Frankly, we've cured that now."

"Yeah, I think I found that out last night. Or was it this morning?"

The phone interrupted and Justin picked it up, feeling proud so far, capable of holding his own with the good doctor. His brief reunion with Brian had given him that confidence. He was surprised to hear his mother's voice on the other end of the receiver.

"Justin, I have some serious news. Can you talk a minute?" Jennifer Taylor's voice had that tightly controlled tone that suggested trouble. His smile faded.

"What is it, Mom?"

"Is Brian there with you?"

"No, he's at work. Why? Is it about him?"

"No, I was just hoping he was there with you."

"Why?" he repeated.

"Honey, it's about Molly."

His sister. Justin frowned. What trouble was the little mutant in now? "What's she done?"

"Nothing. She's...she's going into the hospital today. For some tests."

"Tests? What kind of tests? Why does she have to go to a hospital for tests?"

"Don't get upset, we're not sure, but the doctor is afraid she may have leukemia."

Justin sat down heavily on the overstuffed chair, his face growing suddenly pale. "Leukemia? But...she's a kid...how could she...why do they think that?"

Jeffrey was suddenly interested in his conversation, and Justin met his eyes, then looked away. He heard his mother begin to cry and blinked back tears of his own. He felt suddenly sick, scared, and angry, all at once.

"I'm sorry, honey," Jennifer said. "I was determined I wouldn't lose it with you."

"Mom, what are they telling you? What kind of tests are they going to run? Why do they think it's leukemia?"

"I don't know! I don't understand half of what they tell me! It's all Greek to me. I thought she may be anemic. She's been listless, tires easily. But now, I...just don't know."

Justin winced, struggling for control. "How serious is it? It's some kind of cancer, isn't it?"

"Put her on speaker," Jeffrey suddenly intervened and Justin glared at him.

"Hold on Mom," he covered the receiver. "Fuck off! Do you have no sense of decency?"

"Justin, think what you will of me, but this is what I do. And I do it very well. Put her on speaker." Their eyes met and Jeffrey glared at him. "Don't be childish. This isn't about Brian. This is about a sick child."

Justin weighed his choices for a moment, then sighed. "Mom, I'm going to put you on speaker phone. A friend of...ours...is here. He's a doctor. He wants to talk to you."

"That would be wonderful, Justin. I'm so confused!"

He punched on the speaker on the phone and Jeffrey pulled a chair up to be closer to the mike. "Mrs. Taylor, my name is Jeffrey Walker. I'm a pediatric oncologist."

"Jennifer, please, Dr. Walker."

"Jeff. Now, I know you're scared and confused and unsure of what to ask or think. I've never met your daughter, so I can't help you with her diagnosis, but I thought you may want to ask me about the process, about what is happening and why. Would that be helpful to you?"

"Oh my God, yes, Jeff! I can't say anything with Molly around, and the doctors are busy and..."

"Calm down, Jennifer. First of all, if it is leukemia, there are many forms of that disease, most of which respond remarkably well to modern treatment. So don't convince yourself that, if it is in fact leukemia, you are without hope, because that's simply not true." Justin watched in wonder as Jeffrey, the evil Mr.Hyde, morphed back into the angelic Dr. Jekyll, soothing voice, reassuring manner, skilled physician. Despite his dislike of Jeffrey, he was finding himself hanging on his every word.

Justin heard his mother's panic ramp down a notch as she said, "They keep talking about blasts. I don't understand."

"Blasts are white blood cells found in the bone marrow but not in circulating blood. Tests are taken to measure blasts. Everyone has some blast in their bone marrow. Abnormal blasts suggest leukemia may be present."

"They'll take her bone marrow?"

"She'll be given drugs to ensure she is not in pain, or perhaps even put to sleep during the procedure. A sample is taken from the back of the pelvic bone with a long needle. A tiny cylinder of bone, about 1/16th of an inch in diameter and a half inch long is removed along with the marrow. This test material is biopsied. They may also want to do a lumbar puncture in the spinal cavity of the lower back to withdraw some cerebrospinal fluid to check for

cells. It sounds horrendous, but it's a very low invasive procedure. They will do all they can to protect her from pain. But early treatment is so critical, it's essential that these tests be completed as soon as practical."

"And they'll know?"

"Most likely, yes."

"Then what?"

"Jennifer, the treatment is so varied, depending upon the type of leukemia, your daughter's general health and the virulence of the disease. You will be presented with a host of treatment options by your team."

Justin looked confused. "Team?"

"Yes, if it is leukemia, a team of doctors will be involved. A pediatric oncologist, of course, a hematology-oncologist, and many others. I have some advice for you on that, Jennifer. Require the team to give you a point person, whose job it is to gather all the confusing medical data you'll receive and deliver it to you in one setting. In human terms. It's no good for you to have to float from doctor to doctor, trying to make sense of what you hear. They can consolidate for you and then you only have to go to the specialists directly when you have a question beyond the knowledge and expertise of your point person. Make sure your specialists are board certified. I will be only too happy to give you the names of some people in your area whom I know to be qualified and competent, if that might help."

"Jeff, I would be forever in your debt!"

"Don't even worry about that. I know how much you have to worry about now, let me help you with that. I'll get your number and call you this afternoon with some names. And I'm going to give you my numbers, Jennifer. While I won't second guess her treatment, I'll be glad to explain things to you if you become confused, and offer whatever reassurance I can from a distance."

"I'm coming home, Mom," Justin suddenly announced, feeling useless compared to Jeffrey.

"No honey, not yet. Let's see what we learn from the preliminary tests. I'll keep you informed."

"I think I should be there."

"I know, Justin. But right now there's nothing you can do."

"I can hold her hand and yours."

"I...I don't know."

Jeffrey smiled slightly. "Sometimes its more difficult to be away when things are happening to someone you love."

Justin met his eyes and sighed. Was he being opportunistic? Getting him out of the picture? Or was he still being the good Jeffrey, because he had to admit, Jeffrey had been phenomenal with his mother.

Justin knew this was too serious to let his insecurity over Brian swing the decision. His belief was that Molly and Jennifer needed him in Pittsburgh, so that was where he needed to be. He had to have faith that Brian would understand, and that their relationship would still be here when he came back.

"I'll come in this afternoon. I'll phone you with the arrangements."

"Ok, honey, if you're sure."

"Don't worry about a thing here, Justin," Jeffrey said with a reassuring pat on the shoulder. "I'll hold down the fort."

"Justin, I'm so glad you have such a wonderful new friend," Jennifer gushed and her son just sighed, his loyalties stretched between two distant points with such tension, he knew the release of that torque could launch a rocket.

DECONSTRUCTING BRIAN

Session 10

by Randall Morgan

Doctor's Notes: BK arrived on time, as usual. He was fastidiously dressed in an expensive suit and tie and looked composed and rested. He was perhaps quieter than usual, and I had to work at drawing him out. His reticence was explained early in the session.

Excerpt from Transcript:

Doctor: What's on your mind, Brian? You seem almost artificially serene today.

BK: Some bad news on the personal front.

Doctor: I see.

BK: Puts the rest of this shit in perspective.

Doctor: Can you share it?

BK: Justin's kid sister is sick. Could be serious. Leukemia, maybe.

Doctor: I'm certainly sorry to hear that. How is he holding up?

BK: He went back to Pittsburgh to be with his mom and his sister while they run all those nasty tests.

Doctor: Of course. Did you object?

BK: (Frowned.) I'm not a monster, Lydia. I wanted him to go back and be with his family! I bought his ticket! I'd go myself, if I didn't believe my presence would just aggravate the situation. His parents are divorced, and the only

thing they agree on is how much they dislike me. They have enough to worry about with their daughter. They don't need to see me with their boy.

Doctor: I see. Did he come over and tell you about it before he left?

BK: He spent the night with me, the night before his mom called. He just showed up at my place in the middle of the night.

Doctor: How did that go?

BK: (Smiled.) It was good, really. We had a hot night, playing this little game about his hating me. At least I THINK it was a game.

Doctor: Hating you?

BK: (Laughed.) Yeah, you know, how much do you hate me NOW? Ba da bing!

Doctor: I see. A sex game.

BK: Yeah. And before I left the next morning, he took a shower with me and it was like old times. Sexy, but also tender, you know? No games.

Doctor: Did you talk much or just have a lot of sex?

BK: More sex than talk. I figured we'd talk that evening, but he got the call. He had to leave.

Doctor: So nothing was resolved about Jeffrey?

BK: Resolved? No, not really. Ironically, Jeffrey stopped by my place and was there with Justin when he got the call from his mom. Jeff talked to her. Calmed her down. He is a pediatric oncologist, after all. He can talk the talk. Even Justin had to admit he was helpful and kind to Jennifer.

Doctor: How do you feel about that?

BK: I'd like to see Jeff and Justin reach some kind of peace.

Doctor: Is that realistic?

BK: Why not? We're all grown ups. Well, Justin is almost there.

Doctor: And what would that accommodation be, Brian? Justin is your partner and Jeffrey is your bit on the side? You think either of them would settle for that?

BK: No.

Doctor: No, me either. So where does that leave you?

BK: Look, right now, I care more about the fact Molly, his sister, is sick. It seems to me, we can put all this angst on the back burner for the time being.

Doctor: Of course the focus will be just that. Her health. But unfortunately, Brian, real life has a way of intervening, even during times of crisis. You need a game plan, at least in your head. You still have big questions in need of resolution.

BK: Yeah, I know that. I just thought with a kid battling for her life, this romance shit seems a bit sleazy. My old friend Mikey is coming into town Friday. It'll be good to see him, and he'll also be a distraction.

Doctor: Will you tell him about your current dilemma?

BK: Doubt it. What advice could Mikey offer? He's a relationship disaster, too. He's only succeeded with Ben because Ben is a fucking saint.

Doctor: Will you be seeing Jeffrey while Justin is gone?

BK: Probably. But I won't be FUCKING Jeffrey. I made up my mind. While Justin is in Pittsburgh, dealing with this big issue, I'm not sleeping around. At least not with Jeff. If some trick comes along, well, Justin understands about that.

Doctor: So a total commitment is out of the question.

BK: (Frowned.) To be fair, I don't know how long he'll be gone, do I? I'm not a monk.

Doctor: Some might consider masturbation an alternative.

BK: (Smirked.) Yeah, that's good too.

Doctor: Brian, I was going through your file. You indicated that early on in your life, you had a relationship, other than Lindsay, that was significant. What can you share about that?

BK: God, it was so long ago. Funny, Justin just asked me about him.

Doctor: How long ago was it?

BK: College. I was nineteen.

Doctor: Who was he?

BK: Not who you think.

Doctor: Who do I think?

BK: Some frat boy or jock or even a naughty professor.

Doctor: Well, then?

BK: He was a gardener. At the university. A groundskeeper. (Smiled.) Sort of a Lady Chatterly's lover, kind of thing. Except I was no lady.

Doctor: You're right, that does surprise me. Go on. Older?

BK: Yeah, late twenties. He was an Italian immigrant. He had only been in the U.S. a few years. His name was Renard. His mother was French. He was a beautiful man, with black curly hair and green eyes. I used to stare at him in those khaki work clothes, up to his elbows in soil, and I was reminded of Roman statues with those elegant profiles and lean, muscular bodies.

Doctor: Who made the first move?

BK: He did, I guess.

Doctor: How did it happen?

BK: I played soccer. That was before I fell out with my coach, who made Hitler look reasonable.

Doctor: I see.

BK: Anyway, one day, after practice, I was doing penalty kicks, just fucking off, testing my chops. I noticed Renard was watching me. He finally came over and told me what I was doing wrong. My follow through was off. I said bullshit, and he played goal tender for me and deflected every one of my kicks. He was good! So, I let him give me some clues. We agreed to go out for a beer after I showered and changed. At the pub, he told me his life story. He was a professional soccer player in Italy, got kicked out of the league for habitual fighting. He said he found peace with himself only after he learned about gardening. Growing things centered him.

Doctor: How did he end up in America?

BK: Married an American girl, but it didn't work out. Mainly because he was into dick, but in his culture, that was a very difficult thing to admit.

Doctor: It is in ours as well.

BK: (Shrugged.) I guess. Worse for him, I think. But we both had the Catholic thing to contend with. And family pressures.

Doctor: You became lovers?

BK: Yeah, more than that. We had a little affair. Kid stuff. But I was hung up on him. Why not? He was masculine, beautiful, an athlete, plus he had this kind of zen flower power thing going for him. Everyone in the gay community wanted him. I was flattered that he fixated on me.

Doctor: How long did it last?

BK: Until I went over to his place one afternoon and found him in bed with two guys I'd seen around campus.

Doctor: Did you think you were exclusive?

BK: Yes, but not because he made me any promises. We never discussed it. I just assumed he shared my infatuation.

Doctor: Which he did not?

BK: True. I was a kid. What did I know?

Doctor: You were hurt?

BK: Yeah. You know how kids exaggerate everything. Melodrama.

Doctor: Did he talk to you about it?

BK: Sure. He told me that love is bullshit. It's for girls and suckers. The only thing that matters is fucking. Fucking is real, is tangible. Never confuse the two.

Doctor: You seem to have learned that lesson rather well.

BK: It became my credo.

Doctor: What happened to him?

BK: Not sure, but I heard he married a wealthy woman. He was killed in a car crash, several years ago. I saw a blurb in the paper in Pittsburgh. He was with some young guy who was also killed. Driving a Mercedes 500 SL. Renard did alright for himself.

Doctor: Did it make you sad?

BK: I felt like I owed him something. But then I thought, fuck him, the cheating bastard! (Laughed.)

Doctor: So your first real infatuation was with a player?

BK: Yep.

Doctor: What did you do after the two of you broke up?

BK: I started tricking.

Doctor: And that stopped when?

BK: (Shrugged.) Hasn't stopped. Slowed down, but hasn't stopped, really. I'm still a free man. If I want to trick with someone, I will.

Doctor: I see. And since you don't count Jeffrey as a trick, who is the last man you tricked with?

BK: Why?

Doctor: You can't remember?

BK: His name? (Laughed.) I don't usually get names.

Doctor: I don't need a name. Tell me a circumstance, a time. No details necessary. This isn't a salacious inquiry.

BK: (Silent pause.) I...I'm not sure.

Doctor: Think.

BK: Shit, I think it was the night I last called Justin in Pittsburgh. Before he came here. I went to a bar after work and picked up some guy and brought him home. After that, I was going to trick with the bartender, but Justin arrived in town, and that screwed it up. So it's been awhile, if that's your point.

Doctor: That's my point, Brian. How important is tricking to you now, at your present age and station in life? Or is it some image of your youth and a pale stand in for personal freedom that you think you OUGHT to want or you fear you may be losing out on something?

BK:(Frowned.) I always thought those old farts who cruise clubs and bars, hitting on young men, are pathetic. I never wanted to end up like them. But I'm not that much less horny now than I was at nineteen, and I just presumed

tricking would take on a different caste. Instead of prowling clubs, I'd meet guys at work, or a party or working for a production company on one of our ads, or modeling in an ad.

Doctor: Or at the Natural History Museum?

BK: (Glared.) Jeff is not a trick.

Doctor: What is he?

BK: A friend.

Doctor: A friend you fuck?

BK: Yes, a friend I fuck.

Doctor: A friend who threatens your relationship with Justin?

BK: No.

Doctor: Now who's being naïve, Brian?

BK: Justin's still a kid. He'll get over it.

Doctor: Just as you would do if he introduced you to some dynamic, handsome, successful man he was fucking?

BK: Ok, I admit it. I'd hate that. But I've been through that fire with Justin, and it's not happening again.

Doctor: You mean YOU aren't going to be the cuckold again?

BK: (Long pause.) Yes.

Doctor: Because?

BK: Because it hurts too much!

Doctor: Then why would it be alright for you to inflict that pain on him? Because he owes you one free pass?

BK: This is ridiculous.

Doctor: What's ridiculous about it, Brian? It's a legitimate question.

BK: I didn't plan on Jeffrey.

Doctor: Do you think Justin PLANNED on his lover?

BK: Yes.

Doctor: Why?

BK: Because he wasn't getting what he thought he needed from me.

Doctor: Are you sure you're getting what you need from him?

BK: Yes.

Doctor: And is he getting from you what he needs now?

BK: He came back to me, didn't he? Yeah, he left again, but that was just anger and hurt feelings. He wasn't gone long. This trip to Pittsburgh doesn't count. He had no choice.

Doctor: Will he see his former lover while he's there?

BK: (Smiled slightly.) Is that some kind of technique? Supposed to shake me up or something? That's just cheap and low, Lydia.

Doctor: Is it? Does the idea of it bother you?

BK: Fuck it, I don't care.

Doctor: You can do better than that, Brian.

BK: Ok, I do care. And no, he's not going to look him up.

Doctor: Why not? Who knows how long he'll be gone and after all...boys will be boys.

BK: (Laughed.) Good try, but I don't play that easily, Lydia. I'm much harder to rattle than that.

Doctor: No, you really aren't.

BK: (Long pause.) You're probably right. I'll just brood about it in private and wonder why you were trying to get to me, and then turn it into some plot and lose all confidence in you.

Doctor: See the lovely insights these sessions are giving you into yourself?

BK: (Laughed.) Seriously, Lydia, while Justin is gone, I have to sort out this Jeff thing. I need to make sense out of it, somehow.

Doctor: Unfortunately, we can't always put time deadlines on emotions. But think about what Jeff has brought to your life. How has he enriched it? How has he damaged it? Where do you see it going, and at what cost?

BK: Boring.

Doctor: I know. Relationships can be a drag. So much better to be a promiscuous barfly.

BK: You got that right. This sucks. So... are you going to meet with Mikey while he's in town?

Doctor: Your oldest and bestest friend in the whole wide world? Do I have a choice? Of course I will.

BK: Good luck.

Doctor: Why?

BK: Mikey is a piece of work. Like a big kid in some ways. An idiot savant in others. To say he is lacking in finesse is a compliment.

Doctor: But you obviously love him very much.

BK: Sure, he's my bud. Unconditional love is Mikey. I'd do anything for him. And vice versa.

Doctor: Swell, Brian, because a dose of unconditional love is just what you need right now, in my humble opinion. Someone to straight talk with you.

BK: We're both fags, Lydia. Straight talk is hard to conjure.

End of transcript.

Doctor's Notes: BK seemed much more controlled today, although not falsely so. He has the type of personality that performs well in a crisis, as with JT's sister's illness. He only tends towards panic with his own emotions, not when providing a strong shoulder for friends. He is a clear thinker in a bad situation, but he is under a lot of pressure from Jeffrey and is confused by his feelings towards the man. JT's unavoidable temporary exit couldn't have come at a worse time, from a relationship stand point. I have hope that BK's old friend's visit will provide him with non-judgmental encouragement and guidance. Despite his cool demeanor, BK is suffering right now from disassociation from those closest to him, and profound isolation. His revelation of his college relationship with Renard demonstrates an early genesis for the attitude he later adopted towards lovers. He obviously fell for this man, and was treated badly and discarded as just another trick. So he assumed the man's attitude towards love: love is without merit, and only sexual conquest fulfills. This shell he's constructed around that young Brian, who fell in love with an older man, is deep and hearty. But the young Brian still exists inside, and each session brings new insights into how desperately he wants to let that person emerge.

BETWEEN THE SESSIONS

(after session 10)

by Randall Morgan

Michael Novotny felt like a movie star when he left the luggage area of La Guardia airport to find a man in a dark suit holding up a placard bearing his name. He beamed at the driver. "That's me!"

The driver seemed less than impressed. "Ok. Want me to take that?" He motioned half-heartedly to Michael's overstuffed duffle bag.

"Cool!" Michael handed it over, hoping everyone would see him with a driver paid for by his best friend. No one seemed to care, much to his disappointment. He followed the driver for what he thought was a long way to the parking lot. Michael hadn't been to New York since they went after Justin, the runaway, a couple years ago. That was before 9/11, when the Twin Towers still marked the landscape. Security had become more rigorous because of the attack, pushing traffic back from the terminal.

Mikey was also disappointed that the car they approached was a Lincoln Town Car instead of a stretch. The back door opened, and Michael tried to peer through the tinted glass, but it was too dark to see.

"Want a ride, little boy?" A familiar voice from inside.

"Brian!" He slid in, slammed the door and threw himself into Brian's arms, kissing him firmly on the lips. Brian kissed him back, ignoring the disapproving look of the driver as he got into the car and started the engine.

"So, this is New York City," Michael observed as they pulled into traffic. Brian laughed and lit a cigarette.

"Mikey, this is Queens. Some would debate whether that constitutes New York City."

"Queens sounds like the kind of place we should hang!" Michael teased as Brian shook his head at his friends typical goofiness. "No smoking, sir," the driver said with a glare into the rear view mirror.

"No smoke-ee, no tip-ee," Brian responded coolly and the man mumbled under his breath and lowered his window slightly, admitting a cold blast of air.

"I have something for you," Michael reached into the pocket of his jacket and handed Brian a sealed envelope, bearing the initial B.

"What's this? A bribe? Won't work, Mikey. I still won't fuck you." Brian teased and Michael laughed.

"Justin gave it to me to give to you. I saw him briefly before I left."

Brian slapped it against his palm. "What does it say?"

"How should I know?"

"I figured you've steamed it open by now."

"Shut UP!" Michael insisted, punching him lightly on his biceps. "I wouldn't do that."

Brian smirked at him and slipped the envelope in his pocket.

"Aren't you going to open it?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"When I'm alone."

"Bitch!" Michael teased.

Brian watched the row houses merge into highway, as he wondered what Justin would put into a letter. A Dear John note? An explanation of why he wants to stay in Pittsburgh? A return to his former boyfriend? Brian's stomach began to ache. "How is Molly? I talk to Justin, but I don't bring her up much because it upsets him," Brian said softly.

"Not good, I guess. Apparently there are all different kinds of leukemia and hers is not the one you hope to find, if one or the other is inevitable."

"What does that mean, exactly?"

"It means she's really sick, Brian. I'm not a doctor, I don't understand the rest. I could call David and ask him to explain if you want," Michael referred to his former lover.

"David is a chiropractor, Mikey. Let's call him when you twist your back. I know someone to ask."

"On a happier note, how are you? You look fantastic, of course."

"Of course. I'm fine. How's Ben doing?"

"All his levels are good. Energy is good. No major setbacks."

"Glad to hear it," Ben's battle with AIDS was not always smooth. Brian liked Ben, in spite of the fact they tricked once, long ago, in Miami. He liked him because he was a calm, stabilizing influence on his best friend, and a genuinely nice guy who never interfered in Brian's relationship with Michael. Doctor Dave, Michael's former lover, hated Brian and was jealous of their tight friendship. Ben accepted it for what it was, and went on.

"So, are you and Sunshine are doing okay?" Michael inquired, his dark eyes peering into Brian in his age-old futile quest to bore beneath his surface.

"Yeah, sure. But he has other, bigger things to worry about right now."

"I know. Poor Molly. Mom is spending a lot of time with Jennifer, shoring her up. You know what a shit Justin's Dad is. He's no use to her."

"That's why Justin needs to be there."

"I guess you can't take off and join him?"

"It isn't work, Mikey. His parents don't want me there and I don't want to add to their trauma."

Michael reached out and took Brian's hand, squeezing it gently and holding it for the duration of the trip. When they reached the loft, Michael spent some time gushing about how slick and huge it was, snapping several pictures with a digital camera, claiming they were for "Emmett and Ted". He explained they wanted to see how Brian was living in the big city.

"You know me. I like the loft life," Brian mused, noticing how perfectly clean the place stayed with Justin away. Also, how empty it felt.

"Who wouldn't like THIS?" Michael insisted, emerging from his tour of the bedroom. "You kept the blue lights."

"They provide a certain ambiance."

Michael rummaged around in his duffel, pulling out a palm pilot. "Ben gave me this. It's supposed to organize my life. I made a list of things I want to see while I'm here. First, I want to go to the outer space museum and see that cool IMAX show on the origin of the universe. Then, I ..."

"Mikey!" Brian held up his hand to stop him. "Much as I'd like to take you on the post adolescent tour of the Big Apple, I can't. I have a job. I took off this afternoon to be with you. I'll see you in the evenings, but you're on your own all day. I have tickets for us for tomorrow night, to attend the show that won all the Tony Awards this year. Otherwise, I left the nights open to do whatever you want to do. I'll take you to some of my favorite restaurants. We can hit a couple clubs, if you want. Think about it. But tonight, let's just stay in and dish. Catch up." Michael beamed at him and nodded. He liked nothing more than having his elusive best friend all to himself. While neither of them would admit it, they both missed living in the same city so they could spend more time together.

Michael slept on his side, his butt towards Brian. His body offered no invitation and aroused no answering interest. Once he was certain his friend was asleep, Brian left the bed, careful not to wake Michael. He pulled on a robe and went into the main area of the loft where he retrieved the note from Justin and carried it with him to the sofa. He poured himself a scotch, first, and then he slapped the envelope against his knee in an absent gesture as he tried to conjure the nerve he needed to open it. The thought of the letter being in his home, unread, had been torturing him all evening. But he knew he could never read it in front of Michael. He finally opened the seal and removed a stack of order tickets from the Liberty Diner where Michael's mother worked, and where Justin used to work as a waiter. They were covered on both sides with Justin's familiar scrawl.

Dear Brian,

I just saw Mikey and since he is leaving tomorrow to visit you, I thought I might as well write you this note. I can't seem to talk to you on the phone. When I hear your voice, I get all choked up. So maybe this will let me tell you what's going on without the tears. I had no paper, so sorry about the tickets. The envelope is off a card I had in my backpack for Molly, so sorry about the pink. Anyway, I miss you. Being back in Pittsburgh reminds me of how much I want to be in New York. It seems the only place that feels like home is the place where you are. Do you miss me, too?

I'm sorry I was such a brat before I left. I overreacted, maybe, but I just can't stand Jeffrey and I can't stand that you like him so much. I step back and see how perfect he is for you. You look perfect together, you talk easily, you like a lot of the same things, and you obviously find him as hot as he finds you. But Brian, I think Jeffrey wants you for all the wrong reasons. Not out of some deep affection, but out of the fact he views you as a worthy partner. A power couple. He tries to dominate you in ways that you probably can't see. He was blunt with me about going after you that day he cut his foot. He's two-faced. Don't fall for it, Brian. Don't fall for him. Wait for me. I love you from the inside out. I don't view you as my slick, successful, handsome boyfriend. I think of you as this beautiful but flawed guy who has such a hard time expressing what he feels because of so much shit he's endured in his life. A guy who

fucks around to medicate his pain, but who is incapable of loving more than one person, and even that one person is in for a long struggle before that love is ever acknowledged.

I waited it out, Brian. I came back for it. I won't let go that quickly no matter how hard Jeffrey pushes me. He wants me to, but I won't. I love you and you're worth fighting for. But if I lose out, its not just me who will lose. In the end, you will too, because I believe Jeffrey loves only Jeffrey. I keep having these images of blood on cement, and hearing this hollow sound of that bat hitting my head. I don't know if it's a flashback, or if I'm just projecting what others have told me. It's frustrating because I can't go on from there. I wish I was there to visit the shrink Lydia referred me to, to start that regression stuff. I think I really need to remember that night, Brian. All of it. It seems to be some kind of key for us.

I guess that has to wait, though. Poor Molly. I get so angry because she's just a little girl. Why should she have to go through this? It's not fair. The flowers and teddy bear you sent her were wonderful, by the way. Did I tell you she loves pink or did you just guess it? You spent WAAY too much money, but Molly loved it and sleeps with that bear. The news is not good. I wish I didn't hate Jeffrey so much so I could ask him some questions. Her doctor is very abrupt and doesn't want to listen to me. Even Mom has problems getting straight answers from him. As much as I resent Jeffrey, I know he's an expert in this area, and I feel like I'm letting my feelings for him get in the way of what's best for Mol. I just want him to say, yeah, this sounds right, or you can expect this to happen.

Great, here I am making my rival sound like a saint to the man we both want. But her life is on the line, and that's a hell of a lot more important, isn't it? Mikey is getting ready to leave, and I want to give this to him, so I'd better sign off. Call me after you read this. I love you, Brian. I miss you. Don't forget me. Love, J.

Brian sighed and returned the letter to the envelope, slipping it into the pocket of his robe. While it was far from the kiss-off he feared, it was still gut wrenching. He could feel Justin's pain, fear and confusion, and he resented the fact he was responsible for so much of it, at a time when Justin should be free to concentrate on his sister's health. He finished his scotch and picked up the telephone, punching auto dial.

"Hello?" Sleepy voice.

"Wake you up, Sunshine?"

"Ohhh! Hi, Brian! Hold on, let me...hold on." After a brief pause he returned. "I'm alone now."

"Where are you?"

"At the hospital. I'm sleeping in her room tonight, giving Mom a break."

"Should I let you go?"

"No! She's asleep and I want to talk to you. It's fine, I'm in the hall. Did Mikey arrive?"

"Yeah, he's asleep. I read your letter."

"Sorry. I was feeling pretty raw."

"Justin, please do me a favor."

"What?"

"Don't worry about me or Jeffrey or our relationship. Everything is on ice until you get back, okay? Just put those fears out of your head."

"Okay," he said cautiously and Brian sighed.

"And let me set up a call with you and Jennifer and Jeffrey."

Pause. "Uhhhh, I don't know about that."

"Swallow your pride, Justin. Let him help. When it comes to sick kids, Jeff only has one goal in mind. Making them well. Don't let the rest of this shit obscure that fact."

Justin sighed. His voice quaked with emotion. "I'm so scared, Brian."

"I know, baby, I know."

"I wish I could feel your arms around me right now."

"Babe, my arms ARE around you right now."

"I'm sorry, Brian, I swore I would be brave the next time you called."

"Justin, be brave for Molly. Be brave for mommy. You don't have to be brave for me."

Justin sniffed, regained his composure. "Ok, go ahead and set up that call with Jeffrey. It's too important not to, and Mom really liked him."

"Right. I'll call you on your cell tomorrow and let you know when."

"Should we be paying him?"

"Of course not. He's doing this as a friend. Get some rest. You sound exhausted."

"Yeah, I'd better get back in there. She was sick earlier, and she can't handle everything on her own. I love you, Brian."

"You too," he said softly, then disconnected, immediately dialing another number.

His mother sounded annoyed. "Did I wake you, Mom?"

"Brian? Is something wrong?"

He laughed. "You would think that."

"It's after midnight."

"Sorry. I need your help."

"My help? Well. That's a first."

"You know my...my partner...Justin?"

"Of course," Joan Kinney said coolly.

"His kid sister is sick. Very sick. She's in St. Joe's in Pittsburgh."

"Oh, I AM sorry to hear that, dear. What can I do?"

"Justin's mother is divorced and his father is an asshole. I don't think they can depend on him for much. Justin is there with his mom and sister now. Both he and his mom are exhausted, beat down. I know you have that auxiliary group in your church that reaches out to people in hospitals..."

"Is she Catholic?"

"No, Mom, but she's human and she needs your help. I mean, don't you guys make food for people and sit with patients to give the family a break and stuff like that? I know you had some programs for hospitalized children. You give them kid videos and books and have storytellers and puppeteers and people with pets...right?"

"But Brian, she's not..."

"Mother, I'll give your auxiliary group five grand if you treat her as if she IS Catholic. Except for the religious crap. Deal?"

Silence. Then his mother responded, "Brian, I'll do this for you. Because he's your, well, as you say, your... partner. Give your money to whatever disease she's fighting. I'm doing this as your mother."

Brian felt a wave of emotion surge within him, threatening to narrow his throat and bubble over into his voice. He inhaled deeply before speaking. "Thanks, Mom."

"What's her name?"

"Molly Taylor."

"I'll get started tomorrow. How are you holding up?"

"I'm not the one suffering."

"No, but someone you love is suffering, and that's difficult to bear."

He sighed and combed his fingers through his hair in a nervous gesture. "Yeah. I'm fine, though. Thanks again."

"Take care, Brian. You're a sweet man."

He hung up, wondering at the little changes that had recently occurred in his life. A month ago, he would never reach out to his mother for help. A year ago, he would never be able to refer to Justin as his partner. Was it Lydia? Was there something to this voodoo of hers?

"Dirty phone calls?" Michael's voice interrupted his reverie. He looked up at him and smirked.

"Yeah with my Mom. How kinky is that?"

"Not kinky, sick. Very sick. Even as a joke, sick."

"Yeah, true. Why are you up?"

"Couldn't sleep. The traffic from the street is so noisy!"

"I don't even hear it anymore."

"You're lucky. Want to go out?"

"At this hour?"

"Hello? Where are you keeping Brian's pod? He's been replaced."

"Mikey, I don't feel like celebrating right now. I just talked to Justin and he's going through a lot of shit. If you want to go out alone, I can tell you some clubs."

"No," he pouted soulfully. "Not if you don't go."

"I have to work in the morning and you have an appointment with Lydia."

"Right. To have my head shrunk."

"Please don't. It's already small enough. Let's go to bed. I'll slip you an Ambian. You won't know what hit you."

"THAT sounds good!" Michael said enthusiastically. "What's an Ambian, again?"

Brian just smiled, not wanting Michael to leak to Lydia that Brian obtained a prescription sleep medication. He knew she would disapprove. He gave Mikey one, then took one himself. Within minutes, both men were sleeping soundly beneath the icy glow of blue neon.

Michael woke up alone and disoriented. He finally placed himself in Brian's loft, but it took a few minutes to realize he was in New York, not Pittsburgh. He called for Brian, and when he got no answer, he glanced at the clock. It was after ten in the morning. He showered and pulled on Brian's robe that he left on a hook on the door. The navy silk felt good next to his skin. There was something intimate about wearing Brian's robe. That fact appealed to the unrequited sexual desire Michael would always harbor towards Brian in some hidden corner of his heart. He realized he missed his appointment with Brian's shrink, called to reschedule, blaming Brian's drug for his oversleeping. Then he called Ben, to check on his lover. As he toasted a bagel and chatted with Ben, he became aware of a crinkly noise in the pocket of the robe whenever he brushed it against something. He reached in and withdrew Justin's letter. The envelope had been opened. He struggled with himself, but when he hung up from Ben, he opened the letter and read it as he ate his bagel.

"Who the fuck is Jeffrey?" Michael demanded as Brian picked up his line at work.

"Did Lydia mention Jeff?"

"No!"

"Did he stop by?"

"No..." some of Michael's indignance waned as he realized what was coming. Brian was silent for a moment and then,

"You fucking read my letter."

"What's the big deal? It was open...in your pocket...I borrowed your robe..."

"Fuck you, Mikey! You had no right!"

Mikey made a rubbery face that Brian couldn't see but that often let him get away with murder. "Ok, sorry, but look...who the fuck is Jeffrey?"

"None of your god damned business!" Brian hung up and Michael frowned, then called Ben again, seeking his advice as to what he should do.

When Michael entered the huge office tower on Madison Avenue, he felt out of place and underdressed. The ad agency occupied ten floors, and the receptionist was a beautiful African-American woman wearing a plain black dress that Michael felt sure was worth more than his whole wardrobe. "Delivery?" She asked, taking in his jeans, running shoes and hooded windbreaker. Michael winced.

"I'm here to see Brian Kinney."

She raised an imperious brow. "Is Mr. Kinney expecting you?"

"Just tell him its his best friend, Michael Novotny."

She dialed an extension and spoke to the person who answered. "Cynthia, there's a Mr. Novotny here to see Mr. Kinney. Alright, if you say so. Thank you." She leveled her ebony gaze on Michael. "Two floors up. Mr. Kinney's assistant will meet you in the elevator lobby."

Michael glared at her, as if to say 'SEE?', but she was already busy with another call.

Cynthia met him in the elevator lobby and greeted him with a big hug and a smile.

"Hi, Mikey! Welcome to New York!"

Michael was pleased to see a familiar face. "Thanks. Fancy digs."

"Isn't it just? Wait until you see his office!" She looped her arm through his as they walked. "He's been in a closed door meeting so I haven't had a chance to tell him you're here. What have you seen of the city so far?"

Before Michael could respond, the door to Brian's office opened and Brian stood in the threshold with another man of equal stature, almost as handsome. They kissed and Michael froze. It was no casual kiss goodbye between friends, it was the parting of an intimate couple. Michael felt a burst of rage, witnessing this embrace. It was hard enough accepting Justin in Brian's life, but this was too much. Michael's old emotions of rejection and longing rolled back to torment him. Brian met his eyes, smiling coolly as he released Jeffrey from his arms.

"Well, how convenient. Michael, this is Jeff Walker. Jeff, Michael Novotny."

Jeffrey stuck out his hand, offering Michael a big smile. "I've heard so much about you, Michael. Welcome to the Big Apple."

Michael hated his precise features, his expensive haircut, his white smile. He even hated his firm handshake and soft hands. He was not good at hiding whatever emotions he was experiencing and he glared at Brian, then Jeff. "Thanks. I just got here last night. I was telling Brian how I had lunch with Justin, his boyfriend, before I left. Justin is really going through a lot, what with his sister so sick."

Brian rolled his eyes, and Jeffrey smiled. "Yes, I have a conference with Justin and his mother to discuss Molly's prognosis this afternoon. They were hoping I could translate into plain English some of the things the little trooper is going through. I'm only too glad to help out with any friend of Brian's."

"Justin's a little more than a FRIEND to Brian!" Michael insisted, and Brian frowned at him.

"Stop. Jeff is fully aware of my relationship with Justin and you're just being childish, Mikey. That's what you get when you eavesdrop and read other people's private mail."

"Don't give it a thought, Brian," Jeffrey said, rubbing Brian's arm gently. "You have enough to worry about. Nice meeting you, Michael. I'll see you later, Brian."

He walked away and Brian clamped Michael's neck in the vise of his hand and shoved him into his office before slamming the door.

"What the fuck are you doing? You're the same man who has called Justin a leech and a virus and other not so nice words over the time we've been together. Now you're his great protector?"

"Someone needs to be!"

"Fuck you, Mikey! That job is filled."

"I don't like Jeffrey!"

"You just fucking met him!"

"Brian..." Michael grew quieter, holding onto Brian's arm. "Look at me." Brian cut him a glare. Michael continued holding him. "Are you falling for this guy?"

Brian pulled free and went over to his desk, sitting behind it, stretching out his long legs and crossing his ankles on the ledge. He looked from Michael to the photo of Justin and Gus on his desk to his view outside the glass walls of his office. Finally he said in a quiet voice, "I don't know, Mikey. I just don't know."

"What is it you don't know? How you feel?" Michael came over to stand between Brian and the desk. He rested his hand on Brian's knee. Brian sighed.

"It's still Justin for me. I don't understand where Jeff fits in, but I can't seem to let him go."

"Are you fucking him?" Brian met his eyes and Michael sighed. "Of course you are. Stupid question."

"It's not about fucking. That's not the main attraction between us."

"Then what is it about?"

"He never looks at me like I've blown up his new cocker spaniel puppy for fun. He never makes me feel he's on the make to trade up but I'll do for now. He makes me feel like I am the luxury vehicle, I am the trade up, I am the top of the line. He's brilliant and rich and successful and handsome, and he thinks Brian Kinney is something special and worth having around. He thinks I'm smart and funny and handsome and fun and a good lay."

Michael nodded, perhaps the only person fully aware of Brian's skewed sense of self worth. "And Justin doesn't?"

"Justin often seems...disappointed in me. He wants me to be his hero. But I have feet of clay. And then he gets sad and then he looks around and then..."

"And then he leaves you."

Brian shrugged and looked away as he whispered, "Yes, and then he leaves me."

"Look at me, Brian," Michael lifted his chin on his fingertips, staring down at him. "You have to let go of that. It's over. He came back to you. You can't build a relationship if you are constantly living in fear of being abandoned by your lover."

"What do you know?" Brian asked, knocking away his hand. "You're always the one who leaves."

"Are you asking me what I know about being in love with a man who doesn't love me? Because I can give you chapter and verse on that, Brian. I lived that life for years. And you know what? It hurts. It hurts a lot."

Brian looked up at him, wincing. "I love you, Mikey, I always have."

"Yeah, like a brother. I watched you fuck everything that moved, and I was jealous and dejected, but I could go on as your friend. After all, I was closer to you than anyone in the world. I was the only one who knew your secrets, who saw you cry, who knew there was a person under the disguise of a stud. That made me a little special, and I clung to that fact."

"What's your point?"

"My point is then Justin came along. I watched him go from trick to ward to lover. I watched your defenses fall one by one. I knew you loved him before you did. And there was nothing I could do about it but watch it happen."

Brian sighed and circled Michael's wrist with his fist. "I never stopped loving you."

"I know, Brian. But not the way I wanted you to love me. Not the way you loved Justin. Even when I was with David, I was in love with you and in pain over your feelings for the twink. And then he got bashed. I sat there with

you, hour after hour at the hospital, watching you go from fear and agony to guilt to self loathing. I thought to myself, 'Jesus, Michael, he's really in love with this guy. Time to give it up. This is the real thing, and it happened to Brian.' So, I went to Portland to be with David, once we knew Justin would make it. I knew I had to get on with my life, and that space from you was a good thing."

"Yeah, well, I'm a big believer in running."

"I know you are, and you found out, as I did, that you can't outrun your emotions. They keep right up with you. When you escaped to New York, it did you no good. The pain continued. But you were able to suffer in solitude, your favorite thing. Because your big stupid plot to let Justin go, to set him free to find his twink version of true love, was a flop. You didn't get over him. You thought you would, but you didn't. And his 'true love' wasn't as fulfilling as he thought it would be. That's because you both were still in love with each other."

"You don't know that."

"I DO know that, Brian."

Brian stood, paced over to the glass, stared down at the city, then turned to look at Michael, his arms crossed at his chest. "And now?"

"Now, he came back. And you're scared. You don't want to be vulnerable again. You don't want to let him hurt you the way he did before. You're looking for ways to stop yourself from falling too hard. You found a new one, Brian. I must admit. This is new for you. Instead of tricking, you found a dream man. A rival. Someone to put in the road between you and Justin. Someone he can't quite get around. Jeffrey's the halfback and you're the quarterback."

"That analogy totally fails. What does it mean?"

"His job is to protect you from Justin's drive in your direction."

"No, Mikey. That's not the half back's job. The halfback runs with the ball. The offensive line protects the quarterback. What have I told you about using sports analogies without a license?"

Michael laughed. "You know what I mean."

"Is it beyond the realm of possibility that I just LIKE Jeff, that we click, and that there's no ulterior motive behind any of it? What about that? Is it not fucked up enough that I'm in love with Justin and mixed up about Jeff? Why make it worse?"

"Because it IS worse, Brian. Much worse. You're mind fucking yourself. You absolutely refuse to allow yourself to find any happiness. You're so convinced you aren't entitled to it, you keep making stupid decisions to force a disaster."

Brian lit a cigarette, took a deep draw. "No, I don't do that."

"Yes, you do, Brian. You know you're hot, so tricking is certainly a worthy pursuit for you. You can still pull the best tricks. But love... no one should be stuck with loving you."

"Maybe there's something to that, Mikey. Loving me has done no good for you."

"Brian, loving you is one of the happiest parts of my whole life. Even though we never really put it together sexually, being your closest friend, knowing how you feel about me, being honored with seeing who you really are, I can't even imagine my life without you to love. And to be loved by you. It isn't how I feel for Ben, no, but it's just as important to me. Don't you know that?"

Brian nodded, refusing to relent to a growing emotional burden. "It's important to me too, Mikey."

"I know. I can't believe I'm saying this, but don't fuck it up with Justin this time, Brian. Let yourself be happy. You've earned it. You deserve it. You both do. Don't be afraid of it."

Brian was silent for a moment, then smiled. "You don't plan to wear that to the theater, do you?"

"What?" Michael looked down at his casual clothes. "Was I supposed to pack a tux?"

"The windbreaker has to go. And that shirt...Jesus. Come on. Let's go do what all good little faggots do after having a sloppy heart to heart about love and pain and the whole damn thing."

"What's that?"

"What else? Shop!"

Michael laughed and let himself be led from the office, waving at Cynthia as they headed for the elevators. Brian's arm rested firmly across Michael's shoulders as they walked. "I can't afford to shop in New York," Michael complained. Brian smiled and removed a black American Express card from his wallet.

"It's beyond gold, beyond platinum. They only give a few of these out and the perks that come with it are extreme. Come see how the other .02 per cent live."

"Oh my god, it's the Holy Grail of consumer excess!" Michael teased, turning the card over and over in his hands. They both began to laugh. Their ability to turn a serious conversation into a lighthearted laugh fest was part of the sticky glue that kept them bound to each other over the years. Nothing was ever so bad that one couldn't cheer up the other, and Brian kept his arm over Michael's shoulders as they walked down Madison Avenue, grateful for his friend's timely interruption of his growing anxiety.

DECONSTRUCTING BRIAN

Session 11, and with Michael Novotny

by Randall Morgan

Doctor's Notes: Michael Novotny is BK's oldest friend. They became close when they were thirteen (BK) and fourteen (MN), respectively. While both men are self-identified homosexuals, their relationship is platonic. MN and his mother provided shelter, emotionally as well as physically, when BK was subjected to abuse at the hand of his father. MN is in town visiting BK, so I was anxious to have a session with him. He overslept our first appointment, claiming he was given a drug, Ambien, by BK that caused him to sleep through. I will discuss this with BK, as I am very concerned about his reliance upon prescription drugs to treat an insomnia problem that is emotionally based. I would also like to know where he got this prescription and whether his doctor is aware of the anti-depressants he is taking. I gave MN another appointment, and he was on time for this one. He is a youthful looking man, appearing

even younger than he is, small in stature, and engaging. He has never been through analysis and he strikes me as someone with an incomplete education and limited life experience.

MN: No couch?

Doctor: Sorry. I like my patients upright when we're talking.

MN: There's a joke in there somewhere, but I'll let it pass. This is cool. I've never met a shrink, although some would say it's overdue!

Doctor: Are you comfortable talking to me, Michael?

MN: Yeah, but I thought Brian would have a male shrink, if he ever had a shrink at all.

Doctor: Why is that?

MN: You know, a gay man.

Doctor: Because?

MN: He'd just be more at ease. Brian is very suspicious of straight people and their motives. He believes straights are out to hurt us.

Doctor: Do you agree with that?

MN: I think he's a little too suspicious. I've known some really great straight people.

Doctor: How do you feel about Brian seeing a psychiatrist?

MN: Weird.

Doctor: Why is that?

MN: Of everyone I know, Brian was always the one with the most confidence. He had a kind of golden touch. In school, he made the teachers crazy because he would never just accept what they said as gospel, he would test them a lot. In sports, he was a natural, but his bullshit quotient was so low, he'd quit the team when it became intense. With tricks, well, Brian always pulled the tricks everyone wanted. He's tall and he's gorgeous, and he has a great job and lots of money. Tell me again why he feels he needs to see a shrink?

Doctor: I can't do that, Michael. But let me turn that question around on you. Can you think of anything Brian may need help with?

MN: You mean his fear of commitment?

Doctor: Do you think he has a fear of commitment?

MN: Big time. (Expression of confusion.) Is it because he had such a mean father and a cold mother?

Doctor: Those facts certainly contribute to a person's sense of self worth. Does it make you uneasy that Brian has sought help with his problems?

MN: Why would it?

Doctor: Sometimes when a close friend acknowledges a problem and seeks outside assistance, the other friend feels a bit insecure. First, there's a feeling of helplessness, that you were not enough to solve the problem. Second, there's a fear that the friendship could be threatened by an outsider.

MN: (Grimacing.) I try with Brian, but he blows me off. As for the threat, if we survived Justin, we can survive anything.

Doctor: Tell me why Justin was a challenge.

MN: Because Brian loves him.

Doctor: And?

MN: You see, Brian never loved anyone else, never even LIKED them, really. I always wanted more with Brian. I wanted to be his lover. I wanted to be with him. But it wasn't happening. I comforted myself with the fact that Brian is closer to me than any other man, and always would be. The others were just sex, we had a real connection. We love each other. Then along comes Justin. Sex AND love. Ouch.

Doctor: Did you encourage that relationship?

MN: Not at first. I have to be honest. I thought he was a little twink, not deserving of Brian. I wasn't sure he wasn't using Brian. Honestly, I'm not one hundred per cent sure he still doesn't use Brian in some ways. Brian's money, at least. But I came around to believing Justin loved him, until he left him for another guy. Then I had to put him on my injured list again. But Brian was so fucking miserable without him. He covered it up, but I know him better than that. He was bleeding internally. I wanted them to fix it, just to make Brian smile again.

Doctor: You didn't want Brian for yourself?

MN: Not happening. And I have someone in my life. Ben. I really love him. I want Brian to have the same thing in his life. If it's Justin, it's Justin.

Doctor: Do you think it is Justin, Michael?

MN: He's the only one who ever got in, but...

Doctor: But?

MN: There's this other guy, I don't get his place in Brian's life.

Doctor: Jeffrey.

MN: Yeah, you know him? What is he to Brian?

Doctor: I can't answer that kind of question. Only Brian can answer that one. Have you met Jeffrey?

MN: Briefly, yesterday. He was coming out of Brian's office when I arrived. They kissed. It was more than a friendly kiss. He's good looking and very slick. If I were Justin, I'd worry.

Doctor: I see. Do you think Brian is capable of loving two men?

MN: Doc, I'm not convinced Brian can love ONE man romantically. He's still fucking things up with Justin. Two would probably create a fatal overload.

Doctor: Michael, Brian tells me you rescued him from a suicide attempt.

MN: (Winced.) The scarfing thing? That wasn't really a suicide attempt, it was just a really stupid and dangerous way to whack off.

Doctor: Is that what you really think?

MN: That's what I tell myself. It's what I want to believe.

Doctor: If it was suicide, why do you think he was at that point?

MN: He just turned thirty. For a guy who depended so much on his beauty to form his self esteem, he feared it was all slipping away. And then what would he have? That plus the fact a big job he thought he got in New York fell apart. And I was leaving Pittsburgh with my then-boyfriend. He had a lot of pressure and Brian is not good at handling pressure when it involves his private emotions.

Doctor: Do you know why that is, Michael?

MN: Not really. Like I said, what does he have to be insecure about?

Doctor: Brian is insecure about Brian. He doesn't view himself the way you do. To him, what you see is all façade.

MN: He said you gave him a scrip for depression.

Doctor: That's right.

MN: It seems to have helped. Either that or Justin has. Something has lightened his mood from how he was when he first moved here. But he misses his support structure. Me, my mom, Em and Ted, Lindz, even Gus. He's so isolated here. No wonder there was an open space for this Jeffrey. Now Justin is distracted with his sister's illness, and I know Brian is lonely. Danger, Will Robinson.

Doctor: What do you fear?

MN: He'll go heavily back into tricking which will piss Justin off, or even worse, he'll move this Jeffrey guy up in importance. I guess the one thing I've learned about Brian since Justin left is that he is kind of fragile, despite his cool, fuck you way of acting. And he doesn't handle emotional pain very well.

Doctor: Very perceptive. Are you still in love with him romantically, Michael?

MN: I guess part of me always will be. I loved him too long to just turn away from those feelings. But I love Ben, and if Brian asked me to run off to Mexico to live on the beach with him now, I wouldn't go. I wouldn't leave Ben for him, and that tells me a lot.

Doctor: Good for you, Michael. That gives you a very strong base on which to continue to support your friendship without blurring the boundaries. Good for both of you. I suspect Brian will need your friendship in the future.

MN: That sounds ominous.

Doctor: Not meant to be. Just being factual.

MN: (Pensive silence.) Doc, don't let anything happen to Brian.

Doctor: What do you mean?

MN: Don't let him...hurt himself. Or get so blue that he can't make sense out of things. He can come off like an asshole sometimes, but Brian's a wonderful guy. He's helped out everyone of us at some time or another, and he's never asked for any repayment. I don't know what I would do if I lost Brian.

Doctor's note: At this point in the interview, Michael became teary. We paused for a few minutes so he could regain his composure.

MN: Will he get better?

Doctor: Unfortunately there is no linear path for treating emotional problems, Michael. No antibiotics. It's a slow, tortuous path and so much of the success depends on how badly the patient wants to understand himself. Does that make sense?

MN: I guess. Can you call me if you think he may be getting too depressed?

Doctor: No, Michael, I'm sorry. I can't report on Brian's progress or lack thereof to you or to anyone, really. I don't have that right.

MN: (Nodded.) Then it's up to you to take care of my old friend.

Doctor: It's up to HIM, Michael, not me. He has to learn to cope, to have tools to assist himself. Healthy tools.

MN: Thanks for trying to find those tools for him, Doc.

Doctor: Thanks for taking the time to talk to me, Michael.

Doctor's Notes: MN strike me as a young man who is still infatuated with BK, sexually, but who has repressed that infatuation. He harbors anger towards JT, beneath superficial friendliness, and is fearful of new relationships in BK's life. He claims to be in love with another, but I sense he has yet to resolve fully his love for BK. Therefore, MN brings a mixed bag to the table as BK's friend and confidante. He has power with BK due to their longstanding friendship and is one of the few people BK trusts. Based on what I perceive as MN's apparent emotional immaturity, I hope that he does not USE that power to satisfy some selfish goal, and in the process create a set back for BK.

(At this point, Michael exits and Brian enters Lydia's office.)

Doctor's Note: BK is impeccably groomed, but appears tired and slightly agitated. I immediately ask about the Ambien and he seems surprised.

BK: How did you...oh. Of course. Mikey.

Doctor: Brian, you can't take drugs without first coordinating the pharmacology. Did you tell your doctor about your anti-depressants or did you just conveniently forget about that? Perhaps you didn't even visit a doctor?

BK: Christ, Lydia, it's not fucking heroin! It's just a mild medication to help me over the hump when I can't sleep.

Doctor: I'm aware of what Ambien is, Brian. How did you get the prescription?

BK: From Jeff, okay?

Doctor: I see.

BK: He was just trying to help.

Doctor: By prescribing medications for someone who is not even his patient? Last I heard, you're not likely to be treated by a pediatric oncologist.

BK: Cut him a break. Doctors prescribe stuff for family and friends all the time. He knows I don't sleep well when Justin is away. I need to sleep, Lydia. I get crazed if I go too long without it.

Doctor: You need to know you're having sleep interruptions, and when, and why, and we need to talk about it when you do. Because this is a principal symptom with you of an emotional disturbance. If you medicate that symptom, it loses its efficacy and muddies your treatment. You can tell the good doctor for me that he should coordinate any medication he prescribes for you with either your treating physician, or with me.

BK: (Sheepish smile.) You guys going to fight over me now?

Doctor: No, Brian. But I want you to take that Ambien, and I want you to flush it down your toilet. Understand? If you can't sleep again, let me know. Expect a little wakefulness now, because you'll be withdrawing from the drug.

BK: Withdrawing? I don't take it everyday.

Doctor: When was the last time you didn't take it, Brian?

BK: (Frowned.) When did Justin leave?

Doctor: I think that says it all.

BK: Shit, does EVERYONE hate Jeffrey?

Doctor: Why do you ask that, Brian?

BK: I just think people are being unfair to him, that's all.

Doctor: Let me answer for myself. I don't know Jeffrey, so I have no personal opinion of him, nor would I. I do know his reputation in the medical community. I've read some of his work in medical journals. He's a brilliant physician. His protocols for treating the whole patient, not just the cancer, are considered state of the art today. And he's very young to have established such credibility. If I had a sick child, I would consult Jeffrey Walker. But you're not a sick child, Brian. And Jeffrey is not your doctor. I would prefer that he not medicate you.

BK: I see your point. I'm telling you he was just trying to be helpful.

Doctor: Or perhaps indispensable.

BK: What does that mean?

Doctor: It means, Brian, becoming so important to you that your reliance on him becomes central. He is there for you emotionally. He is there for you sexually. He even treats your medical complaints. You have to decide what is right for you, but do it with your eyes open.

BK: I haven't slept with Jeffrey since Justin's been gone, and he's honored that decision. He hasn't pressured me at all.

Doctor: I see. Has it been difficult?

BK: Sometimes.

Doctor: How do you feel about that?

BK: I miss Justin. I'm a little frustrated.

Doctor: Suggestion?

BK: Yes?

Doctor: When your friend, Michael, goes home, go home with him. Spend the weekend in Pittsburgh. Enjoy a change of scenery. See old friends. Visit Justin.

BK: But...his parents...

Doctor: If you really feel your presence would disturb them, visit him away from where they are likely to be. Get a hotel room and have him come there. It's very stressful to be a caretaker when someone is gravely ill. I'm sure a visit from you would be more than welcome by him. I also believe it would help your emotional state. You are experiencing increased anxiety and sleeplessness. Interrupting that spiral is a good thing.

BK: (Smiled.) If I didn't know you better, Lydia, I would swear you were trying to put me together with Justin and remove me from Jeffrey's perimeter.

Doctor: I'm not a matchmaker, Brian. I'm your doctor. If I felt a visit with Jeffrey would assist your progress, I would suggest that.

BK: Man, going back to the Pitt...why is that such a weird feeling for me?

Doctor: Perhaps because of how you felt when you left?

BK: Good point. I was miserable.

Doctor: Yes. And you have made yourself a new life here. You view it as a step back into pain. But it isn't, Brian. It's just a city, one filled with most of your memories. Realizing that now will help remove some of the sting and fear from your associations with Pittsburgh.

BK: I would like to see him.

Doctor: Then go.

BK: I think I will.

Doctor: Brian, promise me you will get rid of that medication.

BK: Yeah, if it's so important to you, I guess I will. I'm telling you it's no big deal.

Doctor: Good, then it should be no big deal to dispose of it.

BK: What if I can't sleep? I don't want to go see Justin feeling all ragged out and exhausted.

Doctor: I'll teach you some bio feedback and relaxation techniques that may help. One thing you can do is limit your intake of caffeine, alcohol and nicotine.

BK: (Smirked.) Might as well stop breathing, too.

Doctor: I didn't say it was easy, but any one of those drugs can contribute to your sleeplessness. It's up to you. Think about it. Perhaps eliminate them one at a time.

BK: Yeah, well, we'll see.

Doctor: You're stronger than you think. You've overcome much bigger problems than dependencies on common crutches.

BK: That's the first nice thing you've ever said to me.

Doctor: That's an interesting observation, Brian. You don't need my approval. I'm neutral on that point. I neither approve nor disapprove of you. I'm here to help you, not pass judgment on you. Never fear that you could lose my approval with an action or a revelation, because that inhibits your treatment. You aren't seeking my approval. Does that make sense?

BK: Yeah. It's interesting. I have this big act going where I don't give a shit about anyone's opinion of me. But it's bullshit. I worry about what almost everyone thinks. Justin, Jeff, Mikey, Deb, Lindz... it's pathetic. Even my partners at work. Sad.

Doctor: Brian, news flash. That's how most people feel. Everyone wants approval and reassurance. So long as you don't let that need overcome your personal goals and sense of self, it's a healthy quest. I think the fact that you can admit it is great progress.

BK: Every day I see little glimpses of how something that happened in these sessions has given me some personal insight. I know I've got a long way to go, but that's big for me.

Doctor: That's big.

BK: (Smiled.)

End of Excerpt

Doctor's Notes: BK is suffering separation anxiety due to the absence of his partner, JT. He has developed a slight reliance on Ambien to sleep, which he says he will stop taking. I suggested a visit with JT. Assuming the visit goes well, it should give him the reassurance he needs to continue with less anxiety. At least it should give him the opportunity to confirm if his fears of what could happen during a separation are real or the result of his anxieties. I am concerned about Jeffrey and his prescription of this medication for BK. I presume Jeffrey is aware of BK's analysis and possibly his anti-depressants. I am beginning to wonder if Jeffrey is attempting to insinuate himself into every key aspect of BK's life in order to control him. He appears to be a very strong personality. He is trained, medically, and is quite capable of recognizing and capitalizing on BK's emotional frailties. This is a situation that bears scrutiny.

BETWEEN THE SESSIONS

(after session 11, part I)

by Randall Morgan

Michael had never flown First Class before. Brian upgraded him and they sat together on the bulkhead row. Brian deliberately made Michael sit by the window. He told him it was so he could enjoy the view, but in fact he wanted to act as buffer between Michael's enthusiasm and the rest of the plane. Michael exclaimed about the width and comfort of the seats, the gadgets available to them, the luxury of the experience. Brian gazed across the aisle at the man separated from him by this narrow expanse. The man gazed back, then smiled and reached over to give Brian's shoulder a gentle pat. This affectionate little gesture did not go unnoticed by Michael, who leaned over and whispered to Brian, "Why did Jeff have to fly out with us?"

"Shut up, Mikey," Brian said, turning so that his back was towards Jeffrey. He didn't want to be overheard. "He's coming here as a favor, so shut up."

"Wonder if Justin will see it s a favor," Michael grouched.

"Since Jennifer asked him to, I'm sure he will. It's for his sister, Mikey. Can't you just look at it for what it is?"

"I am looking at it for what it is! You're the dumb ass!"

"Fuck you," Brian responded. Jeffrey leaned over and tapped on the arm of Brian's seat.

"Am I going to have to separate you two boys?"

"Better men than you have tried," Michael snapped at him and Brian rolled his eyes.

"I forgot to bring his crayons and coloring book. He gets cranky when we travel," he said to Jeffrey, who laughed.

"No problem." He reached up to tuck a stray strand of hair behind Brian's ear. Michael saw Brian smile and duck his face to ensure his skin made momentary contact with Jeffrey's fingers. Michael bristled at his reaction but somehow refrained from saying anything. As the jet climbed, Jeffrey became engrossed in reading Molly's file that had been sent to him at Jennifer's request by her daughter's treating team.

"It's not as if he's the only cancer doctor in the country," Michael mumbled, and Brian glared at him.

"True. He just happens to be one of the BEST. Do you know what the doctors at St. Joe's said when she told them she had been talking to Jeffrey Walker about Molly?"

Michael shook his head. He really didn't want to know. Brian went on. "They said he wrote the book on a case like this. They said they would be honored to consult with Jeffrey."

Michael tried to think of something sarcastic to say, but everything that popped into his head sounded petty and mean. This was Molly's life, after all. He couldn't begrudge her the best talent out there, even if that talent was after his best friend's fine ass. "Whatever!" That was the only retort he could conjure.

Brian was reading some financial documents he took from his briefcase and midway through, he leaned across the aisle to consult Jeffrey. "Do you have any money invested in a hedge fund?"

"Sure, why?"

"I have a prospectus for a fund I've been watching. I want to diversify, but it's a hundred grand minimum which is a big commitment for me."

"Is it heavily weighted in either Pacific Rim or Telecom? I think both of those sectors are soft. And will be for awhile. I have a broker..."

Michael tuned out the rest of their conversation. He had no idea what a hedge fund was or anything else they were talking about. Watching them converse, he was struck by a revelation. Brian had grown up. He wasn't sure where or how, but the wild hare he knew and loved was suddenly "substantial." He read and understood the Wall Street Journal. He had INVESTMENTS, not just some money in the bank. He had a big job handling multi-million dollar accounts. He worked out to stay healthy, not just to look good. He knew wines, not just red from white. He knew fashion, and how to wear it, not just what was hot. He had a membership in an exclusive DINING club and the limo service knew him by name. He had a shrink. He worried about his RELATIONSHIP, not just about getting laid. He had a friend and potential or present lover who was a world- renowned cancer specialist. Brian was not just working with the power structure; he was PART of that structure. For some reason, this epiphany made Michael feel scared and alone.

When they landed, Ben was waiting for Michael, who ran to embrace him. Ben exchanged a less than enthusiastic hug with Brian and shook hands with Jeffrey as they were introduced. Brian and Jeffrey went to pick up a rental car, and Michael watched them go before glancing at Ben. "Well? What do you think?"

"I think you're right. I think Justin should be worried."

"Because he's so handsome?"

"Because they seem to like each other very much. Not Brian's style."

"THANK you! Damn, Brian anyway."

"Look Michael," Ben said firmly. "You can't tell Brian who to love. Maybe Jeff is just what he needs. Wouldn't you feel bad if he were, and you told him something that cost him that relationship? And for god's sake don't say anything to Justin! Remember what happened the last time you tried that? You told Brian, against my advice, about Justin's kissing you-know-who and everything disintegrated. Brian was miserable, Justin wasn't happy for long and it got pretty awful for everyone. Learn a lesson."

"I know, I know," Michael pouted.

Ben just sighed, uncertain he had gotten through to his lover. He should know better than to try and restrain Michael from talking about anything that had to do with Brian. What Michael would do with this latest threat to Brian's solitude, Ben didn't know, but he could anticipate that it wouldn't be good.

In the rented Lincoln Navigator, that he thought had the size and maneuverability of a tank, Brian glanced at Jeffrey's handsome profile. "Why so quiet?"

"Am I?"

Brian smiled. "Yes, Jeff, you are." He couldn't help but notice how good he looked in his charcoal gray trousers, and red cashmere pullover, his alpaca overcoat tossed in the back with the luggage. His glasses only enhanced his intelligent good looks. When they stopped for a light, Brian impulsively leaned over and kissed him. Jeffrey rested a hand on the back of Brian's head and slipped his tongue into his mouth. Only the incessant honking of the car behind them when the light turned green interrupted their embrace. Brian reluctantly sat back and moved the car forward.

"What was that for?" Jeffrey asked and Brian shrugged.

"Thanks."

"For what?"

"For coming here, without being paid a dime, to consult on Molly's case. For being understanding about the sex thing. For being my friend."

"Brian I do a lot of pro bono work for kids who CAN'T pay. I have no problem volunteering a visit to Justin's sister. Or more, if needed. I have plenty of money. The kids are more important than anything else to me."

"I know. I believe that."

"Good, because it's true. As for the sex, I can wait. You have enough pressure in your life right now. And being your friend is the best thing that's happened to me in years."

Brian smiled slightly. "Thanks. For me too."

Jeffrey reached over and rested his hand on Brian's thigh. Brian sighed as he felt the impact of that touch in his groin. Jeffrey massaged his strong quadriceps muscle for a moment, then drifted his fingers up his leg, towards the firmly packed bulge at his crotch. "Nooo," Brian said, exhaling slowly as he covered Jeffrey's hand with his own. "Don't make me crazy."

Jeffrey smiled, and nodded, withdrawing his hand, having made his point. "So this is your hometown?"

"Pretty, isn't it?" Brian said with a laugh.

"Not bad. I'm sure there are prettier places than this highway. I want to see your home, where you grew up, so I can picture the little Brian. I want to see your infamous loft, at least the building, and Babylon and Boy Toy and Meat Hook and the baths, all the places you've told me about. Most of all, the diner. I'm dying to see the diner."

"What is this? The Brian Kinney tour of the Pitt?" he said with a laugh, and Jeffrey shrugged.

"As far as I'm concerned, you're Pittsburgh's greatest export."

Brian beamed at him, flattered by that compliment. Jeffrey had an almost magical way of making him feel worthy, better than worthy. He made him feel special, unique. Jeffrey seemed to see things in him that no one else saw, including himself. "Can I ask you a touchy question, Brian?"

"Sure," Brian said cautiously.

"Are you sure you aren't using the excuse that Justin's parents don't like you to avoid having to see Molly? Or to see Justin around Molly, while she is so sick?"

"Why would I feel that way?"

"Because seeing a small child suffering from a grave disease is very hard to take. Not being sure how you would react to it is natural. But believe me, when you're there with her, you'll see beyond the bald head and thin limbs to the little soldier putting up a valiant struggle. All you'll want to do is encourage her to keep going."

Brian was quiet for a moment, then, "Who are you? Lydia? My shrink?"

"No sweetheart, your friend. Your lover. I care about you. I understand you."

Brian sighed, meeting those words with a smile. "You pegged me on this one. I am uneasy about it. I don't know what to say. Not to Molly, not to Jennifer. Justin, I can handle."

"Trust me, Brian. You're a fine man. You have more than enough strength to do this. And it will mean a lot to her family and even to her. When little ones get sick like this they begin to feel very isolated. Think what it would mean to Justin."

"Not if he has to hold me up."

"Yes, even then. Maybe even more so."

At the hospital, Molly's room was dim. She had been napping fitfully, and her brother was zonked out in the chair beside her bed, still holding the book he had been reading her, Harry Potter's latest adventure. Their mother slept on the couch under the windows. Brian entered the room quietly, his heart pounding with fearful expectation. Only Molly was awake enough to focus on him. Her eyes seemed huge in her face, partly due to the fact she was very thin, not bloated as some little leukemia patients seemed to get. She wore a pink knit cap advertising the Powerpuff Girls over her bare head, and her impossibly spindly arms were networked with tubing, while a center line shunt poked out from the neckline of her floral hospital gown. Her chemotherapy was delivered through that shunt. The teddy bear Brian had sent her was nestled in the crook of one arm. As their eyes met, he had the strange sensation that her illness had given her an almost adult precognition. He steeled himself and held a finger up to his lips to signal silence. She nodded as he sat on the edge of her bed, speaking to her in a low whisper.

"Do you know who I am?"

She nodded.

"I'm your brother's friend, Brian."

She nodded again, holding up the bear and he smiled. "Glad you like him."

"Are you here to take Justin away?"

"Nope, only to visit. He has no interest in leaving you, Molly. How do you feel? Pretty rotten, huh?"

She nodded, relieved to meet someone who would let her admit to feeling bad. Most of the adults around her seemed let down and disappointed in her if she complained of aches and pains.

"Not fair, is it?" Brian anticipated her emotion.

She shook her head. He reached out and delicately threaded his fingers through hers. Her hand felt impossibly tiny in his. "Know what, Molly? I don't think it's fair, either. You should be out playing with your friends and eating chocolate sundaes."

She nodded, squeezing his hand, and he smiled. "You will be again. It doesn't seem like it now, but you will be. Sooner than you think."

"Not if I die," she said quietly, and he shook his head. Expressing her fear of death was also forbidden with the adults. They thought she was too young to truly comprehend the seriousness of her condition, but they were wrong.

"No one's dying around here. Remember when Justin had that ...accident... and was in the hospital for a long time?"

"Yes. His head was hurt bad."

"Right. Some people said he might die, but I knew he wouldn't. You Taylors are made of tough stuff."

"But I lost all my pretty hair," she said with a quivering lower lip and he nodded.

"Yeah, that's a shame, but look at me, Molly. You see all this hair? Feel it." He leaned down so she could run her hand through his brushy hair. "When I was your age, I found this old cat and brought it home with me. Turns out the old boy had ringworms. I had to have all my hair shaved off to deal with the disease. Kids made fun of me. Called me chrome dome and other mean things. I used to cry about it. But then I noticed I had a shadow of hair, and then a buzz and then all this stuff. If your arm or your leg or your teeth had to fall out in order to make you well, that would be sad, because they don't come back. But don't worry about your hair. Hair is like fingernails. It always grows back. Even better than it was."

She giggled and Brian smiled, surprised when he felt a hand close over his shoulder. He looked up into Jennifer's teary face, never having heard her get up and walk over to the bed. She leaned down to kiss his cheek, whispering the words "Bless you" as she did so. Brian fought against a surge of emotion and then nodded towards the door. "Going to talk to your mom a minute, Moll."

"Ok, but come back."

"I will."

Jennifer's usual preppy, precise beauty was being tested by her ordeal. Her hair looked dull, and in need of a wash, pulled back in a stringy ponytail. She wore no makeup, and the stress showed on every feature. She wore a baggy sweatshirt over jeans and white cotton socks, but no shoes. She self consciously smoothed over her hair as she felt the gaze of this handsome young man pass over her. He may be gay, but he was unfairly gorgeous, and she was still enough of a woman to want to look less than horrible to him.

"Thank you for making her laugh. I haven't heard her laugh in so long. I was listening to you. You were wonderful."

He shrugged, uncomfortable, feeling his face grow red. He had no snappy comeback for that compliment. "Poor kid."

"And thank you for Jeffrey. He has been a lifesaver for me. He makes me understand all this medical mumbo-jumbo and he also makes me believe there's a chance for a happy ending. Sometimes I just can't..." her face fell as tears began, and Brian pulled her gently into his arms, just holding her against his body without saying anything.

"I always knew it was my Mom you had the hots for," Justin said drolly as he entered the hallway and witnessed the embrace. Jennifer left Brian's arms and accepted his offer of a linen handkerchief, blotting her tears as she glanced at her son.

"Don't be rude, Justin. Brian's come all the way from New York to see you. Is that all you can say?"

"Actually I came to see Molly, but I thought I might bump into him while I'm here," Brian teased. Justin smiled and nodded.

"So it's both the women in my family, is it? Animal. Molly's asking for you. No, Mom, not you. Brian."

Brian looked from Justin to Jennifer and shrugged. "Hey, I have a kid. I'm not a total burn out. Jeffrey's meeting with your doctors in the consulting room. Why don't you two go down there and talk to him? I'll stay with Molly while you do."

Jennifer looked uneasy. "Brian, she has a tendency to get sick to her stomach because of the chemo, and it's very sudden. She can't handle it by herself."

Brian shrugged. "My kid has thrown up, pissed, shit on me. Oh, and Gus is a problem, too." His eyes were on Justin, who laughed.

"Shut UP!"

"Oh yeah, you bled all over me, too."

Jennifer watched their interplay and smiled. "I'll go make sure it's okay with Molly." She left them alone and the two men faced each other in silence for a moment, then Brian reached out and rested his hand on the back of Justin's neck, pulling him close. Justin encircled his slim waist with his arms, clinging to him in emotional, wordless desperation. Brian tightened his grip on him, resting his lips against his ear as he whispered,

"She's going to be alright. I just know it."

"I need you," Justin said in a tightly controlled voice as Brian stroked his hand through his hair and kissed his cheek, his temple, his forehead, his mouth. Their lips touched, opened, pressed, inhaling the essence of the other. For the first time since Justin left New York, they both felt complete.

"You have me," Brian said when the kiss ended, moving his hands down to cup Justin's firmly rounded ass.

Jennifer cleared her throat to announce her presence, and Brian reluctantly released Justin. "Molly seems to have been put under your spell, Brian. If you're sure..."

"Go. We'll be fine."

"Come on, Mom," Justin said, smiling at his lover. "She's the wrong gender to be under any real threat from the Kinney charm."

"My charm crosses all gender barriers," Brian retorted, waving them away as he returned to Molly.

Justin felt guilty as he entered the hotel room with Brian. He hadn't left his mother alone at the hospital often, and it didn't seem right for him to be seeking a romantic rendezvous with Brian when Jennifer was suffering and Molly

was so sick. As soon as he locked the door, Brian walked over to Justin and put his arms tightly around his waist, lifting him off the floor and walking him backwards to the bed, where he threw him down on the mattress. Standing over him, he removed his sweater and jeans, feeling Justin's eager gaze as if it were a caress. Naked, already erect, he crawled over Justin on all fours, posing above him like a lion over an antelope, leaning down to kiss him hotly.

Justin kissed him back, eagerly, letting go of his guilt as passion overtook him. He squirmed out of his sweats, wanting to feel Brian's naked flesh against his own skin. Brian kissed his face, his chin, his jaw, his neck, supporting his weight on his arms and occasionally rubbing his erection against his belly. Justin reached down to enclose his hot cock in his fist, pulling gently at it as Brian moaned and nipped his left nipple between his teeth. He dropped down to fellate Justin's turgid erection, realizing he was not good for a long session. He was too close to the surface. He intensified his sucking and within minutes, Justin found release deep within the confines of Brian's mouth. Brian looked up at him and smiled.

"Miss me?"

Justin smiled back, stroking Brian's cock more rapidly. "You seem a little edgy yourself."

"Not like that," Brian insisted, retrieving a condom and lube, flipping Justin over to admire his firm rump. His tongue traced the base of his spine, forced its way into the clenched crease of his ass and probed for the tight hole he wanted to possess. Justin groaned with pleasure as Brian's tongue hit home, penetrated, poked. Brian withdrew, replacing his tongue with fingers slicked with lube, opening him up and preparing him for his entry. Condom in place, he positioned Justin by raising his ass in the air, holding his head down on the bed by placing a hand on the back of his neck. He moved up behind him, guiding it in with his free hand. His eyes closed in ecstasy as he felt his penis slide up that snug, slick tube that enfolded him so tightly. The feeling it created was pure bliss. He went into his fuck mode, stroking, stroking with increased intensity and building urgency.

Justin got hard again, and he jerked at his erection as Brian pounded into him, providing a delicious pressure against his prostate and making him feel as if he were one with Brian's body. They fucked in perfect rhythm, and then Brian cried out as he shot, the waves of pleasure rolling through him with the force of a tsunami. Justin shot too, and they collapsed together on the bed, gasping. Brian suddenly had to pee, and when he returned, he gently slid an arm under Justin, realizing with a disappointed sigh that the exhausted young man had fallen asleep. Brian let him rest, knowing how badly he needed it. He snuggled close to his body, his eyes closed, wanting to sleep, too. But it was too early and sleep was not his friend. Finally he gave up and dressed, leaving a note beside the bed and turning off the light, slipping his cell phone in his pocket as he left.

"Oh my dear precious God, this is the ONE!" Emmett said eagerly, fixing his gaze on a tall, elegant young man who entered the diner, snuggled deep into an alpaca overcoat. Ted turned and looked beyond the very handsome Jeffrey to the very pretty Brian, dressed in leather and denim. Emmett saw Brian too, and sighed. "Just like I always say. The pretty boys dance with the pretty boys."

"Is dance a new word for it?" Ted queried as Emmett raised himself in the booth and waved eagerly at Brian.

"Brian! Brian! Over here!"

Jeffrey looked from the tall, effeminate young man to Brian and smiled. "Friend?"

Brian winced. "Loosely speaking. Come on. The queen demands an audience."

Emmett stood and hugged Brian tightly, as Ted reached around him to shake his hand in greeting. "We've missed you, sweetie!" Emmett declared as he let him go, but his eyes were on Jeffrey. Brian smiled wryly.

"Over here, Em. This is Dr. Jeffrey Walker. Jeff, Emmett Honeycutt and Ted Schmidt."

"A DOCTOR!" Emmett exclaimed, clapping his hands with glee, as Jeffrey laughed.

"Just Jeff is fine. May we join you guys?"

"Try to get away!" Emmett exclaimed, moving over to the other side of the booth in a lightning smooth gesture so that Jeffrey would sit beside him. Brian laughed at that ploy and slid in beside Ted.

"Oh my God, it's my long lost son!" Deb abandoned a tray and rushed over to Brian, leaning over to leave a crimson lipstick imprint on his cheek and smother his face in her ample bosom. As much as he protested, Brian was happy for her greeting. She used her zaftig ass to scoot him over so she could join them in the booth, squeezing him against Ted. "How are you, honey? Mikey said you were so sweet to him in New York! The little prick is still shackled up with Ben. Can't be bothered to say hello to his mom. You'd think they'd been apart for a world war! Where's Sunshine?"

"Asleep," Brian responded. "He's exhausted."

"Of course he is! The poor little thing. So devoted to Molly. Oh god, now I'm going to cry again..." she sniffed and finally regained control. "I'm so glad you came to visit. He's missed you so much." She let her gaze land on Jeffrey, as if just now noticing him. "And who is this?"

"Jeffrey Walker," he extended his hand across the table and Deb shook it with some obvious reticence.

"He's a DOCTOR, Debbie!" Emmett beamed, and she looked interested.

"Are you that New York doctor Jennifer raves about?"

"I'm from New York, yes," he said modestly and Deb smiled, instantly warming to him.

"Well, your dinner is on the house. You've been an angel to her and to Molly. And you, Brian Kinney," she kissed him squarely on the cheek again, leaving a second imprint. "I am so glad you and Justin are together again. I never did like him with...well, you know who."

Ted and Emmett shared a glance while Brian nodded. "Yeah, I know who, Deb."

"Anyway, he never stopped loving you, that's obvious."

Brian looked at Jeffrey and smiled sheepishly. Jeffrey met his eyes briefly, and then stared down at his hands. Ted and Emmett exchanged another look, taking it all in. They ordered when Deb resumed her waitressing duties, and Brian reached over and covered Jeffrey's hands with one of his. Jeffrey looked up. Brian raised a single brow in a questioning gesture, saying nothing. Jeffrey smiled and moved their hands so that Brian's was between his. Ted kicked Emmett under the table just as Emmett kicked Ted.

"So, catch me up on the dish," Brian said, leaning back and removing his hand from Jeffrey's grip as Emmett and Ted stumbled around, grasping at any gossip that might be as compelling as what they had just witnessed.

Over dessert, Brian's cell phone rang, and he answered it immediately, smiling when he heard Justin's voice. "Hi there." They all listened to his lopsided conversation in silence. "You were sleeping too soundly to wake you and I was starving. At the diner, of course. With Em and Ted. They say hi. Uh, yeah, him too. He wanted to see it. He's heard so much about it. It's ok, he's a doctor, he knows how to treat ptomaine poisoning." Jeffrey winced as Brian went on. "Want to join us? Want me to bring you something then? Sure, no big deal. What do you want? The usual?"

Ok, we're finishing up. I'll be there in fifteen. Uh, yeah. You too. Bye." He hung up and stared at Ted and Em with stony disinterest. "What? He was tired! I'm going to go up to the counter to order him some food. Finish up, Jeff. We'll be going."

Jeffrey watched Brian walk away, the telltale twitch in his fine jaw giving away his irritation. When he felt the others watching him he covered it with a smile. Brian returned with a sack of food and put some money on the table. "Ready, Jeff?"

"I'm not going."

"What do you mean?"

"Just that, Brian. Ted and Emmett were nice enough to invite me to go to a couple clubs with them and I think I will." He met Brian's silent disapproval with a slight smile. "You have a problem with that?"

Brian gnawed on his inner jaw, then said, "No, fine. You want to go to the clubs, go to the clubs. You're an adult. Have fun. You can get a cab back to the hotel."

"Exactly," Jeffrey said, as Brian waved at his old friends and left the diner, carrying Justin's dinner in his tightly clenched fist.

BETWEEN THE SESSIONS

(after session 11, part II)

by Randall Morgan

Justin, famished, devoured the dinner Brian brought him. Brian had turned on the television while his lover ate, aimlessly trolling through the stations with the remote control while lying back on the bed, fully clothed. Nothing caught his attention. He was thinking of Jeffrey at Babylon, hot new meat besieged by enthralled predators.

"You want this lemon bar? I'm stuffed," Justin offered and Brian shook his head.

"You know I don't eat sugar."

"I'll save it for later," he closed the bag and crept up on the bed, suddenly pouncing on his lover, covering his face with kisses. Brian smiled, switched the television off and spread his hands on Justin's ass.

"Didn't you get enough?"

"Never enough," Justin quoted him, causing Brian to laugh. Brian outstretched his arms on the mattress, closing his eyes.

"You drive," he said softly. "Do with me what you will."

Justin smiled and started by removing Brian's shoes and socks. He sucked gently on his warm toes, and then licked the fine bones of his feet, causing Brian to shudder. He caressed the arch of his foot, before he circled the prominent ankle bone with the tip of his tongue. Sliding his palms up Brian's calves, over his knees, his thighs, his abdomen, Justin paused to roll his sweater and t-shirt up and over his head and off his arms. Brian's torso revealed, Justin drifted to his nipples, twisting them with his fingers until they were as hard as pebbles. He sucked and nibbled first one, then the other. Brian moaned and let a hand spread in Justin's blond hair, stroking him with gentle appreciation.

Justin smiled up at him, and then let his tongue slip down Brian's midline opening his jeans and unhooking each metal button of his fly. He eased the soft, worn denim down his long legs. As usual, Brian wore no underwear, and his heavy penis was already erect. Justin tossed the jeans on the floor and straddled Brian's powerful thighs. He made sure he held Brian's gaze as he dipped down and enfolded the glistening knob between his puffy lips. Brian groaned and bucked his hips upward, responding to the overwhelming sensation. Justin felt the shaft slip past his teeth, into the moist cavern of his mouth, grazing the ridges on the roof of his mouth, aiming at the soft tissue at the back of his throat. He took him as far as he could without gagging, then withdrew from him and pumped the hard rod in his hand as he said, "I want you for dessert, Brian. I'm going to swallow every drop you can feed me."

"Do it," Brian responded with a groan. There was no room for thoughts of Jeffrey in his mind now. All he could think about was how much he wanted Justin, how much he loved him. He watched his pretty, flushed face slip back down on Brian's cock, recreating the flash of heat. He saw how pink Justin's lips looked on the hard white marble of his dick, the visual adding to his pleasure. Brian felt his ejaculation build in waves of increasing intensity. His abdominal muscles were like steel under the flat of Justin's left hand. The wall of his groin pulled into a tight knot to propel the fluid out of his tubes and into the waiting warmth of his lover's mouth. The orgasm overtook him in a seizure of muscular contractions and rippling titillation of his nerve endings, pumping the semen out of his body in multiple spurts that Justin sucked down as if it were ambrosia.

While he was still recovering, Justin took Brian's hand and slipped it down the waistband of his sweats, to encircle his hard phallus. Almost automatically, without really thinking about it, Brian began pulling him in a familiar gesture with a pre-destined result. Justin shot his load on Brian's bare torso, then leaned over and cleaned it off of him with his tongue, licking up every pearly drop, comparing how he tasted to the flavor of his lover. Brian pulled him on top of him, kissed him deeply, their combined flavors still on Justin's tongue as he sucked eagerly at it. He rolled him on his side and encircled Justin in his arms, pressed against his back, closing his eyes. He was exhausted. He wanted nothing more than to sleep, at last. With his lover in his arms, he felt the comfort he needed to slip into that delicious state of nothingness. His lips parted, breathing in a regular rhythm, Brian was finally nearing the desperately needed release of slumber when Justin said, "I need to go back to the hospital."

Brian groaned, the elusive promise of rest escaping him once again. "Now? It's after eleven. Wouldn't Jennifer call you if she needed you?"

"I've left her alone all evening. I really need to go back, Brian."

"I wanted to sleep with you," Brian complained. "Hold you in my arms. Wake up with you. Just have your body next to mine. I'm so tired and..." he stopped. He didn't want to heap guilt on Justin. The kid had bigger things to worry about than whether Brian could sleep without him. "Give me a minute. I'll get dressed and take you over there."

"I can get a cab," Justin offered, but Brian shook his head. He was awake now anyway, so what the fuck? The drive to the hospital was made with little conversation, and once there, Justin kissed him and said, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be a twat. Of course you need to be here. Tell Molly I'll come by to see her tomorrow."

"Ok. Brian, why don't you go to Babylon?"

Brian narrowed his eyes at him. "What the fuck?"

"I know you want to. It's your old stomping grounds. You must be curious to see it again."

"You trying to hook me up?"

"No! I don't mean go to the backroom or pick up a trick, although I guess if that's what you want to do, I can't stop you. I meant to dance and see old familiar faces."

Brian smiled and lit a cigarette. He knew sleep wasn't happening, even though he wanted that more than just about anything. "I might. Maybe dancing will tire me out."

"I haven't said anything, but Jeffrey was wonderful earlier today with my mom. And even with me," Justin said with a sigh. "He made the doctors answer a bunch of tough questions and he had some ideas they should add to their treatment protocol. He was really incredible, Brian. I may hate him for wanting you, but Christ, he wants to save my sister, so how selfish can I be? Even as a dumb ass, so many of his ideas made sense to me. A lot of it had nothing to do with her medical treatment. It had to do with making her more comfortable, increasing her appetite, decreasing the side effects of chemo, using homeopathic sources to heal what he called her 'general debilitation'. When he spent some time with her, he had her laughing, even though she's terrified of doctors. Watching him, I thought of what a selfish little prick I am. All I can think about is this gorgeous guy is after my boyfriend. But he may be able to save my sister's life. How can I dislike him?"

Brian leaned over and kissed him gently. "Don't worry about Jeffrey, Sunshine. He's my problem. I'm just sorting things out. I feel the same way towards you that I always have. I'm not in love with Jeff. I want him to be my friend, Justin. I don't want to have any ambivalent feelings about him."

Justin spread his hand on Brian's cheek as he whispered, "But you do."

Brian said nothing, feeling his heart flip at the poignant expression on Justin's face as his lover leaned closer and said, "I've been there, Brian. I came out the other side. I know we're meant to be together. I just know it. But you have to find that out for yourself. It can't be forced. I learned that lesson. I can be patient. I have confidence in our love."

With that, he left the car. Brian sat there, idling, until Justin disappeared inside the hospital corridor, then he sighed and put the big car in gear. He was riddled by guilt, confusion and an almost painfully intense sensation of love for the wise, young, blond.

Melanie was shocked to find Brian Kinney at her door shortly before midnight. "I thought you moved." She was up late, working on a brief. She was tired and her nerves were strung thin.

Brian nodded. "Hello to you, too."

"Sorry, Brian, but it's midnight."

"I want to see Lindz."

"She's asleep. So is Gus. Why don't you come back at a normal time tomorrow?"

He stared at her, trying to gauge if there was a chink in her resolution. He saw no sign of that. "I really need to talk to her, Mel."

"She had a long day. Gus is getting over a cold and kept us both up last night. Give her a break, Kinney."

He sighed, scrubbing his fingers through his hair in a nervous gesture. "Shit."

"You look like you could use a little sleep yourself."

"Tell her I'll call her before I leave town and arrange a time to visit Gus." He turned to walk away, hunched into his leather jacket, his head lowered in the cold wind. Melanie sighed, suddenly feeling a surge of sympathy for the big lug.

"Brian!" He turned, his expression questioning. "You want to come in and take a look at Gus? But please don't wake him up."

He nodded, going upstairs with her, into his son's room. The baby slept with his lips parted, his breathing thickened by his congestion. A humidifier in the shape of a smoke breathing dragon dampened Gus's hair and skin. Brian

leaned over the crib, rubbing a slow circle into his back for a moment, while Melanie leaned in the doorway, watching. He covered him up and walked out.

"Thanks," he said softly and she reached out and took his arm at the front door.

"Are you ok? Is it Molly?"

He shrugged. "Partly. I'm fine. Thanks, Mel." He left the house, and got into the car, driving straight to the diner. It was a strange in-between hour, with most of the regular patrons still at the clubs. He sat at the counter, acknowledging Debbie's greeting with a nod. She was finally freed up and she sat on the stool beside his, pouring them both cups of coffee.

"What's on your mind, Brian? I didn't expect to see you again tonight."

"I took Justin to the hospital to be with Molly."

"I see. I know it's rough, honey," she patted his arm. "Your mom has been a real help to Jennifer, bringing food to her house and helping out at the hospital."

"Good."

"Maybe I've misjudged her."

"Maybe we both have, Deb. Who knows? Good and bad in everyone, I guess."

"Why so blue?"

He shrugged. "Just tired."

"Is it strange, coming back here?"

"Yeah, I feel like I was never here."

"Trust me you were, Brian. You left an indelible mark."

"Like a stain?" he teased, raising a brow. Debbie laughed at him.

"More than one stain, I'd wager."

"You still boinking that cop?"

She punched him on the shoulder. "You're still not big enough to talk to me that way! I'll knock you into last Tuesday!"

He laughed. "Inquiring minds want to know...or not."

"Are you and Justin doing ok? I know this has to be a strain. What a horrible thing to happen. And right after you two put it together, finally."

"I don't want to lose him, Deb."

"Lose him? He gave up a lover and moved to New York to be with you. Why would you lose him?"

Brian shrugged, and she reached over and lifted his chin on her fingertips so he would look at her. "What's going on?"

He pulled away, staring into the ebony depths of his coffee. Surely the answer resided in that brew, he seemed to be thinking. "Nothing."

Debbie laughed. "I haven't bought that word in that tone of voice since you were thirteen, Brian."

He smiled, and then leaned back, slowly meeting her gaze. "I know he gave up a lot and took a big chance to move to New York to be with me, Deb. But..."

"But what?"

"I can't help but think of how I felt when I saw him kissing...his...the other guy. How I felt when I was alone after he left. How I never want to feel that way again. It gets in the way. It's fear, maybe. Insecurity, I don't know. I'm seeing a shrink, as I'm sure Mikey told you, to work through my demons. But Justin, as much as I love him, makes me feel off-center. I don't feel safe with him."

"Honey, that's called love. No one ever feels a hundred per cent safe with someone they love that much. You give so much of yourself to another person, you wonder if you'll regret it later. And you've been burned, once, so you're even more cautious. But ask yourself, Brian; were you happier when you didn't have him? If not, you'll have to assume some risk."

He shook his head slowly. "What if we're wrong? What if he was with the right guy and I broke them up?"

"He was with the right guy the first time. Someone else broke you up. He's come home, Brian. Allow yourself to be happy."

"I'm trying."

"I know you are and I'm so glad you're finally getting some help. It will all work out, Brian. You two are a great love story. We all want to see you succeed. By the way, I really like your friend, Jeffrey. He's not only a lifesaver, literally, but he is gorgeous and sweet."

Brian sighed and nodded. "Yeah, he is."

"He'll be the belle of the ball at Babylon," she said with a laugh.

Brian looked at her, and there was such turmoil in his eyes that Debbie's smile faded. She held his gaze for a long moment, no words passing between them, and then she whispered. "Oh god, Brian. Oh no."

He stood up, leaving some cash on the bar to more than cover the coffee. He brushed her cheek with his lips and turned to go, but she grabbed his arm and held tight to the leather. "Don't go to Babylon, Brian. Stay here."

"I wish I could," he said with a sigh. He didn't look back at her as he pulled free of her hold and left the diner. Debbie watched him go, feeling as if she was helplessly watching him walk into the path of an oncoming train.

Before entering Babylon, Brian pulled off his sweater, wearing a plain black cotton t-shirt underneath. He topped it with his leather jacket and glanced at his image in the rear view mirror. Had he aged? Did he still have it? Would anyone remember or even care? Why the fuck did he care, anyway? He didn't even want to be here. He had outgrown Babylon awhile ago. But...he had enough ego to want to be desired, to have that same old magic when he entered the club. He tried not to meet glances or acknowledge anyone as he went straight up to the catwalk which afforded him the best view of the dance floor. Several men approached him, assuaging his insecurity, but he was looking for only one. Then he saw him.

Jeffrey had shed his red sweater, and his heather gray sleeveless undershirt was plastered to the lean muscles of his torso by a sheen of sweat. He had been dancing hard and often, his glasses still on the bridge of his nose, his hair disarrayed. Brian realized he had never looked sexier, a bar of platinum in a vault full of gold and silver. If Ted and Emmett were still around, he didn't see them, which was just as well. He went up to the disc jockey's glassed in booth, removing some cash from his wallet as he walked.

Jeffrey looked up when his partner was suddenly blocked by a tall man in black. His annoyance quickly shifted into excitement as Brian turned to face him. The music changed from pounding disco to a dance version of tango rhythms. The others could continue their body displaying bumps and grinds, but when Brian held his arms out, Jeffrey knew what he wanted. Smiling, Jeffrey glided into them without a word. Their eyes locked, their bodies melded together in a familiar abrazio, or embrace, they started la cadencia, which was the walk without the progressive movement, just marking time in place in sensuous steps. Around them, dancers stopped to watch, taking in this unusual style of dance in a club like Babylon. The fact that it was the legendary Brian Kinney only increased their interest. Babylon lost a star when Brian left town.

No surprise that Brian immediately honed in on the hottest guy there that night, but what was he doing? Oblivious to the attention, Brian began the el paseo, or stroll. Jeffrey followed, in perfect step, their gazes fused and hands and arms held tight and with grace as the others moved aside to allow them a line of dance. They were the same size, the same body type, moving with the liquid ease of felines as they drew the attention of the room. Around they went and back again, entertaining the others with fancy footwork where their thighs insinuated between their partner's legs and out again, their feet mingling and clearing. At one point Jeffrey smiled and threw his head back, allowing Brian to lead him through a slow spin and back again into their frame. Among the watchers were Emmett and Ted, who stared in wonder at this alien who possessed Brian Kinney's body. It was hot, it was beautiful to see, it was...romantic. And it was not with Justin.

When the song ended and the music went back into a dance loop, Brian didn't immediately release Jeffrey. Nor did he acknowledge the applause of his audience. He didn't really notice the audience; his attention was so fixed on Jeffrey. "Let's get out of here," Jeffrey said, and Brian held his hand tightly as they left together.

"I guess this means I get to keep his red cashmere sweater," Emmett finally said to Ted. "And you can have the alpaca overcoat."

Ted sighed. "I guess this means big trouble." They shared a silent communication, and then left the club to find Michael. Some dish was too momentous to wait until morning.

In the parking lot, Jeffrey grabbed Brian by his jacket front and kissed him hard on the mouth. Brian let him do it, and then reluctantly backed away, shaking his head. "Please Jeff, don't do this."

In the car, Jeffrey pulled on Brian's discarded sweater, and stared hard at his profile. "Don't look so fucking hot if you don't want me to kiss you, sexy boy."

Brian smiled, pulling into traffic. "It's such a struggle for me to look bad."

"That's not a joke. If you won't do me..." Jeffrey said in a voice hoarse with sensuality, and Brian glanced at him, and then stared as Jeffrey opened his fly and pulled out his semi-erect penis. Brian laughed.

"You are not going to do what I think you're going to do, are you? Not while I'm driving."

"I think I am, as a matter of fact," Jeffrey leaned his back against the window and spread his thighs wide, slowly masturbating with his right fist. "See what you do to me, Brian? You make me crazy." When Brian almost left the road, he forced his attention on his driving, but he took as many glimpses at Jeffrey as he could without endangering their lives. The idea of his cool and sophisticated friend whacking off in semi-public inflamed him. He watched Jeffrey's skin become flushed, his penis become rigid and swollen, bulging above the tight circumference of his hand.

"I'm watching you as I do it, Brian. Your perfect nose, your beautiful lips, that square jaw, those eyes...God, those eyes...and your fucking body... I'm admiring you while I do it." Brian could hear the smacking sound of pre-cum lubricating his strokes, and he felt his own body respond with an answering heat. He shifted his weight and adjusted his crotch to give his penis room to expand inside his tight jeans.

"Are you crazy? If I pull up to the stop light next to that bus, they can look down into the car," Brian said softly, staring hungrily at Jeffrey while the red light held them captive. He stopped back from the bus, but Jeffrey laughed.

"Don't worry about it, I don't care. So they see some attractive man beating his meat at a stoplight. There are worse sights to be seen in this world."

"It's called public lewd. They bust you for that."

Jeffrey moaned and leaned his head back against the glass as the light changed. "I'm going to shoot, Brian. I'm going to come all over your fucking sweater."

Brian winced as his own cock throbbed miserably under tight cover. He turned sharply into a shopping mall, deserted, because it was so late. He pulled into the most secluded spot he could find and idled the engine, leaving the car running to provide not only heat but a low cast of light. Jeffrey felt Brian's gaze fix on him with eager anticipation just as he shot his load. He allowed the stream of cum to stripe Brian's sweater in three distinct tracks. Watching Jeffrey reach satisfaction made it impossible for Brian. He struggled with the buttons on his fly. He had to take it out before it was too late. Jeffrey reached over and rolled Brian's t-shirt up his belly to reveal his skin. Brian pumped his own erection a few times in rapid succession, before he released a blast against his belly. He still held it in his fist, eyes closed, until the throbbing stopped.

He opened his eyes just as Jeffrey leaned over and delicately licked it off his stomach like a child licking the icing off a spoon. Brian let him do it, enjoying the sensation while his body sought a more normal pace. He deliberately didn't let his mind wander to earlier that evening when Justin licked his own sperm off Brian's belly. When he was clean, Jeffrey rolled his shirt back down and smiled up at him. "I love a late night snack."

Brian replaced his softening dick in his jeans, still too shaky to drive. Just then a bright light flooded the car. Brian winced as a security guard rapped on the glass of his window with a mag light. Brian glanced at Jeffrey who smiled, his own penis back under cover. Brian lowered the automatic window, as he said, "You mind getting that light out of my eyes?"

"What are you boys doing?" The rent-a-cop asked suspiciously. He rolled the beam up and down their bodies, but the only telltale evidence was the cum stain drying on the sweater Jeffrey wore, and he wasn't close enough to see that clearly.

"Problem, officer? I'm a doctor. I got an emergency page," Jeffrey flashed his text pager at the man. "It was too dark to read it and Brian felt it wasn't safe to turn on the interior light in traffic."

"I didn't see no light," the man said with a scowl, and Jeffrey smiled.

"Must have read it by then. We were just leaving."

"Ok, well...the mall is closed. Move on."

Brian put his window up and laughed as he started the car and drove towards the road. That was too close. A few seconds earlier and both he and Jeffrey could be on their way to a lockup and public humiliation. Cops liked nothing better than busting fags. "A page?"

Jeffrey shrugged. "Worked, didn't it? Anyway, I did get a page."

"When?" While Brian admired Jeffrey's quick thinking under fire, his easy facility with lying was vaguely disturbing.

"I don't know, while we were doing what we were doing."

"Who sent you a page?"

"One of Molly's doctors at St. Joe's."

"You're just now telling me? Is it an emergency?"

"I just now read it," Jeffrey said defensively. "I'm not her treating physician. They wouldn't call me in on an emergency unless it was life threatening. He just left me a telephone number," Jeffrey removed his mobile from a pocket and dialed the number off his pager. Brian watched him nervously, ready to divert to the hospital, but Jeffrey indicated he didn't need to do so, talking quietly to the doctor for the remainder of their drive to the hotel. Once he parked the car there, Brian turned to him as Jeffrey hung up.

"Well?"

"Got some blasts back. I asked them to re-test."

"And?"

"And, I think the family should be tested for bone marrow match."

Brian felt his stomach lurch. "Why?"

"Bone marrow transplant is a very common tool when fighting leukemia, Brian. And the best match is family. Notably, sibling. It's time we found out if there's a match."

"By sibling, do you mean Justin?"

"I do, yes. He's her only sibling."

They got out and walked towards the hotel, silent, until they were in the elevator. "Is it dangerous?" Brian asked.

"For the donor? There's a slight risk. Not high. It's painful, however. I won't lie about that. Not the test, that's nothing. But the actual harvesting of bone marrow is not a happy event."

"Then I don't want him to do it."

"Would you deprive Molly of that chance of success to save Justin a little pain? And isn't it his choice, not yours?"

"Take my bone marrow. I'm bigger than him."

"Unless you're his brother, which raises a whole host of scary issues, then no, it's not going to work, darling."

Brian frowned. "Fuck."

"Let's not worry about it tonight. Want to come in?" He paused at the door to his room, sliding two fingers up Brian's lapel. "You look exhausted. Come lie down with me for awhile. No funny business."

Brian sighed. "I can't, Jeff. I...I have something I have to do." He kissed him on the lips, a non-romantic buss, and then left him there, headed back to his car.

BETWEEN THE SESSIONS

(after session 11, a post script)

by Randall Morgan

When Brian reached Molly's hospital room, he found a quiet, almost soothing environment; the only noise the occasional blips and bleeps from her monitoring equipment. He stood at the foot of her bed staring at her tiny, still form, as if he could miraculously find a solution to her illness if he thought about it long enough. He straightened her bedcovers and then noticed the chair was empty, and her brother was dozing on the sofa/bed, a Harry Potter book tented open on his chest. Jennifer was not there. He gently lifted the book >from Justin's chest and placed it on the floor. He pulled the blanket up over him and was turning away when Justin grabbed his hand. He stopped, looked down at him.

"Don't go," Justin said softly.

"Where's your mom?"

"I told her to take the night off. They gave Mol morphine for the pain so she's really out of it. Mom needs a night in her own bed."

"I won't keep you from sleeping, I..." he hesitated, rubbing his tired eyes with his thumb and forefinger.

"You're falling down tired, Brian. Come here."

He sat down on the sofa, his face in his hands. "I'm exhausted. I need to take something, but Lydia made me get rid of my Ambien."

Justin sat with his back against the arm of the sofa, his legs spread slightly. "Come here. Take that jacket off."

Brian let the jacket fall to the floor. He glanced quizzically at Justin who opened his arms to him. "Here?" he said with incredulity and Justin smiled.

"Not THAT, fiend. Lie down with me."

"Not enough room."

"Try it."

Brian stretched out above him, resting his face on his shoulder, his back to the wall, his long legs overhanging the sofa. He was half on Justin, half on the bed. He closed his eyes, snaking an arm over Justin's torso. "I just can't sleep," he whispered, but as soon as he said it, the soothing comfort of Justin's body next to his seemed to fill him with a delicious ennui. Justin combed his fingers through Brian's brushy hair as he said, "Yes, you can, Brian. Just let your mind go free. You're safe. I've got your back. I love you."

"I love you too," Brian whispered, but that was all he remembered before slipping into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Ben stared vacantly at Emmett and Ted as they leaned in the doorway of his apartment. "Do you know what time it is?" He finally said, and Emmett smiled, admiring Ben's boxers that featured a print of alarm clocks.

"Well, I know where the BIG hand is, but how do you keep track of the hour?" Emmett teased, and Ben sighed, waving them in.

"Let me guess, you want to see Michael."

"Sorry, Ben," Ted said with an apologetic shrug. "But we really do need to see Mikey."

"About WHAT?" Michael came from the bedroom, wearing a pair of tighty- whiteys, rubbing his sleepy eyes with his fists like a kid.

"Brian," they said in unison, and Ben shook his head.

"Guys, we're all grown ups, here. Including Brian. Brian perhaps more than any of you. Is there ever going to be a time when you boys stop living vicariously through Brian's ups and downs?" Ben insisted.

"You just don't know him, Ben," Emmett said quietly. "He's not like other people."

Ben sighed, sitting down on the sofa, refusing to leave them alone with their gossip. "You know, I may know Brian better than you think. I knew Brian before I knew any of you."

Michael winced. "Please don't bring up your one-nighter with Brian at the White Party, Ben. It makes my skin crawl."

Ben glanced at his lover, absently stroking his hand over the hard planes of his bare torso. "It wasn't just a one-nighter, Michael. It was more of a two day fling. It's amazing how well you can get to know someone in forty-eight hours."

"You never told me that," Michael whined and Ben shrugged.

"You never asked."

Emmett and Ted exchanged a look. Each had their own fantasies of Brian in bed for forty-eight hours. You couldn't hang with Brian and not wonder what it would be like to fuck him. But they were there on a mission. They didn't want Mikey to be distracted by jealousy over his lover's former fling. "Listen, we saw Brian at Babylon tonight."

"There's an emergency," Ben said sarcastically. Michael glared at him.

"Forty-eight hours? Did you spend the whole time in bed?"

"Most of it," Ben admitted, and Emmett frowned.

"HELLO? Call the Smithsonian on that lost weekend, it is HISTORICAL! I'm talking about the here and now!"

Michael forced his attention to his late night guests. "Ok, so you saw Brian at Babylon. So?"

"So, he came in, went straight over to Jeffrey..."

"Jeffrey? He was there already?"

"Yes," Ted said with a wince. "Em and I asked Jeff to come with us. Since Brian was tied up with Justin or so we thought."

"Oh, nice," Michael said with a frown, feeling unfairly betrayed by that action by his friends. "So Brian shows up and walks over to Jeff. So?"

"So," Ted took up the charge. "He must have bribed the DJ to put on this sexy Latin music and he took Jeff in his arms and led him into this sensual samba."

"It was a tango," Emmett corrected him.

"Are you sure? I think it was a samba."

"Honey, my grandmother had a ballroom dancing school. It was definitely a tango."

"Who gives a SHIT?" Michael insisted as Ben groaned.

"Tango, samba, whatever," Ted said as Emmett mouthed the word "TANGO" in silence beside him. "It was hot, slow, and sexy. Incredibly sexy. Everyone stopped and watched them. They cleared a space for them to dance. But they were only looking at each other. I found it incredibly romantic."

"Oh god, girl," Emmett leaned in to enhance Ted's depiction. "There was not a soft dick in the room. They were drop dead gorgeous together. And when the song ended, Brian took his hand and they LEFT. He didn't even stop to get his sweater and coat."

"Where was Justin?" Michael insisted with a dour expression.

"EXACTLY!" The other two said, and Ben shook his head.

"This is the business of absolutely NO one in this room," he said, as Michael glared at him.

"Why are you protecting Brian?"

"I'm protecting Brian's privacy. There's a difference."

"I told you that fucking Jeffrey was after him!"

"Michael, if there's one thing Brian can do, its take care of himself where another man is concerned."

"That's what you think. And who is protecting Justin?"

"The same people who protected Brian when Justin left him. Remember that? You guys were such good friends to him, he ended up leaving town, he was so unhappy. Because not one of you, not even you completely, Michael, were able to accept the fact Brian, the GOD, was less than invincible. That he was in serious pain. You just let him slide. And now what? You're going to attack him for cheating on Justin?" He stood up, walking towards the bedroom, pausing at the door. "You guys have done enough damage to Brian in the name of so- called friendship. Why don't you just leave him the fuck alone?" He closed the door and Michael shrugged.

"He doesn't understand."

"It's Brian we want to help," Emmett said self righteously. "Although, helping Justin is helping Brian, isn't it? We weren't bad friends to Brian, were we, Teddy?"

Ted shrugged, thinking back. Brian's first reaction to Justin's leaving was a façade of nonchalance. No one tried to look behind it. They all secretly believed he brought it on himself. His fucking around, his emotional isolation, what did he expect? He went from forced nonchalance to withdrawal. Days would pass when they would neither see nor hear from Brian. Did anyone go over to his loft to see how he was doing? Did they inquire if he was well? No, they just presumed he was shacked up with someone. Then he seemed to invest in excess, drinking, drugs, sex, Brian squared. Did that trigger an inquiry? Was he trying to hide something? Was he running so fast to escape something painful? And then...he was gone. Ted sighed. He remembered the many times Brian helped him out of a jam. "You know, Ben may have something."

"What do you mean?"

Ben came out of the bedroom, dressed in jeans, a sweater and a jacket. Michael glared at him. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"I fucking think I'm going out, is that okay?"

"Out where?"

"Just out, Michael. I need some air."

"Don't be a drama queen, Ben."

Ben just glared at him and left as Michael frowned. "I can't believe him."

"What do we do, Mikey?" Emmett insisted, and Michael formulated a plan as Ted got to his feet.

"Where are you going?"

"Home."

"Why?"

"I think Ben does have a point. I think maybe I wasn't as good a friend to Brian as I might have been, and I want to think about it before I make another mistake."

"That's crazy, Teddy!" Michael insisted. "Ben doesn't know how close we all are. He doesn't get it."

Ted paused at the front door. "Sometimes someone a little less close to the center can see the whole picture. Later, guys." He left and Emmett shrugged.

"He'll come around. What do we do, Mikey?"

"I say we confront Jeffrey."

"When?"

"Now."

Emmett clapped his hands, following Michael into the bedroom so he could dress, always up for a battle.

Jeffrey awoke to a persistent pounding on his door. Believing Brian had come back, unsure of the hour, he threw on a robe and opened the door, squinting into the light, focusing on Michael and Emmett. "Is something wrong?" Emmett pressed his sweater and coat into his arms and Jeffrey took them and shook his head. "Couldn't this wait until tomorrow?"

"Tell Brian to come out," Michael huffed and Jeffrey glared at him.

"Brian isn't here."

"Don't even bullshit me, Jeff. Tell him to come out."

"I'm telling you he is NOT here."

"Then where is he?"

"How the hell do I know? Asleep, if he has any sense at all. Did you try HIS room?" Michael and Emmett looked at each other and Jeffrey groaned. "Oh for chrissakes, come in! You should know Brian better than to think he would HIDE from you if he were here. Take a look around? Let me know if you find him."

They did so, noticing how orderly the place was. When Michael went into the bathroom, Emmett looked in the closet, fingering a soft gray mohair jacket. "Ohh, is this Armani?"

Jeffrey just glared at him. Michael came out of the bathroom and sighed. "He's not here. Of course that doesn't mean he WASN'T here."

"You have a reason for this?" Jeffrey asked and Michael threw a dagger like stare in his direction.

"Yes. We do. Leave Brian alone."

"Or what?" Jeffrey said with a laugh. "You'll break my kneecaps?"

"He's in love with Justin!"

"Then Justin has nothing to worry about, now does he?"

"They've already been through so much," Emmett said, holding up a black silk shirt, still on the hangar, in front of his torso. Jeffrey took it from him and returned it to the closet.

"Get out."

"You don't know Brian," Michael argued. "You don't care about him!"

"Don't I? I think I do, MIKEY. I know the grown up Brian, not some insecure little Mick kid you used to dream about jerking off. I know the successful ad executive with an investment portfolio and a future. I know the father of a young son. I know a man who has a brilliant mind and a creative curiosity. I know a man who can talk about whether the Beaujolais crop came in this year, and what continuing influence the Q'ing dynasty has on modern Chinese culture. That pretty, jock, bitch stud wet dream you boys carry around in your memory lobes is no more. Brian's a big boy now. And he needs a big boy for a partner, and neither you nor you nor that blond twink can fulfill that role for him. You understand me?"

Jeffrey paused, poured himself a glass of wine from a bottle on the table in the small sitting room of the suite. "He's outgrown you, all of you, and I'm just waiting for him to let go of old loyalties and move on with his life. He doesn't need you barnacles on his bow. You just slow him down. When he did need you, you weren't even there for him."

Jeffrey sat down on the edge of his unmade bed, totally in control now as Emmett and Michael listened like contrite schoolboys. "You want to take everything he gives, but you give nothing back. You let him sink into a black depression when the Boy Toy left him, and what did any of you do about that? Not a damned thing. Well, I would have. I am, in fact. I'm showing him it's time to shed the past. And believe me on this one, boys. If it's important enough to me, I get what I want. And he is that important. And I will get him. And we'll have you all over for dinner and bury the hatchet."

"I'll bury the hatchet in your head!" Michael lunged, but Emmett restrained him. Emmett felt certain Jeffrey knew martial arts or some other twisted method of killing an attacker instantly. He felt as if they were in the same room with Damien from "Omen, the Doctor".

"I'm sure Brian will find all this very interesting," Emmett snipped, and Jeffrey shrugged.

"Yes, especially the part where you confront me at, oh, say, four in the morning to make your accusation? Don't leave out a word, boys. I mean everything I said."

Emmett herded Michael towards the door and into the hall. As he started to shut it, he asked Jeffrey, "Do you have a place in New York where you get those designer clothes at discount?" Before Jeffrey could respond, Michael pulled Emmett away and slammed the door shut.

Jeffrey bolted it, and finished his wine. He then picked up the phone and calmly punched zero. He asked to be connected to Brian's room. When he got no answer, he asked for voice mail, and began a long and carefully crafted message.

When Jennifer Taylor entered Molly's room, she found Justin gamely trying to convince Molly to eat some of her breakfast while Brian slept soundly under a blanket on the sofa bed.

"Don't wake him up, Mom," Justin pleaded with her. "He was utterly worn out."

"Why didn't he just sleep at the hotel? He's much too tall for that sofa."

"He wanted to protect me," Molly said, and Jennifer looked confused.

Justin smiled. "Molly had this dream that she was being chased by bad guys and Brian came out of nowhere and scared them away."

"He did kung fu," Molly said, and Jennifer nodded, amused to see yet another of her children had fallen under Brian Kinney's spell.

"Who the hell is that?" Craig Taylor entered the room, glancing from his family to Brian's sleeping form, and back again.

"Daddy!" Molly said enthusiastically and he patted her foot in greeting, not responding to her outstretched arms. He hadn't been able to embrace her spindly body since the disease took hold.

"Hi Punkin. Jen, who is that man?"

"It's Brian, Dad," Justin said coolly and his father flashed an angry glare.

"Get him out of here. I won't have him around my daughter!"

"At least he IS around your daughter, Craig!" His wife flared. "Which is more than can be said for you!"

"I'll call security if you won't do it!"

"Daddy, Brian is my friend!" Molly began to wail and Brian sat up, throwing off the cover, forcing his grainy eyes open and scrubbing his fingers through his bed hair. He looked from Craig Taylor's furious face to Justin's stricken expression to Molly's tears, and frowned.

"What happened? What's wrong, Mol?"

"Brian!" She opened her arms to him, and he went over to her, sitting on the edge of her bed, careful not to move any tubes as she clung to him. Her feverish face was pressed to his chest, her little arm not even covering the span of his ribcage. Craig was furious at Brian's ability to so casually embrace his daughter, and how she calmed down as soon as they touched. "Don't let Daddy make you leave!" She whimpered and Brian glared at him.

"Is that what you want?"

"Get the hell away from my daughter."

Brian felt Molly's weakened arms grow as tight as they could around him. "Is that what you want, Jennifer?"

"Craig, Brian has been wonderful for Molly. You can see that, can't you, and isn't she the focus?"

"I don't give a shit what you want, Jennifer. Get him out of here."

"Nooo," Molly insisted, clinging to Brian still, and they all looked up as Jeffrey entered the room, wearing a lab coat over his street clothes.

"What's going on?" he said calmly. "I was at the nurse's station, looking at her chart, when her monitors jumped up. Brian? What's happening?"

Brian shook his head, his rage barely repressed, and Justin answered with a sigh. "Jeff, this is my dad, Craig Taylor. Dad, Jeff is a specialist from New York City who came in to consult on Molly's case."

"New York City? Is the insurance paying for that? Because I sure as hell will not! She already has a million doctors on this thing!"

Jeffrey smiled slightly. "May I speak with you in the hall, Mr. Taylor?"

"You can speak with me right here."

"Let's step outside, shall we?"

He reluctantly followed Jeffrey out and Justin went with him while Jennifer and Brian remained behind with Molly. In the hall Jeffrey's pleasant demeanor vanished. He shot lasers into Craig's face with both eyes. "I realize you are under a tremendous amount of stress, Mr. Taylor, but there is absolutely no excuse for upsetting your daughter. None."

"You don't understand. That man is a pedophile. He..."

"Stop it, Dad!" Justin insisted. "Stop that shit! I was seventeen, not seven! Almost eighteen! Get the fuck over it! How old were you when you lost your virginity?" Jeffrey held up a hand. "I don't care about your issues, nor do I care what you think of Brian, Mr. Taylor. Unless you think he poses some threat to your daughter's well being, and I don't think that's likely, then you need to allow her whatever comfort she can find from whatever source. She's the one fighting for her life. She's being filled with poison that makes her sick and makes her ache and causes all of her hair to fall out. She gets thrush and rashes and bruises. Then she is irradiated with such powerful doses of radiation that she'll never be a mother if she survives this disease. And in the mean time, every joint, every bone causes pain

and she is so weak, she can hardly walk across the room. Add to that her fear and inability to comprehend, and you have one needy little girl. If you aren't man enough to stomach some discomfort to be around your son's lover, than you need to take a hard look at your priorities."

"Excuse me, doctor, but what the fuck business is this of yours?"

"I treat the whole patient, not just the disease, and I know how important peace of mind is to sick kids. She'll have enough reasons to cry and be scared as she works through this treatment. Don't impose unnecessary ones on her. She does not deserve that. And as for my fee, what your insurance won't cover, I'm absorbing. Including my travel. I'm doing this as a favor for a friend and because I genuinely care about your daughter's health."

"What friend?"

"Justin," Jeffrey said, slipping an arm across his shoulders. Justin tensed, but stood firm. "And Brian. We faggots stick together in hard times."

"You...you're..."

"Gay?" Jeffrey completed the sentence for him. "Yes, I am, Mr. Taylor. We're everywhere."

Justin repressed a smile as his father shook his head. "Fucking perverts. I came here to have a bone marrow test with the rest of my family. Now I think I'll just go. Tell Jennifer if it's really important to her that I test, she can call me and I'll give her my conditions."

"You would do that to Molly?" Justin confronted him, restrained from going in his face by Jeffrey's arm that tightened on his shoulders.

"It's up to your mother."

"Fuck that," Brian joined them in the hall, holding his jacket. "I'm leaving."

"No!" Justin went into his arms and he held him in a close embrace that caused Jeffrey to flinch.

"It's ok, Sunshine. Molly said she wanted a cream filled donut, so I'm going to go find her one. There's a bunch of strip malls around here, I'm sure at least one has a donut shop. You guys visit. I'll be back."

"Don't bother," Craig Taylor said, and Brian smiled coolly at him.

"If you duck this bone marrow test for your daughter, using me or anything else as an excuse, I promise you I will hunt you down and stick a needle in you myself. You won't like it very much, I have these big clumsy hands, but I will do it, Craig, old boy. Because you're her father and if you have any chance of prolonging her life, you will." He kissed Justin's cheek, waved at Jeffrey and walked away.

Jeffrey and Justin both watched his retreating form, and so did Craig Taylor, who made a mental note to find a way to keep Brian Kinney out of his daughter's life.

DECONSTRUCTING BRIAN

Session 12

by Randall Morgan

Doctor's Notes: BK conducted this session with me via telephone, for he's still out of town visiting his partner, JT, in Pittsburgh. He wasn't sure how much longer he would be there, and felt like he needed to talk at the usual interval. While I couldn't see him, I could hear the fatigue in his voice. With his permission, the phone call was recorded for treatment purposes.

Excerpt from transcript:

Doctor: How are things?

BK: Peachy.

Doctor: Can you expand upon that?

BK: (Paused.) Where to start? My confrontation with Justin's homophobic father? My continuing inability to sleep unless Justin is next to me? My visits with his sister and how hooked I am on this kid now, and vice versa? How she has to get better, or someone will pay? How Jeff is here to help with her treatment protocol and how he has set off a whole new firestorm with my old friends? Where to start?

Doctor: Let's start with what troubles you the most, Brian.

BK: Molly.

Doctor: Go on.

BK: She is too fucking small and sweet and frail to have to face this kind of crap. It's not fair. It makes me so fucking angry! And yet I feel totally helpless. When I first met Jeff, he came to have lunch with me, but all he could do was sit on the bathroom floor and cry. Now I understand why. He had just lost a patient. You don't have to know these kids for long, or be related to them, to get sucked into their fight.

Doctor: Are you sucked in, Brian?

BK: Totally. I so envy Jeff having the power to help. I can't do a damned thing but hold her hand and try to make her smile at some dumb story or joke. I know she's Justin's sister, not mine. I have no tie to her except through him, but I've fallen madly in love with her, and she just has to get better. That's all there is to it. She is one of the bravest people I have ever met. So much for maintaining an emotional distance, right?

Doctor: Easier said than done.

BK: For some reason I seem to have a calming effect on her. I'm like her bodyguard. She feels safe when I'm around her. But her father is trying to get me banned.

Doctor: Why?

BK: He hates my guts. I'm the pedophile who seduced his son. He thinks I turned Justin gay.

Doctor: You didn't "turn" Justin gay, Brian. That's just not a valid opinion.

BK: No, but it's an emotional opinion. I don't want to put Jennifer, his mom, or Molly through hell, but god damn it, I want to see her too! (Sighed.) I guess I'll play the good guy and back down. She's his daughter, after all. But he never comes by, and both Jennifer and Justin think I have a good effect on Molly.

Doctor: Don't make any promises, Brian. See how it resolves. When a child is gravely ill, adults often don't engage all their faculties. They are emotionally depleted. Keep doing what you're doing, but keep any disagreements away from the child, who has enough to deal with without that kind of pain.

BK: Yeah, Jeff said that too.

Doctor: I didn't realize Jeffrey would be going when you went.

BK: Jennifer asked him to consult. Since I was going anyway, it made sense to fly out together.

Doctor: I see. How is that going?

BK: (Long pause.) It's tough.

Doctor: In what way?

BK: In every way. It's tough having him here when I need to concentrate only on Justin and what he needs. It's tough denying my feelings for Jeff, but even tougher reconciling them with my feelings for Justin. It's tough that my old friends all view Jeff as a monster, trying to steal me away from Justin. As if I have no free will. It's tough watching Jeff be so godlike with Molly, knowing he wants me for himself, which would break Justin's heart. The whole fucking thing is one steaming pile of shit.

Doctor: Sounds like a mess. How are you coping?

BK: Better sometimes than others.

Doctor: You said you were denying your feelings for Jeffrey. What are those feelings, Brian?

BK: I wish I knew. Desire, definitely, admiration, most certainly, affection, pleasure in being around him, a sense of security, friendship, I'm not sure what else.

Doctor: Can you contrast that with your feelings for Justin?

BK: I love him. I yearn to be with him. I want to fuck him. I want to spend my free time with him. I want to hear how he feels, how his day went, and tell him about mine. I want him to wrap me up in his arms and let me sleep. I feel insecure because I'm afraid he will leave me again. I feel he is still looking for the monster inside me. But maybe...

Doctor: Maybe what, Brian?

BK: Maybe a little less than before.

Doctor: Less looking for monsters?

BK: Yes, and even a little less insecure. Every day, a little closer.

Doctor: That sounds like progress.

BK: Yeah it does. This therapy of yours has ripped me open, Lydia. I'm not sure I like all these things I'm feeling.

Doctor: Told you so. Still taking your Wellbutrin regularly?

BK: Yep.

Doctor: Now of all times, don't forget.

BK: I won't.

Doctor: Are you having sex?

BK: (Laughed.) Yeah, Lydia. I'm not dead yet.

Doctor: Tell me.

BK: Why you naughty woman! Phone sex? And I have to pay AND deliver? That doesn't seem fair!

Doctor: Whenever you're through...

BK: OK, ok, yes, Justin and I are doing the nasty every chance we get.

Doctor: Anyone else?

BK: Define sex.

Doctor: You aren't the President of the United States, Brian. Let's just use the usual definitions. Titillation and orgasm.

BK: In that case, Jeff and I had sex. Once.

Doctor: So much for that resolution, huh?

BK: Not exactly. We didn't really touch each other. We masturbated together.

Doctor: On the phone?

BK: In the car.

Doctor: Slightly reckless.

BK: I know. But it just made sense at the moment.

Doctor: And now?

BK: Seems kind of dumb, a little embarrassing. But it was very hot at the time.

Doctor: Plan to do more?

BK: (Laughed.) No.

Doctor: Why not?

BK: I think it just makes me even more confused.

Doctor: Very good, Brian. That's a coping tool you've never had before. You've realized that even something that feels good may add to your emotional burden rather than clarifying things for you. The strain of abstention is overruled by the need to avoid conflict. That, my man, is progress.

BK: You think so?

Doctor: I know so.

BK: But I want to fuck Jeff. I want to fuck him so much.

Doctor: Yes, Brian, which makes your use of that restraint even more impressive. Sex was always your bandaid. In this time of high `sturm und drang', you're not falling back on destructive habits.

BK: So about this sleeping problem...

Doctor: No Ambien, right?

BK: Right.

Doctor: And when you're with Justin you sleep?

BK: Like a baby.

Doctor: Brian, do you fear if you're not with Justin, he may be sleeping with someone else?

BK: (Paused.) I - I don't know. I don't think so, but...shit, I really don't know. I don't think he is. I mean he's at the hospital, not conducive to fucking around. But maybe there is some old fear plaguing me.

Doctor: Maybe. It could be a lot of things, but that's one possible explanation. Let's not presume it's THE explanation right now.

BK: I feel like I'm under attack from every front.

Doctor: What's this about your friends and Jeffrey?

BK: Christ, Mikey and Emmett had this half-assed intervention with Jeff. They told him to leave me alone. Listen to this message Jeff left for me the night they showed up at his door. Hold on, I'll play it back for you.

Recording: (Man's voice) Hi, Brian. It's Jeff. Sorry to call at this ridiculous hour. I'm glad you didn't pick up. It's almost four and your friends, Michael and Emmett, just left my hotel room at my invitation. They woke me up to warn me to stay the fuck away from you. They said you were in love with Justin and I had no right to tempt you. Frankly, baby, I think it's none of their god damned business what we do. We're adults. You and I are, anyway. I let them know I have no intention of letting anyone but you deter me from taking a shot at having you in my life, in whatever role we decide is right for us all. I also let them know I considered their friendship with you fair weather, at best. Where were they when you needed them most, after their precious Justin left you for another man? Anyway, consider this a warning. I'm sure you're next on their hit parade. Although I must say it was mostly Michael doing the talking, Emmett was far more interested in my fucking wardrobe! Sleep well, love. Let me know if you need something to help you relax. Goodnight.

BK: That's it.

Doctor: He's still offering to medicate you, I see.

BK: Just trying to be helpful. I was exhausted.

Doctor: Sometimes control is disguised as help, Brian. Remember that. Have you talked to Michael yet?

BK: Not yet. We missed each other a couple times. I will, though.

Doctor: Do you agree with what Jeffrey said about these two being fair weather friends?

BK: I could never think that about Mikey. We've been friends too long for that.

Doctor: Were they there for you when Justin left you?

BK: I wouldn't let them be there for me.

Doctor: I see. Have you seen your mother or Lindsay?

BK: No, but I plan to do so. Gus has been sick. I wanted to be sure he was over the contagious part of his cold. I don't want to carry it back to Molly.

Doctor: Smart. Overall, being back in Pittsburgh, bad or good?

BK: Odd. I don't fit in anymore. It doesn't feel like home. Babylon was weird, even the diner is filled with strangers. I guess I'm the proverbial man without a country.

Doctor: So New York is home, now?

BK: So long as Justin is there too.

Doctor: And Jeffrey?

BK: Yes, and Jeff.

Doctor: I don't often analyze by popular tune, but there was a line out of a pop song that was popular long before your time: "Did you ever have to make up your mind/ Say yes to one and leave the other behind/ It's not often easy and not often kind/ did you ever have to make up your mind?" You know that crossroads is looming, don't you?

BK: The Lovin' Spoonful. I know that song. I know, Lydia, I know.

Doctor: Someone is going to be hurt, Brian. I suggest you do what you can to make sure it isn't you.

BK: That's narcissistic.

Doctor: That's self protective.

BK: I don't buy the premise.

Doctor: How is that?

BK: Why can't Justin be my lover and Jeff be my friend?

Doctor: I think you can answer that question better than I can, Brian.

BK: You mean because I'm attracted to Jeff?

Doctor: Is that all it is? Sexual attraction?

BK: (Paused.) I don't know.

Doctor: You need to be able to answer that question before you make a decision, Brian.

BK: Can I tell you something I could never say to anyone else?

Doctor: Of course.

BK: I danced with Jeff at Babylon. I didn't want to go, I tried to avoid going there, because I knew he was there, but I was drawn like the needle to north. As I walked in, I felt very self conscious, as if everyone in the club was staring at me.

Doctor: Why would you think that?

BK: Because I had been gone so long, I don't know. I used to be a regular there. But now I felt all grown up, like a man in a room full of boys. And then it hit me.

Doctor: What did?

BK: It was exactly the way I felt when I walked into the prom that night that Justin got bashed.

Doctor: Ah, I see. Then what?

BK: I bribed the DJ to play a certain song so I could tango with Jeff. I got lost in that dance, just as I got lost in the dance with Justin. Everyone watched us, just like at the prom.

Doctor: And then?

BK: And then I felt this explosion of joy, as if the whole thing was recreated and made perfect this time. My partner was looking at me with adoration, it was all coming together. But...

Doctor: But what, Brian?

BK: He was looking at me through the wrong eyes.

Doctor: You mean they weren't Justin's eyes?

BK: (Sighed.) Yes. I just wanted to get out of there. So we did. I was being bombarded with memories, the black car, holding hands, the dance...but then, he kissed me.

Doctor: What did that do?

BK: I shut down. It wasn't the right kiss. I couldn't get the feeling back. I was miserable. I shook it off. The fantasy faded. It was just the two of us in the car after that. Why does that fucking dance haunt me so much, Lydia?

Doctor: Why do you think it does, Brian?

BK: I wish to hell I knew. I wish I could just forget it, the way Justin has.

Doctor: Do you really?

BK: No. I wish I could make him remember, that's what I really wish.

Doctor: Why, Brian?

BK: So he can see me for who I really am. It's the one time in my whole life I was without artifice of any kind. I was wide open. And no one remembers it but me.

Doctor: Have you convinced yourself he can never really love you unless he remembers that dance?

BK: Fuck, I don't know.

Doctor: Brian...

BK: (Sighed.) Maybe. (Paused.) I don't know. I really don't.

Doctor: Ok. Let's leave it there for now.

BK: Why would I try to recreate that dance with Jeff?

Doctor: Why do you think?

BK: To test if I feel more for him than I'm admitting? To see if I set up a dance like I shared with Justin, would I feel the same way?

Doctor: Do you think that's possible?

BK: Shit, I think I'm capable of just about anything lately. I'm totally fucked up.

Doctor: It's not about being fucked up, Brian. It's about being open to your own emotions for the first time. It's about allowing yourself to feel.

BK: Which is not necessarily good. I remember things being pretty peaceful and easy to live with before all this crap happened.

Doctor: Do you? I remember a man who was so emotionally and physically exhausted, he was on the verge of a complete meltdown. Remember him?

BK: (Laughed.) You got me there, Lydia.

Doctor: You can bullshit yourself with that 'I like being the iceman' crap, but don't try to bullshit me.

BK: You got it.

Doctor: You're doing well. This is a painful and slow process. Don't give up on yourself.

BK: I won't if you won't.

Doctor: That's a deal.

End of Excerpt

Doctor's Notes: BK is experiencing a period of high stress and anxiety and has shown signs of coping well in crisis mode, so far. He is still having problems sleeping, piqued by separation from his partner, JT, but overall he has worked his way through several highly emotional moments with a modicum of cool. His conflicting emotions

towards Jeffrey and JT are encapsulated in his mind with his obsessive attachment to this dance with JT that occurred shortly before the bashing JT received. He is intent on recreating that dance, and yet his efforts to re-live it have only increased his pain and anxiety. There are so many roadblocks in his life right now that are significant enough to derail his recovery, that I fear he may never be able to negotiate them all to find emotional satisfaction. We can only continue to try and identify his problems as they pop up and give him the tools he requires to survive and understand himself better.

DECONSTRUCTING BRIAN

Session 13

by Randall Morgan

Doctor's Notes: Once again, we are conducting this session by telephone since BK is still in Pittsburgh. With his permission, the call is being recorded.

Excerpt from Transcript:

Doctor: How are you?

BK: Tired.

Doctor: Sleeping?

BK: Sometimes.

Doctor: How long do you think you'll be there?

BK: Awhile. I've arranged with New York to work out of our offices here for the time being. Just until everything stabilizes with Justin and Molly.

Doctor: Has there been something new?

BK: (Paused.) Yeah. Justin matched Molly. He'll be her donor.

Doctor: That's good, isn't it?

BK: For Molly? I guess so. To be honest, it bothers me.

Doctor: What bothers you about it?

BK: I don't want him to go through it. He's had enough doctors and pain and medical crap.

Doctor: Are you advising him not to do it?

BK: I can't do that. She's his sister. And I want her to get well, too. I'm torn. I wanted to be tested, but because I'm gay, they won't take my marrow. They're only taking Justin's because he's her sibling.

Doctor: How does that make you feel?

BK: Angry.

Doctor: Why?

BK: It's just more crap being thrown at gay men in the guise of AIDS panic.

Doctor: I see.

BK: I'm negative. What's the big deal?

Doctor: Do you feel as if it's a condemnation of your life?

BK: That's exactly what it is.

Doctor: How does that make you feel?

BK: Like a loser. Like everything I believe in is for shit.

Doctor: Explain.

BK: I've never apologized for being gay. I've never had those doubts about what a terrible thing it is to be queer. I made up my mind to just live my life the way I was meant to live it, and if others didn't like it, fuck them. Now the power structure comes along and tells me that while I have no symptoms or traces of any disease, the mere fact that I'm gay prevents me from saving someone's life. If not Molly's, some stranger, because I was prepared to donate to a bank so some other kid may be helped. It's wrong. Some kid could die because I'm gay. Or even worse, because I refuse to lie about being gay.

Doctor: I see. Brian, AIDS is a huge fear factor to people. Most are somewhat ignorant about what causes the disease. Some remember the cases that arose before we knew what to do to ensure the integrity of blood products. Part of the strict screening process is to allay that fear. But also, HIV screening is time delayed. You can have the virus in your system but it won't show up in a test for weeks, even months. If you were not sexually active, and you had a clear test after six months or more of celibacy, then perhaps that would be a mitigating cause. But you are sexually active. You have to look at it >from a liability stand point, not as a slam at you, personally.

BK: It feels personal. AIDS is prevalent in the straight community, too.

Doctor: Unfortunately that's true. But let's get beyond your overall disgust with what you view as a prejudice and get to the core of your concern. You're afraid for Justin.

BK: (Paused.) Yes.

Doctor: I think a discussion with his doctors would help. I'm no expert in the area, but I believe that the procedure is non-invasive, and very safe.

BK: I already know all that.

Doctor: Then you also know your fears are largely irrational, right?

BK: I guess so.

Doctor: What's really bothering you, Brian?

BK: (Sighed.) I'm so hung up on his sister. I know this will be a horrible time for her. They'll start what Jeff calls her "conditioning", which is a nice word for torture. I look at her, and she appears so frail, so paper thin and fragile. I don't see how she can even survive this conditioning. And I probably won't be able to see her. They limit her visitors because of the immunity problems, and Craig Taylor, her father, will use that as his excuse to ban me.

Doctor: Were you close to Molly before all this happened, Brian?

BK: No, I didn't really know her at all. Saw her a couple times, is all.

Doctor: So this bonding with her has been since she's been ill?

BK: Yes. So?

Doctor: What are you reminded of, Brian?

BK: What do you mean?

Doctor: When you break down why you've become so attached to this little girl, what springs to mind?

BK: I don't know what you're getting at. Some fear about Gus? I've thought of that. How I would react if Gus were ill.

Doctor: Quite natural, but no. That doesn't really explain your instant attachment. What does, do you think?

BK: I'd be a monster if I didn't care what happens to her. I'm not a monster.

Doctor: No, of course you're not. But Brian, your attachment to Molly goes beyond the issue of being a human being who hates seeing a child suffer. It's much deeper than that, isn't it?

BK: (Angry.) Are you trying to suggest I'm some kind of fucking pedophile?

Doctor: No, Brian. I don't think your interest in Molly is carnal.

BK: Thank you, Craig. (Sighed.) Where are you going with this?

Doctor: It's called displacement, Brian.

BK: What am I displacing?

Doctor: Your feelings of hopelessness and guilt and inability to protect when Justin was bashed.

BK: (Paused.) Go on.

Doctor: The memory of standing by helplessly when he was struck, of the aftermath of the bashing, when you didn't feel welcome at the hospital, of the fear that he would never recover. Remember all those emotions, Brian. Don't repress them for the moment. Remember that pain you felt.

BK: (Quietly.) I've never forgotten.

Doctor: And now his little sister is in trouble. Again, you're helpless. Again, you feel unwelcome. Again, you fear she may not recover. And now you have an extra layer of guilt because you are unable to help her since you're gay. Do you see the connection?

BK: (Exhaled slowly.) Shit.

Doctor: It doesn't mean your feelings towards Molly aren't genuine. They are. It just explains how you got there so quickly and so deeply.

BK: She acts like I'm her protector. And I can't protect her from anything.

Doctor: You can't cure her, Brian. But you can offer her emotional support, which you seem to be doing. What you can't allow yourself to do is to internally assume that role of protector. Because if she doesn't recover, it's not your fault. It's no one's fault. It's just a sad and horrible fact of life. You can't afford to take on that emotional burden right now. You don't have the emotional reserves to handle it.

BK: It's too late, Lydia. I already feel that way.

Doctor: And I'm trying to get you to understand that these feelings are overly enhanced by your history with her brother. You have to separate the two. Care for her, be there for her as much as you can, but don't assume a role with a built in path to disaster. Your partner in this situation is Justin. Be a support to him, shore him up, be strong for him. Don't become so lost in your confusion towards Molly that you put him in the role of the comforting partner. She's his sister. He's the one who gets to be the most affected by this horrible situation.

BK: Christ, you're right. I am doing that. I am letting my feelings run all over me. And Justin has been stronger, comforting me. It's upside down.

Doctor: Don't repress your feelings towards Molly. They're good and they're real. Just seek a balance. In the long run, it will serve her well, too. Because she will respond positively to your encouragement, more than to your fear and pain. My guess is they will let you see her when she's in isolation. Because she'll insist upon it. You will need every reserve you have to deal with her in such a painful situation. Before then, you need to find that balance, Brian.

BK: You know, I had a little scene with her father, who hates me because of Justin, and who has been violent with me in the past. He said something to my mom, and I just went medieval on his ass. I slammed him up against the

wall and scared the shit out of him. If my mother hadn't intervened, god knows what would have happened. Maybe that was wrong. Maybe I was assuming a role I have no right to assume.

Doctor: Violence is never right, Brian. It does sound as if the extreme emotion you feel towards Molly set this in play. What's been the outfall of that encounter?

BK: Justin followed me out into the parking garage after he saw it happen. Believe it or not, we had sex. Right there. In the garage. Behind a wall of cars. He blew me.

Doctor: What prompted that reaction?

BK: He told me it kind of turned him on to see me slam Craig around. I had the opposite reaction. I was feeling sick about it, physically ill. But when he started on me, the sex displaced the shame.

Doctor: And the outlaw aspect of having sex in public, did that enhance the experience?

BK: Yes, frankly, it did.

Doctor: Then what happened? Were you discovered?

BK: (Laughed.) If so, no one complained.

Doctor: Anything else?

BK: Yes. I slammed him against the wall, kind of like I did with his father, and I fucked him.

Doctor: Right there in the garage?

BK: Well, we were in a dimly lit corner, with the cars blocking the view, but yeah. In the garage.

Doctor: From what you've told me about your sex life, that's not so extreme for you, Brian. Why does it seem noteworthy? Is it the timing?

BK: No. It's the fact, for the very first time since we've been together, we rode bareback.

Doctor: Explain.

BK: No condom.

Doctor: I see. And that's significant to you?

BK: Yes. I never do that.

Doctor: Then why did you?

BK: I had nothing on me, and I knew I had to fuck him. And he wanted me to fuck him. And there was just no waiting. As soon as I did it, I felt this horrible sense of dread.

Doctor: That you infected him?

BK: It's not impossible.

Doctor: It is if you're HIV negative, Brian.

BK: But what if it's dormant, like you said?

Doctor: So you have been careless before with other men?

BK: Not since I was old enough to have a brain. Sometimes, when I was just starting out.

Doctor: Then you know its not possible, Brian. Unless you've had unprotected sex in the last year, I wouldn't worry about it at all. The virus has a dormancy period, but it's not multiple years.

BK: Logically, that's true. But I was still afraid. What if I contaminated him? Then he contaminates Molly? I could be responsible for killing them both.

Doctor: Stop. I certainly recommend that you practice safe sex, Brian. For your own health. But it is almost impossible that you infected Justin. Get a test today if it will make you feel better. But Justin can also infect you. He was with another lover. How much do you know about their practices or about the lover's practices? If Justin were infected, you aren't the culprit. But he could infect you.

BK: (Sighed.) I guess.

Doctor: But they will have HIV tested him as part of the screening. I'm sure it was negative, and I'm sure you're both fine. But this is a good reminder of why safe sex makes sense. It removes the fear factor. Even irrational fears. What happened with his father after this?

BK: I think my mother talked turkey to him. She has a way of making even grown men feel foolish. I know that for a fact. When I went back to Molly's room, I apologized for losing my temper and he accepted my apology and didn't ask me to leave, which was his concession, I guess.

Doctor: Good. That will make it easier for Molly and her mother.

BK: Maybe. It's a frosty détente, but whatever.

Doctor: Brian, what are you doing right now?

BK: Besides talking to you?

Doctor: While talking to me. What's your demeanor? I lose a lot not being able to see you.

BK: Losing nothing today, Lydia. I'm in business drag, sitting in an office that used to belong to my boss, overlooking a city I don't belong in anymore. I'm smoking a cigarette with a bunch of storyboards on my desk that I have no interest in whatsoever. The people here at this office treat me with that strange blend of fear and curiosity reserved for the big wigs, and I'm amazed by that.

Doctor: Why?

BK: I still feel like one of them, not like a VIP.

Doctor: Self esteem, Brian. You've earned it. Revel in it.

BK: I'm not much of a reveler. Not that kind of reveler anyway.

Doctor: Are you smoking?

BK: (Laughed.) Yes, and there's not a damn thing you can do about it, either.

Doctor: You finally got to smoke during a session. Tell me Brian, how has it enhanced the experience?

BK: For one thing, it keeps me calm.

Doctor: Why is that a good thing during a therapy session? This is the one place you can express your true emotions with no fear of blowback.

BK: Control ...good. Out of control...bad.

Doctor: Control FREAK...bad.

BK: (Laughed.) Jeff went back to New York today. He's still consulting, but he does have other patients.

Doctor: How do you feel about that?

BK: Relieved in one way, sad in another.

Doctor: Still torn?

BK: Yes, but maybe...let's just leave it at yes.

Doctor: Brian, has something happened with Jeff?

BK: No, not really. I had a long talk with an old friend. He made me think.

Doctor: Michael?

BK: God no. I'm avoiding him.

Doctor: Why?

BK: He pulled this intervention on Jeff, which was really juvenile and embarrassing. Jeff was great about it, but I can't believe they did that to me.

Doctor: What kind of intervention?

BK: Basically told him to leave me alone.

Doctor: How do you feel about that?

BK: Embarrassed. I'm not a two year old. I don't need my friends to govern my love life.

Doctor: But you don't plan to tell them that?

BK: Yes, I'm having lunch with one of them, in fact.

Doctor: I'm sure their intentions were honorable, Brian, but I tend to agree with you. You don't need that help right now. You're aware of the implications and are working them through. Intervention is a valuable tool to shock someone out of denial. Used improperly, it rather resembles extortion.

BK: (Laughed.) These clowns couldn't extort lunch money from a first grader. I'll handle it. And it takes more than that to rattle Jeff. He's the most composed person I've ever known. Holy shit!

Doctor: What happened?

BK: I just picked up a storyboard and a face jumped out at me.

Doctor: Whose face?

BK: Freddie. Friedrich, this male model Jeff used to live with. I wonder if he's signed for this ad campaign. That's weird.

Doctor: Why is it weird? He's a model. This is what models do, isn't it?

BK: Yeah, but...

Doctor: Why hesitate? What were you going to say?

BK: Nothing.

Doctor: Brian...

BK: Just that it would be interesting to meet him and not because he's a Nordic god.

Doctor: Do you think that's wise? To pump an old lover about a current friend? Unless you know the precise reason for the break up, you may get a spin on your friend that is deeply colored by hurt feelings.

BK: Yeah, I guess, but...

Doctor: But you have every intention of meeting him.

BK: Well, hell, yes, Lydia. He lived with Jeff for three years. I want to meet him.

Doctor: I've said all I plan to say on the subject.

BK: It wouldn't be the first mistake I've made.

Doctor: That's cold comfort.

BK: I just want to talk to him, not boink him. Although...(Laughed.) Just kidding. But he is a beauty.

Doctor: Brian, focus on having LESS intrigue in your life, not MORE.

BK: I promise to behave.

Doctor: You have to make your own decisions, and then live with the consequences, Brian. I'm not your mama. I won't tell you what to do.

BK: That makes you a distinct minority, lately.

End of Excerpt

Doctor's Notes: BK is suffering from his over-identification with Molly Taylor, sister of his partner, JT. He has displaced his unresolved feelings about JT's bashing to Molly's current illness. This could create a major emotional setback for him if he is unable to establish some appropriate boundaries, and if she doesn't recover. Layered onto that is his guilt over his homosexuality, enhanced by the fact he is banned from donating bone marrow because of the AIDS risk. He still has not resolved his complicated feelings towards Jeffrey, and now threatens to involve a former lover of Jeffrey's, in order to secure information on the man. I have a concern that BK is floundering, emotionally. He is trying to deal with too many significant concerns at once. At the same time, his emotions are becoming accessible to him after so many years of constructing defenses around them. This leads to confusion, overload and inappropriate acting out. I want to see him in person for our next session, to better analyze his current emotional state.

BETWEEN THE SESSIONS

(after session 13, part I)

by Randall Morgan

Emmett smiled uneasily at Brian from a back booth of the sushi restaurant where Brian asked to meet for lunch. "Where's Mikey?" Emmett asked tensely, taking in the stern set of Brian's jaw and the steely glare in his eyes. Sometimes Emmett forgot just how big and how strongly built Brian was. Today, the reminder of that fact was not for the usual erotic fantasy purposes.

"No Mikey," Brian responded, sliding into the other side of the booth. Emmett looked stricken.

"W-what do you mean? Mikey's not joining us?"

"That's right," Brian said, fixing his gaze on the menu. He rolled the stubby pencil, provided for choosing sushi, over and between his fingers with hypnotic dexterity.

"Should we call Ted? I know Ted would love to see you," Emmett popped open his cellular, but Brian reached across the table, took it from him with an easy grab and snapped it shut. He placed it on the table surface and Emmett knew better than to reach for it.

"It's just you and me, Em. Deal with it," Brian ordered hot tea and then glanced at Emmett who had not yet begun to check the menu. "Want me to do the ordering?"

Emmett nodded and Brian added some check marks, handing the sheet to the waiter. He then leaned back in the booth, combing his fingers through his hair as he focused on Emmett's nervous countenance. "Nice suit," Emmett said with a tense smile. "Prada?"

"Yeah. Prada."

"Of course, you can wear anything. It's amazing how good clothes look on you, Brian. In another life, you could have been a male model."

Brian raised a brow. "Don't blow smoke up my ass, Em. That's not why we're here."

Emmett sighed. "Is it divide and conquer? You meet with us separately to break us down?"

"Yeah, I'm so diabolical."

"Our intentions were honorable, Brian."

"How do you figure that?"

"Ted and I saw you and Jeff do the tango at Babylon and it was obvious you two had a connection. After all the crap you've been through with Justin, we just thought...Brian; you have a way of being your own worst enemy. We didn't want to see you blow it...again."

"So you swept Mikey up in your game and confronted Jeff in the wee hours in his hotel room. That's mature. And why didn't Ted go with you?"

"After we went to find Mikey, Ben talked to us about leaving you alone. I guess he got through to Teddy, who went home."

Brian smiled. Of course. Ben. "But you and Mikey persevered."

"We just wanted Jeff to know that you had a lover and that he was interfering."

Their first round of sushi arrived and Brian ate while Emmett just stared at the pretty food, unsure if he could swallow. "What was Jeff's reaction?"

"He didn't tell you?"

"I want your side of it."

"He was very cool, very calm. He told us our image of you as some Mick, jock, bitch stud was no more, that you were all grown up and needed a grown up partner. He said we were never there for you when Justin left you, and that you had outgrown both of us, as well as Justin. That you needed a partner who was your equal. He said if it's important enough to him, he always gets what he wants, and you are that important to him."

Brian leaned back, noting Emmett's suddenly serious demeanor. He believed him. He wasn't sure how he felt about what he was saying, but he was sure it was true. "Well..."

Emmett dared to eat a California roll. When he could get it down, he moved on to the tuna. "Brian, he's a very attractive, charming, lethal man. He's obviously out to get you, and he's very predatory about that fact. You do love Justin, right? You understand how dangerous this is?"

Brian sighed. "Jeff may seem lethal to you, Em, but to me he's a safe harbor. He makes me feel secure."

"Why? Because you can talk about Beaujolais crops and ancient Chinese dynasties?"

Brian looked confused. "Huh?"

"Jeff said the grown-up Brian can discuss those things."

"Why would I, even though I can?"

Emmett smiled. "Honey, I don't know. I don't get it. Why he can't leave you alone is beyond me. He would have no trouble finding a replacement, one with whom he could have a real relationship, without hurting anyone else. He's a prize package after all."

"You can't always dictate your heart, Emmett. Sometimes it leads you where it wants you to go."

"And where does your heart want you to go, Brian?"

Brian met his gaze, and then looked back down at his chopsticks. "I'm in love with Justin."

"There's your answer."

"It's not that easy."

"Why isn't it?" Emmett sighed. "Because you still feel something for Jeff? I saw that dance, Brian. You don't have to tell me. I know."

"You don't have a clue what I felt when Justin left."

"I think I do. You wouldn't let any of us near you, Brian. We wanted to help, but we were unsure how to go about it. You were like ice on the surface. We sensed you were bleeding under the skin, but you put up such a good front. You've always been so enigmatic about emotions. We didn't realize how bad it was."

Brian frowned, looked down at the tray of food, picked up a morsel, and put it down again. "Can I tell you a story?"

"Sure."

"About a month after Justin left me, I was taking a short cut through the park. I thought the air might revive my flagging creativity. I paused to watch some guys playing a pick-up basketball game, just killing time, and then I saw them. Justin and his new lover. They were seated on the grass, beneath a tall pine, with Justin's head on his shoulder. I wanted to look away, but I couldn't. They looked so young, so good together. And then his lover saw me. He met my eyes and his face broke out in this big, triumphant smile. I felt stripped naked. I walked away. I knew I had to get out of Pittsburgh. I had to try and find a life."

Emmett's eyes teared up and he reached across the table to pat Brian's arm. "Sweetie, I wish I knew how much pain you were in. But look at you now. You won. He's back where he belongs."

Brian nodded. "Maybe, but the pain never goes away completely, Em. You always feel threatened by its return. I can't seem to let go of that fear. And with Jeff, there's no painful history."

Emmett squeezed his arm. "This may seem unfair to Jeff, but I have to say it. I feel that there's no painful history only because you haven't known him very long. I feel that he's a master manipulator, playing you and your entire circle to his advantage. Justin's youthful mistake will be like a daydream compared to the damage someone with Jeff's intellect and experience can cause you."

"But why would he, Em? He thinks I'm his ideal mate."

"In my opinion, he's a hunter. His joy is in the bagging. Once his game is bagged, let someone else flay it and feed it to the multitudes. And you're big game, Brian. You're handsome and sexy and successful. The fact that you have a beautiful younger man in love with you is just the icing."

"You make Jeff sound like me," Brian said with a wry smile. "A predator."

"You were a sexual predator, Brian. You liked to trick, and you were very open with them about how meaningless it was. Jeff is far more dangerous. He likes to trick with your head. Your heart. Twist you up."

"You don't know that."

"I think I do. I pretended to be all caught up in his wardrobe while he and Mikey argued. But I was watching him, taking him in. I kept picturing a wolf, lean, beautiful, but assessing the vulnerability of his prey at every moment."

Brian frowned, considering what Emmett shared. Suddenly, he noticed Emmett's face had grown pale, his expression vacant. He was staring over Brian's shoulder at someone or something. "What?" Brian started to turn, but Emmett grabbed his hand and squeezed tightly.

"Do you want to go? I know a great new coffee shop where we can get frappuccino or latte for dessert. I know you don't want sweets."

"What's your problem?" Brian pulled free of him, and turned to follow his gaze. He saw him immediately. His slight, dark, brooding countenance dominated an otherwise empty booth. He had enjoyed a small measure of commercial success when one of his recordings was picked up and used in the score of a film. That coup improved his financial picture dramatically, which wasn't saying much. He had dropped out of school to become a featured soloist with the Pittsburgh Symphony, and quickly fell in with the middle class he once eschewed. He leased a large apartment with a good view, and spent a fortune on clothes. He was the type who kept his own press clippings and even read them at his leisure, over and over again.

Brian turned back to Emmett. "I don't give a shit about him. Let's finish the sushi."

Emmett's feminine intuition told him to leave, and take Brian with him. Before he could do so, trouble walked in the door. And joined the other man in the booth, looking all blond and innocent and windblown. Brian read the entrance in Emmett's expression. He didn't turn around. He placed some money on the table, and reached for his coat that he folded neatly over his arm. "Brian, it's nothing," Emmett insisted. "A lunch with an ex in a public place. Nothing could be more natural. Don't let it bother you."

"Later, Em," Brian said quietly. He stood, turned, letting his gaze fall on the two young men who were clasping hands on the tabletop. Justin looked near tears. The other looked empathetic. When Justin saw Brian, his expression froze. He released his former lover's hand and started to stand up, but Brian waved him down, pausing for just a moment, refusing to even look at the other man. He stared only at Justin, who was saying,

"We were just about to order. Want to..."

Brian smiled slightly, shook his head, walked towards the door.

"Brian!" Justin called, but he failed to stop or turn around.

"Let him go," the other man insisted, and Emmett appeared in the spot formerly occupied by Brian.

"Are you fucking crazy?" He said to Justin, who winced.

"He's not allowed to have lunch with an old friend? Brian does it." The other man spoke up and Emmett glared at him.

"You can shut the fuck up, thank you very much. And you get your fine ass out of that seat, Justin, and go to him. It doesn't matter how innocent this is. It doesn't matter if it's unreasonable for him to not want you two to have lunch together. All that matters is he can't handle it right now, and you can't afford to let him drift."

"Don't let some Nellie Queen order you around, J. You are perfectly entitled to have friends, and to be civilized about things."

Emmett turned on the other man. "I'll show you what a Nellie Queen can do when properly motivated, you pussy mouthed little faggot!"

"Stop it!" Justin insisted. "I'm sorry," he said to the other man and grabbed his jacket, running out of the restaurant.

Brian realized he was standing in front of a display window showing off women's lacy lingerie. He wasn't sure how long he had been there, he only knew his face, fingers and feet were cold. He was surprised he hadn't been identified as a pervert and forced to move along. He walked a couple steps forward, and then lurched into an alley, vomiting all of the sushi he had just ingested, flattening his hands on the cold brick wall to support his limp body. He wondered at his touchy stomach, standing there until he felt the dizziness pass and he trusted that no more was coming up. He pulled his coat around his body and walked back into the pedestrian traffic, head high, face pale.

He paused at a corner, trying to get his bearings. He had no idea how he got where he was or why. He just started walking and this is where he ended up. He wondered if he was getting the flu. He ached all over. His stomach was killing him. Waves of nausea rolled through him. Food poisoning? Even in this cold, he felt a little damp, a clammy, cloying sweat, not one born of heat. He felt dizzy, confused. His heart was racing at a sickening rate. He dropped down to sit on the cold cement of the curb, ignoring the people who walked around him, staring. He felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Brian, get up."

He glanced up at Justin's concerned face. A cold, unmitigated rage rose up to tighten Brian's features into a mask of anger. "Get the fuck away from me!"

"Please, get up," Justin pulled at his arm, and Brian yanked free, standing up and stepping back, almost being sideswiped by a passing car that honked at him. Justin winced, waving him onto the curb, but Brian backed up even farther, deeper into the traffic. More cars swerved, honking to avoid the tall, outraged lunatic in the expensive clothes. He pointed a finger at Justin, unable to say anything, letting the pointed digit and the expression in his eyes accuse. "It was NOTHING!" Justin pleaded, holding up a hand to redirect traffic as he approached. He could barely be heard above the cacophony of horns.

"Get your ass out of the middle of the road, you fucking moron!" A portly driver opened the door of his Lexus and leaned out to yell at Brian. Brian turned, his expression sufficiently terrifying to cause the man to slam and lock his car door. Brian brought down both fists on the hood of the man's Lexus with a resounding BOOM.

"Shut the fuck UP!" He yelled at the portly driver. He raised his hands to his ears, muffling the sound of the horns, drowning out Justin's plea. He closed his eyes and turned in a slow circle, as he repeated. "Shut up, SHUT UP!" He felt hands on his arms and yanked free, opening his eyes to see Emmett, who grabbed him again and led him to the opposite curb, to safety.

"Fucking DRUNK!" The portly driver yelled through his now open window as he sped past in his chrome and steel cage of protection. Brian held onto Emmett's arm and leaned over, throwing up again, less bulk this time, splattering the curb and the street. Emmett winced, but held onto him since he felt so slack. Brian looked up at him, miserable, as he whispered, "Bad fish."

"Sure, baby," Emmett said softly, his own stomach showing no ill effects even though they ate the same food. He knew Brian's illness had more of a basis in his emotions than in his lunch. "Come on; let's get you out of the cold."

"I feel sick, Em," Brian said with a grimace, allowing himself to be led.

"I know you do, honey," Emmett flagged down a taxi. He looked over his shoulder at Justin's helpless countenance. He mouthed the words, "Not now, call you later," and poured Brian into the cab, following his body with his own. Justin stood there, watching them merge into traffic, unsure what was happening or why. It was just an innocent

lunch. Why was Brian overreacting this way? What had he done to deserve his wrath? After all, Justin had tolerated so much more >from that fucking Jeffrey. It seemed grossly unfair to him.

"What a drama queen," his former lover caught up to him and placed an arm over his shoulders. "Let's get out of here." Justin nodded, numbly allowing himself to be led away.

BETWEEN THE SESSIONS

(after session 13, part II)

by Randall Morgan

Justin was devastated.

Not only did he have that horrible scene with Brian, but now Brian's friends were on his neck. He always thought of Ted and Emmett and Mikey as Brian's friends, more than his own. Now, more than ever, that fact was evident. They turned on him like cornered rats, baring their teeth and squealing insults. He had done nothing wrong! They were in Ben's apartment, dissecting the events now known as the "Sushi Incident".

"You're the one who lost him!" He finally blurted at Emmett. He was tired of fielding criticism for his lack of judgment over meeting his ex when Brian was around, and for compounding his stupidity by meeting him at one of Brian's favorite restaurants. He tried to make the point that meeting him at a restaurant Brian frequented was intentional. If he had met him in some out of the way place, then it would appear they had something to hide. On the contrary, Justin was hiding nothing. He felt no compulsion to do so.

Emmett glared at him. "He demanded the driver stop the cab. I thought he was going to be sick again. I watched him walk over to the curb. By the time I realized he was going to keep walking, I had to pay the driver and go after him. By then, Brian had disappeared. He could have gone into any building to escape me. What could I do?"

Michael glared at both of them. "I still don't understand why he would take you to lunch, Em, instead of me," he was still hung up on the beginning.

"I do," Ben volunteered. "A lot less baggage there, Michael. From what you've both reported, it sounds as if Brian had a particularly severe panic attack. They can make you sick, faint, heart palpitations, all kinds of physical symptoms. Given what he's going through now, with his shrink, it's logical. In the old days, he could hide his response to a disappointment. Today, with his emotions at the surface, he was flooded with input and his mind and body overloaded. But Brian is a very controlled man. He will regain his composure. The kindest thing we can do is give him time and space to do so. He's not suicidal."

"He walked into the path of those cars!" Emmett corrected him, and Ben shook his head.

"Heat of the moment. Trying to escape a confrontation with Justin. We've already done the usual things. We called the hotel and they told us that to their knowledge he was still a guest. Although, since he paid by credit card, he wouldn't necessarily have to check in with them when leaving. They have his credit card number on file. He doesn't answer at his loft in New York. The airlines won't release lists of passengers. His office hasn't heard from him since lunch. His mother hasn't seen him. Deb hasn't seen him. Jennifer, Linds and Mel haven't seen him. Where does that leave us? He could be anywhere."

"He's on his way to Jeffrey," Justin said quietly, then escaped to the bedroom and closed the door behind him. Michael glared at the door as if he could see through it to the offender.

"Stupid shit!"

"Stop it, Michael," Ben said quietly. "Justin is not the villain here. He may have used bad judgment, but he did nothing wrong. Look at what he's told us. He gets a call from a former lover with whom he had a bad breakup. The man says he just heard about Molly, and he was sorry. They talk without anger for the first time since Justin left. The man says let's meet for lunch. Make peace. Justin wants peace in his life right now, and he feels guilty about how he treated this man. So he agrees. The ex suggests a restaurant. Justin feels good about it, because he didn't want to appear to be meeting on the sly. When he arrives, he doesn't see Brian, who is in a back booth. His ex says something sweet about Molly, Justin tears up. His ex takes his hand to comfort him and up pops the devil. Brian's timing couldn't have been better."

Emmett nodded. "I tried to get him to leave, but you know how stubborn he can be. And we'd still have to walk past the ex. But then when Justin came in, I just melted. Look at it from Brian's point of view. He sees them together, holding hands, tears in Justin's eyes. He goes nuts. But he keeps it inside, turning his own stomach to bile."

"He's already so insecure about that bastard," Michael said with a sigh. "How can you not be worried, Ben?"

"I'm worried about Brian's state of mind, Michael. I worry that he may be hurting unnecessarily. I worry about whether his shaky trust can be repaired. I don't share your overwhelming need to root him out and surround him. Brian is by nature, a solitary man. And wearing his emotions on his sleeve for the edification of all of you is definitely not his style. Give him some space."

"I think I know him better than you, Ben," Michael complained, and Ben shrugged.

"I think you know the young and confused Brian better, sweetheart. I think I know the grown up Brian very well."

"That's just what Jeff said," Emmett responded quietly, and Ben shrugged.

"On that point, he may be right. Brian is not the same guy you grew up with, Michael."

"And one weekend of fucking him doesn't make you a Brian scholar, Ben," Michael snapped and Ben frowned.

An uncomfortable silence ensued, and then Ben got up. He walked into the kitchen to brew some tea. He lifted the phone to place a call, but when he heard Justin's voice, he hung up.

Justin was lying stomach down on Ben's unmade bed, talking to Leo Chang in New York. "Bill says he's talked to your anesthesiologist today," Leo was saying. "He says he's very well respected, you have nothing to fear."

"Tell him thanks," Justin said softly. "Leo, have you talked to Jeffrey?"

"Sure. When?"

"Recently?"

"We had brunch. Your name came up, sweetie."

"In what context?"

"I told him you told me you were a match, and I asked him what it all meant. He gave me the ten thousand foot look at the procedure. You're a brave boy."

Justin winced. "It's not a big deal. It's her best chance. Not like I'm donating a kidney, although I would."

"You're still brave and you know it."

"Did he say anything about Brian?"

"No, but I already knew he's there with you in Pittsburgh."

"Anything else?"

"We talked business. We're on a couple boards together. Arts stuff, you know. He told me about that intervention your friends pulled on him. He said Brian told him he that he was taking one of the interveners to lunch to tell him how the robin ate the worm."

"What else?"

"Nothing much. He promised to make some more calls to attract even more artists to perform at our Winterfest. It's a big fundraiser for the arts scene here."

"Leo, if you hear Brian is back in New York will you tell me?"

"What do you mean? Have you misplaced him?"

"Sort of. Will you?"

"Of course, darling. Not sure I will, but if I do..."

"Thanks. What do you mean that he was contacting more artists to perform?" Justin circled back. "How do artists 'perform'?"

Leo laughed. "Not visual artists, darling. Actors, musicians, singers. We have entertainment at our annual Winterfest dinner and ball. That's what brings in the bucks. That, plus the auction of visual arts donated by artists. I would have asked you to donate, but you have enough going on right now. The money we raise is spread among the various artistic communities. Jeff is very persuasive, and we are both on the board of the charitable organization that sponsors the event."

The others looked up as Justin burst from the bedroom, zipping his jacket and heading for the door. "Where are you going?" Michael demanded.

"Out!" Justin said without stopping, slamming the door shut behind him.

"Probably to see his ex," Michael scowled and Ben sighed.

"Don't borrow trouble."

"I hate to think of Brian being in the arms of that conniving Jeffrey," Emmett conceded.

"There are things you can't control, but I think you underestimate Brian," Ben insisted. He retrieved his coat as Michael glared at him.

"Now what the hell are YOU doing?"

"Playing a hunch," Ben said, kissing his cheek on his way out the door. The three remaining men exchanged a look of confusion, suddenly left alone to unravel the mystery of the missing Brian.
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Justin felt strange to be approaching the door of the apartment where he once lived. He felt as if he had been gone for years. He could hear the music before he reached the threshold. Loud, frenetic, his ex at his showy best. He tried the bell, but he knew it would never be heard over the music. Impulsively, he tried his key. It still worked. He

entered the foyer, walking quietly towards the source of the music. In the lush living room overlooking the river, his ex had carefully posed between the wide windows, framing himself in the final glow of twilight as he bowed the strings of his violin. Watching with rapt attention was a young man, blond, pretty, smitten with the talent of his host. Justin paused, experiencing a sense of déjà vu as he saw a scene similar to one he had been part of unravel in front of him.

"The music plays me," his ex said with a smoldering gaze at the young man. "I become the instrument. I'm merely a pass through."

Justin thought to himself that his ex had improved that line with time.

"You're a genius," the young man insisted, and Justin answered aloud, along with his ex.

"People have been telling me that since I was a child."

Both men turned to stare at him with surprise and Justin smiled and held up his key, placing it on the surface of the table. "I meant to send it back."

"J, this is William. He's interviewing me for the Arts Section of the paper," his ex looked shell shocked, and Justin nodded.

"I see," as true as that may be, he knew where this interview was likely to be concluded. "Could you give me ten minutes?"

"Sure, babe. What do you need?"

"Not here," Justin took his arm, leading him into the bedroom. He shut the door as his former lover smiled seductively.

"I do my best work in the bedroom, as you may recall," he moved over to Justin, placing his arms around him, but Justin easily evaded him.



"Not quite good enough, that's what I recall. But tell me something. How long have you known Dr. Jeffrey Walker?"

His ex grew cautious. "Who?"

"Don't lie to me. I know he's been in touch with you about performing in Winterfest in New York," Justin threw it out, taking his shot.

His former lover stretched out on the bed, one knee raised, propped up on one elbow, trying to look fetching. "I get those kinds of requests all the time. I'm a star, babe. You forgot."

"I'm only interested in Jeff Walker."

"Oh yeah, the guy who is fucking your precious Brian behind your back?"

"I know all about it. Did you two put your pretty heads together and think this was a good way of pulling us apart? A concerted effort by the two of you, each to end up with one of us?"

"Don't flatter yourself."

"What does that mean?"

"It means one thing, Goldilocks," he sat up on the edge of the bed, lighting a cigarette, all pretense vanishing. At his thermal core, Justin's ex was a mean spirited egomaniac. "I don't fucking want you back. I'm famous now. I can do better than you."

Justin laughed. "Like that cub reporter out there? Trophy time!"

He narrowed his eyes at Justin. "He's hot."

"If you don't want me back, why did you arrange to have Brian see us together? I assume you got information from Jeff. Brian must have said he was having lunch with Em, and Jeff casually asked where. Ba da bing. You two had a plot. But what was in it for you, if you don't want me?"

"I don't want him to have you," he said coolly. "And I don't want you to have him. You are both a couple of self centered bastards. You deserve each other. But what the fuck? Why should you be happy?"

"You hate me that much?"

"I don't give a fuck about you. I just want to see you bleed. If Jeff wants Brian, he can have him. That's his problem."

"You feel that way about me because I left you for Brian?"

"You're so pathetic. You'll never be able to hold onto him. Give it up."

"I remember when I left Brian for you. He made it happen because he mistakenly thought it would be better for me. He facilitated it at great pain to himself in order for me to be happy. You want to hurt me, because I love someone else. I guess this is the clearest definition of what makes love true, isn't it?"

"Is it? Too bad you're losing out to a man whose boots you aren't good enough to lick. Frankly, I don't know what he sees in your big drama queen, but that's not my problem. As long as it breaks your little black heart, I'm happy."

"I'm sorry I hurt you. I'm sorry you feel such anger and pain towards me. I'm sorry I ever believed a single word you said to me, and most of all, I'm sorry you caused me to turn away from Brian in the first place. He is ten times the man you can ever hope to be. Maybe you should take a longer look at Jeffrey. He's rich, he's connected, he's handsome. He could do a hell of a lot for you. You two are made for each other."

His former lover laughed and combed his fingers through his disarranged dark curls. "You'd like that, wouldn't you, J? Maybe after Brian loses everything and is totally dependent upon Jeff, emotionally, I'll do just that." He trilled his fingers up an imaginary fiddle. "A grand slam."

"You're a sick puppy," Justin said quietly, and left the room and the apartment, more frantic than ever to find Brian.

Ben opened the door to Molly's hospital room slowly and quietly. The room was dark, only the monitors on the machinery hooked to the tiny patient provided light, along with the wedge of glow from the open door. He saw that Jennifer was sleeping soundly on the sofa and Molly was dozing. Brian was seated beside her bed, his arms crossed on the side of her mattress, his face resting on his arms. He appeared to be asleep. Molly had one hand in Brian's hair, as if she had been stroking him when she drifted into sleep. As Ben approached Brian, Molly's eyes fluttered open and she looked at him, holding a finger of her free hand up to her lips to signal for stealth.

Ben smiled at her grave little face. "It's ok. I'm his friend."

"Brian is sad."

"Why is Brian sad, Molly?"

She sighed. "I don't know."

"May I try to help him?"

She nodded and Ben placed a hand between Brian's shoulders, massaging him gently. Brian slowly awoke, straightened up, squinting first at Molly, then up at Ben. "What are you doing here?"

"Can we talk?"

Brian sighed and stood up. He stretched his cramped muscles, and then leaned over to kiss Molly on the cheek. "Be back, Mollusk." She giggled and he smiled at her. "What's so funny?"

"Your hair."

"What about it?"

"It's sticking up in front!"

"Well, then, fix it, lazybones," he leaned down and she attempted to smooth his bed hair with both hands, and then sighed.

"It's still a mess. You look funny."

"Yeah? At least I HAVE hair, baldielocks!"

She giggled again, having found some peace with her hair loss thanks in part to Brian's gentle, loving teasing. "Will you come back, B?"

"Of course I will. If only to tell you goodnight. Now try to nap," he smoothed her covers, arranged her toys beside her, and rubbed his palm across the satiny smooth skin of that was stretched tautly across the prominent bones of her face. Ben felt an emotional surge at their tender interplay, but choked it down as he and Brian stepped into the hall and closed the door.

"Let's get out of here," Brian said, and they walked to his car in silence. He drove a short distance to the lake and parked in a deserted scenic overview, where tourists congregated during the day and lovers hid at night. They were in the twilight period between the two groups, the only car in the area. Brian left the heat on as he lit a cigarette and stared straight ahead, not even seeing the skim of fog above the waterline. His mind was elsewhere.

"Why did they send YOU?" Brian finally said, and Ben sighed.

"No one sent me, Brian. I came on my own. Everyone thought you would head back to New York. I thought you would never do that without stopping to see Molly first."

Brian smiled slightly. "So I go in to say goodbye and she starts this stiff upper lip, big eyed bravery, thanking me for Pinky Bear and for Angel Bear and asking if I would call to make sure she was doing alright, and I just came undone."

"Where was Jennifer?"

"Sound asleep. She's exhausted and we spoke very softly. I put my head down on Molly's bed, and she reached out and stroked my hair. 'Poor Brian,' she said to me. 'Poor little Brian. He's so sad. Don't be sad, Brian. Molly loves you.' I couldn't move."

Ben reached over to gently rub his biceps, up and down in a soothing motion. "I'm sorry, Brian."

"I guess I fell asleep like that. I'm always so exhausted. The next thing I know, you're waking me up," he glanced at Ben's profile. "I'm glad it was you if it had to be anyone."

"Brian, everyone cares. That's not a bad thing."

"I made a fool out of myself." "No, you had a panic attack. It happens. Especially under high stress and during periods of exhaustion. It can happen to anyone. No one thinks less of you because of it."

"I do," he said softly. "I don't like to lose control."

"I know, Brian. I'm sorry. But Justin doesn't understand what he did. It had no hidden meaning. What he said happened..."

Brian glared at him as he interrupted. "Don't, ok? They were holding hands. Justin was in tears."

"Give him a chance to explain."

"I don't require an explanation. Justin obviously doesn't know what he wants. I think we should put some space between us until he does."

"You don't want that."

"How do you know what I want?"

"I know how much you love him."

Brian stared long and hard into the night. "And I hate loving him. I hate loving anyone."

Ben moved his massage to the back of Brian's neck, kneading his tense muscles. "You feel that way right now. You don't, really."

Brian grabbed his arm, forcing Ben's hand down Brian's belly in a rapid gesture, pressing it to his crotch. Ben felt Brian's penis move under his fingers as it filled with blood, engorging the delicate tissues, quickly making the organ stiff. He closed his eyes as his mind involuntarily filled with memories of a Miami hotel room. They had met at the airport, while waiting for their luggage. Because it was the weekend of the White Party, many gay men were filtering in to further swell Miami's already substantial gay population.

Ben saw Brian right away, and he was not alone in noticing the tall, slim stud talking on a cell phone with an unlit cigarette between his lips. They both reached for the same black leather bag. Their hands touched. Brian hung up on his call after taking in the full measure of Ben's hard body and handsome face. He smiled slightly. "This must be yours. Mine's a Tumi."

"Thanks," Ben swung it off the carousel, and Brian took his arm before he could go away. He leaned in close and whispered in his ear, "Your tongue, my cock, now."

Ben glanced down Brian's lean physique to the substantial basket displayed in his tight Levis and smiled. In the cab on the way to the hotel, they stared out separate windows while their hands kneaded the other's lap. They would manipulate to the point of orgasm, and retreat, maintaining an exquisite tension. They ended up at Brian's hotel, because it was nicer, but Ben called his own hotel to ensure they held his room. He never expected this encounter to last the whole weekend. In the crowded elevator, Brian slipped his hand down the back of Ben's jeans, smoothing his naked ass as the lift crawled slowly to the tenth floor.

Inside the threshold of the door to Brian's room, while the door was still swinging shut, Brian slammed Ben into the wall and thrust his tongue down his throat. Ben held to him, memorizing the firm planes of his body through his clothes. Brian waltzed him over to the bed and threw him back, sailing on top of him and flattening him with his weight. He ground his pelvis against Ben's, and then paused long enough to get naked. He stripped Ben, groaning with pleasure at the sight of his hard muscles, dragging his tongue down his throat, his pecs, his belly and up again. Brian raised himself to his knees and thrust his erect penis at Ben's mouth. Ben opened to receive him, sucking eagerly on his meat.

Brian reached back to jack Ben's hard on and within minutes, both were spent. Ben watched Brian get up, cross the room, rummage in his luggage. He raised himself to his elbows to see, and smiled as Brian returned with two handfuls of goodies. Lube, condoms, and a length of soft white cotton rope. "What do you plan to do with that rope?" Ben asked. "Demonstrate your boy scout knots?"

"Just one. It's called Bondage Boy. You'll love it."

He did love it. He loved everything Brian did, and Brian did everything. Remembering the heat of that encounter caused Ben to reflexively squeeze Brian's cock, but then he withdrew and leaned against the door. "What's wrong?" Brian asked impatiently.

"We can't do this."

"Why not?" Brian insisted. "You know you want to. So do I."

"Not as much as you want to be Michael's friend. Not as much as you love Justin. We can't blow all that for a few minutes of pleasure."

"Try forty-eight hours. Remember?"

"Even worse. Brian, you wouldn't do this to your best friend. Think about it. I know you're hurting, and I want you more than any man I've ever known, but we can't. We both know that."

"Fuck!" Brian said, giving his erection a comforting squeeze. "Shit."

"You can't pave over a dead buffalo and act like the road is smooth. You have to face this thing with Justin and get over it."

"Fuck."

"You know I'm right, don't you?"

Brian leaned over and kissed him hard on the lips. Ben responded by opening his mouth, and they frenched for a few minutes, relenting to the excitement. Finally, Brian leaned back. "I also know you want me."

"Yes, I want you, Brian. But not enough to fuck up everyone's lives. No matter how great the sex is, it's not enough to do that."

"Don't be too sure."

"Will you talk to Justin?"

"Where is he?"

"Not sure. He left my apartment on a mission. Not sure where he was going, but we'll find him."

"No," Brian said softly as he turned over the engine and put the car in gear. "If he wants to talk then he can damned well find me."

"That's fair," Ben agreed, staring out the window, away from Brian's handsome face, willing his own excitement to dissolve.

After dropping Ben at his car, Brian went up to Molly's room to tell her goodnight, as he promised. When he opened the door, he saw Justin there beside her bed, reading to her, and his stomach flipped. He was paralyzed, unable to retreat. Justin closed the book. Brian steeled himself and walked over to Molly. He kissed her cheek. He told her goodnight. He left. Justin followed him into the hall, still holding the book he had been reading. "I thought you went to New York."

"I'm going to New York. But I'll wait until after the procedure to make sure all goes well."

While his words encouraged Justin, his cold distance did not. "Brian, it's not what you think. We were set up."



Brian held up a hand. "Don't."

"No, you have to hear this. Jeffrey planned the whole thing. He wanted you to see me with my ex. He knew how much it would bother you, so he arranged for it to happen. I got the whole story out of your least favorite fiddle player. It was bullshit."

Brian narrowed his eyes at him. "I have no idea what you mean. But even if Jeff did what you said, for his own nefarious reasons, the fact is, you accepted an invitation from your fiddler. You never told me you were meeting him. You held his hand. Don't try to lie this off on someone else. You don't know what the hell you want."

"I know exactly what I want, Brian. I want you."

Brian shook his head, pinching the narrow bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. "Then you have a funny way of showing it. Look, I'll be here to hold your hand through your donation, and until they put Molly in isolation. I owe you both that much. I want this to be very successful. But then I'm going back. I think we both have a lot to think about."

"Brian, please...I have no dilemma here. I only want you."

Brian shook his head and walked away, the pain in his expression so intense that Justin knew not to follow. He would have to let Brian move beyond some of these blocks, and he tried to be grateful for the fact that Brian was still in Pittsburgh, which gave Justin at least a couple days to try and make him understand.

## BETWEEN THE SESSIONS

(after session 13, part III)

by Randall Morgan

Pain Management 101, according to Brian Kinney.

1. Sleep. Impossible, so consider alternative remedy.

Pain Management 101, alternative course, according to Brian Kinney.

1. Jim Beam, liberally consumed. Check. 2. Assorted disco drugs. Check. 3. Disconnect brain. Check. 4. Deploy predatory sexual attitude. Check. 5. Fuck anything that moves. Houston, we have a problem.

Brian had never dangled his dick at so many likely prospects with so little result. They were all sexy, all willing to do whatever he wanted to get off. He wanted to get off. He had no trouble getting and holding an erection. It was the rest of it that proved elusive. Rather than losing himself in the pure visceral pleasure of having his cock sucked or stroking some fine ass he was about to enter, his brain kicked back online and flooded him with reminders that were painful and humiliating and raw. His hard cock urged him to go ahead. But his brain told him you can if you want to, but you won't enjoy it. I'll make sure of that. Even going progressively outlaw, from the backroom at Babylon to the baths to the heavy leather scene at Meat Hook to the glory holes in a notorious rest stop were unable to overcome his pesky brain.

Pain Management 101, desperation course, according to Brian Kinney.

1. Visit the following people to seek emotional shelter: (Forget Justin. He is the source of the pain.)

a. Michael: Forget it. Ben would be there. He was embarrassed to face Ben right now. He was still mad at Michael, too. b. Lindsay: Forget it. Too late and he was too wasted. Mel would chew off his testicles. c. Emmett/Ted: Embarrassed because of scene he pulled in front of Emmett. Ted was never the reassuring kind with Brian. Too many barriers. d. Jeff: Possibility, but too far away. Too wasted. Airline would never let him board a plane like this. e. Debbie/Mom: God, no. f. Lydia: Too late at night to call. Too wasted. She would nag him about it later. g. Molly: He would never let Molly see him this way.

Pain Management 101- beyond desperation course, according to Brian Kinney:

Do something completely stupid and absolutely out of character just to distract yourself from the pain. Check.

Brian leaned his elbow on the doorbell so it made a continuous buzz. Despite the cold, he had long ago shed the jacket to his Prada suit and his Hermes tie. His white dress shirt was wrinkled and untucked. A couple of buttons

were fastened in the wrong holes, the result of re-dressing in the dark after a failed sexual cruise. He had the shadow of a beard. He was exhausted. He was drunk. He was high. He was in pain. He was dangerous.

Finally, he heard the lock disengage and the door opened, putting him face to face with Justin's ex. Wrapped in a Chinese red silk robe, he glared up at Brian with the foolish bravado of a man who bought his own bullshit. Anyone else would have double bolted the door and called 911. This one was arrogant enough to believe he was in control.

"What the fuck do you want? He isn't here."

"I know," Brian walked past him and kicked the door shut.

"You're drunk," the ex sneered and Brian turned and smiled slightly at him.

"Ya think?"

Suddenly, the world as it truly existed came into focus for the ex. He was a small, out of shape, non-violent artiste. Brian Kinney was a big, muscular, drunk Irishman with a nasty temper and a bone to pick. "If you don't leave now, I'm calling the police."

"Go for it," Brian challenged him, and when the ex reached for the phone, Brian reached around him and yanked the cord out of the wall, the plastic jack plug splintering into pieces. Now the ex was scared. Brian saw his fear, smelled his fear, reveled in his fear.

The ex reached for a heavy candleholder on the coffee table and took a swing at Brian's head. Not expecting an assault, Brian grabbed his wrist just inches from the intended target and twisted it until the candleholder dropped to the floor. He then grabbed the ex by the throat, picked him up off his feet with one arm and slammed him down to the floor, without ever releasing him, crouching over him like a demented lover. "Stay away from him," he growled through gritted teeth and the ex clawed at Brian's grip on his throat, his face turning crimson. Brian finally released his grip so he could breathe, which he did in long, choking gulps. He didn't try to buck Brian off, so he could stand. He knew it was hopeless; Brian was calling this fight.

"You can have him," his voice was raspy from the choking. "I'm so over him."

"Yeah? Then why did you meet him for lunch? Hold his hand? Have him in tears?" Brian had moved his hands to the other man's wrists, pinning them to the floor without effort.

"That was all for you, you dumb Mick," the ex getting a little braver as Brian became a little more controlled. "To make you worry. To make you see I could play him if I wanted to."

"Why?"

"Because I despise you."

"Because Justin left you to come back to me?"

"Because I don't like to lose."

"Do you even know what he's going through right now?"

The ex grimaced. "That shit with his sister? Big fucking deal. He's not the one who's sick."

"She could die."

"I don't know her. I don't care one way or the other."

Brian nodded and sat back on his haunches, leaning some weight on the man's calves. He didn't release his wrists. "Tell me, ETHAN, I've often wondered about this, having no musical ability of my own. Which hand is more important to a violinist? The one that works the bow or the one that plays the strings?"

"They both are," Ethan responded with a glare that suggested no oaf like Brian Kinney could ever understand the mystery of his genius.

"So, are you telling me I'd have to break both of your hands to wreak the maximum havoc on your career?" He balled Ethan's right hand up inside his left, slowly tightening his fist. Ethan grimaced and squirmed, unable to shake his aggressor.

"Stop it! Are you crazy? I'll sue you for everything you own!"

"Maybe. But right now I'm just this big dumb drunk Mick who can't even think about the consequences of what he does," he tightened his hold, feeling the smaller hand bend in on itself, and then he released it, along with the other wrist. Brian stood up. Ethan didn't move from the rug, staring up at him in horror as he massaged his hand, which was a little sore but undamaged. "I wouldn't piss on you if you were on fire," Brian said, walking over to the door. "But believe me about this, slick. You ever come near Justin again and you'll have to pay someone to feed you. That's a promise."

Brian left, went down to his car and lowered the windows to circulate cold air in the interior, combating his drug and alcohol haze. The problem with this course of pain management, it was only effective while in play. Afterwards, embarrassment and regret often increased the misery he was trying to escape. He made it safely to his hotel and to his room, engaging the chain on the door.

"You look like shit," Justin said quietly, and Brian turned, surprised to see him there, leaning in the bedroom doorway, wearing the hotel's robe. As mad as he was at him, he was inexplicably thrilled to see him. But he couldn't let him know it.

"I don't recall telling you to come over here to..." in the middle of his forced cool response, he tripped over the ottoman and landed on his ass in the middle of the floor. He began to laugh and shake his head as Justin came over and hauled him up. Brian stood still, except for a slight weave from side to side, like a stalk of wheat in a breeze. He watched Justin unbutton his shirt. He watched him slide it off his arms. He saw him open his fly and snake his trousers down his legs. He shimmied out of his shoes and socks and let Justin lead him into the bedroom. He stretched out on the bed, watching as Justin opened his robe, and let it drop. He wore nothing underneath.

"Let's fuck," Brian said, replaying his pain management techniques as Justin slipped into his arms and stroked his hair gently.

"Not tonight, Brian. Sleep. Just sleep."

"I don't want to sleep," Brian protested, feeling a warm ennui overtake him with each hypnotic stroke of Justin's hand. "I want to fu..." He was gone. Out like a light. His primary pain management tool, sleep, had been activated by the one man who could make it happen, and resistance was absolutely futile.

Melanie was on her third cup of coffee when Brian called. She wasn't sure if it was the caffeine or the sound of his voice that made her so jumpy. With Brian living in New York, she could go for weeks without remembering he was the father of her son. She liked that ability. Now he was back, albeit temporarily, and she couldn't wait for him to go home.

"Lindsay's not home," she pre-empted him and he sighed.

"I'm calling to talk to you."

"Why?"

"There're two cops at my door. Justin is talking to them right now, but they're here to see me. What should I do?"

"What DID you do is the question, Brian! Do they have a warrant?"

"I don't think so."

"Then you have no obligation to talk to them or let them in. What did you do?"

"Nothing, I..." he hesitated. "Well, I was pretty wasted last night."

"What a surprise. Were you in a wreck?"

"No."

"With some underage boy?"

"Shut UP! NO!"

"In a fight?"

Silence.

"Brian, were you in a fight?"

"Not exactly. A fight suggests two participants."

"You beat someone up?"

"I never laid a hand on the motherfucker!"

"Oh Christ, Brian! When will you ever grow up? Tell me what happened."

He quickly related the high points of his experience with Ethan, and she sighed.

"You fucking moron. That's assault, battery. He could probably make it stick."

"What do I do?"

"Go out there and put me on speaker phone and follow my lead, you jackass."

"Love you too, Mel."

Justin was playing the perfectly charming host with the two officers, one of whom Brian immediately recognized as the cop he fucked in the back of his patrol car awhile back, before he moved from Pittsburgh. The cop's expression suggested he remembered Brian too, and he was horrified that Brian might say something to out him to his homophobic partner. Brian had pulled on a pair of jeans and nothing else, his hair sticking up like a crown of thorns, and his hard night showing on his handsome features.

"Gentlemen," he pressed the speaker button on the phone on the table. "The voice you hear is Melanie Marcus, my lawyer."

"Mr. Kinney, a Mr. Gold called in a complaint. He claims that you appeared at his home at three a.m., and assaulted him. Is that true?" The straight cop stated coldly.

Justin's eyes grew wide as he stared at Brian, who shrugged. "You don't have to talk to these men, Brian. Unless they are charging you, you don't have to say anything," Melanie counseled.

Brian sighed. "It's ok. I did show up at his house. He invited me inside. We had some words."

"About what?" The other cop asked, as the one Brian had fucked allowed his gaze to travel down Brian's bare torso.

"Does it matter?"

"Don't answer that, Brian," Melanie insisted, but Brian ignored her again.

"I told him to stay away from a mutual friend."

Justin groaned and flopped down on the sofa as the cop bore in. "Did you assault him?"

"Brian, DON'T!" Melanie was increasingly insistent.

"He tried to hit me with a candleholder. I deflected it and held his hands down to keep him from trying again. It was self defense."

Justin hid his face in his hands as the cop said, "How big a man are you, Mr. Kinney? Six-one?"

"Six-two."



"And Mr. Gold is what? Five six?"

"In stilettos, maybe," Brian quipped, as the cute cop smiled at him. "Yes, I'm bigger than he is, but put a heavy pewter candlestick in a dwarf's hands, and he can cause some damage."

"So you say it was self defense."

"I'm telling you he invited me in. I didn't break in. And he moved on me first, trying to hit me in the head with that thing. Could have killed me. I didn't injure him at all. I just disabled him so he couldn't try it again, and then I left."

"Sounds like a domestic dispute to me, Carl," the cute cop said softly. "Nothing here. Gold has no visible injuries. It's his word against Kinney's."

"Faggots," the other cop grumbled and Brian flashed.

"What did you just say?"

"Brian," Justin took his hand, but he pulled free.

"What was that again?"

"I said 'FAGGOTS'. Did you hear me this time?"

"Carl, let's go," the cute cop looked nervous and Brian glared at them both.

"I heard you. My partner heard you. My lawyer heard you. If this gets any publicity at all, trust me, the whole world will hear about your homophobic views despite the official position of tolerance in this city."

"Just stay away from Mr. Gold," the cute cop handed Brian a card. "Call me if you have any problems." They left. Brian picked up the phone.

"Thanks Mel."

"For what? You didn't listen to anything I said! Brian, grow up. Aren't you a little old for this kind of stuff?"

"Yes, Mel, I am. Thanks, bye," he hung up on her, then turned to Justin who was staring at him in wonder.

"I can't believe you."

Brian shrugged and punched in the line for room service. He ordered coffee and a bagel. He glanced at Justin, who indicated he wanted nothing. When he hung up, he collapsed in a chair, staring straight ahead. "Great way to start the day."

"You threatened Ethan?"

"I was drunk. I was stupid. I don't know why I did it."

"You told him to stay away from me?"

"Yes."

Justin began to laugh and Brian glared at him. "Why is that funny?"

"Because I wouldn't fuck him with YOUR dick!"

"Since when?"

"Since yesterday when I confronted him myself, and discovered just how big a pig he truly is."

"What do you mean?"

Justin told him everything, and Brian sighed. The food arrived. He poured himself some coffee but was suddenly not hungry. "You're telling me Jeff set this up? I don't believe it."

"Why would I lie?"

"You aren't lying. Ethan is."

"Is he? Ask Jeffrey."

Brian cut a glare in his direction. "Even if he did, you chose to meet him. You held hands with him. You never mentioned this meeting to me."

Justin shook his head. "I thought it would be a good thing. I thought he wanted to make peace. And he wanted to tell me how sorry he was about Molly."

Brian remembered what Gold said about Molly last night. He would never be cruel enough to repeat it. "So?"

"So, I met him very publicly for lunch. And when we talked about Molly I got choked up. He reached across the table to hold my hand sympathetically. There was no romance there, Brian. I don't care how it looked to you. It was nothing. If you would just TALK to me. You never TALK before you react."

"I'm talking to you now."

"Sure, after you blew up at me and made yourself sick and got wasted and made a fool of yourself with Ethan."

"Whatever."

Justin sighed and went over to him, easing his way onto his lap. "If you're going to be mad at someone, be mad at Jeffrey. He set you up."

"I still don't believe that."

"Ok, Bri. Find out for yourself. You always have to do everything the hard way."

Brian smiled, tilting his pelvis against Justin's ass. "Are you complaining about the hard way now?"

Justin smiled back, leaning over to kiss his cheek. "That cop was so cruising you. The cute one. Have you pulled him?"

"Maybe, who can remember them all?"

"I knew it."

"Shut up," he slipped his hand inside Justin's robe and began massaging his penis. "Fuck me," Justin whispered against his ear.

Justin straddled Brian's strong thighs and leaned over to kiss him deeply as Brian continued his manipulation. Justin could feel him grow hard beneath the denim and he reached down to open the buttons of his fly, exposing his erection. He trailed a line of kisses down his bare belly and then sucked eagerly at his cock, bringing him to full measure. Brian threw his head back with ecstasy, letting the sensation build. Justin raised himself on his knees, and then bent Brian's dick back slightly so he could position it for penetration. It was self-lubed from Justin's wet mouth and Brian's oozing pre-cum. Neither of them mentioned a condom, and neither of them wanted that barrier between them. They had broken new ground and going back was almost impossible. Justin slipped his tongue deep into Brian's mouth as Brian shoved his dick high up into Justin's tight chute.

The pleasure Brian couldn't feel the night before burned within his groin, fueling this fuck. His brain was engaged again, but this time it participated, flooding him with happy enzymes and endorphins, increasing his pleasure rather than dampening it. He was fucking someone he loved, and there was nothing on earth that could imitate that feeling.

Later, after a shower that resulted in more of the same, only wetter, they sat quietly together on the couch, hands interlaced, lost in separate thoughts. "Are you scared?" Brian finally asked and Justin sighed.

"Not scared, really. Apprehensive."

"I think you're very brave to do this," he raised Justin's knuckles up to his lips to kiss them.

"No, I'm not. You were more than ready to volunteer."

"Yeah, but you're actually doing it."

"Are you scared for me?"

"Yes."

"You heard what the doctors said. It's virtually no risk."

"I know. I know you'll be fine...but..."

"You're remembering when I got bashed?"

"Yes."

"Don't think about that. This is nothing, Bri. I'll go home the next day."

Brian nodded, staring down at the floor, unable to meet his eyes. "I wish it were me instead."

"So do I," Justin teased and they both laughed. "It's for Molly, Brian. I have no choice."

"I know. I'm proud of you."

"I haven't said this, but thank you for being so wonderful with my kid sister. I can't think of words to tell you how much I love you when I see you with her. It's a side of you I've only seen glimpses of with Gus. It's a side of you that enables me to put up with the rest of your bullshit."

Brian glanced at him and smiled. "I love her. I want her to get well."

"I know."

"Lydia says I've displaced feelings to Molly that I felt when you were hurt and I was so helpless. She's probably right on one level. But I've definitely developed a separate affection for Molly, all her own. I can't stand to see her suffer."

"Me either."

"So, you're going to save her life, you little twat. How about that?" He smiled and pulled Justin closer to him.

"It's not a sure thing. Are you going to resent me if I fail?"

"Baby," Brian raised Justin's chin on his fingertip and smiled at him. "It won't fail. And if the worst happened, whose fault is that? No one's. It's just a cruel fate. I will always admire the fact that you did this, you gave everything you could give, and I'll be there for you. We can hold each other up."

"Oh Brian," Justin hugged him tightly, burying his face on his shoulder as Brian stroked his pale hair and closed his eyes, forcing away his sense of dread.

DECONSTRUCTING BRIAN

Session 14

by Randall Morgan

Doctor's Notes: This is the first face to face meeting I've had with BK since he went to Pittsburgh to visit his partner, JT. He looks a little tired, but was on time, as usual, well dressed, as usual, and drinking his usual Starbuck's cha. (I have become addicted to this tea since he put me onto it, and I'm not sure if that's good or bad. I do seem to be drinking less coffee.)

Excerpt from Transcript:

Doctor: How did it go? The marrow extraction.

BK: (Winced.) Frankly, I feel a bit misled.

Doctor: In what way?

BK: We were told, by Jeff and others, that it's not a big deal. But his ass looks like he got grabbed by a giant octopus with super suction tentacles and no plan to let go! Every puncture site is purple and raised and sore. He's being brave about it, but I know he's in considerable pain.

Doctor: Temporary, Brian. He'll feel better soon. And what a wonderful gift he's given his sister.

BK: I know, I know. I just don't like seeing him in pain.

Doctor: Of course not. I know I prompted this face to face meeting. Thank you for coming here. Are you going right back?

BK: (Tensely.) No. I have some business to take care of.

Doctor: Alright.

BK: I was there through the procedure, and stayed until they released him. He's staying with Debbie for a couple days. She'll spoil him rotten. Molly is in isolation because of the conditioning she's going through. I can't go in there to see her right now. So my presence there is temporarily redundant.

Doctor: You seem agitated. What's wrong?

BK: I had a little problem in Pittsburgh.

Doctor: What kind of problem?

BK: A melt down kind of problem.

Doctor: Explain.

BK: I misunderstood something I saw. I made an idiot out of myself.

Doctor: Keep going.

BK: I saw Justin having lunch with his ex. They appeared very chummy. I lost it.

Doctor: In the restaurant?

BK: No, I walked out. I just wandered, not sure how or where. I walked into an alley and threw up. I couldn't breathe. My heart was racing. I had to sit down on the curb.

Doctor: Panic attack. Serious one. Did you try the biofeedback?



BK: I was just trying to keep from passing out. I've never felt anything like that and don't want to again. It was debilitating. I couldn't think, I couldn't move.

Doctor: What happened?

BK: Justin found me, and I just pulled away from him and backed my ass into the traffic to avoid him. I could have been killed. What an idiot!

Doctor: I've told you before, Brian. When you have a panic attack, stop. Don't try to drive or work or do anything but sit still until it passes. Practice your biofeedback. It will pass, but until it does, you can get in a lot of trouble. Panic means just that. Panic.

BK: It was terrible. I can't bear being out of control.

Doctor: I know. What happened ultimately?

BK: My friend Emmett found me, took me away in a cab. I got out of that cab and started walking. I wanted to walk it out. I eventually wandered back to my car.

Doctor: Were you in control?

BK: No. I wasn't in a panic mode, but I was definitely not in control. I tried every trick I know to feel better.

Doctor: Such as?

BK: Drugs, alcohol, sex, nothing worked.

Doctor: That was not the brightest thing to do.

BK: DOH!

Doctor: What happened next?

BK: I went to see the boyfriend.

Doctor: Do you mean Ethan?

BK: Yes.

Doctor: Did you ever think to go to a phone and call me instead?

BK: Yes, but I knew you would nag my ass and I was not in an ass nagging mood.

Doctor: What were you in? An ass kicking mood?

BK: Yes, as a matter of fact, I was.

Doctor: Not good.

BK: Anyway, I confronted him.

Doctor: Was Justin there?

BK: No.

Doctor: Did it get physical?

BK: In a girly, bitchy, fag sort of way. He tried to crown me with a candlestick so I took him down and told him the way the aardvark eats the artichoke.

Doctor: Forgive me for laughing, but that's a colorful phrase. What does it mean?

BK: (Smiled.) Thanks, I write phrases for a living. Update on how the cow eats the cabbage...it means how it's going to be done. Anyway, I never hit him, never hurt him. Just told him to stay the fuck away >from Justin. That's when he told me he doesn't want Justin, he just doesn't want me to have him. He told me he wanted me to see him with Justin. Then Justin informed me that Ethan told Justin that he, Ethan, and Jeff worked this out together.

Doctor: Jeffrey Walker? How does he know Jeff?

BK: I'm not clear on that concept and I'm also not sure I believe Ethan, the little skank.

Doctor: But how would he know to even mention Jeff?

BK: I don't know. Maybe Justin let something slip. Not sure. But I intend to find out.

Doctor: Why would Jeff do that, Brian?

BK: If you believe what the skank says, it's to ensure a break up so he can have me.

Doctor: How do you react to that?

BK: I'm insulted on two fronts. First, that I can be manipulated, and second, that if Justin was not part of my life, I'm a lock for him or anyone else. I do have free will, you know.

Doctor: I think both of those reactions sound valid. What do you intend to do?

BK: Talk to him.

Doctor: Good. Direct route is always best.

BK: (Looked away from me, towards windows, crossing, then uncrossing his legs in a nervous gesture.) I guess.

Doctor: What?

BK: (Met my gaze.) Jennifer really depends on him now and Molly is at a critical point. I won't let something as lame as my sex life interfere with her recovery.

Doctor: How would it interfere?

BK: If Jeff and I had a major falling out, what if he decided to fuck his participation in Molly's recovery?

Doctor: Then I would be very disappointed in his view of the Hippocratic oath.

BK: I can't risk it.

Doctor: So where does that leave you?

BK: Maybe I should just let it cruise for awhile. Confront him when she's on the upswing.

Doctor: Brian, don't use Molly's illness as your excuse for not wanting to know about Jeffrey. She won't get well tomorrow. This is a long arc of recovery. Months. You can't put your life on hold for that long. If you don't want to know the truth about Jeff, ask yourself why?

BK: (Frowned.) Why do you think?

Doctor: Doesn't matter what I think. What do you think?

BK: I think I don't want to lose Jeffrey, and if he's as big a horse's ass as Ethan describes, then I've been wrong about him all along. I always believed we would at least be friends, even if the romance thing wasn't going to happen.

Doctor: What's your alternative? Terminal denial?

BK: I get your point.

Doctor: Brian, did you resolve whether Justin was rekindling a relationship with Ethan?

BK: He wasn't. He was naïve, but not duplicitous. I truly believe he loves me.

Doctor: Time out.

BK: What?

Doctor: Don't you dare lose that pronouncement in the midst of a conversation. Let me play it back.

(Played tape: Doctor's voice:...did you resolve whether Justin was rekindling a relationship with Ethan? Brian's voice: He wasn't. He was naïve but not duplicitous. I truly believe he loves me... End playback.)

BK: So?

Doctor: You believe he loves you. Go back thirteen sessions. How did you feel then, even after he left Ethan for you?

BK: Yeah, I get it. I still doubted his commitment.

Doctor: Big time. You don't now?

BK: (Long silent pause. Looked out windows, leaned back, crossing hands across his stomach.) I don't. And quit smiling at me.

Doctor: You are so transparent. You can take a minute to enjoy this, you know.

BK: (Smiled.) What should I do? The Snoopy dance of joy?

Doctor: If you'd like.

BK: (Laughed.) It's still not where it needs to be, so don't get so smug. The only thing that's changed is that I don't have an overwhelming fear of his leaving me for someone else any time soon.

Doctor: And that fear blocked your ability to commit. What lies ahead is dealing with your own demons, Brian. You still have plenty.

BK: He has to remember the dance, Lydia. He has to remember what flowed between us. He has to see that I gave him my heart that night, and he slipped it back to me unused. If not, there will always be a missing beat.

Doctor: I see, but in the mean time, we can work on what issues you have, not what issues you attribute to his inability to remember.

BK: Short lived victory.

Doctor: Big victory, but the war's not over.

BK: I know.

Doctor: What will you say to Jeffrey? Let's discuss.

BK: I'm meeting Friedrich first.

Doctor: The ex lover?

BK: Yes.

Doctor: I was hoping you had given up on that idea.

BK: I'm meeting him tonight, for drinks.

Doctor: On what pretext?

BK: I pulled my ad agency out of the bag. We are using him in a campaign, so that helps.

Doctor: That seems a little dishonest.

BK: (Wicked smile.) Hey, I'm in advertising. It's what I do.

Doctor: Very droll, Brian. I still advise against this meeting.

BK: Noted.

Doctor: You are a very stubborn man.

BK: So I've been told.

Doctor: Don't say that so proudly. An ass is stubborn too, but it doesn't go around bragging about that fact.

BK: (Laughed.) You calling me an ass?

Doctor: If the long ears and tail fit....

BK: Got to be an ethical complaint there somewhere.

Doctor: Take your best shot. Brian, I'm just trying to help you see that sometimes the most direct route is still the best. You don't have to do ten hours of research to figure out you need to change a light bulb.

BK: Ok, Lydia. I see your point.

Doctor: Well, that means you'll do it your way, of course. That seems to be your pattern. You have to experience everything, learning from someone else's knowledge or experience is a cheap substitute for you.

BK: Yes, that's true.

Doctor: Did you see your mother?

BK: Yes, I told you. Remember? She called me down with Craig Taylor.

Doctor: I meant on a more peaceful basis.

BK: No, ran out of time. I will, however. Next time.

Doctor: Are you avoiding her?

BK: My life has been so out of control. I really don't want to deal with my mother when I'm out of control. What's up with that, anyway? I take off on Craig Taylor, I push Ethan around, I put the moves on my best friend's boyfriend...



Doctor: Hold on. What was that last part?

BK: (Sighed.) Oh yeah. The night of the long knives, when I had the melt down. Ben, Mikey's boyfriend, came looking for me at the hospital. He's been a good friend to me on this trip, and we have a history.

Doctor: What kind of history?

BK: We met each other a couple years ago in Miami and spent the weekend together.

Doctor: I see. And Michael knew this?

BK: Not at first.

Doctor: When did you tell him?

BK: I never did. Ben told him. After they were together for awhile.

Doctor: Why did you never tell him, Brian?

BK: Gay etiquette. You don't discuss your tricks, especially with the trick's current boyfriend.

Doctor: Is that all it was with Ben? A trick?

BK: ( Long pause.) I don't know.

Doctor: What are you thinking?

BK: At the time, it was really hot sex. Ben is beautiful and sexy. I planned to spend that weekend on a forty-eight hour cock hunt, but I ended up with a trick I met at the airport. Ben. We seldom left the room.

Doctor: And then?

BK: He lived in Philly at the time. We talked about getting together but we never did. I found out later, Ben was diagnosed as being HIV positive shortly after our fling.

Doctor: Did that worry you?

BK: No, we were safe. And by then, I had already tested negative several times.

Doctor: Did he try to contact you?

BK: No. When he moved to Pittsburgh, he said he looked me up but I was already with Justin, and he felt there was no room for him in that scene. He said he could never build his happiness on Justin's unhappiness.

Doctor: That's a very loving view.

BK: Ben is very Zen.

Doctor: I see. So when did this "moving" on him take place?

BK: In my car that night. It was stupid and thoughtless, on my part.

Doctor: Ben resisted?

BK: Yes. Thank God.

Doctor: Why do you say that?

BK: Wrong thing for me, for Mikey, for Justin, for Ben. Just wrong.

Doctor: How do you feel about it in retrospect?

BK: Guilty.

Doctor: Towards whom?

BK: Justin, Mikey, Ben.

Doctor: You realize how that would be a terrible risk to your long term friendship with Michael?

BK: Yes, I know.

Doctor: Worth it?

BK: No, it's not worth it. But see, this caring about guilt is new to me. Just like trying to beat people up, and throwing up in the street and being unable to trick are also new to me.

Doctor: When were you unable to trick?

BK: Same night. After Ben. I went out with the singular idea of getting laid.

Doctor: And?

BK: I pulled tricks, no problem. I got hard, no effort. But I couldn't get off.

Doctor: By that you mean you couldn't reach orgasm?

BK: Right. I had the arrow but not the bow. Nothing to launch it.

Doctor: Has this happened to you before?

BK: (Shrugged.) Sometimes. (Played with French cuffs on his shirt, needlessly straightening them, obviously uncomfortable.) Usually, it's if I've been boning someone all night, and my dick gets hard again, as if it wants one more go, but when I agitate it, nothing pops. I just can't quite get over. Sometimes too much disco drugging can give you an eternal boner, and I took Viagra once and ended up shagging Justin for hours to get rid of the starch. But this was different.

Doctor: How so?

BK: All that was physical stuff. This was in my head. It was as if my brain was willing my body not to fully enjoy the sensation. Not to reach a climax.

Doctor: Why do you think your brain would do that, Brian?

BK: I don't know. Is it part of that anxiety attack?

Doctor: If so, it's new symptoms to me. What else could it be?

BK: Are you trying to get me to say it was guilt?

Doctor: I'm not trying to get you to say anything, Brian. You tell me.

BK: I really don't know. It's all part of this emotional roller coaster you have me riding. Up and down and all around. Nothing is predictable, nothing is sure. I hate unraveling my emotions. It sucks!

Doctor: You have to understand what it is to feel before you can learn moderation, Brian. You've encased your feelings in ice for so long, the thaw is inevitably painful as the nerve endings come alive. But the pain is transitory and the return of feeling is divine.

BK: I'll be the judge of that, Lydia. Right now it feels more hellacious than divine.

Doctor: Which is a good sign that it's working. You're doing well, Brian. Let it happen. Don't stop now.

BK: Interesting to see if I have one friend still standing when this ends.

End of Transcript.

Doctor's Notes: BK has just endured a traumatic visit in Pittsburgh. His internal defenses are coming down too fast and too furiously for his psyche to handle the onslaught. Thus, he has had at least one significant panic attack. His fall back medications for emotional pain are not performing. Even anonymous sex has become routine and unfulfilling. He sought to bury that pain in the kindness of a former lover, who is now living with BK's best friend, Michael. The friend declined, which was a break, because I fear that BK could not handle the misery of infidelity with his best friend's lover.

He has also found out some unpleasant truths about Jeffrey, the man he viewed as his one safe harbor. He will be investigating the likelihood of those doubts, but I disagreed with his method of seeking information from Jeffrey's former lover. BK is not currently emotionally equipped to sift through this man's point of view and apply the appropriate filters to the words of a rejected lover. BK is either at or very near to the crisis point in his relationship with Justin as well as his relationship with Jeffrey. At this point, I'm not sure even Brian could say in which direction he was leaning. Perhaps by the next session, some clarity will have entered his life.

## BETWEEN THE SESSIONS

(after session 14)

by Randall Morgan

Brian looked up from the plush, half-moon shaped banquette where he sipped a Jim Beam from rock crystal. He was looking at two tall, willowy young women who paused before his booth. They looked strangely alike, as if they were slightly different model numbers >from the same android assembly line. All legs and attitude, with collagen

enhanced lips and saline breasts that were carefully understated. Their "fuck it" hairstyles took a lot of work to look so casual, and their slinky dresses were by a hot new Italian designer. The material was stretched tightly over prominent hipbones seen only on models, which they were, or twelve- year-old girls, which they were not.

"Ladies?" He asked casually, and the blonde spoke.

"My friend and I want to buy you a drink?"

"And then?"

"We want you to buy us drinks."

"And I would do that because...?"

"Because we will get drunk and take you home and fuck you until your nose bleeds."

Brian laughed. Their sense of entitlement, as beautiful women, would have been annoying if it weren't so ironic. "As tempting as that sounds, I have to decline."

They appeared stunned, as if it were not in the realm of possibilities for any man to deny their fantasy offer of a three-way with two models. "What do you mean?" The not so blonde one said. Brian shook his head. Amazing arrogance.

"I mean I'm not interested."

"Told you he was a faggot," one girl said to the other and Brian laughed.

"I just prefer women with a little more substance. You can take that any way you wish." He didn't care if they thought he was gay, but he didn't want to let them off the hook with such an easy out. He wanted them to question their invincibility. They left in a huff of Chanel scent and he leaned back, checking his watch. Why had Friedrich wanted to meet at such a face place and at a bar that catered to straights? He said it was close to the photographer's studio in Soho where he was shooting, and it was also only a few blocks from Brian's loft.

The bar was crowded, smoky, with soft eclectic jazz playing from a sound system while a bored looking, beautiful wait staff moved among the bored looking, beautiful patrons. Brian fit right in. He picked up cruising glances from both genders, but he was in no mood for games. The fact that he trusted Lydia and that Lydia made it clear that meeting Friedrich was a dumb idea concerned him. But he had to do it, had to know.

When Friedrich entered, Brian had no doubt he was the man he was waiting for, and even the coolest of the cool turned to look at the striking man who scanned the room, looking for his "date". He was tall and rapier slim, but hard bodied. His hair was platinum blond, a color seldom found beyond early childhood without the aide of a bottle. Friedrich's color was Nordic and natural, which made it even more striking. He wore it slightly long, since it was a major asset, and it framed his handsome face in perfectly razored planes. His features made him a poster child for the Aryan race, and his eyes were a shocking shade of ice blue, cold and crystalline, behind lightly tinted glasses. He wore Dolce and Gabbana casually, as if it was Levis and Hanes, and he held a cigarette between two fingers as he walked.

Brian stood and when Friedrich saw him, the model smiled. His gleaming white teeth were contrasted by a perpetual tan. He waved off the maitre de and went over to Brian, taking him in with one long, predatory gaze. He gave Brian the European embrace, a light kiss on both cheeks, and Brian whiffed his expensive cologne as Friedrich pressed in. He then dropped into the booth, picking a central spot so wherever Brian sat, they'd still be close together. He signaled the waiter and asked for a dirty martini with extra olives, then smiled at Brian. "Another?" his accent was pronounced, Germanic and vaguely erotic. Brian was reminded of the stories of Berlin before the Nazis changed the world. The decadent, homosexual club scene of that era would fit Friedrich, who would look dashing in an SS uniform as he trolled the clubs on the sly.

"The same," Brian said to the waiter, tapping his glass to ensure he didn't get a dirty martini by mistake. He knew martinis were sophisticated, but he couldn't get past the medicinal flavor of vermouth. "So, Friedrich...I'm Brian."

"It's pronounced FREED-rick. But call me Freedy, everyone does."

"Freedy, thank you for meeting me. I know it's been a long day for you."

Freedy leaned back in the booth with a dramatic sigh and lifted his glasses to his forehead. That gesture gave Brian the full impact of his ghostly eyes that seemed as unfathomable and chilled as a glacier. "People say, 'oh Freedy, what a glamorous life you lead, wearing pretty clothes and having your picture taken for big bucks' but I tell them, you don't know how lucky you are to be ugly. This is hard work! Standing on your feet all day, having people poking and combing and pinning and moving you. All under miserably hot lights."

"Yes," Brian said, restraining a wry smile. "Being ugly is definitely fortunate."

Freedy met his gaze and smiled flirtatiously. "What would you know about that, Brian? You're simply divine. I never met an ad man who looks a bit like you!"

"Well, no one has asked me to be on the cover of a fashion magazine."

"The way you wear that Hugo Boss suit? They would, darling, they would."

Brian nodded, only marginally flattered. His own good looks were only important for what they could get him. Sex, attention, intimidation. He was not wrapped in self-love over the fact that he was handsome. His arrogance was based on what he had accomplished professionally. When the drinks came, they talked about the ad campaign, Brian's excuse for meeting with him. Only after they were more comfortable with each other did Brian launch the topic of Jeffrey. "You know, Freedy, we have a friend in common."

"Do we?" Friedrich was hoping this shared friend would give him a clue as to Brian's sexual orientation. He thought he sensed a response to his striking beauty, but he wasn't sure. Brian looked straight, acted straight, but there was a subtle hint of something more interesting beneath that glossy surface.

"Yes, Jeff Walker."

Friedrich's smile froze, shards of ice coming into his expression. "Jeff? How do you know Jeff?"

"I met him when he was out with Hannah and I was with my son, Gus. They're the same age, our kids."

A double blow, Friedrich realized. Not only did Brian know Jeff, but also he was a breeder. "I see."

"We walked the Museum of Natural History together, the four of us."

"How domestic," Friedrich's pouty, sullen side was emerging. "Where was your wife?"



"I don't have a wife."

"Divorced?"

"Gay."

Friedrich perked up slightly. "Oh? So you adopted?"

"No, he's my natural child. Sperm donation for an old friend. He lives with his Mom in Pittsburgh. He was just visiting me."

Now Friedrich's oozing charm returned. Not only was Brian gay, but also this barnacle of a child was not even in the same city. "How lovely for you. So you and Jeff bonded over dinosaur bones?"

"Something like that."

"Over some bone, eh?" A knowing smile. Brian smiled back.

"Yeah."

"So how did my name come up?"

"Discussing histories."

"I'm sure he was kind," Friedrich said with a bitter laugh. "As only Jeff can be. That cruel kindness he exudes." Friedrich chain-smoked; pulling thin European cigarettes from a flat, wide box.

"I'm sorry it didn't work out."

"Are you, Brian? Or are you the latest? Checking out the former to see if there is still something there? You're just his type."

"How do you figure that? You and I are nothing alike."

"Of course we are. We may be different physical types, but we're both beautiful. Tall, lean, he likes that. Successful in our own right. Jeff insists upon that. Smart but maybe a bit decadent. His preference. Who did he steal you from? I know how he works. There's always one who loses out to Jeffrey. He wants die beaute, die trophae; the prize, the trophy."

Brian gave away none of the discomfort that statement gave him. "Were you with someone else when you met him?"

"Oh yes. Long-term affair. Jeff entered the scene, and at first I think he only wants to be friends. Then I see he had this goal to...uh, diener ordentlich durchficken... what is that in English? Let me think."

"To fuck your brains out," Brian translated. "I took some German in school."

Friedrich laughed. "Yes! Very good! But in time, his goal is much more than that. He wanted all of it. He wanted all of me. And he didn't give up until he had me by die hoden, the balls."

"So are you telling me you were a victim?"

"A victim?" he laughed cynically. "My love name for Jeff was das raubtier. Translate that one, Brian?"

Brian nodded. The predator. "And you were das kindhichkind?"

Friedrich smiled. "Naïve child? No. But naïve compared to Jeffrey? Yes."

Brian frowned, lit a cigarette, and stared straight ahead. When he felt Friedrich's hand on his thigh, he looked back at him. "What are you doing?"

"Let's not be coy, Brian. I know you want me."

Brian covered his hand with his own and gently removed it. "Why did you break up?"

"He tired of me," Friedrich admitted, leaning back with a defeated sigh. "Once das raubtier devours the prey, he doesn't linger over the bones."

"Really? He suggested you were boning everything in sight and using him as a private pharmacist. Not to mention the fact you couldn't stand Hannah."

Friedrich laughed, shaking his head in wonder. "How funny is that?"

"You tell me. Is it funny?"

"Ya. A riot."

"In what way?" Brian said, not really wanting an answer.

"In every way, Brian. Every way."

"Such as?" Brian bore in, becoming bored by his diffidence.

"When I met Jeff, I was just climbing to the top of the heap, as they say, in the modeling world. I could have anyone I wanted, and I say that with no arrogance. It is fact. But I was in love with my boy friend, Dieter, who I had known since we were kinder, kids, in Frankford. Promiscuous, I was not. Dieter was the only man I slept with. There were some girls, now and then, experiments, but no men. Dieter was all I needed."

Brian nodded, his stomach beginning to knot up. "Go on."

"We met at a tango club. Jeff loves the tango, do you know that?"

Brian nodded, vaguely and unfairly annoyed that Jeffrey had shared that sensual dance with Friedrich. In some ways, he considered it more intimate than sex.

"I went with some girls who modeled for the same agency as me. Dieter was in Germany on business. He had a Mercedes dealership in New York, very successful. But he had to travel back to Germany fairly often."

"So you met Jeff."

"Yes, and let me say, before this time, other than some youthful experimentation with the usual chemicals, I was a health nut. I didn't drug. I drank very little. Dieter and I ran miles every day. When I met Jeff, I think this is a man who can be a very good friend. His profession amazed me, all that good work with little ones. He was so kind, so smart and knowing."

Brian nodded, agreeing with that assessment. Friedrich continued. "Not sure when we went from friends to lovers. I know we had sex early on, but he act as though he truly respects my relationship with Dieter, although Dieter never liked Jeff, told me >from the first he was up to no good."

"You left Dieter for him," Brian cut to the chase and a tragic look clouded Friedrich's features. He paused, drank a couple sips of his martini, and then nodded.

"Jeff introduced me to the beauty of prescription drugs. Something to take away the pain when you run. Something to relax you. Something to put you to sleep. Something else to wake you up. I realized so much later that it was all part of his plan as a control freak to ensure I was enslaved to him."

Brian frowned. "Freedy, you're very attractive. But why would Jeff go to such lengths to get you and keep you? He can have pretty much whomever he wants. He's rich and handsome and charming."

"He wanted me. And he wanted me at his price. You see this is what makes Jeffrey tick. The game."

Brian sighed, deciding it was best not to argue. Friedrich was obviously bitter, as Lydia predicted. He had wanted to hear the story, so he had to let him talk. "Go on."

"Ultimately, I make the decision to leave Dieter and move in with Jeff," he sighed, tearing up, and wiping those tears on a cocktail napkin. Only when he saw a smudge of beige on the white paper, did Brian realize Friedrich was wearing a skim of artfully applied makeup. He wondered if it was left over from his shoot, or if this was something he did to enhance his tan. "Biggest mistake of my life."

"I'm sure you didn't feel that way then."

"No, I had my doubts even then."

"So why did you stay?"

"Where would I go?"

"Back to Dieter?"

"Dieter?" He shook his head. "Dieter committed suicide a month after I left him. He blew his brains out in one of his fancy new cars. No note, but then, did he really need one?" He teared up again. Brian was stunned by that admission. He reached over and impulsively squeezed Friedrich's hand. Friedrich held onto him for a moment and then let him go. "Anyway, this is the guilt I carry. My fault, not Jeff's, not really. I was the one who betrayed my love."

"I'm sorry, Freedy. That's terrible, but you really can't be faulted. If someone makes the decision to end his or her life, it's not something you can control. I just wish he had sought help for his depression. I did, and it's really made a difference for me," Brian couldn't believe he was admitting his therapy to a stranger.

"Who is your love, Brian? I know there is one."

Brian shrugged. "It doesn't matter," he had no intention of discussing Justin with Friedrich. "Tell me about Hannah. You didn't want to live with a child?"

"That's a good one. When Jeff's sister got knocked up, as they say, I was the one who suggested we take her baby. I thought a child might help us grow closer. I felt he was aloof from me. He resisted, saying a child would limit us. But I persisted, and his sister, she needed the help. So he adopted his niece when she was born."

"And did Hannah harm your relationship?"

"Hannah? No. Hannah is heaven. But Jeff is a demanding lover. I became infatuated with caring for the baby. I was a perfect mother," he laughed, the sound bitter and ironic. "She even looks like me, fair and blonde, and everyone assume she's my natural child when we go out. It really bothered Jeff when that happened."

"But," Brian was having a problem reconciling information. "So you love Hannah?"

"Adore Hannah. Losing Hannah was the hardest part of the breakup."

"You still see her?"

"No. I assumed I would, when I left. But Jeff reminded me that I have no legal rights with her. She's his child; he is the sole parent on the adoption papers, because he told me his sister demanded that. I now doubt if that was true. She always liked me."

Brian thought of his own status with Gus. He had signed away his paternal rights so Melanie could have joint custody of Gus. To the law, he had no more claim on his own son than did a total stranger. If Lindsay cooled on him, or if some catastrophe occurred, would Mel ever let him visit Gus? The ease in which a person's fundamental need to be with their own flesh and blood could be snatched from them made him uncomfortable. "Are you saying that you left Jeff?"

"Of course. If I hadn't left, I would be dead today. I was so deeply dependent on the drugs he dispensed, and that dependency was affecting my work. He's right about one thing. I did start playing around on him. I had to slip the leash occasionally. He so controlled my life, it was the only freedom I had."

Brian was silent, taking it all in, resisting the urge to call him a fucking liar. Some dark inner recess of his mind told him Friedrich wasn't lying, and yet he didn't want to believe any of it. Why would he choose to believe this man, whom he didn't know, over Jeffrey? Why were all of his Irish instincts kicking in and telling him he had no logical

choice but to believe him? Why didn't he listen to Lydia? What purpose was there in paying her if he didn't listen to what she said?

Friedrich got his attention by reaching over and resting a hand on his forearm. "Don't do it, Brian. Don't let him sucker you. He doesn't love you; he's not capable of love. He plays games. He fucks minds. Do yourself a favor, and let Dr. Mengles fuck someone else's mind."

Brian jumped, startled by the vibration of his cellular phone. He excused himself and opened the clamshell phone, surprised to hear Debbie's voice. "Brian, where are you?" She sounded frantic.

"New York, Deb, you know that. Why?"

"I hear music. Are you in some fucking club?"

"What do you want?" He didn't feel the need to explain himself to her.

"You have to talk to Justin."

"I talk to him several times a day. What's happened? Is he ill?"

"He had a nightmare and he's inconsolable. He won't talk about it to me or to Vic. Please talk to him; see if you can make him feel better. I wonder if it was about Molly."

"Hang up, Deb. I'm going home so I can call him in privacy. It will just take me a few minutes to get there."

"Ok, Kinney, but hurry! No grabbing ass or getting sucked on your way out!"

"Not that kind of club, Deb," he ended the call and motioned the waiter for the check. He paid with his black Centurion card and glanced at Friedrich. "Something's come up. I have to go."

"So I heard. Brian, do you date other men?"

"No," Brian heard himself say. "I'm in a relationship." He signed the ticket, told Friedrich he was looking forward to working with him, and left the bar. He sprinted the few blocks to his loft, anxious to find out what was troubling his lover. In a perverse way, he was grateful for the interruption, for it meant he didn't have to think about the Jeffrey conundrum for now. Trading one worry for another seemed like a painful avenue of relief, but dealing with Justin's fears was much easier for Brian than was the deconstruction of a friendship.

He ran up the stairs to his loft rather than taking the creaky elevator, and caught his breath before he picked up the portable phone. He carried it into his bedroom, loosening his tie and kicking off his shoes, then stretched out on his bed, and dialed. Debbie answered and immediately told him to hold while she fetched Justin. He waited for what seemed an eternity before he heard Justin's voice. He sounded calm, but strained.

"Hi babe," Brian was deliberately laid back.

"Hi."

"How are you feeling?"

"Fine, much less sore. The bruises on my ass are fading."

"Great. I want that sweet ass back to its former perfection. How's Mol?"

"Miserable. The worse she's been. They've irradiated her so thoroughly; they said she could die if she gets something as minor as a sty in her eye. Mom is a basket case. I think they'll let me suit up and see her tomorrow. They wanted me to have at least 72 hours in the clear, since my own immunities were compromised by the extraction."

Brian winced. "Give her my love, okay?"

"I will. Mom says she asks about you every day. She's explained to her that they are only allowing family members to visit her in isolation, but she keeps saying you are family. She really loves you."



"I know. I feel the same. And if they relax that rule, I'm there, babe. But tell me, how does her brother feel about me?"

"Her brother loves you too."

Brian smiled. "He'd better."

Justin paused. "How's Jeff?"

"I haven't seen him."

"Really?"

"Really."

"He's stayed in close contact with Molly's medical team. He made some suggestions on nutrition and pain management that they incorporated. He really is a brilliant doctor, Bri."

"I know."

"What's wrong? You seem quiet."

"Tired I guess. Are you sure you're fine?"

"Debbie told you I had a nightmare?"

"Yep."

"Figures. I told her not to."

"And she listens to any of us since when, exactly?"

Justin laughed. The sound of his laughter made Brian smile. "Good point. Since never."

"Exactly. What was it about? The nightmare?"

"I don't remember," Justin said softly.

Brian sighed. "Liar."

"I don't want to remember."

"Was it about Molly?"

"No, why do you ask that?"

"Logical, given the anxiety we all feel about her."

"It was about you."

"Me?" Brian laughed. "I'm fine, babe. What about me?"

"It didn't make a lot of sense."

"Tell me."

"We were in a dark place. There was movement, like we were on a train or something and a lot of background noise. Wailing noises, like people in pain. But it was pitch black, and I could see nothing. Worse than that, I couldn't move."

"Go on."

"I knew you were there because I heard your voice. I felt your hand on mine. You sounded like you were scared."

"Of the dark?"

"I don't know. I wanted to reassure you, but I couldn't talk. You were saying, 'Justin, don't leave me. Don't go, I love you.' At first I thought it was my fantasy about what I wanted you to say when I went off with Ethan. But this was different and Ethan was not in the dream at all. You just kept saying, 'Please don't leave me, don't let go of me.' I was desperate to say that I loved you too, but I couldn't and it was so fucking frustrating. I woke up yelling, I LOVE YOU BRIAN, and that got Debbie's attention. I was a basket case."

Silence.

Justin waited a beat, and then said, "Brian?"

Silence.

"BRIAN?"

"I'm here."

"What's wrong?"

"It wasn't a dream."

"Yes it was."

"No, it wasn't," Brian said quietly, choking back a sudden flood of emotion. "It happened. In the ambulance, after you got bashed. I was sitting with you in the back, holding your hand. The wailing you heard was the siren. I leaned over you and whispered those exact words. 'Justin, don't leave me. Don't go. I love you. Please don't leave me, don't let go of me.' And the attendant caring for you said, 'He can't hear you' and I said 'How the fuck do you know what he can hear?' It happened exactly the way you dreamed it. It's a recovered memory."

Silence.

Justin finally said, "Jesus Christ, Brian. Why didn't you ever tell me that?"

"What would it change?"

"I don't know. Everything, maybe?"

"Maybe nothing," Brian said quietly.

"That shrink Lydia referred me to, before I had to come home, told me that trauma can often retrieve buried memories. Maybe the extraction triggered it, or being in the hospital again."

"Call him, Justin. Talk to him. Find out if there's anything you should do to protect yourself. I'll ask Lydia, too."

"Brian, can you come back to Pittsburgh? I need you."

Brian sighed. The Jeffrey conundrum bubbled up in his consciousness again. No resolution, and lack of resolution was one of his pet peeves. And yet, he knew what he had to do. "I'll catch a plane in the morning."

"Thank you."

"Rest easy, Justin, and make that call."

"This late?"

"Tell his service. He'll call you back. Please."

"Ok, and Brian?"

"What?"

"Thank you."

"For coming to the Pitt?"

"For what you said in the ambulance. Maybe it planted enough of a seed for me to want to come out of that coma."

"Maybe," Brian said with a sigh, wanting to believe this recovered memory would be a positive step, but unable to convince himself it was true.

## BETWEEN THE SESSIONS

(after session 14, part II)

by Randall Morgan

Brian, who never slept well without Justin, finally dozed off on the leather chaise in the main room of the loft. A hockey game had been playing on the television when he drifted off, but an old black and white movie was on when he was awakened by the insistent buzzing of the street level intercom. Confused at first, he finally identified the

sound and stumbled over to the box by the door. He was still dressed in sweats and socks, his hair a mess and eyes cloudy with sleep.

"What the FUCK?" He demanded, and Jeffrey's voice responded.

"Let me in, Brian."

Brian paused for just a second, and then hit the release button. He slid open the front door, leaning in the threshold, waiting. Jeffrey came up the stairs, not the elevator, and he looked tired, wearing a coat over hospital greens. "Working late?" Brian asked coolly, noting by the clock that it was almost three. In four hours, he would be leaving for the airport to go to Pittsburgh.

"I had an emergency call. But it turned out well, for now. May I have a drink?"

Brian motioned to the bar. "Help yourself. If you want ice, its in the freezer."

"Not necessary," Jeffrey poured himself two fingers of Glenfiddich and sat down heavily on the couch, still wearing his coat. The thin cotton scrubs were not enough protection in the chill of the loft. Brian lit a cigarette and sat across from him, waiting. Jeffrey noticed his leather duffel by the door and asked, "Going somewhere?"

"Pittsburgh. Early flight."

"I see. They still won't let you see Molly, you know."

"Yes, I do know. I'm not going there for Molly, this time, although I will at least wave at her through the glass panel in her door. I'm going there for Justin."

"Oh. Well, then..."

"Yes. Well. Then. What are you doing here at this hour, Jeff?"

"Why did you contact Friedrich?"

Brian smiled. "I asked you first."

"Fine. I came by to ask you why the hell you contacted Friedrich?"

"We're working together on a campaign."

"Yes, and that's a bullshit excuse and you know it. What's up, Brian? What did Freedy tell you that I didn't?"

Brian sighed, not yet ready for this, but seeing now that it was inevitable. "Do you know Ethan?"

Jeffrey looked surprised. "What are you talking about? Ethan who?"

Brian flung a CD at him, from the table by the sound system. "Violin boy."

"Ethan Gold? Yes, I've talked to him on the phone. We haven't met. I solicited him for Winterfest. We're always soliciting new talent and he had a little shine after his song got picked up in that score. In fact, I thought of him when I saw this CD over here. I meant to ask you about it. I bought one myself and was quite impressed."

"Don't jerk me off, Jeff. You know he's Justin's ex."

Jeffrey glanced to his left, as if to look out the windows of the loft at the night. Brian read somewhere that people cut their eyes to the left and downward then they lied. "Okay, I know." So much for that theory.

"How did you know?"

"Does it matter?"

"It does to me, yes."

"I asked some gay friends I have in Pittsburgh. It was something of a cause celebre when the mighty stud, Brian Kinney, was shot down by some pasty little geek. That's the way it looked to the gay boys, I guess. That you lost Justin to this Ethan guy."

"Why would anyone give a shit?"

"Because you broke a lot of hearts along the way, Brian. You were a selfish bastard, out for your own fun. Justin was your first-*quote*-relationship-close *quote*. People were fascinated by that. And by the fact he dumped you. For such a non-studly guy, at that."

"Why did you ask about him?" Brian was determined not to allow Jeffrey's taunting words to dive beneath his surface.

"I had to understand."

"Understand what, Jeff?"

"What went wrong with you two."

"Why?"

"To make sure we don't make the same mistakes."

Brian was quiet for a moment, and then he said, "I'd buy that if you and Ethan didn't plot against Justin and me."

"Please explain that, Brian."

"Did you or did you not plot with Ethan to ensure Justin and I were at the same restaurant at the same time?"



"You've lost me."

"Christ, Jeff! Why did you ever call Ethan in the first place?"

"Brian, I never bought the crap I heard that you got dumped for this clown. I know you. I see how you compare to him. I also know how you operate. Some mechanism in you, either because you were afraid of love, or because you felt unworthy of it, drove Justin to Ethan, probably out of a sense of doing the right thing for a person you loved. Because no way that you could ever be right for him, or for matter, for anyone. There was no plot. I asked him to perform at Winterfest because he is precisely the kind of artist we seek to balance the better known talents. Good for us, great for him. Was I wrong? You view that as some kind of a plot to get him back with Justin? It's certainly a slow moving one, wouldn't you say?"

"Did you discuss me when you invited him to perform?"

"Discuss you? No. Did I mention your name? Yes. He asked how I heard of him. I told him about the CD. So yes, he knows that I know you. He told me he thinks you're a raving asshole. I suggested he might be bitter. It was a short conversation."

"Long enough to discuss my dining choices."

"Excuse me?"

"Didn't you tell him that I was dining with Emmett and where?"

"Did I know you were dining with Emmett and where? And if I did, why would I mention it to Ethan?"

"Remember, I told you I was having sushi with Emmett to discuss his little 'intervention' with you? And who should show up at the same restaurant at the same time? Ethan and Justin."

"Yes, I think you did tell me that, Brian. But you never said WHERE you were having sushi."

"There's only one sushi place I ever go to in Pittsburgh."

"How would I know that?"

Brian paused. "Well... I guess you wouldn't, really. Are you sure I didn't tell you the name?"

"Baby, how often do you say to someone I'm having lunch with so and so at such and such unless the whole purpose is to brag about the restaurant? You never do. No one does. You just say, 'I'm having lunch with Emmett' or maybe, 'I'm having sushi with Emmett'. Why would you blame me for that set up?"

Brian sighed, confused, and yet strangely relieved by that confusion. "Ethan said you told him. He said you wanted me to see him with Justin. He told Justin that."

"Did he? Or did Justin tell you that?"

"Justin doesn't lie to me."

"No? About Ethan? Did he not lie to you about Ethan when he was seeing him? Before he left you?"

"Ethan himself told me he doesn't want Justin anymore."

"Of course he did. Why wouldn't he? If he's seeing Justin, it's cover. If not, it's to protect his huge ego."

"Then how did we end up in the same restaurant?"

"How big is gay town in Pittsburgh, Brian? Is it really so strange? And how much time passed before Justin told you that plot? Plenty of time to concoct it? To tell Ethan how to play it if you confronted him? I'm not saying he did, but it's certainly more logical than my plotting with some man I don't even know. Why are you staring at me like that?"

Brian shook his head. "Either you're telling the truth or you're one of the most diabolical liars I've ever known."

Jeffrey smiled slightly. "Dr. Demento? I don't think so, do you? You've seen the hours I work. When do I have time to come up with these elaborate plots and for what? If I have to go through all those machinations for your love, it's not worth it. I'm not that desperate."

"Then you're suggesting Justin is gaming me?"

"Let's not be cruel. Isn't it possible he got scared that you caught him and his ex together, and so he tried to deflect the blame? To make you feel secure that he had no ulterior motive? And he probably didn't, Brian. He probably was one hundred per cent innocent, but your negative reaction scared him. I'm sure it's just that. I'm sure he loves you, not Ethan. Probably some residual guilt with Ethan, some unfinished business."

Brian stood, paced to the windows, staring down at the blackness of pre-dawn. He felt chilled, confused. Jeffrey had tapped his greatest fears about Justin: his insecurity about the constancy of his love. He didn't remember telling Jeffrey the name of the restaurant, that was true. Jeffrey had asked can one get decent sushi in Pittsburgh, and Brian answered yes, there was one place, but he never said the name. Did Ethan plot with Justin? If so, what did it mean that they put their heads together to game Brian? Why would Justin do that if not because he still had feelings for Ethan? Brian shook his head.

No.

Fuck no.

This wasn't right.

He turned towards Jeffrey. "Freedy said he had to talk you into taking Hannah."

Jeffrey smiled. "Back to Friedrich, finally. Did he say that? Did he tell you why?"

"Uh..." Brian searched his memory. Did Freedy ever say why Jeffrey didn't want Hannah? "I think he implied you feared it would limit your lives to have a kid."

"You don't know my sister, Brian. She's a ditzy, overly emotional, slutty little brat. Spoiled rotten by my parents. I had a horrible fear of taking in her child because she needed a solution, becoming attached to the baby and then having my sister demand her return."

"But...he said your sister insisted only you adopt the baby, not you and Freedy."

"She did. She never liked Friedrich."

"He said you won't allow him to see Hannah now."

"I won't allow him to see her ALONE. I don't trust him. I fear I'll look up and he'll have spirited her away to Germany where his family is very prominent." "But you told me before that Freedy left because he didn't want a child in the house. He grew weary of her. He seems to adore her."

"Didn't we skip one big step in this inquiry, Brian? Why did you contact Friedrich in the first place?"

Brian sat down again, lighting another cigarette. "I had to meet him. I was hearing conflicting things about you, Jeff. I wanted his take on your relationship. I was beginning to fear I was being played. I don't like to be played."

"I see. Couldn't you just talk to me, instead of to a drug addled, mentally fragile former lover of mine?"

Brian shrugged. "I could have. But I wanted a frame of reference. And he seems very fit to me, very healthy."

"Naturally. He's a model. He has to look good. Inside, he's a mess. But you must have seen that."

"I saw a man who is very unhappy, yes."

"We make our own shit, for the most part."

"Was he lying to me about his love for Hannah, or were you?"

"Neither," Jeffrey said coolly. "He was telling you how he feels now, I was telling you how he felt then. People change, establish regrets, and rewrite history."

"He said he was the one who was close with Hannah, not you."

"Sure, that's why I adopted her. You've seen me with Hannah. Do you believe your own eyes? Do you think I have my two year old playing a part? She's precocious, but not THAT precocious."

Brian's stomach was hurting. He was feeling a little foolish, as well as a little relieved. He didn't want Jeffrey to be some diabolical monster. He didn't want to have been manipulated by him. And yet he was still chewed with doubt. "He said you like to take people out of relationships, its part of your game."

"What people would that be? He's my one longer-term serious relationship. And yes, he was in a relationship when we met. He made the decision to leave that relationship. I didn't make it for him. His friend committed suicide, so Friedrich was guilt ridden over it. It's no surprise to me he's blamed me rather than himself. How could he live with it if he took responsibility? If that makes it easier for him, fine. He has enough to bear."

"He said you addicted him to scrip drugs to control him."

"I told you he used me as his pharmacist. I finally had to stop it, which didn't sit well with him. I gave him prescriptions occasionally, but only to keep him from buying some dangerous, stepped on crap off the street. It had to end. Ending it was for his own good, as well as for my professional ethics. If nothing else, I hope this experience with Molly has shown you I am indeed a very ethical medicine man."

Brian nodded, having to give him that. He saw the respect the other doctors showed him. He was brilliant at what he did. But would that brilliance not extend to other areas of his life? Who could conceal better than a brilliant man? Brian still felt uneasy. "Jeff, are you gaming me? Do you want me at any cost?"

"Never," Jeffrey said softly, reaching over to squeeze his hand. "I want you joyfully. I want you without any doubt or regrets. I want you forever."

Brian sighed and leaned back, releasing his hand. "You met him at a tango place."

"True. Did you think I never danced the tango until I danced with you? Where did I learn it if so?"

"I wondered if it's a seduction tool with you."

"Brian, Brian, how can anyone so beautiful, accomplished and intelligent be so insecure about himself? You just amaze me with your insecurity. It would be almost charming if it weren't so crippling to you."

Brian stood, stretched, and shook his head. "I'm processing, Jeff. Give me a little time. I want to believe you're as good a friend as I think you are. But I'm shaky right now."

"Baby, the last thing I want to do is add to your problems and tension," he walked over to him, slipping his arms around his waist and holding him tightly. Despite his uncertainties, Brian felt safe in his embrace, relaxing against his body. "Take some time, you don't have to worry about me, even think about me. I'll be here. I'm going nowhere. I care about you, Brian. I want to be a positive force in your life. If I'm not that, even for reasons beyond my control or unfairly attributed to me, I would rather lose you than make you unhappy."

Brian turned and hugged him gently, resting his forehead against Jeffrey's. "I'm sorry if I've been unfair. I'm just so confused."

"Of course you are, Brian. You have much bigger things to worry about right now than you and me. I'll be here. No pressure. You go back to Pittsburgh and calm Justin down and reassure yourself about his feelings. He's the one you feel uneasy about, he's the one who created all these doubts in the first place, so that's what you need to work through, right?"

"Jeff, I think he may be remembering what happened at the prom."

"When he got hit in the head?"

"Before then. How it was with us."

"And why is that so important Brian? What does it change?"

"You had to be there. It was a watershed birthday for me. I felt over the hill, dead. I seriously toyed with suicide. But in the end, I went to his dance because he so wanted me to, and it was an epiphany for me. It was every high school and college event I missed because I was gay. It was what it felt like to be the one couple in a gathering of straight people who were truly in love. It was the first time in my life I risked making a fool of myself publicly because I loved the other person more than I cared about my own pride. And when he looked at me, just before he got hit, he said it was the best night of his life. And it was. Of mine too. And in one minute, it turned into the worst."

"Baby, I love the romance of that. It's one of the things I love best about you. Your sense of romance that you hide beneath that predatory exterior. If I thought Justin could make you as happy as you wish, I'd never interfere. But does he? You're so uneasy about him. Sometimes you just have to trust your instincts, no matter how hard that may be."

Brian sighed, and left his arms. "My instincts are so fucked up lately, I can't trust anything I'm feeling."

"Really? Wasn't it your instinct to believe the best about me even when I was being savaged by others?"

"I've seen how you are with Molly. I've watched you with Hannah. I know how you've acted with me. It's hard for me to throw all that aside because of what some people have said."

"I know, Brian, and I love you for that."

"Jeff, I do feel insecure about Justin, but I also love him. Instincts again. I don't believe he's with Ethan, or wants to be. Yeah, he lied to me about him. But if he were lying now, given what he's said, he'd be pathological, and Justin isn't like that. He lied before in a casual, omission kind of way. This would be blatant commission and he wouldn't do that. And when Ethan told me what he did, he was terrified. It didn't sound convenient. It sounded very bitter and very real. So I'm wondering if you're all you seem to be. I have to be honest with you. I want to believe it. I don't want to think I've been so naïve. You're the first man I've ever felt this way about, other than Justin. How stupid am I? And how shallow am I to be swayed by the superficial? I want to believe I'm wrong. I want to believe you're being straight with me. But I've known Justin longer, and I think I know him better than anyone, just as he knows me best. It's not in him."

"And is it in me, Brian?"

Brian looked into his dark eyes and sighed. He was so handsome, so intelligent, and so hot. He was such a great doctor, so empathetic with the children. How could he be false? How could his feelings for Jeffrey be so far off base? "I hope not."

Jeffrey walked over and kissed him gently on the lips. "You'll have to work this out for yourself. I adore you, Brian. I'm exactly what I appear to be. I've never betrayed you the way others have. I love and accept you exactly the way you are, making no demands that you become someone else's idea of a romantic ideal in order to be worthy of me. I want your body and I want your mind. I want to be your partner. I want us to raise our children together and to be the hot couple on the gay scene in the greatest city in the world. I want to open doors for you. I want to be your equal, not your twink. I make no demands on you, financially or emotionally. I just want to share your life. If I have an agenda, that's it. So sue me. I can wait for you to sift this out. I make no ultimatum. You're worth waiting for. Just do one thing for me."

"What's that?"

"When people attack me behind my back, ask yourself, what would Jeff say to that? I'm not there to defend myself, so think through my defense in my absence, would you? Can you do that for me?"

Brian nodded, his eyes closing as Jeff kissed him and walked to the door, where he paused. "I think you're the most beautiful man in the world, Brian Kinney. Inside and out. I love everything about you. Including your faults. I wouldn't change a thing."

Brian smiled slightly. "Nothing?"

"Okay, one thing. I'd have that blond blemish removed from your back."

"Don't do that, Jeff."

"Brutal honesty. He'll bring you down, again. He did it once; he'll do it again. He neither appreciates you for who you really are, nor understands why you're the way you are. He only wants you to fit some fantasy of his about true love. Bullshit. I hope he grows out of that crap for his own sake. But I don't want to see him take you down in the mean time, because baby... you can't take it again. He'll destroy you this time. And that's very scary. Be afraid, be very afraid."

He left and Brian sat down heavily, resting his head in his hands as he digested what Jeff had to say. He wished he could call Lydia, but knew it was too late, or too early, depending upon how one viewed the clock. He felt so apprehensive and confused. His conversation with Jeffrey hadn't gone at all as he anticipated. It seemed to resolve nothing; rather it made him even uneasy. He sighed and decided to take a shower and dress. There was no reason to try to sleep. He knew he would be unable to do so, and it was too close to the time his limo would arrive.



"Be afraid, be very afraid," Jeffrey had said. Nothing terrified Brian more than emotional vulnerability and he was replaying that in his mind as the warm water against his naked skin failed to rinse away his anxiety.

## DECONSTRUCTING BRIAN

Session 15

by Randall Morgan

Doctor's Notes: I left my brownstone to find a black limo and a handsome white man waiting for me. I still felt decidedly less like Cinderella than one might think. He handed me a steaming cup of cha, his peace offering. I had to laugh. I recorded our conversation on a portable recorder, with his permission.

Excerpt from Transcript:

Doctor: I wouldn't do this for just anyone, Brian. I must admit you intrigued me with your call. Psychiatry isn't normally practiced on the run from the back seat of a limo on the way to La Guardia.

(He closed the privacy screen between us and the driver.)

BK: I know. I really appreciate your riding out to the airport with me, Lydia. I know this adds an hour at least to your long day.

Doctor: At least. You said it was critical. And then you asked me what was my favorite movie. How do I juxtapose those two information bytes?

BK: My favorite movie is 'The Usual Suspects.' Have you seen it?

Doctor: Kevin Spacey, Gabriel Byrne. Yes, it's a fine little thriller.

BK: It's much more than that. I get something new out of it every time I watch it, which is often.

Doctor: I'm sure you didn't plead with me to see you in order to recommend a movie.

BK: (Smiled slightly.) Let me do this my way.

Doctor: Alright, Brian. Go on.

BK: At one point Verbal, the Spacey character, while discussing the arch villain, Kaiser Soze, says, 'The greatest trick the devil ever pulled is to convince the world he doesn't exist.'

Doctor: I vaguely remember that line. Why is it significant to you?

BK: Because it's so true.

Doctor: Go on, Brian.

BK: Evil, if identified as such, scares people off. People cross the street to avoid it. How can it impact your life if you never let it in?

Doctor: But I think we would both agree that evil exists, wouldn't we? Whether you call it the devil, or not.

BK: Of course. But the more pernicious and insidious it is, the more impact it can have. It doesn't have to force itself upon you, like a rape or a murder. You let it in, even welcome it.

Doctor: And then?

BK: Then it does the maximum amount of damage before you can find it out.

Doctor: What's happened, Brian?

BK: In that movie, Verbal seems like such an engaging harmless character. He talks a lot, but he's crippled and weak. He's the perfect sheep, not even the lead sheep, just a member of the flock. Then at the end, he's in the cop's office, being questioned. He has an answer for absolutely everything. He sounds scared and intimidated and hurt. He defends his friend, Keaton, from the cop's attack. He won't believe Keaton could be Kaiser, the villain. He interlaces the story with memories of his life: a barbershop quartet in Skokie, Illinois, picking coffee beans in Guatemala, a slick Californian drug dealer named Redman. It's all completely believable and convincing. The cop has to let him go, believing Verbal will be killed by the real Kaiser. Of course, coming over the fax in another room is a sketch of the real Kaiser, drawn by an actress who looks just like Melanie Marcus, by the way. Lindsay's lesbo spouse. The sketch is of Verbal. Verbal has taken little things in the room where the cop is questioning him, and built a story around them. The bulletin board is called 'Quartet' and was manufactured in Skokie. An ad for Guatemala, mentioning coffee, the name Redman on a list of names on the board.

Doctor: Yes, I remember how clever that was. And as he walked down the street, Spacey lost his affectation of a limp and other symbols of his character.

BK: But the cop never saw it until he stepped back and looked at everything together. You know when it dawned on me that Verbal was Kaiser, the first time I saw the movie?

Doctor: When?

BK: When he claimed his personal items from the guy manning the cage where they lock up the stuff when someone is arrested. He had a fancy solid gold watch and a solid gold lighter. I thought, a guy like Verbal wouldn't have that stuff. Leave it to me, to require a fashion accessory to figure out a mystery plot. (Chuckled.) Point is, I knew Verbal wouldn't have it, but Kaiser would.

Doctor: I didn't figure it out til the cop did, I must admit.

BK: On reviewing, I always watch to see if it holds up. If there's some little clue or misstep that doesn't fit with making Verbal into Kaiser. It's perfect. It hangs together nicely. It's a great little movie, in my opinion.

Doctor: I'll watch it again.

BK: You should.

Doctor: How does it meld with why I am here, Brian?

BK: Because last night, I realized I've been the dumb cop sitting on the edge of the desk, listening to the master criminal play me for a fool.

Doctor: Who is the master criminal, Brian?

BK: (Looked out window, paused.) I'd rather not say right now.

Doctor: What do you intend to do about it?

BK: I'm Irish. My grandfather always said, 'Don't get mad, get even.'

Doctor: How do you plan to do that?

BK: I'm not sure yet.

Doctor: Brian, I want to counsel you against acting precipitously. First of all, there's every chance your instincts are wrong. You're obviously upset.

BK: I'm upset, that's for sure, but I'm not having some massive anxiety attack, like before. I'm in control.

Doctor: Don't be so sure of that. The fact that you can breathe and function doesn't mean you're in control. I don't want to see you act out your anger until you know how to better manage it. Remember what happened with Ethan.

BK: Don't worry about that, Lydia. Revenge is a dish best served cold.

Doctor: Now you're talking about revenge? Revenge is a waste of time, Brian. Revenge ensures you're the loser.

BK: 'Revenge is sweet saith the Lord'. An eye for an eye...I can go on.

Doctor: It's 'Vengeance belongeth unto me, I will recompense, saith the Lord'. I think that means we mortals are not equipped to handle that wrath. I know you're not, Brian. Not in your present state of mind.

BK: (Coldly.) You can't control this one, Lydia.

Doctor: You wouldn't have been so desperate to see me if you felt you could control this on your own, Brian.

BK: Some things a man has to do for himself. I'll be fine. I have a plan. It's a careful plan, and one that doesn't require immediate action. In fact, immediate action would ruin the long term impact of it.

Doctor: Brian, is this about Jeffrey?

BK: Why immediately assume it's Jeff who gamed me?

Doctor: I'm not assuming, I'm asking.

BK: He's involved, certainly.

Doctor: Is he your Kaiser Soze?

BK: (Long, hard stare.) I'm not answering that one, Lydia.

Doctor: Why not?

BK: Because that would be telling.

Doctor: Is it Justin?

BK: Same answer.

Doctor: Now who's gaming, Brian?

BK: Why didn't you warn me?

Doctor: About?

BK: (Angrily.) Aren't you supposed to be looking out for me? Why didn't you tell me you saw the signs. Don't deny you saw them. Why didn't you warn me?

Doctor: I'm not sure what you mean, Brian. But I am sure that you're very capable of making a huge mistake in judgment in your present emotional condition. And if I thought you were talking a physical vengeance, I would have to warn the person, and alert the law.

BK: Physical is too easy, too transitory. No, this has to hit him where he lives. It has to last. No one uses Brian Kinney. No one.

Doctor: Brian Kinney uses Brian Kinney. You're mad at yourself right now, Brian. You fucked up, or so you believe. You misread a situation or a motive or a person. You let yourself be used and now you're embarrassed and humiliated. You're beating yourself up. What you have to understand is that even the smartest and most canny person can be manipulated. Some people are masters at it, and the rest of us aren't equipped to deflect that kind of voodoo. There's no shame in that. There's no harm in believing the best about someone. It makes you a vulnerable and loving human being, not an idiot. Don't beat yourself up over it and don't tell yourself you have to get some kind of comic book revenge in order to save face.

BK: I can't do that, Lydia. I can't turn the other cheek. Not this time.

Doctor: That's because we haven't gone far enough in your therapy for you to find the inner strength to do so.

BK: Whatever the reason, it won't go down that way. But don't worry about it, Lydia. I'm not going to beat someone up. That's why God gave faggots an evil sense of humor. We know how to make people squirm without saying anything directly insulting.

Doctor: And then what, Brian? What will you be left with after this revenge?

BK: If I'm real lucky, my dignity. It seems to have gone missing along with my instincts.

Doctor: I predict a hollow victory that will leave you feeling as bad as your victim. Why? Because you're not the Brian Kinney you were when we started this therapy. You may not be the Brian Kinney you want to be, or can be, but you've left that other incarnation in the dust. You can't do this kind of thing without residual pain now, Brian. Is it worth it?

BK(Long pause): I think so.

Doctor: Why do you think so?

BK: Because someone has to do it, and it may as well be me.

Doctor: Double fallacy.

BK: (Angrily.) What would you have me do? Act like nothing happened? Let him think he won, that he played me like a violin?

Doctor: As long as you know he didn't win, what does it matter what he thinks?

BK: Are you really that forgiving or is this some kind of shrink speak?

Doctor: It's not about me, Brian. It's about you. You're obviously quietly furious. You feel cheated and victimized. How is this a good time to make any big decisions?

BK: I don't know that it is, but I do know I have to do what I have to do.

Doctor: Absolute nonsense. Of course you don't. We're a civilized species, for the most part. Civilization imposes rules on our behavior.

BK: Relax Lydia. I'm not burning someone's house down.

Doctor: Again, this isn't about your victim. This is about you, and how your actions will affect you.

BK: Isn't it possible that it will make me happy and relieved and proud of myself again?

Doctor: Possible? Yes. Likely? No.

BK: I've always been big on playing the odds. I'll take that chance.

Doctor: Brian, it's not like you to deliberately hold something back. Why do you feel you can't tell me?

BK: I don't want to debate it. I don't want to hear all the reasons I could be wrong about this...about him.

Doctor: If you're so sure you're right, why do you fear a debate? Clearly, you have some fear that you're wrong. You don't want to entertain a contrary opinion. What does that say to you?

BK: No. I'm not wrong.

Doctor: What happened last night?



BK: Jeffrey stopped by.

Doctor: Ah.

BK: Woke me up.

Doctor: That's too bad. You need your sleep. What did he have to say? Was he angry about Friedrich?

BK: Jeff doesn't really get angry. He was curious about my meeting with him, yes.

Doctor: How do you suppose he found out?

BK: (Paused.) Interesting. Haven't thought of that. I presume Freedy told him.

Doctor: Why would he?

BK: I don't know. It may have just happened. You talk to someone, it slips out.

Doctor: So they're still in contact?

BK: (Frustrated.) How the fuck do I know?

Doctor: Something Jeffrey said set this revenge of yours in motion?

BK: Not directly.

Doctor: Indirectly?

BK: Let's just say the conversation stimulated my little gray cells.

Doctor: I see. Care to elaborate?

BK: No, not really.

Doctor: Do you think this is a good time to go to Pittsburgh? When you're so angry?

BK: I have no choice.

Doctor: Of course you do.

BK: Not really. Justin asked me to come, and he doesn't do that lightly. This recovered memory is weighing heavily on him.

Doctor: You're not equipped to handle that crisis, Brian. He needs a professional to help him navigate those memories.

BK: I told him that.

Doctor: Stick to your guns on that point. He needs the help.

BK: (Long pause.) He needs something.

Doctor: Explain that remark.

BK: (Shakes head.) No.

Doctor: Brian, when do you plan on unveiling this revenge you're plotting?

BK:(Met my stare coldly.) When the moment is right and not before.

Doctor: And in the mean time?

BK: I'll act as though nothing is wrong. Business as usual.

Doctor: You really think you can do that?

BK: I know I can. I have to.

Doctor: Promise me we'll talk again before you do anything along those lines.

BK: I can't do that, Lydia. The chances are good we will, but I can't promise anything.

Doctor's Note: (The limo pulled up to the curb at the terminal and BK grabbed a leather valise and opened the door of the car. He glanced over his shoulder at me.)

BK: The driver is fully paid and will take you wherever you want to go.

Doctor: Brian, please think about this very carefully, and let's talk again. Call me anytime. When will you be back?

BK: Not sure. I'll work out of our Pittsburgh offices while I'm there. We'll talk, Lydia, we always do. But don't look so tragic. I'm fine.

Doctor: It's your belief that you're fine that scares me the most, Brian. You're far from fine.

BK: (Smiled.) Adios, Lydia.

End of excerpt.

Doctor's Notes: I am extremely concerned about BK's veneer of calm over what appears to be a significant emotional event. While he won't say what prompted a revelation that he is being used, it's tied to a visit from Jeffrey. I can't be certain if it's Jeffrey he is angry at, or if Jeffrey caused BK to reach an epiphany about JT, or even someone else. BK believes he is being gamed and expressed his intent to take a non-physical revenge for that abuse. This concerns me on two fronts. First, I believe he is too emotionally raw to be able to appropriately analyze a situation in order to determine whether he is being used and by whom. Second, he does not yet have his anger and pain management tools developed to the point where he knows how to cope with a powerful emotional confrontation. Witness his violent exchange with Ethan. I take some comfort in the fact he is not planning an immediate campaign, but the storm of emotions brewing under his deliberately cool façade are dangerous to himself and will not be easily controlled. I would prefer that he not be out of town when they erupt. I will follow up with a call to him tomorrow to check his emotional status. This is a turning point for BK, and my fear is that he is not ready to manage it, which could create an irrevocable setback.

## BETWEEN THE SESSIONS

(after session 15)

by Randall Morgan

"Brian, let go of me! I can't breathe!" Justin tried to squirm out of Brian's arms, but it was impossible. Brian held him in an anaconda- like grip, crushed against his body. When Brian reluctantly let him go, Justin giggled as he rubbed his ribs. "Were you trying to kill me or did you just miss me?"

Brian looked a little sheepish. "That was just my way of saying hello."

Justin winced. "Next time, I'll settle for 'hi'."

They were in Debbie's living room, with Vic in the kitchen, pretending not to hear. "Don't make me spank your ass," Brian threatened, holding his hand a few inches from Justin's rump.

"Don't even think about touching my ass," Justin warned, his bruises still vivid across the surface of his lower back and midway down his buttocks.

"Exactly what do you mean by that threat?" Brian insisted, slipping his hand under the waistband of Justin's jeans, flattening it on his rounded butt with gentle delicacy.

"What I mean," Justin said, sliding his arms around Brian's neck, "is that it's your ass that's gonna get a workout, not mine."

Brian laughed. "You think you're man enough to top me?"

"I've proven I'm man enough to top you, Brian Kinney."

Brian nodded, leaning down to kiss him. "Yeah, I guess you have." They kissed, separating when Vic came into the room.

"Sorry to interrupt this touching reunion, boys," he said, engaging in a handshake with Brian, their ritual form of greeting. "But I need to talk to you a second, Brian, before you two move into the rocket launching stage."

"I'll go get my bag from upstairs," Justin said, and Vic watched Brian watch Justin climb the stairs, wondering what emotion caused the serious expression to cross his face.

"What's up, Vic?" Brian turned his attention back to Vic as Justin disappeared from view.

"It's about Mikey."

"What about Mikey?"

"You two have been best friends for too long for this to go on, Brian. He's miserable about it. And you can't afford to lose his friendship, either."

Brian looked cautious. "What are you talking about?"

"Ever since he went with Emmett to visit your friend Jeffrey, you haven't spoken to him. You've spoken to Em, but not to Mikey. What's going on?"

Brian sighed. "I've been busy."

"Bullshit."

"Ok, I'll call him while I'm in town. Will that make you happy?"

"It's not about making me happy, Brian. It's about an old friendship that is pretty fucking important to both of you."

Brian nodded, looking up as Justin re-entered the room, carrying his duffel bag. "I get it, Vic."

"You know, it might have been a dumb thing to do, but he did it out of love."

"I know."

"Did what? Who?" Justin asked, and Brian covered Justin's face with his palm.

"No one and nothing, Sunshine. Let's go."

"Tell Deb thanks again and I'll call her," Justin said, giving Vic a little hug. Vic nodded, staring gravely at Brian who looked away from his gaze. In Brian's leased Navigator, Justin glanced at his lover's profile.

"Don't freak. I met Ethan for a cup of coffee at the diner. I just want you to hear it from me. I called him and insisted upon it. I made him meet me in a place where there can be no doubt we were not trying to be secretive."

"Why did you meet?" Brian asked tensely, cutting a glare in his direction.

"Because I wanted him to understand how I feel. When I last saw him, and he told me all that shit about how he didn't care, and how he set me up, and the rest of it, I was furious. But when I thought about it, I realized a lot of that attitude came from the fact I damaged his ego when I left him. Ethan's ego is huge."

"I've noticed," Brian's lips were drawn thin, flattened into a scowl.

"I know he never really loved me, not the way I thought, but he did want me and he was rocked when I left him to move to New York to be with you. We never had a chance to talk about what happened and why."

"And that would be necessary because...?"

"Closure. I explained to him my theory about love."

"This should be interesting. Love, as explained by a blond twink," Brian said cynically.

"If you're going to be insulting, forget it," Justin was hurt by his taunt.

"No, no, I'm fascinated to have this glimpse into what you boys talk about together," Brian remained visibly cool, despite his inner turmoil.

"We don't do anything 'together', Brian. Not anymore. This was a one time meeting, at my request. I told Ethan that I believe, if you're really lucky, you meet only one person in your life who is truly your soulmate. If you're even luckier, that person feels the same way, and is free to be with you. I met my soulmate early in my life. I was so young that no one could believe it that I knew my heart well enough to recognize him. Not even my soulmate believed it could happen. You're my soulmate, and I've known that since I met you. Unfortunately, that meeting doesn't guarantee success. We went through hell. But I never stopped loving you, Brian, not even when I was with Ethan."

"You told him that?"

"Yes."

"And he said?"

"He wasn't surprised. He called it my 'death wish'."

"Nice."

"Anyway, I told him I was wrong to run to him when I was still so in love with you, and I was sorry for it. I was also sorry for hurting him when I left. But as bad as I feel about it, I can't turn away from you. You'll have to do something really, really bad to drive me away again."

Brian sighed. "What was the upshot of this meeting?"

"Ethan warned me that you would break my heart, again. That I was a fool."

"What did you say to that?"

"I said that was always a possibility, but I've seen the good in you, and I have to believe we have a future together, as much as you resist it."

"Resist it, hell! How am I resisting it?"

"Jeffrey."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean Jeffrey is a roadblock you put between your commitment to me and your precious freedom."

"Is that how you see it?"



"Yes."

Brian swerved off the road, parking the car on the shoulder with such suddenness that Justin's stomach flipped. "Let me tell you something about that, Sunshine. My fear of commitment to you has fuck all to do with Jeff and everything to do with you. You hurt me in a way I didn't think I was capable of being hurt. I tried to maintain both my individuality, and my sense of self, as well as my relationship with you and I failed miserably. I ended up losing both. I couldn't read your signals. When you first got out of the hospital, I tried to be romantic. I treated you gently. I didn't press the sexual issue. I backed off when Jennifer asked me to, and came back when she requested that change. I tried to spur your memory, even though it was intensely painful for me. You laughed at me when I tried to recreate that fucking dance. You mocked the whole thing. You looked at me like I was a perv for telling you we kissed in front of your classmates. Right then, I thought, 'Whoa, Brian. Whoa. The little dream is over.'"

"Brian, I..."

"Shut up. Listen."

Justin sighed, nodded, staring at his lover with a pained expression as Brian continued. "I thought, 'He's young, he needs other experiences. Don't stand in his way. It's too soon for him to feel what you feel.' You made up these little rules, and I lived by them, as silly as they seemed to me. You didn't. That was another blow. But we had some fun, some good sex, with and without tricks. And then you had this epiphany that you failed to share with me. The rules you established were false, not what you wanted. The man you were living with was harsh and unromantic. He didn't tell you what you wanted to hear. He didn't treat you the way you wanted to be treated. You began seeing someone else and lying to him about it. What little trust I had left vanished. Do you know what that did to me, Justin? Do you know how foolish I felt? I broke every rule I lived my life by, just for you, and it wasn't nearly enough. I could never be enough for you. I had no idea how to play it. I thought I was romantic, in the beginning, and you mocked me. Then I was cool again, and it wasn't enough. You played me every which way but loose."

Justin shook his head. "How long do I have to apologize for this? I never meant to mock you. Shit, I never had a clue where I stood with you. I felt you wanted me, but you also wanted everything to be the same for you. All the tricks, all the freedom. I could live with you, but you weren't changing anything. In the beginning, I was still pretty shattered, Brian. I was anxious, and Dr. Brenner says even now I'm suffering the aftereffects of post traumatic stress disorder."

"Who is Dr. Brenner?"

"The shrink I'm seeing here."

"Since when?"

"Since I couldn't continue with the guy in New York."

"And you never told me?"

Justin shrugged. "No. Don't you want me to see someone? Get into regression therapy?"

"It's not about what I want," Brian parroted Lydia. "Is it helping?"

"Is Lydia helping you?"

"I don't know. Sometimes I wonder."

"I feel the same way."

Silence, then Brian smiled. "We are so fucked up. Both seeing shrinks. Christ, how cliché."

"Brian, all that matters is that you know that I love you. Watching you with Molly, feeling your support, seeing how much more in tune you are with your feelings, I can say, yes, Lydia is helping you, and by extension, she's helping us. You aren't even tricking."

Brian winced. "I tried, but it was no fun. Doesn't mean I won't ever trick again."

"I know, I know, you never close any doors. But this Jeffrey thing..."

"I don't want to talk about Jeff. Are you planning on seeing Ethan again?"

"Not by design. I may bump into him somewhere, but we have no plans to meet. We've said it all, found peace. I hope. You can worry about this or that, Brian, but don't worry about Ethan. It's over."

"How many times did you tell Ethan it's over with me?" Brian asked pointedly.

Justin sighed, looked away. Just then, a rap on the glass diverted Brian's attention. Another of Pittsburgh's finest was calling. Brian lowered the electronic window and glared at the cop.

"Is there a problem, sir?" The policeman inquired.

"Nothing we can't handle, officer."

"Mechanical problem with the car?"

"No. I just pulled over to have a conversation."

"Is this your car?"

"For the week," Brian's patience was wearing thin. He was asked to produce his license and the rental agreement, which he did. The policeman returned them and focused on Justin.

"How old are you?"

"Oh for chrissakes," Brian exploded. "He's twenty! He's my lover! It's by consent! What is your problem?"

"Brian," Justin placed a hand on his arm and flashed a megawatt smile at the cop. "Everything is fine, officer. We were having an emotional conversation about a sick friend. He pulled over for a moment. Isn't that the responsible thing to do?"

"The responsible thing to do is to pull off the road completely. The shoulder is for emergencies. Move along, Mr. Kinney."

"Jawohl," Brian responded bitterly and merged into traffic. "It will be nice when you finally look older than 13, so I'm not viewed as a perv every time we're out together."

Justin laughed. "And I don't get carded everywhere I go! Where are we going? I thought we were going to your hotel. You missed the turn."

"We're going to the hospital. I want to see Molly."

"They won't let you, Brian. Tomorrow will be my first trip into her room in isolation. They have started the marrow induction. She's at high risk."

"I didn't say I was going into her room. I said I want to see her. I can watch her through the glass in her door."

Justin said nothing, tabling their discussion for another time. He was looking forward to having sex with Brian, and as much as he loved Molly, he wished this trip was being postponed.

At the hospital, Jennifer, looking worn, was sitting with Brian's mother. Greetings were exchanged and Jennifer smiled. "Go up to the glass and let her see you're here, Brian. She asks about you everyday. I wish you could go in, but..."

"Not a problem. I'd never compromise her health."

"Warning, she's quite frail. The conditioning was brutal, and now the anti-rejection drugs are adding to the onslaught."

He nodded and walked with Jennifer to the nurses' station. Even though the patient rooms were sealed, he had to don a mask and gown to enter even the common area. He walked up to the door and peered in through the glass panel in the door to Molly's room, trying not to flash back to the many nights when he watched Justin through a panel in the door, observing his restless sleep.

Despite the warnings he had been given, Brian was shocked by how frail she appeared. Her arms were like sticks against stark white sheets and her skin seemed as thin as parchment. Heavy looking machines monitored her vital signs, and pumped her full of medications. He felt sick, but forced aside that feeling and tapped lightly on the glass. Her eyes fluttered open and she turned her head slightly towards the door with what seemed a great effort. He scrubbed his fingers through his hair as if to identify himself and stuck his tongue into the mask and flattened it to the glass. Slowly, a smile lit her wan features and she raised one hand slightly to wiggle her fingers at him. He waved back. She motioned him in, and he shook his head and shrugged, meaning "I want to, but I can't."

She traced the outline of her heart and pointed at him. She followed that gesture with a kiss that she blew in his direction. He mimicked her gestures. She smiled again and closed her eyes, exhausted by even that much effort. Brian stood there, watching, then finally turned and left the protective clothing in a bin at the desk. He took a deep breath to steel himself. He didn't want to alarm either Justin or Jennifer with a display of emotion. He needn't have worried. Only his mother waited there.

"Where are they?" He asked and Joan Kinney smiled.

"I told them to go outside and get some air. Jennifer needs a break. Are you alright, Brian? You look pale."

He nodded and sat beside her on the love seat, staring at his clasped hands. His vision seemed to blur suddenly and only when a crystal drop hit his hand did he realize why. His mother stretched one arm across his shoulders and sighed.

"I know, son. It's so difficult to watch a child suffer."

"She doesn't deserve this," he said in a whisper, wiping his eyes on the back of his hand, forcing control.

"Of course she doesn't."

"Where is your God now, Mom? Why is He letting this happen?"

"It's not God, Brian. It's all part of life."

He leaned back, closing his eyes, feeling her hand cover his. He was strangely comforted by her presence. He reached into his pocket and removed his mobile, speed dialing a number and waiting for his party to come onto the line. Finally, he heard Jeffrey's voice.

"Brian! Miss me already?"

Brian was quiet, then he said, "She's dying."

"Molly?"

"Of course Molly! Who else?"

"Why do you say that, Brian? I get reports on her progress. This is a critical time, yes, but I think you're overreacting."

"You haven't seen her!" He said angrily, lowering his voice when his mother touched his arm. "You don't know how bad she looks."

"I do know. I see this every day. I told all of you this was a crisis time. She is at grave risk of life threatening infection from rejection of the graft. She has no immunities to fall back on. So yes, her life hangs in the balance every day for the immediate future. But the longer she goes without showing signs of infection, the more hopeful we can be."

"Your ass should be here in Pittsburgh supervising her treatment, Jeff!"

"Why would I do that, Brian?" He asked coolly, and Brian frowned.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I have patients here who need me too. Molly has a treatment team."

"Jeff, you know when you were here, you did some things they hadn't thought of, and she improved. I know Jennifer would feel better if you were supervising. She has confidence in you. Can't you just come and see if everything is being done correctly and if she needs something else to be done?"

"Brian, I have a huge practice. It's an incredible inconvenience for me to be there. I would do it, anyway, but only for you. That is, if I had any idea of where we stand."

Brian paused, stared past his mother and out the window. Joan Kinney watched his fury roll across his face like a summer storm, familiar with that dark emotion in her late husband's face. "What are you saying?" Brian asked, in a voice that didn't betray his anger.

"I'm asking a simple question, Brian. Where do we stand?"

"And does my answer to that question affect whether you come here to care for Molly or not?"

"I can't say it wouldn't influence me."

"Why would you want anyone on those terms, Jeff?" He watched as Justin and Jennifer returned and went into the isolation area to don protective gear.

"I wouldn't. Not if I didn't believe you need a shove in the right direction. Once you land in the right place, you'll see that's where you belong."

Brian closed his eyes, running his fingers through his hair in a nervous gesture. Just then, Justin came out of isolation, in tears.

"She's throwing up blood!" he said miserably, and Brian pulled him into his arms, holding him gently as he said to Jeffrey, "Get on a plane."

"I consider you a man of your word, Brian. Am I wrong to do so?"

"No."

"Then I'll see you this evening."

Brian hung up, stroking his hands up and down Justin's back. "Jeff is on his way."

"Good," Justin said miserably, his desperation over his sister's condition trumping his distrust of the doctor's intentions towards Brian. "I'm so scared," Justin whispered against Brian's shoulder, and Brian soothed him wordlessly, meeting his mother's worried gaze and then looking away, unable to give her comfort that he was doing the right thing.

Molly's condition stabilized slightly and Jennifer insisted Justin and Brian get something to eat and take a break. They checked in at Brian's hotel. Once in the room, Justin began to remove his clothes as Brian watched.

"What are you doing?" Brian asked and he shrugged.

"Getting naked."

"Why?"

"So we can... you know."

Brian sighed and laid back on the bed, still fully clothed. "I'm not really in the mood."

"I'll get you in the mood. I want to feel alive right now, Brian. It's not disrespectful to Molly to celebrate being alive."

"Justin, nothing is more important to you right now than Molly's recovery, right?"

"Of course. Why?"



"I cut a deal with Jeff. If he comes here and sees her through this crisis, I'll go with him."

Justin paused, still wearing his underwear as he sat beside Brian on the bed. "What does 'go with him' mean?"

"Exactly what you think it means. It doesn't mean I don't love you. I do. More than ever. More than anything. But I couldn't live with myself if..."

"Stop," Justin interrupted. "Do you want to go with Jeffrey and this is just your way of wrapping it up in a pretty package for me?"

Brian met his eyes. His lips drew into a thin line as he shook his head. "The thought of it makes me ill."

"Then don't be such a martyred dick, Brian. You can't cut a deal for love. Either you love someone or you don't. And if Jeffrey thinks he can use my kid sister's health as the wedge to drive between us, he's nuts."

"Justin, think about it. It's her life. He may not be a miracle worker, but he's brilliant and we can't just blow off the chance he could make a difference for her."

"What is it he wants? A night? A month? A lifetime?"

"I don't know, but whatever it is, I'll give it to him."

"Hello? You can't barter for her life, Brian. He's not the devil. He can't take your soul in exchange for her cure."

Brian sighed. "I'm not so sure about that, baby." Justin began dressing again. "What are you doing?"

"I'm not letting this happen."

"Justin, don't. Let me handle this my own way."

"Are you wack? You've fucked it up so far! No, Brian, let me handle it MY way!"

Brian came over to him and held him in his arms. "We can't risk it. Not now."

"I'm not giving him one fucking night with you, Brian. Not one!"

"You don't have a choice."

"The fuck I don't!"

"It won't take him long to realize he doesn't want me on these terms, Justin. I'll see to that, subtly. You'll have to be patient."

"Patient? While you...what? Fuck him? Live with him? What?"

"I don't know. But I do know one thing. Molly has to live. She has to be given every chance and the rest of this is bullshit."

"You and me? We're bullshit, Brian? Because that's what you're giving up."

He sighed. "Only temporarily."

"Well, that's too long."

"In the end, we'll be together."

"When we're seventy? No. We'll be together NOW, Brian. God, you are so fucked up! He has so totally mind fucked you! Snap out of it."

"Justin, I'm not as fucked up as you think," Brian pulled him up against him. "I have a plan. Can you trust me on this? Can you be patient? Can you PLEASE let me handle it my way? You're a tough kid, but with people like Jeffrey, you can't presume the usual techniques work. I know that now. But I have a plan, and it requires you to wait. Can you do that?"

"Why did you let him into our lives, Brian?"

"Because this is the price we pay to fate in order for him to save your sister's life. It's a favorable trade. Sit down, calm down. We can get through this."

Justin pulled free of him and walked over to the door. "Brian, this is insane. Don't you see that? Insane. People don't act this way. He would have to be some kind of monster to bargain my sister's life for a man who loves another."

"I know," Brian said quietly. "What's your point?"

"My point is, I'm not playing this game. I don't believe he would refuse to treat Molly if he didn't get his way. No one is that cold. I think this is some kind of sick excuse and you want to go with him. Maybe you can't even admit it to yourself, but it's what you want, deep down."

"No way. Absolutely not."

"Then don't do it, Brian. Don't ruin it."

Brian said nothing as Justin left the room, and closed the door behind him. He laid back, staring at the ceiling, battling doubts about whether his plan for revenge had just hit an immutable road bump.

## BETWEEN THE SESSIONS

(after session 15, part II)

by Randall Morgan

"Push me," Brian said to Michael, who laughed.

"I'll push you off a cliff, asshole," Michael responded. They were sitting in soft-seated swings in a deserted playground near Ben's apartment. Their make-up had been swift. They were never able to nurse a grudge against each other. Brian's long, lanky physique dwarfed the swing, and he leisurely walked his feet back and forth in the soft earth to give himself some motion.

"Come on, Mikey. Push me."

"Do you know how ridiculous you look in that swing?"

"We can't all be the size of a munchkin. My body's more suited to slings than swings," Brian quipped.

"Yeah, and you've been PUSHED in a few of those, that's for damn sure. And I'm not a munchkin. I'm an average size. You're a geek."

Brian smirked at him. "Right."

"Why do I always feel like a perv when I'm near a playground? I always think some mom is staring at me to gauge whether I'm a child molester."

"Because you ARE a perv, Mikey."

"Not that kind of perv," he argued, getting up and standing behind Brian, flattening his hands on his broad shoulder blades and giving him a shove. Brian cooperated, pumping his long legs as soon as he got clearance. Michael pushed harder, connecting with the edge of the seat of the swing and shoving his friend higher into the air. He stepped back, straddling the swing beside Brian's, watching him soar through the air, leaning back, hair blowing, and legs doing the work to keep him aloft. Christ, he was beautiful.

Michael sighed. He hadn't known Brian when they were little boys. They missed sharing the playground stage of childhood. It all went by so quickly. Maybe if he knew Brian then, he could have avoided a few bloody noses administered by boys who called him a sissy. Brian would have protected him. No one would dare call Brian Kinney a sissy. Not and live to tell about it.

They were adolescents by the time Brian was placed in public schools, and already he was tall and handsome and cool. Michael learned the cool factor was largely façade, but it was a good façade, and it held up with almost everyone. Almost, but not quite. Michael knew his secrets. Well, some of them. He was pretty sure even Lydia didn't know all the darkness that made Brian who he was. Michael certainly knew him well enough to know that something was eating him alive tonight.

He waited for Brian to tire of the soaring and come back to earth. When he finally did so, he sat there, slumped in the swing, staring down at the ground. Finally, he spoke. "Do you think I'm a bad person, Mikey?"

"No, not fundamentally."

Brian laughed. "That's a ringing endorsement from my best friend."

"You can be an asshole, arrogant, selfish, vain. But you have a good heart, and you care. Is that fair?"

Brian nodded. "Fair enough."

"Is this about Justin?"

Brian cut him a glare. "Can you ever say his name without sounding like you have a stink up your nose?"

"I do have a stink up my nose."

"Why? Because your mom loves him more than she loves you?" Brian teased and Michael frowned.

"Very funny. Because you love him more than you love me. And because he hurt you."

"Not more. Differently. I love him differently than the way I love you."

"Big difference."

"Yeah, I know. And what happened between Justin and me is our business, not yours. You don't have all the facts. You couldn't put up with me as my lover, Mikey. I'm not sure he can, frankly."

"What have you done now?"

"It's not what I've done. It's what I'm going to do."

"Jesus, Brian, why do you have to kick your own ass? Why can't you ever allow yourself to be happy?"

"This isn't about me. It's about Molly."

"What about Molly?"

"She's dying."

"You don't know that."

"I do know that, Mikey," he met his gaze in the last glow of twilight. "I saw it in her eyes. She knows it too."

"What about that bone marrow thing? What was the point of all that?"

"It's not a cure-all. You have to survive the procedure and not everyone does. She's so weak."

"I hope you're wrong, Brian, but even if you're not, what can you do about it?"

"I can make Jeffrey come to Pittsburgh to monitor her treatment and provide comfort to Jennifer and Molly."

Michael frowned. Jeffrey. Dr. Jekyll, or was it Mr. Hyde? He couldn't stand that slick prick. He didn't understand what voodoo Jeffrey could bring to the table that the other doctors lacked. Nothing, was his guess. It was all smoke and mirrors. "He's not a miracle worker, Brian."

"Do you know how important a positive state of mind is with a critically ill patient? Molly likes him. If he's here, she can only feel better about things, and so will her mom. Even if it's not enough, even if we lose her anyway, I could never live with the nagging doubt that if I had been able to coerce Jeff to come to Pittsburgh, she may have had a chance."

"Ok, so he comes to Pittsburgh. So what? You can pay his fucking way."

"It's not about money."

"What's it about?"

"It's about control."

Michael scrunched up his nose in his confused expression. "Huh?"

"Jeff wants to control our relationship. He wants me. He intends to have me. He wants to be sure of it."

"Fuck him! You don't want him, do you?"

"Not anymore. I hate him, Mikey, and I don't hate many people."

Michael sighed, relieved. "Thank god you finally get it. He was using you."

"It's not what he did to me, although yes, he made a fool out of me. He manipulated me, fucked with my mind. But that's not the problem. The problem is what he's doing to Molly."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean he's very subtly bargaining the degree in which he is willing to get involved in her treatment with the degree in which he can control me."

"That has to be illegal or unethical or something!"

"I'm not debating that issue. I don't care if it is. She'd be dead by the time any complaint saw justice. That's a pyrrhic victory."

Michael stood up and walked over to his friend, standing in front of him, both hands on his shoulders. Brian looked up, resting his own hands on Michael's waist. A casual passerby might mistake them for lovers, perhaps preparing for a session of oral sex, but what they shared was far more intimate than that. "What are you thinking of doing, Brian? I don't like the way this sounds."

"I have to go with him. I have to be his lover, at least for awhile. Until Molly passes this crisis. One way or the other. What else can I do?"

"Why the fuck would he even WANT that? How sad is that? He's gorgeous, rich, an egomaniac... what the fuck?"

"Because he believes it's what I really want, too. That if we start up, I'll want to stay. He is an egomaniac, Mikey, but more than that, he's a gamesman, and this is one big fucking game to him. He has to win. Even if it's not forever, he has to win. He has to beat Justin out, he has to cause me to submit. If I leave later, so be it."

"No one is that psychotic."

"He is."



"Then why do you want him treating Molly?"

"Because he's a psychotic with a special genius and she has a team of doctors who would know if he went south on us."

"So, you'll pimp yourself out to him, like some rent boy? At a cost of losing the one man you do love, the person you FINALLY got back in your life?"

Brian sighed and rested his forehead against Michael's stomach. "What else can I do? I hope Justin will be patient and wait it out. But if Molly survives, which I pray she will, it could be months before we know for sure. How patient can he be? I can't expect that. Even if he knows why I'm doing it, so what? It's torture."

Michael stroked his fingers through his hair. "And you can fuck Jeffrey and sleep in the bed with him and suck his cock as if nothing is wrong?"

"I don't know, Mikey. I just don't know. There was a time not long ago when I couldn't get enough of Jeff. Maybe in time I can recapture that feeling. Enough to get through this. Because when I do get through it, I will fuck him up so bad, he won't know what hit him."

Michael smiled, lifting Brian's chin on his fingertips. "You'll still be the loser, Brian. You'll not only have lost Justin, but you'll have lost something much more valuable. Yourself. Hostage love is not something Brian Kinney could survive."

"This hostage love is something Brian Kinney has to survive, because Brian Kinney doesn't have a choice." He tightened his arms around Michael, squeezing hard and then let him go as he stood up. "I have to go. I have to pick him up at the airport."

"How can you not just punch him out on sight, Brian?"

"I don't know," Brian said softly. "I guess I'll just have to remember how Molly looked at me, that resignation in her eyes. That's my mantra to get through this."

"And Justin's mantra?"

"I don't know the answer to that, Mikey. Justin will have to find his own mantra, whether it's to leave me, or to wait. I can't impose anything on him, now can I?"

"Brian, why do you care so much about Molly? I mean beyond the human factor we all feel. She's not your child, your sister. Why have you fallen so hard for her?"

Brian sighed, smoothing his windblown hair with both hands. "I've thought about that. I've even discussed it with Lydia. But there's no pat answer, Justin. I can't say its because I'm reminded of Justin's bashing, or because she's his sister, or because I think about how I would feel if it were Gus. It's all of that. And more. Maybe it's just because she's sick and she's vulnerable, and she loves me. For whatever reason, she fell for me and I fell for her. I want to see her grow up and marry a nice guy and even if this illness means she can never have kids, I want her to adopt and be a good mom. Or maybe run a corporation, I don't care. I want to see her as a woman, happy and well. Does that make any sense at all? I want her to have a chance at life."

Michael hugged him for a long moment. He broke it off with a soft kiss. "I love you, Brian Kinney."

"You too, always have, always will." He waved goodbye and walked to his car. Michael watched him go, then activated his mobile and called in the Marines.

Brian waited on the other side of security at the airport. When he first saw Jeffrey, he was shocked by the wave of anger that swept over him. He wanted to pound the handsome man in the bomber jacket and soft suede pants. He wanted to grind his designer glasses under his heel and push his elegant face into the plate glass doors behind them. He inhaled sharply, waiting for that reaction to pass.

Jeffrey smiled as if they were already living together in bliss and had been sweating out a brief separation. "Hi, baby," he reached for him, but Brian leaned away from his kiss. Jeffrey laughed. "Shy?"

"Let's get something straight. I'm not your boy. I'm not your baby. I won't be mauled in public."

"I like you this way, baby," Jeffrey said with deliberate intent. "Very butch."

Brian said nothing, lighting a cigarette as soon as they were out of the terminal. "There's a habit you'll have to break. Second hand smoke kills." Jeffrey chided him.

"I've been smoking since I was fourteen. I'll quit when I choose to quit, and not before."

"I just can't reconcile such a destructive habit with your strict diet and exercise regimen."

"Frankly, Jeff, I don't give a damn."

"Thank you Miss Scarlet," Jeff responded with a laugh. "Are you driving towards the hospital?"

"Yes."

"Hotel first."

"No, hospital first."

"Brian, I want to go to the hotel first. Understand?"

Brian bit hard on his inner jaw. He diverted their course. At the hotel, he said he would wait in the lobby for him. Jeffrey laughed and said that wasn't the plan. They were going upstairs. Brian resisted. Jeffrey explained being together meant TOGETHER. Brian winced. He went up with him in the elevator. In the room, Jeffrey unpacked, gossiping casually about things happening in New York, the status of Leo and Bill, the upcoming Director's Ball for Wintergarten, at which he was to be the keynote speaker. Brian listened with one ear, marking time, seated in an upright chair in the main room of the suite. When Jeffrey grew silent, Brian looked up to find him standing in the doorway to the bedroom, naked. His toned, well-sculpted body would have been inviting to any gay man, and not long ago, Brian dreamed about touching him. But now he felt nothing but revulsion.

"I'm not interested," he said quietly and Jeffrey smiled.

"But baby... I'm interested. So get interested, okay? It's been awhile. I want you."

Brian shook his head. He felt dead from the waist down. "I can't."

Jeffrey disappeared into the bedroom and reappeared, dangling a pair of handcuffs and a syringe. Brian tensed. "What the hell is in that spike?"

"Let's just call it viagra plus. It could get a marble statue interested. You'll love it."

"I...I don't want to do that. I want my wits about me at the hospital. Drugs fuck up my cognitive skills."

"You won't need cognitive skills, baby. Your COCKnitive skills will do just fine," Jeffrey walked over to him and helped him out of his jacket, and then unbuttoned his shirt. He swabbed his left groin with an antiseptic wipe and slowly inserted the needle into a major vein located deep inside his flesh. Brian cried out at the hot, oily feel of the shot, and Jeffrey smiled.

"Sorry. It's the hormones in it. Oil base."

"Shit!" Brian felt the effect immediately. It was as if Jeffrey had filled his lower body with molten lead. His muscles turned into a hard wall, and his cock grew to full erection with no manipulation, throbbing for release. Within minutes, Jeffrey had him cuffed and threw him down roughly on the bed, face first. "You're going to learn how I like it, Brian," he said harshly, lying on top of him and smoothing his hands all over his exposed flesh. "A little resistance is fun, but don't push me too hard. You'll only make it worse for yourself."

Brian felt as if he couldn't breathe. His heart was hammering at an exaggerated pace, and his dick was pounding like a jungle drum. He broke out in a sweat, the drug tricking every system in his body into overdrive. It was more frightening than thrilling, and when Jeffrey rammed himself up his ass without the mitigation of lube, and with a condom hastily applied, he felt pain like never before, his pain sensation as equally heightened as his pleasure sensors. He came twice, once with such force it was excruciating, the second time in a vain attempt to find release. Jeffrey finished, dismounted, stretched out on the bed, sated. Brian turned, the move made awkward by the cuffs.

"Get these off of me," he insisted. "Can't breathe! Dick hurts..."

Jeffrey smiled and left the bed, returning with a second syringe. "This will fix you up, baby. Cool you down."

"No," Brian tried to protest, but this needle went in the fleshy part of his rump, sending a calming chill throughout his body, replacing the frenetic hyper activity with a blessed passivity. He fell back and Jeffrey uncuffed him,

trusting that now he would be too zonked to act out his anger. Brian rolled onto his side, drawing his legs up towards the center in a fetal position, pulling a pillow over his head to block out the light. Beyond that, he couldn't move.

Jeffrey watched him and smiled. Modern medicine was a marvelous thing, he realized again. One way or another, it always got him what he wanted. For as long as he wanted it. Glancing down at Brian's beautiful body, he realized he might well want this one for an eternity.

Justin and Jennifer looked up as Jeffrey entered the lounge for the isolation rooms, trailed by Brian. Jennifer stood and embraced Jeffrey, thrilled to see him, while Justin stared at Brian, realizing he looked stoned, or worse. As Jennifer walked with Jeffrey to the nurses' station, Brian sat down heavily in a chair, resting his elbows on his knees, his face in his hands. He was still numb, frozen, going through the motions of walking and speaking and breathing in and out. His ass ached, his head ached, and his heart was a block of ice.

Justin went over to him and slipped an arm across his shoulders. "Look at me."

Brian didn't respond.

"I said look at me," Justin spread a hand on top of his head, gently urging it back. Brian let him, staring vacantly into his eyes. "I love you, Brian. I don't care. Nothing can change that. Nothing can make me love you less."

Brian sighed and pulled him against him, pressing his cheek to his chest. He knew that wasn't true. Just this one encounter had changed Brian, made him feel less than human and absolutely without choice. "Don't wait for me, I don't know what you'd get back," he whispered and Justin smiled sadly.

"It's still you. Come on," Justin made him stand. Holding his hand, he led him into the men's room and sat him down on a toilet in a stall. He left him there and came back with a mass of damp paper towels, sponging off his face and neck. Brian closed his eyes, letting Justin bathe him, soothed by his touch. Justin locked the door and smiled down at him.

"When was the last time we did it in a public john? Together?"

"In the hospital for fuck's sake?" Brian insisted. "I don't think I can..."

Justin leaned over and kissed him deeply. Old, familiar emotions broke through Brian's haze and he returned the kiss, grasping for something he understood. Justin lowered himself onto Brian's lap, deepening the kiss. Brian felt desire break through his haze of drugs and self-loathing. He slipped his hands under Justin's shirt, exploring his back and then down to his firmly rounded ass. He moved beneath him, his love for him combining with a raw need to have a sexual experience based on a positive emotion. Justin reached down and opened Brian's fly, massaging him into a firm erection and then kneeling before the toilet, hands resting on Brian's thighs, as he fellated him. Brian groaned, head back, hands scrubbing Justin's pale hair, lost in the fire of their joint sexuality. He came without effort and it was the release that eluded him earlier, rocking him back with its intensity.

"Not so fast, sexy boy," Justin whispered, standing up and straddling Brian, lowering his own zipper. Brian looked up into Justin's challenging blue eyes and then down at his turgid erection. "My turn," Justin said hoarsely and gasped as Brian took him in hand and slid his lips down the shaft until they brushed his reddish gold pubes, then up again. "He can tell himself he has you, but he can't keep us apart," Justin whispered, anchoring himself by holding Brian's shoulders, letting him take him to paradise.

"Don't let him give you drugs, Brian," Justin said as they straightened up at the mirrors above the sinks. "Even if you have to do something you don't want to do, don't let him give you drugs to get through it. He can take you down that way. Promise me you won't."

Brian nodded, knowing he was right. "I love you."

"I know. I love you too. And we both love Molly."

"Justin, my big plan to get revenge on him, I can't do it now. It's too dangerous with her so sick. For now, he's driving."

"I know. Good. It was probably something stupid anyway. You and your half-assed schemes," he taunted him.

Brian smiled. He couldn't believe he was smiling. "It was a good plan, and I'm still gonna do it when Molly is better."

Justin laughed and said nothing. They hugged once more and shared a long kiss before leaving the bathroom. When they did walk out, Jeffrey was standing there with Jennifer and Justin met his knowing glare with a triumphant smile. "Take that you scumsucker," he thought to himself. He may think he won, but he didn't and he never would.

Brian loved Justin, and no good deed was going to overcome that fact. What Justin didn't tell Brian was that the Marines had met. They had a scheme of their own. The only thing they weren't sure of was when to pull the trigger. He was already performing the biggest part of his role. Keeping Brian calm and connected. Justin hated thinking of Jeffrey touching Brian, making love to him, but more than that, he hated the idea of Jeffrey enslaving Brian, capturing his beautiful free spirit and dulling it with drugs and humiliation. He hated him. He was pure evil. And yet...

Three hours after Jeffrey, upon consultation with Molly's doctors, altered her protocol in two major respects, she was breathing more easily. Her temperature went down from 104 to 101. Her kidneys output more urine. Her pulse rate grew stronger. For what it was worth, Jeffrey was keeping up his end of the bargain. And so the games began.

## DECONSTRUCTING BRIAN

Session 16

by Randall Morgan

Doctor's Notes: BK called from Pittsburgh to cancel the session. He spoke only to my assistant and said he would call later to make another appointment. This marks the first session he's missed and it concerns me that he would do so now during a period of high stress in his life. Later today, I received a telephone call from his mother, Joan Kinney. With her permission, I recorded the call. Permission to talk with his mother exists in the file.

Excerpt from Transcript:

JK: I'm worried about Brian.

Doctor: In what way, Joan?

JK: Something terrible is going on with him.

Doctor: How so?

JK: Well, he's obviously very worried about Molly Taylor. I would say almost obsessively worried. He's not allowed to visit her, so he spends long stretches of time standing outside her door, watching through the glass.

Doctor: Is he working?

JK: Yes, he seems to spend several hours a day at the agency's offices here.

Doctor: Does he appear to be sleeping?

JK: Not from all appearances. He looks exhausted. But it's worse than that.

Doctor: How is it worse?

JK: He's almost trance-like. I don't know if it's exhaustion or drugs or what, but he's not Brian. There's none of the swagger, the humor, the confidence. He's stony quiet, and very remote.

Doctor: Is he eating?

JK: I suppose he is. Not a lot.

Doctor: Have you tried to talk to him about what's troubling him?

JK: Of course. He says everything is fine.

Doctor: Does it appear to be a problem with Justin?

JK: No, they seem very loving together. But this Dr. Walker...well, he appears to have interest in Brian. That interest is creating tension. I can see it on Brian's face whenever he's nearby."



Doctor: Jeffrey Walker is in Pittsburgh?

JK: Yes, apparently Brian talked him into coming here to care for Molly.

Doctor: I assume Molly's family requested it?

JK: Jennifer Taylor is convinced Dr. Walker can work miracles with Molly.

Doctor: Has Molly's condition deteriorated?

JK: She's going through a crisis. They told Jennifer this was likely. After the conditioning, Molly was so weak and frail, with all of her immunities deliberately destroyed. Then with the induction, her body started fighting this strange marrow, and she just doesn't have much fight left. They're treating her to avoid rejection of the graft, but she is very ill, yes. There's no denying it. She could die at any time. Or she could recover, begin to mend. She's at a crossroads. Honestly, Doctor, I don't know who to worry about more if Molly doesn't make it. Her mother or Brian. The loss would be devastating to Jennifer, of course, but she's a strong woman. Brian seems so uncharacteristically fragile to me.

Doctor: I guess I didn't realize you were such good friends with Mrs. Taylor, Joan.

JK: (Paused.) I am now. I feel very protective of Jennifer. But it's all because of Brian.

Doctor: Explain.

JK: He came to me some time ago and asked me to help Jennifer. He knows I do volunteer work at the hospitals through my church. He asked that I extend that charity to the mother of his...partner.

Doctor: I see. Was that difficult for you?

JK: At first it was. I felt awkward with her. Our sons are intimately involved, in love, and I'm still not quite used to that fact. Although Jennifer is. We've had long talks about it and I feel so much better, thanks to her. She told me so much about their past, how they met, the traumas they've been through. She admitted she detested Brian at different points along the way. She blamed him for causing her son to be gay, a fact she now knows is ridiculous. She blamed him for going to the prom and setting up a scenario in which Justin was gravely injured. Now she knows he did that out of love, and she saw the way he stood by him during his recovery. She knows how damaged Brian was by Justin's leaving him.

Doctor: How does she know that?

JK: She saw him once, in New York.

Doctor: She visited Brian?

JK: She was in New York with Molly and her class. She was a chaperone. They wanted to take the girls to see "Into the Woods", that Sondheim musical, but were having trouble with tickets. Debbie Novotny called Brian for her. Brian was able to make it happen, and Jennifer asked him to allow her to buy him dinner. He declined, but agreed to meet for tea in the lounge of her hotel in the late afternoon. She said Brian was quite cool at first. Polite, but distant. He asked how Justin was doing as if they were casual friends. She responded fine, and asked how he was doing? She said it was the strangest thing. Brian started to pop off a quick response, just to say something non controversial and expected. But then a look clouded his face and he stared at his cup of tea for a long moment before he spoke.

Doctor: What did he say?

JK: He said, "New York can be a very cold place when you're alone."

Doctor: Ah.

JK: It broke my heart to hear that. Jennifer said she reached across the table to touch his hand, but he pulled back, and the mask returned. Molly came in from a field trip she had been on with a some of the girls and one of the moms, and she ran up to her mother, showing her a statue of liberty teddy bear she had purchased. Jennifer said Brian watched her very carefully. Molly said to him, "Are you my mother's boyfriend?"

Doctor: (Laughed.) I'm sure Jennifer loved that.

JK: She was mortified, but Brian laughed and said, "No, Molly, I'm your mother's friend. And your brother's friend, too." Molly said, "You look like the handsome prince in the storybooks. Will you bring me a glass slipper one day?"

Doctor: That must have pleased him.

JK: Brian has always had an affinity with children. I think it's because he doesn't talk down to them. He treats them with respect. Jennifer said he beamed at that and promised Molly that someday he would bring her a glass slipper if she promised to save the last dance for him at the ball.

Doctor: And then?

JK: She said...(Paused, emotion overtaking her momentarily.) Sorry. I...

Doctor: It's alright Joan. Take your time.

JK: I'm fine. Anyway, Molly said, "And then we'll live happily ever after, right?"

Doctor: Oh dear. That must have been hard for Jennifer to tell you under these circumstances.

JK: Yes, but she was very brave. She wanted me to have this insight into my son and I'm so grateful for that fact. Brian responded to Molly, "I'll just be your standby until your real prince comes along. Keep you out of trouble."

Doctor: That's a charming thing to say.

JK: Yes. Molly smiled at him and said, "You'll do just fine until then. You have sad eyes. I want to make you happy." She then hugged him, impulsively, and Jennifer said she saw such an expression of benign affection and sweet acceptance on his face that any doubt that she ever had about Brian just vanished.

Doctor: That little vignette offers some interesting insight into Brian's preoccupation with Molly.

JK: How do you mean?

Doctor: She beguiled him in the way a child can, and at the same time he established himself as her protector. It may have seemed very innocent and meaningless at the time, but when Molly found herself in a grave situation, I'm sure every word of it came back to Brian. And possibly to her.

JK: I haven't thought of it that way.

Doctor: Their bond goes beyond Justin.

JK: Yes, that I do believe. But Dr. Johnson, he's taking it to such an extreme that I'm frightened for him.

Doctor: Explain.

JK: We all want Molly to get well. Brian seems to believe he can control that outcome if he does everything right. If she dies, it will be a personal failure on his part. I don't know what he will do. I don't understand why he feels the way he does. He had nothing to do with her becoming ill. He has no way of curing her, either.

Doctor: Logically, we know that to be true, Joan. So does Brian. But emotionally he is in the bargaining stage of grief and fear. He is under the delusion that he can bargain for her survival. Do this, promise that, and all will be well. He's apparently using Jeffrey Walker as his bargaining tool. By delivering Jeffrey to Molly, he is not impotent, he is able to contribute to her treatment.

JK: Well, truthfully, Dr. Walker does seem to make a difference with Molly. The medical team treating her has the highest respect for his abilities and he did write the protocol she is being treated with. He seems to have a strong instinct for this disease. He tweaks some drug level, even alters her nutrition, or provides untraditional remedies like aromatherapy and massage relaxation techniques, and Molly has responded beautifully. He says every patient is different. The basic protocol is the same, but the small tweaks that are geared towards the individual are what increases their comfort and provides the serenity in which they can heal. He is a very big believer in the power of the mind over the body. He treats the whole patient, he says, not just the disease. She prospers under his direct care, because he makes changes and recommendations several times a day. He can't do that remotely.

Doctor: You sound very high on Dr. Walker.

JK: I'm amazed and impressed with his medical skills and his bedside manner. (Paused.) I despise him for what he's doing to my son.

Doctor: That's very strong, Joan. Tell me what you mean.

JK: I'm not a fool. It's obvious to me that Walker is in love with Brian, or at least infatuated. He has no respect at all for Justin's relationship with my son, in fact he acts as if it doesn't exist. Brian's waited for Justin to come back, is absolutely smitten with him, and now Walker is interfering. It maddens me.

Doctor: Do you think Brian is responding to Dr. Walker's interest?

JK: There's something going on there that I can't figure out. Brian's affection for Justin has never been more obvious. And yet he has this sad resignation about Walker, as if he's doomed to be with him in some way.

Doctor: Why do you say that?

JK: I watch them all. Walker treats Brian with a kind of entitlement. As if he's staked his claim, and Brian has no choice in the matter. Brian is a very fiery man. He doesn't take to being ordered around, that's one reason he kept quitting athletic teams, despite being an excellent athlete. He would get crossways with the coaches. That rebellious temperament also got him in Dutch with his father. He wouldn't back down, even when he knew he was going to take a punch. But with Walker, he seems defeated.

Doctor: Where is Justin in all this?

JK: He seems as affectionate with Brian as ever. Concerned, protective. He respects Walker for all he's done for Molly, but it's clear he's jealous and suspicious, and I think for good reason.

Doctor: Joan, what do you think is happening with Brian and Dr. Walker?

JK: I'm not sure. I thought maybe they were having an affair, but if they are, it's the most joyless affair in the world. What would be the point of that? When you said that about bargaining, I wondered if Brian promised something to Walker to incent him to come to Pittsburgh.

Doctor: Promised him what?

JK: (Paused.) I don't know. That he would sleep with him, maybe? But Brian has been around, apparently. I don't think sleeping with someone would have such a strong impact on him unless it's some kind of guilty reaction due to Justin.

Doctor: Describe the impact as you see it, Joan.

JK: I've never seen Brian like this. He's obsessed with watching Molly, as if she might slip away if he turns his back. He seems exhausted and yet agitated at the same time. His emotions are on the surface and yet he expresses none of them. He seems to be sleepwalking much of the time. Justin can get a reaction out of him, but otherwise, he's quite remote. If I didn't know better, I'd wonder if he was on drugs.

Doctor: What do you think is Brian's history with drugs?

JK: I'm not naïve. I know he's experimented, when he was younger. He smoked marijuana, I found some in his room once. I assume he's done other things. But he was never going to let drugs get in the way of his achievements. He was too driven for success to do that. And he wouldn't want drugs to get in the way of his vigil over Molly. That would be regarded by Brian as a self-indulgence.

Doctor: I see. And have you asked him about his relationship with Dr. Walker?

JK: I tried.

Doctor: What happened?

JK: He just glared at me and told me he was a friend from New York. When I tried to ask Jennifer if she thought Dr. Walker may be a problem between Justin and Brian, she defended him. You see, she's in a terrible position. She wants Justin to be happy, is even accepting of Brian as his partner, but she has a more immediate crisis. Her daughter's life. And rightly or wrongly, she believes Dr. Walker can save her life. She would give up anything for that, even Justin's love interest.

Doctor: And how do you feel about that, Joan?

JK: I want Molly to survive, too. But Brian is MY child. My baby, my youngest. It doesn't matter that he's grown up, now. He's still vulnerable. I want him to find the happiness that has eluded him his whole life. I'm not willing to sacrifice his soul to anyone. Not for any reason. And that's how he appears to me, as if his very soul is in jeopardy.

Doctor: Because he's bargained it in return for Jeffrey Walker's treating Molly?

JK: Perhaps. I know it sounds diabolical...but...

Doctor: It sounds diabolical, yes. But Brian is not emotionally equipped to handle a manipulation of that magnitude, Joan. Perhaps he would be if not for the overlay of his strong feelings towards Molly. But even then, I wonder. He's only now acknowledged the fact he has a variety of feelings that he's battled his whole life to repress. He's not on solid enough ground to be able to accurately deploy those feelings. Especially not in the wake of a person with such a massive and remarkably deviant ability to control. If in fact, your beliefs about Jeffrey Walker are correct.

JK: What do I do? Should I confront Dr. Walker? I know if I make him mad and he leaves, Jennifer will be devastated. And what if that does result in Molly's decline? I'm so confused!

Doctor: Joan, you have done an amazing turn around with Brian since we last talked. You've accepted him as a person, despite his homosexuality, even made a real attempt to understand his relationship with Justin. You always cared about him, but now you've allowed yourself to express that care.

JK: You helped me. You opened my eyes. And his. We've had some important talks, thanks to your guidance. I am deeply grateful for what you've done for Brian, Dr. Johnson.

Doctor: Don't be. My work has just started with your son, and now we have this issue that concerns me greatly. Brian cancelled our session. This is not a time for him to do that. I'm alarmed by the things you have told me, the things you've described. I need to make some calls, do a little research. I'll get back to you. In the mean time, do this. I'm calling a friend of mine in Pittsburgh. He's an internist. I want Brian to go in for a check up. Is there anyway you can make that happen? I'll tell him if you can get him on the phone. I want some bloodwork done on him. A urinalysis. What do you think the chances are that he'll go?

JK: Frankly, slim. But sometimes I can be very persuasive with Brian. I'll drive him myself if need be.

Doctor: Do what you can, Joan, but don't let Dr. Walker know what's going on, okay?

JK: Why?

Doctor: Just don't. It's better that way. If Brian tells him, nothing you can do. But suggest to him that Lydia thinks he should not. And try, try to get him to go. Leave me your phone number and I'll call you with the doctor's name and an appointment time.

JK: Doctor, is Brian in trouble?

Doctor: Yes, Joan, I'm afraid so.

JK: (Sighed.) No, I thought so, too. I'm grateful for the confirmation that I'm not just being an overprotective mother.

Doctor: Joan, you are being a very loving mother and that's what he needs right now. A loving mother with a bit of a whip in one hand to make him help himself.

JK: (Laughed.) I can be that mother too.

Doctor: Please stay in touch with me. And if you can convince Brian to call, do so. He needs me right now, whether he can see that or not.

JK: I will.

End of excerpt.

Doctor's Notes:



I am very concerned about BK's current emotional well being. His missing the session, followed by his mother's concerned phone call, underlines my fears. JK impressed me with how far she has come towards BK since our original meeting. I'm doubly satisfied with that, because he desperately needs her now. BK is a strong, controlling individual with a narcissistic edge and a tendency towards self destruction. His defense has always been to cover his emotions with layers of impenetrable ennui. Now that those layers are being eroded with therapy, he's vulnerable. That vulnerability is enhanced by his reunion with his partner, JT, and his obsession with "saving" JT's sister, Molly, from leukemia. Part of his desire to save Molly is to entrench himself with JT, about whom he still harbors some insecurity. How could JT ever abandon him again if he saved his sister's life? Part of it may stem from this meeting he had with Molly in NYC while he was still wounded by JT's absence. He seemed to reach a child-like pact with her, and even if she doesn't remember it, he must. Finally, I am gravely concerned about the amount and type of influence Jeffrey Walker may be wielding with BK. If my concerns are legitimate, BK is dealing with an individual suffering from an extreme case of narcissism, enhanced with a potentially psychopathic need for control at any cost. If Walker has this personality disorder and decided BK is his target, he will stop at nothing to achieve his goal. The fact that his "prize" is coerced is meaningless to him, it would merely solidify that Walker had been the superior gamesman. What devices Walker may be using to impose this coercion also concerns me. The BK described by his mother is not the BK I have seen in these sessions. He is either on the verge of emotional collapse, or he is under the influence of medication. Perhaps both. I can't make that judgment in isolation. I want BK to undergo a physical workup to see if he's taking drugs, and what drugs he is taking. If he's not using, then my concern about an emotional collapse becomes more vivid. Either way, he is in a box he cannot escape on his own. The question is, who can assist him in finding his way out and how? Time is of the essence.

## BETWEEN THE SESSIONS

(after session 16)

by Randall Morgan

Jennifer awoke from a recurring nightmare in which her daughter was drowning, screaming for help. Jennifer was just yards away from her, but the water was gelatinous, and she couldn't move in it, just struggle and watch Molly sink. She didn't need a shrink to explain this one to her. She bolted out of bed in the guest room provided for families of critically ill children. Justin slept in the easy chair, undisturbed by her exit. She took just enough time to don her mask and gown, and then ran to Molly's room. Brian was at the door. Compassionate nurses had placed a chair nearby, so he could sit down occasionally without leaving his self-appointed post. Molly had endured a tough twenty-four hours and her struggle had taken a toll on them all.

Jennifer looked in to make sure nothing had changed. Molly seemed to be sleeping soundly. Relieved, Jennifer sighed and placed a hand between Brian's shoulder blades. "Go lie down in the room, Brian. I'll sit up for awhile. I've had some rest."

"Craig came by about an hour ago," Brian said quietly. "He didn't want to wake you. He went in to see her, but she didn't wake up and he didn't disturb her rest." After Brian's flare up with Craig, something Brian's mother said to Craig after Brian escaped from the confrontation had enabled Brian and Craig to reach détente. Craig let go of some of his anger towards Brian in order to concentrate on his anger at fate for infecting his daughter. Brian hadn't asked his mother what she said, but he knew how persuasive she could be. He had no confidence Craig's fury towards him wouldn't return later. He really didn't care. The future suddenly felt very murky to Brian.

"Good, I'm glad he was here. Please go lie down. You must be utterly exhausted."

He glanced down at Jennifer. It was strange to carry on a conversation while wearing masks. They looked like alien ventriloquists. "I'm fine."

Jennifer took his hand and halfway pulled him from the door and into the hall, where they both removed the claustrophobic masks. She noticed how tired he really looked, his handsome face pale, with dark circles under his eyes. She placed a hand on his cheek.

"Brian, thank you."

"For...?"

"Everything. But mostly for what you've done for Molly. I appreciated how you were there for Justin, when he was in need, but I knew you were his lover, so you had every reason to be concerned. Molly is really no one to you, except for the fact she's Justin's sister. And yet you're as responsible for doing all that can be done to save her life, as is Justin, for donating his bone marrow."

Brian looked puzzled. "How do you figure that?"

"You found Jeffrey. You brought him here. He worked around the clock last night, as you know. I swear she would have slipped away if not for him. She was so close to the edge and he kept ordering remedy after remedy to bring her back. Finally, it all came together. She's here today because he wouldn't quit, no matter what curve he was thrown. He was incredibly tenacious. At one point in time, one of her other doctors said it was no use. He seemed to have forgotten that I was in the corner of her room when he said it. Jeffrey blew up at him. He ordered him out of the room. Later, I heard him yelling at him in the break room. He was telling him it's never too late, not until they call time on a patient. Until that moment, they must do absolutely everything they can to save the person, even if it doesn't seem possible that the patient can pull through. He is such a fighter, Brian. He is so determined to have it

turn out the way he wants it to turn out. I find that incredibly compelling. It's one of the main reasons why Molly is with us today."

Brian sighed, well aware of Jeffrey's determination to have things his way against all odds. "He is an incredible doctor," he said quietly and she smiled.

"And you brought him to Molly. Don't you see how big that is? I would be hopeless if Jeffrey wasn't here, distraught. I don't know what I would do! I made him go to the doctor's rest area and get some sleep. Like you, he was just going to stay up and keep going, but we need him fresh and with all his brilliance sharply honed. He is a national treasure, Brian. One of the heroes."

Brian grimaced. "All I did was introduce him to you, Jennifer. He did the rest. I deserve no credit."

"Well, I may not have all the facts, but Justin very clearly told me that you are the reason Jeff is here and why he stays. He must be a very good friend."

Brian nodded, saying nothing. It was clear to him that Jennifer had no clue about what was going on, nor should she. She had more than enough to worry her. She didn't need to worry about her son's love life as well.

Jennifer squeezed his shoulder. "Besides that, you've given so much of yourself. You know how Molly loves you and seeing you here has been a real boost to her morale. She can't have her favorite toys in isolation due to the germ issue, so she has to find her comfort in other ways. Having you here is one of those ways. Thank you so much, Brian," she kissed his cheek. "Now take care of yourself. Get something to eat and then lie down. Justin's still sleeping. Take a clue from him."

Brian smiled wryly. "He's a growing boy."

"So are you. I'm serious. I'm worried about you. The last few days have been hard on everyone. The wear and tear is obvious, Brian. Go get some rest. I promised Joan I would make you crash after this crisis."

Brian nodded, still not accustomed to having a mother who cared. He walked towards the room, feeling weighed down by what Jennifer intended as a compliment. Her praise for introducing Jeffrey only enhanced what he already knew. He had to keep Jeffrey involved with Molly's treatment, no matter what the personal cost to himself. Brian watched Jeffrey work during Molly's crisis. He had to put aside his anger and sense of betrayal over Jeffrey's treatment of him, to acknowledge again how good he was at what he did, and how dedicated he was to her recovery.

Even the nurses commented on how brilliant he was and on his kind bedside manner. Somewhere, in his darkest heart, Brian wondered what Jeffrey was thinking. If Molly recovered, did he believe Brian would stay with him? If not, and if he truly wanted Brian, wasn't he working at cross-purposes by healing her? But then, the same was true if he died. All Jeffrey really had was Brian's word. And his arrogant belief that given time, Brian would want to stay.

Brian didn't let his mind go far down that road. Nothing made sense anymore. He couldn't let himself think about the future, he just had to focus on what needed to be done now.

In the room, Justin slept soundly in the chair and Brian smiled as he watched him rest. He looked like a child, all the worry of the last day relaxed in slumber. Brian walked over to him and let his fingers drift through Justin's pale hair in a sweetly familiar gesture. Justin stirred but didn't waken. Brian gazed longingly at the bed, then shook Justin gently. He awoke, groggy. "Get in the bed. You'll be more comfortable," Brian insisted. Justin allowed Brian to lead him over to the bed, but he grabbed his hand when Brian tried to walk away. Brian gazed down at him, questioning. Justin simply lifted the covers in silent invitation. It was a single bed, too narrow for two men.

Brian hesitated, but exhaustion crashed in on him, and he dropped beside him, his back to Justin, spooning to conserve space, still wearing his shoes as well as all of his clothes. With the simple comfort of Justin beside him, he closed his eyes and within seconds, he was asleep.

Three hours later...

"Have you ever seen anything sweeter than that?" Debbie Novotny whispered to Michael and Ben as they peeked into the room. Michael grimaced at the image of Brian and Justin snuggled together in a non-sexual embrace. They were still sleeping in the same position in which they started. Jennifer had returned to the room to doze in the chair while her ex-husband watched over Molly. Ben motioned for them to withdraw, and Debbie obeyed, turning to her son when they were alone in the hallway. "How can anyone see those two together and fail to realize the fact that they are meant to be a couple?"

Michael frowned. "Hello? I'm with Ben now, Mom. I don't care if Brian's in love with Justin. Can you just let it go?"

Debbie smacked the side of Michael's head as Ben laughed. "Ow! What was that for?" Michael protested and she shook her head.

"Not you, you mope! I'm talking about that fucking Jeffrey." Since the plan had been revealed, Debbie couldn't say Jeffrey's name without adding "fucking" to it.

"Not here!" Michael insisted, covering her mouth with his hand and bringing back a large red imprint from her lipstick. "You never know where he may be or Brian or Jennifer might hear you."

"Brian might hear you say what?" Brian came from the room, his hair sticking up, face unshaven, the picture of a man who needed more sleep. Debbie and Michael looked stricken, but Ben remained cool.

"Nothing Brian, we were just saying you need rest."

Brian didn't buy it, but decided not to press the issue. "Any change?" He meant in Molly's condition.

"We just got here. Honey, eat this," Debbie opened a box of fresh pastries. "Vic made them for all of you, and the nurses too. Have one. I know you like cherries. There's a cherry turnover in there with your name on it."

Brian and Michael exchanged a smirk over her saying that Brian was fond of "cherries", a buzzword for "virgins". Even in the worst of times, their adolescent humor tended to surface. "Thanks, but I'm not hungry, Deb."

"Really? Let me put it this way, Kinney. Either you eat it on your own, or I'll force feed your skinny ass! Vic went to all the trouble to make them. At least eat one!" Debbie went into her controlling mother mode.

Brian surrendered. The still warm pastry was delectable once he got started on it. In fact, he ate another, tensing as Jeffrey sidled up behind him and pinched his waist. "Fat and sugar, not the best way to maintain that slim physique, Bri." Unlike Brian, a few hours of rest made Jeffrey look as if he had just returned from vacation. He had showered in the locker room provided for doctors, and was clean shaven. Debbie, Michael and Ben saw the look of resignation on Brian's face as Jeffrey insinuated himself into their group. Michael squeezed Debbie's hand tightly to restrain the anger he saw bubbling beneath her superficially benign surface.

"He could stand a little meat on those bones," Debbie said with admirable restraint, and Jeffrey smiled.

"He is perfectly equipped in the meat department," his double entendre fell flat and Brian glared at him.

"How is Molly this morning?" Brian asked Jeffrey.

"Improved. Her temp is down, her vitals are a little stronger, and her kidneys are functioning. The blood tests will tell us more of the story when we get the results, but I'm encouraged."

"Thank God," Debbie made the sign of the cross as Brian sighed.

"Thank Jeffrey. He worked his ass off for her last night," Brian had to concede.

Jeffrey smiled and kissed the back of Brian's neck, causing him to shudder. "You're sweet, but we have a team dedicated to Miss Molly. I'm just part of that team."

"False modesty doesn't become you, Jeff," Brian insisted and Jeffrey shrugged.

"Really? I thought humility became everyone."

"Only if it's genuine," Ben interrupted quietly. "And I'm sure yours is, Jeff. Why wouldn't it be? Certainly you don't buy that old adage of doctors as gods."

"Of course not. Excuse me, do I know you?" Jeffrey inquired of Ben.

Ben stuck his hand out to be shaken. "I'm Ben Bruckner. A friend of Brian's. And Justin's, of course."

"I see. Mikey I know. But Ben is a NEW friend of Brian's."

"It's MICHAEL," he seethed as his mother nodded her approval.

"What do you do, Ben?" Jeffrey ignored Michael. He was no more than a gnat on a rhino to Jeffrey. But something about Ben interested him.

"I'm a professor at Carnegie-Mellon."

"Ah," Jeffrey responded with a wry smile. "An intellectual." He made it sound like a disease. Ben nodded.

"That's right. A bookish man."

"Without a bookish body," Jeffrey said with a smile. Brian glared at him. Things were bad enough without Jeffrey flirting with his best friend's boyfriend. He sensed it was deliberate, a jibe aimed at Michael.

"I'm going to look in on Molly." Brian wasn't up to Jeffrey's intrigue.

"You do that, then I'm taking you back to the hotel, Brian," Jeffrey responded. "You need a shower and some serious sack time."

"I'll go to the hotel when I'm fucking ready!" Brian responded and Jeffrey smiled coolly at him.

"Of course. Whatever you say, baby."

Debbie tensed at the endearment rolling off Jeffrey's tongue, angered by the obvious distress Brian was feeling under Jeffrey's control. Her son squeezed her hand again as Brian walked away, towards the isolation area.

"You'll have to tell me all about your field of expertise sometime, Ben," Jeffrey said with a smile. "I admire an intellectual mind."

"I'd be glad to," Ben responded, ignoring Michael's glare. With that, Jeffrey said goodbye and walked in the direction Brian had gone.

"The fucking nerve of that fucking Jeffrey!" Debbie exploded and Michael nodded.

"He's such an asshole. Did you see how he just CLAIMED Brian? It was disgusting!"

"No," Ben said softly, watching Jeffrey retreat. "Not disgusting. Frightning." He had felt the power of Jeffrey's game in their one brief exchange. Jeffrey was not only smart and handsome, but he was skilled at breaking into relationships and scavenging for a thrill. Ben knew he had been cruised, and he could put aside his personal disgust long enough to realize what a powerhouse Jeffrey truly was. His fear for Brian increased. "Who much time do we have?"

"Two weeks," Michael responded, and Ben shook his head.

"I'm afraid that may be too long to wait."

Michael wrinkled his nose at his lover in confusion. "But it's YOUR plan, Ben. You're the one who thought it through."

"And a damn good devious fucking mind you have, Ben, if I say so myself," Debbie beamed at him, and he shrugged.

"That was before I met Jeff. Now I think I may need to go back to the drawing board and enhance our defenses. He's a powerful foe."

Michael leaned into Ben's iron bicep and said, "You ARE doing this for Brian and Justin, right?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean this has nothing to do with your own...umm...PAST with Brian, does it?"

"Of course it does, Michael. It was my so called 'past' with Brian that made me feel close enough to him to help me understand what's happening here."

"Let me live long enough to meet one handsome fag Brian Kinney has not fucked," Debbie mused, and her son glared at her as Ben repressed a smile. It remained unsaid that her son had never been granted Brian's sexual favors.

"I want you to tell me you aren't still hung up on Brian," Michael insisted and Ben shrugged.



"I will if you will."

"Good one!" Debbie said with a laugh, but Michael didn't find it funny.

"What's that supposed to mean? Are you hung up on Brian?" Michael insisted.

"Are you?" Ben countered.

"Is the Pope Polish?" Debbie quipped, then smiled as Justin came from the room, looking adorably rumpled. He took a pastry as Debbie kissed his cheek, after foraging in the box.

"Where's Brian?" He mumbled, mouth full, searching for a new pastry while still eating the last. He looked from Michael to Ben and sighed. "Are you two fighting over Brian again?"

"I don't fight," Ben responded. "I discuss. And yes, we are discussing Brian."

"We're discussing the fact you're still hung up on him after one lousy weekend in Florida, a hundred years ago," Michael grouched, as Justin smiled.

"That's one weekend more than you've had, Mikey," Justin quipped as Ben winced and made the blade across the throat signal at him.

"You stay out of this, Sunshine! If you hadn't left Brian for that skank then none of this would have happened," Michael reminded him.

"I'm not going through that again," Justin said, holding up a hand, palm out, as if to stop him. "I'm with Brian. I love Brian. Brian loves me. Get the fuck over it."

"Amen and from your lips to God's ears," Debbie proclaimed, kissing Justin on the cheek as Michael frowned.

"I am 'the fuck' over it, Justin! I don't give a rat's ass about you and Brian. I just want Brian to be happy. I'll wait for you in the car, Mom," he threw a final glare at Ben who sighed.

"Aren't you going after him?" Debbie insisted, and Ben shook his head slowly.

"I know you love him and you mean well, but you'll just have to let me handle this one, Debbie. I know how he is, and what he needs. Trust me."

She beamed at him. "I have such a smart son in law. He's wrong about that Brian thing, isn't he?"

"Yes, Debbie," Ben said softly. "He's wrong about that Brian thing. I care for Brian but not the way Justin does."

"THANK you," Justin said enthusiastically, tired of all the hidden agendas swirling around his lover.

"But we need to talk, Justin. I met Jeff. I have some ideas about the battle plan."

"I'm going to look in on Jennifer while you boys play army," Debbie said, then added. "But if you change my part, I need plenty of time to get it right, so don't keep it to yourself. And don't cut me out, either. I knew Brian before there were White Parties, Ben, and before Justin was even born. He's my big, impossible kid. No matter how I may act around him, I love that boy and he knows it. I insist on being part of this."

Ben kissed her cheek. "Deb, you're the star," he said with a kind smile and put his arm over Justin's shoulder, leading him to a quiet place to talk.

Brian left isolation, thrilled by the little wave and a wan smile he got from Molly. It was the first interaction she was able to grant in over twenty-four hours, and he believed it was a better sign that she was improving, than the story told by the bloodless black and white statistics they tracked so minutely. He went looking for Justin and found him with Ben. They were seated on a couch in a waiting area. They were talking quietly, almost intimately, and Michael was nowhere to be seen. Brian felt an unreasonable surge of jealousy as he walked over to them and interrupted.

"Isn't this a cozy scene?"

Both men looked up and Justin appeared confused. "What's wrong?"

"What could be wrong? Where's Mikey?"

"In the car. He and Ben had a fight."

"It wasn't a fight," Ben corrected him. "It was just silly. Sit down, Brian."

"You know what? I'm getting tired of people telling me what to do. Your sister waved at me, if it matters, Justin." He walked away and Justin looked at Ben in confusion.

"What's up with that?"

"He's exhausted, Justin. Go after him. Take him away from here for awhile. I'll run interference with Jeffrey."

"Sure?"

"Positive."

Justin impulsively leaned down and kissed Ben's cheek. "You're too good for Novotny," he teased and Ben smiled.

"I know. I'm just biding my time until I can have you."

Justin laughed. "I'm not the member of my dynamic duo that you want, but you can't have him. He's mine."

"Remember that, Justin. When things get rough. He's yours. Don't lose sight of that fact."

"Never," Justin waved and walked away, as Ben prepared to distract Jeffrey if he came stalking Brian.

Justin slipped his hand between the elevator doors just as they were closing. Brian looked up, frowned. Justin stood there in the gap, until the buzzer started, then stepped in and hit the stop button when the car began to descend. "What are you doing?" Brian insisted and Justin smiled.

"Ever done it in an elevator?"

"Don't be stupid. I'm going downstairs to smoke. You can work off your Ben boner on your own."

"Sorry," Justin said, mischievously squeezing the bulge at his crotch. "But this definitely has the feel of a Brian boner to me."

Brian tried not to smile. "You know they have cameras in elevators, brainiac."

"Then let's give them a good show," Justin dropped down to his knees, and unbuttoned Brian's jeans with slow deliberation.

"Are you nuts?" Brian insisted half-heartedly as Justin reached in and freed his penis of its denim imprisonment.

"No," Justin responded, stroking Brian gently, then lifting the half-erect shaft towards his waiting lips. "Just hungry."

Brian closed his eyes as he felt Justin's soft, full lips make full contact with the head of his cock. He allowed him to sex him up, lifting his sweater so Justin's hands could wander his torso and pec's. When he felt the intensity begin, he pulled Justin to his feet and kissed him deeply on the mouth while he loosened his clothing.

On the fifteenth floor, the bored security guard turned towards one of the elevator camera screens, expecting to find the usual scene. Patients in wheelchairs or walking bags of IV drips hanging from racks, visitors with flowers or balloons, a few bored staffers in white coats and sensible shoes. Sometimes he got lucky and saw some doctor pinch some nurse on the ass, or vice versa, but seldom any more than that. Until today. Hoo boy! They may be faggots, but he always had a secret yen to see what it was faggots did to each other, and DAMN! They were beautiful and as naked as the day they were born!

Their clothes were all over the floor and the tall one had the blond one slammed up against one wall, holding both his wrists in his hands as he drove his long, wet cock up his ass in a steady rhythm. Watching his lean butt contract and relax with each thrust above the long, strong line of his legs was highly erotic. When the tall one released one hand for the blond, and the blond began pulling his own hard cock, the guard decided to follow suit. No one was around, so what the hell? A quick whack to get his heart started.

Watching Brian and Justin fuck was inspirational, even if he was straight. The guard keyed on Justin's sweetly beautiful face, contrasting it with Brian's rugged good looks. The blond came first, splattering the fake woodgrain on the wall with his semen. Then the tall man finished with a shudder, followed almost immediately by the guard, who was their silent partner in this caper.

"I love you," he read the lips of the tall one, and the blond responded, "I love you, too, Brian."

The guard felt a little guilty when he realized these boys were more than just fucking for his viewing pleasure. They shared something, that was clear. He watched them dress, then smiled as the blond looked straight at the camera in the corner and rubbed his tongue rapidly across his lips, following that gesture with an exaggerated kiss. The guard laughed. "Kiss to you, too, cutie," he said aloud. Then they were dressed, and the elevator was made active again. They left when they reached the first floor, holding hands as they walked out of view.

The guard sighed and went back to his tedious job, deciding this was one security tape he just may have to dupe for his personal collection.

## DECONSTRUCTING BRIAN

Session 17

by Randall Morgan

Doctor's Notes: BK was in New York for one day, due to a meeting at his office. At my urging, he squeezed in for an appointment with me. There is only one word to describe BK at this time: worn. He is time worn, care worn and

worn out. Despite the designer suit and the hundred dollar haircut, he is one tired young man. Spiritually as well as physically.

Excerpt from Transcript:

Doctor: When do you go back to Philly?

BK: It's Pittsburgh, Doc.

Doctor: Sorry. Is there a difference?

BK: (Laughed.) Spoken like a true New Yorker. In about three hours.

Doctor: How is she?

BK: Fighting for her life. Started showing signs of rejecting the graft, so they've been battling day and night to turn her around.

Doctor: Progress?

BK: She seemed a little better before I left. She was awake, at least, and her temp and vitals have stabilized for forty-eight hours, now, but she's not out of the woods. Jeff saved her life.

Doctor: How do you feel about that?

BK: Glad that I met him. Glad that I made him come to Pittsburgh. Grateful.

Doctor: At what price?

BK: What do you mean?

Doctor: I mean what has it cost you to secure Jeffrey's services?

BK: (Shrugged.) Nothing. Her insurance is paying him.

Doctor: Not money. Emotionally.

BK: (Sighed, shifted weight uncomfortably.) I guess I know how Little Eva felt when Simon Legree was nipping at her heels.

Doctor: Explain.

BK: You don't know that classic?

Doctor: Of course I do, Brian. But I'm having a hard time picturing you as Little Eva. Educate me.

BK: Little Eva was all about a lack of choice. There's really no difference, once choice is taken away from you.

Doctor: Who took away your choice and for what?

BK: He did.

Doctor: Jeffrey?

BK: (Nodded affirmatively.)

Doctor: Choice for what, Brian?

BK: Life or death. For Molly. That was my choice. I chose life.

Doctor: Brian, you can't bargain for the life of a critically ill child. Either she'll survive or she won't. Nothing you do will affect that outcome.

BK: That's not true. It already has. I got Jeff to come to her, to work with her, hands on. I'm not pulling credit for it, Lydia. He's the miracle worker. I just got him there.

Doctor: Ok, leaving aside the moral and ethical issues that "bargain" raises, tell me, Brian. What were you asked to trade for such medical devotion?

BK: (Raised his eyes to meet mine. His expression was strangely vacant, as if all emotion had been bled from him.) My soul.

Doctor's Notes: For the first time in the months that BK has been coming here, he lost his icy control. At first there was silence, then a tear drifted down his cheek, and finally he covered his face with both hands, weeping silently. I didn't interrupt him, letting him experience the release of this relaxation of his internal control mechanism. When he finally seemed to be calm, I handed him a bottle of water and some Kleenex. He gratefully accepted both.

Doctor: You ready to continue?

BK: I'm sorry. What a pussy.

Doctor: Stop that. This is not about weakness. This is about the strength to express what you're feeling. Now, tell me exactly what is happening. Are you being drugged?

BK: (Looks up at me, his fair skin flushed by his emotional release.) Why do you ask that?

Doctor: Is that your answer?



BK: I know that's why my Mom was trying to get me to see some doctor at your urging. Isn't it? You wanted a drug screen.

Doctor: Yes, I did.

BK: Why?

Doctor: Because many of your current reactions suggest the introduction of a chemical. You're in no emotional and now physical shape to take drugs, Brian. Not even your mild recreational choices. But if you're being given any drug that alters mood or emotion, it's criminal interference with your treatment, with possibly fatal results.

BK: Fatal? You mean like an overdose?

Doctor: Possibly, but more likely it could throw you into a depressive spiral that results in self-destructive behavior.

BK :(Winced.) I'm not suicidal.

Doctor: Glad to hear it, but you would be one of the last to know if you were.

BK: What are you trying to do? Hang Jeffrey?

Doctor: If he's prescribing for you, yes, especially if he's prescribing drugs aimed at controlling you sexually or emotionally.

BK: (A flash of anger heightened his color.) Back off!

Doctor: Why so defensive of him?

BK: Did you not hear me before? Molly is at a critical point in her treatment. Live or die. If you did anything to distance Jeff from her, and something happened, how do you think I would feel about that? Well, I won't let you. I'll deny everything. You couldn't prove anything without my cooperation.

Doctor: (I leaned forward, placing my hand over his, forcing him to meet my gaze.) When children wish that a prince may come along in a golden coach, carrying a glass slipper, and all their problems will vanish with his arrival, we call that "magical" thinking. It's a very acceptable form of fantasy; using fantasy images for comfort and to endure things they can't control. When adults engage in magical thinking, it's a problem.

BK: (Leaned away from me, slipped his hand free of mine.) What are you saying?

Doctor: I'm saying your belief that you have bargained for Molly's survival by selling your soul to Jeffrey is magical thinking. Jeffrey may be an excellent oncologist, but the cold fact is, a certain number of his patients won't survive. Not because he failed, not because their loved ones were bad bargainers, but because cancer is a pernicious disease that claims a certain number of victims, no matter what.

BK: (Shook head.) Not Molly. No.

Doctor: Let's think about this. Why are you the one who has to bargain for her life? She has parents. She has a brother. Why have you taken this burden onto your shoulders?

BK: I told you. I love her.

Doctor: I thought you loved her brother.

BK: I DO love her brother.

Doctor: But you're willing to give him up in the bargain? How does that square?

BK: (Frowned.) I-I'm not giving him up. It's temporary. I just have to hang in with Jeff until Molly is better and then...

Doctor: Then what, Brian?

BK: (Hesitated, shook head.) I'm not sure. I had a plan, but things changed when she got so sick and then...it just got mixed up. But I love Justin. Somehow we'll be together. He just has to be patient, and...I don't know. Nothing makes sense anymore.

Doctor: Brian, you're on the verge of nervous exhaustion. You have to stop.

BK: Stop what?

Doctor: All of it. You need to fly somewhere quiet and sleep for a couple weeks.

BK: Don't be crazy. I can't leave Molly and Justin.

Doctor: And Jeff?

BK: (Shrugged.) I guess.

Doctor: Then you're going to crash, and you're going to burn, and your recovery will take a hell of a lot longer. You can't let Jeffrey do this, Brian. You can't handle it now. Let me help.

BK: Let me make this perfectly clear, Lydia. I won't do anything, nor will I let anyone do anything, to drive a wedge between Jeff and Molly. Not now. I won't let it happen. I haven't given up this much just to lose her in the home stretch.

Doctor: Magical thinking, Brian.

BK: She's made it this far, hasn't she?

Doctor: Yes, because of her medical care and her own will. Not because of your skill as a negotiator. You plan to take credit for her recovery if it goes well?

BK: Of course not.

Doctor: Then you can't have the blame either.

BK: I'm tougher than you think. I can sweat this out. So long as Justin stays strong for me, I can do it.

Doctor: Has he seduced you?

BK: Justin?

Doctor: No, Brian. Jeffrey.

BK: (Shrugged.) Define seduction. We had sex if that's what you want to know.

Doctor: Consensual?

BK: (Motioned to the tape recorder. Signaled for me to turn it off. I did so. What follows is my transcription from memory of what he said, to the best of my ability to remember his words.)

BK: He gave me a shot of something that made my dick hard and my heart pound. It was like super Viagra. And then he handcuffed me. And then he fucked me. Is that what you want to know? I was in such distress, he gave me a second shot afterwards that knocked me on my ass. It was the next best thing to heroin. If I didn't do it, he said he wouldn't treat Molly.

Doctor: This is illegal activity, Brian. A complete breach of his ethical duty as a physician, and an unlawful use of duress in exchange for sexual favors.

BK: So? You can't use it. I'll deny it. I won't let you compromise her recovery.

Doctor: I'm obligated to report him.

BK: I will absolutely deny it. You have no proof.

Doctor: You're in no shape to make that call, Brian.

BK: Try me. I just pulled myself together enough to convince a candy company to commit to a five million dollar spend with my agency, all with less than an hour of prep time. I can convince any tribunal that this claim is bullshit. Don't test me, Lydia. I've not only survived as a gay man in a straight man's world, but I've beaten them at their own game. If you don't think that requires balls of steel, you're wrong. I'll turn this into a vendetta against a brilliant, but gay, doctor.

Doctor: And who says you're not suicidal? You're killing yourself, Brian. Slowly, but surely. You can't take her place on that sickbed. You can't trade your life for hers. It doesn't work that way.

BK: No? What if you're wrong about that? What if you're wrong about magical thinking? What if there are powers out there that don't fit your textbooks, but are no less powerful? What about that?

Doctor: Who do that voodoo that you do so well?

BK: (Smiled.) It's all voodoo, isn't it? Her brother's blood in her body, fighting this disease we can't see, grafting to her bones as if she were born with it. Where does she stop and Justin begin? Is there really a difference anymore? It's his blood that is taking over her body. They took away her ability to have children. To be a mother one day. The radiation did that. What gender is she? Is she a girl or is she a girl on the outside and her brother within? It's all voodoo.

Doctor: Look at me, Brian. There's no magic here. Molly is no more Justin than she would be Joe Blow, some stranger who just happened to match her bone marrow. Don't let your fertile little brain further confuse the issue of your lover and his sister, and which of them you're trying to rescue.

BK: Jennifer told me once I was the reason he came out of that coma. He wanted to see me again.

Doctor: You believe that?

BK: (Sighed.) Not entirely.

Doctor: Love is a very compelling emotion. Your love for him couldn't help but assist in his recovery. Your love for Molly is a comfort to her and to her family. Your obsession is no help to anyone. Especially not to you. Step back.

BK: I can't.

Doctor: You must.

BK: Seriously, Lydia, I CAN'T.

Doctor: We need to do something about Jeffrey, Brian. He's dangerous.

BK: He's a brilliant doctor. How can he be dangerous?

Doctor: Because he thinks he's a God, and whatever he wants, is his by virtue of his divine entitlement. Well, guess what? He's not a god. He's a man. A man with a severe mental disorder. He shouldn't be treating anyone. What he's doing to you is evil and manipulative and potentially life threatening.

BK: So? He's not hurting Molly.

Doctor: Yet.

BK: What the fuck does that mean?

Doctor: It means, you don't know what he'll do if he feels as if he's losing his control of you, Brian. He has complete access to her and he knows how to manipulate her care to make a decline appear natural and inevitable.

BK: Stop it! Why are you fucking with my head?

Doctor: I'm not the one fucking with your head, Brian. He is. And you're letting him. You're endangering yourself and others with this twisted view of you as martyr.

BK: Say what you will about Jeff, but when it comes to kids, he loves them. He would never harm a child. And he cares very deeply about curing them. When I first met him, he was in tears over the loss of a patient.

Doctor: Because of the patient or because his invincibility was cracked by this failure?

BK: That's just cynical.

Doctor: No, Brian. That's symptomatic of his delusion.

BK: Don't fuck with me, Lydia. You don't want to see how I am when I'm really mad. You can't beat me down. I'll deny everything. And Jeff's reputation in the industry will support what I say. You can't prove anything, and I won't let you or anyone else interfere with Molly's care.

Doctor: You think I'm out to hurt you, Brian?

BK: (Looked away from my gaze.) No.

Doctor: Well, then?

BK: But I think you're wrong about how important Jeffrey is to Molly's care. Anyway, how do you know I'm not lying?

Doctor: About?

BK: About Jeff. About all of that. I'm a nutcase, right? What if it's all one big sick fantasy? What then?

Doctor: Take off your jacket.

BK: Why would I do that?

Doctor: Do it, Brian.

He removed his jacket, folded it over arm of chair.

Doctor: Now give me your right arm.

He extended his right arm towards me. I rolled up his sleeve and examined his inner arm and the bend of his elbow. I did the same with his left arm. No sign of needles. He is too calm, knowing I will find nothing.

Doctor: Take out your shirttail.

BK: This is getting too weird. No.

Doctor: Modest? Take it out, Brian.

BK: (Pulled out his shirttail.) What are you going to do?

Doctor: (Lifted his shirt and ran my finger along the tight ridge of his abdominal wall, locating a small red mark at the bulge of the artery feeding his groin.) What's this, Brian?

BK: A pimple.



Doctor: (Turned him around. Raised his shirt and uncovered another red mark high on his hip, just below his belt.)  
Another pimple?

BK: (Looked over shoulder, shrugged.) Adolescence is hell.

Doctor: Why do I think you've never had a pimple in your entire life? Fix yourself up.

BK: (Tucked in shirt, sat down again.) That was kinky. Enjoy yourself?

Doctor: This isn't a joke, Brian. This is your life. Your future emotional well being.

BK: (Leaned forward, rested his hands over mine. His expression was pleading.) Give me two weeks, Lydia. I promise I won't let Jeffrey near me with a needle or a pill. Please. Two weeks. If she's better, or even if she's not, we'll talk again about what to do. But please don't pull the rug. Not now. You could kill her.

Doctor: Or I could lose you? Or he could kill her? My choices are few, Brian. In fact, I'm not sure I even have a choice. I have an ethical obligation.

BK: What about your obligation to keep what we talk about secret?

Doctor: I would never reveal your name. I wouldn't have to do so to open an investigation.

BK: Give me two measly weeks, and then I'll help. Please.

Doctor: I can't promise anything, Brian. I'll need to look into my obligations.

BK: Molly has a team of doctors, so he couldn't hurt her, and I'll back off a little. I swear I will, Lydia. PLEASE.

Doctor: Two weeks in the progress of this disease is not much, Brian.

BK: Within two weeks, we'll know if she's going to live or die.

Doctor: You can't know that.

BK: I do know that. Call it voodoo or Irish intuition, whatever you want, but I do know that.

Doctor: Magical thinking.

BK: (Glances at his watch.) My car will be here. I have to beat the traffic to La Guardia. Thank you, Lydia, for giving me a chance.

Doctor: I've agreed to nothing.

BK: (Smiled, lifted jacket from chair.) That's not what I heard.

Doctor's Notes: I am very concerned about BK. He is physically and emotionally exhausted. He is being manipulated and controlled by a narcissistic megalomaniac. Jeffrey Walker is using his considerable skills as a physician to drug BK, and elicit his sexual favors. BK suffers from the fantastic belief that both he and Walker are keys to Molly's recovery. His magical thinking includes a desperate belief that if need be, he could bargain his own life for hers. There is no doubt he has placed his life in jeopardy, for he is unable to cope with Walker's attack. This false bravery has made him hostile to any attempt by me to "out" Walker for the dangerous man he is. He has requested a two week truce that I did not and cannot agree to honor. I will research my ethical obligations as a physician, and will speak to an attorney about how to proceed. My greatest fear is losing Brian's confidence, because he needs me more than he ever has, but not as much as he will.

## BETWEEN THE SESSIONS

(after session 17)

by Randall Morgan

ONE WEEK LATER.

Justin still felt nervous when he entered a parking garage alone, at night. His anxiety was vague, but he knew it stemmed from the bashing. Walking towards Brian's rental car in the hospital's garage after dark caused that crawling fear to return. He was exhausted, and that heightened his unease. His recaptured memory of the bashing was still limited. A glimpse of Chris Hobbes coming at him, wielding a bat. The sound of Brian screaming "JUSTIN!" just before the thud of wood hitting bone. Nothing more.

"Justin!" The voice echoed in the cavernous garage, the shock of it throwing him back into the memory. Only this time he saw soft lights, a circle of people, including Daphne, who was laughing with delight. He saw Brian, handsome as always in a dark suit, his body pressed to Justin's. The others were all watching Brian and Justin move together in languid unison. Someone was singing, "But don't forget who's taking you home and in whose arms you're gonna be. So darling, save the last dance for me!"

"JUSTIN!" The urgent summons cut off the memory, and Justin couldn't retrieve it. He stopped, turning to see Jeffrey catch up to him. While Jeffrey carried no bat, Justin still felt fearful.

"Is it Molly?" She was slowly progressing, but her improvement was so slight, they all knew she could slip back into critical illness at any time. Only Brian seemed convinced this was a corner she had turned, and she was on the mend.

"No change," Jeffrey responded. "Where are you going?"

Justin sighed, relieved. He considered his question, and then glared at him. "None of your business."

"You're meeting him, aren't you?"

"Meeting whom?"

"Don't fuck with me, twink. You haven't got the balls. Where is he? He's been gone for twenty-four hours. What the hell is he doing?"

Justin enjoyed seeing how desperate Jeffrey looked over Brian's absence. "You mean he doesn't tell you everything? I thought you were two were a couple."

Jeffrey grabbed Justin's shirtfront and slammed his back against the nearest car. This unexpected action knocked the breath out of Justin and filled him with dread. Jeffrey was big, as big as Brian, and powerfully built. Justin knew he was outmatched, and the bashing allusion returned in force. Jeffrey's handsome face was contorted in a mask of rage.

"Look, you little prick; Brian and I have a deal. Do you think I'm stupid? Do you think I don't know how he sneaks around, meeting you in a hotel room or some fucking closet to get his dick sucked or to fuck your little pink ass? Well, enjoy it while you can, baby, because when we go back to New York, the party's over. He's moving in with me, and I'll see to it that he never touches you again. You think he gives a shit about you? He's still working through his revenge for what you did to him. As soon as he convinces himself he can have as much of you as he wants, he'll lose interest. You're an undereducated, underachieving, vacuous little shit, and Brian deserves an equal as a lover, not some high school twink with a selfish streak. All he is to you is a checkbook, someone to pay the rent and keep you fed and cared for while you draw your little pictures and cheat on him. You don't give a flying fuck about that man!"

Justin inhaled sharply, and then said through clenched teeth. "I don't have to bribe him with the health of a sick kid to make him stay with me, do I? How can you say we're sneaking around when we're the couple? You are blackmailing him into sleeping with you, and nothing more, Jeffrey. You're one sick puppy. Don't you dare tell me I don't care about Brian when you're the one who's killing him. How can you get off with a man you have to coerce into fucking you? Who is physically and mentally sick over it? What kind of a fucking freak are you?"

Jeffrey looked as if he may hit Justin, but then the mask shifted and he looked icy calm as he said, "I'm the fucking freak that holds the key to whether your sister lives or dies. How much is that worth to you?"

"Problem here?" A security guard rolled up in the golf cart he used to patrol the grounds, and Jeffrey released Justin and glared at the man. The guard looked from him to Justin, recognizing Justin as the beautiful little blond having elevator sex. That was still one of the guard's favorite porn tapes. The man menacing him, dressed in a lab coat, obviously a doctor, was not the lover who co-starred with the blond.

"This is nothing to do with you," Jeffrey coldly remarked, dismissing this minion. The guard smiled wryly. Of course he was a doctor; he had that asshole superiority down cold.

"Want a ride to your car?" He asked Justin who nodded gratefully and hopped onto the cart. Jeffrey glared at him and said,

"You tell him to call me or I'm on the next plane to New York and I'm not coming back."

Justin responded with a one fingered salute as the guard drove him towards the aisle number he gave him. When they arrived, Justin unlocked the car, noticing the guard stayed there to make sure he got in safely. "Thanks for everything," Justin said with a smile, and the guard smiled back as he said,

"Thank YOU, kiddo."

Confused by that response, Justin just smiled and started the big Navigator, waving goodbye to the man without understanding what pleasure he had brought him.

Debbie greeted Justin at the door to her house as soon as he rang the bell. She hugged him and asked about Molly. He told her there was a little improvement, and then asked, "How is he?"

Twenty-four hours ago, Justin dropped an exhausted and completely depleted Brian off at her house. Debbie was reminded of when Brian was a boy and would show up with his bruises, left by his father, seeking sanctuary. This time his bruises were emotional, but his pain was no less extreme. Too tired to resist, Brian let Justin take him up to Michael's room, undress him, and put him to bed. Justin stretched out beside him until he fell asleep, which was almost immediate, and then he quietly slipped away and closed the door. Now, he was back, having spent the last day with Molly and Jennifer. By being visible at the hospital, he deferred Jeffrey's suspicion that Justin was with the missing Brian.

Debbie forced some pasta on Justin, which he eagerly devoured, sitting with him at the table, joined by Vic. "Honey, he's slept straight through. I've heard him get up to pee a couple times, and once he had a nightmare that was loud enough to wake Vic. I was at work."

Vic nodded. "I went in there and sat with him for awhile, and he drifted back to sleep, eventually, after I convinced him everything was fine and that he had only been resting a couple hours instead of twelve."

"Since then?"

"Not a peep," Debbie said. "I've looked in on him to make sure he's alive, and he's hardly moved."

Justin smiled. "Great! He really needed this sleep. Unfortunately, Dr. Demented has reared his psycho head and Brian's going to have to calm him down or he's leaving. I know Brian would go crazy if he left, he'd never stop blaming himself. And I also know my Mom would be terrified of the consequences."

Debbie glared at him. "God, that man is pure EVIL! I know Ben's plan is solid, but after seeing Brian come into my home like a ghost, I'm not sure he can hold out another week."

"I know Deb. How do you think I feel? Knowing Brian is having to fuck this guy, and then dealing with the aftermath of it, when he's so ragged and abused. It's torture. But no one is being tortured more than Brian. We have to hang in there, and do this the right way. My Mom and Molly are also innocent victims of Jeffrey's disgusting web of lies and deceit, don't forget."

"I know, Sunshine, I know," she patted his hand. "You go up and take care of him. I'm going to make him some French toast. It's his favorite breakfast. I don't care if it is after ten at night." Justin went upstairs, quietly entering the room and closing the door. Brian didn't stir as he sat beside him and smoothed his hand up his bare back. His skin felt like silk over iron, and Justin opened the drawer of the bedside table. He withdrew a small vial of lotion he left there, while staying with Debbie, an emergency backup if he ran out of lube while jerking off. He warmed some lotion between his hands, and then smoothed it on Brian's back and shoulders, gently massaging it into his skin.

Brian eventually awakened to this gentle caress, glancing over his shoulder at Justin who smiled and straddled Brian's hips, putting his weight forward on his knees. "Just relax, let me wake you up properly."

Brian smiled and closed his eyes, luxuriating in Justin's sweet attention. The sensation was delicious, relaxing his muscles and soothing his skin. He wasn't sure when it turned sexual, but suddenly Brian became aware of the fact he had a boner banging his belly and he flipped over with easy agility, pulling Justin on top of him and kissing him deeply. Justin stretched out on Brian's body, raising his arms so Brian could skin off his shirt. They continued to kiss as Brian lowered Justin's jeans and didn't stop as Brian rolled him under him and ground his pelvis against Justin's.

Justin finally came up for air and reached for Brian's erection, guiding it towards the destination they both wanted. "Have you done it bareback with Jeff?" He asked. Brian winced and shook his head, no. That was enough for Justin. He smoothed a drop or two of pre-cum down the shaft to ease the glide and Brian did the rest.

Downstairs, Debbie and Vic exchanged a look as the unmistakable sound of the headboard beating against the wall echoed through the ceiling. "He's baaaaaack," Vic said with a smile and Debbie laughed, turning off the heat under the griddle.

Eventually, Brian and Justin joined Debbie and Vic. Both had showered and shaved, and Brian's old vigor seemed almost restored. Neither Debbie nor Vic was sure if it was the sex or the sleep that did it. Probably both.

"I'm confused about the time," Brian said as he sat at the table, accepting Debbie's offer of French toast. It was never the wrong time for French toast. "Is it midnight? That means I only slept a couple hours? It feels like more."

Justin smiled at him. "Try twenty-six hours. It's midnight the next day."

"That's not possible!" He protested, slathering the hot bread with butter, powdered sugar and syrup. "I couldn't have slept that long."

"You remember having a nightmare?" Vic asked. "Remember talking to me?"

He shook his head and glanced at Justin. "Molly?"

"About the same, or maybe a little better."

Brian beamed. "I told you she turned a corner!"

Justin exchanged a look with Debbie. "The doctors say it could still go either way."

Brian shook his head. "We just hold the course, she'll be fine," he stopped mid-bite and looked suddenly worried. "Jeffrey. What did you tell Jeff?"

"Nothing," Justin said stubbornly. "He knows we weren't together because I was at the hospital, but that's all he knows and he's not happy."

"Shit! I'd better call him. This is the worst possible time for him to bolt!" He took that last bite on the run, picking up the phone in the living room as the others glared after him.

"Never thought I'd see Brian Kinney jump to someone else's fiddle," Debbie challenged Brian in a loud voice. He frowned at her.

"You know it's more complicated than that, Deb. It's for Molly. We can't let her down now." Jeffrey answered the call, and the others watched as Brian turned away from them and began to soothe Jeffrey's anger with reassurances. Justin sighed and shook his head, reaching over to finish Brian's toast as Debbie gave his shoulder an encouraging pat.

Jeffrey was waiting when Brian came into his hotel room.

"I stopped by the hospital on the way," Brian said with forced cheerfulness. "I think her color is better. Jennifer said she watched a little television today."

"Don't get too cocky, Brian. She can still die, just like that," he snapped his fingers.

"Don't say that," Brian said with a wince and Jeffrey glared at him.

"I have a reservation to fly back to New York in the morning."

"You can't leave now! Not just when things seem to be going well! Give it a few days. We don't have to go back until Friday for your Winterfest event. I thought the plan was that we'll fly out Friday afternoon."

"Why do I think you'll be on that plane with me, Brian?"

"Because I gave you my word. Because you can't trick fate. If I bailed, and Molly sank, either a week from now, or a year from now, I'd know it was because I tried to fuck with fate."

Jeffrey stood and grabbed a handful of Brian's hair, yanking his head back as he stared hard at him. "I don't want some shell of you, Brian. I don't want what's left over after you spend yourself on Justin. I want every centimeter of you, including all of this," his other hand cupped Brian's genitals and Brian sighed and nodded.

"I know what you want, Jeff."



"All of my peers and my friends will be there to see me get that award. And it is very important for me to be seen with a new, high ticket boyfriend. Someone who can compete with Freedy's image. Someone worthy. And you will be adoring, understand? None of your black Irish sulking."

Brian pulled free of him and sat down heavily on the sofa. "I'll be Fred to your Ginger, Jeffrey. Don't worry."

"At least you look better. It must be partially true that you've slept these hours. You were beginning to look fagged out. You need to get back in the gym."

"Yeah. Ok."

"Have you listed your loft?"

"Can't we just wait until we get back to New York?"

"Have you told Justin he has no free ride waiting for him there?"

"I will, ok? I WILL!" Brian fished a key to his suite out of his pocket. "I'm going to go change."

"For what?"

"I'm going to the health center in the hotel. You're right. I need to work out."

"At two o'clock in the morning?"

"It isn't that hour for me. I've been asleep forever."

"Before you go, Brian," Jeffrey lowered his zipper and pulled out his penis. He began stroking it as he stared at Brian's handsome face. "Take care of this for me, will you?"

Brian flared. "Take care of it yourself. You seem to be doing a pretty good job."

Jeffrey picked up the phone. "Front desk? Just to let you know, I'll be checking out in the morning. Could you have my bill ready? And I'll need a car around seven to...hold on a minute."

Brian came over to him, replacing Jeffrey's hand on his dick with his own. Glaring at him, nose to nose, with no spark of either excitement or affection, Brian began to masturbate him. "Never mind," Jeffrey said into the phone. "Change of plans." He hung up, sighing as Brian's expert touch excited him. He leaned forward and kissed him, finding Brian's lips stiff and unyielding. Jeffrey thrust his tongue against that barrier, and then placed a hand on the back of Brian's head, squeezing a handful of hair until Brian relented and admitted his tongue into his mouth.

Jeffrey explored the confines of Brian's mouth, arousing no reciprocal erotic curiosity, then pulled back and smiled. "Your mouth is so silky and smooth. Why don't you put it on my cock?"

"Jeffrey, just let me..."

"I said put it on my cock, Brian."

Brian sighed. "Ok, ok, I'll sit on the sofa and you can..."

"No," Jeffrey interrupted. "On your knees."

"Come on Jeff..." Brian pleaded.

Jeffrey responded by placing his hands on Brian's shoulders and urging him down. Brian bit into his inner jaw to quiet his response and closed his eyes as he went down on his knees and gave Jeffrey the submission he craved from him.

In the hallway of the hotel, outside Jeffrey's room, Brian leaned against the wall, his eyes closed. He could still taste him. Green, slightly metallic. He gagged, struggling to keep his stomach from rolling over. It wasn't the taste of the load that made him sick. It was the abject humiliation, the surrender of control.

"You can't trick fate," he had said to Jeffrey, and now those words came back to haunt him. He was superstitious, maybe, as he suggested. But he was also terrified of upsetting whatever balance there was in the universe that was giving Molly a shot at life. What if it was because of him? And what if he lost the good will of that fickle power, by going back on his bargain? He couldn't allow himself to think too hard about that conundrum. Because when he did, he couldn't see that light marking the exit anymore. Without that light, his whole world seemed to crush in on him with an unbearable weight.

"Justin," he whispered softly, but he knew Justin couldn't save him from himself. No one could. Numbly, he went to his own suite in the hotel, the one he had refused to give up, despite Jeffrey's insistence. He changed into sweats and tennis shoes, hoping that the mindless challenge of physical stress may clarify his thoughts and provide him with a plan. Sometimes his best advertising ideas came out of nowhere. Maybe he'd have the same luck with this. Doubting it, he stepped into the elevator, and pushed the floor where the health center was located. He wanted to do some weight machines, and also to run on the treadmill. Expending energy and getting nowhere was too indicative of his current status to pass up the guilty pleasure of irony.

## DECONSTRUCTING BRIAN

### Session 18

by Randall Morgan

Doctor's Notes: Not surprisingly, BK cancelled his appointment. He said he is still in Pittsburgh, but will be back in New York at the end of the week for a social event, and may be staying after that, so he'll be in for his next regularly scheduled appointment.

I doubt that very seriously, if he is still with Jeffrey Walker.

Walker's psychotic need for control will not permit BK the freedom to see a professional about his problems. Walker knows he is perhaps BK's most pressing problem at the present time and that I would work with BK to help him realize that and reach a solution.

More importantly to Walker, he may well know that if BK is telling me everything, I would question his medical ethics and perhaps pursue a complaint against him. His incredibly inflated ego would be devastated by such an action, since he views his healing powers as godlike and impeccable.

He would be right to be concerned.

I've been in communication with my attorney about what my rights and responsibilities are in a situation like this. I have to be careful to protect BK's privacy and identity, and yet I'm obligated to come forward if I believe Walker is misusing his position of trust and his professional access to the detriment of my patient.

I have no doubt that he is doing just that.

I also know Jeffrey Walker is not only well respected in his field, but he's wealthy and from a politically powerful family. I mention this because I know by filing a complaint against him, I will incur his wrath. More importantly to me, even though I protect BK's identity, it will be obvious to Walker that BK is the one who gave me the information I needed in order to file.

I am very afraid for BK.

He is already so deeply entranced by Walker's having made himself indispensable to Molly's care that he is extremely defenseless and vulnerable. What I would like to see happen is that BK would pull free of Walker before I make this filing. Otherwise, I sense the danger to him could be extreme. He would be the one person who could hang Walker when an investigation is opened.

Because of my concern, I have asked that BK meet with me on Friday, when he comes to New York and before his social event. I plan to attempt a direct intervention to see if I can force him to distance himself from Walker, at least temporarily. If I fail at that, I'm talking to my attorney about whether I should alert the police to my concern for BK's safety.

The fact that he's been so depressed and acting so far out of character sets him up perfectly for an apparent suicide, which I know is not on his horizon. But there are many ways a doctor can make a murder look like a suicide, and with BK silenced, the case against Walker loses much of its danger. While this sounds fantastic rather than realistic, I'm not convinced Walker is incapable of such extreme measures if he feels public humiliation is imminent.

BK agreed to meet with me late Friday afternoon. I am preparing my complaint with the assistance of my attorney and I plan to file on the following Monday. Hopefully, by then, I will have convinced BK his life is in danger and have seen to it that he is safely removed from this threat. If I'm unable to convince BK to leave Walker, I'll have to reconsider how to proceed in light of my legitimate concern for his safety.

I am having lunch today with the head of Pediatric Oncology at the teaching hospital where Walker did his residency. He is an old friend and I hope I can confirm some insights into Walker's character without giving away any information.

I've asked BK to call me if he experiences any undue pressure or fears before Friday. He sounds utterly deflated on the telephone, but he assures me he is still taking his anti-depressants. From what I can discern, Molly's condition has improved slightly.

This will be a difficult week for all.

## DECONSTRUCTING BRIAN/BETWEEN THE SESSIONS

(BTWN THE SESS, AFTER 18 & DECONST BRIAN, SESS 19, 20)

by Randall Morgan

### BETWEEN THE SESSIONS, After session 18

Brian was as nervous as a boy meeting his prom date at the door. He was finally going to get to see Molly! Dressed in gown and protective mask, he was being admitted to her isolation room because her blood levels were up, and because he was leaving town. He had even brought a gift for her that had been cleared by her medical team. He kept it behind his back as he walked in with Justin, blowing her a kiss through the mask after she blew him one. Hugging or kissing was not permitted. Molly was frail, but she was very aware of things as he pulled a chair up to her bed and looked at her grave little face.

"You can't tell with this mask, but I'm smiling," he said and she giggled. The sound was like silver bells to him.

"Because they let you come in?"

"Yes, and because you're so much better."

"I still feel crappy."

He laughed. "Is that a word princesses use in your kingdom?"

"It is if they feel crappy," she said reasonably. "You're going away, aren't you?"

"Just for awhile. I'll be in New York, it's not far."

"Brian, thank you for being my prince. For being there at my door every time I woke up. I would feel so scared, so certain something awful was going to happen, but then I would see you there, watching me, and I'd relax. Because I knew you would keep the bad things away."

He rested a hand on the covers above her bony knee, recovering his voice with some difficulty. "I always will, Molly. No matter what."

"I know. I believe you."

"I want you to get well more than anything in the world."

"I know. I'm trying."

"I know you are. Hey, with your brother's big strong bone marrow, how can you miss? Think you'll be able to draw when you're better? Like he does?"

She giggled again. "I wonder if you would love me more, like you love him?"

Brian sighed. "I couldn't love you more than I already do. It's not possible."

"Yes it is. You could marry me."

He laughed. "You're too short for me."

"Too bald for you, you mean."

"No, I like a girl with no hair. She takes a heck of a lot less time to get ready."

Molly groaned at his joke. "That sucks!"

"More princess talk?"

"Brian, are you gay?"

Brian heard Justin clear his throat, but he just shrugged. "You know what that means?"

"Yes, it's when boys like boys and girls like girls. I used to hear Mom and Daddy fight about Justin."

"I see. Yes, Molly. I am gay. I love your brother."

Justin came over and rested his hand on Brian's shoulder. "And I love Brian, Mol."

She looked from one to the other, and nodded solemnly. "If I can't have Brian, I'm glad you do, Justin. At least he's in my family."

Brian smiled. "Thanks, kid."

"But don't let him go, Justin, or I'll be really mad."

The two men exchanged a meaningful look. "Never," Justin said quietly, while Brian winced.

"They aren't going to let us stay, Molly," Brian told her. "We aren't supposed to tire you out. But remember when I met you that day in New York with your mom?"

"Yes."

"You told me you were looking for the prince with the glass slipper?"

"I said you were the prince with the glass slipper."

"No, I'm just his friend. I'm here to hold his place in line until you're grown up enough to see him. But he asked me to give you this so you never lose sight of the fact that he's out there waiting, and never settle for anyone less than the man who is perfect for you." He handed her a crystal slipper, small but perfectly formed from hand blown glass. It had a high heel and a bow across the toes. She reached out and carefully took it from him, her small hands caressing the smooth surface as she took in the wonder of what she held.

"Oh Brian, it's BEAUTIFUL!" she exclaimed, reaching out to hug him. Instead, he took one of her hands and pressed it to his lips, impeded by the mask.

"So are you, Molly. And don't you ever forget it. And don't forget what that slipper means."

"I won't. Not ever. I knew you would give me a glass slipper. I just knew it!"

"Now you get some rest. We should go."

"Brian, you will come back to see me sometime, won't you?"



"Of course, honey," he blinked back unbidden tears. "I'll dance at your wedding."

"Don't wait that long," she insisted and he nodded, reluctantly getting to his feet.

"Next time we meet, I want a big hug from you," he requested. She nodded, tears rolling down her cheeks as he waved a sad farewell, and left her room. Brian walked straight out of the hospital, still wearing the mask and gown, taking the stairs instead of the elevator, unaware that Justin followed. In the courtyard, his hands shook as he tried to light a cigarette, and Justin took it from him, lowered Brian's mask, and slipped it between his lips, then lit it for him. Brian inhaled sharply, exhaled, inhaled again, and blew it out. The nicotine calmed him.

"I don't want to go. I don't want to leave."

"Stay," Justin urged him. "Molly's better. Just stay and let him go. Fuck him."

Brian pulled Justin into his arms. "I can't. It's fate, baby. I can't trick fate."

"Bullshit," Justin insisted. "No such thing." He remembered the plan. He didn't push it. "We'll be together, Brian. Don't worry about that. We will be. This is just a temporary setback."

"Yeah," he released Justin from his arms. "Sure it is, Sunshine. I know," he didn't sound convinced. "But I have to leave now, pick up Jeff at the hotel and then head for the airport."

"I know."

"How can you be so brave about it?" Brian asked.

"Because I'm not the one going with that freak, and because I know it will work out. Maybe sooner than you think."

"I wish that were so."

"It is so, Kinney. Have some faith."

"Don't give up on me."

"Never," Justin said firmly, reaching up to kiss him. Brian let the kiss linger for a long time, as if afraid he would never kiss him as a lover again. Then he turned and walked away, unable to speak. Justin wanted to follow, but he forced himself to stand pat. They had a plan. He had to play his part. But it was excruciating to watch Brian walk off that way, full of dread and feeling utterly defeated. Justin sat down heavily on a bench, searching for strength he didn't know he had.

"So we'll change at my place and leave from there," Jeffrey said as the limo drove Brian and him from the airport into the city. Brian said nothing, saw nothing, felt nothing. He was as numb as a corpse. "Are you listening to me?"

"Drop me off at my loft."

"Why?"

"For one thing, I need to pick up my tux."

"Oh. We'll wait at the curb."

"No, Jeff. I want to go into my office for a couple hours. Find out if I still have a job. I'll be at your place in plenty of time."

"I'll give you something to pick you up when you arrive," Jeffrey insisted. "A little jolt. That ought to improve your personality. It's a party, Brian. Everyone will be there. I don't want to show up with a zombie."

"I'm just tired."

"You're more than tired. You're fried. You're not seeing that woman are you?"

"What woman is that?"

"That African female shrink."

"You mean African American? Lydia?"

"Exactly."

"Does it matter?"

"If you want to see a shrink, I'll refer you to a real doctor, Brian. Not some witch doctor. Or should I say BITCH doctor?" Jeffrey chuckled at his little joke.

"Lydia is one of the most respected psychiatrists in this city. What is WRONG with you?"

"With me? Are you telling ME who is well respected in the medical community? Aren't you the guy who sells dog food and douche?"

"Yeah, I sell dog food and douche. Why would you want to be seen with a guy like that, anyway?"

Jeffrey leaned over and kissed Brian on the temple. "Because you're such a pretty boy, darling."

Brian cringed, leaving the car as soon as it pulled up to his building. He waved off Jeffrey as he called out a time to him and escaped to the temporary sanctuary of his loft.

DECONSTRUCTING BRIAN, Session 19

Doctor's Notes: Brian arrived at my office, as pre-arranged, just before five. No matter what turmoil he had been through in the last few weeks, he looked like a movie star in his black, shawl-collared tux and pleated white shirt

with black jade studs and cufflinks. He sat down in the chair, resting a polished dress slipper against his opposite knee.

Excerpt from transcript:

Doctor: You look mighty spiffy.

BK: Thanks. I wish I felt spiffy.

Doctor: How do you feel?

BK: Like the cow in the chute just before they bring the mallet down on its head.

Doctor: That's descriptive. This is all for the Winterfest party?

BK: More than that. This is my debut in New York society as Dr. Jeffrey Walker's new bit of cooze. He's getting an award tonight, he wants to show off his latest scalp.

Doctor: Is that how you feel about it?

BK: No. I feel much worse than that about it.

Doctor: So why are you going through with it?

BK: You know why.

Doctor: I thought you said on the phone that Molly has improved.

BK: Fate, Lydia. I can't trick fate.

Doctor: Bullshit.

BK: (Laughs.) That's blunt.

Doctor: Snap out of it, Mary Sunshine. You didn't cure her by bargaining with fate, nor will you kill her if you make fate angry. You may succeed in killing yourself, however.

BK: What does that mean?

Doctor: It means you're severely depressed over this capitulation of your basic self to the utter control of a psychotic. You're turning away from the person you love, you're prostituting your body, you're in abject misery. You can't do this and expect to survive, Brian.

BK: I'm tougher than you think.

Doctor: No, you're really not. And I believe you're in no small danger. I think Dr. Walker is incapable of withstanding humiliation, and by this time Monday, he will be humiliated in front of his peers.

BK: What do you mean?

Doctor: I'm filing my complaint. Don't try to talk me out of it, Brian. It's my obligation as a physician. And I intend to inform the authorities that you are endangered by this man.

BK: You can't do that.

Doctor: I am doing that.

BK: We have a privilege, my privilege, to protect!

Doctor: If I fear you're in imminent danger, my obligation to protect you trumps that privilege, and I do fear that.

BK: Jeffrey would never kill me. He may be a freak, but he's not a maniac.

Doctor: I don't agree with the word "maniac", but I disagree wholeheartedly with your assertion that you aren't in danger.

BK: I'm a big boy, Lydia. I can take care of myself.

Doctor: See, that's what worries me. You believe that and yet nothing you've done lately would suggest it's true.

BK: Please don't do this. The whole thing with Moll, I just can't risk it. Please. She's only now doing better. I won't support your claims and you can't prove anything without my cooperation.

Doctor: Brian, I lunched with an old friend of mine. He's a vastly respected pediatric oncologist at the hospital where Jeffrey did his residency. He was chief of that practice at the time Jeffrey was there. Would you like to know how he described Jeffrey?

BK: (Silent.)

Doctor: I'm telling you anyway. He said Jeffrey struck him as a driven perfectionist who viewed cancer as "untidy" and against the natural order, so it had to be eliminated. He fought the disease with creativity and from multiple angles, and he seemed to care about his patients.

BK: See? That doesn't sound bad.

Doctor: But if the patient failed to prosper under a regimen, or the parents failed to see the merits of his protocol, Jeffrey reacted as if they were trying to make him look bad. The loss of a patient to the disease wasn't so much a personal loss as it was a loss of internalized prestige. He worried that Jeffrey's ego and personalization of the disease would not serve him well in a specialty where compassion and empathy are so important. Where the whole family has to be addressed. He thought Jeffrey was the perfect surgeon, but was not suited for the specialty he chose.

BK: I guess Jeff proved him wrong. He's been extremely successful.

Doctor: Yes, and my friend said he believes Jeffrey has developed some compassion towards these children, but that he's still myopic in his belief he's the only one with the clear view of what needs to be done. And he believes Jeffrey has a dark and volatile temperament.

BK: What's the point of all this? You have no proof and I have no choice.

Doctor: Brian, we always have choices. They may seem impossible, but they are still choices. I've made the choice to uphold my ethical code and file a complaint against Jeffrey. Even if he uses all of his power and his reputation to defeat me and to make me look foolish or vindictive, I'll always know I tried. I did the right thing. I couldn't live with myself if I didn't even try.

BK: Even if I won't verify your claims?

Doctor: Even if.

BK: He could ruin you.

Doctor: I suppose he could.

BK: Why would you take that risk?

Doctor: I take my ethical obligations very seriously. And I care what happens to you. I don't want you to be the victim of his narcissistic compulsion. Nor do I want anyone else to be. This is not a man who should be practicing medicine.

BK: Even if everything you said is true, think of all the kids Jeffrey saves from death. If he rode me into the ground, even killed me, and yet he saves fifteen kids who never had a chance otherwise, where is the ethical choice in that?

Doctor: I love the smell of burning martyrs in the morning, Brian. You're being melodramatic and are caught up in your self-image of Brian as savior. You saved Justin from the bashing, you saved your friends from their ups and

downs, you saved your mother from loneliness, you saved Molly. Doesn't matter what it costs you so long as you can play the hero.

BK: That's crap.

Doctor: Yes, it is crap. But it's also true.

BK: Lydia, I don't know what to do.

Doctor: Leave him. Don't go to this party, don't pass go, don't collect your two hundred dollars, just GO. Slip out the back, Jack. Make a new plan, Stan. By Monday, be distant from him and promise me you won't let him near you, or the police will be called into it. By me.

BK: (Sighed.) What happened to keeping your distance? Aren't therapists supposed to stay emotionally remote from their patients? Aren't you a little too caught up in it? Protective?

Doctor: Strangely, it's not personal, Brian. I know it seems that way to you, but it's his psychosis I'm fighting, not the man. I'm stopping him before someone gets hurt. It may not be you he hurts, but it will be someone if this train isn't stopped.

BK: If you do this, I'm not coming back.

Doctor: I understand, Brian. But as I said, I have to do what I know to be right. And I only hope you will see someone, if not me. Because we've made such progress, and I don't want you to have a setback. Not for any reason. You've come too far.

BK: (Shook head, sighed.) Don't make me leave, Lydia. There's no one else I can talk to like I can talk to you. First I lose Justin, now you? You're right. I am depressed.

Doctor: Both of those losses would be your choice, Brian, not ours. Think about that. Your motives may be laudatory, but the end effect is the same. You'll have isolated yourself and bricked up your emotions.



BK: What else can I do?

Doctor: Overcome your irrational fears and tell Jeffrey you appreciate all he's done for Molly, but it's over. Make sure someone else is there with you, if not in the room, in the house. And then... leave.

BK: I don't have the balls.

Doctor: I think you do, Brian. I think they may have retreated into your abdominal cavity a bit, but they're still there and still pumping testosterone. Let them drop and do what has to be done.

BK: I'm afraid.

Doctor: Truthfully, Brian, so am I. My career may well be on the block, and I fought very hard against impossible odds for this career. I don't threaten it lightly. You think you're risking Molly's health, but you're not. You need to reach back into your rational self and come up with a solution.

BK: (Stood.) I have to go. It's been great, Lydia. You've helped me. I appreciate that. I just wish...well, I know you'll do what you need to do.

Doctor: If you tell him before I file, I think I may be in danger myself, Brian.

BK: (Looks shocked.) Really?

Doctor: Yes, eliminate a threat. It fits his profile.

BK: I would never tell him. I would never let him hurt you.

Doctor: Thank you. Hero, again. I hope you consider what I said and leave him now and we continue as we have before. But if you can't see coming back here, I'll leave the names of several colleagues on your machine. Any one of them would serve you well.

BK: You ripped me open, emotionally, and I despised you for it, but now I understand why. I may not like feeling things so deeply, but I appreciate having the chance to feel. I owe you.

Doctor: Then listen to me, Brian. I have nothing to gain by leading you wrong. If you've never listened to me before, listen to me now. You have to get away from him. Immediately. In any case, before Monday.

BK: (Nodded. Paused at door, smiled sadly.) Goodbye Lydia. Thanks.

End of transcript.

Doctor's Notes: BK is now fully informed of my plan to file a complaint against Jeffrey. I told him I would go to the police if he is still with Jeffrey on Monday, and demand protection for him. I also told him he should leave immediately. He reacted predictably. He said he would never come see me again, and that he could not leave Jeffrey. He fears "tricking fate", meaning causing a downturn in Molly's condition. I've made a strong effort to get him to understand that his magical thinking is delusional and unrealistic. I have made no progress in that area. I also hope that if he is unable to return to me for therapy, he sees someone else. He is in a desperate phase of his treatment and needs professional help to weather these emotional storms. I truly believe BK is in mortal danger, either through long term drug abuse by Jeffrey's illegal prescriptions or a more direct route when Jeffrey is informed of my complaint. I dread the idea of placing BK in danger, and will consider it over the weekend before I make my move. But, like BK, at this point in time, I see no way out.

#### BETWEEN THE SESSIONS, After Session 19

Brian refused Jeffrey's strong offer of drugs. As miserable as he felt, he didn't want to dull or even enhance his reactions. The event spanned two nights. The first evening was dinner and dancing, with a special award for Jeffrey Walker. The second was a program of entertainment by up- and-coming artists as well as some well-known names. Many of these celebrities would also be at the dinner. Towards the end of the first evening, the program called for several of Jeffrey's friends and colleagues to give brief presentations about his humanitarian contributions to society, and then the Chairman of Winterfest would present the award and Jeffrey would give his acceptance speech. Brian was one of the speakers. Jeffrey wanted people to notice how clever, as well as how beautiful and successful, his lover was.

He wanted them to leave the event envying Jeffrey's professional success, humanitarian actions, but also his ability to pull the best men. First a well-known model, now a high flying advertising executive who LOOKED like a model. He and Brian had rehearsed what Brian would be saying, honing his remarks into a succinct, witty, affectionate homage. In the limo on the way over to the event, Jeffrey stared at Brian's classic profile.

"Are you ready for this?"

"Yes," he responded without looking at Jeffrey.

"Many of the people in that audience are CEO's of huge companies to whom you may well want to market your firm. You need to make a good impression."

"I'm a more than adequate public speaker, Jeff. Relax."

"Let's hope. If you make an idiot out of yourself, we'll both look bad."

"Why would I make an idiot out of myself?"

"I don't know, but I'd feel better if you'd let me give you something to remove that edge."

"I like my edge just fine," Brian insisted, slouching lower on the seat as he slipped back into silence.

Leo Chang and his partner, Bill, were alone at the large round table when Jeffrey and Brian joined them after cocktails. Table assignments were prearranged, and Jeffrey was at the lead table, nearest the podium. There was a cleared space for dancing and a live band was setting up.

The huge ballroom had been transformed into a winter wonderland. Small trees with bare branches were painted white and strung with white fairy lights. Gauze panels were draped from the ceiling and lit from within to give the appearance of a soft wintry light. The linens on the tables were white, edged in silver, and the floral arrangements were white and ivory. Even the candles were white, providing a soft amber glow.

Female guests traditionally dressed in white gowns, while their male companions were like formal penguins in their dark tuxes and white shirts. Brian had been to a lot of benefits and award ceremonies, but he had to admit, this one was well done.

"Where is everyone?" Jeffrey insisted to Leo as he noticed all the other tables were almost full already, while his was mostly empty. Leo shrugged.

"Can't imagine. Still drinking, I suppose."

"I left this part of it up to you, Leo, while I was preoccupied in Pittsburgh. You'd better not let me down. You had my list of who should be at my table. How hard can it be to arrange seating?" Jeffrey demanded.

"Not hard at all," Leo responded. "Relax, Jeff, they'll be here."

"They'd better be. It would be humiliating to have my table be the only one with vacancies."

Leo smiled broadly. "Yes, it would be, wouldn't it?"

Brian wondered at their exchange, anxiously awaiting the pouring of wine by the wait staff. He looked up and saw a lush blonde woman enter the room. Her clingy white gown was worn with a bolero jacket trimmed in white fox. Her fair hair was swept up in a chignon. The petite brunette accompanying her wore a white velvet two piece pants suit, cut low in the back. His eyes grew wide as they walked up to the table. Lindsay kissed his cheek and said, "Sorry we're late. Traffic was a bitch."

"What the hell are you doing here?" Brian insisted.

"Miss a party? Us? Never!" Melanie smiled and sat down across from Brian as Jeffrey coolly informed them, "Sorry, but these seats are spoken for. You'd better check the seating chart to find your table."

"No," Leo said with a droll smile. "They are part of the entourage for this table. It's fine, Jeff. You didn't want an empty table, remember?"

"But..."

"Where's Gus?" Brian insisted, and Lindsay smiled.

"Holding down the fort in Pittsburgh with my parents. Isn't that great? They actually volunteered to watch him."

"If you call having their arms twisted and boiling oil held over their heads 'volunteering'," Melanie added, causing Brian to smile.

Lindsay was in the art scene, after all. That was how Brian reconciled their presence to himself. This was probably arranged through the university where she taught. Then Ted, wearing a plain tux, entered the room. He was with Emmett who glistened in a white tailcoat and trousers, his shirt sprinkled with silver stars. He drew stares as he passed. Emmett rushed over to Brian, kissing him firmly on the cheek. He then kissed Lindsay and Melanie and gave Jeffrey a little wave. Ted's greeting was more subdued and Brian stared at Emmett as they sat down on either side of the girls.

"What are you doing here?" Brian asked, and Emmett smiled broadly, smoothing his star-drenched shirt.

"Someone told me it was a dress up party where the girls all wore white and well... come on, honey...how often do I get a chance to wear this FABULOUS outfit?"

"Once is too many," Ted grouched good-naturedly, then waved to Michael and Ben who just entered the room. Both were wearing traditional tuxes, and Jeffrey glared first at Brian, then at Leo.

"What the FUCK?" he insisted, and Leo's smile grew colder.

"Relax, Jeff. It's either this or empty seats. Did I forget to mention that I slightly edited your guest list?"

"Did you know about this?" He demanded of Brian, who shook his head in wonder, getting to his feet to embrace Michael in a bear hug, then give a less intense embrace to Ben.

"He knew nothing about it," Leo insisted. "It's as much a surprise for him as it is for you."

"So, Leo, is this your way of saying you never intend to sell another piece of art in this town? Because I assure you that's the effect of this stupidity," Jeffrey threatened him. Leo just shrugged.

"Confucius say, 'the gold in one's heart is far more precious than the gold in one's purse'. I guess we'll just have to see how it plays out, Jeff," Leo said with a deliberately inscrutable smile.

"What's going on?" Brian asked Ben. Ben shrugged and leaned in to whisper, "We're here for you, Brian. Your friends. We won't let you down."

Brian looked from Ben to Michael, feeling emotion squeeze his throat into a tight stricture as Michael smiled and reached up to kiss him. "Did you think we wouldn't care?"

"Nothing you can do," Brian said hoarsely, and Ben just smiled.

"Let's see, shall we?" He escorted Michael to a seat. There were only four empty chairs at the table now, and two of them were about to be filled by the two women who entered together. Debbie was resplendent in white lace, embroidered with rhinestones and seed pearls, an amazing combination of lace curtains meets the bride of Frankenstein. Keeping the winter theme in mind, her hair was decorated with silver tinsel, woven among her crimson curls. Brian felt certain radio signals throughout Manhattan were being scrambled by that mass of metal. In contrast, Joan Kinney wore simple white crepe and the diamond stud earrings Brian had once given her for Christmas.

He stood for them, accepting Debbie's strong embrace with an "oof" of expelled air, and then his mother kissed his cheek and told him he looked very handsome.

"Vic wanted to come, but he got a cold and didn't want to infect everyone," Debbie explained, taking her seat. Brian looked wistfully from the door to the two empty chairs, but Justin was nowhere to be seen. His absence spoke volumes to Brian. Dinner was served in courses, and the talk around the lead table was loud and animated. Brian participated only marginally, still in shock. Jeffrey was as silent as a tomb. Leo and Bill were having a great time with the guests from Pittsburgh, while Jeffrey plotted his revenge.

By dessert, Brian was more in tune with the party atmosphere, his disappointment over Justin's absence mitigated by the comfort of being around his closest allies. He was even laughing, until the band started playing and people began to dance. As soon as tango music began, Jeffrey stood and motioned to Brian to stand up. He shook his head, but Jeffrey's gaze was unyielding.

"Let's dance," he insisted. He wanted to rivet the attention of the audience with a sensual dance with his beautiful lover. That ought to divert the gossip from the embarrassing rubes who populated his table. Brian reluctantly stood

and allowed himself to be led to the dance floor. He automatically went into the moves as Jeffrey led him through a tango. Just as Jeffrey predicted, heads turned to watch the two tall, elegant young men glide together in perfect harmony. Brian began to lose himself in the beauty of the dance. He had fond memories of when Jeffrey taught him the basics, and wasn't this the same man?

He had to make the best of it; what other choice did he have? He closed his eyes, forgetting that his mother and his friends were watching, and surrendered to the rhythm. He forced himself to remember the good times they had, the cabin in the middle of nowhere, the museum, the clandestine meetings. But even those happier memories were contaminated by the guilt he felt over Justin, and the strong pull in his heart towards the man he loved.

But Molly...little Molly. She would be dead now if not for Jeffrey. How could he ever repay that kind of debt? And Justin had obviously decided to write Brian off or he would have come with the rest of them. If Justin was moving on with his life, why should Brian even consider tempting fate?

As Brian examined his options while dancing with Jeffrey, Ben made his way over to the band. As part of his war plan, he had investigated who was playing at the event, and then looked into the members of the band. He communicated with the leader by phone and by Internet, so the man was prepared for him when Ben approached. Ben had represented the song as a particular favorite of Jeffrey's, the guest of honor. Since Ben had sung with choral groups most of his life, he was more than prepared to take over the lyrics.

Michael and the others watched Ben with great anticipation as he picked up a handheld microphone. When the song changed, so did the lights. The spots became a soft blue, emphasizing the wintry atmosphere. Ben's voice was clear and deep as he sang,

"You can dance every dance with the guy who gave you the eye, let him hold you tight..."

Brian bolted into alertness. Jeffrey stopped, trying to adjust to the new beat, but Brian wasn't moving at all. His tension was evident.

"You can smile every smile for the man who held your hand beneath the pale moonlight..."

Brian was shocked by Ben's cruelty for choosing that number. How could he do this to him when Brian felt so vulnerable? How could he force him back into a memory that was so incredibly painful to bear? Remind him of everything he had lost in front of a crowd of people?

"But don't forget who's taking you home and in whose arms you're gonna be..."

Jeffrey looked at Brian, and then they both turned as someone intervened. The intruder tapped Jeffrey's shoulder. The crowd was entranced by the young blond man in the tux who had quietly entered from the back and made his way up to the star couple on the dance floor. Jeffrey glared at Justin with heated fury, but he knew he couldn't make a scene in front of everyone, so he forced a smile and stepped aside. Justin locked his gaze with Brian's. Brian couldn't move, couldn't speak, watching Justin remove a pristine white silk fringed scarf from over his lapels and drape it behind Brian's neck. He spoke these words as Ben sang them,

"So darlin', save the last dance for me."

Brian stared at him as he automatically moved into a dance stance, and began to sway with his lover. "Do you remember...?" Brian asked in a whisper, and Justin beamed as he responded,

"All of it. Every minute of it."

"But... since when?"

"Does it matter?"

Brian smiled broadly and began to recreate that moment, this time with Justin's complete involvement, as Ben sang, "Oh I know that the music's fine like sparkling wine, go and have your fun..."

The audience was as hypnotized as the kids at the prom had once been, drawn by the genuine heat and irresistible grace shared by Brian and Justin. Brian led Justin into a spin and focused only on his lover. The others on the dance floor stopped to watch, giving them room to operate.

"But while we're apart don't give your heart to anyone. And don't forget who's taking you home and in whose arms you're gonna be..."

He lifted Justin slowly, off the ground, Justin's hands on his shoulders, their eyes on each other, their smiles intended for no one else.



"So darlin', save the last dance for me!"

Ben moved into the bridge of the song. "Baby, don't you know I love you so? Can't you feel it when we touch?" Justin whispered in Brian's ear, the line Ben sang, "I will never, never let you go..."

Brian responded with the lyric, "I love you oh so much!"

They kissed, a long, passionate, impossible-to-mistake caress that brought all but one person at the lead table to their feet with a rousing round of cheers and applause. The noise didn't penetrate the spell cast between the lovers as they held the kiss through the last chorus of the song, barely moving to the beat.

When the song ended, the whole audience applauded. Being an artistic crowd, either they were homosexual or they supported the arts that were heavily populated by homosexuals. No one was so uncool as to be judgmental based on the shared gender of the lovers. Brian and Justin were strangely unaware of the applause, still enraptured with each other. They held hands as they walked off the floor.

"Ridiculously romantic," Brian said, and Justin beamed at him.

"The best night of my life."

Only when they reached the table, did Brian allow anyone else into his world. He congratulated Ben as Michael kissed his lover on the cheek and hugged Brian, and then Justin. "Ben E. King has nothing on you, man," Brian teased Ben, who laughed.

"Believe me, I know the only thing we share is a first name. He has a beautiful voice."

Brian glanced at his mother, unsure of what her reaction would be to her son's public declaration of his love as well as his sexual orientation. But Joan Kinney had been the victim of an imperfect romance. She embraced the fantasy of the romantic illusion, and was pleased to see it was personified in her son's relationship, even if his love match was another man.

It was then that he turned and saw the look Jeffrey was leveling at him. Poisonous, silent, deathly still. It gave him a chill. He reflexively placed Justin slightly behind him as if to protect him from harm. The master of ceremonies was at the podium, beginning the process of anointing Jeffrey as the great humanitarian that he was. Brian sat in the

empty chair next to Justin rather than by Jeffrey, their hands clasped on Brian's thigh as Jeffrey stared pointedly at the podium, a fixed mannequin-like smile frozen on his handsome features.

Brian felt as if he might explode from the stress. He had the incontrovertible joy of reliving a key moment in his life with Justin, their love rekindled even when it already burned bright. And yet, he had the cold disdain of Jeffrey, unsure what he would do to exact his revenge, coupled with the danger of tweaking his nose at fate. He didn't know what to do, not even hearing the praise others were heaping on Jeffrey as they came and went at the podium. And then he heard his own name being spoken by the emcee.

"Brian Kinney is a partner in the Madison Avenue advertising firm of BGGD&L. He has won numerous CLIO awards for his advertising campaigns and is a relative newcomer to Manhattan. Already, he's become an avid supporter of the arts. He is Jeffrey's partner, and he would like to say a few words about his close friend. Brian?"

Jeffrey glared at him across the table. Justin squeezed his hand. His mother smiled tensely. "Fuck him," Debbie mouthed the words, and Michael looked like a suddenly sick puppy. Lindsay shook her head as if to say don't do it, while Mel smiled, secretly pleased to see Brian facing an ethical and moral dilemma. Ben leaned across the table and closed his hand over Brian's as he said, "With deference to Leo, I'd like to quote one of my favorite Confucian wisdoms: 'By keeping silent when we ought to speak, much may be lost. By speaking when we ought to keep silent, we are wasting words. The wise man is careful to do neither.'"

Brian met his eyes and smiled slightly. He stood, noticing the nervous twitter that spread through the audience. After all, they had just witnessed his dance with Justin. No one could doubt the depth of their affection. And yet he had been introduced as Jeffrey's "partner"? They were confused and slightly amused by the subterfuge. Jeffrey grabbed his arm as he walked by. He kept his expression serene as he stood and whispered, "You fuck this up, you embarrass me, I swear to God everyone you know will live to regret it."

Brian flared at that threat, then forced a smile. He walked up to the podium, taking his notes from the pocket of his jacket. He stared out at the glittering crowd, deliberately avoiding the table of his friends as he began. "Jeffrey Walker is a brilliant doctor and a true humani... uh, humanitar...humanitarian," he cleared his throat. "Sorry. When I met Jeffrey, I was struck by how close he was to his daughter, Hannah," he paused again, shook his head. He coughed. A woman walked up and handed him a glass of water. He took it gratefully, then his eyes widened as he saw that the woman was Jennifer Taylor. He hadn't seen her looking so glamorous in so long, he hardly recognized her. She wore a heavily beaded white gown that conformed to her slim shape and her blonde hair was freshly coiffed. He stepped down, away from the microphone and asked,

"Who's with Molly?"

"Her Daddy. And Vic. He's not sick. The truth is, he's helping Craig babysit. She's just fine without me, Brian. I would really like to say a few things about Jeffrey, if you'd let me."

He nodded, stepping aside and standing behind her as she lowered the microphone to her height. Brian noticed that Jeffrey looked thrilled to see this lovely woman standing there, ready to tell her heart-felt story about how he saved her daughter's life, especially after Brian's bumbling start.

"My name is Jennifer Taylor," she said in a strong, calm voice. "That was my son, Justin, we all saw dancing with Brian earlier. I watched them from the back and I thought how lucky I am to see my son so healthy, so vigorous, so bravely in love. Because I almost lost him a year ago to a vicious gay bashing that Brian Kinney rescued him from, thus saving his life. Thank you, Brian, from the bottom of my heart."

He shook his head, wincing, as the audience applauded, spurred on by Justin's enthusiastic two fingered whistle.

"If there were ever two men who should be together, it's my son and Brian. They've been through hell and back, but I think we've all seen the true definition of love in the form of a simple dance earlier tonight."

Another round of applause. Jeffrey's wide smile began to fade. Jennifer continued, as Brian stared at her in wonder.

"But we aren't here to celebrate my son's recovery or the love two people share. We're here to talk about the miracles a man can work to save a child from what appears to be a certainty of doom. My daughter Molly was diagnosed with acute leukemia recently. Molly was a normal ten year old dynamo until that time. She had long strawberry blonde hair, freckles on her nose and a fascination for fairy tales and horses. Her cancer hit my family like a tsunami. We were all too shocked to be thinking clearly about her treatment. Nothing seemed to be working. She was sinking, fast, despite all the wonders of modern medicine." Jennifer paused, looked over at Jeffrey's table and smiled.

"Our good friends, many of whom are here tonight, shored us up, but it was one man who made the difference. One man questioned her treatment protocol. One man saw past the disease to the child, and nurtured her soul and gave her hope and even joy, when she was at her lowest ebb. One man sacrificed his home in New York, his work, his time, his love, to put Molly's recovery over everything else. Especially over his own needs and happiness."

Jeffrey preened as several people turned to acknowledge him. Brian tried to leave the podium, but Jennifer stopped him by placing a hand on his arm. "Please stay," she said off-mike, and he sighed and nodded.

"My son went through the pain of donating his marrow to give his sister a chance at life. For that, he will always have a special place in her heart and in mine. Not to mention a place of honor in her bones," there was laughter at that remark, and Justin blushed as Debbie leaned over to kiss his cheek. Jennifer continued.

"But for anyone who has ever battled leukemia or any other cancer where a bone marrow transplant was indicated, you know the big struggle is after the procedure. Molly has struggled mightily. More than once, we feared we would lose her. But he was always there, and he never gave up on her. He saw to it that she had the very best that modern medicine had to offer, no matter what he had to do to get it for her. He was tireless. He was tyrannical with the staff when he believed she was not being treated appropriately. He was questioning results when the rest of us were too tired to think clearly. And he not only took care of Molly. He took care of me. He took care of her brother. He took care of everyone but himself."

Brian looked up, a slow ray of knowledge breaking through his confusion. Jennifer went on. "I'm pleased to say that Molly is better. She still has a long way to go, but we are hopeful that the worst is behind her now." She acknowledged their applause with a smile. "When I told her I was coming here tonight, to tell everyone how much we appreciate the dedication and devotion of this man, she asked that I give him a little gift from her." Jennifer opened her beaded bag and withdrew a plastic figure of the Beast from Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*. She held it up and said, "As you can see, this guy has a very convincing camouflage. He looks gruff and forbidding, as if he either has no heart or his heart is impenetrable. But voila," she pulled off the costume that slipped over the beast's head and shoulders. Underneath was the handsome image of a prince. "It's all one big hairy act. Underneath it all, he's a prince of a guy. He's Molly's prince, he's my prince, and most of all, he's Justin's prince. Brian, for everything you've done for my family, my children, my daughter, this prince is for you."

She handed him the doll, and he took it from her, then hugged her tightly as the audience overcame their surprise and found themselves applauding a man they didn't know, who was given an homage they didn't expect, but that he seemed to greatly deserve. Jennifer smiled, as she turned back to the podium. "I promise I'm almost through. I know we're here to honor Jeffrey Walker. He was one of the doctors who treated Molly. I have one thing to say about that fact. Jeffrey, you're fired. If you come near my daughter or try to influence her treatment in any way, I'll have you arrested."

Nervous laughter and then a pall of silence fell across the room as it became obvious that she was serious. Jennifer cut her glare from Jeffrey's furious face to the crowd. "Thank you for your patience. Good night." She left the podium as Brian stepped up to the microphone, his composure regained. He looked at the doll and smiled. By firing Jeffrey, Jennifer took the sting out of Brian's fear of a tricked fate. Fate would follow its own course now, because it was beyond his control. If she had no intention of letting Jeffrey near Molly, then Brian had no reason to continue with this false friendship.

"Just my luck," he said into the microphone. "My one award and it's fully clothed," the laughter was a release of tension, and Brian smiled in Jeffrey's direction. "I can't fire you, Jeffrey, because I didn't hire you. I want to thank you, though. Thank you for the positive work you did with Molly. I believe you made a difference in her recovery. I believe you're a very talented doctor. I believe that makes it all the more tragic that you're also a psychotic sack of

shit. You used drugs and extortion to get me to sleep with you and stay with you, threatening to stop treating Molly if I refused to cooperate. You knew I was in love with another person, but you would stop at nothing until you had me. And you used the tenuous life of a little girl as your bait. Killing's too good for you, Jeffrey. Too quick. I want you to suffer the humiliation of ostracism, socially and professionally. I want you to know the pain of a 'political death' as the ancient Greeks called it. And I want your money, so I can start a fund, to be named after Molly to help kids with cancer who don't have the means for the best treatments. You won't need it anyway, because the way I hear it, you're going to be in jail for awhile. See how well your mind games work in Oz," he walked over and picked up the crystal award that was to be given to Jeffrey and placed it on the podium.

"Don't forget this when you leave, Jeff. I want you to look at it everyday and remember: 'This was the night my life as I knew it came to an end'."

Jeffrey stood, slightly unsteady and felt the cold, inquisitive gazes of all the other guests. He forced a mask of calm, even smiled. He considered going up to the podium and rebutting these character assassinations. He had never felt such fury, but beneath the anger was an emotion that made him feel much worse, much more desperate. Beneath the anger was a dreadful slimy coating of humiliation. He felt ill, he felt like killing someone, he felt like hiding in a cave. People were smirking at him, whispering behind raised hands. He didn't deserve this treatment! He was a doctor for chrissakes! And a brilliant one! Who were these trashy people from Pittsburgh to ruin his event? To embarrass him in front of his friends? How dare them!

Jeffrey decided the people in this room didn't deserve his rebuttal. If they chose to listen to trash rather than depend on what they knew about him personally, then fuck them! No one tried to stop the bitch or even Brian. No one spoke up for him. These people didn't rate his presence and support. Let them come crawling to him for his forgiveness. He turned on his heel and left the ballroom at a brisk pace. A murmur spread through the crowd, and Brian silenced them by saying, "That concludes the award portion of our program," he turned to the band. "Maestro, put on your red shoes and dance the blues."

Brian left to a round of applause, returning to the table as the music began. The others engulfed him. He cut through them and sought out Jennifer, whom he kissed on the cheek. "Thank you."

She stood and wrapped her arms around him. "Thank you, Brian, and I'm sorry for being so blind."

"You saw what was important. Did you guys plan all this?" He looked from her to Michael to Ben as Justin hugged Brian tightly.

"We all played different parts," Michael responded. "Ben was the brains behind the plan, of course. Lindsay used her art contacts to get us tickets and of course Justin was the link to Leo. Leo got us the table assignment and the low down on how the program would line up. Mel researched the legalities before talking to Jennifer. Didn't want the

evil doctor to sue us for libel, or is it slander? I found that extremely collectible doll that Molly wanted to give you, through my contacts in the biz," he beamed at Brian. "Emmett got us the tuxes through his rag trade contacts, and Ted found a deal on the airline tickets and negotiated them down. Mom kept everyone fed and from squealing to you. And she made her own dress, of course."

"I told them I'd make them work one of my shifts at the diner if they squealed," Debbie boasted to Brian, who laughed.

"And your mom, Joan, helped Jennifer understand what had been happening with you and with Walker. She also spoke to Lydia about how worried we all were."

Brian went over to hug his mother and she smiled and patted his cheek gently. He then glanced at Michael. "Where's Dorothy and her little dog Toto, too?"

"She must have left when the wicked witch made his exit," Justin quipped.

"That's DOCTOR wicked witch to you," Brian teased.

"Not for long," Debbie insisted and they all laughed.

"Look at us, we're all beautiful, we have limos, let's get the hell out of here and go to a real club!" Emmett pleaded and Brian sighed.

"Let me think of a club where the Pittsburgh Queens and my mother could feel equally comfortable. Nope, nothing springs to mind," Brian mused.

They all decided to go eat instead, the official dinner largely unfinished due to the tension. Brian found it easy to recommend some good restaurant choices. They settled on one. As they left the ballroom, they began to split up and pour into limos. Brian stopped Justin from getting inside the car. Justin looked confused, then Brian leaned in the open doorway and said, "Justin and I are going to go home and boil an egg. You guys have fun. We can meet for brunch before you fly back tomorrow."

No one protested, because no one was surprised. Brian watched the limos pull away, then waved down a cab and gave the driver the address of his loft. In the back seat, he pulled Justin close and kissed him deeply.

"Boil an egg?" Justin teased and he shrugged.

"It seemed an easy thing to cook."

Justin leaned his shoulder against Brian's in a casually affectionate gesture that spoke volumes. "What if I don't want an egg?"

"Then I guess you'll have to settle for some ass licking, cock sucking, butt fucking, pelvis grinding, jism soaking, tongue slurping, tit tweaking, nose bleeding, heart stopping makeup sex."

Justin bit into his inner jaw to keep from laughing as midtown Manhattan merged into the Village and finally Soho. "I can get into that," Justin mused. Brian paid the cab and once they were on the sidewalk in front of the loft, Brian pulled Justin into his arms, moving him to a rhythm in his mind as he softly sang, "Baby, don't you know I love you so? Can't you feel it when we touch?"

Justin smiled and moved with him, responding, "I will never, never let you go. I love you oh so much."

"Hey, guys, save the last dance for me!" A man called out as he walked past them and Brian beamed at him, watching Justin punch in the code to the door.

"Sorry," he said to the stranger. "Our dance cards are full."

With that, they disappeared into the building together, and the door closed on the rest of the world, locking with a satisfying click.

DECONSTRUCTING BRIAN, Session 20 (Epilogue)

Doctor's Notes: BK showed up on time for his regularly scheduled session, dressed casually in jeans and a rugby shirt. He looked rested, healthy, tall cups of chai in each hand, one for each of us.

Excerpt from transcript:

Doctor: (Accepted tea from him.) Not working?

BK: Nope. We're leaving tonight.

Doctor: Leaving? Who is we?

BK: Justin and I.

Doctor: Where are you going?

BK: Florence, Rome, Venice, Amalfi Coast, Portofino. The whole Italian thing.

Doctor: Wonderful! For how long?

BK: Three weeks. If we don't kill each other after that much togetherness, I guess we can make it as a couple.

Doctor: My money's on the two of you. Of course, it sounds as if you might want to take along your old pal, the shrink. What do you say? Portofino should be a nice break from this wintry weather.

BK: (Laughed.) If I have my way, the most we'll see of any of these places is when we come up for air once a day. I plan to spend the bulk of the time between the sheets.

Doctor: And by that, I hope you mean sleeping as well as the obvious. You need to sleep off a serious deficit.

BK: Yeah, sure, Lydia. I'm sure we'll sleep...occasionally.



Doctor: I hope you two have a wonderful holiday. On a less bright note, I understand you filed a criminal complaint against Jeffrey yesterday.

BK: Yep, the process servers should've been at his door all day, between your ethical complaint and my criminal charge. And I have a lawyer working on a civil suit. I intend to file when we get back from Italy. I want his goddamn money. I want to set up a fund for sick kids with his cash.

Doctor: I hope he's seeing a shrink. He'll need help to get through this humiliation.

BK: Don't feel sorry for him, Lydia. He's a monster.

Doctor: It's not about sympathy. It's about psychosis. He needs serious professional help. As you know, its very difficult for people with narcissistic qualities to seek assistance. Especially doctors.

BK: Yeah, well, Hannibal Lecter was a doctor, too.

Doctor: Your resentment is natural after all you've been through, Brian. But it's far more harmful to you than it is to him, so we need to help you get past it.

BK: I'll leave it behind somewhere over the ocean on my way to Italy. I don't intend to have Jeffrey in a gondola with us in Venice.

Doctor: Your reservations about Justin's sincerity...gone?

BK: He couldn't have proved his love any more vividly if he walked burning coals and drank acid.

Doctor: That sounds convincing. Good. He had a complete recovery of his memory of the prom?

BK: (Leaned back, smiled. Crossed legs and rested folded hands over his knee.) No way.

Doctor: But on the phone...

BK: He was standing there. I had to say it. He wants me to believe him, so I do. But between you and me and the apple tree, he isn't being honest. I think he remembers a little more, flashes, but not the whole thing. Maybe he never will. But I don't care anymore.

Doctor: First, why do you suppose he's telling you he remembers if he doesn't?

BK: To please me. He knows how much it means to me.

Doctor: I see. But it's not so important to you now?

BK: (Shrugged.) Nope.

Doctor: Why not?

BK: It was not about the dance, Lydia, it never was. It was about love. It was to show him how much I loved him, even then. It was to prove an emotion.

Doctor: Then why is it less urgent now than it was awhile ago, Brian?

BK: Because we found a different way to prove that proposition. There is no way Justin can doubt my love for him now, nor can I doubt his.

Doctor: I see.

BK: (Grinning.) Besides, we have a new dance to remember. Same old song, but different audience and very different resolution, thank God.

Doctor: Don't attach too much to a dance, Brian. It's just a symbol. But never forget the emotions you are feeling right now. They'll get you through a lot of adversity.

BK: I won't. Burn me once...you know the rest. I'll be back in after we return. I know I still have big issues to work through with you, Lydia.

Doctor: Good, and yes, you do.

BK: Should I still take the anti-depressants?

Doctor: Absolutely. Brian, how are you feeling about leaving the country while Molly's in the hospital?

BK: We discussed it with her medical team. They're moving her out of isolation at the end of the week, and if she continues to improve, she can go home in two weeks. Once she goes home, she still has to avoid crowds and take it easy. After six months, presuming she's stayed healthy, she can resume most of her normal activities. We can't continue to hover over her.

Doctor: That's great news, and a logical response.

BK: Don't get me wrong. I intend to see her often. We're flying to Pittsburgh when we get back to spend a couple days with her. (Paused.) She's my family now.

Doctor: And your mom?

BK: (Laughed.) Yeah, she's family too. Seriously, I think she and Jennifer have formed a strong friendship. It's made a big difference in how she views Justin and me.

Doctor: Excellent. While you're gone, if you get anxious, or feel yourself slipping into a funk, call me, Brian. I ask that you be sensitive of the time difference, but do call.

BK: I'll remember that. I need to go, Lydia. I have to pick up Justin at the passport office. He did an emergency walk through to get his passport in a timely manner. But first, I have something for you.

Doctor: You pay me for my time, Brian. No gifts, please.

BK: You won't worry about this one, believe me. (Handed me a small card. It's a frequent buyer card from Starbucks. All of the boxes are stamped except one. When it's stamped, the bearer gets a free coffee or tea.)

Doctor: You can use this when you get back.

BK: I want you to have it. I want to think of you drinking chai while I'm gone. You can't help but think of me, and that will be nice. I'll sit at a sidewalk café in Florence, sipping espresso, and you'll be here with your chai. I won't feel quite so disconnected.

Doctor: Brian, you're a dangerous romantic commodity. You could cause a table to fall in love with you.

BK: (Leaned forward, squeezed my hand briefly.) If I were a few years older, and straight, I'd show you dangerous. And to hell with all those ethical things about doctors and patients.

Doctor: (Laughed.) And if I were an elephant, I could lift a telephone pole with my nose. Go. Have a wonderful time and call me when you get back.

BK: (Stood, paused at the door.) Lydia?

Doctor: Yes, Brian?

BK: Thanks.

Doctor: You're very welcome.

BK: (Winked slyly, smiled, left.)

End of transcript excerpt.

Doctor's Notes: BK is on his way. On his way to Italy, on his way to self-awareness, on his way to true love. He still has issues, resentments, fears to work through, but the crisis is past, and he survived, stronger than before. He made rational judgments when forced to do so, and has had important support from people about whom he had ambivalent feelings. This proof of love is very important to a man with BK's insecurities, and was wisely planned and delivered. There will be tension as he and JT put their relationship together, but I am hopeful that it will go well for them both. I expect to hear from him upon his return, and not before. His vacation plans don't include therapy sessions.

Lydia cut off her recorder. She placed the tape in her desk and locked the drawer. Later it would be transcribed and filed with the rest of Brian's sessions. She stretched and went over to the window, staring out at the late afternoon traffic. She glanced across the street to where a man was standing in the shadows. He was staring at her building, at her window. Or was he? She felt as if he was. She tried to place the face, then inhaled sharply as she realized the man was Jeffrey Walker. Dressed in jeans and an oversized parka, he hardly looked the elegant socialite, but then, that image had been attacked soundly on multiple fronts in the last twenty-four hours.

A truck passed between the man on the street and her line of vision. When she looked back, the man was gone. Lydia looked up and down the street, but saw no sign of him. She sighed. She was probably wrong about his identity anyway. Walker had been on her mind so much for the last week or so. She was probably projecting her anxiety. Or was she?

Brian had been her last patient, and she picked up her purse and pulled on her coat, pausing to give her assistant a few last minute instructions before taking the elevator down to the garage. When the doors opened, she hesitated, remembering the man on the street. Steeling herself, she looked around. Seeing no one, she walked briskly to her car. She was embarrassed by her own uneasiness.

Safely ensconced in her locked Mercedes, she pulled out and started towards the exit. As she entered the traffic on the street, the increased lighting illuminated the glint of a CD jewel case on her passenger seat. She didn't recognize it, noting it was a homemade recording or re-recording. Lydia immediately thought of her teenaged daughter, who frequently burned her own CD's.

She slid it into the sound system, listening to Ben E. King sing, "You can dance every dance with the guy who gives you the eye beneath the pale moonlight..." Lydia knew this was not a CD burned by her daughter. It wasn't vulgar and discordant, the two hallmarks of the music she seemed to favor.

She listened to the soothing music as she drove, concerned about where it came from and why, but finding the song selection soothing and melodic. The lyrics were nice, unthreatening...but something nagged her about it. How did it get in her locked car, anyway? She never failed to lock her car in the garage. Who would break in and leave a CD of

nice music? Why? When he sang "save the last dance for me", Lydia thought of Brian and his fixation with his dance with Justin. Did he ever tell her what song was playing when they danced? If it was this song, could Brian leave it for her? She thought not. That was a creepy thing to do, and he was very positive and upfront with Lydia.

She thought of the man on the street, the man who looked like Jeffrey. Suddenly, the words "last dance" seemed far from romantic. Suddenly, Lydia felt very afraid. Not just for herself, but for Brian and Justin. She glanced at her watch, hoping they were boarding a plane by now, leaving the country. They deserved a little happiness, she thought with a hint of anger. And Jeffrey, well, Jeffrey deserved what was coming to him and she was determined to see that he got it. She refused to be deterred by his evil little games.

"You've met your match, doc," she said aloud, turning up the volume of the CD and wailing along with Ben E. King, reclaiming the song for the love ballad it was meant to be.

The End

Reconstructing Brian

by Randall Morgan

Reconstructing Brian - A novel by Randall Morgan

PROLOGUE: New York City

Brian and Justin sat at opposite ends of the bench seat in the limo, staring at the city through opposing windows while lost in their separate thoughts. They were both tanned from their journey. Justin's hair was bleached almost white in places from exposure to the sun. Even Brian's auburn locks were shot through with strands of gold. Back in New York, they watched as the city fell victim to a sudden rainstorm. The skies went from blue to gray so fast it was as if someone had lowered a metal security shade. They shared a communal sigh, and Brian stretched his long arm across the distance between them, wiggling his fingers at Justin.

Justin smiled and threaded his fingers among Brian's, gripping his hand tightly. That one gesture made the weight of their return much easier to bear. Their vacation had been idyllic. More than a honeymoon, it established between them of what they each hoped their relationship would become. Returning to their real lives, fraught with traps and challenges, felt suddenly threatening. They were soaking wet by the time they got all their luggage out of the limo and into the loft building. The loft itself had the slightly stale scent of a place left unused for too long. Brian's cleaning team had ensured it was gleaming, but it felt empty and lifeless, as if impatiently awaiting their return.

Justin put on music and started a fire in the hearth while Brian retrieved a bottle of water and replaced his wet clothes with a robe. They left their luggage dripping on the slate floor just inside the doorway.

"Are you hungry?" Justin changed into sweats and came into the kitchen where Brian was listening to messages on the machine.

"Yeah, let me troll through these and we'll order something in. Too jet lagged to go out." There was no food in the refrigerator since they'd emptied it of all perishables before they'd left.

Justin retrieved a tote bag and began unwrapping the items contained in it, each piece carefully protected in bubble wrap. He sat the unwrapped examples of sunny Tuscan pottery on the coffee table, and the rainy day suddenly seemed less dark. He had chosen this pattern from among the many at the factory. It was the traditional cobalt and white with touches of golden rod and terra cotta, all in designs of flowers and leaves and stylized graphics. There were dinner plates, salad plates, bowls and mugs. The platter and pitcher were being shipped. He envisioned displaying them above the cabinets to add some color to the kitchen.

Watching Justin carefully unwrap these souvenirs of their trip caused Brian to smile. He had incurred way too much expense during the month they'd spent in Italy. He'd charged up his credit cards, a personal pet peeve, and dipped into his financial cushion. He'd wanted the trip to be something they would always remember and part of that equation was to give Justin anything that made him happy. He could replenish the money, but they could never recapture their first trip together. It had to be perfect, so it was.

"Brian, this is Felix Kimbrough," a deep and commanding voice leapt out at him from the machine. Kimbrough was the managing partner of the advertising agency and Brian's ultimate boss. Brian seldom had direct dealings with Kimbrough, working more with the layer of senior partners directly under him. Kimbrough had left the creative end of the business to become a rainmaker, seeking out new accounts to add to the agency's coffers. It was very unusual for him to call Brian, especially at home. "I know you're just returning from your vacation today, but I need to see you first thing when you come in tomorrow morning. Be in my office by nine."

Brian frowned and turned off the machine, sitting beside Justin on the sofa, watching him admire the pottery. "Why is your big boss calling?" Justin asked casually.

He never missed a thing, Brian thought as he shrugged, "Must be some mondo project they want me to do. Jump right back in it, I guess," he leaned over and kissed Justin's lightly freckled cheek. Exposure to the sun had temporarily dappled his porcelain skin. Blonds, Brian thought with an internal smile. "You want Chinese? Thai? What?"

"I really want a big juicy hamburger. I've missed big juicy hamburgers."

"Okay, then let's order from Bubba's. That'll satisfy our grease quotient for the week. Did you hear that message from Leo Chang? It was for you?"

"Yeah, he wants me to call. Cool. Maybe he made some headway getting me into the Art Institute here."

"Maybe you can start mid-term. That would be good, because then you wouldn't be far behind your class."

They ordered dinner, and Justin met Brian's eyes. "We have forty-five minutes. Can you think of anything to do?"

Brian smiled wryly. "Unpack?"

"The honeymoon is definitely over."

Brian laughed and leaned him back against the sofa and kissed him. Both of them flinched when the phone rang. Brian, always unable to ignore a ringing phone, picked it up. "Yeah?"

"Welcome home, world traveler" Michael said.

"Hi, Mikey. Look, I was just..."

"This will only take a minute of your busy time," Brian hated it when Michael turned pissy.



"No, I want to talk to you. It's just... can I call you back after our dinner arrives so we'll have time to talk uninterrupted?" he moaned softly as Justin reached inside his robe and squeezed his dick.

"I just wanted to tell you about Jeffrey."

"I really don't want to talk about Jeffrey," he said and Justin stopped fondling him, his expression suddenly tense.

"Did you know he left the United States? He wasn't supposed to leave, but he did. He was in Italy. I wanted to tell you while you were there but everyone made me promise not to. They said it would ruin your vacation. I argued that you should be told so you could be on the lookout."

Brian frowned and scrubbed his fingers through his hair. "I'd really rather have known that Jeffrey was in Italy, but since we're back, I guess we don't have to worry, right? Nothing bad happened to us over there."

"Because they arrested him and extradited him back to the United States. He's in jail now, awaiting trial. You'll probably have to testify."

"Shit," reality banged in on Brian like a collapsed roof. He had deliberately forgotten Jeffrey while they were in Italy. The way he drugged Brian, blackmailed him by using Molly's health as his weapon, toyed with his nerves until he was on the breaking point. He had never felt so helpless, used and miserable. As much as he hated the idea of testifying in open court about his own fallibility, he had no reservation about doing so if it meant Jeffrey would be locked up.

"So how was it?" Michael asked cheerfully as if he had not just delivered dreadful news.

"Later, Mikey."

Justin stared at his lover as he hung up. "It's so weird, Bri. I swear I saw Jeffrey when we were in Florence. You were shopping. I was taking in the art. I saw him in the crowd, and then he was gone."

Brian glared at him as he said, "You never..."

"I didn't want to worry you, and I thought it must be my imagination."

Brian reached out and spread his hand on Justin's cheek. If anyone suffered more than he did at Jeffrey Walker's hand, it was Justin. He pulled him into his arms and held him tightly. "It's over now. You heard that Lydia called me, right? I'm making an appointment with her and you need to get back into that regression therapy."

At the awards dinner, when their situation with Jeffrey hit a crescendo, Justin rescued Brian while the band played "Save the Last Dance". Brian believed his lover had finally recalled the magic of that moment they'd shared at the prom. Only when they were in Italy did Justin admit that his memory was still blocked by the bashing, and that he had only pretended to remember in order to reassure Brian.

By then, Brian was finally able to have confidence in their love for each other, even without the framework of the prom. Despite that confidence, he wanted Justin to work through this block, believing it was harmful to keep the attack bottled up in his subconscious.

"I know," Justin snuggled close to Brian's chest, listening to the soothing thump of his heart. "I promised you I would. I want to remember. I even want to remember the bashing and get rid of it once and for all."

"I'll be here with you, if you need me, Justin. You won't have to do it alone."

"I know you will be, Brian," he squeezed him tightly. "I trust you."

They held each other as the rain pounded against the glass casement windows. Rather than having sex, they simply enjoyed a quiet moment together before their food arrived. This peace was much more important to them than Jeffrey or the therapy or even the intrusion of their daily lives. The still moments between them exemplified a safety zone they had established, where they were free to love, to feel, to experience each other without any expectations or demands. This was perhaps the greatest souvenir they brought back from Italy with them; the simple comfort of being a couple.

## Chapter 1: Madison Avenue, Manhattan

Brian felt uncomfortable in a suit. He'd worn a suit once or twice in Italy, when they had gone to a fancy restaurant or to the opera, but he had gotten out of the habit. Now it felt confining. He noticed that the boss's secretary, who

always flirted with him, apparently not getting the clue about his sexual orientation, was glacial today. When he finally went into Kimbrough's ridiculously large and luxurious office, he assumed an attitude of extreme indifference to conceal his instinctive nervousness.

"Have a seat, Brian. You look very tanned and fit," Kimbrough announced in an overly loud voice. He always talked that way, as if volume represented the importance of what he was saying. Brian learned long ago that it didn't.

Brian smiled slightly and suppressed a witty comeback. "I feel great."

"Good, good. I hate to bring you home to unpleasant news, but no sense beating around the bush. Better to come out with it. Brian, I'm going to have to let you go."

Brian chuckled. As if. "What's this about, Felix?"

"You're a nice guy, you have a lot of great ideas, but you're just not committed to this job. I need people who are committed to the firm. You've allowed your personal life to take over. You know how many days you missed when you were going back and forth to Pittsburgh when that kid was so sick? Then you top it off with a vacation. And now this Jeffrey Walker situation hits the papers. It doesn't inspire client confidence to know that a man they entrusted with millions of dollars of spend and a host of trade secrets is testifying that some society doctor got him hooked on drugs and made him into some kind of homosexual love slave."

Brian processed this information before he responded. "That 'kid' as you put it is my partner's sister. She was fighting for her life. I have a very strong bond with that little girl. I had to be there, to do whatever I could for her, for him, for their mother. And I never missed a deadline. I worked long distance, out of our Pittsburgh office. After Molly finally turned the corner, I was emotionally and physically depleted. I was entitled to a vacation, having never taken one in all the time I've been with this firm, so I cashed in and went for it. Everyone else takes vacations, why can't I? As for the Walker situation, where did you hear that sex slave story? It's bullshit. I'll testify to put him behind bars, which is where he needs to be. My clients don't need to worry. I'm healthy and happy now. I never fucked up their accounts when I was at my worst. Why fear that I would do so now, when I'm healthy?"

"Too much publicity. Too sordid."

"Is it the gay aspect of it?"

Kimbrough shrugged, not wanting to get into discrimination territory. "It adds to the salacious tone, but no, Brian. Many of our best people are gay. They just don't make a scandal out of being so." Brian considered the roster of employees. There were gay men and lesbians in the art department, in support functions, in legal, even, but he couldn't think of another partner with that distinction.

"You know, Felix," Brian deliberately emphasized the use of his first name. "I'm a partner in this firm. You can't just fire me."

"Look at your partnership agreement, Brian. It provides for termination. I can vote you off the island, which is what I've done, along with the concurring votes from the majority of our partners. You'll receive the value of your partnership units, as provided for in the agreement. You haven't been a partner long enough to break the bank, but it should give you with a suitable nest egg while you look for something else. Certainly you'd get a good recommendation from us regarding your work, which is always first rate. It's your personal life that got in the way of your success. You gays are too dramatic about everything. If you're going to compete in this world, you have to learn to take things as they come, like a real man. You can't just fly off the handle at every little bump in the road."

Brian crossed his hands over his knee, forcing calm. "You mean like when Wilson went on a three-month bender when his wife left him for another man? No one even knew where he was for six weeks! We thought he'd been killed or kidnapped or something. Or when McGaw used the company suite at the Waldorf to entertain the temps whom we were paying to do company business, not to suck his dick? Or when Manny refused to come to work for three weeks because he thought his chemical peel made him look like the Phantom of the Opera? Are those the straight guys you're talking about? But the firm didn't vote them off the island, now did it? No, because they're in the club. I'm in that OTHER club, with the women and the people who aren't white residue. We're supposed to be grateful to have been given a shot. So long as we're absolutely perfect, we're welcome to stay."

"Brian..."

Brian shook his head slowly, laughing cynically. The irony was beautiful. All of his life he'd been a lone wolf. No strings, no relationships, no complications. His sole focus was his career. His sex life was just an endless string of faceless tricks. His friends accused him of being cold and unfeeling. Then Justin came along and changed everything, including Brian's priorities. Brian consulted a shrink to understand the root of his emotional unavailability. He struggled to express his feelings to Justin. When Molly became ill, he tried to be a resource to Jennifer as well as a beacon of strength to Molly. It all seemed worth it when he and Justin were able to forge a solid, loving relationship after the crisis passed.

But it would seem the powers that be would have no part of Brian finding both emotional and financial success. He was happy at home, well, by god, that inner peace must be threatened! He laughed again, shaking his head. Kimbrough seemed alarmed by his reaction.

"Do you understand what I'm telling you, Brian?" Kimbrough hammered his point home. "You're fired."

Brian suddenly felt as if he had been rolled over by a locomotive. He was flat, numb, in shock. "When do I...?"

"Now. We'll pay you through the end of the month, but better that you not stay around. Your severance, in the form of the value of your partnership units, should arrive in the mail within the week. Good luck to you."

"What about Cynthia?" Brian had brought her with him from Pittsburgh. What was her fate to be?

"Who is Cynthia?" Kimbrough wouldn't trouble himself with knowing the names of underlings.

"My creative assistant."

Kimbrough shrugged. "Nothing to do with her."

Brian nodded, relieved, and stood up, willing his knees not to shake. He extended an outstretched hand to the man, who shook it limply. "Thanks for the opportunities, Felix. I've enjoyed it."

Kimbrough turned red, unsure of how to accept such a gracious response. Brian left him with that and proceeded to his office where he closed the door and sat down behind his desk, staring blankly out the window at the city.

A restaurant in Chinatown...

The lunch crowd had thinned out and Leo Chang watched Justin with inscrutable delight as the young man devoured his mandarin noodles while extolling the virtues of honeymooning in Italy. After all that Justin and Brian had been through, because of the illness of Justin's sister, and also because of the evil of Leo's former friend, Jeffrey, Leo was delighted that their sojourn had been an unqualified success. As part of a long-term gay partnership, Leo was a sucker for happy endings.

"Justin, it sounds divine. What was your favorite stop?"

Justin wrinkled his nose. Choosing one place was almost impossible. "The art in Rome and Florence was incredible, of course. Venice was sooooo romantic, with the canals and the gondolas, and this incredibly soft light. Pompeii was like stepping back in time, it's so well-preserved. I loved riding motorcycles through Tuscany but...I'd have to say Portofino was my favorite stop."

"I've always wanted to go there. Tell."

Justin described a secluded cove in an azure sea, with terraced hillsides overlooking the water. Stucco buildings surrounded the waterfront and dotted the hillsides, each structure painted lemon yellow or turquoise or terra cotta. Swank jewelry stores and upscale restaurants lured wealthy tourists to the natural beauty and seclusion of this place.

"We stayed in a little pensione overlooking the sea," Justin said dreamily to the older man. "We'd ridden our motorcycles there, so we had very little luggage. We always stored our main stuff in the big hotels, in big cities. We liked to ride the bikes to the smaller places. Our room was huge with shutters over the windows and shuttered doors that opened onto a small veranda. It was so romantic. The bed was draped in white gauze and there was no television, no radio. We spent one whole day in bed, having all three meals delivered to the room. We had the sun in the morning and the sound of the ocean all night."

Leo reached across the table and patted his hand. "Sounds divine. If my old dear, Bill, had a romantic bone in his body, I'd drag him there tomorrow."

"Most people think Brian isn't romantic either, but he is. Our bathtub was like a small wading pool, lined in ceramic tile. We floated rose petals on the water. Okay, I was the one who gathered them off of the arrangement in our room and put them in the water like they did in a movie I saw once. Brian complained the petals stuck to his skin, but we enjoyed the hottest water sex since mating season among the dolphins!" He blushed at the memory. "Brian called it our Portofino Fuckfest. But it was much more than that. We connected on so many levels in that quiet little hotel in that beautiful little town. We walked, talked, dreamed, ate and fucked." He looked down at the table, embarrassed to have gushed the way he did, but unable to curb his enthusiasm.

Leo smiled at Justin's beaming, beautiful face. "Honey, you two have earned a little happiness after all you've been through together. Bravo!"

"Thanks Leo. I've never been this happy in all my life."

Leo laughed. "That long, huh? I have shoes older than you. Well, let's leave behind your romantic idylls before I die of jealousy, and let me tell you about school."

"Any luck?"

"I can get you into the Art Institute in the fall, but not before."

"Damn!"

"Be patient. You can help me out in the meantime. I'm opening a new gallery in Tribeca and I need someone to be my eyes and ears as we start to hang it. You can learn about the business end of your chosen profession. How we decide what to buy, how we price, what it's like dealing with the artists, and you'll meet some very well-known artists as well as some very wealthy collectors."

"I'd love to do that, Leo!"

"First you should hear how dreadful the pay is, how long the hours are and how there are no benefits, and then you can thank me for my generosity," Leo teased and Justin grinned at him.

"I don't care. It's not as if I need a lot of money. Brian's rich, and he pays for everything. He calls my money, 'pocket change'. He'd be thrilled for me to have this opportunity."

"Then it's a deal," Leo reached across the table to shake his hand and Justin grinned at him, excited by the prospects of learning about the art world from the inside out.

Brian's office...

Once he was sure of his composure, Brian called Cynthia into his office and she closed the door, her expression concerned. "Brian, what's wrong? The rumor mill is working overtime."

"First of all, you're fine. Nothing's changing with you. Your job is secure. I have that straight from Kimbrough's mouth."

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"It is." He hesitated, then said, "I'm leaving, Cyn."

"Leaving? You just got back."

"I've been fired."

She stared at him, her face going pale. "B-but you're a partner."

"True, there must be another word for it. Termination, maybe. But the effect is the same. I'm gone."

"Why? You have a huge portfolio of clients! You've won awards! You've made this place a ton of money. Why would they ever let you get away?"

"Because I'm a lazy, scandal-mongering faggot is the word I'm getting."

"Lazy? You're a workaholic. You may be gay, but what's with the scandal mongering? You mean that horrible stuff with Jeffrey?" He nodded. She looked angry. "That wasn't your fault! You were a victim of that sleazoid!"

"Doesn't matter. The facts remain the same. I'm outa here."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. Have a drink for one thing. Maybe more. Dust off my resume, start looking for a job. Shit, I don't know, Cyn."

"I'm so sorry," she rushed over to him, leaning over his chair to embrace him tightly, even though she knew he was adverse to such displays of emotion. He disengaged as quickly as possible and she returned to her chair, dabbing at her eyes with a Kleenex that she pulled from a pocket.



"Don't ever let them make you cry, Cyn. It's not worth it," he gently cautioned her.

"Brian, wherever you land, I want to go there, too. Working with you is what I like most about this job. Promise me you'll bring me aboard at whatever firm that hires you."

"I promise you if I have the stroke to do so, I will. I like working with you, too, Cyn. Will you do me a favor?"

"Anything."

"Will you have my personal stuff packed up and delivered to my home?"

"Of course I will. Oh Brian, this is just so fucking wrong!" She began to cry and he sighed and swiveled his chair to look out the windows again, gazing at a cityscape that suddenly looked hostile to him.

Lydia Johnson's office...

Doctor's Notes: BK has returned to New York following a month in Italy with his domestic partner, JT. This is our first meeting since his return, and he requested a 'squeeze-in' appointment that I was glad to accommodate. What follows is an excerpt from the transcript.

Doctor: Welcome back, Brian.

BK: Thanks, Lydia.

Doctor: You look tanned and very relaxed.

BK: (Chuckles) Do I? Must be the scotch for that relaxed part.

Doctor: Little early for that, isn't it?

BK: (Shrugs)

Doctor: Was Italy wonderful?

BK: It was a dream. Too good to be true.

Doctor: That sounds ominous.

BK: Well, I've had better homecomings.

Doctor: Want to talk about it?

BK: I got fired.

Doctor: Wow. Why?

BK: Given reason? Letting my personal life interfere with business. How's that for a laugh? Brian Kinney's personal life. Real reason? I'm a faggot, therefore I'm not entitled to any other fallibility. Like sick family members, or stalkers, or even vacations, apparently.

Doctor: I see. How do you feel about this, Brian?

BK: Angry, hurt, angry, confused, angry, scared, angry.

Doctor: Nothing unnatural about any of those emotions. You'll feel many more. You weren't born with this job. You'll find work. The important thing to do now is to prevent it from forcing you into a black hole of depression.

BK: Lydia, I have bills to pay. Lots of bills. I have an expensive home to support. I have a son to support. I have a lover to support. I've never been out of work. This fucking vacation to Italy cost me a bloody fortune. It's not even

half paid for. When I get those credit card bills, I'll go into shock. The market ditched, so my investments are way down...where am I supposed to go to manufacture this money? Hell, I'll lose my medical insurance at the end of the month. I won't even be able to pay you.

Doctor: And you'll be wearing raggedy jeans tied with a string and sleeping on cardboard. Don't take it to the worst extreme, Brian. Be logical. Sit down with your financial advisor and figure out what you have to live on and what you need to live on and for how long can you maintain the status quo without additional income. Make adjustments that make sense, but don't panic. You're young and smart and experienced. You'll be employed long before your cushion depletes.

BK: (Sighs.) This will teach me.

Doctor: Meaning what?

BK: I have no right to be happy. I feel happy for the first time in my fucking life and SHAZAM, I'm out of work. Bad boy, no happiness for Brian.

Doctor: You mean happiness with Justin?

BK: (Nods.)

Doctor: Now you listen to me, Brian. Do NOT sabotage your relationship because you feel it has brought you retribution from the fates. There's no one watching you with an abacus in one hand, totaling your happiness/unhappiness factors. You lose Justin now, you have absolutely no center. This is what a loving partner is for. Not just for the good times, but to help you get through the tough times, as well. You owe him the opportunity to do just that. You also owe that to yourself.

BK: Yes, I'm sure you're right, Lydia. But I don't need anyone to feel sorry for me, least of all Justin.

Doctor: Not when you're so good at it yourself.

BK: (Stares hard at Doctor) I've missed you, Lydia. You always know how to call me on my shit.

Doctor: Damn straight I do. Now, another thing. You're not going to use this as an excuse to avoid the sessions with me. We'll work out payment arrangements. We've come too far to turn back. You're also not going to make Justin believe all is well. You're going to have enough respect for him to share with him how you really feel, including your fears and insecurities. You will thus give him a chance to be a stand-up guy. It's only fair. You're in this together.

BK: That's a heavy burden on a kid.

Doctor: He's been through a lot already, Brian. He's not your typical kid.

BK: That's true.

Doctor: Right now you're numb. You're not thinking clearly. But one person I want you to meet with after you meet with your financial advisor, is an employment attorney.

BK: Why?

Doctor: Find out what your rights are and make sure you're getting what's due you. Don't leave money on the table. Maybe there's nothing there to be had, but make sure of that fact.

BK: I don't even know an employment lawyer.

Doctor: I'll give you my brother's name. He's a partner in a large firm on Wall Street. He practices Securities Law, but I'm sure he can refer you to someone.

BK: (Smiles.) What did your mother feed you guys to produce such high achieving kids?

Doctor: Self-confidence, Brian. It's a delicious treat to give a child.

BK: (Nodding.) I'll remember to whip some up for Gus.

Doctor's notes: BK came home from a desperately needed recuperative holiday to find himself in the midst of a crisis: the loss of his employment. He centers much of his self-worth around his financial success. This was one area he could seemingly control when everything else in his life was in disarray. Since becoming partners with JT, his other crutch for showing himself to be worthy, promiscuous sex, has been curtailed. So he is being forced to stand on his own two feet with no crutches whatsoever, and he is currently wobbling. This crisis will be a test of his partner's devotion to him and of Brian's ability to overcome a personal disaster without falling back into bad habits or becoming enmeshed in a depressive spiral. Whether he has learned coping tools from his prior therapy will be severely tested.

Soho, the loft...

Justin looked up from the stove as Brian entered the loft, greeting him with a smile. "Guess what I'm cooking?"

"Jambalaya?" Brian said dully as he sat down at the table and loosened his tie. Justin handed him a beer and leaned over to kiss him. He wondered at Brian's half-hearted return caress.

"Close. Shrimp scampi. Remember that scampi we had in Naples?"

"You haven't had enough Italian food?"

"Never enough, as a wise man once told me. What's wrong? Bad day? I called but they said you left early."

"I went to see Lydia."

"Oh? That wasn't planned, was it?"

"You have a problem with it?" Brian snapped and Justin held up his hands in surrender.

"Put down the ax, Lizzie Borden. I'm just saying..."

"Sorry," Brian shook his head and went into the bedroom, changing out of his suit and into his sweats. He approached Justin at the stove, leaning against his back, resting his chin on his shoulder. "Smells good." Justin smiled and offered him a spoonful, which Brian declined. "I can wait."

"What's wrong, Brian? Was it that bad going back? Are you totally buried?"

"I got fired."

Justin laughed. "Yeah, right."

Brian walked over to the sofa and sat down, resting his fists against his closed eyes, battling a headache he had suffered from for most of the day. Justin felt something cold and clammy begin in him as he looked at his lover. He instantly knew this was no joke. He turned the flame down low under the saucepan and walked over to Brian, sitting beside him and stretching an arm over his shoulders. Brian was still for a minute, then he took Justin in his arms, pressing his cheek to his chest as Justin stroked his back gently, neither of them talking. Finally, Justin said, "I'm sorry, Brian. But we'll be okay."

Brian leaned back to look up at him. "How do you figure that?"

"We're both young," he smiled. "Well, relatively young, in your case. We're both healthy, smart, good looking. You have a degree and experience. I have a job now."

"Wait a minute. You have a job?"

"Yes, Leo offered me a job today to work at his new gallery in Tribeca. I'll be his assistant, I guess. It doesn't pay a lot, but it's something. You know what? I'm going to ask for more money. He's expecting a lot of me. He should pay me more, especially now."

Brian had to laugh. "Let me get this straight. The day I lose my job, you get one?"

"Yeah, but making a fraction of what you earn, unfortunately. How much do you earn, anyway?"

"How much do you think I earn, Justin?"

"I've never really thought about it," he said honestly. He came up with a number that he shared with Brian, believing it to be extravagant.

Brian laughed. "To live in a loft like this in Soho and enjoy the perks we have? Try twice that, more if the firm is having a good year."

Justin's eyes grew wide. "Jesus!"

"Yeah, try finding those jobs on the ground, Justin. This is a big problem. We can't both work minimum wage jobs. Even if I got a job as an ad exec somewhere, we could never live the way we do now. Not happening."

Justin shrugged. "So we don't live the way we do now. So what? I don't have any friends, and neither do you, not real friends, who live the way we do now. But they're still happy enough. We can be too. This is just stuff, Brian. It's great stuff, and I love it here, but I can live without it."

"It's not just 'stuff' to me, Justin. It's evidence. It's proof that I've done something with my life; that it means something."

Justin got up, walked over to the bureau in the bedroom and returned with a frame, putting it in Brian's hands. It was the picture of Justin and Gus at Gus's first birthday. "This is something you've done that means something. Your son. Our relationship. The rest is just junk you've purchased."

Brian sighed and put the picture down, pulling Justin onto his lap. "I know, I know, I'm just scared, Justin. Really scared."

"We could move in with my mom, if we needed to, while you looked for work."

Brian's eyes grew wide. "In Pittsburgh? You, me, Jen and Molly in the condo together?"

"Why not? They both adore you since you single-handedly saved Mol's life," he teased. It was only a half-joke. They did adore Brian.

Brian met his innocent gaze and began to laugh. "Only you could make me laugh tonight." He leaned over and kissed him deeply. "We're a long way from having to bunk with relatives, kid."

"I'm just saying..."

"I know what you're saying. Tomorrow, I'm making an appointment with my financial advisor and I want you to go with me. You also need to know where we stand, financially."

"Okay," Justin said, pleased to be included in such a grown-up and serious discussion. "Are you hungry at all?"

"For your ass," Brian said simply and Justin grinned.

"Some things never change. Let's go. The scampi can wait."

Brian took his hand and went into the bedroom with him, falling back on the bed and watching Justin crawl up his torso like a jungle cat. He sighed when he felt the boy's lips on his chin, his neck, his shoulder. He held up his arms so Justin could skim off his sweatshirt and moaned when Justin nibbled on a taut brown nipple. Brian slid his hands along the waistband of Justin's jeans until he got to the front and unzipped them, sliding them over his hips.

Justin kicked them off along with his underwear and popped Brian's waistband under his erection, sucking the thick, growing shaft into his throat. Brian moaned at the sensation, burying both hands in Justin's fair hair. Pain management 101, Brian thought to himself. Boosted by his feelings for his partner, endorphins flooded his bloodstream to chase away depression. He rolled Justin beneath him, kissing him, dominating him, claiming his body as his own turf.

Justin didn't mind that Brian was a little rough as he flipped him over and looped an arm under him, pulling him up to his knees with his head and shoulders still flat on the mattress. Brian opened him up with a lubricated index finger, drilling Justin's snug hole and leaving behind enough lubricant to make his penetration painless. He leaned over and chewed at the back of Justin's neck as his hand guided his penis past the tight circumference of Justin's sphincter and up the open canal.



Justin moaned and undulated his rectal wall, caressing his lover's erection and urging him deeper, wanting to feel him press against his prostate and create that familiar thrill. It happened quickly and Brian smiled as he felt his lover respond to the contact, going into his rhythmic thrusts in and out of his tight, welcoming ass. They fit as if a master carpenter milled their bodies to matching spec's in order to ensure a tight fit. Justin slipped a hand down his belly to stroke his fiery erection, timing his strokes to meet Brian's thrusts.

As Brian picked up the pace, so did Justin. Their orgasms were almost perfectly timed to be mutual, and they lay there in an exhausted, sweaty tangle of limbs for awhile. Finally, Brian said, "Now I'm hungry."

Justin laughed, kissed him, and left the bed, first for the bathroom, then the kitchen. "I'll expect you to do this when I'm the breadwinner," Justin taunted him as he paused to pull on his discarded jeans. Brian did the same with his sweats and padded barefoot into the kitchen with him.

"Take it up the ass, you mean?"

Justin laughed. "No, you already do that. Cook."

"I hope you like cold cereal and ice cream," Brian said with a smirk.

"I'll buy you the Joy of Cooking."

"As long as I have two nickels to rub together, we're eating out when it's my turn to cook."

Justin laughed, busying himself with his cooking, while Brian watched him, amazed by how much better he felt already. A year ago he would've run to cover and hidden, licking his wounds. He would've drank too much, downed a variety of drugs and fucked anything that moved. At the end of the evening, he would be alone, scared and miserable. How sad was that? "Hey Justin..."

"Hey what?"

"I love you."

Justin glanced over at him and grinned. "I know, I know. God, do you have to tell me that so often? I'm really sick of hearing it."

Their eyes met and Brian smirked at him. "You little fucker."

"Is that a complaint?"

"What do you think?"

"I think not."

"I think you're right."

"Hey Brian?"

"Hey what?"

"I love you too."

"Yeah, yeah," Brian said with a smile. "Tell me something I don't know." With that, he turned on the television, aimlessly flipping through the channels.

## Chapter 2

The next morning, Justin ran downstairs in his robe to greet Cynthia at the front door of the loft building. Together, they loaded four banker's boxes into the elevator and then struggled to get them inside the loft where Justin stacked them beside Brian's desk.

"How did you get all that in a cab by yourself?" he asked quietly, offering her a mug of fresh coffee which she gratefully accepted. "He's still asleep," Justin explained the reason for his half-whisper. She nodded and they sat together on the sofa after he started the gas fireplace.

"One of the boys brought them down for me on a dolly. The cab driver was nice enough to help me unload them, for a tip, of course. I'm pretty sure I got everything that was Brian's. A lot of it is personal files, like tax returns and so forth. How is he doing, Justin? I know he was being brave for me."

Justin shrugged. "It's tough on him, but he's being brave for me too. I think he's still in shock. Do you know what happened? I didn't really probe. I figure he'll tell me when he's ready, but I'd rather be prepared for it when he does."

She looked perplexed. "Nothing happened! He's always handled his clients beautifully. There was jealousy among his peers because Brian was building up a big portfolio, and because he'd won so many awards. He's also made a ton of money for the firm. Of course there was the usual sniggering about his being gay, but everyone seemed to like Brian, except the jealous ones. If I were Brian, I'd open a competing agency and steal all their fucking clients away from them."

"Could he do that?"

"Why not? He has the rainmaking skills as well as the creative genius. It would be hard, especially in New York where all the huge agencies are located, but he could still make a dent. Find a niche to start with and grow from there. I've told him this before. I've always believed Brian would be happier if he worked for himself."

"That would take a lot of money, right?"

She shrugged. "It wouldn't be cheap. Rents are high in Manhattan and he'd have to hire a staff, establish credit with commercial printers, etc. Anyway, I am so angry over this, Justin. It's just not right. I think the final straw was when that fucking Kimbrough learned that one of their biggest clients said they would wait until Brian returned from vacation to start a new campaign, rather than work with another partner. Brian was gaining too much power with his accounts. I shouldn't have done this but...this is a list," she pulled it from her purse and handed it to him, "of all of Brian's major accounts, along with his contact people, their numbers, their average billings. Also whether they're under contract to the agency and for how long."

Justin took it with a smile, both of them looking up as Brian came into the room, stark naked. Cynthia stared even though she knew she should look away. Brian appeared completely nonchalant. "Oh. Sorry. I didn't know we had a visitor."

She finally tore her eyes away from the parts of Brian she hadn't seen before as Justin smiled wryly at him and motioned to his dick. Brian looked down as if remembering he was naked and returned to the bedroom, emerging in a robe. "Sorry Cyn," he said, smoothing his sleep-fluffed hair with both hands. "Why are you here so early?"

"It's almost ten," Justin informed him. "You slept like a log."

"Someone, uh, something wore me out."

They shared a chuckle and Cynthia sighed. "How can you be so happy? I'd be slitting my wrists."

"What's the point?" Brian took Justin's mug from him and drank the remainder of his coffee. "I can't change what's done. I thought about it last night. If I had it to do over, I would've been less naïve about Jeffrey, but I still would've gone to Pittsburgh to help Molly as much as I could, and I still would've taken Justin to Italy. This isn't about the time I took off to handle my personal life. This is about homophobia in corporate America."

"Homophobia?" Cynthia looked surprised. "I thought it was because they were worried that you were getting too tight with their clients."

Justin handed him the list Cynthia brought with her and Brian perused it, then looked at her. "You could get fired for this."

"I know."

"Why?"

"My loyalty is to you, Brian, not to that stupid agency. I live paycheck to paycheck, so I can't leave until I have a place to go. But as soon as you find your new home, I expect you to call me. I'll give my notice that day."

He smiled and leaned over to hug her. "I'd marry you if I wasn't already encumbered."

"Hey!" Justin said with a laugh as Cynthia blushed.

"You have my home number, and my cell phone, Brian," she reminded him. "Anything I can do to help, just call. I can type your resume, research the firms you consider, whatever."

"Just keep your head down, Cyn. I'll stay in touch. Let me know what the buzz is about my leaving."

"I will."

He thanked her for bringing his personal items to him as he escorted her to the door. When she'd left, he went back to Justin, sitting heavily beside him. "She's good people."

"Yeah and she's totally crazy about you."

"Yes, but not in that way."

"After seeing your dick, I'd say, yes, in that way. Now you'd better get dressed. We're meeting with your financial advisor in an hour."

"Plenty of time," Brian said, pulling Justin onto his lap, kissing him as his hand roamed between the flaps of his robe. Justin started to protest, concerned about the time, but within minutes he was as enthusiastic about this diversion as was Brian.

The noise and bustle of the Carnegie deli was a good counterpoint to the heavy silence between the two men as they stared at their overstuffed sandwiches and untouched mounds of potato salad. Finally, Justin spoke. "Most people would be grateful to have as much money as you have at your age, Brian."

"Most people aren't facing my debt load either," he said glumly. The meeting with his financial advisor had been sobering. With heavy losses in the market and a recent increase in his debt, largely due to their extravagances in Italy, they were informed that, if they continued at their current level of spending, they had approximately four months of income, depending on how Brian's partnership units were valued. If they were more cautious with the outflow of cash, that period could be extended to six months, perhaps a bit more.

"We don't have to pay that COBRA stuff. That was really expensive," Justin suggested.

"Justin, COBRA is the only way we'll continue to have medical coverage. We can't afford to be uninsured. What if one of us got sick or hurt?"

"Poor people get medical treatment for free."

"We're not poor. We'd just be in that netherworld where we'd have no insured care but we wouldn't qualify for indigence. No. COBRA gets paid. Besides, I have Lydia, you have your shrink, we need to keep that up."

"I'll get a higher paying job than the one Leo is offering me, or I'll work a second job at night. I can wait tables. The tips are good."

Brian reached over and interlaced Justin's fingers with his own. "You're freaking me out. I know you're trying to be helpful, but you're causing me to panic. Please, just don't say anything at all for a few minutes."

Justin tried, he really did, and then, "It won't take you six months to find a job."

Brian groaned and placed some money on the table, rising to leave. But Justin paused and had their uneaten food wrapped to go. No sense in wasting it. Brian glared at the paper bag he carried out. "Scraps? We aren't reduced to scraps, Justin."

"Scraps, hell, they're whole sandwiches. We can eat them later. Let's take the subway instead of a cab. It'll be fun."

"Stop it!" Brian angrily insisted. "Just stop it! You're already making me feel like a loser."

"I'm just trying to help."

"Well, don't. Your help isn't helping!" Brian waved down a cab and they sat in sullen silence in the back seat. Finally Brian spoke, resting his hand on Justin's thigh. "I'm sorry I blew up like that. I'm just on the razor's edge right now."

"I didn't take it personally."

"I can't do this," Brian said, almost as much to himself as to Justin. "I can't use you as a convenient whipping boy, just because I'm frustrated."

"I understand, Brian."

"Well, don't. Don't let me do that."

Justin nodded, holding Brian's hand tightly throughout the remainder of the drive.

Brian slept while Justin left for work the next day, a reversal of their usual roles. When he finally awoke, he was disappointed to find himself alone. He made coffee, went to the corner to buy the New York Times, read it, jogged on his treadmill, showered, dressed casually in jeans and a cotton sweater, and then sat down by the phone. He knew he should call and tell Lindsay his situation. Sooner or later he would have to tell Mikey, too. He couldn't bring himself to make those calls. Instead, he called Lydia's brother. The man sounded as smooth and eloquent as his sister. He listened to Brian's story and commented thoughtfully.

"Brian, we have people in this firm who specialize in employment law, and they would do an excellent job for you. But they would also cost you an arm and a leg. What you need is someone with a pit bull reputation, who doesn't share our overhead expenses and is thus more affordable. One of my classmates from Harvard Law fits that bill precisely. Brilliant, eccentric, well-respected in the legal community, a lone wolf. Impeccable reputation, but aggressive and determined."

Brian took down the name, number and address, calling immediately to make an appointment. An hour later, he was in a cab headed for an address in East Village. When the driver pulled over to the curb, Brian looked confused. "This is a bar."

"That's the address you gave me, buddy."

Brian paid, left the cab, flipped open his cell phone and dialed a number. The same brittle-sounding woman answered as when he made the appointment. "This is Brian Kinney. I must have written down the wrong address. Can you give it to me again?" She did, and he frowned. It was the same one as this bar's, which was called "Hot". He

had heard of the place, a gay bar with an active cruising reputation and a back room. Gay men only, straights and lesbians were unwelcome.

"Are you looking at a fag bar called 'Hot'?" she asked, without a care for the political incorrectness of that question. He found that odd given her boss' specialty.

"Yes."

"Then you're here. Go in the bar, past the main room and up the stairs. Don't go down the stairs unless you want to get your dick sucked. Upstairs office, downstairs backroom. Got it?"

Brian assured her he did. What kind of lawyer had offices upstairs from a hardcore gay bar? How would a woman feel running this gauntlet to get to the office? He walked in. Owing to the early hour, it was uncrowded, but not empty. He nodded at the bartender, a handsome, butch type. The bartender grinned at him, appreciative of his looks. Brian found the stairs and glanced at the descending steps, wondering what the action was like in that dark void at the base of the stairway. Like any other backroom, he decided. Hard cocks, open mouths and waiting asses. Ah, youth, he smirked to himself. Or was it something more sinister than youth? A desperation he didn't want to examine too closely.

He went up, finding a single door, unmarked. He knocked. "It's open, come in," called the same brittle voice as before.

He went inside, finding a small reception area where a woman was foraging through some file cabinets. She put the diesel in dyke, Brian thought to himself. A big-boned, broad-shouldered solid wall of woman with graying dark hair, buzzed much shorter than his. A cigarette dangled from the corner of her mouth, and her khaki Dockers were worn with a red Izod shirt that displayed some fairly well-developed biceps. Brian figured she could take him easily in two falls out of three.

"Motherfucking son of a bitch," she exclaimed as she slammed a file drawer shut. "I can't find JACK SHIT in this fucking office. Are you Brian?"

He nodded, noticing she was almost as tall as he was when she stood up, and a good twenty pounds heavier, most of it hard muscle. "I have an appointment with Mick," he stated the obvious, and she narrowed her dark eyes at him.



"Duh. I'm the one you talked to," she stuck out a big hand decorated with a couple of rings and a leather cuff bracelet. "I'm Mick Donovan."

"You...are?" He automatically shook her hand, impressed by the power of her grip. She laughed.

"Michelle, okay? I prefer Mick for obvious reasons. Everyone knows me as Mick. Come into my office. This place is making me nuts. When my secretary takes off, I may as well take off too. I have no idea where he puts things. I'd need the Rosetta stone to figure out his filing logic."

He followed her into the inner office where utilitarian furniture that looked as if it had been lifted from a government-issue fire sale occupied most of the space. Nothing broke the monotony to confer a sense of style. The only wall hangings were her diplomas, which were admittedly impressive. Smith undergrad, magna cum laude, Harvard Law, with distinction. Brian noted they were hung too high on the wall to be fashionably placed, a small faggot moment overtaking his thoughts.

She sat behind the desk, and crossed her ankles on the edge of it, displaying feet clad in Hush Puppies that would've easily fit Brian. If he would be caught dead in Hush Puppies.

"Okay," she said, lighting another cigarette, prompting him to do the same. What a relief to be able to smoke without incurring wrath. He noticed that despite her masculine qualities, she had a sizeable rack. No doubt she hated that fact. "Discrimination, you said over the phone. You're young, white, gorgeous, male. Unlikely to be a veteran, so you must be queer."

Brian smiled. "Interesting elimination game."

"Look, there are only so many protected classes. You have to fall in one in order to qualify. I guess you could be gender-reassigned or something, but you look like a natural born to me."

"Yeah. I'm gay."

"Out?"

"I don't wear sandwich boards or rainbows, but I don't hide it, either. I have a partner. He's listed on my benefits."

"So tell me what happened."

Brian did so, succinctly and she peered at him the whole time, her unflinching gaze seeming to bore beneath his surface as she listened. When he stopped talking, she sighed. "Did they ask you not to go on that vacation?"

"No. No one said a word other than have a good time."

"Did you stay in touch with your office?"

"They knew where to find me, and I called in a couple times a week."

"Did your doctor recommend that break?"

"Definitely, but I didn't tell anyone that."

"When you were in Pittsburgh, caring for the little girl and working remotely, did anyone ask you to come back?"

"I went back for a couple meetings. When they needed me, I was there. Otherwise, no."

"And you stayed in touch with the office?"

"I was in the office. The Pittsburgh offices. Every day, I went in at least for awhile, barring some extreme emergency. Look, we have partners who take the summer off and work from their vacation homes in Chappaqua or the Hamptons. I had my laptop, my pager, my mobile, it's not as if I disappeared."

"Do you have a sales quota or anything?"

"We have thresholds for billable hours. Like lawyers, I guess. I've always exceeded those thresholds, even now. Admittedly, my hours are lower this year, but still well over my threshold. Now that I'm back, I would make up most of that lost ground before year end."

"Did you sign anything when you left?"

"No."

"I need to see your partnership agreement."

Brian opened his leather portfolio and handed it to her. She got up, went into the other room to copy it, and then returned it to him. "Do I have a case?" He asked nervously.

She shrugged. "I don't know yet. New York City has had anti-discrimination laws protecting homosexuals since 1986. Only last December did the state pass SONDA, the Sexual Orientation Non-Discrimination Act, which codifies rights similar to the city's measure. It became effective earlier this year. So be glad you live here, or you'd be completely unprotected since the federal government doesn't give a rat's ass about faggots."

"Yeah, I read the literature, Mick."

"Any other gays or lesbians who are partners in this firm?"

"Not declared."

"Your gaydar suggest there are?"

He shrugged. "Not really. I think they are mostly married, or divorced, straight- appearing and if not straight, deeply closeted. We do have gays and lesbians who work for the firm, in production or support functions."

"What's your history, Brian? You mentioned a partner. Long term relationship?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"I'm trying to gauge how attractive you'd be to a fact finder. I'm not your enemy, Brian. I'm not some straight person out to judge you. But if you lie to me, I'm outa here. I don't take clients who lie to me."

Brian sighed and gave her the short version of his relationship with Justin.

"Before him? Any dirt there?"

Brian shrugged. "Look, I'm a healthy, hot looking gay man. I had no interest in a long term relationship before I met Justin. I had my fair share of tricks and maybe a few others' fair shares as well. But so what? I was single."

"Let's talk about your professional life for a minute, Brian. You're quite young to be a partner in a big firm. How did that happen?"

"I'm good. I work hard. I know how to make clients happy and I'm a genius when it comes to ads."

"So you made them a lot of money?"

"I've been a top biller every year."

"Tell me this story about the doctor, the man you alluded to earlier when you gave me the overview."

Brian sighed and gave her the main data points concerning the way Jeffrey ingratiated himself into his life, drugged him, drove a wedge between Justin and himself, and then used his treatment of Molly's illness as his hook to keep Brian with him. She listened intently, then sighed. "I read about him in the paper. Some fancy ass rich family, right?"

"Apparently so, yes."

"So he'll hire fancy ass criminal lawyers to savage you when you testify against him. They'll try to destroy your evidence by destroying your character."

Brian winced. "Should I get a lawyer for that?"

"You have a lawyer for that. The D.A. is your lawyer," she made a note. "I used to be a public defender. I know a bunch of those guys. I'll see who has the case and we can talk about what to expect."

"Mick, are they on solid ground to fire me because of Jeffrey Walker and the publicity?"

"Sure, if you WERE Jeffrey Walker, Brian. Sitting in jail, a fucking, stalker psychopath! But you were the victim, not the perp. They gonna fire some woman because she was gangbanged in the park? Probably, but they'd lose that one, too. So what are you keeping from me?"

"Nothing."

"Sure you are. But we'll think of it as we go along. When he fired you, did he say anything stupid? They usually do."

"He said the problem with gays is that they are over-emotional. I need to be a real man and not overreact to everything."

Her eyes grew wide. "Get the fuck out of here!"

Brian shrugged. "He did. Something like that, anyway."

She laughed. "What a MORON. We'll have some big fun with that. Think about it and write it down exactly the way you remember hearing what he said. Email it to me. Now, let's talk about goals. Is it your goal to publicly humiliate that firm and make good case law for the rights of gays everywhere, or is it something else?"

"I don't care about being the poster child for gay rights. I'm not an activist. I don't need any more publicity. I just want to be treated fairly."

"You want your job back?"

He hesitated. He wondered if he could ever work there again, after this. He'd feel humiliated and exposed. Everything he did would be subject to strict scrutiny and they'd be building a case to get rid of him from the moment he showed up. "No."

"You want money?"

"Yes, and an apology."

"Fuck the apology, it sounds good, but that never happens. Money is what matters. Listen to me, Brian. You go through with this and you're not only mud with them, but also with every other big firm out there. They will label you a troublemaker no matter how right you are. That means that finding employment will be difficult, at least in your chosen field. Is that fair? No. But it's a fact."

He frowned, having let that fact escape his own analysis. She went on with her bad news scenario. "Plus every aspect of your private life will be examined in detail. Their goal is to make you look unstable and unreliable. They'll dig up all kinds of dirt in order to accomplish that goal."

"Are you trying to talk me out of this?"

"I'm trying to make sure you understand what you're up against."

"Okay, I get it."

"Fact finders are not as likely to be inclined towards helping out a gay man as they may be towards a person of diverse race or a woman. You get on that stand, looking like a movie star in a thousand dollar suit, and they're like 'Give me a fucking break. That's what you get for sucking dick'."

"I'm used to my sexual orientation being viewed as a blight on the world."

"We all are, man. But this is more than a prejudiced view, this is why it's harder to collect on one of these cases."

"So you're telling me not to do it."

"Brian, this is how I make my living. No, I'm telling you that this is a case we should try to settle, not to trial. You have to be emotionally prepared to go to trial, if need be, but we should push them and bully them into a fat settlement. Get you enough cushion to do what you want to do. You understand?"

"Yes."

"Your partner has to be prepared to put up with some hard times and hard truths too."

"My partner is like steel," he said proudly.

"Good, he'll need to be. Now let's talk about the important stuff. My fee structure." Brian smiled, and began to relax. As graceless as she was, Mick's intelligence glowed beneath that gruff exterior, and her insight was solid. Everything she said made sense to him, and he appreciated her blunt frankness. After talking money, and agreeing to her terms with a handshake, she told him she wanted to review his partnership agreement and that she would call him later with her impressions. As he stood to go, Brian paused.

"Why the hell do you have offices above a hardcore gay bar?"

She smiled. "I own the bar, this building. I'm cheap. What can I say?"

"You own a bar that has a gay men only policy?"

"It was that way when I bought it. Why change? It's making money. There are enough fern bars for straights to keep them busy, and just as many dyke joints. Let the boys play. I don't give a rat's ass. I also own Regency Baths. We just remodeled and reopened in Chelsea. I live upstairs, above it. Check it out. The guys tell me it's the top of the line. I did a lot of the tile work myself. I'm a great handyman."

Brian smiled and nodded. His days at the baths were becoming a memory now, and strangely enough, he didn't miss them.

"Hi gorgeous," a man at the bar said to Brian as he walked by and Brian nodded at him, acknowledging the cruise, but not slowing his pace as he went out to the street and hailed a cab.

The unfinished gallery in Tribeca smelled of varnish, wet paint and freshly planed wood. Carpenters were putting in the final touches, but it was almost finished and the lights were working. Tracks and spotlights which were meant to illuminate the works that had yet to be hung. There was a showroom with a maze of moveable walls and some offices in the back, along with bathrooms. Storage was upstairs, temperature controlled and secured with a sophisticated alarm system. Justin had a clipboard and was making notes of anything he saw that appeared unfinished.

"Anybody home?" A voice called from the showroom, echoing in the vast emptiness.

Justin came downstairs, grinning at Brian, who stood there, holding a paper bag, smiling back at him. Justin threw himself into his arms, ignoring the workmen who smirked at each other when the two kissed. "What are you doing here?"

"I brought lunch. Where can we eat?"

Justin led him into the office and peered into the paper bag, laughing as he took out the sandwiches from Carnegie, now a day old. The bread was a little tough from being refrigerated, but they didn't mind. They sat on molded contemporary chairs, using the cube-shaped glass table as their dining platform as they ate potato salad with plastic forks. Brian told him about his visit with the lawyer, then asked, "When does the art arrive?"

"Leo's first show is scheduled for next week. He's already pimped it, and the art begins arriving in two days. It's called 'Queer Art' and features out artists from the city. Part of the proceeds goes to his favorite AIDS charity which underwrites hospice care."

"Well, you should have lots of artists grabbing your fine ass, in that case."

Justin beamed at him. "They can grab, but they can't have it. It's what we in the art world call, 'reserved'."



Brian laughed. "Better be."

"You seem much more chipper."

"I tasted blood after talking to the attorney. I love a good fight."

"Cool. I'll be a little late tonight."

"Oh?" Brian raised a brow slightly, while pretending not to care.

"I have that appointment with Dr. Friedman. Regression therapy."

Brian brightened up. "Oh yeah. Good. Want me to go with you? Wait for you?"

Justin shook his head. "I'll be fine. Want to go see a movie later? We're way behind on current movies."

"Yeah, maybe." As he finished his sandwich Brian reached for Justin, kissing him across the expanse between their chairs. Justin smiled and got up and walked over to kneel between Brian's knees, reaching up to unbutton his jeans. Brian watched him take out his cock, fondle it, slip it into his mouth. He then closed his eyes and threw his head back, giving in completely to the sensation. After he came, he looked down at Justin who stood, wiping his forearm across his lips and edging up to be flush with Brian's body while he slowly unzipped his own jeans. Brian smiled and spread his hands on Justin's firm ass, returning the favor with equal gusto.

"Now that's what I call a great lunch," Justin said with a sigh when they were both sated, zipped and standing together in a tight embrace. Brian laughed and kissed him gently.

"Yeah, especially dessert. But don't expect it every day, I have other things to do, and blowing the delivery boy is hit and miss. You never know which one will expect a different kind of tip."

Justin walked with him to the door, waving goodbye as Brian slipped into a cab.

"Nice lunch, little faggot boy?" One of the workmen called out. When Justin turned to face them, no one gave away who was the talker.

"Eat your heart out," Justin said smugly, wondering if any of them had ever had a blow job even close to the mastery of the one he just enjoyed. Leaving them with that thought in mind, he resumed his chores.

Brian was feeling better about life. He stopped to pick up Ad Week to see which agencies were doing what, along with Time and the latest issue of GQ. He was planning on working out and then enjoying a nice, leisurely drink while perusing magazines, listening to music and waiting for Justin to come home. He'd check the paper for start times for movies they might want to see and return some emails that had accumulated while he was gone. He needed to call Mikey back, and to check in with Lindsay.

Preoccupied with thought, he almost tripped over a barricade on the sidewalk, recovering just in time to trip over a second and careen into his loft building while trying to retain his balance. "What the fuck?" He stared at a collection of bags and paraphernalia, only then noticing Lindsay who was seated on the steps of the stoop, holding onto Gus's stroller, where he napped. She looked dragged out, exhausted, oblivious to the fact her belongings were not only a hazard, they were easy pickings for a thief. Brian gathered them around her, off the walk, and stared at her in silence. She stared back without speaking and then burst into tears. He sighed, watching his pleasant evening slip away.

Gus was sleeping soundly in his portable crib. Most of Lindsay's gear was stored in the small bedroom at the end of the hall, where she and her son were bivouacked. Brian lit a fire and poured the wine, choosing soothing music for the sound system. He sat beside her with his arm across her shoulders. The box of tissues on her lap had been purloined from his bedroom. "Start over," he insisted. "I couldn't understand what you were saying when you were crying so hard. Something about Melanie working late and then going out for Chinese?"

She sighed, shaking her head and blowing her nose into the wadded tissue in her hand. "She's been going out with a Chinese woman."

"What are you talking about?"

"Cheating, Brian! You know all about cheating, don't you?"

He sighed. "Don't make this about me," he cautioned her. "I haven't done anything wrong."

"I know, I'm sorry," she said as she patted his arm. "If it were the first time, but it isn't. She didn't even deny it. She was all self-righteous about it, accusing me of following her, checking up on her. Well, why shouldn't I? Every night, she's late, claiming to be working on a case, but she's really out with this China doll. They go to some sleazy hotel and spend the whole evening together and then she comes home to me smelling of ginseng and ginger which she claims is from some herbal tea."

Brian suppressed a smile. "So what did she say when you hit her with it?"

"Nothing, it turned into a horrible fight. She has no respect for me or my career. I'm just the mother who stays home with the baby while she buys the bread. You know what? I buy bread too. I may not be a lawyer, but I also have ambitions beyond raising a child."

"I remember when we were young, and you were going to be this sophisticated and vastly successful art dealer in New York," he said with a smile and she sighed.

"Is it too late for that?"

"Linds, I don't know. When is it ever too late to pursue a dream? But reality is ugly. Dreams don't always come true, and making a living is harsh."

She glanced at his handsome profile. "Were you off today? I called your office and they said you were out."

Brian nodded. For the rest of the month, they would take messages for him, and not reveal that he had left the firm. Once he went off their payroll, that would change. "Yeah, I was off." He just couldn't tell her the truth. He was too ashamed. "What did Mel say about your leaving?"

"She said 'Oh sure, run off to your precious Brian. That's where you've always wanted to be anyway'. I told her she couldn't reverse this and make me feel guilty when she was the one cheating. She said I had a filthy mind and no faith in her and that she was sick of my being such a drama queen and a drain."

"Can dykes be drama queens?"

"Brian!"

"I'm just asking..."

"Anyway, after she left for work, I packed up and here I am."

"Yeah, here you are. What the hell do you plan to do?"

"I don't know, Brian. Get my head together and maybe pursue that dream of mine?"

"Do you know how expensive it is to live in this city, Linds? In a place where Gus would be safe? And then there's the issue of a nanny, of a private school, of...how do you plan to pay for all this?"

"We can sell the house in Pittsburgh. It's half-mine. Until then, I have the money you give me for Gus and a little in the bank...I don't know, Brian. I was hoping you could help me. It's not like I wouldn't pay you back."

He leaned back with a sigh, feeling the pressure settle in on his chest like an anvil. "Fuck." He didn't realize he had said it aloud until she glared at him, welling up for another thunderstorm of tears.

"Forget it, then! I can take care of Gus on my own. I'll get a job, I'm smart, I'm educated, I don't fucking need you or..."

"Shut up," he said calmly, shaking her shoulders gently in both hands. "Just shut up for a minute. Finish your wine. I have to take a leak. I'll be right back."

He went into the bathroom and leaned against the door, his eyes closed. His old friend, Mr. Headache, returned with a vengeance. Next to Mikey, Lindsay was his oldest friend. His former lover. The mother of his only child. Even if he had no feelings for her at all, he had a responsibility to Gus. He couldn't let her do anything rash that would place Gus in danger. But what could he do? He had enough money to exist for a few months, without this extra burden. With it, how short was his fuse? When he finally went back out, with an expression of forced good humor, he found her asleep on the sofa, still holding her wine stem. He gently took it from her hand and covered her with the afghan, checking on Gus before he went into the kitchen, wondering what they could stretch to feed another.

Dr. Friedman's Notes:

Justin Taylor (JT), 20, W-M, self-identified homosexual. Student. Lives with domestic partner, Brian Kinney (BK), 32, Advertising Executive. JT was referred by Lydia Johnson. JT was the victim of a hate crime over two years ago. He suffered a head injury, see notes in file, and was in a coma for several weeks. He has residual motor control issues as a result of that injury for which he is still undergoing physical therapy.

JT left BK and became involved with another man, but that relationship was short-lived. He has reunited with his first partner, and as part of their attempt to build a stronger relationship, both are undergoing therapy, individually and as partners. They were victimized by another man who is now facing criminal charges. An additional emotional burden is the fact that JT's younger sister is recovering from leukemia.

JT complains of occasional bouts of night terrors and non-specific anxiety. I asked that he submit to a physical examination, and the complete results are in the file. Overall, his health is good. His only physical limitation is his motor skill injury, for which he is being treated. JT arrived on time for his first session. He is a charming, amiable youth. Handsome, clean cut, casually dressed. He has a nervous habit of chewing on his thumbnail as he thinks, and he sits with one leg tucked under him in a boyish manner.

Excerpt from transcript:

Doctor: Have you been through therapy before, Justin?

JT: Once, my mom took me to see this shrink because I guess she thought she could talk me out of being gay. Mom was at the session with me.

Doctor: When was that?

(Winces, contemplates.) JT: When I first came out. A couple years ago.

Doctor: How did it go?

JT: (Laughs.) Well, I told her I liked sucking cock and we never went back. I think my Mom realized it was hopeless.

Doctor: You think it was her attempt to prevent you from being gay?

JT: She was scared of it.

Doctor: Were you?

JT: How can I be scared of something I am? That's like saying I'm scared of having blue eyes.

Doctor: When did you realize you were gay?

JT: I've always been gay. I have no memories of ever believing I was straight. As a kid, I had crushes on men. I was nervous about it, not sure how to go about it, but there was no doubt in my mind, ever, whether I was queer.

Doctor: When was your first sexual experience?

JT: When I was seventeen, with Brian.

Doctor: He seduced you?

JT: Other way round. I went to Liberty Avenue with the express idea of getting laid, at last. Only, I wasn't having much luck. I wasn't sure where to go. The whole scene was intimidating. And then I saw Brian getting into a Jeep with some friends. He was so fucking hot.

Doctor: You approached him?

JT: No, I made him approach me. As soon as his eyes met mine, I knew.

Doctor: What did you know?

JT: That he was the one.

Doctor: For your first sexual experience?

JT: For my life partner. At least I knew that, physically, this was my ideal partner, everything I wanted in a man. I guess he could have turned out to be dumb or boring or an asshole, but he didn't. (Laughs.) Well, maybe an asshole, but we all are from time to time.

Doctor: So you went home with him?

JT: Yes, to his gorgeous loft.

Doctor: How did it go?

JT: You want details?

Doctor: I'm not after the prurient, Justin. Tell me what you think is important.

JT: I was terrified. I wanted it but I was unsure of what to do. Brian undressed, showing off that perfect body of his and he is so well hung....sorry.

Doctor: You aren't going to shock me, Justin. Continue.

JT: He was very gentle and sweet about it. It hurt at first, but I got into it pretty quickly. We were interrupted by the birth of his son.

Doctor: Excuse me?

JT: Yeah, he had donated sperm to a lesbian friend, and she delivered that night. So we went to the hospital and visited them. I even got to weigh in on the baby's name. Brian dropped some E on the way home, so he was pretty tweaked.

Doctor: Do you use drugs?

JT: I have used drugs, everyone does. Mainly E, tried coke once, grass. A few disco drugs, like K. But both Brian and I have cut way back. We just aren't doing the scene anymore and it's stupid to do those kind of drugs when you're a couple. We still smoke grass to mellow out, occasionally.

Doctor: Let's spend some more time on the drugs later. For now, let's talk about that first night. So after the hospital, you returned to his home?

JT: Yeah, we did it all night. Brian was funny. He was so tweaked, he was showing out all over his loft, messing the place up, really funny. And then we started fucking, and that was all that mattered. By the next morning, he had forgotten everything. Who I was, that he had a baby, what he did to the loft. But he hadn't forgotten the sex, and we did it again in the shower.

Doctor: How did you feel about the loss of your virginity?

JT: Sore! He's huge. Seriously, I felt like I was madly in love with him. Looking back, I know it was a reaction to the whole sexual introduction thing and the dynamics of being with a man as handsome and experienced as Brian. I see the difference between how it was to THINK I was in love with him, and how it is to BE in love with him, as I am now. I was in lust and had a crush. Now I love the man.

Doctor: Did it take you awhile to get to that separation of emotion?

JT: You wouldn't believe how long. Lots of pain, lots of growing up, for both of us.

Doctor: How old was Brian at this time?

JT: 29.



Doctor: Were you bothered by the age difference?

JT: No, I figured he was somewhere between his mid- twenties and early thirties. I didn't care. I teased him about it, but I thought it was kind of cool to be fucking an older guy. I couldn't stand boys my age. Up until recently, I thought they were all homophobic assholes.

Doctor: Did boys your own age give you a hard time?

JT: Are you kidding me? I'm lucky I made it out of high school alive. Seriously. I was almost killed at my prom.

Doctor: The prom is the event that led to your bashing?

JT: Yes.

Doctor: How much do you remember about it?

JT: Not much.

Doctor: Tell me.

JT: I thought you were going to make me remember.

Doctor: I'm not going to MAKE you do anything, Justin. I'm going to help you remember, if you want. But before we do any regression, I'd like to know what you remember now.

JT: Some of it is mixed up with what people have told me. I had asked Brian to go to the prom with me but he flatly refused so I went with Daphne, my best friend. To my surprise, Brian showed up. It was his birthday, he'd just turned thirty. He looked so elegant in a dark tux and shirt with a white silk scarf against his lapels.

Doctor: That must have caused quite a commotion.

JT: Oh yeah, everyone was staring as he walked up to Daph and me. I didn't care. I couldn't take my eyes off him. I was so thrilled, I couldn't stop smiling.

Doctor: And then?

JT: ( winces.) And then he asked me to dance. Nothing. I don't remember any of it although Daph says it was the most romantic thing she'd ever seen. I know we stopped the show, everyone watched. I know I walked to his car with him and he put his scarf around me as we kissed. I know Hobbs was waiting for me in the garage and that he hit me in the head with a bat. Most of that I know from what people have said. I have had a few flashes of memory, of Brian twirling me on the dance floor. Of his kiss. Of his screaming my name in the garage, when he saw Hobbs. But they're nothing more than sound bytes. They just last a millisecond.

Doctor: What is your first memory after the bashing?

JT: I woke up with this horrible headache and a big thirst. I could barely open my eyes. My mom was there. I was in a bed in a strange room. My hand felt like a lead weight was pressing it to the bed. I asked for Brian.

Doctor: Was he there?

JT: No. He wasn't there. I thought he just forgot about me when they told me I'd been in a coma for weeks. He wasn't into boyfriends, especially not sick ones. I knew I had to get well and track him down. I didn't want to lose him. Months later, I find out he was at the hospital every night, watching me sleep. He just didn't want anyone to know. And he wore that white silk scarf that was covered in my dried blood under his shirt every single day.

(JT sighs, looks down, becoming emotional. I give him a moment to recover.)

Doctor: Do you want to leave it there until the next session, Justin? We're almost out of time.

JT: (nods.) Please.

End of excerpt.

Justin walked into the loft, surprised when Gus toddled up to him like the friendly two year old going on three that he was. He was also verbal enough to speak in sentences, and generous enough to hand him a soggy cookie. Justin scooped him up and the baby straddled his hip as Justin glimpsed Lindsay asleep on the couch and Brian busy in the kitchen.

"Mama's sleepy, shhhhhhhh!" Gus cautioned as Justin carried him into the kitchen and looked up to receive Brian's kiss.

"Are you cooking?"

"I'm warming up the leftover scampi and making a salad for us, and I opened a can of Spaghettios for the kid. I have cans of it left over from his last visit. Your position in the kitchen is secure."

"Daddy!" Gus held open his arms for Brian, who took the handoff from Justin, and gave him the spoon to stir the saucepan.

"What's up with this?" Justin asked carefully, nodding towards Lindsay.

"Down," Gus demanded, and Brian let him down on the floor, instructing him to go play with his toys in the other room. He then turned to Justin when they were alone.

"Fight with Melanie. Big one. Thinks she wants to move to New York. Doesn't know about my job. Say nothing."

"There's nothing to be ashamed of, Brian. You didn't do anything wrong."

"Please?"

"Okay, sure, if that's what you want. What will she do? Where will she live?"

"Right now, in the spare room down the hall," Brian responded and they shared a grimace.

"For how long?"

"I don't know, Justin, we haven't discussed it. She's an emotional mess right now. I'm just letting her vent. She and Mel will put it back together and she'll go back to Pittsburgh and that's that. This is all some kind of dumb misunderstanding."

"This is all you needed, Brian. I'm so sorry."

Brian shrugged. "What can you do?"

"Some people would tell her good luck and help her find a hotel. Not you. Because you're a big softie underneath that big bad wolf costume."

"Shut up, or I'll eat you up, mutton chop," Brian teased.

"Again?" Justin teased back. "Lunch wasn't enough?"

"Never enough," Brian pressed against him, nibbling his neck. Justin moaned and leaned into him, closing his eyes, as Brian said, "What did the shrink say?"

"Oh, that's romantic," Justin said with a giggle and Brian smiled.

"We can't be too romantic with a toddler running wild in the house and his mother zonked out on the couch."

Before Justin could respond, the front door buzzer rang, startling Gus, who began to cry and then ran full speed into Brian's arms. Brian picked him up, comforting him, as Justin went to the squawk box and said, "Yeah?"

Lindsay sat up, groggy, but cognizant enough to fluff her hair and look for her crying son. Justin buzzed up the person whose voice he couldn't hear above Gus's wails. Lindsay walked over and took Gus from Brian, calming him

with a mother's soothing murmur and embrace as Justin opened the door to the biggest, strongest-looking bull-dyke he had ever seen.

"You must be Justin, the boyfriend," she said, holding out a hand and shaking his hand firmly. "I'm Mick, the lawyer."

"Uh, yeah, come in," he waved her in and she looked around the loft's main room, then at Lindsay and then Gus, who had finally stopped crying, and finally at Brian, who came from the kitchen, then back at Lindsay, noting her tension.

"Looks like you're having dinner," she said, as she handed Brian an envelope. "I just need a minute."

Brian led her into his bedroom and closed the door. The problem with loft living was that almost all of the space was open. The bedrooms and bathrooms were the exceptions. "What's up?" He was annoyed that she didn't call first. He wasn't ready to handle the inquisition from Lindsay.

"I got real excited after reading your partnership agreement and looking at some New York law on non-compete agreements and dissolution of a professional partnership. We have a case, Brian. They've fucked up more ways than one. I wanted you to read this little position paper I threw together. This is purely on the letter of the law concerning those two areas. I haven't even touched discrimination, yet. Ignore the typos. Scott, my secretary, is back tomorrow and will clean me up. So who's the hot blonde?"

"I told you, he's my partner, Justin," Brian said, glancing at the memo written to him under attorney-client privilege. Mick laughed and sat down on the edge of his bed. Brian imagined his bed recoiling slightly, unaccustomed to visitors like Mick.

"God, you're such a fag. I meant the woman. With the baby."

"Oh," he sat beside her, still perusing the paper. It was concise and well-written. She was at least as smart as he imagined. "Lindsay, old friend and mother of my son. The kid is my boy, Gus."

"I thought they lived in Pittsburgh."

"They do. Major meltdown with lesbo lover. Look, she doesn't know anything about this, doesn't even know I've been fired, so..."

"Hey, man, whatever we talk about is privileged. She's gorgeous."

"Yeah," Brian said absently, looking up when Justin entered. He shut the door behind him.

"What am I supposed to tell Lindsay?"

"Nothing," Brian responded. "I'll tell her I'm having a will drawn up or something."

"Ok, well, the scampi is starting to stick to the pan," he hinted and Brian glanced at Mick.

"I don't suppose you'd want to stay for dinner..."

"Sure!" She accepted immediately, and Brian and Justin exchanged a look, surprised to have a polite question taken as a serious invitation.

"I'll go set another place," Justin said, thinking of ways to further stretch the food they were already stretching to cover Lindsay. He needn't have worried. The wine got a better workout than the food, and Gus was the only one with a strong appetite, eating all of his Spaghettios and half of a second serving. His skill with a spoon was roughly equivalent to Michael's ability with eating utensils, holding it in the same way, but getting a little less into his mouth. The New York Times was spread beneath the small plastic chair and table that Brian had purchased the last time Gus visited.

"No diet aid is better for cutting back than watching a little one eat," Mick said, glancing at the creamy red blend of canned spaghetti and milk from a sippy-cup that Gus had created in his plastic bowl, also a purchase from his last visit. Brian smirked as another spoonful landed on the newsprint.

"You'll notice I sat with my back to him."

"That's mean," Justin said with a laugh. "He's not that much worse than Mikey."

"Point taken," Brian agreed as Lindsay winced.

"You guys are so evil!"

Brian noticed she perked up with another lesbian in the room, even one as butch as Mick. She had smoothed her hair back when they were in the bedroom and even put on some lipstick. It was a phenomenon he didn't understand, but then lesbians were pretty much an enigma to him. A life spent rejecting dick and eating pussy was not on his radar screen.

"I actually love kids," Mick said with a smile. "I have two sons and a daughter."

Brian choked on his wine and Justin leaned over to slap his back until he waved him away. "Excuse me?"

She landed an unflinching gaze on Brian's handsome face. "What? You think no man could get past this formidable barrier of mine?"

"Pretty much, yeah."

"Brian!" Lindsay chided him, but Mick laughed.

"No, it's okay, people are always shocked to hear I was in a heterosexual marriage for nine years. Had three kids, twin boys and a girl. The fact is, it surprises me, too. I didn't look all that different then. I was thinner, but who wasn't thinner at twenty?" She glanced at Justin, who was twenty now, and Brian, who was as slim as a rake, and sighed. "Except fags, of course. Anyway, I was a Kansas farm girl, accustomed to hard labor. Had a big family, married a boy when we were straight out of high school. I was a clueless virgin, and so was he."

"Fancy wedding?" Justin asked, enthralled by her story and she smiled at him, as Brian rolled his eyes.

"In my little town? We got married in a church, I wore a dress and shoes, so yeah, it was fancy. We had the reception at the Holiday Inn on route seventy. That was big time."

"Did you love him?"

"Justin!" Lindsay cautioned him as Brian got up, clearing the dishes from the table. Both Lindsay and Justin were too caught up in her story to help.

"He's a sweetheart, a good guy. But neither one of us had a clue about love. We worked his farm together. I got pregnant immediately, of course. Had my daughter, then got pregnant again with the twins. By the age of 21, I had three babies," Gus toddled over to her, holding out his filthy hands and smiling under a face smeared with spaghetti sauce, gesturing to be held. "Whoa there, ranger," Mick said, wiping his hands and face with her napkin that she dampened from her water glass. She then lifted him up to her lap, and he leaned against her solid body, recognizing the easy manner of a woman comfortable with small children. She put an arm over his chest and bounced him gently on her knee as she went on. Lindsay beamed at the two of them, and Brian was amazed by this whole dynamic.

"When did you go to law school?" Lindsay asked, and Mick shrugged.

"I took undergrad classes at the community college just to get away from the kids for awhile. I had a faculty advisor there who informed me of three important truths. First, I was gay. Second, I was brilliant. Third, I had to get out of this marriage and out of town."

"Your lover?" Lindsay asked, enraptured, and Mick shrugged.

"More of a mentor, but we fooled around a little. Enough for me to know she was right about that first thing."

Justin giggled. "So what did you do?"

Brian was interested now, picturing this big, raw-boned farm girl faced with an alien dilemma. He stood behind Justin, crossing his arms on his lover's chest as he rested his chin atop his head. Justin closed his hands over Brian's arms. Gus sucked his thumb, fighting off a doze, oblivious to the conversation. Mick continued. "With my mentor's help, I was offered a scholarship to Smith. My husband and I talked about it, and agreed I should go. The kids were in school by now, and his mother was a widow, living with us, so she could help him with them. There I was, this big ol' dyke-in-training with a wardrobe straight out of the Sears catalogue among all these tight-assed blonde girls with turned up noses and silver spoons," she glanced at Lindsay. "Much like you."

"Hey!" Lindsay said with a blush. "I may look the part, but I was a misfit too. Right, Brian?"



He shrugged. "I don't know, Linds. Your folks have money, and all the boys wanted to fuck you. Some of us did fuck you, in fact. No one thought you were a dyke, including you, until junior year."

"Did you get a divorce?" Justin interrupted this detour into the Brian and Lindsay in College show.

"Eventually."

"What happened to the kids?"

"Nothing happened to them. They stayed with their father. He remarried, had three more. They visited me in Boston when I was in law school, and we were always in touch. My daughter's at NYU now, so she's living with me. One of my sons is in the Army, Military Intelligence, travels around the world. The other was killed by gay bashers when he was nineteen."

A sudden pall fell over the table. Justin's smile faded. "W-what?" Lindsay asked and Mick nodded, showing no emotion as she said,

"He was a sophomore at the University of Kansas. Smart boy, creative, wanted to write plays when he grew up. He loved everyone, never met a stranger, was completely stupid about his sexual orientation. He believed there was nothing wrong with it, so why keep it quiet? One night he was being a little too vocal about gay rights while in a local bar. These two good old boys followed him out, beat the shit out of him, threw him in the back of their truck like a sack of feed, drove him to the countryside and used a tire iron to administer the fatal blows. Left him dead in a ditch. He got covered up with snow. It took three days for them to find him."

"Christ," Justin said softly, tightening his grip on Brian's arms, who leaned down to kiss his forehead and remind him that he was fine. Lindsay had teared up again, and she reached over to squeeze Mick's hand gently.

"Up until then, I had been living a rather quiet life as a gay woman trying to make it in law. I didn't lie about it, but I didn't make a big deal out of it either. When I lost my son to a couple of bigots, I declared war on the straight world, at least that portion of it who has declared war on us. I advocate for changes in the laws, I write books and articles, I fund outreach programs, I try cases where gays have met discrimination. None of it will bring my boy back, but I owe him at least that much."

Brian took a sleepy Gus from her arms. "I'll put him to bed," he said quietly, wanting a few minutes alone with his son after listening to that story.

"Make sure he pees first," Lindsay said. A turning point had been reached when Gus successfully potty trained himself, even remaining dry through most nights. She went over and hugged Mick gently before returning to her chair and dabbing at her eyes. "I am so sorry. I don't think I could survive if anything happened to Gus."

"You'd be amazed what you can survive when you have to, Lindsay. I was a terrible mother, I loved the kids, but they were never my focus. I guess I regret that fact more than any other. I wasted a lot of years that I could have spent with him."

"But you have to be true to yourself. Your example was probably inspirational to him, allowing him to live his life the way he wanted," Justin reassured her. "Even though it was a terrible ending, he was himself, not hiding behind a lie."

"You're a sweetheart."

Justin blushed. "No, I just think all kinds of parental role models are okay, so long as they love their children and are there for them. You don't have to live with them to be there for them. Look at Brian."

"Look at Brian what?" He came back in, carrying Gus who was now dressed in snuggly flannel pajamas with feet in them and yellow ducks in the print. "He wants to tell everyone goodnight."

"I was just saying you don't have to live with your kid to care and to be a good role model."

Gus leaned over to kiss first Lindsay, then Justin, and then insisted on giving Mick a kiss too. After that, he locked his arms around Brian's neck, resting his face against his shoulder, exhausted. Justin beamed at them, smiling, watching until they left the room. "I love him with Gus. He's never sexier than when they're like that together."

"For your sake, I hope that's not entirely true, but I know what you mean," Mick teased. They all laughed.

Later, Justin rested the back of his head against Brian's lap as he stretched out on the sofa while Brian sat with his feet propped up on the coffee table. Mick had just left and the three remaining adults polished off the wine and grew progressively quieter. Finally Lindsay said,

"I'm going to have lunch with Mick tomorrow. I want to pick her brain about the situation I'm in with Mel. What are my rights? That kind of thing."

"I don't think she does that kind of law, Linds," Brian cautioned her.

"Why not? She did your will. It's all family law stuff. "

Brian frowned, caught by his lie. He hated lying, he could never keep up with it. "Whatever. If she doesn't, she could probably recommend someone who does."

"I like her."

"I noticed. Not your type, is she?"

"Not really, no, but she's fascinating. And I'm not looking for a girlfriend, Brian. I'm not even rid of the one I have. But I'd like to be Mick's friend."

"Whatever floats your boat."

"I promise not to stay here long, Brian. I know we're in the way."

"Bullshit, stay as long as you want," he said, feeling Justin grimace against his thigh. "I guess I'd better put my other boy to bed. You?"

"Not quite yet. I had that nap. I'll turn off the lights."

Brian nodded and stood up, bringing Justin with him. He paused to kiss Lindsay goodnight, and put an arm around his lover, leading him to their bed. He had no idea how he was going to manage all this, but for now it was rather nice to have his little family unit together.

"Daddy, I peed in the bed."

Brian awoke to this announcement. As if to prove his claim, Gus smelled faintly of ammonia. Brian opened one eye, noticed it was still dark, and then groaned. "Did you tell Mommy?"

"Mommy is too sleepy. She won't wake up."

Brian sighed, knowing from experience that Lindsay and chardonnay led to a solid sleep. "Okay then," he sat up, just as Justin asked what was wrong. "Gus wet the bed," Brian said and Justin yawned.

"Need some help?"

"Well, yeah," Brian took him up on his offer. "You have a choice. Wash the kid or change the sheets."

"I'll wash the kid."

After Gus was cleaned up and wearing fresh jammies, and the sheets on his crib were equally pristine, he went right back to bed. Brian and Justin, on the other hand, were wide awake. They worked as a team to scramble eggs and toast English muffins, suddenly ravenous. They took their plates back to bed, sitting Indian-style and chowing down on this snack as they talked in low, intimate tones. So much for Brian's habit of rejecting carbs and fat after seven. He smirked at the thought of being both unemployed and fat.

"Should one of us call Melanie?" Justin wondered and Brian frowned.

"I don't think so. I hate meddlers. She must know that Linds and Gus are here. You'd think she'd call just to see how the kid's doing."

"You think she's cheating?"

Brian shrugged. "I don't know. She's done it before."

"Poor Linds."

"We've heard exactly half the story. Remember that."

"I can't believe you're defending Melanie."

"I'm defending no one. I'm just saying keep your mind open for now."

Justin took the empty plate from Brian's hands and stacked it on his own, placing them both on the bedside table. "I so want to fuck you right now. You're so hot when you're being paternal with Gus."

Brian laughed. "What a chick thing to say. So what are you waiting for?"

Justin wrinkled his nose. "I feel funny about it with them right down the hall."

"Fuck that," Brian said, pushing him back and yanking at the sash of his robe.

"Daddy?" Gus's small voice was like a bucket of cold water thrown on their activity. "There's a monster under my bed. Can I sleep with you and Justin?"

Brian groaned and lifted him into the bed, exchanging a last longing look with Justin before he turned off the lights and they both tried to sleep with a wriggling toddler trapped in the space between them.

The next morning, Brian dressed in a dark gray Armani suit. He wore a pale blue hand-tailored shirt and a blue Ferragamo tie decorated with small silver birds. He drank black coffee and kissed his son on his way out. Justin had gone to the gallery a half hour earlier. Brian entered the elevator, rode it down to the street, left the building and put on his sunglasses. Now what? He glanced at his watch. Nine o'clock. He had nowhere to go, but he didn't want Lindsay to realize he wasn't going to work. What did people do when they were out of work? He knew he should be polishing his resume and talking to headhunters, but he was too numb to think about finding a job now. He was still in shock.

He just wanted to hide, but where? He wanted to stay home and bolt the door, but here he was, on the street, with no office to go to, no appointments to keep, no money to spend frivolously and nothing to do. At least the rains had stopped. He bought the New York Times, and went into a coffee shop where he ordered breakfast. He ate slowly as he read the paper from cover to cover.

"Hey, Brian. Why so dressed up? Going to an interview?"

He looked up at one of the younger partners in his ad agency, a man he would consider a peer. The guy had been educated at elite universities, but Brian found him more arrogant than intelligent. He knew he could take him in a match up, because Brian was that much better at what they did, and far more appealing to clients. He always sensed this guy's jealousy. How happy Brian's humiliation must have made him. He was dressed casually, accompanied by a small woman who was obviously pregnant. She smiled sympathetically at Brian, clearly not sharing her husband's gloat.

"Hello, Evan," Brian responded, not bothering to answer his facetious question.

"I took the day off. We have a doctor's appointment to figure out if they'll induce or let nature take its course."

The wife looked so miserable, Brian smiled at her. "For your sake, I hope they induce."

"Thanks," she stuck out her hand. "I'm Beth, Evan's wife."

He shook it. "Brian. Why don't you sit down, Beth?"

"No," her husband intervened. "We won't bother you in your job search."

"I'm just reading the paper."

"I'm getting your old office at the end of the month," Evan twisted the knife, but his wife winced at his cruelty. Brian gave away nothing. His old office had the superior view, and the better location, because he made much more money for the firm than Evan did. Brian was immensely bothered by the idea of this numb nuts moving into his space. "Is that Cynthia woman any good?" Evan continued.

"She's the best. Why?"

"They asked me to put her on my team. I'm thinking about it. She'll have to prove herself to me."

His wife sighed. "I really need to sit down, Evan."

"Please," Brian said tensely, and she gratefully lowered herself into his booth. Her husband continued to stand. "Cynthia's a great asset to the firm," Brian assured him. "I hope you treat her fairly," Brian tried not to make it sound like a warning. What threat could he offer, other than to smash in Evan's smug face?

"Is she your girlfriend?" His wife inquired innocently and her husband laughed.

"Your mind is shot from your hormones, honey. Remember? I told you. Brian is gay." He put an odd emphasis on that last word, drawing out the "a".

Her face reddened as she gave Brian a stricken look. "Sorry, I....you don't..."

He tensed. "Look gay? Act gay? Well, he's right. I am. And Cynthia's a talent. She shouldn't be punished just because she has the stigma of working for the faggot partner."

"FORMER faggot partner," Evan said with a smile. "I mean faggot FORMER partner. I know a lot of the agencies have queer partners, Brian. They seem proud of it. I'm sure they'd love to have you. We just have this family-oriented atmosphere, where alternative lifestyles don't really fit in."

Brian stared at him. "Being gay is not a lifestyle any more than being straight is a lifestyle. It's a sexual orientation, not a decision to live in a condo overlooking the sea. Or choosing Southwestern cooking over Chinese. It's as big a part of who I am, fundamentally, as being straight is who you are."

"Sorry if I wasn't 'PC'," he made quotes out of that last statement with his fingers. "The fact remains the same. You were a square peg in a round..." he hesitated as Brian smiled wryly. "Well, you know what I mean."

Yeah, Brian thought to himself. You wouldn't want me to be in that round hole, now would you, asswipe? To Evan, he said, "I'm at a loss to understand why the partners would sit around and gossip about who I fuck. What could it possibly have to do with them? They're safe. I wouldn't fuck any of them with YOUR dick."

"It's just not...normal...is it? You have to admit, it's not normal."

"Normal? Sure, it's normal. Faggots are nothing new. We've always been around, at least ten per cent of any population. Maybe that's not the majority, but it's certainly not abnormal."

"Many Christians and psychiatrists would disagree."

"Not the ones with brains."

"Uh, do you have a boyfriend, Brian?" Beth tried to break the tension.

"Yes, Beth, I do. Would you like to see a picture of him?"

"We need to go..." Evan said, but his wife shot him a poisonous glare and he shut up. Brian removed a photo from his wallet. It was taken on their balcony in the pensione in Portofino. They wore matching hotel robes, their arms around each other, a sparkling, incredibly beautiful backdrop of the ocean behind them. Their relaxed posture and wide smiles said it all. They were two men in love. She looked at the handsome couple and nodded. "He's very attractive. You make a lovely pair."

"Thanks," Brian returned it to his wallet and his wallet to his pocket.

"Pair of what?" her husband said with a laugh. "Come on, honey, let's go eat. Brian needs his time to peruse the want ads."

As she laboriously moved her bulk out of the booth, she reached out and placed her hand over Brian's for a fleeting moment. "I'm so sorry," she said softly. He wasn't sure if she meant for his loss of a job or for her boorish husband. He supposed it didn't matter. He smiled and nodded as her husband moved her along, asking. "Why'd you say that?" as they went.



"Why'd you have to be such a raving asshole?" she responded and whatever his answer was, Brian couldn't hear it. His blood was rushing in his ears. His face was burning. He felt exposed and vulnerable. He took his Mont Blanc pen from his pocket and began writing down everything he could remember from this conversation on the newspaper.

Later, Brian went to a movie, just to kill time, and then he finally went home to a blessedly empty loft. He changed out of his suit, pulling on jeans and a silk sweater, his feet bare as he sat down at his computer and brought up his old resume. Lots of updating was needed. He wasn't sure how much time had passed when the door opened and Lindsay came in, holding a sleeping Gus. She looked surprised to see Brian there, put a finger to her lips to silence him, and took Gus to the bedroom. When she emerged, she retrieved a Coke from the refrigerator, and then sat down on the sofa with a heavy sigh.

"What are you doing home so early?" She asked.

"I live here."

"You know what I mean."

He swiveled his chair to face her. "Where were you?"

"We went to lunch with Mick."

"Right. Late lunch. What advice did she give you?"

"To talk it out with Melanie before I took any action."

"Smart lady."

"Very, but I don't know if I want to do that. I'm already talked out. So why are you home?"

He took a long beat before he said, "I got fired, Linds. I'm out of a job."

She stared hard at him. "No." He nodded. "But...why?"

He explained the situation succinctly and she walked over to him, hugging him gently. "I'm so sorry, Brian. And here I am, adding to your burdens."

He sighed and swiveled out of her embrace, raising his hand to rest under his nose as he peered hard at the computer screen, feeling perilously close to tears. He didn't know why he felt like crying. Was it her maternal touch? Was it the humiliation in the coffee shop? Was it just the fact he was such a fucking loser, not only in Justin's eyes, but now in Lindsay's, too? Thank god Gus was too young to understand. She massaged his shoulders, saying nothing, knowing when he needed space to think or compose himself. He edited a couple lines on his resume, then stopped and leaned his head back against her belly, his eyes closing. "I don't know what to do with myself, Linds. I'm drifting."

"It just happened, honey. Allow yourself some time to rebound from the shock."

"I thought this was my shot. From here to senior partner, then managing partner. I did nothing to deserve this. I'm a top performer. I never let them down, even when Molly was so sick and I was so strung out. How could this happen?"

"Because they're a bunch of homophobic assholes."

"Are they? Or am I making excuses? Did I blow it by spending time in Pittsburgh with Molly and Justin? Or by taking that vacation? Do you know how much vacation time that I lost every year because we could only carryover a week and then it all expires in March? I could have taken a year off on unused vacation time. I worked my vacations. Except one. When I was so physically and mentally exhausted, I would've been no good to them anyway."

"Brian," she swiveled him around to face her, leaning her hands on the arms of his chair. "You did the right thing. This is bullshit. Don't let them cause you to question your decency. Is this why you hired Mick?" He nodded. "Good. If anyone can take them to the bank, it's Mick."

"I guess so. I feel like such a failure."

"How did you fail, Brian? You helped Molly and her family through a crisis. You cemented your relationship with Justin and took him on a vacation that you both deserved and earned. Where was your failure in all that?"

Gus began to cry, barely heard down the hall, and she sighed and went to check on him. Brian leaned back in his chair, feeling the calm of numbness return. Numb was just a step away from denial. Denial was a close friend, his constant companion throughout his childhood and much of his adult life. Deny your feelings and it doesn't hurt. Lost in a haze of fear and self-pity, he didn't notice Lindsay as she returned to the room, holding Gus. She watched Brian with the worried expression of a mother, wondering what she could do to help.

Justin came in quietly that evening, in case Gus was asleep. Music was playing at a low volume, the fire was lit. Brian was seated at his computer, his expression reflecting his concentration. Justin walked over to him and kissed the top of his head. He could feel Brian's tension. He didn't even look up from the screen.

"You're late," Brian said gruffly. "Lindsay made dinner. There's food in the fridge for you. You can nuke it."

"Okay. Are you mad at me? I called to say I'd be late."

"Yeah, at seven. An hour after you were due."

"Brian, we were working on inventory. It took forever. We have to catalogue everything, enter it in the computer along with all of the artist's information, the prices, and then update the insurance rider. Look at me."

Brian sighed. "I'm working on my resume. Lying is such a fine art."

"No need to lie, you have great credentials. Stop for a minute. Where's Lindsay?"

"Taking a long bath. Gus is asleep." Brian stopped what he was doing and swiveled to look up at Justin, his expression flat. Justin knew that look well. It concealed either anger or hurt feelings, often both.

Justin took Brian's handsome face in both hands and leaned down to kiss him sweetly on the lips. He could almost feel Brian's tension subside, as Justin's warm love chased away the blues. Their tongues touched, and then Justin withdrew and said, "I love you. I'm sorry I was late."

"S'ok," Brian responded softly. "One of us has to make a living."

As Justin went into the kitchen to retrieve the food set aside for him, Brian followed him with his gaze. "I told Lindsay the truth."

"Thank you! That'll make things so much easier. What about Mikey?"

"I sent him an email, but I haven't heard back. Not sure if he's seen it."

"He'd call if he had," Justin took the foil off the plate of curried chicken, rice and broccoli, rolling the silver paper into a ball and tossing it in the trash as he placed the plate in the microwave. He noticed some discarded mail in the trashcan, one envelope in particular. He waited until Brian went back to his computer screen, before he retrieved it and stuffed it in his pocket. It had been torn in half.

"I'm going to take a leak while my food heats up."

Brian said nothing and Justin closed the door to the bathroom before he pulled out the envelope with Jeffrey Walker's embossed home address on it. Justin wryly supposed the psychopath couldn't put his current address on the envelope, since the city jail lacked a certain panache. He lined up the heavy vellum paper he found inside, squinting at the almost illegible doctor's scrawl as he read,

"Dear Brian,

I heard from my attorneys that you're back from Italy. I'm sure you intend to testify against me. I don't blame you a bit. What I did was wrong. I know you'll find this hard to believe, but I did it because I love you. I love you, Brian. I always will, whether you believe me or not. We were made to be together.

Do I hate you for embarrassing me in front of my friends and colleagues? For throwing me into this hellhole? For ruining my career? No, I could never hate you. I love you. There's so much you don't see, won't see, refuse to understand.

You're blinded by your obsession for Justin, you just can't see how little he cares for you. Your money? Yes. Your support, your lifestyle? Yes. You? No. He's proved that over and over, leaving you, not believing in you, running to

another man. Breaking your heart. Busting your balls. He's a menace. He's too young for you, too green, completely undeserving of the person you are.

Someday, if, god forbid, you lost your job or your money or all the perks you can offer, you want to see how fast he'll be gone? Don't blink. He's a blond twink who will be hanging off the arm of some other older, richer benefactor before you can even apply for unemployment. Not I, Brian. I would always be there, supporting you, paying your bills if you couldn't, loving you.

I may have gone about this the wrong way, and I'm willing to pay my dues for what I did, but never let them make you uncertain of my motives. I'm now and forever motivated by one thing: love. Do what you have to do at the trial. I understand and I love you no matter what.

Always,

Jeffrey"

Justin frowned, returned the letter to the envelope, and shoved it back in his pocket. The psychopath was still at it. He walked back to the kitchen, where Brian was at the fridge, removing a beer from the door. He saw Justin's expression and sighed. He walked over to the trash can, glanced at its contents, then held out his hand to Justin. "Give it to me."

Justin reluctantly did so, and Brian took the letter over to the hearth and threw it in the flames. "NO!" Justin insisted. "Get it out!" By the time Justin began shoving at it with the poker it was too late, the letter was incinerated.

"What are you doing?" Brian insisted.

"It could be evidence."

"Of what?"

"Doesn't matter now. It's gone."

"Justin, I don't care what that psycho thinks or says. I don't doubt your feelings for me. Come here."

Justin went into his arms, ignoring the chime of the microwave, announcing that his dinner was warm. "Good, because he's wrong."

"I know that."

"Do you think he loves you, Brian?"

"Maybe in his sick control freak, obsessive way, he does. But that doesn't mean he has my best interests in mind. Love is not always a force for good. A lot of murders and other mayhem, even wars, involve the emotion of love."

"What he said about your job interested me. You think it's just an ironic coincidence?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, it's so weird that he warns you about what I would do if you lost your job, and then...you do lose it. Coincidence?"

"What else could it be? Jeffrey's in jail, and I hardly think he can control my partners."

"I don't know. I don't have a theory. I just don't like coincidences."

Brian kissed his nose, and said, "He may be right that you're a blond twink, but he fails to see the fact you're a blond twink covering an ancient soul."

Justin smiled and kissed Brian squarely on the mouth, luring him towards the bedroom, unconcerned that his dinner was growing cold.

The following evening, Brian sat at the bar in Hot, located beneath Mick's offices. He was drinking a scotch, waiting for her to appear. It was way too early for a gay bar to fill up, and he suspected some of the men who wandered in now were just escaping the rain, which had started again, with a vengeance. No one had the nerve to approach him, and Brian was fine with that. He wanted to be left alone. Mick finally came in from the street, dressed in matching pants and blazer that was one tuck away from being a man's suit. Her blue cotton shirt had an open collar, and the whole ensemble seemed to cry out for a tie. She slammed her briefcase on the bar, slapped Brian's back in greeting and ordered a boilermaker.

"How ya doin', Terry?" She asked the bartender who grinned at her.

"Can't complain, boss."

"Since when?" She said with a guffaw. "You be nice to my friend Brian, here. You got it?"

"I think I can manage that. He dresses up the place."

Brian smirked at that remark and she led him to a back table where they could talk.

"Dykes aren't allowed in this bar," one of the stragglers grumbled at her, glaring at Brian for having the gall to host this woman in their closed domain. Mick laughed.

"You must be new. I own this bar, chickie baby. Fuck off."

Brian smiled, enjoying Mick's attitude. "Were you in court?"

"Yeah, that's why I look so elegant. How did you know?"

"Scott told me." Her secretary was back.

"Just a discovery hearing, but while I was there, I went over and talked to the D.A. who's trying Jeffrey Walker's case. He's a good one. And he feels like he has a strong page on this creep. He wants to see him do real time, not just get his wrist slapped since he has no priors and is a rich doctor."

"Good," Brian said, looking down at his drink, his brows knitting together in consternation.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Don't do that. I hate it when my kids do that. What's on your mind?"

"He wrote me a letter. Told me he did it out of love. Admitted he was misguided, he was wrong, apologized, and said he loved me. That Justin didn't love me and never would. He only loved the life I gave him."

"Shit, that's a confession, kid. Did you keep it? Turn it over."

He looked up, blushing slightly. "Justin said the same thing. I burned it."

"Oh well. What worries you about it?"

"I think in his own twisted way he did love me, Mick. And for a time, I encouraged that love. Now his whole life is ruined. I keep remembering that, despite everything else he did, he saved Molly's life. He's a brilliant doctor. Is the trade off worth it? How many kids will die because I have the satisfaction of putting Jeffrey behind bars?"

"Listen to me, Brian. You can be brilliant and still be a freak. Look at Hannibal Lecter. Someone that unstable, that twisted, doesn't need to be dealing with life and death issues, no matter how technically skilled he is. Stop that."

He met her eyes and sighed. "I try, but I remember how sick Molly was until Jeffrey took over. Now she's on the road to recovery."

"And he almost killed you in the process. At least he endangered your mental and physical health by misusing his professional tools. Quit beating yourself up. We have a different battle to wage now. Against your firm. I want to get



a letter out this week. The first volley. I'll need some names and information to do that. I'll also want you to review it."

They were interrupted by a tall, lanky youth who wandered over to their table. He lit a cigarette with a shaking hand. He was chalk pale, soaking wet from the rain, his dark hair streaming into his eyes, which were blue and haunted. His cheekbones were gaunt, giving him the skeletal beauty of a fashion model. He was all angles and bends in jeans that were beginning to bag and a thin, less than clean t-shirt. He looked cold, and wiped his runny nose on the sleeve of a battered leather jacket.

"Hey," he said to Brian, ignoring Mick as if she weren't there.

"Hey," Brian said, raising an inquisitive brow.

"You want a date? We can go downstairs."

Brian looked confused. "A date? You want me to pay you to go downstairs with you when I could go downstairs and get a free blowjob from anyone I chose?"

"Yeah, man. I don't give it away. You'll like it. I'll suck your dick without a condom for fifty or you can suck me, with a condom, whatever you like. I'll let you bareback me for a hundred."

Mick started to speak, but Brian held up a hand to stop her. "I'm not interested."

"Come on, man," the kid persisted. "I'm hungry. I haven't eaten all day. Two days."

Something about him hit a chord in Brian. Was it the tall, gangly body? The haunting but handsome face? The expression of hopeless chaos? He was seeing himself at this age if he didn't have people like Debbie Novotny and Vic and Michael to support him when things got unbearable at home. He reached in his pocket and removed a twenty dollar bill he couldn't really afford to spare, and handed it to him. "Get yourself something to eat."

"And stay the fuck out of my bar," Mick said gruffly. "This isn't a hustler bar and you aren't old enough to be in here. Wait." She too produced a twenty and as the kid reached for it, she noticed how thin his hand was, like skin stretched directly over bones. On the back of his hand was a purplish lesion. She encircled his wrist, which was tiny, holding fast when he tried to pull away. He couldn't do it, she was too strong. "You sick?"

"Fuck you, you fat dyke bitch! Let go of me!"

"Honey, you need help."

"I'm fine."

"You infected?"

"None of your business. It don't matter to you. I wouldn't fuck you for a thousand bucks," he suddenly grimaced, his face contorting as a cramp went through his body. "Leave me alone, I have to go to the bathroom. Let go of me."

She released him, and he ran towards the can, while she exchanged a look with Brian and shook her head. "He's got it."

"HIV? You can't know that, Mick. He's just thin."

"He's sick and he's practicing unsafe sex for money. He's got it. You notice he didn't offer to share his body fluids with you, only to take yours into him. Because he has nothing to lose." She flipped open her cell phone and auto-dialed a number. "Hi, Frankie, it's Mick. Good, and you? Got room for one more? Medical workup, shelter, food, the usual. Come on, this kid is desperate. He's probably not on any meds and he needs to be. He's wasting, he's sick. I don't know. I'm at the bar. I can be there in ten, if he'll come with me. I know Frankie, we'll talk about the horrors of finances later. For now, let's help this kid." She hung up and Brian looked at her.

"A shelter?"

She nodded. "A safe place for HIV- positive youths. Sad that there has to be such a place, but there does. Some of it is social and educational, a place they can go and hang out, get a meal, get condoms for free, play some video games or listen to music or watch television. Get medical care. If they're users, they get free hypos. But we have a few slots for resident kids until they can find a halfway- house or somewhere to stay. All of the slots are taken. The place is way too small to accommodate the demand and money is always a problem. But we'll double him up with someone. He can't be left on the street."

"How are you involved with it?"

"It's the Patrick Donovan Center for Gay Youths. Patrick was my son who was murdered. It's something I've funded in his honor, but it's gone beyond me. We depend on agencies and charities and private contributions to eke by. It started out as more of a social club for young gays, but we've filled this sad little niche now. It's become a place for HIV positive kids to go without censure."

He looked at her and sighed. "God, that's great, Mick."

"No, it's small potatoes. Just a handful gets helped, but I like to think that's a start. We're struggling right now in these tough economic times. Brian, he's been gone too long. Will you check on him?"

He winced. Sick hustlers were not his thing. But how could he refuse after what she just told him? He went into the bathroom, crinkling his nose at the unpleasant stench. The kid was seated on the tile floor, his back against the wall, his long legs splayed out in front of him. He was as white as the tile and trembling like a rat on crack. Brian looked for a sign that he had recently shot up, but nothing was apparent. "You okay?" He asked, and the kid sighed.

"I'll be okay, just let me sit here a second."

Brian squatted beside him. "Mick, the dyke at the table with me, has a place for you to stay."

"Some fucking shelter? No thanks. You ever been to those? The streets are cleaner and safer."

"This one is okay."

"How do you know?"

"I uh..."

"Yeah, you don't look like the Good Samaritan type. You've never even been in it, have you? It'll be a hellhole."

"Where else do you have to stay? You have a crib?"

The kid looked down at the floor. "Not right now."

"I'll go with you. If it's a terrible place, if I wouldn't stay there myself, I'll buy you a hotel room for the next three days, okay?"

He looked up at Brian, his eyes reflecting an absolute emptiness. He had no fight left in him. Brian stood and held out his hand to help the kid to his feet. The boy reached out and Brian saw the eggplant colored mark against the white skin of his hand. He hesitated just long enough for the boy to understand the reason, and withdraw his hand. He struggled to his feet under his own power. He was seething with anger.

"It's just a bruise! Some asshole shut a car door on it! See?" he pressed his thumb against it and the mark lost color and then darkened again when he removed the pressure. "AIDS spots don't fade out if you push them, you asshole!"

"Look, I..."

"I don't have AIDS! I don't!" His voice rose in anger and fear. Brian tried to quiet him by lowering his own voice.

"It's okay, I believe you. Come on." When Brian touched his hand, it felt hot and dry. He pressed the back of his hand to the kid's clammy forehead. "You're burning up."

"I can't stop shaking. I feel cold."

Brian thought of Molly, of all the hell she went through and all the hell he went through with her. He knew he couldn't let himself care about what happened to this sad kid. He couldn't survive another health crisis, and he had enough on his mind. It wouldn't be the same, because he had no connection to this kid as he did to Molly, but still, it was too much for anyone to ask of him.

"I'm scared," the boy said softly and Brian slipped back into a memory.

Brian was four, not much older than Gus was now. His father was on a drunken rampage after coming home from a night of boozing and bowling with his friends. When he heard Jack yell at his mother, Brian ran down the hall to his sister's room. He remembered he was wearing flannel pajamas with feet in them and his feet slipped on the hardwoods as he ran, making his escape more perilous. Claire was only seven, but she seemed grown up to him. He crawled in bed beside her and drew in his limbs, becoming a red flannel ball, as small as he could make himself appear.

"Hide me," he whispered desperately. "I'm scared!" Claire covered him up with the quilt just as their father entered her room.

"Where is that little crybaby? He broke my god damn radio!"

Claire pretended to have awakened at that exact moment. "He didn't mean to, Daddy. The knob just came off in his hand."

"I told him to leave it the hell alone! How am I supposed to listen to the game when I'm working in the garage? Where is he?"

"I don't know. Hiding, I guess."

"He'll wish he hadn't when I find him," he stormed out of her room. For some reason, Claire wasn't subjected to Jack's rages. Whether it was her gender or her fragile appearance, or something else, he saved his beatings for his son and occasionally his wife. Claire rubbed Brian's arched back, helping him to relax and stretch out again. She whispered, "Don't be scared, Brian. He won't come back. He's gone. Don't be scared, you aren't alone."

Whimpering softly, Brian pressed close as she enfolded him in her arms. He listened to her sing "The itsy bitsy spider went up the water spout..." as if it were a lullaby. Eventually, he fell asleep. By morning, the liquor would've worn off, and the worst of Jack's rage would've passed. For the moment.

Over time, Brian and Claire lost that closeness they felt as kids under fire. He missed that sense of camaraderie. He should call her sometime, try to mend some fences. Strange how a simple act of kindness could remain with you forever. He sighed and slipped an arm around the boy's thin waist.

"Don't be scared," Brian said softly as he led him out of the bathroom. "You aren't alone."

The Patrick Donovan Youth Center was not what Brian expected, although he wasn't sure why he expected anything, really, having never been inside a youth center. The organization occupied a small stand-alone structure in Chelsea. It had once been a tiny private school, built on two stories and a basement. It featured casement windows and a back lot that once served as a playground, but was now a fenced-in basketball court. While it was undistinguished in appearance, Brian knew it had cost a fortune, simply because he knew the price of real estate in this area.

Buzzed in at the front door, once inside Brian realized how much care went into making this building homey and welcoming. A small reception area was painted a plum color while the ubiquitous rainbow logo signifying gay culture formed a border between the wall and the white ceiling. A lot of activity was going on behind the desk where people answered phones and processed paperwork.

"Mick!" A large woman with multiple chins and a winning smile came over, hugging her as tightly as two big women could manage. "How ya doing, hon'?"

"Good. I've got one for you. I called Frankie."

"Let me get him. We're full up, not sure what he was thinking. Want to start the paper work?"

A clipboard and forms were produced for the kid, along with a pen. Brian sat beside him as the boy began to fill in the blanks. Mick spoke in low tones with a small, harried and obviously gay man who came from somewhere behind the double doors from the interior. He listened, while unable to take his eyes off of Brian. Brian didn't even notice him, having realized that the kid was having trouble writing with a shaking hand. He took the clipboard from him. "I'll write, you dictate. Name?"

"Shea."

"Shay?"

The kid spelled it and then said, "Last name Hennessey."

"I can spell that. I'm touched by the shamrock, too. Address?"

"I don't have one."

"I'll just put none. Date of birth?"

"January 5, 19..." he hesitated and Brian glared at him.

"Don't bother lying."

"Okay, I'm seventeen."

Brian did the math and wrote down a number. "Emergency contact?"

"None."

"Come on. Parents?"

"Dead."

"Siblings?"

"None."

"Friends?"

"No."

Brian figured he was lying about both his parents and his siblings, but there was no reason to push it. Shea narrowed his eyes at Brian as he continued with the forms. "What are you writing?"

"I'm putting down my name."

"But..."

"Don't sweat it, they don't care. How tall are you?"

"I don't know. Six feet maybe?"

"I'd say six-one."

"Really?" he sounded proud of that and Brian smiled.

"I'm six-two, and you're almost eye-level with me. Weight?"

"No idea."

"I can't judge weight, I'll leave it blank. Your hair is black, your eyes are blue, when was your last medical checkup?"

"Probably when I was thirteen, before I left home."

"Where is home, Shea?"

"Keokuk, Iowa," he winced. "Don't write that down."

"How did an Iowa boy end up in New York City?"



"Hitchhiked," he said dully. Their conversation was interrupted by Mick and Frankie, the small man with an eye for Brian.

"Let's take a look around, Shea. Give you the feel of the place," Mick invited. "This is Frank Webb, he runs the joint."

Shea and Frank shook hands and when Frank was introduced to Brian, Brian ignored his worshipful gaze. As a group, they walked through the double doors. Frankie was cruising way outside his road tolerance as he continued to stare openly at Brian. Brian pretended not to notice. The rest of the ground floor was taken up with offices and medical facilities along with a small gym equipped with treadmills and weight benches. Motivational posters on the wall reminded that nutrition and maintaining strong muscle mass were critical to combating wasting. The basement had been converted into a rec room with a large screen television, DVD library, pool table and two arcade-sized video games. A few boys were watching an action film, the smell of fresh microwaved popcorn hanging in the air.

Snacks were liberally scattered in the small kitchen along with signs crediting those who'd made the donations. More posters on the walls reminded about safe sex, taking prescribed medications and the warning signs of various secondary infections. Brian winced, thinking how horrible it would be to be a kid dealing with this kind of vulnerability.

Upstairs were two large dorm-styled rooms, with rows of single beds and identical chests of drawers between the beds, and a brass trunk at the foot of each bunk. Brian counted room for six boys in each dorm, and all of the beds showed signs of having occupants. They were personalized in small ways, with abandoned books or favorite pillows or comforting, strangely child-like toys. A much smaller room had only two bunk beds and a door that locked.

"We don't see many girls who come here, needing a place to stay," Mick explained. "But we want to have space set aside in case they do. Since no one is using it now, we're going to put you in here, Shea."

"Great, the girl's room. What about that hotel?" he said to Brian who glared at him.

"This place is clean, pleasant...well run," he flopped down on the bed, as if testing the mattress, and then stood up again. "Bed is fine. I'd stay here. And so will you."

"There's a bathroom attached, Shea," Frankie said with a smile. "Why not take a nice shower? Have a nap? We'll serve dinner at seven. Come down to the rec room for that. We eat in front of the television, like all Americans."

Shea looked like a dog trying to decide if it should bolt out the door or stay put where it was warm. Brian nodded at Mick and Frankie to go, and they left them alone together. Brian sat on the edge of the bed, looking up at him.

"I know this sucks. But you don't have a good alternative right now. You can't stay on the street, you're sick. You aren't in jail here, you aren't committed. You shower, eat some warm food, sleep. What's the problem with that? It's not one of those places that harps about religion or any of that crap."

"I'm not used to being fenced in. I don't fit in with those other kids."

"So? This isn't about popularity. I'll see if Mick can't have dinner brought up to you. This once. It's just a bed, Shea. Take it. There've been plenty of times I was grateful just to have a safe place to sleep," Brian said, remembering his shelter at Mikey's when his own father was on a rampage.

"You?" Shea smirked as he sat beside him on the bed. "Mr. Armani? Mr. GQ?"

"Not when I was your age. Anyway, stay the night. Don't be a dumbass."

"Brian, that's your name, right?"

"Yeah."

"Why didn't you want to fuck me? Because you thought I have AIDS?"

"Because I..." he hesitated. "I'm in a relationship."

Shea groaned. "God, you're one of those."

Brian smiled. "Haven't been for long, but yeah. I guess I am one of those. And I used to feel exactly the way you do about it, but not anymore. You stay here and I'll bring you some cigarettes tomorrow."

"Okay, okay, one night."

Brian left him there and joined Mick and Frankie in his office. "He's staying."

"Good."

"What happens now?"

"Assuming he'll consent, we have a team of doctors who volunteer their time and tomorrow is their visitation day," Frankie said. "We can test him, give him a general work up, see what's going on. He's very thin, wasted. We'll feed him and keep him safe as long as he wants to stay and we have room for him. At least until the results come back. Will you sponsor him, Brian? We try to find sponsors for our kids who stay with us awhile to offset costs. We look for \$75.00 a day, but anything is a help."

Mick winced. "This isn't a good time for Brian, Frankie."

"Shut up," Brian said, removing his checkbook from his back pocket. "If I can't afford \$75.00 bucks...I'll make it for a week, okay? Let me know if you need more later."

"If he leaves, may we just apply it to our general fund?" Frankie pushed.

"Of course."

Frankie gave him a receipt for his taxes and Mick sighed, "Hope we're open until the end of the week."

"What do you mean?"

"It costs a fortune to run this place, Brian. With charitable donations down everywhere due to the economy, we get less in from our usual sources, and lower allocations from the big ones like United Way. I've put every penny I can into this place, and I've begged the utility companies to extend our unpaid bills, and the tax department to give me an extension on the property taxes, but it's bleak. The demand is huge, but the resources are small. We're almost at the end of our financial rope."

Brian sighed. "I could spare a thousand..."

Mick patted his arm. "Honey, I'm not asking you for money. You need yours yourself right now. I'm just venting. When the charitable funds run low, AIDS becomes an even lower priority to the mainstream."

"Why not do a fundraiser?"

"We have. We've been to the well one time too many. Our benefactors are strapped."

Brian nodded, understanding. "Well, I need to go. Were we going to talk about the case, Mick?"

"Sure, let's share a cab. We can talk on the way. Later Frankie."

Brian spontaneously pulled Frankie into an embrace, causing the man to struggle not to swoon in his arms as he pressed his lips to his ear and whispered, "Take dinner to his room tonight. Just this once. Okay?"

At that moment, Frankie would have done anything for him, up to and including opening a vein. He nodded vigorously as Brian touched the tip of his tongue to his ear, and then released him and walked out with Mick. "What the fuck was that?" she asked and he smiled and lit a cigarette, declining to answer.

"What are you doing?" Brian asked curiously when he came into the bedroom following dinner that evening to find Justin reading the entries in his checkbook. Justin blushed, busted.

"I uh..."

"You what?" Brian took it from him and returned it to the top of the highboy. Justin sighed and waved a deposit slip at him. "What are you doing with that?"

"I'm putting my paycheck in your account. It isn't much, but Leo paid me a week in advance."

Brian looked confused. "You have your own account, and we have the joint account for the household, if you...I don't understand."

Justin sighed. "I just wanted to pay back a little of the money you've spent on me over the years. Who's Patrick Donovan?"

"I give up. Who is he?"

"You wrote him a rather sizeable check today."

"You may be my partner, and we may share this place, but you have no right to snoop my personal finances, Justin."

"I know, but I did. I'm sorry. I was writing in the amount of the deposit I'm making and I saw it."

"First of all," Brian took the deposit slip from him and tore it up. "You aren't making a deposit into my account. It's your money, you earned it, spend it on yourself. Second of all, some things are too personal to share, and my private checking account is one of them. Third, Patrick Donovan is a shelter for HIV positive kids. Mick's son was Patrick Donovan. She founded it in his honor."

Justin was embarrassed, but still asked, "Ouch. Sorry. But can we afford such a generous gift right now?"

"It's not that much. Butt out, Justin. I can't have you jonesing after every dime I spend."

"Am I doing that?"

"It feels like it."

"I don't mean to be."

Brian sighed and crossed the room, standing behind him as he held fast to Justin's slim form, resting his forehead against the back of his head. "I don't mean to be a cunt. It's just been a long day. Where are Linds and Gus?"

"She told you. Mick is having a little lesbo party for her, to introduce her to some people and Gus was invited too."

"Methinks Mick may be warm in the valley where no man dare to go for Miss Lindsay," Brian teased and Justin wrinkled his nose.

"Eww, I like Mick, but she's a big old dyke. I don't see Linds with someone like that."

"We aren't equipped to suss out how dykes think, Sunshine. Since we're alone for a change, let's get naked and screw in the other rooms of the loft."

"Which other rooms?"

"All of them," Brian said with a smirk and Justin laughed and agreed, immediately beginning to strip.

Justin picked up the phone on the third ring as he squinted at the clock. Three a.m. Brian was on his back, snoring softly, dead to the universe. "Yeah?"

"Brian, it's Shea."

"Who?"

"You know, the guy you met at that bar called Hot today. I can't stay here. I'm crawling out of my skin. You have to break me out of here. You promised me a hotel room. I want it. I won't go see that doctor tomorrow. Meet me in front of this place in an hour, or I'll be gone. You said not to be scared, you said I wasn't alone. Help me," he hung up and Justin stared at the phone with a stunned expression. He pushed the end button and then shoved Brian's side until he got a response.

"Wha's wrong?" he asked groggily and Justin sighed.

"Who is Shea and why did you meet him at a gay bar and why did you promise him a hotel room and why is he calling you at three o'clock in the fucking morning?"

Under the blue lights, Brian stared at the hard set of Justin's jaw and smiled. "You need your hair in rollers and a rolling pin in your hand, Jealous Wifey."

"It's not funny."

"Less funny than you know. What exactly did he say?" Justin related the conversation and Brian groaned. "Proving once again that no good deed goes unpunished."

"What are you doing?" he asked as Brian left the bed.

"Getting dressed."

"You're going to meet him?"

"What choice did he leave me?"

"Who the fuck IS he?"

Brian explained his brief history with Shea Hennessey as he dressed. Justin listened, understood, and began dressing too. "What are you doing?" Brian demanded and Justin shrugged.

"Going with you."

"Like hell you are. You have to work tomorrow."

"It's not brain surgery. I'm young. I can stay up late occasionally."

"Are you doing this out of some misguided need to keep an eye on me?"

"No," Justin said resolutely. "Out of some misguided need to keep an eye on HIM."

Brian smirked at him, and they left the loft together, dressed for the continuing rains.

The three of them sat at a small table at a Starbucks in Chelsea. The only other patrons were a cooing gay couple either on their way to a rendezvous or still basking from one, and a tired looking executive either bagging an all night meeting or up very early for a morning one. Shea looked utterly exhausted as he drank sweet chai and tried to explain his discomfort with the shelter.

"So let me recap," Brian said patiently. "No one's bothered you or given you a hard time. You had a nice hot shower, a hot meal, a warm, comfortable bed. What's the problem again?"

Shea glared at him. "I'm not going to that doctor."

"Okay, but that's tomorrow, well, later today. Want to tell me again why you're so terrified of a check up?"

Shea met his eyes. "They say if you hustle after you know you're HIV positive they can try you for murder."

Brian and Justin exchanged a glance. "So you think you may be but as long as you don't know, you intend to go on hustling?" Brian clarified and Shea frowned.

"I don't let them suck me without a condom or fuck them without a condom. I'll suck them raw or let them fuck me, but not the other way around. So I'm not exposing anyone."

"But..." Justin started to say, but Brian put his hand over his to quiet him.

"It's not about that, Shea. It's about you. If you're infected, the sooner you start treatment, the better. With the new protocols, you can live a long time in relative good health. If you don't take the meds, you won't last a year."



Shea shrugged. "Big loss. Anyway, I can't afford the meds if I'm sick."

"There are ways to get meds even if you have no money. Trust me. Shea, don't be a coward. I get tested regularly, we both do. It's always slightly scary while you wait it out, but you have to do it."

"I thought you two were partners. That you didn't fuck around on each other."

Justin smiled, pleased that he had heard that from Brian, who'd obviously passed on Shea's offer. "We are, but we haven't always been exclusive," he said. "Since our last tests were clear, and since we aren't with anyone else, we feel safe now. But we didn't always."

"I did," Brian said softly. "I always practiced safe sex. I never felt like I was going to get it. But look, Shea, if you have it, it's not the death sentence it used to be."

"You don't know," Shea declared. "It is if I say it is. Because if they tell me I have it, I'll off myself the same day I find out. I'm not going down that way. I've seen people die of it. It sucks." He got up and headed for the bathroom. Brian glanced at Justin, who rolled his eyes.

"Drama princess."

"I'm not so sure of that. I understand where he's coming from, you don't."

"What special insight do you have into his twisted little mind, Brian?"

"I was once a scared seventeen year old loner. I had no family to back me up, and I suffered a great sense of tragedy when I thought of the future. If not for the Novotny family, who knows where I might have ended up? I would have dropped out of high school, with no job, no shelter, running away from a bad home situation. I could have ended up on the game, too. More than once, I thought the time had come to pull the plug."

Chilled by the specter of Brian dying young, Justin reached over and took his hand. "Brian, did you ever..." They were interrupted by Shea's return. He glanced at the men's joined hands and smirked as Brian told him to sit down. Ultimately, Brian convinced him to go back to the center only by promising to be with him when he saw the doctor.

It seemed an empty promise to Brian, since he knew it would be nothing. All they would do now is draw blood. The results would come later. After they dropped Shea off at the center, it was time for breakfast.

The rains had momentarily stopped and so they walked to a nearby diner populated mainly by young men, stragglers from the nearby clubs. They ordered food as unhealthy and greasy as anything Debbie Novotny served. Justin combed through his hair with his fingers, noting it still felt damp. He saw Brian smiling at him and asked, "What?"

"You look like a baby duck."

"Excuse me?"

"I've often thought that about you, especially when you're wet. Little yellow feathers," he reached over and fluffed Justin's blond hair. "Blue eyes, and your full upper lip is wide, kind of like a stubby little beak."

Justin smiled wryly. "You're describing a rubber duckie."

"Exactly! That's it."

"Fuck you," Justin laughed.

"It's a compliment. Rubber duckies are cute. Everyone loves them."

"Maybe, but no one wants to look like one."

"I've been called worse things than that."

"Like?"

"Like I'm going to feed you insults to flip back at me?" Brian and Mikey had a deal. He would never tell anyone that when they were in high school Mikey was often referred to as "The Mole" since he was small and dark and the

glasses he wore prior to his contact lenses made his eyes look tiny. Mikey would return the favor by taking to the grave the fact that Brian was known as "Ostrich" for his long neck, big eyes and his endless, powerful soccer legs. Justin reached across the table and gripped Brian's hand in his.

"Don't get too involved with this kid, Brian. You're vulnerable, he's in trouble, don't do it."

"You can't seriously be jealous of him?"

"Not the way you mean."

"Then...?"

"You come across as a big, tough, cynical bastard, but when it comes to certain things, you turn to marshmallow. Sick kids head that list."

"I'm not Mother Teresa. Yes, I got very involved with Molly. But she's your sister, which makes her my family and we share a special bond, Molly and me, for reasons I don't fully understand. I have no connection to Shea, other than a vague sympathy for what he's going through."

"You're creating a tie by identifying him with your own youth."

Their food arrived and Brian leaned back, glowering at his eggs and bacon. Justin had made his point. Now, Justin drove that point home. "Because of what happened at work, you feel you can't control so much that is going on in your life, which is torture for a control freak like you. Don't create a situation where you think you can determine the outcome, because you can't. You'll just be loaded down with more guilt and disappointment."

"Thank you Sigmund Freud," Brian quipped. "Just keep me from going too far, okay? That'll be your job."

"I'm trying now. Brian, have you ever attempted suicide?"

Brian looked up at him and lied. "No."

Justin nodded sagely, disbelieving him.

At this hour in a back booth in the coffee shop at the Plaza Hotel, two power suits were concluding a business breakfast. One was Felix Kimbrough, Brian's former boss. The other was John Richardson, CEO of a huge conglomerate that wholly owned several of Kimbrough's most profitable clients. They were concluding their meeting when Kimbrough dropped a credit card into the calfskin folder. It would all be written off to client development.

"One more thing, Felix," Richardson said as if suddenly remembering some small detail. "About that Brian Kinney matter..."

"Taken care of," Kimbrough assured him.

"Good, good. No problems?"

"None at all. He took it very well."

"And you've put the word out among your colleagues, have you?"

"Small issue there, John."

"Explain."

"Legal informs me if we give Brian a bad reference, we could run into legal issues. They said defamation charges could be lodged against us. Frankly, if we were forced to defend why we fired Brian, it would be tricky. Certainly we couldn't claim it was performance based. He was one of our top performers, year over year. I realize we have the right to vote out a partner, with or without good cause, but when we start telling other firms not to hire him and we have no solid, business related reason to do so, he can claim, and win, defamation charges."

"What are you saying?"

"Legal is telling us to give a neutral reference, if asked, and not to affirmatively go out and seek a conversation about Kinney."

"I see," the other man turned glacial. "Neutral won't quite cut it with my Chairman, Felix. I thought I made myself clear."

"But John..."

"But what? It's a small enough request, Felix, given the amount of work we send your firm. Get rid of one faggot. Who the hell cares? Paint a picture in your industry that will be his ruination. Now you're telling me you can't make that happen because you have some nervous lawyers? That won't do, Felix."

Kimbrough nodded, not giving away the fact he had sweated out the armpits of his shirt under the jacket of his three-thousand dollar suit. It was distasteful enough to fire Brian Kinney, but that obviously was not going to be satisfy this client. "I understand."

"It's easy enough to assassinate a man's character to your peers without overtly calling him names or committing some vague tort. If you're clever enough to come up with innovative ad campaigns, you must be clever enough to find a way to accomplish that simple feat, Felix."

"Yes, but..."

"I have every faith that you have no intention of making me look bad to my chairman. That would be a very big mistake. Of course, if your feelings about Kinney are more important than our advertising budget..."

"Of course not, John. I'll see to it. Don't give it another thought."

"I won't, Felix. I'll assume it's done."

"And it is," Kimbrough assured him. Felix had spent so many years doing the corporate bullshit dance that his destruction of a promising young man's career was barely a blip in his ethics. Someone with extreme power, perhaps the Chairman or a principal shareholder, had it in for Brian Kinney for whatever reason, and Felix had been caught in the middle of this struggle. The reasons didn't matter so long as the results were measured in the flayed flesh of Brian Kinney.

Later, as Brian headed for his gym, he paused to drop two resumes into the mailbox. They were addressed to two firms who had actively recruited him within the last six months, trying to lure him away from his agency. That fact made him feel he had a chance. At the time, he had no reason to make the leap. The money they promised wasn't that much better, so why start over? Establishing himself, his credibility, obtaining a new client list...why bother? What a dork, he thought now, with the benefit of hindsight.

Content that he had finally done something about his employment situation, Brian was looking forward to a workout. He wanted to feel good for tonight. He wanted to be pumped and strong because tonight Brian was going to trick.

That night, with the stealth of a jungle cat, Brian checked out the herd grazing the three floors of a hot club in Chelsea. He had dressed for trouble in tight black leather pants and a white silk shirt. His Lizard King tribute to Jim Morrison, an old hero. Downing his drink as he felt the adrenaline of outlaw sex begin to pump, he drew power from those who cruised him, but he offered nothing back. They weren't what he wanted. He allowed a willowy brunette to lead him out onto the dance floor, caging the kid in with his cobra dance, but all the while he still scanned the hard bodies for his prey. Nostrils flared, taking in the scent of sweat and amyl nitrate and blow, he still loved the nightlife and liked to boogie.

He saw the prey, just a glimpse, but enough to engage the chase. He abandoned his dancing partner and cut through the crowd, arms raised over his head, making a straight razor of his body. His gaze remained fixed on his victim, who was sashaying with a lean, handsome stranger. Brian walked up to him, standing between the stranger and the target.

"Fuck off," the stranger warned him.

"You fuck off," Brian warned back, and then hooked his fingers in the front of his prey's jeans and led him towards the backroom.

"I was with him," the prey said lamely, and Brian grinned.

"And now you're with me."

In the dark labyrinth illuminated by strategically placed blacklights, Brian threw the prey up against a carpeted wall and kissed him hard. He felt the prey resist at first and then concede to the inevitable. "Suck my cock," Brian

whispered in his ear and the prey smiled and took his hand, leading him deeper into the canyon, past men fucking each other against walls or against other men, or sucking each other with enthusiastic slurps.

Suddenly, the prey disappeared. Brian looked around, finally noticing fingers wiggling at him from a hole in the partition. "Give it to me," the prey insisted and Brian smiled and lowered his fly as he pressed his body to the partition, letting the prey pull his cock through the opening. He moaned as the prey, almost invisible on the other side of the wall, began eagerly fellating him, feeding on him, swallowing his rod. Brian spread his hands flat on the partition, shoving his hips forward to push more of his dick into the waiting, unattached mouth. He turned his face to one side, the nubby fabric on the wall abrading his cheek as he moved his ass forward and back, fucking through the glory hole into the mouth.

He came hard, ejaculating in thick ropes of semen that would choke a lesser prey. This one swallowed, then withdrew and as Brian was repairing his clothes, he saw the hole that was slightly lower than his chin become threaded by a stiff, pulsating shaft. The prey had climbed the steps to insert his own throbbing erection through the partition. He was high enough that he could reach over and down, stroking Brian's hair and smoothing his hands over his neck and shoulders while Brian ducked down and returned the favor with great enthusiasm. The prey didn't last long and Brian sucked every drop of him down into his throat before he reached up and pulled the prey over the wall, standing him up against the partition as his loosened jeans pooled at his ankles. He kissed him hotly, tasting their combined flavors.

"Fuck him," someone commanded, and only then did Brian and the prey become aware that their combined heat had drawn a small crowd of voyeurs. "Fuck his twink ass," the man persisted, masturbating with great energy. The prey pulled up his jeans and Brian looked at him, and smiled. The prey smiled back.

"Let's go home," Justin said softly, and Brian agreed, looping an arm around him as they left the disappointed voyeurs to find another inspiration. It was fun to be bad, but part of the thrill for them both was knowing who you would be with when you went home.

## Chapter 6

Doctor Lydia Johnson's Notes:

BK has been out of work approximately one week. I was pleased to see that his tendency towards self-hatred and depression has not overtaken him thus far. He confirmed that he is still taking his meds for depression. He is dressed casually in jeans and a shirt, and looks relaxed.

Excerpt from transcript:

Doctor: How goes it, Brian?

BK: Peachy.

Doctor: Can you expand on that?

BK: Well, in the last week, I've lost my job, my son and his mother have temporarily moved in with me, I sent a demand letter to my agency, and I've become involved with a street hustler who probably has AIDS. Envy me?

Doctor: You're never dull, Brian. Last thing first. Sexually involved?

BK: No, not suicidal... yet. It's your brother's fault, really.

Doctor: Explain.

BK: He put me onto Mick Donovan, the lawyer, who put me onto this center she operates for HIV positive kids which is where this hustler, who came onto me in a bar, is now staying.

Doctor: ( laughs) How dare my brother!

BK: (laughs) I know. This kid touched something in me, reminded me of my own pathetic youth. There but for the grace of Debbie Novotny and Vic Grassi go I.

Doctor: Do you see yourself playing a continuing role in his life?

BK: Hope not. Have enough drama. But today is the day he gets the results of his tests and I promised I would be there for him.

Doctor: And if he's positive?



BK (shrugs): He's threatened suicide.

Doctor: You think you're skilled enough to deal with that?

BK: Funny you should say that, Lydia. You know, those doctors at the center, they donate their time to a good cause. Do shrinks ever do that?

Doctor: What did you have in mind?

BK: That I bring him to see you, to talk out the issues. But my insurance won't cover him, and I can't afford your rates out of pocket.

Doctor: Clever boy. We'll think of something. If you think he needs to see me on an emergency basis, call. I'll do what I can. And by the way, I do lots of volunteer work. I run a group session for recovering alcoholics and other addictive behaviors at my church every Monday night, and I take consulting work for doctors who are my friends and who have patients requiring an emotional health assessment but are unable to pay.

BK: Tax write off.

Doctor: Don't be cynical. Be careful, Brian. You have a full plate right now and you're just back from your own precipice.

BK: Now you sound like Justin.

Doctor: How is Justin?

BK: Justin is great. He's a machine. He just keeps on going, no matter how rough the road.

Doctor: Is that admiration I hear in your voice?

BK: More like amazement.

Doctor: So he knows about your job situation.

BK: I was honest with him.

Doctor: And he didn't go screaming into the night?

BK: Not so far. I guess things really aren't that different, yet. The change in lifestyle hasn't started.

Doctor: You really think that will matter to him?

BK: (Winces.) No, Lydia, I really don't. So if it does, if he runs, I'll be so unprepared for it, I'm not sure I'll ever pick myself up from the fall.

Doctor: Does that scare you?

BK: Big time.

Doctor: That, Brian, is normal anxiety. Congratulations.

BK: (Grins.) You mean I've progressed from abnormally fucked up to normally fucked up?

Doctor: Yes, I feel so proud. (Laughs.)

BK: Can we talk about Gus?

Doctor: Your son? Of course we can.

BK: He's changed so much since the last time I saw him. He's more like a person now, not just this kind of cute...thing.

Doctor: In what way?

BK: He pees in his little potty instead of his pants, well, most of the time, anyway. He talks. He seems to understand things.

Doctor: That would be called 'growing up'.

BK: Yes, but...I wonder if...I feel uncomfortable, I mean, what kind of image am I supposed to project as his father?

Doctor: I hope a loving, caring, nurturing image, Brian. A true image of yourself and how you feel and how you are.

BK: But Justin...we aren't disgusting about it, we don't have sex in front of him, but we have a tendency to touch each other, kiss, you know what people do. He grows up seeing Daddy kissing Justin and Mommy kissing Melanie...what the fuck are we doing to his head?

Doctor: What are you afraid of, Brian? That you'll make him gay?

BK: (Frowns.) No. If he's gay, he's gay. I don't view that as a negative. But I don't want him to think he's supposed to be gay because his parents are. I want him to be himself, no matter what.

Doctor: Did you think you were supposed to be straight because your parents are?

BK: Well, YEAH. Of course I did. When I first realized I was queer, I knew it wasn't the usual thing to be. I knew it was outside the lines. I couldn't figure out why I was so different, why I didn't feel the way I was supposed to feel.

Doctor: When did you first become aware of these feelings?

BK: I don't know. When I was five, I was always trying to kiss Richie Green in my kindergarten class. He would run away in tears. I didn't understand why he reacted that way. I thought he was cute, with all that blond hair, and I just wanted to show him how I felt. The teacher talked to my mom, and they put me in another group. Didn't help. I just started trying to kiss Bobby Patterson, another blond bombshell, aged five.

Doctor: You were quite the Casanova.

BK: Oh yeah. I soon learned that you get your ass kicked kissing boys in school. So I hid it. For years. Puberty made that impossible, I guess. But back to your question, I knew that liking boys was weird. I just couldn't help it.

Doctor: Were you ashamed?

BK: Confused is more like it.

Doctor: About what?

BK: About why I didn't think girls were interesting. Why I found boys all hot and sexy. And why people seemed to think that was all wrong. It felt right to me. Why should it be wrong? Why couldn't I kiss who I wanted to kiss? Why should they dictate what was expected of me?

Doctor: Did you ever go through the "I like girls" stage?

BK: Not really. I dated a few girls, slept with a few, but I was kidding myself. It never worked for me, and I was stone cold to them emotionally. Now I like women very much, some women, anyway. But that's because I feel no sexual pressure, internally, so if they try to put sexual pressure on me from their side, I can shrug it off. But look, I was trying to get to the core of it with Gus. I don't want to fuck with his head.

Doctor: Would you rather him be straight or gay, Brian, if you could pick?

BK: I want him to be comfortable enough in his own skin that he can follow his heart in whichever direction it takes him without feeling any pressure from me, one way or the other.

Doctor: Then he will be.

END OF EXCERPT

Doctor's Notes: BK's troubles are compounded by the arrival of his child and his child's mother. This creates an additional financial as well as emotional strain, given his employment status. He is also soon to be embroiled in the legal system, both as a key witness against Jeffrey Walker, and by suing his former agency. For now he seems to be coping with the stress, but it's a situation that bears close watch. He's still emotionally and physically fragile from his experience with Walker. I shall continue to closely monitor his behavior to ensure he's staying ahead of his anxieties and not falling back on more destructive methods of pain management.

Gus was running in concentric circles in the vast open space of the gallery in Tribeca, each loop becoming smaller and smaller until he was twirling more than running. The paintings to be hung were still crated, so there was very little damage he could do either to himself or to the gallery. His mother was touring the facility with Leo and Justin, while always keeping her hyper son within her immediate view.

"It's a dream gallery, Leo," she informed him with a smile. "The location, the lighting, the design, absolutely perfect."

"It is, isn't it?" Leo responded. "Of all my galleries, I like the layout and location of this one the best. I just wish I could give it the attention it's due in order to ensure its success."

"Why can't you?"

"I have five other galleries, Lindsay, all very busy. My main office is in midtown. I oversee everything, manage the major acquisitions and artist relationships, so I can't pander to any one locale at the expense of the others. I have to rely on my gallery managers to do that."

"Who will manage this gallery?"

"I haven't made a final decision. I have several candidates."

She smiled her most charming, most blonde smile and looped her arm through his. "Will you consider adding one more name to that list?"

Justin fetched Gus, who was trying to unravel a stray roll of masking tape. Justin brought him back over to the adults. "That would be so cool, Linds! I didn't even think of that. She's perfect, Leo. She's smart and beautiful, and she's an art expert, a professor, and an artist in her own right. Everyone loves Lindsay, so she'd be great with the artists. What do you think?"

Lindsay laughed. "I think I should pay you to promote me, Justin. Seriously, Leo, may I send you a resume?"

"I have a better idea, let's go to lunch, just the two of us, and talk it over. Get to know each other a bit. Justin would be only too happy to babysit, right, Justin?"

He laughed. "Sure, I'll take Gus to the park at the end of the block and then we'll get a hot dog or something."

"Watch him very closely, he has a tendency to suddenly run wild and catching him isn't easy," she warned. Justin laughed.

"Like father like son. I'm used to chasing the Kinney men. Don't worry, Linds. I won't let him get away from me."

"I know you won't, sweetie. Meet you back here?"

Justin nodded, watching her leave with Leo. "Mommy go bye-bye?" Gus asked wisely and Justin nodded. The baby stared at him for a long moment, then his lower lip trembled and he began to cry. Justin sighed and picked him up, distracting him from his separation anxiety by carrying him out of the gallery. He locked the door and bribed Gus with the lure of the park and a hot dog.

Brian felt the anxiety wash over Shea in regular waves, the scattershot of fear hitting him as they waited in a small cubicle at the Center for the doctor. Brian wanted to say something to say to placate Shea, but everything he thought of sounded like an empty platitude. So they sat in silence, awaiting the verdict.

Finally, the doctor entered and sat down across from them, scowling at the pages of results on his clipboard. "Shea?" he glanced at the kid. Shea nodded, slipping his hand into Brian's, who squeezed it gently. "Are you his lover?" The doctor asked Brian.

Brian shook his head. "I'm his friend."

The doctor met Shea's eyes as he said, "Your HIV antibodies test came back positive. We re-ran it twice to be sure it wasn't a false reading. It wasn't. I'm sorry to have to tell you this. But don't despair, it's not as bad as you fear. There are treatments that will hopefully enable you to live a long time without becoming ill."

"What test did you use?" Brian asked, wincing as Shea's grip on his hand became vise-like.

"ELISA confirmed by a Western Blot test. These tests are accurate 99.5% of the time."

"That's it, then." Shea stood up, as if to leave but Brian took his arm and yanked him back.

"Sit down. The doctor's still talking to you."

"He has nothing to say that I want to hear."

"Well, I do. Sit down."

Shea reluctantly did so, and the doctor looked pensive. "A positive result doesn't mean you have AIDS, Shea. But we need to see where you are, health-wise, so we can figure out a course of treatment. First thing we do is a CBC, or complete blood count. We'll look for your T-cell count and your viral load. That will tell us a lot about your current condition."

"I'm not doing that."

"You have to do it, otherwise we can't gauge what treatment you need, if any. If you need treatment and don't get it, your immune system will continue to erode until an opportunistic infection kills you. We don't want that."

Shea had checked out of this conversation. His eyes were on the doctor, but his brain was far, far away. Brian sighed and touched his shoulder. He didn't even flinch. The doctor was droning on about new treatments, the need for a complete physical, nutrition issues, testing, safe sex, emotional support. Shea was somewhere else, mentally, sitting on a bluff in his hometown of Keokuk, watching the Mississippi River run past the dam at the power plant. He was nine, healthy, without fear. Anything was possible. Getting a death sentence eight years later was not in his boyhood plans.

Brian was asked to step out of the room. Shea didn't even seem to notice. They would draw blood, examine Shea for signs of other infections, run whatever tests they felt were necessary. He would let them manipulate him like a big doll, having no will of his own and completely remote from the process. Brian sought out Frankie, who stared up at him from his desk in his small but neat office as if Brian rode in on a white horse with a glass Bruno Magli in his hand.

"You have a minute?" Brian asked.

Frankie urged him to sit in one of two guest chairs, and then he sat in the other, their knees almost touching. Frankie's career as a queer included years of being rejected or completely ignored by studs like Brian. Instead of resenting that fact, he was thrilled to have Brian interacting with him, even if it wasn't sexual. "You alright? You look pale," Frankie said.

"It's not me, it's Shea. He's positive." Frankie nodded as if expecting more. Brian frowned. "Do you hear me? He's positive, the kid is HIV positive."

"Well, we knew that, didn't we?"

"Not until a few minutes ago when the doc gave him his test results."

"Sorry to sound so blasé, Brian, but you have to realize all of our kids are HIV positive here. That's the whole purpose of this place."

Brian leaned back with a sigh, as if just now realizing the enormity of what that meant. Not just one lost, hopeless kid facing a long-term health crisis and possible death, but a whole house full of them. Brian had come of age in the era of AIDS. It was always that dark shadow behind the joy of sex. He knew about men dying wasting deaths, but then the cocktail changed that, and HIV positive men were numerous and apparently healthy. He had always been scrupulous about safe sex, well almost always, so he had no major fear, but now..."I don't understand something,



Frankie. These kids know about AIDS and safe sex. How come they're so stupid? It's not like the older generation who didn't know what was happening or how to stop it. Why are they so careless?" He thought of his own son, what his future would be. Would AIDS be cured by the time Gus was sexually active? Or would Gus be called upon to make life-altering decisions every time his dick got hard?

"It's difficult to understand, Brian. Some kids do it for the outlaw aspect of it, live fast, die young, leave a beautiful corpse. Of course AIDS victims seldom leave a beautiful corpse. Some kids are raped or just careless. Some kids believe the cocktail is a cure. There are too many causes to list."

"It's so fucking stupid! I knew how dangerous it was when I grew up, why don't they?"

"Because kids are immortal. Didn't you once feel that way?"

He shrugged and massaged his eyes as Mr. Headache flickered in and out of his brain, not quite taking hold. "What do we do with Shea? He's in shock. He's depressed, possibly suicidal. He has no family, no support. What happens now?"

"Immediate problem, we'll get him in with a shrink from social services, to talk about his reactions, and we'll put him on suicide watch here. But he's free to come and go, Brian. If he wants to go and do something to himself, we can't control that."

"That sounds a little cynical, Frankie."

"Sorry, but I've been here for three years. I've seen it all. We aren't a permanent placement. I'll start looking for a home for him, but I'll be honest with you. Most of the available placements are not where you would want to stay, even if you were desperate. He'd be better off if he bit the bullet and went home."

"You don't know that," Brian snapped at him. "You don't know why he left home. It could be a terrible situation."

"True, but so is this. What are his options? He has no high school diploma, and he's only seventeen, so what kind of job will he land? Where will he live in New York on what he can earn? And if he gets sicker, who will care for him?"

Brian's brows knitted together in consternation. "You need to have more beds."

"We can't afford to support the beds we already have."

"Then you need to raise funds."

"We HAVE done that, Brian! That's why the doors are still open, at least for now. But we survive day to day, just like a terminal patient, never sure when the whip will come down."

"You obviously haven't done it very well. I'll talk to Mick about it. For now, he needs to stay here. I'll pay, do whatever it takes, but he needs to stay right where he is. Any further disruption in his life, who knows what he'll do? After that first night, he's settled into a routine here. Maybe these other kids can give him some hope."

"We can't keep him indefinitely. That's not how we're set up. Our beds are for emergency, temporary situations. If he gets very sick, this isn't a hospice."

"And that's what this is, an emergency situation," Brian reached over and covered Frankie's hand with his, causing him to shudder. "Do this for me."

Frankie nodded numbly, once again willing to do anything for Brian Kinney.

Felix Kimbrough faced his chief legal counsel across the wide expanse of his black granite desk. The paper he held in his hand trembled slightly as Felix's rage grew. "What the fuck is this?"

"It's a demand letter from Brian Kinney, Felix."

"I see that, Walt. What the fuck is he claiming? It's a bunch of gibberish to me!"

"He's claiming he was terminated because he's gay, and that the termination is in violation of city and state statutes."

"You can sue for that? The law protects queers?"

Walt stared at his boss, wondering if the man ever read anything he sent him. "Of course it does, Felix. If you ever attended the training on sexual harassment and discrimination my staff provides, you might know that. Kinney says he was singled out for termination on the pretext of a business reason, but the true reason is that he's gay and you knew it and you discriminated in the terms of his employment, as opposed to how non-gays have been treated."

"I hate these fucking queers! See? This proves my point. They're a bunch of drama queens!"

"Felix, I'm not real clear on why we did terminate Kinney. He made a lot of money for this firm, was a key rainmaker, from all reports, a top performer. What did he do that warranted his termination?"

"I don't have to explain myself to you," Felix grumbled.

"Maybe not, but you will to a judge, so you may as well start with me. I'm the one who has to defend you. First of all, did you know he was gay?"

"Of course! For chrissakes, Walt, no straight man looks as perfect as Brian Kinney. Always groomed, always fit. He made no secret of it, although, thankfully, he wasn't effeminate and never pushed it in anyone's face."

Walt forced himself not to smile at that mental image. "Did you ever discuss it with him?"

"Once. I told him his private life was his business, but we have some conservative clients and he needs to keep it to himself."

"How did he respond to that?"

"His usual sarcasm. He said he'd be sure not to fuck any of them."

Again, Walt gnawed on his inner jaw to restrain a smile. "So what was the event?"

"What event?"

"That led to your decision to terminate him?"

"He missed a lot of work, left town, got himself mixed up in a big mess."

"According to what I uncovered from his records, he missed two days, as sick days, while in Pittsburgh. The rest of the time, he worked out of the office in Pittsburgh and managed to bring in a three million dollar account and lead the launch on that cosmetics company. And the fact that he went to Pittsburgh because his lover had a critically ill younger sister is rather sympathetic to a fact finder. What else?"

"He then took that long vacation in Italy."

"With permission, and as he's entitled to do under the terms of his partnership agreement. Anything else?"

"Unfavorable publicity about that doctor who drugged him and has been arrested for it and for other things he did. Makes him sound unstable and unreliable."

"Have clients complained?"

"They've called. Several of them."

"To complain?"

"Well, while he was away, to see if he was alright, if they could do...something...don't look at me like that."

"Felix, what happened? Who did Kinney screw? What's the real story? I don't believe it's because he's a fag, but I also don't believe that anything you've told me would make you fire him. What is it?"

Kimbrough sighed and lit a cigar without offering one to his counsel. "Alright, alright. This is under privilege, right?"

"Of course."

"Jon Richardson is one of our most influential clients. Best Deal chain stores, Home Oven Foods, EZ Electronics retail stores, and several other top billed accounts are all under his control."

"I know Jon, Felix. So? Did Brian screw up one of his accounts?"

"No, Jon came to me and asked me to fire Kinney, and to see that he not be employed elsewhere in the industry. What can I do? I like Brian, he did good work, but I'm asked to balance eight- figure billings against the career of one man, no matter how good he is, and there's no contest."

"I repeat. Did Brian screw up one of his accounts?"

"As far as I know, Brian never even worked on one of his accounts."

"Then why...?"

"I don't know, Walt. I didn't get an answer from him and he wasn't willing to expound upon it. He just said it was a directive from his Chairman and he was delivering a non-negotiable edict."

"This feels strange," Walt said. "Okay, let me do some thinking, Felix. I'll have to respond to this letter within ten days. It's our window to settle."

"You know this Mick fellow? The lawyer?"

"Mick Donovan is a woman. Sort of. Dyke. Bleeding heart liberal activist in gay rights. Very well connected within the power structure of partisan politics. Can deliver votes in that community which empowers her. And she's a brilliant employment lawyer, Felix. We can't underestimate her. She's not just a bull dyke, she's a bull dog."

"That's why I pay you the big bucks, Walt," Kimbrough dismissed his lawyer by picking up the phone to arrange a weekend golf game. Walt returned to his own office on the same floor as Kimbrough's palace. He plugged into the internet on his computer and pulled up Boston Industrial, the holding company that wholly owned the various companies Felix referenced, plus many more. A multi-billion dollar enterprise, he skimmed their web site and reviewed the officers and directors page of their annual report. As a publicly held company, they had to file information on their top team and the web site reflected that information that was on file with the SEC. What he found just compounded his confusion.

Brian returned to his home later in the evening, after spending an emotional time with Shea and Lydia. Shea insisted he sit in with him as he finally gave in to his fears and pain, under Lydia's careful guidance. Afterwards, Brian took him back to the Center and sat with him until he fell into an exhausted sleep. Brian insisted that Frankie have someone stay with Shea that night, and Frankie assured him that was their usual procedure on a suicide watch. Feeling emotionally drained and exhausted, Brian opened the door to a celebration of some sort underway in his loft. Leo Chang was cooking in his kitchen, reminding Brian of that first dinner at Jeffrey's house. His lover, Bill, was playing with Gus, while Lindsay and Mick were arranging placesettings at the table. Justin was loading CD's into the soundsystem, blasting Crystal Method's "Roll It Up".

"What is this?" Brian asked loudly. "Babylon revisited?" He grabbed the remote from Justin's hand and lowered the volume. Justin looked quizzically at him as Brian turned his attention to Lindsay. "Entertaining? Make yourselves at home! Mi casa su casa!" He didn't even acknowledge Gus before he went into the bedroom and slammed the door. Lindsay cut Justin a glance and he nodded, following Brian into their room and closing the door behind him. Brian was stretched out on the bed, fully clothed, his arm over his eyes. Justin carefully removed Brian's shoes, dropping them to the floor. He then sat beside him on the edge of the bed, massaging his tummy gently.

"Are you okay?" Justin asked. Brian said nothing. Justin went on, "Brian, what's wrong?"

"I just didn't expect to come home to a party," Brian replied, without removing his arm from over his eyes.

"It's not really a party. Leo offered Lindsay a job, so I guess you could say it's celebrating that fact. He wanted to cook and Linds invited Mick, and of course Bill is Leo's lover and..."

Brian sat up on his elbows, squinting at Justin. "Lindsay already has a job, doesn't she? In Pittsburgh? What about that?"

Justin brightened up with a smile. "She's resigning. She says she wants to learn this end of the art game and Leo made her a great offer. Isn't that majorly cool? He offered her the job managing his new Tribeca gallery. She's thrilled and so is Leo. I guess the pay is pretty good and we'll kind of be working together, although, I guess I'll still really work more for Leo."

"Does he have a job for me too?" Brian asked flatly. "He seems to be hiring the whole family."

Justin sighed, realizing why this news could cut both ways for Brian. He may feel some relief over Lindsay having a source of income, but it also underscored the fact he had no job. "Brian..."

"Forget it. I'm taking a shower. Go entertain your guests."

"They're not MY guests. I'd rather take a shower with you."

Brian met his eyes. "I don't want a mercy fuck."

"Take it anyway you can get it. It's all good."

Brian stared at him, and then broke into a smile, pulling him into his arms and kissing him, feeling his tension subside.

"Let me drive," Justin said softly, reaching down to remove Brian's clothes and then his own. When they were both naked, he stretched out on top of Brian and kissed him again, caressing his body with his whole form, smoothing skin against skin. He sucked his tongue deeply into his mouth and let his hands wander freely. "Turn over," he instructed Brian, who smiled at him before he did so. Justin separated Brian's long thighs and traced the bend in the back of his knees with his tongue, then followed the curve of the muscles on the back of his thighs to the smooth rise of his buttocks. Brian crossed his arms under his head, anticipating what was happening next by pressing his erection against the mattress. Justin's wet tongue dampened the crease of his ass and then probed. First he found the back of Brian's balls, which he stroked in long, smooth laps, and finally the source.

Brian moaned as that expert little tongue ran circles around his tight sphincter, setting off waves of pleasure that rolled through his groin and inflamed his cock. He felt his body relax, his prostate itching for contact. He glanced over his shoulder at his lover. "Are you going to fuck me?"

"I thought I might," Justin said with an evil smile and Brian nodded.

"Good."

Justin reached for the lube, excited by the invitation, and greased up a couple fingers to use as a tool for lubrication and to open up his lover before the main event. Brian gasped as a finger hit home, aching for Justin's cock to take over. Justin reached under Brian and used his lubed fingers to masturbate his swollen erection while he penetrated him with urgent expertise. Brian felt the pressure on his prostate beneath the flicker of discomfort and gave in to the experience, realizing this capitulation of control was exactly what he needed.

After they showered and re-dressed, the couple seemed relaxed, happy and very loving as they re-joined the others. Brian's pissy mood had been vanquished by Justin's persuasive pleasure.

"Someone got a little ass," Lindsay whispered to him and Brian smiled at her as he responded,

"Someone did." But not the one she figured. Some things were meant to be known only by his lover and him.

## Chapter 7

Cynthia was sitting across the booth from Brian in the crowded pizza joint on Bleeker Street when she noticed something about him. Outside, the weather was emerging from the last tendrils of winter to embrace early spring, and the rains had momentarily stopped. Brian wore a gray ribbed poor boy t-shirt over jeans, very casual, but...there was something different.

"Why are you staring at me?" He was typically perceptive. She felt her face redden to have been caught.

"Is it possible you look even more handsome than usual?"

He smirked at her. "My ego is not so low that I require smoke to be blown up my ass at regular intervals, Cyn."

"I'm serious. You look...I don't know what it is."

"Maybe I'm pregnant and glowing from my little surprise."



She laughed. "You know what it is? Despite everything that's happening, you look relaxed, and it's obvious that you've been working out."

"And you look lovely today, Mrs. Cleaver," he teased.

She giggled. "But your personality certainly hasn't improved."

"How are things at the funny farm? I guess these are the last few days I remain on their payroll."

"Your letter shook things up. Legal is running around like headless chickens and the partners are all whispering behind closed doors."

Brian laughed, picturing the chaos. "Have you seen it?"

"The letter? Yes, Betty, Walt's secretary, is a friend, and she shot me a surreptitious copy of it. I can't pretend to understand all those references to laws, but I loved it."

"I didn't fully understand it either, but Mick is so good. She knows that shit. They've called her, want to set up a meeting."

"To do what?"

"Mick says they'll make me some kind of low-ball settlement offer, which we'll reject. Nuisance value."

"That should be an interesting meeting."

"More than you know. She's making them come to us so we're meeting in her office which is located above a hard core gay bar. Can you see Walt and Felix walking through that bar?"

They both laughed at the image.

"Won't you just want to smack Felix when you see him?"

"I intend to. In the pocket."

"How are you coping? You seem good."

"I have Lydia to deal with the blue meanies and then there's..."he hesitated, flinched. Cynthia laughed.

"You can say it: Justin. I know you love him."

"Whatever the hell that is."

"You know exactly what it is."

He met her gaze and sighed. "I suppose I do. He's been wonderful through this."

"Because he adores you too. Brian, did you ever work on any of the Boston International accounts?"

"No, why? Those were handled strictly by Felix and his little core team of senior partners. They really weren't my kind of accounts, anyway. Very mid-America. I do better with the edgy stuff."

"It's probably just buzz, but there's a rumor going around that you were fired because you fucked up a BI account and you know how important they are to the agency."

"I never worked on a BI account, so that's bullshit. And I don't fuck up accounts. Did you bring me what I asked for?"

She pulled an envelope from her purse and passed it to him with a glance from side to side, as if they were completing a drug transaction. "Mo says to tell you she loves you and misses you."

"Mo? She hates me."

"Not anymore. You're her new hero."

Brian looked confused. "Thank her for this. Thank you, too." He slipped it in his pocket without opening it. "You know, Mo, uh, Maureen, is such a dyke. She never liked me."

"The letter changed all that. You're speaking up for all the gays in the firm now."

"Swell. Now I'll become a dyke magnet. I remind them of how happy they are that they date women instead of men. I represent everything they hate about men, in one package. They'll appreciate the reminder."

"You do NOT," Cynthia said with a laugh. "Brian, why would you want that particular document? Of all the things you'd want, why that?"

He offered her an enigmatic smile as he responded, "All will be revealed."

Shea was sitting on the steps of the Center, smoking, when Justin walked up to him. He pushed his running shoe with the toe of his own running shoe and Shea glared up at him.

"What do you want?"

"A drag off that cigarette would be nice, I'm out."

Shea narrowed his eyes at him. "Aren't you afraid of getting AIDS cooties?"

"Yeah, right," Justin wiggled his fingers at him and Shea gave him the cigarette. Justin inhaled deeply and then handed it back. He dropped down on the stoop beside Shea. His simple act of smoking the cigarette he took from Shea's lips melted some of the mistrust and misguided resentment Shea felt towards Brian's healthy young lover.

"Why are you sitting out here? Just soaking up the first sunshine in a millennium?"

"Just getting away from the geeks. Aren't you supposed to be working?"

"I am working. I dropped off some stuff for Leo at his Chelsea gallery and took a walk past here to see how you're doing."

"What do you care?"

"I can't care?"

"You don't care. You just want to look good for your boyfriend. So you can say you stopped by to check on the freak."

Justin laughed. "Man, you really don't know Brian, do you?" He glanced at Shea's handsome, gaunt profile. "It's okay, Shea. Every gay boy who meets Brian gets a crush on him. I'm used to it."

"I don't have a crush on him. I don't even like him. He's the reason I'm here. He's the one who made me find out that I'm sick. Now I have nowhere to go."

Justin sighed. "He did it to help you, Shea, not to hurt you. Look, you want to go do something? Brian's not going to be home this afternoon and I can spare some time from my high-powered gofer job. We could see a movie or something."

"I don't have any money."

"My treat. Look, I'm gonna go anyway. You coming?"

Shea shrugged and struggled to his feet, walking with him towards the subway, his loose, lanky gait reminding Justin of his lover. They stopped at a newsstand to buy a newspaper and check what their choices were, determining their destination by making that decision.

Brian feigned cool as he waited in a small dingy room of the correctional facility. He was seated on a stiff-backed vinyl chair staring through a glass partition at an identical chair on the other side of the glass. Behind that empty chair was a yellow tiled wall, unforgiving fluorescent lights turning the color acidic. Brian shifted his weight uncomfortably, feeling more than a little queasy. He thought of all the old movies where the bad guy and the mother or the girlfriend or some other key player talked through the glass using the heavy bakelite phone receivers hanging on the partition, but it was hard to smile at that moment.

There was a slight commotion on the other side, and then he appeared.

He wore a bright orange zip-up jumpsuit, hardly the fashions Brian was used to seeing Jeffrey sport. He was pale, and his hair needed cutting, but he still looked fit and handsome. He was able to retain the persona of the patrician doctor who was miscast in the role of a criminal. He smiled broadly at Brian and pressed his palm to the glass in greeting. Brian didn't return the gesture, his entrails turning to ice. Jeffrey slowly let his hand drop and picked up the receiver motioning for Brian to do the same.

"You look so beautiful," Jeffrey said immediately. "God, I'd almost forgotten how beautiful you are."

"Stop it," Brian cut him off. "I don't want to hear that shit from you."

Jeffrey smiled. That white, crocodile grin that used to be so appealing to Brian, now just increased his chill. "Why're you here? I'm sure our attorneys wouldn't appreciate it. Did you get my letter?"

"Yes. I tore it up."

"Brian, Brian, how juvenile. I was hoping it might mend some fences between us."

"There aren't fences between us, Jeffrey. There are walls, countries, continents, we couldn't be any farther apart if you were on Mars. If your idea of love is what you did to me, I don't even want to know what your idea of hate is."

"You never will. I adore you."

Brian felt a shudder begin at the base of his spine and travel up his body, cascading trembles as it went. Each ripple tightened his bowels and left him feeling even sicker. "Don't! Don't love me, don't adore me, don't even think about me. I don't exist for you, and neither does anyone I care about!"

"Don't be so dramatic, baby. I know you're mad at me now, but..."

"'Baby'? 'Mad at you'? You're even crazier than I thought! I despise you, Jeffrey. I despise you for what you did to Justin, to Molly and to me. Most of all I despise you for having this brilliant talent and a great mind while wasting them on your own selfish, twisted passions."

Jeffrey's infuriating smile stayed in place, but his eyes were turning cold. "How is little Molly?"

"Don't even speak her name to me."

"Send me her file, and I'll give you a free consult on how her health is being monitored. This post-transplant period is so important. I hope they're doing all the right things to prevent recurrence."

"Shut up. I just came here to tell you that you can write me a thousand letters, but I'll never open another one. I'll turn them over to the D.A., still sealed. Nothing you say or do will stop me from testifying against you. I want to see you in jail for a long time."

"Selfish boy," Jeffrey said with a chuckle. "Let all those babies die so you can exact your pound of flesh, and for what? Pursuing you a little too heatedly? Don't even act like you didn't want it, Brian. We both know you did. Who followed whom to that remote cabin in the woods where this all got started?"

Brian winced, having regretted that rash move on his part almost from the day he did it. Jeffrey was right. Brian knew he wasn't innocent in this nightmare. But neither did he cross criminal boundaries, stalk Jeffrey, blackmail him, endanger or threaten to endanger the treatment of a critically ill child, or use drugs to lower Jeffrey's resistance to him. And there was no other lover, no Justin, in Jeffrey's life to pay a price. "I've said what I came here to say, Jeffrey. If you ever cared about me, back off now and get some help. Maybe it's not too late for you."

"Brian, after ruining my career, humiliating my family and me, and having me locked up like an animal, with animals, what more do you want from me? How much do I have to bleed to satisfy your thirst for revenge?"

Brian sighed and met his eyes. "There's no evidence that you're the least bit contrite about any of the pain you've caused, Jeffrey. I think that's because you don't know how to feel pain the way normal people do. You only know how to inflict it. If you can't take responsibility for what you did, and see the error of your actions, then you can sit and rot for awhile."

Jeffrey leaned in, pressing his palm to the glass again. "You're wrong. I feel pain, beautiful. I feel pain looking at you and not being able to touch you. I feel pain hearing your voice and not feeling your breath on my face as you speak. I feel pain knowing you are wasting your life with someone who will never deserve you. I feel pain at my inability to make clear how much you mean to me."

"You're one sick motherfucker," Brian said quietly, but before he could hang up, Jeffrey motioned for him to hold onto the receiver for another moment.

"Brian, how goes the job?"

Brian met his cold stare as another chill rocked his body. "What do you mean?" How could he know?

"Still the Master of the Universe you once were? Still holding Madison Avenue by the balls? Or is Madison Avenue squeezing your balls in it's greedy little fist?"

"How did..."

"Tough market for an out of work ad man, isn't it, baby?"

"Who told you that?"

Jeffrey winked at Brian and gave him a small salute. "I keep you in my sights, Brian. Always in my sights." Jeffrey made a kissing motion and blew it in Brian's direction, then hung up the receiver and walked away.

Brian sat there for a moment, waiting for his heart to stop racing and his stomach to stop rolling. He finally stood, shakily, and then lurched over to the waste basket and tossed up his lunch. A nasty surprise to leave some poor cleaning person, but he couldn't stop it. Jeffrey Walker scared the shit out of him. His legs felt rubbery as he walked

down the hall towards the exit, and he was sweating through his clothes. By the time he reached the sidewalk, his face was burning up and he realized it was more than nerves that gave him the heaves. For the first time in years, Brian was sick.

As soon as he walked into the loft, Justin knew something was wrong. No music, no fire, no sign of Gus. Brian's clothes trailed from the living room to the bedroom and Justin picked them up squeezing them tightly as his heart began to pound. He had been here so often before. Usually there was music, and he would follow the trail to find Brian fucking some trick in the bed they shared. With great trepidation, he opened the door and found the blue lights were on, the bed was rumpled, but Brian was not there. A sound drew him to the bathroom. Expecting the worst, a shower scene or other water sports underway, he threw open the door to find Brian propped up beside the toilet on the floor, a pillow from the bed supporting his head against the wall, and the duvet cover wrapped over him to keep him warm.

Justin dropped Brian's clothes and knelt beside him, ignoring the slight stench of sickness that lingered in the room. "What the fuck?" He pressed his hand to Brian's forehead. He was burning up, his skin clammy and hair plastered to his face. His flesh was the color of bone.

Brian opened his eyes and squinted at him. "Sick," he said through parched and cracked lips.

"What are you doing on the floor?"

"I got tired of running to the bathroom to puke every five minutes, and once I didn't make it and I don't feel like cleaning that up again."

"You need to be in bed. Come on. Let me help you up."

"Don't wanna move."

"You're too big to carry. Come on." He helped him stand, Brian hesitated, then leaned over the bowl, heaving, nothing left to spew but clear liquid and not much of that. Still, the heaves rolled through him as he kept trying to eject food that wasn't there. Justin stroked his back gently and then helped him into the bedroom. He covered him up, fluffed the pillow and disappeared into the kitchen, returning with a large mixing bowl and a bottle of water. Brian eyed him suspiciously.

"You have to drink or you'll get dehydrated. If it comes back up, just use this bowl, don't try to get up."



"I won't make you do that, Justin, empty a barf bucket for me."

"Shut up. I've had my tongue halfway up your asshole, you think this is that much more intimate?"

"Don't make me laugh, I hurt too much."

"Who's your doctor here? You're never sick."

"I don't have one, other than Lydia. She made me get a physical when I first started seeing her. His name is in my PDA under doctors." He took a sip of the water, winced, and promptly threw it up in the bowl. He put the water bottle down and laid back, covering his eyes with his forearm. Justin took the bowl, emptied it, rinsed it and gave it back, thrusting a digital thermometer under Brian's tongue. When it beeped, he read it. 102. He frowned.

"Where's Linds?"

"I made her go stay with Mick. I don't want either Gus or her getting sick. You either. Go stay with Leo."

"As if. I'm calling Bill, Leo's lover. He's a doctor."

"He's an anesthesiologist."

"So? They go to medical school."

"Good, maybe he can put me to sleep. For good."

Justin smiled at him. "Drama queen."

"Bitch."

Justin left the room to make the call, his humor masking his concern for his lover.

After examining Brian, Bill joined Justin in the main room of the loft, accepting his offer of a drink. "This is the first house call I've ever made," he said with a smile. "Not too much call for a gas passer to drop in on someone in their home for treatment."

Justin looked worried as he handed him a neat scotch and they sat before the fire. "Is it serious?"

"There's a stomach virus going around and he has all the classic symptoms. Several at the hospital have had it. He's strong and otherwise healthy, give it twenty-four to forty-eight hours and he'll be feeling better. I gave him a shot to stop the nausea and I've written out a scrip for some suppositories if it gets bad again," he grinned at Justin. "Serious medicine, not for play. He can take Advil for the muscle pain and fever, once he can hold them down. When you go to the store to get his scrip filled, pick up a few jugs of Pedialyte in the baby section. We give it to infants when they have stomach problems because they dehydrate so quickly. It comes in flavors and does much of what Gatorade does, stabilizes the electrolytes and replenishes fluids, but with less sodium and its easier to tolerate. Over crushed ice, it's tolerable. Make sure he keeps drinking fluids, the shot should help him keep them down. As he feels up to it, slowly introduce food, clear liquids and BRAT...bananas, rice, applesauce and toast. Nothing spicy or fried or tomato based. After about four days he should be eating normally."

"Any danger signs to look for?"

"If he can't hold down fluids, call me and we may have to put him on IV. If his fever goes up over 103, call me. If he has localized pain or if he can't urinate, call me. It's the stomach flu. Don't look so tragic, honey. It happens to the best of us."

"Brian never gets sick."

"He's been under a lot of stress. Stress is killer. He has to deal with it. I'll tell Leo you're taking off tomorrow. You really should stay home with him. Wash your hands frequently with that antibacterial soap I left you to minimize the risk of your getting it. He needs to sleep, and try to keep stress away from him while he's down with this. It'll impede his progress. I'd better get home. Talk about stress, Leo is a maniac this close to his opening," he leaned over to kiss Justin's cheek. "You're a good boyfriend."

"I try to be."

"You succeed. Take care, kiddo."

Justin checked on Brian, found him asleep, then rushed to the drug store to purchase the prescription and the Pedialyte and Advil, stopping at the market to find the BRAT items. He rushed home to find Shea sitting on his stoop, oddly déjà vu from the afternoon. He looked up at Justin. "No one answered the buzzer."

"Brian's asleep. He's sick. What are you doing here? How did you get this address?"

"Brian wrote it on the form."

"Shea, this is a bad time. Brian is really sick. He's also contagious, and with your immune system being low..."

"My immune system is fine. Please, Justin. Just let me hang over here for awhile. I'll watch television, stay out of your way. I don't want to spend time with those geeks tonight. Just one night."

Justin sighed. It was against his better instincts, but he couldn't say no. Shea was so lost, so desperate. "Okay, but stay away from Brian. You don't want this."

He shrugged, taking a bag from Justin and helping him carry the loot upstairs.

Brian awoke late that night. He was soaking wet, his body sweating through his pajamas as well as the sheets. He sat up, then quickly went back down, too weak and dizzy to do more.

"Justin," he said softly, then with more vigor. "JUSTIN!"

Justin groaned and raised himself on one elbow to look at him, illuminated by the blue lights. "You okay?"

"I'm soaking wet."

"You peed in the bed?"

Brian had to smile. "No, that would be Gus. I broke the fever and sweated out. The sheets are drenched. Will you help me? I'm sorry, but I'm so fucking weak..."

Justin reached over, felt the wet linens and winced. "Let's get you under a warm shower and I'll change the sheets." He helped him into the bathroom and out of his pajamas, running the water and seeing that Brian was in before he completed his task. He then went back for Brian, helped him dry off and dress in sweats. He then escorted him back to the bed and handed him a tall glass of grape Pedialyte.

"Drink this."

Brian winced. "It makes me piss!"

"Exactly. You lost a lot of fluid in that sweat. Drink all of it."

"Yes Nurse Ratchet," he complained with false irritation and Justin smiled, watching him finish the liquid. He then tucked him in, kissed the damp top of his head and crawled in on his side of the bed. Brian watched him under the lights and felt overwhelmed with a sudden rush of emotion. He placed a hand on Justin's back, letting his fingers filter through his hair. "No one has ever taken care of me the way you do, Justin. I get weird when I think of how close I came to losing you."

"Don't think of it. You aren't losing me. And you take care of me too. It's what partners do."

"Is it? Well, it's what we do, and that's what matters." Brian snuggled close to his body, resting his forehead against the back of Justin's head. "I love you."

"I love you too, Brian. Now go to sleep, you're supposed to be resting."

Brian closed his eyes, shutting out his horrific thoughts about the visit with Jeffrey as he comforted himself in the close proximity of his lover.

Brian awoke the next morning to find that demons had entered the room during the night and stole all of his strength, leaving him a mass of rubbery, oversized limbs and a hollowed out shell of a body. His head swam, his mouth tasted like a day-old panty liner and he was starving and queasy at the same time. In short, Brian was in a bitch of a mood.

He stumbled into the bathroom, and pissed out the rest of his Pedialyte. Then he brushed his teeth and gargled to rid himself of the foul taste that lingered in his mouth. Finally, he wrapped a robe over his sweats, because he was still bone-chilling cold, and went into the kitchen. He wanted something, he wasn't sure what. To his surprise, he found that Justin was still home and he wasn't alone. He was heaping two plates with scrambled eggs and shingles of toast, handing one off to Shea.

Shea?

"You should be in bed," Justin scolded him. "What do you want? I'll bring it to you."

Brian was shocked to find individual servings of applesauce in the fridge, which had some appeal. He picked one up and fetched a spoon. "I can feed myself Clara Barton. Hi, Shea. Come see me when you're through eating, Justin." He trudged back to bed, this little bit of exertion more than he could tolerate. He was scraping the bottom of the container with the spoon, strangely satisfied by the applesauce, when Justin entered the bedroom and shut the door.

"Shouldn't you be at work?"

Justin handed him a plate containing dry toast and a sliced banana. "I took the day off. Eat this. Bill said you can tolerate it."

"I just ate."

"Try," he sat beside him on the bed, feeding him a banana slice. Brian ate it, then glared at him.

"What is Shea doing here?"

"He was on the stoop when I got back from the drugstore last night. Speaking of which, want to take some Advil?"

"No. How does he know where we live?"

"Apparently you wrote it down on some form."

Brian groaned, recalling that moment of weakness. "He stayed the night? Has he been kicked out of the Center?"

"I don't think so. I think he just wanted a break."

"He can't stay here. I'm not running Father Flannigan's home for wayward hustler boys."

"I know, but it was just for the night. We went to see a movie yesterday afternoon. I think he just wanted a friend. But you were sick and...I tried to get rid of him, Brian. It was just too awkward."

Brian sighed. "Okay, but the night is over. He goes back to the Center today."

Justin nodded solemnly. "Alright, Brian."

"Do you disagree? This is your home too."

"Not really, but I do feel sorry for him. He's so unhappy and scared."

"So do I, but we didn't take him on to raise, Justin. He's got problems we can't handle, and we have big problems of our own."

"I know. I'll take care of it. You get some sleep, but first you need to drink more Pedialyte."

"Can you just hook up a length of rubber tubing to my dick and run it into the toilet? That's how fast that stuff goes through me."

Justin grinned at him. "That sounds kinky."

"Don't be a perv when I'm too sick to play."

Justin watched him down the Pedialyte and pick at his toast and bananas, then he turned on his side and quickly fell into a deep sleep. Justin watched him for a moment, then sighed and went back out to handle his other problem of the day.

Late that afternoon, Brian awoke to find the demons had returned some of his strength. He could feel the bone in his limbs again, some of the rubber was gone, and even a taste of nutrition, held down, had fueled his flagging energy. He wasn't so inalterably cold anymore, and he was even feeling a little...hungry?

"Justin?" He called out as he left the bedroom, and the answering voice was not what he expected.

"He's not here," Shea was stretched out on the chaise, trolling through the channels on the flat screen. Brian sighed, wishing he were gone.

"Where is he?"

"He said he had some errands. You need something?"

"I can get it." He paused at a note on the refrigerator, written in Justin's big, childlike printing style. It read: "B, You can only eat bananas, rice, applesauce and toast (dry). I made some rice, it's in a container and you can nuke it. Drink a bottle of Pedialyte too. I'll be back soon. Love, J." Brian suppressed a smile. He wanted to be angry at this bossing around, but he couldn't be. There was something incredibly sweet about it. He warmed up some rice, and peeled a banana, standing at the counter to eat it as Shea wandered over.

"Have you guys always been like this?"

"Been like what?"

"Married."

Brian winced. "We're not married."

"What's the difference?"

"The difference is we're together because we want to be, not because a sheet of paper tells us we have to be, and because we're not dykes."

"You like it?"

"I like it with Justin. I can't imagine playing house with anyone else. I was very promiscuous before we met, and after we met, too. I believed in fucking, not love, and pursued that belief with a vengeance."

"And now?"

"Now I believe in love with Justin. I don't believe in love as a remote concept, but I was lucky enough to find the one person in the universe who can tolerate me for who I am. We broke up for a period of time, and I was very unhappy without him. Through therapy, I've learned that everything is a trade off. I like to fuck strangers in back rooms, but do I like that more than I like having Justin in my life? No. So, it's a trade off. If we weren't together, I'd probably go right back to fucking strangers in backrooms rather than try to find another partner. I struggled against the partner concept for as long as I could, and then I finally forgot why I was fighting, so I gave in to it. Sometimes you stumble into the right decision."

"I guess I'll never know."

Brian smiled at him. "Don't be so tragic. At your age, not only would I have agreed with that sentiment, but I would've run from it if I saw it coming. Give yourself a few years, things fall into different perspective."

"I don't have a few years, Brian."

"Stop it. Just because you're HIV positive doesn't mean you're going to die young. People live for years and years now that they know how to combat so many issues that used to take people out early. The cocktail has changed the deathscape. My best friend's uncle..."



"I don't just have HIV positive reactor, Brian. I have AIDS."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean just that. I have AIDS."

Their eyes met and then Shea looked down, his shoulders shaking slightly as he began to cry silent tears. Brian hesitated, then went over to him, pulling him into his arms and holding him gently, his eyes closing as he struggled against his unexpected emotional response to this news.

## Chapter 8

Brian waited until Justin went to sleep that night to make the phone call. He was feeling better, if not well. He was able to eat some food other than BRAT and keep it down, but was also still weak and easily exhausted. Shea remained their temporary guest, also asleep, in the guest room at the end of the hall. After two rings, Ben answered.

"It's Brian," he said and Ben turned down the music in the background.

"Brian, how're you doing? Unfortunately, Michael is at the shop, conducting inventory. You can reach him there. Let me tell you myself that I'm very sorry about your job. That just sucks. Michael's been torturing himself trying to find the 'right' words to comfort you, even though I assured him you'd rather just hear his voice rather than hear a speech. You know that he supports you. If you need anything..." he didn't find it necessary to complete that thought.

"Ben..." Brian didn't want this to become a pity session focusing on his unemployment status. "I didn't call to talk to Mikey. I called to talk to you. And I don't want to discuss my job. It's not important. I'll handle all that."

Ben hesitated. "Okay. Is something wrong?"

There had always been a little tension between Brian and Ben ever since Ben became part of Michael's life. Some of it had to do with the fact they were once casual lovers, unexpectedly thrown together again, but most of it was just the natural tension between a man's lover and his long-time best friend. Michael had similar issues with Justin, only

Mikey was far more childish about his jealousy. Brian basically liked Ben, and vice versa. "You can tell me to fuck off and I would completely understand if you did. I want to talk to you about AIDS."

Ben was silent for a moment. "Why?"

"Because I've spent my life, once I became sexually active, doing the smart thing to avoid AIDS so I wouldn't have to worry about what it is and what it does. I'm not trying to be in your face with this, Ben, or suggest that you were stupid and I wasn't. In fact, I was stupid often enough to realize that I'm very lucky. But I have this tendency to deny unpleasant truths and one of those unpleasant truths is that AIDS is still a menace to society, especially to the gay subculture."

"I have no idea where you're going with this, Brian."

"Sorry, I've been really sick, and I think my brain is still impaired by dehydration or something. Let me try again."

"Wait," Ben interrupted. "Sick? Brian, are you..."

Brian was confused for a minute, and then he winced. "No! God no, it's not me. I had the stomach flu. It's this kid...long story, won't bore you with it. The fact is, he's HIV positive and he says he's more than that, that he has AIDS, and I'm confused by this whole sliding scale of sickness thing. When does HIV become AIDS and what does that mean for a seventeen year old boy? Is he right to be so tragic? Is he as good as dead?"

"Brian, are you involved with this kid?" Ben's curiosity was tinged with uneasiness, as if he sensed a disaster was brewing.

"Not the way you mean. Not as lovers. He's here, as a guest, in our loft, but that's just temporary. I feel sorry for him. He has no one. And I'm trying to understand what he's facing."

"Has he been tested?"

"Yeah, he's sure."

"Well, I'm no expert in this area, although I guess I've read everything out there that I can find in order to ensure I'm doing all I can do to stay alive and healthy for as long as I can."

"Understood, Ben, and we want you to do that."

"I can tell you he needs to find a doctor who is very well-versed in treating HIV disease, because most of them aren't. That's the only way he can be sure to get the latest treatments and ensure attention is paid to important factors. Any good AIDS resource center can recommend doctors with that specialty."

"Okay, but when does HIV-positive become AIDS and what does that mean exactly?" Brian was intent on pinning him down on certain facts he needed to know if he was going to be of any use to Shea.

"Again, I'm no doctor, but in layman's terms, being HIV-positive is not the same as having AIDS. You can be positive for years and not get sick. Still, you have HIV disease and even when you're healthy appearing, the disease is wearing down your immune system. Opportunistic infections, viruses, fungi, bacteria, things that exist everywhere and in everyone's body, have no effect while you're healthy, but when your immune system erodes, they take hold and make you sick."

"Even if you're on the cocktail?" The panacea that men like Brian liked to believe made AIDS no more dangerous than a bad cold suddenly seemed less of a miracle to him as he viewed it from the kid's perspective.

"Let me get to that. Most doctors will tell you that you've gone from HIV disease to AIDS when your T-cells drop below 200, or when you develop one of the opportunistic infections the Center for Disease Control has identified as being AIDS associated."

"Like what? That skin cancer thing?" Brian recalled pictures of men leopard spotted and wasting, forcing that image out of his mind's eye.

"Kaposi's sarcoma, yes, that's one. PCP, which is a form of pneumonia, CMV, candida...there are a bunch of them. Some are treatable. Some, like MAC are serious, and then there's PML, which hits the brain, and is usually fatal."

"So what do they do to prevent all that from happening?" He was beginning to feel as hopeless as Shea. The more he learned about the disease, the more grateful he was for safe sex.

"Brian, each case is unique. Everyone reacts uniquely to therapies. Some respond well to anti-virals and nukes and even herbal infusions, others don't. The goal is to reduce the viral load and strengthen the T-cell count which enables the body to ward off infection on its own. Other than that, all they can do is treat the infections as they pop up. Most are treatable if not curable. Not all."

Brian frowned. "So when you go from HIV disease to AIDS, what's the prognosis? How long do you have? Is this hurting you, Ben, to discuss it? Because I don't mean to do that."

"Not at all," Ben, the teacher, was glad to inform and educate. Even on a topic this personal. "Believe me, I deal with these demons every day, Brian. You don't deliver a death sentence with an AIDS diagnosis, not anymore. Many people live years and years even after being diagnosed with AIDS, assuming they can respond well to the treatment of infections. Others don't last more than a few weeks. It all depends on your general health, how you react to treatment and whether you have an infection you can't resist."

Brian exhaled slowly. "So, I'm seventeen and I've just been told I have AIDS. I want to live because...?"

"Because the alternative will catch up to you soon enough. Take advantage of the good days and when the bad days start to outnumber the good, then you can weigh your exit options. But don't be premature. The good days can go on for years. Depression is a big part of this disease, Brian, as it is with any potentially fatal chronic disease. I even suffer from depression on occasion. Teenagers tend to be melodramatic anyway. He needs to monitor his mental health as closely as his physical well-being. I'm a big believer in diet and exercise. Maintaining muscle mass combats wasting, and wasting robs you of the final barrier of defense against viruses. I would be very happy to talk to this kid, Brian. Would that help?"

"I think it might," Brian agreed, picturing Ben and how healthy and handsome he appeared. "To see you, how good you look, how happy you are with Mikey, that would be encouraging to him. He seems to resent Justin and me for being healthy, at least he acts that way sometimes. Why don't you two come to New York for a long weekend? I haven't seen Mikey in a long time. You could take the train. Stay with us."

"I thought Linds and Gus were with you, and now this kid..."

"Long story. Plenty of room. Check with Mikey and let me know. I'd really like it if you could."

"Okay, one of us will call you tomorrow. Brian, he needs to be on a treatment plan right away," Ben cautioned. "Every day that passes, his system gets weaker, his viral load increases and his T-cell count drops."

"I know. Thanks, Ben, you were a big help." He hung up, startled when Justin said,

"Shouldn't you be in bed?"

Brian glanced over his shoulder at him. "I'm coming. I was talking to Ben."

"I heard part of it. Is Shea in trouble?"

Brian stood, turning off the lamp as he walked over to Justin and spread his arm across his shoulders. "Yeah, he's in trouble."

"What do we do?"

They walked together to the bedroom, closed the door and slid into bed. Justin rested his head on Brian's chest, his arm flung across his belly. Brian let his long fingers drift aimlessly through Justin's flaxen hair. He was still too weak and too flat to attempt sex, but it was nice to be able to feel this closeness to Justin even without doing more. "First thing we do is see that he goes to a good doctor."

"How does he pay for that?"

Brian shrugged and Justin raised himself to gaze down at him. "No, Brian, you can't afford it."

"I can't afford to pay a hospital bill, or for his continuing treatment, or for all the drugs, but I could afford to pay for a diagnosis. If he gets started on a course of treatment, then a doctor who volunteers his time could probably monitor his progress. I'm sure there are social services to cover his drugs."

"You've already paid for him to stay at the Center. Remember, Brian, we're supposed to be on a budget to EXTEND your current cash flow, not to take on new responsibilities."

"I know, I know, CHRIST! I hate being out of work! I'm such a fucking loser! If not for the fact I was out of work, I could do so much more and..."

"If not for the fact you were out of work, you wouldn't even know about Shea. Stop beating yourself up." Justin kissed him and Brian went into his lover's open arms, finally drifting into a troubled sleep.

Brian awoke the next morning to the sound of Justin retching in the bathroom. As he got up he realized most of his strength had returned. Justin was draped over the bowl, puking. Brian dampened a towel and pressed it to Justin's forehead, stroking between his shoulders with his other hand until his vomiting stopped. Justin leaned against Brian, his body flushed with fever and trembling slightly from the effort of being sick.

"I've got it," Justin stated the obvious and Brian nodded.

"Sorry, kid."

"I want to die."

"It gets worse. Rinse your mouth out. I'll put you to bed with a big bowl and a bottle of pedialyte."

Justin groaned but followed his instructions, too sick to argue. An hour later, Brian looked up as Lindsay entered the loft, using her key. She hesitated in the entry as Brian said, "Where's my boy?"

"At day care. I'm trying out a place near the gallery. Is it okay to come in? You look pretty healthy. A little pale."

"You really shouldn't. Justin has it now. It's like the plague. Trust me, you don't want it."

"I'll just pick up some clothes for the two of us and leave. I'll breathe through a beak stuffed with herbs," she walked past him and down the hall before he could intercept her. He followed, starting to explain about Shea as she opened the door to the guest room. But no one was there. The bed was neatly made up. Everything was as she left it. She opened a suitcase and began folding clothes into it. Brian went into the bathroom attached to the suite. No Shea, but there was an envelope propped against the mirror. It bore Brian's name and return address in embossed letters. Obviously it had been taken from his computer desk. The front of it was addressed, "Brian and Justin" in neat block print. He slipped it in his pocket as Lindsay came in and removed some bottles from the cabinet.

"You sharing a bed with Mick?" he teased. "She obviously has the hots for you."

Lindsay glared at him. "Women are so much more evolved than men. I'm sharing a room with your son. And Mick's daughter lives there, too, which has been a godsend for me because she loves to babysit Gus when she's not in class."

"You plan to stay there?" Brian carried the suitcase for her. It felt heavier than it should, reminding him of how weak he still was.

"Eventually I'll get my own place. But if it's easier for you if I stay with Mick..."

"I'm not saying that."

She smiled slightly. "Right. Has Melanie called for me?"

"No, Linds, I would've told you if she had." Her hurt expression touched him and he put down the suitcase to pull her into his arms. "She's been weird since she lost that baby she and Mikey were having together. Isn't there some kind of syndrome attached to miscarriages? Maybe you should cut her some slack."

"That was over a year ago, Brian. This isn't post-partum depression, this is fucking around."

He shrugged. "What should I say if she calls?"

"That I'm not home," Lindsay said with a tight, glacial smile.

After she left, Brian checked on Justin, who had fallen into a deep sleep, after yet another round of vomiting. Brian covered him up, then sat on the edge of the bed, opening the letter. Shea's neat, block print continued.

Brian and Justin.

Thanks for everything. I have to do this on my own. I hope you guys are always happy the way you are now. I took a bottle of water and a banana, hope that's okay. Love,

Shea

"Fuck!" Brian said aloud. Justin stirred but didn't awaken.

After trying unsuccessfully to find someone to care that Shea was missing, including the police, child protective services and the AIDS resource center, Brian alerted Frankie in case Shea showed up at Patrick Donovan's, and then returned to the bedroom. He stretched out beside Justin and quickly fell asleep. An hour later, the phone rang and Brian picked it up before it bothered his lover.

"Yes?"

"'Yes'?" Michael repeated. "You answer your phone 'yes'? Whatever happened to 'hello'? Is this a New York thing?"

Brian sighed, his heart hammering from his sudden awakening. He carried the portable into the main room to avoid waking Justin. "I was asleep, Mikey."

"At this hour? Out late last night?"

"I've had stomach flu. I'm still tired."

"What's up with that? You never get sick."

"I guess I do now. But I'm over it. Justin has it, though."

"You guys really do share everything."

"Very funny. What do you want?"



"There's the ever-friendly Brian Kinney we know and love. I wanted to give you our travel plans. We're coming to New York this weekend at your invitation. We'll leave around two on Friday, after Ben's last class. We decided to take the train. We should be there in time for dinner. We want to take you guys out for Italian, assuming you're both well by then."

"Who's minding the store?"

"Uncle Vic. He volunteered."

"I'm glad you're coming," Brian said, although his reason for inviting Ben earlier had now vanished. Brian was still happy to see his best friend, even though Shea's departure had stilled the urgency. "But dinner's on me. I'm not broke. Not yet, anyway."

"Brian, I'm so sorry about your job. It's just fucked up."

"A lot of things are fucked up, Mikey. I guess this is fairly minor in the scope of what's not right in this world."

"Very philosophical. Of course, it's also bullshit."

"Whatever, Mikey," Brian pinched the bridge of his nose. Mr. Headache was back.

"Brian!" Justin called out from the bedroom and he stood up.

"I have to go, Mikey. Justin needs me. See you this weekend."

Later, Justin was soaking in the tub, his head propped up on a terrycloth pillow, his skin pale under the flickering candlelight. Brian came into the bathroom and laid some folded sweats on the counter. "You should get out of there soon. The water's probably getting cold, and you need to go back to bed."

Justin looked up at his lover. "I'm sorry, Brian. I can't believe I threw up on the floor like a kid. I just woke up and was instantly puking."

"Forget it, I did it too. It's all cleaned up. The beauty of hardwood floors. How do you feel?"

"Praying for death."

"I understand. When you get out, I'm ramming a suppository up your ass."

"The hell you are."

"I talked to Bill. He told me to. I've stuck my tongue, my fingers and my dick up your ass, not to mention a variety of sex toys, so this little silver bullet is no big whoop," he held up a bullet-shaped and sized cylinder.

"I can do it myself."

"And deprive me of the fun?"

Justin met his teasing smile with a roll of his eyes. "Help me up."

Brian helped him out of the water and opened the drain after wrapping Justin in a large bath sheet. "Do you wish we never left Italy?" Justin asked and Brian shrugged, rubbing the towel briskly to soak up the moisture from Justin's skin.

"Not really. Italy was great, but this is life, Sunshine. If we plan to make it together, we have to be able to get through things like stomach flu and job losses and financial strain."

He helped Justin into the sweats, and then pulled the waistband of his pants below his firm butt and leaned him over the slate countertop. Gently, he inserted the suppository, shoving it higher in Justin's rectum with his index finger. Considering the fact Justin routinely took Brian's hard nine inches up that same opening, the discomfort was minimal. Brian stroked his ass before pulling the pants back up. "Keep your butt cheeks clenched until it dissolves."

Brian rinsed the medication off his hand and escorted Justin back to the bed. Not only had he cleaned the floor, but he changed the linens, which caught some of the flow. Brian handed him a bottle of pedialyte and positioned the mixing bowl nearby.

"What's wrong?" Justin asked as Brian rubbed his lover's stomach in soothing circles.

"Shea split."

"To go where?"

"I don't know, Justin."

"He can't! He needs to be on medication."

"I know. I called the police. I called everyone I could think of and no one cares. He didn't go back to the center, I checked with Frankie. What can we do? It's a big city."

"Do you think he went home? To Iowa?"

Brian shook his head. Justin felt tears well up in his eyes, unsure of the source, but unable to stop them. Brian used his knuckle to brush those tears off Justin's cheek, then took him gently into his arms. "We did what we could. We can't save the fucking world."

"When I was a kid, we had this cat. I was allergic, so he stayed outside, but I loved him. My dad built him a heated dog house, where he loved to spend his time. He carried around this old jack ball, just like a dog. He was more canine than feline. As I grew up, the cat got old. He got progressively bonier and less active, but he still kept that jack ball nearby. One day, he disappeared. He left the jack ball by the door and took off. My dad explained it was his time to die and that cats just wandered off when it was time, to die alone. That upset me even more, thinking of him alone somewhere, dying and then left to rot."

Brian squeezed him gently, and held him as he cried. He remembered what he had told Shea, repeating the words his sister Claire said to him so long ago. "Don't be scared, you're not alone." But now Shea was alone and he was scared, and Brian felt like a fucking liar.

Brian invited Cynthia, Lindsay, Mick, Mick's daughter, Gail, Frankie, Leo and Bill to the loft for a casual dinner honoring Michael and Ben, who were arriving that same evening. The flu had finally exited the loft, although both still felt a little tired and gaunt from the attack. Brian catered the food and Justin bit his lip to keep from criticizing the cost. Everyone arrived before the guests of honor. The mood was lively. Canapes and alcohol filled the void before dinner. After being fed early, Gus was lulled to sleep on Brian's bed by a story from his mother.

Lindsay was glad to see Brian and Justin feeling well enough to slip into a sexy little dance together in an open part of the room as the music throbbed in the background. Gail, a tall willowy brunette, was beautiful enough to model part-time while attending NYU. She watched them move and whispered to Lindsay, "Are you sure he's gay?"

Lindsay gave her a sad little smile. "Trust me. That train has left the station."

"Come on, girl, let's see if you can still shake that thing!" Mick pulled Lindsay to her feet and they joined the boys in a dance. Dressed in faded jeans and a workshirt that flattered her mannish figure, Mick looked ... attractive. Lindsay moved with her as Brian leaned in to kiss Justin hard on the mouth. Gail watched them with a sigh. He was gay, alright. Leo leaned over and patted her knee gently.

"Feeling outnumbered?"

She smiled. "I'm used to it. Sometimes I wonder if my mom even knows any straight people."

The buzzer sounded and Brian released Justin, exclaiming "MIIKEY!" with a delighted smile. Barefoot, he ran down the stairs to greet them at the street level, opening the door and then opening his arms to Michael who fell into them for a prolonged bear hug. Ben stood by, smiling tensely, as the two friends shared a platonic kiss. Brian finally released his best friend and put an arm over Ben's shoulders in greeting. "You look good."

"You too, Brian."

"Yeah," Michael said with a perplexed expression as they stepped into the elevator. "You don't look tragic at all."

"Why would I look tragic?"

"Your job..."

Brian laughed. "I'll get another one. I survived stomach flu, Jeffrey's in jail, life is good."

The evening waned until Cynthia was the only guest left who wasn't staying at the loft. She helped Justin in the kitchen as Brian sat and talked with Michael and Ben. "So how much does a place like this cost?" Michael mused, taking in the enormous room with eighteen foot exposed ceilings, antique brick walls, gleaming hardwoods and a series of sailcloth screens that divided the space. Amid all the new trappings, Michael was pleased to see that the painting of the ugly naked man was still prominently displayed.

"That's rude," Ben chastised him while Brian smirked.

"Remember that apartment you and Emmett shared on Liberty?"

"Of course."

"About ten times that rent."

Michael's eyes grew wide. "NO!"

Brian nodded. "It's Soho, man, and it's HUGE."

"Are you moving out?"

"Not until they make me."

"You're so good at what you do, Brian," Ben said with a smile. "I can imagine your former competitors are dying to hire you."

He shrugged. "I sent out some resumes. As sick as we were, I let that slip. I need to follow up." Cynthia announced she was leaving as Justin dimmed the kitchen lights. Brian got up to walk with her to the door. "I'll put you in a cab."

"I can do it myself."

"I wasn't raised that way," he said, and when they were gone, Justin sat down heavily in Brian's vacated chair.

"How is he doing, really, Justin?" Michael asked.

"He's reacting the way anyone would react. He's angry and he's worried, but he's not just sitting by and letting things drift. He hired a lawyer, obviously, he's meeting with them Monday about a settlement, and he's looking for a job."

"You can't live this way with no income," Michael observed and Justin glared at him.

"Please don't keep telling him that, Mikey. He knows exactly what he has to spend. We visited his financial planner early on. It just makes him feel like a failure if you keep telling him he can't afford his lifestyle."

"Well he can't! I'm sure you like living like this, who wouldn't? But you're breaking him."

"Why am I breaking him? This was his place before I ever moved into it with him. I'd live anywhere with Brian! Are you EVER going to get over the fact it's the man I love, and not his fucking lifestyle?"

"I will when you do!"

"What the fuck?" Brian looked from Justin to Michael as he re-entered the loft.

Ben sighed. "Just more of the eighth grade Mikey meets the seventh grade Justin."

Brian shook his head and lit a joint. "Well shut the fuck up. I don't want to listen to you two snark at each other all weekend."

"He started it," Justin moped and Brian laughed and pulled him up and then back down onto his lap, turning his face to kiss him deeply. Michael looked away, never reconciled to the Brian and Justin saga. Ben patted his knee gently, reminding him of his own partner.

"I think I'll turn in," Ben said, standing up with a stretch. "I'm tired. You and Brian catch up, Michael." He leaned over to kiss him and Michael smiled up at him.

"I won't be long."

"Take your time. You haven't seen each other in ages."

Justin took the hint and whispered something erotic to Brian, reminding him of what was waiting for him later, casting a sly glance at Michael as Brian followed him out of the room with his gaze. "Earth to Brian," Michael said and he turned back to his friend, offering him a toke.

"Sorry, he just has such a fine ass."

"I thought you'd be pretty used to it by now."

"If the day comes when I don't want to stare at his ass, stick a fork in me."

An hour later, the music on the sound system shifted to stuff popular when they were in high school as their marijuana-influenced patter turned back time. They were seated on the couch together, Brian's bare feet propped up on Michael's thigh. A platter of munchies positioned between them, was almost empty now. "Remember when you made that stink bomb in eighth grade chemistry lab and we all got to go home for the day?" Michael asked with a laugh. Brian giggled at the memory.

"I got to go home for a week. Suspended."

They both giggled. "It's amazing you ever got out of high school."

"Hey, I was a National Merit finalist, you twerp."

Michael smiled at him. "Geek."

"Mole."

"Ostrich."

They giggled together again. Brian then said, "How's Ben? He looks good."

"He always looks good. He's been very healthy. Not even a cold. His t-cells are high and his viral load is low. We're going through a good period. I hope it lasts."

"Me too, Mikey. Me too."

"Are you happy with...you know..."

"Justin? You can say his name."

"Whatever."

"I love him, Mikey. Enough said."

Michael sighed and nodded, wishing he didn't still feel a glimmer of pain over that fact. "I guess he'll stick around."

"What does that mean?"

"I mean with you out of work and all. That changes so much. He's used to being married to a rich guy."



"Justin loves me. He's not here for.....this..." Brian gestured vaguely to the loft. "He's with me. If I believe that, why can't you?"

"I want to."

"Then do us both a favor and DO."

The phone rang and Brian picked it up. "Mr. Kinney?"

"Yeah?" A woman's voice, unfamiliar. He glanced at his watch. It was after one.

"I'm a nurse at City Hospital. Do you know a Shea Hennessey?"

"Yes," Brian sat up straight, feeling a sudden chill. "Why? Is he there?"

"He's critically ill. You may want to come down here."

"On my way." He hung up and Michael looked confused. "It's that kid I told Ben about. The one who's been missing. Hospital said he's there and very sick. I have to go. I'll see if Justin wants to come with me. Sorry Mikey, but..."

"It's okay," Michael said with a sigh, watching Brian disappear into his bedroom. Seeking out his lover. Responding to an emergency as a couple. Feeling suddenly alone, he walked down the hall to his own room, his own lover, his own life.

Brian and Justin sat in uncomfortable vinyl chairs in the cramped waiting room outside Intensive Care until a harried looking resident came out to talk to them. He was Asian-American, his green scrubs rumpled from an endless shift. "You related to him?" He asked after they confirmed they were there for Shea Hennessey.

"Friends," Brian said simply, and the doctor nodded.

"Do you know how to reach his family?"

"Not really. I...why? Is it bad?"

"He's gravely ill. He was brought in with a temperature of almost 105. He was convulsing, dehydrated. What probably began as a simple stomach virus has migrated into a secondary infection that isn't responding well to drug therapy. He's septic, has periodic renal failure, and his heart and lung activity are being impacted. He just doesn't have any reserves left that he can use to battle this back. It's touch and go. If you know how to contact his family, you should."

Justin saw the look on Brian's face and went over to him, spreading his arm across his shoulders. He knew Brian was blaming himself. It started as a simple stomach virus, one that Brian brought home. Brian reached up to squeeze Justin's hand tightly as Justin asked, "Can we see him?"

"He's sedated. He wouldn't know that you were there."

"How do you know what he knows?" Brian snapped.

The doctor sighed. "He can have two visitors on the hour for ten minutes. Don't try to wake him. Right now, he needs to be out in order to reduce the stress on his body."

"How did they know to call me?" Brian said and the doctor shrugged.

"You'd have to talk to someone in admissions. I have to get back to the patients. Call his family."

He left them alone. They had fifteen minutes until the hour and Justin went outside with Brian to smoke. "It's not your fault," he huddled in his hooded sweatsuit jacket as Brian seemed impervious to the late night chill.

"I gave it to him."

"Bullshit, Brian, and even if you did, it wasn't a planned gift, now was it? You had no idea."

"He could die because of me."

"No, he could die because he has AIDS, and can't battle a simple virus."

Once again, they had traded which one of them was to be the strong one in this relationship. Brian took solace in that trade-off. Sometimes he wanted to be able to rely on his lover for support. Being the stoic got old. Justin embraced him and Brian allowed himself to be held. They stood that way for several minutes, just breathing in the comfort of the other. Finally, Brian glanced at his watch. "We need to go in. It's time."

The staff required them to place sterile wraps over their clothes and wear masks, not for their protection, but to avoid passing any germs to the patient. They even had to wear latex gloves. The patient rooms in ICU were in a circle around the central nurse's station. Brian thought it looked like the control center for NASA with all the screens monitoring the vital signs of the critically ill. Shea looked impossibly thin and pale against the sheets, his stick arms threaded with tubes. Other ominous lines ended somewhere under the blanket, draining his urine into a bag and feeding medication into a chest shunt. Only his black hair and smooth skin suggested he was young, otherwise, he could be an eighty year old man.

Justin hung back slightly, alarmed, as the roles shifted again. Brian took one of Shea's hands, careful of the tubing and tape attached to the back of it. "Hi kid. It's Brian and Justin's with me. You're going to be okay. You just have to rest and let your body fight this thing."

Justin finally walked over, running his hand down Shea's shin. To Justin, Shea's shinbone felt as sharp as the blade of a knife. "Get well so we can go see the second part of that new Jet Li trilogy. Brian won't go with me."

They got no response, but they kept talking to him. Just before they had to leave, Brian felt a slight pressure against his palm. He supposed it could be some autonomic reaction from the boy's beleaguered nervous system, but he chose to believe it was something more.

Justin napped on the short vinyl sofa while Brian paced and talked on his cell phone. There were a surprising number of Hennessey's in Keokuk Iowa, and so far not one who admitted to having a son named Shea. All seemed to be in general agreement about what Brian could do to himself for having called at this hour. A call to Seamus Hennessey at daybreak in New York yielded a different response.

"Do you have a son named Shea?" Brian asked flatly, expecting nothing and the man answered.

"Why? Is he dead?"

Brian was shocked. "Uh..."

"I ain't responsible for nothing that kid does. He's no son of mine."

"He's gravely ill," Brian said softly. "In City Hospital in New York City. He may not make it."

A pause. "So?"

A tingle of rage, fed by his own memories of an unfeeling father, rippled through Brian, building into a gale of emotion. "What do you mean, 'so'? He's a seventeen year old kid dying alone in a strange city! What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Justin sat up, alerted from his light doze by Brian's raised voice. Brian waved him back as the man responded, "He's been dead to me for two years. They can put him in the ground now, he's starting to stink." He hung up and Brian stared at his phone as if it could fix this situation. He sat down beside Justin, shaking his head in wonder.

"He hung up on me. He doesn't even care."

"Brian..." Justin stroked his back gently and they both jumped when Brian's phone rang. He pushed the talk button and held it up to his ear. "Yeah?"

A woman's voice, soft and deliberately subdued, as if to avoid being overheard. "Did you just call Seamus Hennessey?"

"Yes."

"Your number was on the phone. I'm Shea's mother. What's this about?"

Brian filled her in. She was silent, but he could hear the tears in her voice when she finally spoke. "What's your name?"

"Brian."

"Are you his...friend?" The way she asked it told Brian that they knew he was gay and that fact was probably what drove Shea away from home.

"Yes."

"I can't come there, my husband would never stand for it, but please tell him I love him and that I'm praying for him. Will you call me and let me know how he is? But call between seven and six, that's when his father is at work. He works Saturdays too."

"What am I supposed to do if he dies?" Brian said bluntly, and she cried softly for a minute, then said,

"See that he gets the last sacraments and that he's given a Christian burial. I have to hang up before he finds me talking to you. Kiss him for me." She hung up. Brian stared at the phone for a moment before pressing end.

Michael looked up at Brian and Justin as they entered the loft. Ben was watching a soccer game on television as Michael prepared sandwiches in the kitchen. "I'm going to rack for awhile," Justin said, kissing Brian on the way to the bedroom. Brian took one of the sandwiches Michael had prepared and bit into it, prompting Michael to make another.

"Well?" Michael said and Brian shrugged.

"He's improved slightly. He's not out of the woods, but the doctor said he at least had a chance to survive."

Ben muted the sound and walked over to them. "What is it?"

"Started off with the same stomach thing Justin and I had, but he couldn't fight it off and it turned ugly. He looks like death."

"Is there anyone you can call?"

"I already have. His family doesn't give a crap. Frankie will mobilize the various AIDS support groups he can interest, and I told them to call me if there was any major change."

Ben put his strong arms around Brian and hugged him tightly as Michael watched with a pleased smile to see the two people who meant so much to him in an embrace. "You're a good person, Brian."

"Yeah," Brian said softly against Ben's shoulder. "Just like Typhoid Mary."

Ben and Justin had gone to see "Hairspray" on Broadway that evening while Michael, who hated musicals, and Brian, who wasn't interested, hung out. They had a quick meal at the diner on the corner, and then climbed the stairs to the roof of the loft building, where a flagstone patio had been set up for tenants, complete with comfortable all-weather furniture and low lights. The weather had turned mild enough for light jackets to keep them comfortable, and they smoked joints and drank beer as they stared out at the low rooftops immediately around them and beyond that, the skyscrapers of Manhattan.

"This is the life," Michael said dreamily, leaning his head on Brian's thigh as he stretched out on a redwood bench and smoked. Brian glanced down at him and laughed.

"Yeah, too bad I can't afford it anymore. The view from our government housing project in the Bronx won't be nearly this nice."

"Are you scared?" Michael asked, sitting up to light another joint.

"I'm angry. And yes, I'm scared. I'm not brave about being poor. I don't want to be poor."

"You still have your degree and your awards and your experience, Brian. You'll get another job."

"Not one that pays like this. Not for awhile. And I did nothing wrong, Mikey. That's the shit of it. I didn't fuck anything up. It's a mystery to me. Why would you fire someone who makes you big bucks and brings in new clients and wins prestigious awards? Even if I did fuck up, they would try to rehabilitate me, not just say adios."

Mikey stared up at his friend's face. "Is there more to it? Did you fuck someone?"

"Literally or figuratively?"

"Both."

"No, neither. There's no hidden motive that I know of. Unless it's truly the gay thing."

"Why would they care if you're gay?"

Brian gave him a withering smile. "The same reason all straight people care. They don't understand it and are threatened by it."

"What happens next?"

"Tomorrow I meet with them and their lawyers. I guess I'll get an idea of how they feel about my threats."

"What if they fight it?"

"Then I'll fight back."

"You're so brave," Michael let his hand drift up Brian's firm thigh and Brian stopped it at the top, covering his hand with his own. Sometimes Michael forgot, and tried to get a little too intimate. Dreams die hard. Brian brought his hand up to his lips and kissed it.

"I'm scared shitless, but I don't want Justin to know."

"Oh for chrissakes, Brian! He's had the benefit of all you could give him, at least let him share in the hard times."

"He is sharing in the hard times, Mikey, and he always has. I haven't told him yet, but instead of shipping back the bikes I bought while we were in Italy, I sold them. I had to take a write-down, but at least it's some cash. I hated to do it, it was my dream bike and we had a lot of fun riding them and a lot of plans for riding them over here."

"Gee, he has to give up his fancy-ass Italian motorcycle. How will he survive?"

"Quit being a cunt, Mikey. Justin's been great through this whole thing. I don't know what I would have done without him."

Michael just scowled, never reconciled to the fact the unreachable heart of Brian had been reached and captured by this...this...KID. "Brian, do you still think we'll end up as two old queens living together in Miami when we get old?"

"I'm not getting old. I don't know about you."

"I hate it when you say shit like that. It's crap, but it scares me."

"Crap?" Brian stood up, causing Mikey's head to fall back on the bench. He went over to the edge of the building and hoisted himself up to the ledge. Michael groaned, experiencing a sense of déjà vu from the night Gus was born.

"Get down from there. Quit showing off."

"All it takes is one false step, and you are permanently young."

"Too late, Bri. You left young behind when you turned thirty. You would only be permanently over thirty."



The door to the stairwell opened, throwing a pie slice of light onto the flagstones and Ben and Justin walked out. Justin stared at Brian in horror, taking in the pungent scent of grass. "Get down," he said firmly, and Brian grinned at him.

"Make me."

"Asshole," Justin turned and went back inside. Brian watched him go, then jumped down and followed him as Ben took a toke off Michael's joint.

"What was that all about?" Ben asked and Michael sighed.

"Just Brian being Peter Pan."

"Well I hope he remembers he can't fly. Not even on this stuff."

"He's never believed it before," Michael said with a sigh, his fears for Brian flickering into being yet again.

In the loft, Justin was sitting before the television, listlessly trolling through stations with the remote. He ignored Brian when he called out to him, and Brian finally took the remote from his hands and cut it off. Justin glared at him as he sat next to him on the couch.

"Talk to me," Brian said and Justin shook his head.

"You're ripped."

"So? I can still talk."

"How could you do that, Brian?"

"Do what?"

"Jump up on that ledge while you're ripped and fuck around like that? Do you know how easily you could have fallen?"

"Ended a lot of our problems. I still have my insurance in force, and it goes to you and Gus."

"Is that supposed to be funny? Because it's not."

Brian reached for him, and Justin pushed him away, standing up. "Fuck you."

"I'm trying..."

"You're not funny. I'm very angry at you. I'm going to bed. And if you come after me, don't try anything. I'm not in the mood."

Brian followed him into the bedroom and tried to put his arms around him as he undressed. Justin struggled free of his embrace and turned to glare at him. "I just told you, leave me alone! Go find Mikey and act like stupid teenagers together."

Brian stared at him for a long moment, then assumed that glacial look that Justin knew so well. The patented Brian Kinney "I don't give a fuck about you" look of derision and removal. He turned away, went to the closet, retrieved his leather bomber and took a pack of cigarettes from a dresser drawer.

"Where are you going?" Justin asked impatiently and Brian shot him a glare.

"What do you care?"

"Don't be a child, Brian."

"Fuck you."

"Fuck you too."

Brian fled the loft and Justin sat down heavily on the bed with a sigh, trying desperately to remember the joys of Italy.

"Hey, Brian, long time," the young man was a model. He had worked with Brian on an ad campaign before Justin moved to New York, and they became occasional lovers. The model had wanted more than Brian was capable of giving, so it hadn't lasted beyond a few fucks, but he did break his one-trick, one-fuck rule. The club was noisy, and Brian was having problems hearing him above the din. They were at the bar and Brian was on his second whisky.

"Hey, Blaine. You look good." Redundant. He modeled for Calvin Klein Underwear. Of course he looked good.

"So do you."

Brian bought him a drink. Blaine smiled at him, standing close enough to brush his shoulder. "I hear you're married now."

Brian glanced over at him and winced. "Who told you that?"

"It's the buzz."

"Well, the buzz is..." he hesitated. "Not exactly right. I...I'm in a relationship, that much is true."

"You told me you don't believe in relationships."

"I don't."

"Then..."

"He's different."

"How different can it be? We're all sporting the same basic equipment, it's just that some of us throw it together a little better than others," he preened and Brian smirked at him.

"Moving right along."

"So where's the wife?"

"At home. Can we drop it?"

"Oooo, dark clouds on the nuptial horizon. What a surprise. Two fags living under one roof who can't get along. Wonder if that's ever happened before?"

Brian shook his head, realizing Blaine's snarkiness was one of the things he liked about him. He was a pretty face and great body with a snide mind. Familiar combo. "Let's dance. At least the music will drown you out."

Blaine smiled, slipping a well-toned arm around Brian's waist as they left the bar for the dance floor.

Justin was making coffee when Brian entered the loft. He heard him, but refused to turn around and look at him. He was in such pain, was so angry, he didn't trust himself to say or do anything. Brian's leather jacket hit the table with a smack and then he was close enough that Justin could catch his scent: cigarettes, sweat, scotch...sex? He couldn't be sure about the sex part. No telltale scent of someone else's soap or after shave, no raw stench of semen. But then, his nose wasn't as acute as Brian's for sussing out cheating through the olfactory senses.

Brian opened the refrigerator, sucked down a bottle of water and then stared at the contents as if looking for something to eat. "Can I have a cup of that?" he asked as Justin poured out the first mug.

"Suit yourself," Justin said stiffly, walking past him, but Brian grabbed his arm to stop him. Justin pulled free, glaring angrily at him. "How could you stay out all night? We have one fight and you revert to your old habits? How could you, Brian?" His eyes filled with angry tears and Brian sighed.

"Put away the melodrama, Little Nell. Nothing happened."

"And by nothing you mean...?"

"I mean I didn't fuck, suck, fondle, jerk, lick, tongue kiss, or exchange any bodily fluids with anyone."

A great relief flowed through Justin, even though he let nothing show. "Then where were you all night?"

"I went to the Angel..."

"Of course."

"Had a couple drinks, danced..."

"Backroom?"

"Are you listening to me? I said nothing happened. And it could have happened. I ran into Blaine."

"Swell. The underwear model, Mr. Perfect."

"Far from perfect. But he is hot. He flirted with me. I could have tricked with him."

"So why didn't you?"

Brian took the mug of hot coffee from Justin's hand and placed it on the counter before encircling him in his arms. He felt Justin tense, but he didn't try to pull free. "Because it wasn't worth it to me."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning the few minutes of pleasure were not going to cancel out making you miserable and making myself feel like a cunt for cheating on you. I didn't want it that bad. I love you."

Justin sighed. Whenever Brian said those three little words, he was lost. "I love you too. So what did you do until dawn?"

"I went over to the hospital and sat with Shea. He was awake for a little while, we talked a bit."

"He's better?"

"He's in a room now, out of ICU. His fever broke and his condition stabilized."

"That's good!" He poured some coffee for Brian and they drank it on the way to the bedroom, where Brian began to undress between sips.

"He's not completely out of danger, but they think he turned a corner. He's still pretty out of it, but he's disappointed that he recovered, Justin. He wishes he just died. Not the way we said we wanted to be dead when we felt sick. He means it."

"Poor kid. What do we do?"

"I'm trying to convince Frankie to take him back at the center when they release him, but he thinks he'll be too sick. He's looking for alternative placement, but I want him at the center unless he's totally debilitated."

"Frankie will do anything for you."

Brian, naked, held out his arms while smirking. "True, but at what cost? Think I have to give him all this?"

Justin smiled and walked over to him, flattening his hands on Brian's pecs. "He couldn't handle all this, and if he tried, I would have to kick his scrawny faggoty ass."

"Jealous bitch," Brian teased, reaching down to cup Justin's package in his hand. "Make it worth my while to save myself for you."

Justin pushed him back on the bed with a strong shove, and stripped quickly before straddling him. He leaned down to kiss him hotly as he reached behind him to fondle Brian's growing erection. Brian closed his eyes and surrendered to the heat, confirming that his decision to walk away from Blaine was correct. Sex was good, almost always, but sex with Justin was something more, endlessly exciting and fueled by emotions no other man could arouse in him. He rolled his lover under him, covering him with his body, his tongue plunging deeper into his mouth as he ground against his pelvis, letting the flames burn both of them with unrelenting power.

Sunday afternoon, Brian and Justin awoke close to the same time, made love, took a shower together, made love again, dressed in robes and left the bedroom. They found Michael and Ben hard at work in the kitchen making brunch, while Diana Krall played on the sound system. Brian smirked at that musical choice, knowing Ben had chosen the artist, since Michael's musical tastes hadn't changed since high school. Rock, metal, and more rock.

"We were going to wake your lazy asses up," Michael said, wistfully taking in the sight of Brian standing behind Justin, his arms firmly around his waist, his chin resting on Justin's shoulder. They were so much in love, it hurt him to look at them together. He never thought Brian could be like that with anyone. Rather than feeling happy his best friend had found such a match, he couldn't help but regret it wasn't himself wrapped in those long arms. As much as he loved Ben, he couldn't completely give up his dream.

Over poached eggs with hollandaise and fresh coffee, the two couples enjoyed a leisurely afternoon together and then agreed to do some lazy window shopping in the neighborhood. Ben wanted to see the exhibition at the Frick and that meant Michael was trapped into going, especially after Brian insisted a little culture wouldn't kill him. Brian and Justin had seen it, and used the time to visit Shea. The four met for dinner at the Café des Artistes, not far from the museum.

Amid murals of beautiful, 1930's-styled naked women and fragrant by enormous flower arrangements that were strategically placed in the small, elegant restaurant, Michael blanched at the prices on the menu. Brian sighed. "It's my treat. Get what you want, Mikey."

"No, let us," Ben started to say, but Brian interrupted him.

"I can afford dinner, Ben. Case closed."

Justin bit his tongue, knowing how Brian would react to a budget reminder. They relaxed into the meal, and while having brandy after the last course, a noisy, fashionable crowd entered and Justin watched Brian's face grow tense as he stared at them. He met eyes with a beautiful ice blond man who separated himself from the crowd and came over to their table. Justin recognized him as a model and his expression hardened as Brian stood to greet him and they shared a European embrace with a kiss on both cheeks. Brian introduced him to the others as Freddie, pronounced "Freedy", and the blond flashed a dazzling smile at them and hugged Brian again.

"He is my hero," he said with a strong German accent. "He brought down that psychopath, Jeffrey. Such courage. I can only imagine what price you are paying with that filthy rich family behind him, finding ways to repay you."

Brian looked confused. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I know his father would never let this happen to his boy without retribution. I'm sure he's made your life a living hell. If there's anything I can do for you, call me, darling. All of us who suffered at Jeffrey's hand owe you greatly. You have my number." He kissed Brian on the lips and left them to rejoin his party.

Justin focused on Brian as his lover sat down again. Freddie's comment about Jeffrey's family wasn't lost on him. He always suspected there was some unknown link between Walker and Brian's current troubles. He just didn't know what it was. As he contemplated Freddie's warning, Justin made a mental note to speak to Brian about his theories when they were finally alone.

On Monday morning, Brian waited with Mick for the arrival of his former boss and the man's attorney. He had deliberately dressed down in jeans and a starched white shirt over a black wifebeater. He was chain-smoking along with Mick as they discussed strategy. When Felix Kimbrough arrived, he was accompanied not only by Walt, his general counsel, but also by a partner in a silk-stockings law firm. All three men wore expensive suits and ties. Introductions were exchanged and Brian thought they all looked as if they wanted to put toilet seat protectors down on the chairs before they sat.

The patrician law firm partner was the mouthpiece for the group as he opened with, "I think this is probably not the appropriate forum to debate the issues raised by the letter you wrote, Ms. Donovan. We're here to see if we can amicably resolve a dispute while admitting absolutely no liability. My clients are more than prepared to defend any litigation to the utmost extent of the law, but we'd all like to avoid that expense and consumption of time if possible."

"Well, Harvey..." Mick said, glancing at his business card and emphasizing his first name. "You should know my client is equally willing to prosecute that litigation and since he has an airtight claim, let's not wade through three acres of bullshit to get to the cow's ass. You're here to make an offer of settlement to make Brian go away. So make it."



Brian suppressed a smile at her blunt way of getting to the heart of the matter and the other lawyer looked as if he were smelling that bullshit as he drew back and said, "As you know there is very little case law on discrimination based on sexual orientation. It's not a popular cause of action, since most juries consist of straight people. Add to that, you have the problem of an unsympathetic plaintiff who was recently embroiled in a scandal involving drugs and some kind of master/slave sexual relationship despite his so-called 'relationship' with a partner."

Mick tapped her pen on her desk and then smiled slightly as Brian bristled. "What you mean is a plaintiff who was so heroic that he risked his own well-being and the love of his life to see that said love's sister received critical medical care as she lingered between life and death, only to find out his heartless employer fired him for doing everything he could to help save this little girl's life. Is that what you mean?"

"You say po-tate-o, I say po-taht-o," Harvey responded and Mick laughed.

"As long as the damage award says six zeroes you can say whatever you want, Harvey."

"We're willing to offer fifty thousand dollars in exchange for a full release and settlement. This is no way to be construed as an admission of..."

Mick held up a hand to stop him. "Good afternoon, gentlemen, and thanks for coming by."

Harvey glanced at Felix who nodded. "Alright, I'm authorized to go up to a hundred grand...plus reasonable attorney's fees for any time you expended on this case and..."

Brian shook his head, smiling at Felix. "You're kidding, right?"

"You'd better take it or you'll spend every penny you have on fighting this matter only to lose in the end," Felix shot back at him, and Brian shrugged.

"The publicity alone will be worth it."

"Take it or leave it," Harvey said stiffly and Brian smiled.

"Kiss my ass."

"You're making a big mistake, Brian," Felix warned and he shrugged.

"Won't be the first time. The first time was when I listened to you about what a great opportunity I had with your firm and how tolerant you were, and how I had a home with you."

"You let me down."

"Cry me a river."

The men stood and left the office. Mick glanced at Brian when they were alone and he shrugged. "Bye-bye a hundred thou'."

"It's bullshit money, Brian."

"I know, but any money looks good to me now."

"You'll be fine, man. This was good. They'll be back."

"Okay, well, let's talk about something else. I have a proposal for you."

"A proposal? Thanks, but I've been married."

He laughed. "That'll keep me from wanting sex the rest of the day. No, I'm serious." He opened his briefcase and took out a file, opening it on her desk and preparing to go through it a page at a time.

In the limo, Felix glared at his lawyers. "That was a waste of time."

"We didn't expect him to bite our first offer, Felix," Harvey assured him. "I told you the case was a quarter of a million dollar claim, and that's what we'll buy it for, but after he spends some bucks on this case and after his money dwindles even further than it has. Be patient."

"I just want this behind me," Kimbrough said, staring out the window, watching the "gay" part of town slip into the more "normal" sights of Manhattan.

## Chapter 10

The opening of Chang Gallery in Tribeca was widely anticipated in the art world. The subject, Queer Art, was interesting enough to be hip, and the featured artists were the crème de la crème of the gay art scene. Brian's life was being consumed by the event, between Justin's serving Leo's manic needs to Lindsay's freaking over her first show while in her first job as manager of a major gallery. Her debut on the New York art world filled her with terror. Brian was a calm center, having nothing on the line.

Or did he?

Justin had noticed some mysterious phone calls that Brian refused to explain. While he didn't suspect that Brian's secrecy indicated his lover was cheating on him, he was still curious. That evening as they dressed in ubiquitous Manhattan black, Brian spent a lot of time on the phone between picking out a shirt and deciding on his Prada boots.

"What are you up to?" Justin finally blurted, and Brian met his gaze squarely, stunned by how grown-up Justin looked in a black silk sweater and black trousers over chunky black Doc Martens. The dark contrast to his silver blond hair was striking. Justin glared at him when their eyes met. "Don't even think about it. We don't have time."

"We should always make time for what's truly important," Brian said with an evil grin and Justin laughed as he eluded his grasp.

"We'll make plenty of time. After the event. Remember, I have to be there early. You still have a couple hours to be lazy."

"Lazy?" Rebuffed, Brian buttoned on his shirt. "I have things to do, too."

"Like?"

"Things."

"You better not get distracted and never show up, Brian. This is a big night for me and a very big night for Linds and Leo."

"Wouldn't miss it for the world."

Justin narrowed his eyes, not quite believing what he was hearing. They left the loft at the same time, kissed goodbye, and then Brian went in one direction, Justin in another. From the moment the reception at the gallery began, Justin was more interested in when Brian would show up than the A-list fags and other art collectors arriving in limos and chugging champagne as they circulated among the paintings and sculptures.

Lindsay was smashing in a black strapless dress, and Mick accompanied her to the event wearing a man-cut black tux with a shawl collar and black silk tee. Mick seemed preoccupied, watching the door, as if she too was worried about Brian. When he finally showed up, he was not alone. He walked in with at least six very handsome young men. Except for Brian, they all wore black t-shirts with a large white plus sign on the chest and an equally large white minus sign on the back, although some had the reverse, minus on front and plus on back. Each was a beautiful example of youthful male sexuality.

While Brian went to get a flute of champagne, the boys circulated among the patrons, handing out slick flyers. The crowd reacted strongly to their presence, asking if the order of the plus/minus signs had any significance, what they were promoting, and why they were there. Justin picked up one of the flyers from a boy and stared hard at the cover of it. It was an arty black and white photo of a man's lean, muscled torso, from tits to pubes. He felt a jolt, recognizing those pecs, that deep sternum, the faint treasure trail from navel to pubes, and yet there was a mark he couldn't match to the body he knew so well. A tattoo of a skull in the indentation beside the hard abdominal wall. The tattoo was inscribed, "KID KILLER" in gothic letters.

Intrigued, he opened it to read in red, "AIDS KILLS KIDS". The text spouted chilling statistics, citing infectious rates among under-18 children, and about the lack of facilities and the lonely, painful end awaiting so many of these victims. There was a paragraph about the Patrick Donovan Foundation, and a tear-off envelope addressed to the Foundation to ease the mailing of a donation.

Brian yanked it out of his hands with a smirk. "Forget it. You gave at the office."

Justin grabbed it back and read the small print that credited "BACK IN" with a tiny "c" following the bold caps, so it really read "BACK INc" as the ad agency responsible for the brochure. "You did this, didn't you? It has your style all over it. Not to mention, your body."

"Couldn't afford a model, and couldn't get one booked in time anyway. Frankie took the picture, he's a professional photographer in his other life. A friend of his painted the tattoo."

"And the printing? This kind of thing is really expensive, isn't it?"

"I have friends in that industry, so I finagled a discount. About half a motorcycle paid for the whole thing."

"Who's 'BACK IN'?"

"Mick incorporated me, for tax purposes. BACK is the homophone for my initials, BAK. The IN part is just a slightly hipper version of 'Inc'. I like BACK IN. Back rooms, back doors, back action, but mostly, I'm back in the saddle again. Back in the game. It's all good."

"The boys?"

"Models I've worked with over time. They volunteered. Liked the t-shirts."

"Why did you do this, Brian? And why here?"

"Because the gay elite, the art snobs, are here and they have money, and they often ignore their own community. And because the Patrick Donovan Center is desperate for funds."

"Leo may not like it very much. A portion of what he sells is already earmarked for AIDS hospice charities."

"Leo can kiss my ass. Rules are made to be broken."

"Why HERE?" Lindsay came over and added her fuel to the discussion. Before Brian could respond, Mick joined them and said,

"Linds, back off. Brian and I planned it together. It was his idea, the creative part, anyway, but I encouraged him and helped pay the freight. We can't afford to be polite and politically correct. We need money to keep the doors open."

Lindsay looked at her and Brian watched her anger turn soft. She sighed and leaned over to kiss Mick lightly on the lips as she said, "Alright then, honey, but I wish we'd discussed it first."

"I didn't want you to be implicated, Linds, given the fact you manage this joint."

"That's sweet," Lindsay kissed her again, then went to mingle as Mick, Brian and Justin followed her with their eyes. The two men exchanged a look before Brian wryly remarked,

"Has there been some movement in this friendship?"

Mick met his gaze with a flat smile. "Ask me something that's your business, sport."

A tall, distinguished looking man interrupted them. "Excuse me, one of the young men in a t-shirt directed me to you. He said you were behind this ad campaign, is that true?"

"Yes," Brian admitted. "Why?"

"I'm not familiar with your agency."

"It's new," Justin piped up, smiling broadly at the man. "Brian is an advertising genius from Pittsburgh, who's won all kinds of awards and recently left a huge ad agency here, where he was a partner, so he could open his own business. BACK IN is going to be big. It's young, hip, has an alternative view."

Brian stared in wonder at his lover, and then laughed. "Say hello to my publicity department."

"A very attractive department it is," the man said with an appreciative stare at Justin. Brian instinctively slipped a proprietary arm around the blond's slim waist.

"I think so too."

The man looked from one to the other, and then smiled. "Oh, so that's how it is."

"That's how it is," Brian confirmed. The man handed Brian a card.

"Call me and set up an appointment. I'm thinking of changing agencies."

Brian glanced at the card. The guy was CEO of a large software manufacturer. He knew their games and some of their office applications. "Sure," he handed the man a card of his own. It was black and glossy, with his name, CEO title, BACK IN and his home phone number written in embossed Chinese red print. As the man walked away, tucking the card in a pocket, Justin asked for a card and perused it closely.

"You need a logo."

"Well, you're the artist, come up with one."

"Maybe I will."

"Well okay, then."

"Well alright."

"Fine."

"Perfect."

Their eyes met and Brian smiled and pulled him into his arms, kissing him softly as the party continued around them. Brian whispered something in his ear and Justin shook his head. Brian looked pleading and Justin winced. "Come on," Brian prompted, and Justin said, "Where?" Brian shrugged, and Justin smiled and led him to the stairs, heading for the storage area which they could lock a door behind them.

Justin used his key to open it and pulled Brian in with him. "Turn on the light," Brian whispered as Justin fumbled with the lock. "I want to look at you." He did so. The room was cluttered with moveable wall panels that could be taken downstairs to hang more art. When not in use, the panels created artificial barriers and hiding slots that were strangely exciting to Brian. It made him feel as if others were sequestered, watching. He pulled Justin up against him, smoothing his hands under his shirt, roaming his chest and stiffening his nipples. Justin moaned and reached down to squeeze Brian's dick, opening his fly while his hand was there.

Brian's large, semi-erect phallus flopped free of his trousers and Justin seized it, stroking him into full erection as they kissed and tongued each other with aggressive urgency. Brian moaned and circled his wrist, urging him to stop before it went too far and he passed the point of being an effective lover.

"Fuck me," Justin pleaded, unzipping his own pants and lowering them down his hips. Brian groaned as he let his hands roam Justin's firm ass. He frenched him and pressed naked phallus against naked phallus, rubbing them together. "No lube," Justin suddenly remembered with a moan, and Brian smiled. Since they had begun barebacking, nature had a remedy. He smoothed his fingers between them, coating them in their combined pre-cum. He used the silky goo to lubricate his lover as he turned him around and slowly slid those fingers inside. Once the passage felt silky enough to accommodate him, he smoothed the oozing semen down the length of his shaft, gently kneading his balls with his other hand to milk additional flow. He forced himself to stop the pleasurable sensation of jerking his well oiled palm against his penis in order to seek the even more pleasurable release of Justin's tight ass.

He penetrated smoothly and Justin pushed back against Brian's body to get the full measure of him, inhaling sharply at the sudden thrust of pressure. He reached back and rested a hand on Brian's ass as he shoved it into him, using his other hand to masturbate. Brian dropped his mouth to Justin's neck, sucking in a mouthful of soft, fragrant flesh, chewing on it gently while he buried his nose in blond hair. Justin shot seconds before Brian, who filled him up with his blast and then leaned into him, gasping, waiting for his strength to return. Justin sacrificed a pair of white cotton gloves used to handle etchings without leaving behind the oil from fingers, turning them into a makeshift cum rag, and then tossed the used gloves into the trash.

"You're sex walking," Justin said softly as they kissed after fixing their clothes. "I love you, Brian."

"You just love my dick," Brian teased, resting his forehead against Justin's. "The rest of me comes with."

"True," Justin fired back, inhaling the steamy scent of their combined sexuality. "My secret is out."



Brian laughed and took his hand. "We'd better get out there before Leo decides not to pay you for tonight. I need to make up the money for the brochures."

Justin laughed, letting go of his hand to turn off the light and lock the door behind them. "That means, at my rate of pay, we should be in good shape in six months."

"Never waste a drip," Brian said, and then winced. "That came out wrong. Oh. So did that." They were still giggling together as they rejoined the crowd.

Back in the storage room, in the sudden darkness left by Justin's turning off the light as they left, Lindsay leaned against Mick with a relieved sigh. They had gone up there for the same reason Brian and Justin fled, only they arrived a few minutes before and left the lights off as they took shelter behind a far panel. A couple of kisses later, the boys intruded. Mick's instinct was to interrupt them before anything got started, but Lindsay stopped her with a silent restraining touch on her arm. She had always wanted to see what it was like with Brian and another man, especially what it was like between Brian and the one man he loved.

Heterosexually, Brian had been a tentative lover, although that fact could have been exacerbated by their youth and relative inexperience at the time they were intimate. Unlike the straight boys she dated, he always seemed slow to arouse and even slower to get off. For her, it was good, because she had problems reaching orgasm, and never did so with the slam-bam variety of lover. Because Brian was patient, and slow, she could come with him, which was a great relief. But she always had to start it, and he was always funny about it, preferring her to suck him rather than fuck, and never even suggesting he return the favor with cunnilingus. She understood all that now, but back then it was frustrating. He was so beautiful, and yet strangely unavailable, even when they were most intimate.

Peeking around the partition to see the heated urgency with which he fucked Justin, to read his overpowering excitement and blistering need in his facial expressions, and then to see the tenderness between them afterwards, Lindsay realized how wrong it would have been for them if she and Brian had given it a chance. He was right about that. He would've lived half a life, and his misery would've eventually caused him to resent her. For the first time since college, Lindsay was able to understand just how wrong their romance would've been.

As the men performed their erotic ballet together, Mick took advantage of Lindsay's fire for Brian, slipping her hands over Lindsay's soft breasts and down her belly. Lindsay suppressed a moan, leaning against Mick's body as she grabbed her hand and pushed it between her thighs. When the men turned off the lights and left, Mick reached inside Lindsay's lacy black panties to slip a finger along the slick wet groove until she rested her fingertip against her peak, jiggling against the hard little button until Lindsay came with a gasp of relief. Her fond memories of heterosexual experimentation with Brian faded as she realized again how women knew just where to go and what to do and how fast to do it and for how long, a mystery few men seemed to unravel. She turned and kissed Mick hard on the mouth, enjoying her firm, broad body with her hands as the heat of her passion subsided to a pleasant tingle.

The Gallery was empty except for Leo, Bill, Mick, Lindsay, Brian and Justin, along with the cleaning crew. The principals sat around on low slung couches, finishing off the champagne and a tray of canapés. Bill proposed a toast. "To a successful opening and a shitload of sales. I see a lot of red dots when I look around this room."

Brian laughed. "Fags buying fag art, what a phenomenon. If I had a job, I'd buy that charcoal of the nude. It's a beautiful drawing."

Justin looked over his shoulder at the rendition of a man lying on a bed, stomach down, a cat curled up on his back, sleeping. It wasn't terribly expensive. He made a mental note.

"You have good taste," Leo said. "I think Joanne will be a very hot artist one day. She has a remarkable eye for the human form."

"I bought one of hers," Mick said. She had shed her tuxedo jacket to drape it over Lindsay's shoulders when the evening waned and her lack of adrenaline chilled her in her bare dress. "It's the one of the two women sitting on that wicker loveseat on the porch. I loved the colors and the wistful expressions, like they were both remembering happier days."

"Yeah, let me buy a depressing painting to light up my life," Brian smirked and Mick swatted him with one of the brochures he printed up. Leo took it from her and held it up.

"Want to explain this?"

Brian took it from him. "It's called a brochure, Leo. Although in the UK, they emphasize the first syllable, BROchure. On the front, you normally put an eye-catching visual, in this case the naked torso of an incredibly attractive man," he glanced at Justin, who giggled, and went on. "Inside is the meat of the message, if you get my drift. This one is unique in that it has a tear-off self-addressed envelope to make it easy to make donations. It's promoting the Patrick Donovan Foundation, which assists HIV positive youths."

"Yes, but this opening already had a charitable component."

"So now it has two. And Leo, your whole approach is wrong. Rich people don't give a shit that you're donating part of your proceeds to charity. Rich people want something they can write off. They can't write off anything when the

check is for the sticker price of the painting, because they got full value for their bucks. You may get a write off, but fuck them."

Lindsay gave him a 'PLEASE STOP' look, but he ignored it and went on. "And your promotion of the opening was marginal. You emphasized the 'queer' at the expense of the 'art', which is a downside to many people. I would've pitched it differently."

"How would you have pitched it?" Leo asked.

Brian handed him a slick black card. "Like the whore at the end of the block, I don't give it away for free. Call me sometime. Sunshine, I don't know if you're stuck here for awhile, but I'm going home. I'm beat."

Leo nodded at Justin, and Brian glanced over his shoulder at Lindsay and Mick. "And the next time you girls want a gay porn show, go to a theater. I can recommend a few. It's not cool to spy on friends."

In the cab, Justin looked curiously at Brian. "What was that about?"

"When we left the storeroom tonight, and you turned off the light, I saw it flash off of something metal. From the light in the hallway, I noticed shoes peeking out behind a partition. Those slinky shoes Linds is wearing. And I think it was that chunky jewelry of Mick's that caught the light."

Justin's eyes grew wide as his face burned beneath a blush. "T-they saw us?"

"Apparently."

Justin moaned and slunk down in the seat. "Kill me now!"

"Fuck it, let them dream about dick for a change. It's not tragic. It's just rude."

"It's embarrassing is what it is, Bri!"

Brian slipped an arm around Justin and pulled him close. "I'm sorry, Justin. I wish I had seen them before. But hell, it's all hot with us. They can only watch it and weep, except for one thing."

"What?"

"Lindsay may well wonder about the difference in how I am with you and how I was with her."

"Is it that different?"

Brian laughed and held up one of the black t-shirts he had the boys wear. This was an extra one. He flipped it in front of Justin, showing first the plus sign, then the negative. Justin got the message and smiled, kissing Brian soundly.

When they arrived at the loft, Brian listened to the phone messages, a habit not easily broken. Justin stood at the refrigerator downing a bottle of water as he did so. A call from Michael, saying he and Ben wanted to come back soon, that Ben had family in New York he promised to visit and that they still needed to hit some clubs. "I've created a monster," Brian quipped. One from Shea, sounding tired, but reminding Brian he was supposed to go with him to Lydia's tomorrow. He was staying at the Center, through the kindness of Frankie and Mick, but he was having a very difficult time adjusting to his regimen of meds, perhaps because he was still recovering from his hospital stay. Brian made a mental note of the appointment time. And then, Melanie's brittle voice crackled across the wire. "Brian, if you get this, I need to speak with Lindsay. I know she's staying with you, so don't try to act like she isn't. She turned off her cell service. Tell her to call me at the office tomorrow. It's important. It's about Gus."

Brian met Justin's expression with a wince as he paused the messages. "This won't be pretty."

"What about Gus?" Justin asked and Brian shrugged.

"Who knows? A fine mess Linds has gotten herself into."

Justin nodded as Brian resumed the messages. The last message said, "Brian, it's Cynthia. Call me. Your spy inside the firm may have some interesting info."

He glanced at his watch and realized it was too late to call. His spy would have to hold onto her information until morning. The phone rang, startling him, just as he was walking away from it.

"Brian, you shit! I know you never gave Lindsay my message. Now put her on."

"Do you know what time it is, Melanie?"

"About the time you're dragging your promiscuous ass home from some club, I would imagine."

"Yeah, that's it. I've been out backrooming it all night." He rolled his eyes at Justin.

"Put her on."

"She's not here."

"Quit covering for her, Brian, and put her on the line!"

"I'm not covering for her, but I'll tell her you called."

"You expect me to believe that Lindsay is out at this hour? Is this supposed to be a ploy to make me jealous?"

"I don't give a fuck what you believe."

"And I suppose she just left Gus with you, Mr. Responsibility. I heard you don't even have a job now. Big surprise. It was only a matter of time before you fucked that up like you fuck up everything and everyone around you."

Justin watched Brian roll his lips inward, against his teeth, a sure sign of stress. He walked over to put an arm around Brian. He could feel his lover relax a little in his embrace. "Thank you for your understanding, Mel. Anything else before I hang up?"

"You can't keep me from her and from my son, you piece of shit. I'll come there if I have to, but I am talking to Lindsay!"

"You do that. 'Night, Melanie." He hung up, following that act with a one fingered salute to the implement. "Fucking dyke cunt."

Justin winced. "What was that all about?"

"Let's not talk about it. I may have nightmares of harridan dykes on brooms."

"I always thought that was kind of sexual, the link between witches and brooms," Justin deliberately lightened the mood.

"You think everything is sexual," Brian said with a laugh, leading him into their bedroom.

"Look who's talking," Justin teased as Brian pulled him into his arms and proved it with a kiss.

Dr. Lydia Johnson's Notes: Following Shea Hennessey's session, BK put Shea in a cab, he returned for his own session. BK appears to be focused and highly functional, despite the stresses introduced into his life.

Excerpt from transcript:

Doctor: Next time I think I should meet with Shea alone.

BK: If he will, sure. I'm not the one inserting myself into this process.

Doctor: I know that, Brian. We just need to transition him to individual sessions, because your presence is an inhibiting factor. You don't intend it to be, but it is just by virtue of your being here.

BK: I understand.

Doctor: So how is your life?

BK: You know all those problems I had the last time we met?

Doctor: Remind me.

BK: Out of work, suing old agency, testifying against Jeffrey, son and his mother in town, got involved with a kid with AIDS...(holds up fingers to tic off his points)

Doctor: There's the list. Made any progress?

BK: Still out of work, suing and testifying. But, I think I made some headway in all of those areas.

Doctor: How do you feel about that?

BK: Good. At least I'm not frozen.

Doctor: Any movement on your employment status?

BK: Sent out some resumes, but the firms seem to be ducking me for some reason. Mick incorporated me in order to have a business structure to do some pro bono work or take the occasional paying gig. I promoted a charitable push and it felt good to be back in it. Not so much from a Good Samaritan standpoint, but from realizing I still have it.

Doctor: Good. Your confidence level is very important right now. The lawsuit?

BK: Mick and I had a settlement conference with the other side. They offered me a ridiculously low amount and we rejected it. That was fun. It was great to see Felix the Cat squirm. So, I guess we're gonna rock and roll on that claim.

Doctor: You seem prepared for that.

BK: I've always enjoyed a good brawl.

Doctor: And the Walker case?

BK: Psycho bastard. I went to see him after that letter. I told him if he sent me another, I'd give it to the DA, unopened. I told him to leave me the hell alone.

Doctor: You went to the jail?

BK: Yes. It was grim. The visit, not the jail. Well, okay, both were grim. Turns out I was coming down with the stomach flu, but I thought it was hearing Jeffrey tell me he still loves me that made me gack.

Doctor: He said that?

BK: (Nods.) Just wanted to let me know he was motivated by love. Love is all you need. Love, love, love. Love makes the world go around. It's amore!

Doctor: Do I detect a faint glimmer of sarcasm?

BK: (Smirks) Good, I haven't lost my edge.

Doctor: All kidding aside, how did you respond when he declared his love?

BK: Threw up. No, that was a little later. It chilled me. I was looking into the perversion of love personified in this one man. You know I've never been a big fan of the love thing. It's overused and overvalued. But through Justin, I've learned what it really means, and Jeffrey Walker is the opposite of love.

Doctor: Brian, look at me. How did you FEEL about his declaration?



BK: (Pause) Guilty.

Doctor: In what way?

BK: I led him on, in the beginning. I wanted to fuck him. I was flattered by his interest in me and impressed by his genius. Watching him change, I almost feel as if I was the one who caused it. As if I made him into a monster.

Doctor: Do you believe that?

BK: Not entirely, but sort of.

Doctor: You're not that powerful, Brian. Jeffrey is an extreme narcissist. He's also a control freak with a psychotic twist and an erotomaniac where you're concerned. His intelligence makes him that much more dangerous. I'm quite concerned with his obsession for you. I haven't told you this, but I think he broke into my car while you were in Italy. He left a tape, nothing overt, but I believe it was intended to threaten me away from pursuing professional ethical charges. It didn't work. But his following you to Italy, at the risk of his freedom, and now this recent declaration concerns me. He's still lost in his obsession for you, and that's dangerous. His brand of love means if he can't have you, no one will. If he were out, I'd fear for your safety. You humiliated him. You rejected him and destroyed his life. Yet he loves you? No, it's hatred, Brian. He despises you. But he's jumbled his emotions to exculpate himself.

BK: Swell. I guess they'd better keep him inside, then. Did you call the police when he broke into your car?

Doctor: No, it seemed too minor to bother, and I couldn't prove anything. After he jumped bail, I wished I had.

BK: What do I do if he gets out?

Doctor: Get a restraining order, an unlisted phone number, an alarm system and be very cautious while out. That, or move.

BK: He's not making me run. Fuck that.

Doctor: Let's worry about it when and if it happens. How are you coping with your son and his mother? Are they gone?

BK: Oh hell no. Lindsay's a New Yorker now. Got a job, which is more than I can say for myself, and a new lesbian.

Doctor: A new lesbian?

BK: She and Gus went to stay with my lawyer, Mick, when Justin and I were sick. I guess the unnatural took its course, and now they're doing whatever it is munchers do. I try not to linger on that.

Doctor: How do you feel about it?

BK: (Shrugs.) I just wish Lindsay would settle up with the lesbian she left in Pittsburgh before she jumps into something new with Mick. I know her deal with Melanie isn't done, not by a long shot, and I really like Mick. I don't want to see her get hurt.

Doctor: You seem more worried for Mick than for Lindsay.

BK: I am. Mick is taken with her. Lindsay can be very manipulative in that silky blonde way of hers.

Doctor: Does she manipulate you?

BK: She tries, but I'm on to her. Known her too long. But sometimes she still surprises me. Weird thing happened last night. We were all at a gallery opening. Justin and I snuck off to fuck. We went to the storage room and locked the door and did what we do. As we left, I discovered that Lindsay and Mick were already up there and they saw the whole thing.

Doctor: They spied on you?

BK: Yeah.

Doctor: Does that bother you?

BK: Yeah. I feel invaded, somehow. We didn't go there to put on a show. We went there to be alone, and we weren't. Look, Justin and I have had sex with other people, men obviously, and we've done it in clubs, while playing our little outlaw games. But the other people were long ago, and the games are at our choice and are performed among other gay men, strangers. Frankly, this peep show made me angry and I told her so.

Doctor: Why do you think she did it?

BK: Curiosity, probably. She lost me to men, and yet she's never seen me with a man. Well, she should understand now. I certainly wasn't like that with her. Of course, I'm not like that with anyone, only Justin. No one gets to me the way he does.

Doctor: You're well within your rights to feel your privacy was invaded, Brian. If she's going to be around, you need to establish some boundaries.

BK: I know. I will.

Doctor: Which brings us to Shea. How are you handling it? I'm very impressed with your compassion.

BK: (Winces.) I backed into it. He has no one. I tried to interest his family and got nowhere. I may be a cold bastard, but Jesus, is anyone that cold? He's seventeen, for chrissakes. It could have been me, Lydia. You think I didn't get plenty of offers to take money for sex when I was a twink? Oh yeah. And it was tempting. But I had a kind of structure with Debbie and Mikey and Vic. I had a safe place to go. Without that, who knows what might have happened? Who would be there to help me if I were in his situation? I just feel so bad for him.

Doctor: Just so you realize he's a very sick boy and that you can't change that fact, Brian. There are no miracle cures for Shea. His chances for survival are slim if he doesn't accommodate the treatment better than he has so far.

BK: (Winces.) Changing the subject...

Doctor: Okay, to what?

BK: Justin.

Doctor: What about him?

BK: He started regression therapy.

Doctor: Good. How's he doing with it?

BK: Too soon to tell, but he's incredibly strong.

Doctor: You two are good?

BK: Uh...we two are...yeah, okay, good. We're good.

Doctor: Brian, I do believe you're blushing.

BK: No way, it's just hot in here.

Doctor: It's okay to be in love, Brian, and to feel happy over that fact.

BK: Until it all comes crashing down on your head like some vagrant satellite.

Doctor: The Tao According to Brian. I love it.

BK: Thanks folks, I'll be here all week. Tell your friends.

End of session.

Doctor's Notes: BK has shown remarkable coping skills in dealing with several concurrent stresses in his life. He's learned that masking his fear and pain with drugs, alcohol or sex is no solution, and he is facing each issue head-on and coping. Undoubtedly, some of this ability has to be credited to his partner, JT, with whom he has established a loving and mutual relationship for the first time in BK's life. He has a support system in JT that he lacked before, and for a man with borderline personality issues, this is key. By allowing himself to love JT, he is allowing himself to accept the fact he is not a worthless human being. If he were, how could JT love him back? Self-hatred, stemming from childhood trauma, is at the core of BK's issues. I fear that if Jeffrey Walker is released and if he stalks BK and interferes in his life, that tenuous progress he has made could be threatened, if not his actual safety.

## Chapter 11

Cynthia met Brian for lunch after his appointment with Lydia. They dined in a small bistro near Central Park, choosing to eat outside since the weather was mild and clear. After initial pleasantries and ordering beverages, she withdrew an envelope from her purse. Brian took it from her with an inquisitive look.

"What is it?"

"A print out of Kimbrough's electronic calendar for the last month."

"How did you get it?"

"Sam in tech support got it. He was doing routine maintenance on Kimbrough's computer, and thought you may want a print out of this. You know Sam?"

Brian pictured the young guy with a ponytail and hornrims, classic computer nerd. He suspected Sam had a little crush on him. Brian hadn't done anything to urge him on, but neither had he discouraged it, because he appreciated the instant service he always got from Sam while others waited forever to get their systems back online. "I know Sam."

"He has a crush on you."

"Naw, he just wants to blow me."

"There's a difference?"

"Subtle," Brian said with a smirk. He opened the envelope and withdrew the print-out of a monthly electronic calendar. He read over a full slate of meetings, many superficially social since a large part of Kimbrough's responsibility was the care and feeding of major clients. Brian recognized many names of clients as well as companies, but not all of them. Some were cryptic initials or no initials, just a location and time. He looked up the day he returned to work after his vacation and saw this chilling reference: BK, 9am, term.

Brian felt an unexpected stab of pain while reading that entry. Cynthia tapped a manicured nail on another box on the calendar. The Friday before the Monday he fired Brian. Kimbrough had written: Lunch w/ J, Edmund's, 12 pm, re BK(?)

"Tell Sam thanks. It's funny, we seem to have a gay mafia at the agency."

"I guess we do and you're their hero."

"Not the hero type," Brian said with a wince.

"Of course you are."

"Can you find out who J is?"

"I can try."

"Cyn," he covered her hand with his, a gesture that surprised her since Brian wasn't known for being touchy/feely. "Be careful. Don't get yourself fired trying to help me. I know you need the job."

"I'll be fine," she reassured him.

"I'm going to beat them down, Cyn," he told her. "I don't want you to bleed for me along the way."

She blushed and nodded, becoming suddenly fascinated by the menu as Brian thought of other alternatives available to him to discover the identity of the luncheon companion of Felix Kimbrough.

Justin came home from work to find Brian tying his tie, looking resplendent in Dolce and Gabbana. Justin kissed him, then flopped back on the bed, kicking off his shoes. "Why are you all dressed up?"

"Same reason you will be soon as you take your lazy ass in there and shower. I'll get your clothes out. We don't have much time."

"Time before what?"

"Before we leave. Go shower." Brian turned away from him, selecting Justin's best suit and a shirt and tie as his lover reluctantly stripped and went into the bathroom. While Justin stood under the hot spray, Brian leaned in the doorway to talk to him. He struggled not to let the sight of his lover's naked body through the foggy glass entice him to action. There was no time. He explained they were going to dinner at Edmund's, listed as one of the best restaurants in the world, not just in New York City. They would be accompanied by the software manufacturer who gave Brian a business card at the gallery opening.

"He's bringing his partner so I'm bringing mine. It's my invitation."

"But can we afford Edmund's?" Justin asked, drying off briskly and then walking into the bedroom to dress, followed by Brian. Brian reached out to smooth his hand over Justin's bare ass, unable to resist the lure of that finely rounded rump. Justin laughed as he eluded him.

"You start that, we'll be late. Can we afford it?" He repeated the question.

"No, but it's client development. A write off."

"How did you get a reservation? Isn't it a month ahead or more to book there?"

"It's a weeknight, that helps. I know someone."

"Of course," Justin smirked. "How are you going to pitch an ad agency that doesn't exist?" He asked as Brian helped him with his tie.

"It does exist. It's in here," Brian tapped his temple. "It's all about ideas. I can hire the execution. Just go with the flow tonight, don't challenge me."

"Why would I?"

"Because you're my little bulldog," Brian said with a smile, kissing him deeply as he released his perfectly knotted tie.

They cabbled to the East Sixties, their destination, an elegant refurbished mansion close to the park. The restaurant was subtly identified by a brass plaque at the ebony door. A huge marble foyer led way to a reception area and bar. Marble columns and floors gleamed beneath enormous crystal chandeliers that resembled intricate upside down wedding cakes crafted from glass. Justin was awed by the priceless tapestries and graceful sculptures. Brian playfully pushed a finger under his chin as if to close his gaping mouth. They sat on velvet ottomans and ordered cocktails while they waited for their dinner companions. A tuxedoed waiter delivered their drinks along with a bowl of olives and an assortment of fancy roasted nuts.

Brian handed him a business card when he left their drink order and asked that it be delivered to Edmund. Justin smiled at him. "What are you up to?"

"Why so suspicious?"

"I know how your devious brain works. You're up to something."

"Relax."

Edmund Rozi, the owner of the restaurant and chef, came from the back. He was a handsome man in his early forties, fit and trim. He greeted Brian with a delicate kiss on the lips, and then beamed at Justin. "Who is this divine child?"



"He's older than he looks. Edmund, Justin, Justin, Edmund. Justin is my partner. Edmund is the cook here."

Justin laughed at his "cook" quip and shook Edmund's hand. He still loved it when Brian introduced him as his partner. "Edmund and I go to the same trainer," Brian continued. "Thank you for getting me a table at such short notice, Eddie."

"Nonsense, you never ask for favors. I knew it must be important, and your advertising campaign, as well as my skill with a whisk, put this place on the map. What does this card mean? 'BACK IN? CEO'? What happened to Vanguard?"

"We split the sheets."

"Good for you! I always told you that you should go out on your own. Well, I guess I'll have a new ad agency. I go where you go. What prompted you to leave?" He sat down with them and ordered a glass of chardonnay, naming the bottle he wanted poured.

"They fired me," Brian said bluntly. Justin smiled. He appreciated the way Brian never sugar-coated even the worst news about himself.

"They're a bunch of homophobes," Justin complained, and Brian rolled his eyes.

"Let's not get into all that. I'm suing them, Ed."

"You go, girl!" Edmund said with a laugh. "So, how long have you two been a couple? You're such a keeper of secrets, Brian."

"Since I was a senior in high school," Justin said with a grin, watching Brian wince from the corner of his eye.

"It's not as bad as it sounds," Brian defended. "I was a very immature twenty-nine year old and this one hopped me. Anyway, it's been a tortured path, we've only been living together here for a few months. But it's good, it's lifelong."

Justin blushed and leaned over to kiss Brian gently as Edmund beamed at them. "Well, big changes in your life, you gorgeous, elusive bastard. I'm glad someone finally tethered you. He never even let me suck his dick," he said with a laugh and Justin smiled at him.

"Really? That doesn't sound like Brian. You missed a good one. But hey, don't try it now, because now I won't let you suck his dick."

"Cross my heart, blondie."

"Moving right along," Brian interjected. "I need another favor, Ed," Brian said. "This is a big one."

"No dick AND another favor? Balls the size of Texas," Edmund joked. "Go ahead darling, I'll let the squab burn." They all knew his kitchen was staffed with the best sous-chefs in the business.

"You know my old boss, Felix?" Brian asked.

"Of course, he's a regular."

"Apparently he met someone for lunch here on this date," Brian slipped him a note. "I really need to know who he met."

Edmund leaned back with a sigh. "Brian, Brian, Brian. Discretion is key in my business. I have all kinds of people who would love to know who dines with whom, but I can't do that and stay in business. Wives, mistresses, lovers, not my concern. They eat my snails and pay a premium for it, so their privacy is assured. Deals are cut here, CEOs are seduced away from companies, I just can't divulge."

"I need to know who he had lunch with. I swear I will protect you, Eddie. But I understand if you can't."

"I'm not sure I could even figure out who it is if I wanted to, Brian. If Felix made the reservation, he probably didn't say who his lunch partner was, so we wouldn't have anything on the books. And if the other person made it, we have no way to link it to Felix."

"I know you aren't that limited in resources, Eddie. Amazing what a smart waitstaff can retain. Just a question here or there. Your first ad mockup will be on me."

Edmund brightened slightly. "Oh well, a question here or there, perhaps. For you, gorgeous. Just for you."

Brian's dinner guests arrived and were impressed to be introduced to the restaurant's owner and master chef. Justin eyed the software manufacturer's partner, noticing he was much younger than the entrepreneur and he was also model handsome. He couldn't help but wonder how he looked to this guy. Did he see him as a young blond bimbo being kept by Brian? He scowled to himself. He didn't agree. He had plans of his own, for his own life, beyond being Brian's lover. And that's the way Brian wanted it.

While waiting for dessert, which for Brian was a brandy and for Justin was a gooey pastry concoction, Justin got up to go to the bathroom. He was surprised when the "partner" of the other man went with him. He noted Brian's wry expression with a little scowl. "Let me get this straight," the man said as they crossed the elegant main floor of the dining room, which glowed under pink-tinted lighting. "He's keeping you, right?"

Justin glared at him. "He's my partner."

"But he's paying the freight, right? Do you know how lucky you are to have someone that young and that handsome paying your bills?"

Justin stepped up to the urinals, and so did the other man. Justin didn't even bother to look. He didn't really care. "Look, I work. I have a job. And in the fall I'm going back to college to finish my degree. I have plans for a career of my own. It's not about living off of Brian." He wouldn't share with this creep that Brian was out of work and that the "agency" he was promoting to the creep's boyfriend really existed only in Brian's fertile brain. It was none of his business that he was in love with Brian, and that he would share a tenement existence with him, if necessary. Let this idiot think what he wanted.

"Honey, we all work at something or go to some classes. Otherwise we'd be totally boring to them. There's a group of us who get together every week. We lunch, we shop, we diss. Sometimes we go out at night and club. We're all young, we're all beautiful, we're all kept boys. Why don't you call me? We have room for one more gorgeous young blond."

Justin zipped up and then washed his hands at the gold-plated basin, handed a warm towel by an attendant. He put a tip in the crystal bowl, then walked out, trailed by the other. "Thanks, but I work, I don't have time to lunch and shop and diss. And Brian wouldn't like me to go out clubbing at night with a bunch of fairies."

"Whatever Daddy wants..."

Justin glared at him. "I doubt if he's any older than you."

The other man bristled at that, and the rest of the walk was in silence. When he returned to the table, Brian read his lover's strained expression and raised an inquisitive brow. Justin shook his head almost imperceptibly and dug into his dessert. On the cab ride home, Brian said, "So? What did that guy say to piss you off?"

"He assumed I was your kept boy."

"Did you explain I couldn't afford to keep a pet right now, let alone a blond?"

Justin laughed. "That didn't seem like the smart thing to do since you're pitching his daddy. I told him we were partners. We are partners, aren't we, Brian? I mean, I know you pay for everything, but..."

"Hey," Brian took his hand between his. "We each bring different things to the table. Until recently, I brought the ability to make money, now I'm not sure what I bring. But I'm sure about what you bring. You're a talented, loving, forgiving, compassionate, smart, beautiful guy, Justin. You make me laugh, you make me horny, you make me like being myself when I'm with you. You bring me peace and comfort. You can't put a dollar value on that shit."

Justin sighed, choking back sentimental tears as he responded, "Don't you see, Brian, you do all of that for me, too. That's why it's not about the lifestyle, it's about the life we share. I'd sleep with you under a bridge."

Brian glanced at him in the dark. "We did sleep together under a bridge, remember? Sleep being a euphemism for fucking, of course. Remember that evening in Central Park? No one was around, so we..."

Justin laughed and punched his arm. "Will you let me be romantic for once? You know what I mean."

Brian leaned over and kissed his cheek. "Yeah, I know. I love you too, kid."

The rest of the ride was spent in comfortable silence, with Justin's head resting on Brian's shoulder.

In the elevator to their loft, Brian began kissing Justin with increasing intensity, beginning the prelude to more. Justin pressed tightly to his body, sucking in his tongue and stroking the front of his Italian-made trousers, feeling for the bulge. Brian moaned when he contacted the hard roll of flesh and Justin manipulated it with deft knowledge of what Brian liked. He unzipped the fly, reaching inside to withdraw the object of his attention.

"Yeah," Brian said, loosely resting his forearm across his eyes, his back against the wall as Justin dropped down and began fellating him. The elevator stopped on their floor and Justin reached over to push the full stop button to prevent it from being called. Neither of them made a move to open the grate and exit. They both wanted to finish it right where they were. But then...

Someone from the outside opened the grate, looked in at them, muttered a disgusted curse and turned away. Justin looked up at Brian, questioning. Brian glanced at Melanie's back and reached over to slam the grate shut. He then filtered his fingers through Justin's golden hair, urging him to finish. Justin offered him a wicked smile before continuing with his fellatio. After Brian came, he pulled Justin to his feet, kissed him hard, tasting his own semen, then backed him to the wall. He kept kissing him as he reached down and masturbated him to completion.

Mutually satisfied, their clothes back in order, only then did they open the grate and step into the hall, holding hands. Melanie turned to glare at them, focusing her anger on Brian. "You are a fucking animal!"

"Hello to you, too, Mel," he let go of Justin to fish for his key.

"Thoroughly disgusting."

"Thank you for noticing."

"Do you know how many hours I've been waiting for you? Open the door, I have to pee!"

"The telephone is a fine invention, try it some time," he opened the door, and she stepped inside, taking in the splendor of the huge living space with a single glance.

"I did call, asshole. No one answered."

"Well, there was your first clue that no one is home. Bathroom's straight down that hallway."

She dropped a leather duffel in the entry and went in the direction he motioned to, as he said to Justin, "I must have been very bad in a prior life. Take your cell and go outside and call Linds. Warn her that Melanie is here and that I'm sending her over there. I'm not getting caught in the middle of a dyke fight. This is something the girls will have to battle out together. It's her problem, not mine."

"You can't just send her over to Mick's."

"No? Watch me. Go call," he handed him the wireless phone and patted his rump. Justin left the loft as Melanie rejoined them. Brian poured himself a Scotch and offered her one. She refused, standing there with her arms tightly crossed at her chest.

"Where is she, you fucking pervert?"

Brian suppressed a smile. "When you talk to me like that, I just melt, Morticia."

"I'm serious, Brian."

"As I told you before, she's not here."

"She's out? At this hour? With Gus?"

"Why don't you sit down?" Brian invited, stretching out on the leather chaise, on his side, propped up on one elbow. "You look like a cruise missile in launch position."

She refused, still staring daggers at him. Brian sighed, and went on. "I came down with a bad case of stomach flu and I didn't want Linds or Gus to get it. So I sent them to stay with a friend. Justin got it after me, so the visit stretched out."

"You look pretty healthy now. So did he, what I could see of him with your dick shoved down his throat. Why isn't she back? Or has she fallen in love with this gay boy friend of yours?"

"I never said it was a gay boy."

"You sent her off with a straight guy?"

"No, with a woman, Mel. A dyke. That make you feel better?"

Melanie's lips drew into a thin line and Brian realized this was as mad as he had ever seen her. Justin re-entered the loft, and joined Brian by sitting on the edge of the chaise, looking from one to the other. "What's going on?"

"I'll tell you what's going on," Melanie said in voice that was carefully controlled. "Your boyfriend has played his trump card to try and break up Lindsay and me. He can't, or won't, seduce her himself, so he sends her to someone he thinks will do the job for him."

"You mean Mick?" Justin wrinkled his nose in confusion. "That's not Brian's fault. He was just trying to protect Lindsay and Gus from the flu."

"It won't work, Kinney," Melanie said, ignoring Justin's corroboration. She retrieved her purse and removed a PDA from it, flipping it open. "Give me an address and a phone number now or I swear to God, I'll charge you with kidnapping my son."

"Christ, Mel, quit being such a DQ!"

"Lindsay is on her way over. I called her," Justin said and Brian winced.

"I didn't mean for her to come over here."

"She didn't want a scene in front of Gus and Mick."

Brian stood up, bringing Justin with him. "That's our cue to go to bed. Make yourself at home in my home, Melanie. And whatever you and Linds break in your catfight, you buy. I'm locking the door to our bedroom. I'm not refereeing this event. You guys are on your own."

Justin waved goodnight to her as he followed Brian into the bedroom and locked the door behind him. Three hours later, wearing sweats he'd pulled on backwards in the dark, Brian staggered into the main room of the loft, squinting at the light as he faced the two angry women.

"Shut the FUCK up!" He insisted with an angry glare from one to the other. "I've listened to you cows shriek at each other for hours, and I'm exhausted. Either go somewhere else to fight, preferably Pittsburgh, or lower the fucking volume! Christ!"

Both had been crying, as evidenced by balls of Kleenex left around, and both were still blotched with anger.

"Fuck off, Kinney!" Melanie shot at him and Lindsay added,

"Brian, please leave us alone."

"See, this is MY home, not yours. Don't tell me to fuck off in my own home."

Lindsay gathered her purse and walked to the door, pausing to say, "I can make this easy. I'm out of here."

"You leave now, don't bother trying to come home," Melanie insisted and Lindsay gave her one of her patented glacial stares.

"Now why would I want to do that?"

"Don't leave her here with me..." Brian appealed, but Lindsay left and slammed the door closed while Brian sighed. Melanie was silent for a moment and then she burst into tears, dropping down to the sofa as her small body was wracked with sobs. Brian groaned and went into the kitchen, filling a glass with Scotch. He brought it to her and she took it from him but didn't drink, still crying too hard to swallow. He stood there in awkward silence, unsure of what to say or do. He had never seen anyone cry that hard. Women were really good at the crying thing.



"Uh, well, I'll just..." he hesitated. Just what? Leave her here to sob in private? What was he supposed to do now? Hell, he was gay, he wasn't supposed to have to deal with crying women, especially crying women he didn't even like. Okay, he had a grudging respect for Melanie's toughness, but he didn't like her. Not much, anyway. And she hated him, so what kind of comfort could he be? As he turned to go, she reached up and grabbed his wrist. Reflexively, he pulled free, shocked by that touch.

"Stay," she said between sobs and he rolled his eyes, trapped, and sat down a safe distance from her on the sofa, passing her the box of tissues. He sat there, wishing he was asleep and waiting for the tsunami of emotion to subside before he said anything. When she finally slowed down to heaving sniffles and silent tears, he tried to speak.

"Uh, there's an extra bedroom down the hall. You're welcome to..."

"Brian, how could she do this to me? Who is she? I don't even know her anymore!"

He sighed. "Were you cheating on her?"

"NO!"

"Who is this bitch she told me about?"

"If you really want to know, she is an expert in homeopathic medicine."

"Homo...what? We have our own doctors, now?"

"Please don't try to be funny. She practices herbology and acupuncture and acupressure to treat medical problems the conventional medical community can't repair."

"In a hotel room?"

"Yes, in a hotel suite."

"And she's hot? Lindsay said she's a 'China doll'. I take that to mean she's hot."

"Well, it's a rather racist way of saying so, wouldn't you agree? Why am I asking you about sensitivity? Anyway, she's a very attractive woman. So what? And yes, we've become friends over the course of my treatment. We have a lot in common, strangely enough. But there's no sexual component to this."

"I guess that depends on what she's puncturing and what she's pressuring."

"Would you please can the sarcasm, Brian? This is serious."

He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Okay, so you meet this attractive woman in a hotel room for some herbal acupuncture or whatever the fuck she does. For what, if I may ask?"

"I want to have a baby."

He glanced at her. "I thought they told you...when you lost your baby with Michael...they said..."

"I know what they told me. I also know conventional medicine does not have all the answers. I want to have a baby, Brian. Sue thinks she can help me."

"Sue being the homo...whatever you said?"

"Yes."

"It's snake oil, voodoo, you're throwing your money down the shitter, Mel. I thought you were smarter than that. If it's so important to you and Linds to have more kids, I told her I'd give her another round of goo."

"This isn't about Lindsay. This is about me. I want to have a baby that I carry myself."

"No offense, Mel, but your tight little body is all you have going for you. Why fuck it up?"

"I cannot believe even YOU would say that to me."

He shrugged. "I may be gay, but I'm still a guy. Okay, look...what's the problem, here? Why didn't you tell Lindsay about this doctor."

"Because she'd react the same way you did. That it's bullshit. I tried talking to her about it once, and she blew me off. The Chinese have been practicing alternative medicine for thousands of years, Brian. Who are we to say it's bullshit? We were still painting our asses blue when they had an advanced civilization."

"Actually, I painted my ass blue for a party just last year, but that's another story altogether. So you have now told her the truth, right?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"And now she says I'm making it all up as a convenient excuse and even if it started out as a medical treatment, she believes it's become something more."

"And has it?"

She met his eyes. "Do you know how long it's been since Lindsay and I had sex?"

He winced. "No, for which I am eternally grateful. I take your non-answer to mean it HAS become something more."

She sighed. "Only recently. Just before Lindsay left town. I have needs too, Brian! If Lindsay doesn't want to have sex with me, I can find someone who does!"

"Like Sue."

Melanie met his question with a defiant stare. He sighed.

"So maybe Lindsay has found another outlet, too. Maybe it's just over, Melanie. Ever consider that possibility? Shit happens. Things end. Maybe yours ended. No mystery. Just over."

She shook her head. "You would think that, wouldn't you? Well some of us care enough to want to hold a relationship together even after an indiscretion. Some of us are more than an inch deep."

"Listen bitch," Brian suddenly flared. "I lived through the darkest point of my life when Justin left me for another man. I waited and I survived and I persevered and I got him back. So don't tell me about wanting to hold a relationship together. I can teach you those rules chapter and verse."

She met his expression and sighed. "You're right. You can. Well, I'm not giving up this easily, Brian. Tell me about this Mick person. I want to know."

He stood up. "If you want to know, find out yourself. I like Mick and I'm not getting in the middle of it. You're welcome to stay here tonight, what's left of it, but I wish you'd find a hotel tomorrow, Melanie. I don't see us sharing space. The sheets on the bed are fresh and there are towels out in the bathroom. Goodnight," he went back to his bedroom as Melanie began to cry again, this time shedding silent tears.

## Chapter 12

Brian was sleeping so hard that he never even heard Justin leave for work. When he finally awoke, he showered and dressed in sweats. He planned to work out with his trainer, a luxury he had paid for through the end of the month. Being a man of leisure had some advantages. He could move his training session to a time when most were at work rather than cram into the hours before and after work that most people required. He walked into the kitchen and stumbled upon the startling image of Melanie, dressed in a short red kimono, her hair askew from a restless night. She was pouring freshly brewed coffee into a mug. The previous night came back to him, causing him to wince.

"This is awkward," she acknowledged as he helped himself to the coffee.

"It does smack of the incredible. The two of us knocking around the kitchen like a couple who just rolled out of the sack together."

She shuddered. "Don't make me nauseous this early in the morning."

"It's almost noon, and believe me, I share your revulsion."

"Not that you could perform, anyway. Not with a woman."

He cut her a glare. "Sure I could. Just not with you."

The buzzer interrupted and Brian answered it, hearing Cynthia's voice on the other end. When she came into the loft, he grabbed her in his arms and kissed her solidly on the mouth. She stiffened in his embrace, at first, and then relaxed to meet his caress. When he released her she felt a little weak-kneed as he turned to glare at Melanie. "See? Cynthia, I could fuck."

Cynthia looked from Brian to Melanie, and back to Brian. "Did I miss the main act?"

"Don't worry about it. You know Melanie, right?"

"Yeah, hi, Melanie."

"Cynthia. I'll leave you two lovebirds alone," Melanie said with a sarcastic sneer. "I'm taking a shower."

"Want some coffee?" Brian invited as Melanie left the room. "Sorry about that kiss, just proving a point."

"It was nice, surprising, but nice. Melanie's staying with you?"

"Yes, I expect Saddam Hussein can't be far behind."

She giggled. "Are she and Lindsay still....?"

He shrugged and handed her a mug of coffee. "I really don't know the answer to that question. Have a seat."

She liked Brian scruffy, with a day's growth of beard and his hair unkempt. She liked it better than when he looked elegant, because he seemed straight and available, even though he wasn't. They sat down together and she sighed. "Mo got you what you wanted, but she said it wasn't easy and please don't ask her to do it again."

"Tell her I owe her big time," Brian responded, taking the envelope from her. "Did you look at it?"

She nodded.

"Well?" he persisted and she sighed.

"John Richardson, CEO of Boston International. It keeps circling back to them."

Brian opened the envelope and stared at the form that the agency used to reimburse the partners for expenses. Whenever the partners took a client out they would put the meal on a credit card, and then file the receipt and an explanation with Finance in order to be paid back for that meal. Being the managing partner, Kimbrough's vouchers were approved by the Chief Financial Officer. He read the explanatory note: "Lunch with John Richardson, CEO of BI, client number B-205, discuss personnel issue." Brian then noticed that a second voucher, from a date following his termination, had been included in the envelope. The charge was for breakfast at the Plaza Hotel. The note read: "Breakfast with John Richardson, CEO of BI, client number B-205, discuss BK."

He looked up at Cynthia. "I don't get it. Why would John Richardson have a hard on for me? I think I only met him once and it was a cordial encounter. I don't work on his accounts. Why would he care?"

She sighed. "I wondered that too. So I looked up BI on the internet." She handed him a print out of Boston International's annual report. "Skip to the back, where they print the bios of the principal officers and the board."

He read Richardson's bio, which revealed no answers to him, and skimmed the other principal officers, also drawing a blank. And then he saw the Chairman of the Board, an attractive, silver-haired patrician in his early sixties. He read the bio aloud. "Jeffrey A. Walker, Sr. , Chairman of the Board and principal shareholder. Walker has served as Chairman of the Board of Directors since 1986 when his father, the previous chairman, retired. Walker is principal shareholder of BI, holding approximately 26% of the company's voting stock, both as Trustee of the Walker Family

Trust and individually. The next nearest shareholder owns less than one per cent. Walker is a graduate of Yale University with an MBA from the Harvard School of Business. He founded the Walker Chair in Industrial Trends at Harvard, and serves on the Board of Trustees for Harvard University. He resides in Boston, Massachusetts with his wife. Walker has two children and one grandchild."

Brian felt as if he had been hit in the stomach as he looked up at her. "Bingo."

"Exactly. You still have that calendar?"

Brian retrieved it, handing it to her, still trying to absorb what this meant for him. How much trouble was he in, having a man with the money and power of Jeffrey's father coming after him? Jeffrey's veiled threat about Brian being out of work had just dropped its veil. Brian was hurt and angry and scared, all at once. He watched Cynthia peruse the calendar. "What are you looking for?"

"Well, here's the lunch meeting at Edmunds. Then the meeting with you, then the meeting with him at the Plaza. But look, Brian. After the Plaza meeting, he has a series of calls, drinks, lunches, with his peers at other agencies. There's a definite cluster of these meetings and calls. Why would he do that? There are none before that time. What's he up to?"

"What are you implying? That he's putting the word out on me?"

"You could make a case."

Brian sighed, scrubbing his long fingers through his hair. "How am I supposed to battle this kind of money and power?"

"That's why you have Mick."

"Swell, a fag and a dyke against the world."

"You have straight woman in your corner, too."

He smiled and leaned over to kiss her cheek. "I sure do. How is that asshole, Evan, treating you?"

"Like shit. He criticizes everything I do...isn't that a Righteous Brothers lyric? Anyway, he so sucks at this, takes credit for the work of his team without even acknowledging any of us, and he yells a lot. He's making me crazy."

"He's a cunt. Sorry, Cyn. Did his wife have her baby?"

"Yes, a little girl. I feel sorry for them both."

"Yeah, me too. She seemed nice enough. Someday we'll be working together again, Cyn. Be patient."

"That gives me a reason to hang in."

The door buzzer rang and Brian answered it, surprised to hear Mick's voice. He let her in, and opened the door to the loft. She stepped off the elevator while juggling a sack from Starbucks and a briefcase. She wore faded jeans and a sweatshirt from Smith. She looked tired. He took the sack as she explained, "Brought you some chai, and a bear claw. We need to talk, but that's not why I'm here. I would've called first but I'm a rude, pushy dyke. What are you gonna do?"

He laughed. "And that's why I love you. Come in, Mick. You know Cyn."

"Sure, hi Cynthia."

"Hi Mick. I need to get back to work anyway. Later, Brian."

"Thanks again."

Brian saw his time with his trainer slipping away if he didn't leave soon. He had to pay whether he was there or not. He took the goodies out of the bag and began to munch on the pastry, suddenly hungry. "So what's up?"



"I'm here to talk to Melanie. Is she here?"

Brian smiled wickedly. This was worth missing a training session. "Oh yeah, she's here."

"Could you get her for me?"

"Is there going to be bloodshed? Because if so, stay away from the suede upholstery. I'll never get it out."

"What a dick thing to say."

They both looked up as Melanie entered the room, dressed casually and carrying her leather duffel. She looked curiously at Mick, as Brian smiled and licked the sugar off his fingertips. "Mel, this is Mick Donovan, my lawyer. Mick, this is Melanie Marcus, my former lawyer."

Melanie flushed at the name, putting it together, her little face becoming as hard as granite. "I only did one legal matter for you and that was enough. So you're the one."

"The one?" Mick said with a smile. "Not sure what that means. Brian, are you going to hang around?"

"Can I? Please?"

"No," the women said in unison, and he sighed and stood up.

"Fine, kicked out of my own home. I'll go work out. But the last one standing needs to lock the door on their way out. I'll call you later, Mick, about the other stuff. I have new information."

"Okay, thanks, Brian."

He picked up his chai and left as Melanie glared after him. "What an asshole. Good luck with representing him. If anyone ever deserved to be fired, it's Brian Kinney."

"That's a ridiculous thing to say. You obviously have no idea about his value to that firm nor do you know their motivation. Given that fact, maybe you shouldn't comment on his culpability."

The gauntlet thrown, Melanie turned her ire to Mick. "I've known Brian longer than you have, so I think I'm imminently qualified to comment on what a miserable excuse for a human being he is."

"You may have known him longer, but you can't know him better, or you wouldn't say that about a man who has shown me nothing but courage and compassion, and who, by the way, happens to be the biological father of your son."

"I don't need you to remind me of that sad fact."

"By berating Brian, you are by implication suggesting Gus is disadvantaged genetically, which is hardly the case. He adores his father. Just as Brian adores him. Do you think it's healthy to denigrate someone Gus adores?"

"I think it's none of your fucking business."

"You're wrong about that."

"How do you figure?"

"Because Gus is living with me now. I share in the responsibility of his upbringing."

Melanie crossed her arms at her chest glaring daggers at the bigger woman. "The fuck you do! Just because Lindsay and Gus stayed at your place while Brian was sick doesn't make you his wicked lesbo stepmother!"

Mick picked up Brian's abandoned coffee mug and passed it under Melanie's nose before carrying it to the kitchen and putting it in the sink. "Wake up and take a whiff, Melanie. Lindsay and I are a couple now."

"You're nothing more than a rebound, revenge fuck. She believed I was screwing around on her, so she wanted to pay me back. Look at you. You're a big, fat bull dyke, not her type at all. And you're old."

Mick laughed, opening a bottle of water she took from the refrigerator. Melanie wondered at how comfortable she seemed to be in Brian's home and with Brian personally. "You can't hurt me with childish taunts about my appearance, Melanie. I realize you're younger than I am and much prettier. But younger and prettier was just not working for Lindsay. At least not when it was wrapped up with the rest of your package. I fully acknowledge I may be a rebound romance for her, although I pray that's not the case. I care more for Lindsay than I have for anyone else, in years. I'm not rolling over for you. If you think you can get her back, it'll be after a fight, I promise you that. And in the meantime, I won't allow you to disrupt her peace of mind by your threats and recriminations. It's not healthy for Gus, and it's not healthy for Lindsay."

"If you think you can keep me from my son, you're nuts. Brian Kinney has no rights to that child."

"Okay, Melanie, let's get one thing straight. I may look like a Kansas farm girl, but I have a mind like a steel trap. I have devoured silk stockings law firms. You aren't even an appetizer for me. I play within the rules, but I know how to manipulate the law to the advantage of my clients with a skill few in our profession can match. Defendants fear me. Juries love me. Judges love me. If you want to challenge me on legal grounds, or add to Brian's woes by trying to come between his son and him, or make Lindsay miserable by using Gus as a weapon, bring it on. I will grind you into bone meal and spread you on the roses."

Melanie looked at the big, strongly built woman and felt a chill. Her tone was even, but the threat was unmistakable. "I'm not afraid of you," she lied and Mick shrugged.

"That's bad judgment on your part. I won't stay, I just wanted to clear the air between us and make sure you understood this isn't some little fling for me. I'm crazy about Lindsay and almost as crazy about Gus. And Brian is not only my client, he's also become a friend. So why don't you take your scrawny ass back to Pittsburgh and let the rest of us live in peace?"

"Fuck you."

"How eloquent. You must wow them in court. With that remark, I'll leave you." Mick picked up her briefcase and left the loft as Melanie headed for the telephone.

Brian, Lindsay, Mick and Justin met for a late lunch near the gallery. Mick cautioned Brian not to discuss his case since the presence of the others destroyed the privilege she shared with him as his attorney. Brian, relaxed from a

ferocious workout followed by a luxurious steam, rested his arm across Justin's shoulders as they awaited their sandwiches and salads. He had gone home to change and was delighted to find Melanie gone.

"Did she really go back to Pittsburgh or will we find her putrefying body in the basement of my building?" Brian quipped and Mick laughed.

"Yeah, but which of us did it?"

"Stop," Lindsay said with a wince. "I know for a fact she was alive after she met with Mick, because I saw her. She's leaving later this afternoon. She was very sweet. She apologized for creating a scene and for the way things were going and said she wanted to spend some time with Gus before she went back."

Mick cut her a glance as Brian leaned over to kiss Justin on the lips for no reason other than the fact he just wanted to kiss him. "So you were at my place with Gus and Melanie?" Mick asked.

"No, honey, I brought him with me to the gallery and she met us there."

"So where is Gus now?"

Brian sensed concern in Mick's voice. He looked at her as Lindsay answered. "He's still with Melanie. She was going to bring him by on her way to the airport."

"How long ago was that?"

Lindsay bristled. "I don't know, Mick! Hours! What difference does it make? She's his mother, too. No matter what happens between us, it's not as if she'd ever hurt Gus. She loves him."

Brian felt his stomach tighten. "What's wrong, Mick?"

She sighed. "Maybe I've just been practicing law for too long. It's given me a suspicious mind."

"In what way?" Justin asked innocently and Mick shrugged.

"I wouldn't have left Melanie alone with Gus."

"Because?" Brian persisted.

"Things happen when people are enraged with a mate, or a former mate."

"Just stop," Lindsay insisted. "I know you can't stand Mel, Brian, and you're wary of her, Mick, but she loves Gus and she would NEVER hurt that boy! I'm sad that you would even suspect such a thing."

"I don't suspect it, Lindsay," Mick corrected her. "I never thought she would hurt Gus. I fear she will TAKE Gus. She has legal rights to him. She is as much his mother as you are, under the law. And you're the one who took him out of state."

Lindsay turned pale. "W-what are you suggesting? That Melanie could take Gus with her?"

"Don't panic. It's equally likely she wouldn't, but it's not impossible to imagine. I suggest Gus not be left alone..."

"This is bullshit!" Brian interrupted, tossing his cell phone to Lindsay who fumbled but caught it. "Call that cunt!"

Lindsay punched in Melanie's mobile number, but she never answered. Handing the phone back to Brian, she forced a tense smile. "This is silly. We're all worrying about nothing. Mel would never make Gus a pawn in all this conflict."

"Melanie would make Gus a human shield if it would progress her own selfish agenda," Brian said bitterly and Lindsay glared at him.

"That's unfair."

"Unfair, my ass! I want to know where my kid is. I want to know NOW."

"Enough." Mick said firmly. "I started this, and I'm sorry. But we get nowhere if we start sniping at each other. What time is Melanie supposed to bring Gus back, Lindsay?"

Lindsay glanced at her watch. "About an hour from now."

"It's not as if we can call the police, nothing's happened. I suggest we finish lunch, then wait and see if Melanie returns as promised. It's too soon to panic. Brian, who are you calling?"

"The airlines. I want to know what the flight times are back to the Pitts. I saw her ticket in an outside pocket of her bag, so I know what airline she flew."

He listened to an agent reel off departure times, checking his watch as she did so. When he hung up, he looked over at Lindsay. "What time did she pick up Gus?"

"About an hour before I left to come here."

"Then I'm sure if she did this, she went straight to the airport, because there was a flight an hour and a half after that time."

Lindsay stood up. Her face was pale, but her voice was firm. "Melanie wouldn't do that. She just wouldn't make Gus a pawn. You hate her, Brian, and you just had a fight with her, Mick, so you two are prejudiced! I have a job, I have to get back to work, and so do you, Justin."

Justin glanced at Brian, who nodded, and then kissed him lightly on the lips as he left with Lindsay. When they were alone, Mick sighed. "I shouldn't have said anything. I'm suspicious by nature. You know Melanie. Would she do it?"

"First of all, I don't hate her. My feelings for her are not that strong. Second of all, she's capable of anything, and since she lost her baby, she's been fucking weird about Gus. She resents him as much as she loves him. Lindsay and I have even talked about it. If she did take him, what can we do?"

"Fight it. Despite the legalities of adoption, the fact that Linds is the birth mother and primary caretaker will go a long way. Unfortunately, Linds took him out of the state without permission before Melanie did. We can't call the police or the FBI, it's not really a kidnapping, since Melanie is also his legal parent. It could be a very ugly situation, Brian. I couldn't handle it for her, because we're lovers. I'm too close. So there's also a money issue."

"Lindsay can't live without Gus, and frankly, I don't want my son with that bitch. So whatever it costs, I'll find the money to support her effort. This seems to be my year for legal fees."

She covered his hand with hers. "You're a good man, Charlie Brown."

"Yeah, just ask Mel. So, want to talk about my case since we can't do anything about Gus until we know for sure what happened?"

"Yes, you said something about new information."

Brian showed her the calendar entries and the annual report, explaining the significance of both. "How did you get this?" Mick asked and he shrugged.

"I have my sources."

"You know, if we use this to confront them, whoever your source may be will be in serious trouble."

"How would they know who it is?"

"They'd start by firing Cynthia, because they know she's close to you. Even if she didn't get the information, they would think she gave it to you. No, don't confirm or deny, I don't want to know. But think about that fact."

"I don't want to get Cyn in trouble."

"But this information is huge, Brian. If your supposition is correct, if Kimbrough is dissing you to other ad agencies because they want to squeeze you out of the business as revenge for Jeffrey Walker's fate, then we have a locked

down defamation case that could be worth big bucks. We need to think if there's a way to develop it without implicating anyone inside the firm. And by the way, that's serious money working to get you slapped down."

"I know. Are you scared?"

"Scared?" She laughed. "This is what I do. This is the kind of thing I like. Fat Cat bastards who think they own the world and can crush any little ant they want make me puke. It's deep pockets, babe. If we can make a case, we'll pull in Boston International and Jeffrey Walker, Senior and up the ante big time. You may not have to work again, ever."

Brian laughed. "Good, because I may not be able to work again. We're talking years, right?"

"Yeah, to do all the discovery and get a trial and survive the appeals. "

"I can't last that long, Mick. I need money now. We have to do enough to scare them into a fair settlement. Okay, even a big settlement. But I can't last for years."

"I understand. But they have to believe you'll try the case, Brian, otherwise there's no threat. There's one weapon in our arsenal we need to launch at the right moment and soon."

"What's that?"

"The power of the press. I have lots of contacts in the gay media. And if we're lucky, a mainstream publication will get interested in it. Big companies and fat cats don't like to be linked to press accounts about gay boys and prejudices. It would out you big time, however, invade your privacy."

"I'm not in. So I can't be outed. I have no qualms about embarrassing my mother or my sister. Justin won't care, he's strong, and Gus is too little to know. Fuck it. Let's do it."

"Has to be the right time. Speaking of time, I have to go. I have a meeting with the Board of the Center."

"May I share a cab? I want to see Shea, it's been a few days."



"Sure and put your money away. This is on me. It's a business lunch, a write-off. How is Shea doing? Frankie says he's having a tough time with the meds."

Brian frowned. "Yeah, very tough."

"Poor kid." They walked to the corner and hailed a cab. Once they were settled inside, Mick asked, "Why does Melanie hate you so much?"

Brian contemplated that for a moment, and then shrugged. "I guess because my dick is so much bigger than hers." Their eyes met and then they both dissolved into laughter.

Brian was surprised by Shea's appearance, but he struggled not to show it as they walked across the street to sit in the small park and absorb some late afternoon sunlight. Even walking that far seemed to tire Shea. He was thinner, if that was possible, and looked so fragile that Brian worried he could break just from the pressure of standing or sitting or walking.

"I have thrush," Shea said numbly. "It's no big deal, but it makes it hard to eat and they're giving me something that seems to be making it go away, but it's always something. They can't seem to get my cocktail right. I react to so many drugs and drug combos that they can't find the magic bullet. I'm tired all the time and I eat, but I get terrible diarrhea that takes my weight down. So now I'm on this special diet, and that may help. They never really tell me what my viral load is or my t-cell count, because they know I'm already depressed. Lydia changed my antidepressants, but they don't help much. I just wish it was over."

"Don't say that."

"Why not? Who would care, Brian? What do I bring to the world? Nothing. The only thing I could ever do right was suck dick, and now I don't even do that."

"Shea, you're going through a rough patch, while they try to balance your meds. Once they do, you'll feel better, have more energy, start to rebuild your weight as all your counts go up."

"Since when are you as big a liar as the rest of them?"

Brian sighed. "I'm not lying. I believe it. I've seen it. I'm sorry you couldn't meet my friend, Ben. But next time they come to town, you will. I should look as good and be as healthy as Ben."

"Your super AIDS faggot? I'm not like that, never will be."

"Okay, kid, I'm not gonna sit here and blow smoke up your ass. But I won't listen to doomsday, either. The truth is somewhere in the middle." He lit up and Shea wiggled his fingers to request one. Brian frowned, but the boy laughed.

"Lung cancer won't be what kills me. Come on."

Brian passed off the freshly lit cigarette and lit one for himself. "Have you thought any more about calling your mom?"

"I have no mom."

"Your mom is worried about you, Shea."

"Well, I'm sure your mom is worried about you too, Brian. Do you give a shit?"

Brian smiled. He had a point. "I had a shitty childhood too. I can relate."

"Doubt it. Let's not talk about families. Don't you have a job? Are you independently wealthy? I see you around at odd times."

"I got fired. I'm between gigs."

"Fired for what?"

"Being queer, maybe. Maybe more dire reasons, not sure yet. It doesn't matter. The results are the same. I'm suing them."

"Cool. Are you scared?"

"Of what?"

"Being out of work."

"Oh. Yeah, I'm scared. I'm scared of the money running out. I'm scared of the future. I'm scared of not being able to support my kid or my partner."

"It's good that you can admit it. You're not the type."

Brian smiled. "I don't know what type I am anymore. I'm trying to be better than the type I was."

"You're okay," Shea said with a shrug. It was as much of a compliment as he could muster. He reached back to rub his neck, wincing as he did so.

"What's wrong?"

"Slept funny, I guess. My neck hurts, feels stiff. And I've had this bitch of a headache all day."

"Did you tell anyone at the Center?"

"Why would I?"

"I don't know. But you should."

"It's probably just those damn drugs."

"Come on. Let's go back. Let's make sure about what it is."

When Brian walked into the loft that evening, Lindsay, Mick and Justin were gathered, and they each offered him a look of annoyance. Lindsay had clearly been crying and Mick had been unsuccessfully trying to calm her. Justin was tensely awaiting his lover. Brian looked at them and concluded, "So Gus is in Pittsburgh."

Lindsay began to cry again, and Mick put an arm around her and sighed. "Mr. Sensitivity. Melanie called to let her know Gus was fine and that she intended to keep him."

"Over my rotting corpse," Brian said, pouring himself a scotch. Justin came into the kitchen and confronted him with a glare.

"Where have you been? We've been worried."

"I've been at the hospital, Justin, with Shea. He had a spinal tap, always a fun way to spend an evening. It would appear he has something called cryptococcal meningitis. It's apparently common in AIDS victims who have t-cells below one hundred. It's a nasty little inflammation of the brain. He's in the hospital again, because they have to give him this very nasty little drug called amphotericin B intravenously. They combine that with some anti-fungal called flucytosine. I sound like a doctor, don't I? The fun thing for Shea, is that this is some fungus we all carry around but our immune systems block it from becoming a problem. Since his immune system is shot, he can keep getting this over and over again unless he takes that anti-fungal indefinitely. And now I come home to hear my son has been kidnapped by a psycho bitch. So don't fuck with me. I'm not in the mood."

"Shit," Mick said softly as Justin slipped his arms around Brian who tensed at first, and then allowed himself to relax into his embrace. "Shea's body is turning on him. This isn't good."

"No, Mick, it isn't good. And he's facing it alone. At seventeen."

"He's not alone," Justin said softly. "He has us."

Brian kissed him, and then held his hand as he led him back into the main room and pulled him down on the chaise with him. "Did we call the cops on Melanie?"

"There's no crime," Mick responded. "Melanie has just as much right to that child as Lindsay until a court says otherwise. She's backed you into a legal corner. If she had a history of abusing the child or was on drugs or something, we could claim endangerment. But from what I've heard, she's a model citizen."

"Being a psycho bitch doesn't count?" Brian insisted. "Taking Gus as a way of striking at Linds is meaningless?"

"She'll say Lindsay is the one who overreacted and took Melanie's child away from his home."

"And who will care for him while the bitch is at work?" Brian demanded.

"I'm sure she'll put him back in the same day care program where he was when Lindsay left."

"Brian, I just want my baby back!" Lindsay said with a sob and he went over to her, taking her in his arms as he rested his cheek against the top of her head. She clung to him desperately as he sighed and said,

"I know Linds, I know. And we'll get him back, don't worry. We'll get him back." He fixed his gaze on Mick who met his silent inquiry with a nod.

## Chapter 13

Melanie looked up as her visitor was escorted into her office by her secretary. She smiled tensely when Justin leaned over to kiss her on the cheek. She motioned to a chair and he sat down, lacing his fingers over one knee.

"So they sent in the U.N. Peacekeepers?" Melanie quipped. "You're letting them use you. They know you're the one person out of that lot that I would agree to see."

"I have the least emotional involvement, I guess. Not that I don't care about Gus, because I do, but I think I can be sane about it."

"Honey, you wasted Brian's dwindling fortune by coming here. I was well within my legal rights to bring Gus home and I'm not letting him go."

"I don't think anyone doubts that you have rights with Gus, Melanie. What shocked Lindsay is that you would make Gus the football in this game."

"Oh, I'm the bad one, am I? She flees the state, and takes him with her, and then she moves in with some bull dyke she hardly knows, and I'm the baddie?"

"No, Mel. No one is bad. But look at it from Gus's point of view. You may both be his mommies, but Linds is the one who carried him and who has been his primary caretaker all of his life, while you worked. Only recently has Linds begun working again. Now he's taken away from her. It can't be easy for him."

Melanie frowned. "In that case, maybe Lindsay should have thought of Gus instead of herself, for a change. I'm not giving him back to her, Justin. You may as well tell her that. Let her try and prove who's the better parent. I do this for a living. Tell her to try and prove how worthy she is as a mother."

"I hate to see that happen, Mel."

"You don't care about Lindsay, let's get real. You're here in your capacity as official pawn for Brian Kinney. It's more convenient for Brian to have Gus there in New York. So Brian sends you out here to confront me, and you use Lindsay as your bait to try to get his kid back. I will never understand the way you let him use you, Justin. It's disgusting."

"He doesn't 'use' me, Mel. He loves me. I'm his partner. And yes, he's worried about his son, too."

"That's the proverbial icing on the cake for me, Sunshine, and you can tell him I said so."

Justin was feeling badly about his failed mission when he walked into Liberty Diner and was accosted by Debbie who crushed him in a bearhug. When she finally loosened her grip, he inhaled sharply and slid into a booth. She slid in on the opposite side, gripping his hand between hers on the table, her eyes filled with happy tears.

"How's my little Sunshine? I've missed you so much! You look great, honey. How is life treating you? Is Lindsay staying with you guys? Is she coming back soon? Did Brian find a job? I can't believe what happened..."

"Deb!" Justin laughed. "Hold down the machine gun fire! I've missed you too, life is wonderful, overall. I'm very happy with Brian and I enjoy my new job. Lindsay isn't staying with us, and I doubt if she's coming back soon. Brian hasn't found a job yet, but he's doing some work on his own and he's suing his old agency. How are you and Vic?"

"We're fine. Have you been by to see your Mom and Molly?"

"Not yet, but I will. Are they okay? I talk to them on the phone a lot."

"Molly's hair has grown back quite a bit. She looks like a little pixie. She's allowed out in public now, but not in crowds or when a flu epidemic or something is going around."

"Yeah, Brian sent her a bunch of things to dress up her hair from some fabulous shop in Soho. She talks to him more than she does to me, of course. He's still her hero and he still adores her. You haven't told Mom that he's out of work, have you?"

"No honey, that's not my place."

"Good, she has enough to worry about now, and Brian will survive, he always does. He doesn't want them to know."

"So you two boys are doing good? Michael said you're disgustingly happy."

Justin laughed. "Good word for it. Yes, Deb, we're fine. But Melanie took Gus back to Pittsburgh with her, and Lindsay is freaking out completely. It's one more stress Brian doesn't need. I tried to talk sense to Melanie, but no luck."

"Well, Lindsay should come back here. Those girls need to be in the same city if they want to work out their problems."

"It's not that easy."

"Why isn't it?"

"Because Linds has a job she loves, and because she...well... she's seeing someone else."

"A woman?"

Justin laughed. "Of course a woman, Deb. She's still gay. Another lawyer. She must have a thing for lawyers," he wrinkled his nose at that thought and Deb sighed.

"Well, since you say that, I may as well tell you I've seen Melanie out and about with a beautiful Asian woman. They seem very chummy. It's worried me."

"It worried Linds too. That's why she left."

"Oh shit."

Justin nodded. "Too bad everyone can't have a relationship as smooth and easy as what Brian and I share."

Their eyes met and then both of them laughed heartily at his little joke. They were interrupted by the noisy entrance of Emmett and Ted who were arguing about something. They paused in their disagreement when they saw Justin. Both rushed over to greet him warmly. As Debbie went back to her other customers, the three men made plans for a welcome home trip to Babylon that evening, since Justin wasn't leaving until morning.

"So dish about Brian getting fired," Ted insisted with an evil grin and Justin sighed.

"Explain something to me, Ted. How come you guys consider yourselves long time friends of Brian's, and yet you take particular glee from anything bad that happens to him? It's as if you want him to be hurt. Why is that? I can't think of anything he did to either one of you to warrant that kind of reaction. Just the opposite, in fact. He got you a job, when you were out of work, Ted. He even let you use his home and his persona, to act out your fantasy. Yes, he told me. And as for you, Emmett, I know he's your wet dream and if he ever looked at you sideways, you'd have been down on his dick like a scuba diver. So why so vicious? I'll be honest. It makes me angry. It doesn't fit my definition of friendship."



There was a moment of silence as the other men looked uncomfortable and then Justin stood up. "Anyway, I have to go see my Mom. I just stopped by to say hello to Deb. I'll see you tonight."

Brian was feeling low. He missed Justin. He supported Justin's staying over to visit his mother and sister, but he missed him. He was sorry Justin had failed to persuade Melanie, but he wasn't surprised. Melanie knew she was in the catbird seat and she wasn't about to give it up. The thought of Gus with that humorless, bitchy dyke made his blood run cold. To top it off, Shea was having trouble battling the meningitis, his beleaguered immune system unable to wage a strong fight. He was expected to survive, but the battle was one more set back for his general health.

Brian dined out with Lindsay and Mick, but all three were solemn, and Lindsay was prone to tears over everything from her order being wrong to the butter being too hard to spread. He knew she was battling a harsh reality. Either enter into a prolonged fight during which she would be separated from her son, or give up her new life and her new love and go back to Pittsburgh to be near her son, yet miserable with everything else. He understood her struggle and saw how much that dilemma was hurting Mick. Because of these undercurrents, dinner was subdued and sad.

Justin called Brian's mobile while Brian was walking back to the loft after dinner. Brian was glad to hear from his lover, and he understood why he was going to Babylon with the boys. He trusted that nothing would happen, but he was still jealous and lonely. On the way home, he stopped at a bar not far from his loft. It was a mixed gay/straight artsy crowd, and the ambiance was soothing, with lots of green plants, soft jazz and pretty people. Someone came up from behind him and bussed his cheek. He smelled divine and Brian smiled when Freddie, Jeffrey's former lover, sat down beside him.

"How's my hero?" Freddie asked in his thick German accent and Brian sighed. The beautiful blond model reminded him of his own missing blond, even though they really were nothing alike.

"Not feeling very heroic tonight," he said, accepting a Dunhill cigarette that Freddie offered him and then lit with a gold lighter.

"What's wrong, sweetie? Where's your young fella?"

"Visiting his mom in Pittsburgh. He'll be back tomorrow."

"One night on your own, is not so bad, Brian. It's good for a relationship to miss each other occasionally. What do you hear from our bad boy, Jeffrey?"

"Hopefully nothing. Ever. Can I ask you a question, Freedy?" He always had a hard time pronouncing his name the way the man wanted it pronounced.

"Of course, I'm the open book."

"Do you know Jeffrey's father?"

Freddie winced. "The Iron Man? Oh yes."

"What's he like?"

"Handsome, older man type. Very tall, very authoritarian, rules that family with an iron fist. It's no coincidence that his son turned out to be queer and his daughter is a slut. Now that Jeffrey is incarcerated, I hate the idea that Hannah is being raised by that man. His wife is sweet, but ineffective against him. It's all about the family with him. You'd think he was heir to some fictitious throne. Of course he's fabulously wealthy, always has been, and powerful. So that always corrupts absolutely. He hated me, because I'm an effeminate queer and he blamed me for Jeffrey being the way he is. Ridiculous, because Jeffrey was always queer. In fact, I think I kept Jeffrey rather sane for awhile. Only after we broke up did he go completely psychotic. I think he owes a lot of that psychosis to his father and his controlling ways."

"We all owe our psychotic side to a parent, don't we?" Brian said bitterly. "Does he love Jeffrey? Would he avenge him?"

"Love? This is a man who's not capable of love, I'm convinced. But yes, he would avenge, not out of love for Jeffrey, but because he would view harm to Jeffrey as a blight on his family. He would avenge his family honor over anything. And he has unlimited resources to do so. Why, Brian? Is he after you?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

Freddie flinched. "Run, darling. You can't win with a man that rich and that connected."

"I have nowhere to run to, Freedy. I have no choice but to fight."

"Christ, that's no good," he leaned over, slipping an arm around Brian's shoulders as he said in a low voice, "You want your dick sucked, Brian? Would that make you feel a little happier? I live nearby."

Brian smiled and shook his head. "It would probably make me feel a little happier, but not for long. I've got to say no, but thanks, Freedy. Your drink is on me. I need to go."

"Don't be silly, darling, this is all on my tab. Some other time, maybe."

Brian nodded, and left the bar, lost in confused thoughts concerning Jeffrey's father. He was surprised to open the door to the loft and find Lindsay there, seated on the sofa, not crying, but having recently stopped. She looked so vulnerable in her dark dress and bare feet, her strappy sandals abandoned on the floor and her long pale hair half up and half down, falling free of its clips.

"Thank god you didn't bring a trick home," she said with a sniff. "I don't think I could've handled that."

"I don't do that anymore, Linds," he said with a hint of annoyance. "What's up?"

He sat beside her and she cuddled up to him, resting her head on his shoulder. He slipped a protective arm around her. "I told Mick I needed to talk to you tonight. You're the Daddy. You have the biggest stake in this besides me. I need your input, Brian. Just the two of us. But first, I need your stash."

He glanced at her and laughed, retrieving his marijuana, rolling joints for both of them. As the green-scented smoke curled around them, they held each other and searched for a quiet calm in which to discuss the future fate of their son.

Justin had a hangover. His early morning flight out of Pittsburgh was no help, and the motion of the plane just made him queasy. By the time his cab arrived at the loft address, he wanted a hot shower and sleep. He was surprised to find Brian was still sleeping soundly, even though it was almost noon. His long, lithe body naked above the sheets, his smooth ass exposed to Justin's view, Justin was beginning to reorganize his plans as he felt the crotch of his jeans become suddenly snug. He stripped quietly to avoid waking Brian, noticing the roaches stubbed out in the ashtray beside the bed, which probably contributed to Brian's heavy slumber. Naked, Justin slid in beside him smoothing his hand down the slope of Brian's back. He spied something black against the gray sheets and pulled it out from under the cover, holding it up as if unsure of what he was seeing.

Brian stirred, squinted his eyes at the light, and then focused on his naked lover and smiled. Before he could reach for him, Justin dangled the retrieved object between them. Brian stared at it, then moaned and dropped back against the pillow.

"What the fuck is this?" Justin demanded and Brian sighed.

"It's a bra."

"I know it's a bra. Looks like it may be a little big for you. You have great pecs, but not a C-cup. Are you doing transvestites, now?"

Brian grabbed it from him and put it down on the table. "Don't queen out on me, Justin. It belongs to Lindsay. It's a long story."

"I have all day," Justin said, sitting cross-legged beside him, his jaw set in an angry scowl.

"C'mere, I missed you," Brian reached for him, but Justin eluded his grasp.

"Talk first. Fuck later, maybe. Maybe fuck never."

Brian sighed. "Look, we had a terrible day after you told us what Mel said. Especially Lindsay. She has two terrible choices before her. She's devastated. I went to dinner with Mick and Linds and we discussed it, and it was very sad and subdued. Later, Linds showed up here to talk about Gus. She was in tears, all shaky and scared and hopeless. Vulnerable, you know?"

Justin rolled his eyes. "Your favorite thing. Sir Lancelot to the rescue. "

"Whatever. I feel for her, Justin. So we got ripped, and..."

"And what?"

"And we talked and..."

"You fucked her."

"I didn't mean to fuck her."

"Right," Justin said angrily. "You just fell on her with your hard dick and then the fox found its hole."

Brian suppressed a smile. "Justin, the fox hasn't found that particular hole in about thirteen years. It's amazing it still knew how that hole worked. It was stupid, we both wish it didn't happen and frankly neither of us enjoyed it very much. She couldn't wait to get out of here, in fact she left so fast she didn't even keep looking for her bra. She just threw on the rest of her clothes and vanished." Brian tried to make light of it. "Not only did the earth fail to move, but I think we destroyed whatever fond memories lingered about the old days."

"I'm not amused by this, Brian."

"Justin, I admit it was wrong for a lot of reasons. But it has nothing to do with you and me. She's a woman, she's my first heterosexual slip in thirteen years, and she was my last heterosexual slip thirteen years ago. In thirteen more years, I just may bang her again, and I guess you'll have to live with that threat. It wasn't planned. I could've picked up a guy if I wanted some stray sex, which I didn't. I never meant for this to happen and neither did she. It's over. She's not your competition."

"Brian, in case I wasn't clear about this, I don't like the fact you would fuck a woman any more than I like your fucking a guy. Fucking around is fucking around."

"It's not happening again, so stop busting my balls. I'm queer, Justin, not bi. This was just a combination of circumstances that isn't happening again. So get over it. I love you. I love her too, but in a different way. I'm sorry if this hurts your feelings, but it makes no dent in our relationship. It was a fluke."

Justin laid back on the bed, closing his eyes as his headache flared. Brian reached for him, but he eluded his grasp and turned his back on him, pulling the sheet over his head. Brian stared at the formidable invisible blockade his lover erected between them and finally left the bed, acknowledging defeat.

That afternoon, Brian entered Mick's office to be greeted by a curt, "Drop your skinny ass in that chair, Bucko, and lets talk about how the cow chewed the cabbage."

Brian smirked at her, expecting Mick to be blunt. He lit a cigarette. "May I go first? Am I on the clock? Because I don't expect to be billed for getting an ass-chewing."

"We have a contingency deal, rocket scientist. I'm not being paid by the hour. I get a piece of whatever award or settlement we get. Did you even read the fee agreement?"

"I scanned it. I trust you, Mick. Look, you don't have to worry about Linds and me..."

She held up a hand to stop him. "Don't. I'm not Melanie. I know Lindsay has unresolved feelings for you. I also know her feelings for you are far more intense than are yours for her. I'm fine with that, Brian. Even I have former lovers who still engender regrets. What I'm not fine with is your taking advantage of her when she's so vulnerable. I'm not threatened by her emotions, I know you're a true faggot. No woman is ever going to win your heart or your dick. I'm not even that concerned if she takes an occasional detour into the realm of the pink submarine. I know where she lives when it comes to sex. But she's fragile right now, and I won't have you fucking with her head."

He sighed. "It wasn't like that. Look, I love Linds in my own way, and I've always tried to be mindful of the fact she has unresolved regrets about our past relationship. I think those feelings are illusory, she would never really want to take me on full-time, even if I were interested. I've been careful not to encourage that shit. I don't know what happened last night, Mick. We were miserable about Gus, and we got stoned. No excuses, but I do apologize and I do regret that it happened. I'm in trouble with Justin, if it makes you feel any better. I've made you mad and I'm sure Lindsay hates it. It sucks. It wasn't worth it."

Mick stared hard at him, and then shook her head. "Tact was never your strong suit, was it? I love that about you. You come onto her again, I'll pickle your little pecker in brine and slice it on a burger. We understand each other?"

"It's not so little," he said with a smirk.

They both chuckled. "What do you know about size?" Mick insisted. "Men are constitutionally unable to measure accurately. They've misled themselves so long about what equals six inches."

"Yeah, well, ask your girlfriend."

"Oddly enough the size of your dangle doesn't interest me, Brian. Are we together on this? Because I won't fight guerilla warfare for her affection the way you and Melanie have for so long. I believe in hand-to-hand combat if there's to be a battle."

"No battle. I surrender. I have what I want in Justin."

"Good, because I like you a lot, Brian, but I won't share Lindsay's box with you."

He held up both palms. "It's all yours."

Mick extended her hand to him and he shook it. She then lit a cigarette and opened a file folder. "This is your formal complaint with the state and city agencies that prosecute discrimination claims. You have to exhaust this administrative remedy before you can sue. Standard stuff. It may draw some press, however. Queer stuff is wicked gossip and this is a big agency. Plus, you have some shine because of the Jeffrey Walker scandal."

"Shit."

"It's nothing compared to the limelight you'll be standing in when you testify against Jeffrey."

"What about that Boston Industries connection?"

"Our ace in the hole, Brian. In a day or two, I'll call your former esteemed general counsel at the agency and drop a broad hint that I'm looking at an action against one of his top clients which will put the agency in a real dicey situation."

Brian cocked a single brow and smiled. "Oh, that's good."

"I know. I am good, it's what I do."

"So they'll pump up their offer?"

"If they have half a brain, yes."

Brian nodded. "Can't you be equally devious with Melanie?"

"Not my area. I know just enough to be dangerous."

"That's how I like my lawyers, big and dangerous."

"Remember that the next time you get a stiffy around Lindsay."

He winced. "Can we just forget about that? I have."

"Sure, come on. I'll buy you a drink downstairs."

He agreed, relieved to leave this disaster behind them.

Justin had been running from gallery to gallery for Leo, dropping off the freshly- minted brochures for the next exhibition in the Midtown location, and Tribeca was his last stop. He was dreading seeing Lindsay, and when he was finally alone with her in her office, they were both uncharacteristically quiet.

"I'm sorry, Justin," she said and he met her eyes with a frank expression.

"About what?"

"About fucking Brian while you were in Pittsburgh, trying to help us. It was a rotten thing to do, no matter how meaningless it was."

He sighed, rolling his lips inward, a nervous habit that he picked up from his lover. "Yeah, that."



"I don't know what he told you, but it was..."

Justin stopped her. "Don't. Don't tell me it didn't mean anything, it wasn't that great, it wasn't right, you both regret it, it will never happen again, okay? I've heard all that."

"It's all true, all of it."

"Is it, Linds? You didn't enjoy it with him?"

"I won't lie to you, Justin. I enjoyed it more than he did. Brian's a great lover, and I've always missed him that way, a little. He's the only man who really took me there, you know? But the momentary thrill aside, it was pretty awful. We both felt like shit, because we both love other people, and we knew it was stupid and wrong. Afterwards, I just wanted to get out of there. Away from him and from what we did. It wasn't even particularly comforting, which disappointed both of us. He loves you so much, Justin. I never thought Brian could feel that way about anyone. I was always a little jealous of you for the depth of emotion you aroused in him, but I see things more clearly now."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I saw first hand that the old Brian, 'no regrets, no apologies', was a thing of the past. When I looked at his face after it was over, it wasn't pleasure or afterglow I saw on his features, it was regret. I knew it had nothing to do with me. It was all about you. He told me he was going to be honest with you, because he couldn't have that secret between you. I told Mick, too. It was horrible, and we don't have the history you two share. Please forgive him. It was just an odd combination of circumstances that won't happen again."

"I have forgiven him, Lindsay. I love him, what choice do I have? But it did hurt me. I want you to know that."

"It hurt all of us, honey. I'm sorry."

She looked up as Brian walked into the office, standing beside Justin and resting a hand on his shoulder. "Leo told me where to find you. I thought I should be here for this. Mick and I made peace. Have you?"

Justin looked up at him. "It hurts."

Brian saw his lover's blue eyes cloud over with tears and he sighed and squatted beside his chair, resting Justin's chin on his fingertips. "I love you, Justin. Only you, forever you, no one but you. Period. I was stupid. Forgive me."

Lindsay bit into her lower lip, unable to believe those words were coming from Brian Kinney. Not only was he saying them, but he was saying them in front of an audience. Justin hesitated, then rested a hand on the back of Brian's head and leaned over to kiss him. Brian wrapped his arms around him as they kissed, and when it ended, he stood and offered his hand to Justin, helping him stand. "Let's go home," he said quietly. Justin slipped an arm around him, and rested his head against his shoulder as they walked out together.

Lindsay caught Brian's eye as they left. The look between them had the impact of an open door quietly swinging shut.

The next day, Brian met a friend for lunch at a quiet bistro in midtown. Off the main shopping streets, it was not often frequented by tourists, making it a good place for nearby office workers to lunch. Only after he sat down at the table with the man did he remember he lunched here with Jeffrey, once. It was at the beginning of his relationship with Jeffrey, when he had no clue as to the magnitude of Jeffrey's psychosis. He remembered seeing the doctor crouch in the bathroom, crying over the death of a young patient. At that moment, Brian thought he was the most compassionate person he had ever met. Funny how wrong early impressions could be.

"Thanks for meeting me for lunch, Mark."

The young man was Brian's peer in a rival agency. They often crossed paths at ad events. When the man's firm tried to lure Brian away from Vanguard, Mark was the one who bore the message. They were occasional tennis or racquetball opponents, so their relationship was business tinged with personal. Mark was Brian's age, a handsome Princeton-educated African-American, straight, but unthreatened by Brian's homosexuality.

After pleasantries were exchanged and an order was placed, Mark said, "Sorry to hear about your trouble, Brian."

"Thanks."

"What happened?"

"I don't know. I wish I did. What are you hearing?"

"The last thing I heard was that you were suing the agency."

Brian smiled. "Hasn't come to that yet, but it may."

"Based on what?"

"Let's not get into all that. Mark, remember a few months ago when you tried to raid Vanguard and lure me to sign with you?"

He looked suddenly uncomfortable. "Uh, yeah, sure. Too bad it didn't work out."

"I recently sent a resume to your agency and I got back a polite and formal no interest letter."

Mark shrugged. "Economic times are tough. No one has the same financial flexibility we had a few months ago."

"You're running ads to hire people. You have a search firm engaged. Don't jerk me off, Mark. What's going on?"

Mark sighed. "Is this just between us? Not something for your lawsuit?"

"You have my word."

Mark knew Brian, and that was enough. "I really don't know what's going on, Brian. When I heard you were out, I immediately went to our managing partner and said here's our chance to get Kinney. He agreed, told me to move on it. I was working on a campaign, and a day or two passed before I could even think about it. On the same day I was going to call you, he comes into my office and closes the door. He looks very worried. He asks me if I've talked to you yet. I tell him no. He sighs and says good, don't. I asked what he meant. He said, 'we don't want that guy. According to Felix, he's a loose cannon'."

Brian nodded. "I figured as much. He's trashing me. Would your boss agree to sign a statement to that effect?"

"Are you serious? Of course not. You said this was off the record."

"It is, Mark, at least your part in it is. I have independent evidence that suggests Felix called your managing partner and I may be forced to pursue it."

"I don't care about that so long as my fingerprints aren't on it."

"I understand."

"You're a great ad man, Brian. Why would Kimbrough let you go and then try to diss you to other agencies?"

"That's the final Jeopardy question, Mark, and I'm betting my whole wad on the answer."

Mark nodded, admiring his courage, but worried about the outcome. "Are you still with that blond kid I met when he came to the health club that day to meet you for lunch?"

Brian nodded. "Justin, yeah, he's my partner. Why?"

"My wife and I would like the two of you to come over for dinner sometime soon. Quietly of course. My managing partner would kill me. The twins are a terror, but she's a great cook. Italian is her specialty."

"We'd love to come over, thanks," Brian didn't do straight couples very well, but he always liked Mark and was impressed by his bravery and acceptance. "How old are your twins?"

"Just turned three."

"My son's age, almost."

"I didn't realize you had a kid." Mark seemed surprised by the possibility.

Brian smiled at his expression. "Yeah, Gus. Long story."

"You'll have to tell me sometime."

"I will. Have you ever thought about going out on your own?"

"Every day."

"But?"

"The usual constraints. A new apartment in Tribeca, two kids to educate, a nanny, a wife who's addicted to Bloomies, maxed out credit cards...in other words, fear and money."

"You think you could steal some clients?"

"Sure, but maybe not the biggest ones."

"But some good paying solid citizens?"

"I think so, but...what evil are you cooking up in that brilliant mind of yours?"

Brian smiled slyly. "Who me? Why nothing. Nothing at all."

## Chapter 14

Brian stared at his banker with a combination of disbelief and confusion. Finally he spoke. "What am I missing?"

The man looked uncomfortable as he shifted his weight, and gazed at his handsome client who was dressed in an expensive Italian suit. "It's not personal, Mr. Kinney. It's business."

"My credit's perfect, isn't it? I've never paid a bill late in my life."

The banker looked down at a credit report bearing Brian's name and nodded. "Flawless."

"No one could really argue that I don't have the experience to launch a business, could they? I have a strong record in the ad game, plenty of awards, and I've already lined up some lucrative clients. True?"

"Yes, you've done a very thorough job with your proposal, Mr. Kinney."

"Well then?"

"I'm sorry, but the committee turned down your loan request. You have to realize the economy is iffy right now. Investing in a new business in a highly competitive field is not necessarily prudent."

"'Prudent'. If I was a bad risk, I would agree. But I've never defaulted on a loan. I have the obvious expertise to do this, and it's ludicrous to presume I'd fail. I maintain healthy bank accounts here. You can look and see how careful I am with money." This denial was a possibility Brian had scarcely considered. There was no valid reason why he couldn't get start-up money to open an agency. He was beginning to feel panic claw at his gut. No job interviews, and now a possibly insurmountable obstacle to opening his business. What the fuck was he supposed to do?

"There's nothing I can do, Mr. Kinney."

"Well, there's something I can do," Brian said as he stood up. "I can move my money to another bank."

The man didn't respond and Brian paused at the door. "Tell me something. Does Boston International keep accounts here?"

The stricken look on the banker's face gave Brian his answer even when the man said, "I couldn't discuss that with you if they did, Mr. Kinney."

"Interesting," Brian left the building. He stopped on the sidewalk, considering his next move. He thought about calling Mick, but instead he called another number.

Justin had been visiting with Shea, the younger man too weak to do much more than talk quietly with him, but he seemed happy for the company. He had been sent home from the hospital once his condition stabilized. His meningitis was being controlled by aggressive drug therapy that left him weakened and exhausted. He was back at the Center, doing little more than sleep and conserve his energy. Seeing Justin gave him some much needed distraction, and when he asked about Brian, he noticed Justin's tense reaction.

Justin had called the loft so he knew Brian wasn't home, but he wasn't sure where he was. He was beginning to worry. Brian never even called him to tell him what the banker said, and he couldn't remember the last time they had gone this long without talking at least once. When his mobile rang, he realized how anxious he was by how fast he fumbled it up to his ear.

"Where are you? I called the loft," Brian sounded annoyed.

"Where are YOU?" Justin returned his annoyance, walking out of Shea's room as the boy drifted into a light snooze.

"At the airport."

Justin froze. What the hell was Brian up to now and why was he suddenly so worried? "Going where?"

"Going nowhere. Coming home."

"You flew somewhere today?"

"Yes. I'm in a cab now. Head home, we need to talk."

"Please tell me you didn't go to Pittsburgh to kidnap Gus."

"What am I? A nut case? I know not to do that!" Brian responded irritably.

"Then what the fuck? You flew somewhere without even telling me?"

"I knew you'd tell me not to do it."

"Shit, Brian!"

"Meet you at home," Brian said and hung up before Justin could question him further.

Justin arrived at the loft before Brian, and spent a nervous twenty minutes cooking something for them to eat, mainly to kill time. When Brian walked in, dressed in a suit and loosening his tie, Justin felt much of his anger slip away. Brian looked so exhausted, so worn, as he kissed Justin and then went into the bedroom to change his clothes. Justin turned down the heat under the food and followed Brian, watching as Brian slipped into the comfort of faded jeans and a soft cotton t-shirt. He hung up his suit for him, just to be helpful. Brian lit a cigarette as he went back to the kitchen to pour himself a drink. He also poured one for Justin, without even asking.

"You're scaring me," Justin said, and Brian shrugged.

"I haven't even said anything."

"You don't have to. I know you."

Brian sat on the couch and patted the cushion beside him. Justin joined him and Brian took his hand holding tightly to it for a silent moment. Finally, he spoke. "I did an up and back to Boston."

Justin wrinkled his nose. "Why Boston?"

"I met with Jeffrey's old man."



Justin paused, feeling his stomach contract. "Why would you do that?"

"He's the one who's behind ruining my life."

"How do you know?"

"I've known for awhile, Justin."

"You never said anything to me."

"I didn't want to worry you."

Justin punched him lightly on the arm. "Bitch! You can't treat me like a kid or some weepy girl, Brian. I'm your partner. You have no right to keep that kind of thing from me!"

"No hitting. You're right, I should've told you, but I was still trying to get it straight in my own head. And now it is."

"What happened?"

Brian took a drink and leaned back to recount his meeting with Jeffrey's father, focusing on the key points.

Brian used some of Lydia's tools to stay calm and centered as he took a taxi from Logan Airport to Louisburg Square, the most prestigious address in the city. Brian knew Boston fairly well. He had a lot of business there, and it was close enough to New York to be an occasional retreat for new faces, new dicks, when he was still playing those games. He didn't spend much time in the Back Bay, however. He heard the assholes there were far too tight to penetrate.

He was curious about how people as wealthy as the Walkers lived, but he wasn't expecting what he found. On a quiet block of two-hundred year old rowhouses overlooking a tree-lined cobblestone street, the Walker residence at seemed superficially modest in scale, at first. Of course, any real estate on this square was worth millions. Brian upped his estimate of the value of the home when he realized the residence was two units wide and six stories tall. The back offered views of the Charles River, while the views from the front and sides, were of the private park with

a keyed entrance for residents, and typical Back Bay accoutrements like gas lights and perfectly tended landscaping. The house was quietly intimidating, the elegant understatement of very old and very bottomless money. What Brian didn't calculate was that the property was carried on the tax roles with a value of twelve-million. Even his fantasies of extravagance didn't reach that far.

Growing up as a lower middle class boy who made good, Brian was forced to realize "making good" was all a matter of degree. "Good" was a nice loft in Soho. "Really, really good" was a six-story double-wide on Louisburg Square. A maid opened the door when he rang the bell, escorting him through an oval-shaped foyer with rose quartz flooring, a marble fireplace and polished, original moldings. He was led past the brass doors of a private elevator and into a drawing room on the same floor. Museum quality artwork was displayed on every wall, and the hearth was so tall, he could walk into it. Bay windows offered one view, while a row of French doors opened onto an enormous deck overlooking the river.

Brian stood tensely by these doors, taking in the fog that skimmed the surface of the water, when a man entered the room. The man closed the mahogany pocket panel doors behind him. Brian could easily see the resemblance to Jeffrey in this tall, silver-haired gentleman who maintained his slim physique and looked casually elegant in a cashmere sweater and dark trousers. Spring in Boston was slow to warm. Brian suspected the core of Jeffrey Walker Sr. never completely thawed, no matter what the season. He took in Brian with a dismissive glance and then offered his hand as he said, "I'm Jeff Walker."

"Brian Kinney," Brian said, shaking his hand with wary caution.

"Have a seat, Brian. Would you like something to drink?" He acted within the rules of his highly-structured society, even though Brian sensed his instant hatred. It was the dismissal of a straight man, multiplied exponentially.

"No thank you," Brian sat on a wing chair, forcing a calm he didn't feel. He knew the older man was studying him, as if trying to determine how Irish scum like Brian could lead his precious son astray. Brian spoke, anxiety closing in on him.

"Nice house."

Stupid understatement, and he wasn't even sure why he said it. He found the place overwhelming and while it was beautiful, it completely lacked any semblance of a family's home. The family photographs scattered about in silver frames was all that suggested people lived in this palace. He glimpsed the photo of Jeffrey and Hannah and grimaced as he wondered what it was like for that sunny little girl to be raised by this ice man. What was her choice? A psycho father or a manipulative, icy grandfather? He could only hope the women in Jeffrey's family picked up the slack left by the men.

"How's Hannah?"

Walker looked surprised to hear his granddaughter's name. "Fine. She's with my wife and daughter at the house on Marblehead Neck at the moment."

Brian had no idea what Marblehead Neck was, but he could imagine it was some wealthy, white-bread enclave with a million dollar view of something. "I have a son Hannah's age."

"Yes, I'm aware of that fact."

Brian frowned, figuring Walker had a nice fat portfolio on him. That fact made him feel invaded. Walker rapped long, slim fingers on a polished table beside him, and then asked, "What can I do for you, Brian?"

"You can tell me what you hope to accomplish by ruining my life," Brian was sick of the social dance.

Walker gave him an icy smile. "I have no idea what you mean."

"Don't blow smoke up my ass. I'm not stupid. You put out the word for Felix to fire me. You made sure he ruined it for me with other agencies. You even made sure my bank wouldn't loan me money to start my own business. I found out you're a board member of that bank. What do you think all of this will buy you?"

"You're a clever boy, Brian. If you figured out all of that, you must have a theory for my motives."

"You think you can scare me off from testifying against your son?"

"Let's be blunt. Without your testimony, there's no real case against Jeffrey, is there?"

"So this is to protect your son?"

"This is to protect my family from further scandal. I think we've seen enough, thanks to you."

"To me? It's my fault, is it? My fault he stalked me and used drugs to subdue me and control me, and that he blackmailed me with the survival of a child in order to keep me with him? How is that my fault?"

"You seduced him."

Brian laughed. "I seduced your innocent son? Trust me. Jeffrey was well into dick before I met him. He was the pursuer, not me."

"I don't need any gruesome details. Now that you have a taste, and I mean only a taste, of what you're up against, what will it take to make you go away?"

Brian crossed his legs and shook his head slowly. "A bribe? To keep me from testifying?"

"Let's just call it an investment in your future."

"I've already filed the criminal complaint against Jeffrey. They'll compel me to testify. What do you expect me to do? Go into hiding?"

"You can damn the case with how you deliver your testimony, and you know it. And if they know it, too, they won't prosecute."

"You're asking me to commit perjury. It's a crime."

"Oh come now, Brian. Your whole life is a crime. A crime against nature, as well as a crime in the eyes of the law. You're disgusting and vile. Am I supposed to believe you're above perjury for pay?"

Brian felt a flash of anger, an emotion that he was determined to contain. His great-grandfather came to Boston from Ireland. He heard his grandfather repeat stories of the prejudice his father suffered at the hand of Brahmins like Jeffrey Walker. He packed his family off to Pennsylvania in hopes of escaping the caste system that held Boston by the throat. Brian realized things may be different now, at least superficially. The Kennedy's and other prominent

Irish clans had penetrated the power structures of Boston, but would the old social order ever really change? He suspected it would not.

"I didn't think it was possible, but you managed to make me realize two things. First, there are fathers in this world who are worse than my own. Second, I can still feel some pity for Jeffrey, even after all he's put me through. Never thought that was possible."

Walker smirked at him. "Now that you have that off your chest, let's talk money."

Justin leaned over to kiss Brian after he recounted the story up to this point. Brian kissed him back, and then sighed, squeezing the bridge of his nose as Mr. Headache throbbed.

"What did you say to that asshole?" Justin asked gently.

"What do you think I said?" Brian challenged him and Justin shrugged.

"I think you told him to stick it up his ass. As desperate as things may be, you aren't the type to arbitrage your integrity."

Brian smiled at him, giving him a little hug. "You're the only person who knows me who would believe that."

"That's not true. You're scrupulously honest, Brian. Even brutally honest."

"I told him I'd like his money very much, thank you."

Justin looked shocked. "You did?"

"I did."

Brian saw the confusion enter Justin's expression and he smiled and patted his lover's knee. "And then I said, I intend to get quite a lot of it, because I intend to sue his company and him personally for defamation and to pursue criminal charges against him."

Justin's frown merged into a grin. "I get it. What did he say?"

"He was furious. He told me not to fuck with him. He said he'd bury me."

"Like that Russian guy said about America?"

"Khrushchev. Right."

"The police will want to hear about this, Brian."

He shook his head. "It's my word against his. He'll just deny it. Even if they break down that he's trying to keep me from being employed, it doesn't prove anything. My remedies are civil, not criminal. I wasn't wearing a wire, damn it."

"Maybe they'll set you up for a sting."

"Been watching 'Law and Order' again? Walker's not stupid. He'd never fall for that. I'll talk to Mick about how we go after him, that's what I plan to do. And I'll try to ensure that his crazy son goes to jail for a long time. Although, after meeting the father, I almost feel sorry for the son."

"Don't. He's a maniac. It's going to get tough, isn't it?"

"Yeah, Justin. It's gonna get tough. If you don't want to..."

"Shut up."

"Let me say it."

"No. Don't make me smack you."

"I would understand if you left me. I really would. You're young, your whole life is in front of you. You don't need to be ruined because of my problems."

"Brian, my whole life is with you. So shut up."

Brian glanced at him and smiled wickedly. "Make me."

Justin pushed him back on the sofa and crawled on top of him, holding Brian's wrists in his hands as he leaned down to kiss him on the mouth. Their tongues battled and Justin ground his pelvis against Brian's, feeling both of their cocks come to life. Brian easily pulled his hands free and spread them on Justin's ass, pushing him against his body with even more force. By the time they finished what they started, dinner was ruined and they went out to eat, suddenly ravenous.

Mick stared in horror at Brian the next day as he related his encounter with Jeffrey Walker Sr. He began to feel nervous when she got up, closed the door to her office and sat on the edge of her desk, peering down at him in mute fury. Finally, she spoke.

"Listen to me, cowboy. I know you're used to running your own shit, looking out for number one, but you aren't in control anymore, you understand? You don't call the shots in this game and you can't outmaneuver a fat cat like Walker. What you've done is to remove the element of surprise and you've given them a chance to prepare. So how is that smart, wise guy?"

Brian winced, then bristled, becoming defensive. "This is my life, Mick! Not a fucking chess game! I may have reacted emotionally to some disturbing news I got from my banker, but I think I had the right to confront the son of a bitch!"

"Your life IS a chess game right now, Brian. Get used to it. That's what litigation is. And these people will be fully armed with the best defense lawyers in the game. I'll have my hands full. I can't be distracted trying to rein in a rogue client. Do we understand each other? Because if you want to be a gunslinger, then you need a new lawyer."

He sighed and then smiled sheepishly at her. "I don't want a new lawyer. I like the one I have."

"Don't give me those cow eyes and expect me to melt, Kinney. Your pretty little face has no cash with me. What I want from you is a commitment."

He winced. Commitment was not one of his favorite words. "Okay, okay, Mick. I promise not to be a gunslinger."

"No contact with any of them without going through me?"

"Cross my black and shriveled heart."

"Christ, I want to kick your ass so bad..."

"Well, it's a given that you could, so why don't we leave it there?"

She laughed and returned to her chair behind her desk. "You do have the blarney stone in your corner, Kinney. I need to reorganize our game plan, thanks to you. There's no strategic advantage in using this as a settlement tool now. We have no choice but to go after BI, because of the actions of its CEO, and after Walker personally. This is going to be newsworthy, man. Get ready."

"Can we file against Walker for offering to bribe me?"

"We could, but it's a swearing match, and I think it distracts from the thrust of our case. I'm going to go ahead and draw up the papers. We'll sue as soon as the state agency gives us a right-to-sue determination rather than taking it up themselves. Trust me, they will. This is an individual case, not a cause celebre. I should get that notification any day now."

Brian was silent as he contemplated the irrevocability of this option. "I need the money, Mick. I don't want to stretch this out into a long lawsuit."

"Filing only enhances your ability to settle. Brian, do you want to back off of testifying against Jeffrey? If so, we need to use that as a weapon while it's still ripe. Obviously, once he's tried, it's off the table."



"I will never back off testifying against Jeffrey."

"Good, that's what I needed to hear."

"This is really stressing me, Mick. I keep running headlong into walls. I'm scared."

She looked into his eyes, realizing that was a big admission for Brian Kinney to make. "I know, kid. But you got right on your side, and despite being a cynic, you may just find that sometimes that's enough."

He nodded, feeling fully confident in Mick Donovan. He wished he felt that confident in Brian Kinney. He suddenly felt the weight of it all crushing in on him. His money situation, his lack of options, his concern for Shea's precarious health, his fears for Gus, his guilt over Lindsay, his worry over ruining Justin's life and his dread over Jeffrey. He felt the fear and helplessness travel through him like a fast acting virus, tingling in his extremities and accelerating his pulse. He inhaled sharply, his equilibrium tilting. He rested his face in his hands, Mr. Headache raging. Mick came over to him, placing a strong hand on his shoulder.

"I know, Brian," she said softly. "I know what you're feeling right now. I always had to be the strong one too. Where do the strong ones go for comfort and to express their fears? It's so hard sometimes."

He stood up, kissed her cheek, not trusting his voice, and left her office.

Doctor's Notes: BK asked to see me on an emergency basis, and I accommodated him. He was extremely agitated when he entered the office and as soon as he took a seat, he began to cry. They were silent tears, his head back and eyes closed, but the emotional release continued for several minutes. BK is not prone to weeping, and this was obviously a much needed escape valve for his pent-up emotions and fears. I encouraged him to cry until there were no tears left, but he was fighting himself, as is to be expected, and cut it off as soon as he was able. The ability to cry in front of me is a positive sign that he is comfortable and trusting enough to bare his most guarded reactions, which is a strong indicator of successful therapy. When he regained control, I gave him a bottle of water and left the box of tissues with him. He seemed understandably embarrassed by his outburst.

EXCERPT FROM TRANSCRIPT:

Doctor: You ready?

BK: (Nods.)

Doctor: What happened? What precipitated this?

BK: (bitterly) Like you have to ask?

Doctor: I know your stress points, Brian. I'm asking if something specific set off this emotional response.

BK: I have control over no aspect of my life. Not a single part of it.

Doctor: A control freak's nightmare. How did you reach that conclusion?

BK: It's a fact.

Doctor: Okay, what brought it home?

BK: I don't know. It just crashed in on me.

Doctor: Let's examine that remark, Brian. Let's look at the different aspects of your life.

BK: Yes, let's do.

Doctor: Start with the obvious. Your lover. No control there?

BK: No.

Doctor: Why not?

BK: He could leave me any minute, and why not? What do I have to offer him? To bind him to me? Who knows how much longer I can afford to keep a roof over his head? Put food in his mouth? And now we're facing ugly publicity and he's just starting his life. Why should he get dragged down with my fucking problems? They aren't his fault. He should have a clean start.

Doctor: Ah, the selfless Brian sacrifices true love for the sake of his young lover.

BK: I don't appreciate your sarcastic tone. It hurts, Lydia. The thought of losing Justin for any reason hurts. A lot.

Doctor: I know it does. So stop thinking about it. The pre-emptive strike is your weapon of choice when it comes to Justin, Brian, and it always has been. Let's examine that motive, shall we? To hear you say it, your reasons sound noble and self-sacrificing. But are they?

BK: What do you mean?

Doctor: What's at play here is your dreaded fear of having Justin think you are no longer a good bet, not worth his investment, and walking out. You fear you could never recover from that blow. You would, but let's not go there. Let's stick with your fear. To avoid being dumped, you think you might be better off being the moving party. Get him out of your life and tell him and yourself, that it's for his own good. What crap.

BK:(glares angrily) I don't pay you to be mocked.

Doctor: I know why you pay me, Brian. And I'm not a friend who is here to comfort and reassure you. I'm a professional who is here to help you realize what makes you tick and to help you negotiate your own emotional roadblocks. Let me ask you something. If Justin were in dire need, physically ill, or unable to work or name your disaster, would you feel the right thing for you to do is to walk out because you're entitled to a fresh start without his baggage weighing you down?

BK: Of course not. He's my partner.

Doctor: Then why don't you provide him with the same respect for your partnership that you would impose on yourself?

BK: (sighs) I walked right into that one, didn't I?

Doctor: I think it's time to meet with both you guys again. Can you arrange that?

BK: Yeah.

Doctor: Good. Next problem, your work. Or lack thereof. Are you sitting on your keister letting everything unfold around you, Brian?

BK: I don't know. I guess not. I've sent out resumes, I've called people, I've tried to get funding to open an agency of my own.

Doctor: So you're doing the things that are within your control. While you can't control others' reactions to what you've done, you're taking control of changing your status.

BK: For what it's worth.

Doctor: Gus. What's new there?

BK: He's still in Pittsburgh.

Doctor: What are you doing about that?

BK: Lydia, I'm trying to stay out of it. I want to be strong for Linds, I know she's miserable, but I view it as essentially a dispute between Mel and Linds. My becoming centrally involved in it will only make Mel dig in all the deeper, because she hates me so much. As much as I wish Gus were here, I know Mel isn't going to mistreat him, that she loves him too, and will take good care of him. He's not in danger. I feel like I need to stand by and let them work through the issues and resolve it together.

Doctor: And that sounds like a very thoughtful, well-reasoned response, Brian. Not a man out of control. The Jeffrey situation, let's look at that.

BK: I'm fucked.

Doctor: In what way?

BK: His old man is richer than God and is using everything in his toolbox to unhinge me.

Doctor: And once you testify, what can he do to you then?

BK: (looks surprised) I haven't really thought about that. Nothing, I guess. The damage is done. Both to Jeffrey and to me.

Doctor: What steps are you taking to protect yourself?

BK: My lawyer is going to sue the old son of a bitch.

Doctor: Your lawsuit will survive your testimony. You'll win, and you'll have the satisfaction of both keeping that twisted man in prison as well as scalping his father.

BK: And I hope they can find a way to get me that nice fat damage award when I'm living under a bridge in the park.

Doctor: Don't project, Brian. You're living well now, and even when things become tighter, you'll survive, because that's what you do. You survived a physically and emotionally abusive father and an emotionally withdrawn mother. You survived being gay in a straight world. You survived losing the one man you've ever loved, and campaigned successfully to get him back. You survived competition with straight guys to succeed in your chosen profession and you'll be on top again. You're a survivor, Brian. You're a fighter. Look what you came through with Jeffrey! Look what you did for Molly. You'll get through this, too. It's what you do.

BK: (smiles slightly) Thanks, Lydia.

Doctor: Don't thank me. You see, Brian, this is what I do. We all have a purpose.

END OF EXCERPT

Doctor's notes: By manifesting his overwhelming emotions, BK has shown the extent of his pressure, but also his progress in analysis. Instead of concealing and running from his pain, using sex, drugs and alcohol to medicate his emotions, he confronted the issues and allowed himself to honestly respond to what he was feeling. I find this to be a turning point for him. I want to meet with his partner and BK in session because I suspect his partner is also enduring emotional trauma, and I want to facilitate a strong communication between them as they face this crisis together.

By the time he returned home, Brian was feeling pretty good. Lydia had a way of calming him that even Justin lacked, because she came at his pain from an entirely different angle and he could be raw with her in ways he couldn't with anyone else. He supposed he should be embarrassed for crying in front of her, but his overwhelming response was one of great relief. When he walked into the loft, Justin greeted him with a big smile and a kiss.

"Why are you so happy?" Brian asked, sitting down heavily on the sofa while Justin retrieved beers for both of them. He tapped Brian's bottle with his and went over to the printer, returning with a sheet of paper. Brian looked at a long row of initials with numbers beside each initial, totaling just over a hundred grand.

"What's this? Our monthly budget?" Brian quipped and Justin laughed.

"It's the amount of money I've been able to raise and I'm not finished yet."

"For what? The Center? How did you do that?"

"Not for the Center. For a business investment."

Brian was totally confused. "In what?"

"In you."

"Are you on crack? What are you talking about?"

"If the bank won't loan you money, I figured I know a lot of people who will. People who know how driven you are, and how you're absolutely guaranteed to succeed and give them a return on their investment. People who owe you big time for past kindnesses. People who love you. I've been amazed by the response."

Brian felt a chill wash through him. "You aren't telling me you called my friends and other people I know and asked them to loan me money, are you?"

"Not loan you money, exactly," Justin said, beginning to read his lover's response and he felt a little nervous at what he was reading. "Invest in your agency."

"Same thing, Justin. You had no right."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you had no right to humiliate me that way! Begging people I know for money? How do you think that makes me look? Not only pathetic for begging, but even more pathetic for not having the balls to beg myself, making my lover do it for me! How could you do that to me? How do you expect me to ever look at these people again?"

"But Brian...they wanted to invest! They all said it was a lock they would make more return off of you than some stock they could buy in a company they don't know anything about."

"Bullshit! You call them all back, you tell them I don't need their money. I'm fine, I will make it on my own, I always have and I always will! I don't need any fucking charity from anyone!"

"It's not charity, Brian, it's respect for your ability and it's affection for you, personally."

"Fuck that. And how unrealistic are you? You think this amount of money is going to seed an agency for me? Christ, I couldn't even rent the space for this!"

"But it's a start..." Justin said miserably and Brian walked over to the door, pausing to say one more thing before he left.

"Call them. Now. Fix it."

Justin flinched when the door slammed. He sighed, wondering how he could have gone so wrong when he was only trying to help. He also wondered where Brian was going to work out his anger and frustration, and what this meant for their relationship.

## Chapter 15

Brian passed the bartender at Hot as the man came up from the storage room. Burdened with industrial-sized bags of pretzels, the barkeep greeted Brian with a warm hello, but Brian just nodded at him and continued downstairs to the legendary backroom. Even before he went in, there were men on the stairs, cruising, touching each other, watching the action come and go. Brian hesitated only briefly before he walked into a familiar scene. Low lights illuminated writhing male bodies. The close atmosphere was thick with the scent of sex and sweat. Clusters and pairs sucked and fucked while others wandered among them, jerking off, watching, or cruising for a sex partner.

He took a hit of E that he picked up along the way and waited for it to neutralize his tension as he leaned his back against a wall and closed his eyes. He fondled his cock gingerly over the denim of his jeans, feeling it lengthen under his caress. It wouldn't be long before...a hand on his shoulder, strong and comforting, another on his wrist, stopping his leisurely masturbation. The scent of soap and cigarettes wafted up and he relaxed, anticipating the stranger's touch, when he heard,

"Are you sure this is what you want to do?"

He opened his eyes. Mick. As big as most of the men, she went unnoticed in the dark among all these erections waiting for action. She was dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, her usual drag. He stared at her in amazement. He wished he had balls as big as hers. The bartender had obviously rattled him out to her.

"Get the fuck away from me," he seethed, and she squeezed his shoulder gently.

"I will, Brian, if that's what you really want. Is it? You ready to slide down this slope? After all the work that you've put into your relationship with Justin?"



"It's none of your fucking business! I have a shrink, I don't need an amateur!"

A man standing nearby came hard and audibly in another man's mouth and Mick didn't seem the least bit bothered by it. She was also less than curious, not even turning to look. This was old hat to her. She was in the sub-business of providing playrooms for gay men. She couldn't recall the last time something shocked her.

"I know that. But I care about you and I care about Justin and I had to give it a shot. Sometimes we do things on impulse that we regret later. It's your life, your dick. Do what you gotta do."

She turned, and Brian called out to her. "Mick, wait."

His preliminary erection had faded, and so had some of his rage. She stopped and he walked up to her. "Buy you a drink?"

She smiled and looped an arm around his waist as they left this dark cavern of sensual delights. Upstairs at a back table, she had a boilermaker while he stuck with whisky. He explained what happened with Justin and she nodded. "I understand why you're mad, but you know he was only trying to be helpful, right?"

"By making me look like a beggar to all my friends?"

"He didn't see it that way, and I'm sure they didn't either. You've helped every one of them, according to Lindsay, and they viewed this as a chance to pay you back a little for your past kindnesses."

"I don't want their money, Mick. I don't want payback. How could he not know that?"

"He loves you and he sees you struggling and he wants to make things better. Maybe he took a misstep, maybe he went too far, but it wasn't meant to hurt you, Brian. It was meant to help. You have enough enemies right now, don't mentally convert people who love you into opponents."

"All I really had left was my pride, and now I've been robbed of that, too."

"No you haven't. You have way too much pride for this incident to leave you without any. You're reeling right now, man. You have to stop, get a grip and reassess. Know why I'm in the office at this hour?"

He shook his head.

"Because I'm working on your case. I'm drafting the complaint. And you know what? It's a powerful pleading. I intend to send a copy to the General Counsel's of Boston International as well as your agency, and to Jeffrey Walker, Senior, along with a letter telling them that this complaint will be filed in ten days if we can't reach a final settlement. When they get it, some fancy shorts are going to be brown. It's such a great set of facts, Brian. I haven't had a case this clean in years. My cut of the money I think we'll get from them will keep the Center funded for a year, maybe more. You'll be on easy street, able to set up your business, or even retire early if you wanted. I'm absolutely convinced of that fact, Brian. You have to have faith. Come on up to the office and I'll give you a copy to take home and read. I'm still tweaking it, but it's good enough to give you the general idea."

He looked at her and smiled. "I'm glad to have you on my side, Mick."

"You have a lot of people on your side, Brian. Never forget that."

He nodded, finishing his drink before going upstairs with her to pick up the pleading.

Justin looked up as Brian entered the loft. He tried to get a reading of what had happened by looking at his lover's face, but Brian was an expert at concealing his emotions. Brian dropped a large envelope on the counter and went over to the refrigerator to withdraw a bottle of water, draining it in one long gulp. He was still feeling the dehydrating impact of the E. He then went into their bedroom, and began undressing. Justin followed.

"I called everyone and canceled," Justin said tentatively. "I told them it was all my idea and that you didn't need the help."

Brian didn't respond. Justin continued.

"They all wished you would take it. They each had a favor from you that they hoped to repay. You have a lot of people who love you, Brian."

"And now they can all feel sorry for me, too. Thanks so much."

"I don't know what to say."

"Say you'll never do anything that stupid ever again!" He shot at Justin as he stepped out of his jeans.

"I was just trying to help."

"Don't help me, okay? Just stay the fuck out of my life!"

Justin winced and left the room, returning to the living room where he sat down heavily on the couch, drawing his knees up and resting his chin on top of them. He stared at nothing, his eyes filled with unshed tears. He became aware of Brian standing there in his brief 2-Exist underwear, looking sexy as hell and just as angry. But when he looked at Justin, and took in his misery, something within him softened. Brian sighed and sat down next to Justin, resting a hand on the back of his lover's neck.

"I didn't mean that last thing, Justin. You know I don't want you out of my life."

Justin blinked, a tear streaking his cheek. Brian sighed and brushed it off. "Don't do that. Come here," he took him into his arms and Justin held tightly to him. "I know you didn't mean to hurt me, Justin, but you did."

"I'm sorry. I was just trying to help."

"Okay, okay, just so I have your promise that you'll never do anything like that again."

Justin nodded against his lover's bare chest, dampening his skin with his tears. "I just feel so helpless, Brian. I love you and I see you suffering and I can't do anything to help."

"That's not true. Do you know how important it is to me that you're still here, despite all the shit you've gone through and will be going through? Despite the threat that we'll probably lose all this?"

Justin looked up at him, his blue eyes swimming with emotion. "Where else would I be?"

"Gone. Greener fields. I'm no picnic to live with when everything is good, but I know what I'm like now. It takes a hell of a strong person to stick around. Or a hell of a strong love. Or both."

"I'm scared," Justin said softly.

"I'm scared too, Justin."

"No, I mean I'm scared for us. I'm scared your fears about your business and the money situation will make you retreat from me. I can endure anything, Brian, anything but that."

Brian sighed. Justin knew him way too well. Only Justin could read Brian's motives before Brian fully developed them. "I don't want to take you down with me."

"And how far down do you think I'll go if I lose you?"

"You're young. You'll get over it."

Justin thumped Brian's forehead with his thumb and forefinger. "That is so fucking insulting. I'm not that seventeen-year old virginal twink you first met. And you're not that impervious, promiscuous backroom stud I first met. So don't be a martyr. They burned so many martyrs, they ran out of stakes."

Brian stared at his lover in silent wonder. "How can they run out of stakes? Stakes are just wooden poles. Are all the trees gone?"

Justin repressed a smile. "Don't be logical when I'm being emotional."

"Someone has to be."

"Well, it isn't usually you."

"I'm not the drama empress in this house."

"The fuck you're not, your majesty!"

They stared at each other and then both began to laugh. "Did you fuck around on me?" Justin asked, and Brian shrugged.

"I planned to, but I was interrupted by an avenging dyke."

"You went to a dyke bar to get laid?"

"Yeah, Justin. Sleeping with Linds has flipped me into a dyke."

Justin giggled. "Lesbians are much too butch to interest you."

"Hey, with what they're used to licking, they must give great rim. They're masters with holes."

Justin grimaced. "Want to bet?"

Brian grinned at him. "No, because finding out is too disgusting to imagine."

"I'm glad you didn't go through with it. I would've gotten over it, I guess, but it would've hurt."

"I had the intent, I just didn't follow through."

"Now you're trying to make me mad," Justin teased.

"Am I?" Brian pushed him back on the sofa and kissed him, thrusting his tongue between his lips. He felt Justin's cock grow rigid against his pelvis and he rubbed against him in a fucking motion. The fight was officially over.

Brian's days were becoming more crowded. He spent some time every day or two with Shea, trying to bolster his flagging spirits. He was worried by Shea's rapid physical debilitation. Brian wondered if Shea had given up and his body was just following along. Or was it his body that was losing the fight and Shea knew it? Perhaps both. Whatever the cause, Shea wasn't responding well to treatment. Brian felt his frustration grow over his inability to help.

Added to his legal problems, financial woes and Gus's absence, his fledgling agency was suddenly taking flight. He had an ad campaign for the software company's latest game under design, working with his resident graphic artist, Justin, on creative concepts. He begged assistance from commercial printers he knew well to get a finished product. Now his friend, Edmond, the master chef, wanted a new layout for the New York media touting his newly created Spring menu. Brian needed an assistant. He needed an art department. He needed a fucking office! He didn't even have a construct by which he could bill his clients and process payments. He had to open a commercial bank account and establish tax identification numbers. The details were making him nuts.

When Cynthia showed up unexpectedly at the loft in the middle of the afternoon, Brian was up to his ass in alligators. He waved her into a chaotic scene with storyboards competing with pitch notes and discarded graphics, to take up all the available space.

"What the fuck?" She asked as he shook his head.

"I can't go to lunch, Cyn. I can't even take the time to talk. I must have been crazy when I thought I could run a business out of my fucking home. Justin's been a lifesaver, but he has a paying job. I can't usurp all of his time."

"You obviously need an assistant," she said, and he glared at her.

"Yeah. Know someone willing to work for...uh...let's see. Nothing?"

"Yeah, me. Well, maybe not nothing, but..."

"I can't afford you, Cyn."

"You can now."

"What do you mean?"

"They fired me this morning."

Brian paused in his critical review of one of Justin's drawings. He stared at her. "Why?"

"Apparently you scared them shitless with some pleading you sent them. They all went into hyper-craze. I was accused of feeding information to you."

"What a bunch of bullshit!"

She sat down on the chaise with a sigh, gathering some papers to make room for her butt. She stacked them on her lap. "Brian, it's true."

"They don't know that! Did you admit it?"

"I'm not that stupid."

"I'm so sorry, Cyn. I never meant..."

She held up a hand to stop him. "Don't worry about it. I hated working for that bastard, Evan, anyway. I wasn't going to last long under his abuse. Life's too short. I brought you this," she handed him a sheet of paper containing a list of expenses and a total sum.

"What's this?"

"It's the bare minimum I need to earn in order to eat and keep a roof over my head. If you can pay me that much to start, I'm willing to risk the balance against a draw on the firm as your business grows."

"I can't let you do that, Cyn. You could make more than twice this at any agency in town, plus have full benefits and a future. You're very good at what you do. You have unlimited potential." Brian was genuinely touched by her offer, even if he couldn't accept her charity.

"I know what I can do at another firm, Brian. But there's a catch to this."

He smiled. "I taught you well. What's the catch?"

"As you know, I have a BBA from Penn State, your alma mater. We've talked about that."

"Yes, I know. Go on."

"I worked as an executive assistant just to get my foot in the door and I've been your creative assistant since you promoted me two years ago."

"I know."

"I think I've done a good job."

"You have."

"I've learned a lot watching you work. I have a pleasing manner with people and I'm a decent salesperson."

"You get along with me. That says a lot."

"My loyalty to you is unassailable."

"True."



"As you said, I could get a job in another firm, but just as homophobia is a problem for you, gender is a problem for me. I'm a young, fairly attractive blonde. Read this: Bimbo."

"Hardly a bimbo, Cyn," he said with a laugh.

"I know. But you know how people in this game think. It would take years for me to get the recognition I deserve. If, in fact, I ever got it."

"Sadly, you may be right."

"I want to take a chance with you, Brian. I want your commitment that when the firm is safely grounded, you'll make me a junior partner. I want my own accounts and I understand I'll be expected to be a rainmaker as well as a good worker."

Brian sat down on the floor, bending one knee, and resting his forearm over it. "A partnership in a small firm is like a marriage, Cyn. You're in each other's faces and pockets all day long. If you don't generate business, you don't draw. It can be very rewarding, but also very risky."

"Okay, marry me, then, and we can adopt Justin. I'll keep a boyfriend on the side for doing the husbandly duties," she teased and he laughed.

"Sorry, already as good as married now. Cyn, I don't even have office space."

"I know, and you need it if you want to ensure client confidence. But I have an idea. I've done a little homework."

He grinned at her. She was good. "Hit me with it."

"This is a great location, right? Great building, lots of space, no zoning issues."

"So?"

"You get a contractor and you wall off your bedroom, bathroom and kitchen. Then you take the rest of the space and you turn it into the offices. Plenty of room here for a reception area, a conference room and a small office. Your second bedroom would be your office, and the extra bath would be in the office space. You and Justin would live in the walled off portion. You may have to cut a new door to the hallway outside the loft."

"We're supposed to live in that tiny space?"

"You spend most of your time in bed with him, anyway," she teased. "Outside of office hours, you guys could utilize the office space, too. Brian, you were going to be forced to sell the loft eventually if you didn't get more income. This way you take out a second mortgage to cover the construction and since the place will be used for business, it's a total write off. You'd have to charge yourself some small rent for the walled-off portion, but the rest is a legit business expense."

"But..."

"When you're successful, you and Justin can move into another loft in the building and we can tear down all of the walls and expand."

He stared at her, digesting her proposal. He finally broke into a wide smile. "You got yourself a deal, pard'ner. When can you start?"

"I already have," she said, taking off her blazer and going over to him to give him a big hug. He winced and wriggled out of her arms.

"It's not that kind of partnership," he teased, and she laughed and swatted him with a rolled up sheet of paper as she glanced around the room, trying to figure out where to start.

Justin brought Lindsay a cup of hot tea and joined her in her office in the gallery, sipping from his own mug. When he came in, she had been staring at a framed photo of Gus that she kept on her desk and was dabbing at her eyes. She forced a slight smile. "I miss him so much, Justin."

"I know."

"I don't think I can survive this separation. I realize it's hard for a man to relate to this, but Gus was a part of my body, physically, for nine months. After he was born, I cared for him night and day, almost exclusively, for over two years. Even when I went back to work, I arranged my schedule around his. I feel as if someone has torn off one of my limbs and I'm bleeding and in pain and don't know what to do to stop it."

Whatever lingering resentment Justin felt over Lindsay's unfortunate sexual interlude with Brian, paled in his sympathy for her obvious pain. "I wish there was something I could do to help, Linds."

"I know, baby, I know. You're sweet. Even if I could've forgiven Melanie for her infidelity, she destroyed any hope of a reunion by taking my baby away from me. Because whatever the law may provide, Gus is my son. He shares my DNA with Brian's. And I'm the one who's cared for him all this time."

"I know."

"I wonder if he's missing me and he doesn't understand why I'm not there. What if he feels abandoned by me? And by Brian?"

"He wouldn't think that, Linds."

"He's a baby, they don't understand legalities. All he knows is that suddenly his mommy is gone along with his daddy. I talked to his school. He's had some potty mishaps and some tantrums. That's not Gus. He's acting out."

"Did you talk to Mel about it?"

"We communicate through attorneys now. Justin, I love Mick. She's a wonderful person. She's gentle, loving, smart and kind. She makes me very happy. I also love my job and living in this city. But if I have to move back to Pittsburgh, and give everything up, to be with my son, I don't see the choice. I can't live without my baby." She began to cry and Justin walked over to her, patting her gently on the shoulder, searching for some comforting words to share with her while he replayed their options in his mind.

Debbie heard Gus wailing even before Melanie opened the door to find an unexpected visitor on her porch that evening. As soon as the barrier between them swung open, the baby's cries were ear-splitting. Melanie, looking frazzled, held the twisting toddler tightly as Debbie forced a smile.

"Whazamatter with my widdle Gus?" She cooed at him, holding out her arms. Gus willingly went into them, snuggling against Debbie's ample bosom. Melanie was relieved to give him over to Debbie's warm, maternal presence. As they went into the living room, Gus's cries subsided to a whimper, and soon he was sleeping on Debbie's lap. "I have a strangely soothing effect on the Kinney men," Debbie quipped as Melanie took up Gus's flag and began to sob. Debbie patted her shoulder as she walked past her and carried Gus upstairs, putting him down in his bed and making sure he was sleeping soundly before rejoining Melanie. She sat beside her on the couch, gently massaging a circle between her shoulders.

"I'm a terrible mother," Melanie gasped. "Gus hates me!"

"Honey, there was a time I felt exactly the same way about Michael. He was three and nothing I did made him happy. He was surly and disobedient and a complete terror. As it turned out, he was mad because I got rid of his crib and was teaching him to sleep in a regular bed. Apparently the crib made him feel enclosed and safe, and the open bed terrified him. Once he made the adjustment, he was fine. Gus has been through a lot more than a bed change. First, Linds takes him out of his school and his home and away from you. Now, you take him away from her. How do you expect him to act?"

"She had no right to take him away!" Melanie said, her sobs slacking into mere tears. "He's my son, too!"

"Of course he is, honey, but you've both acted badly. Remember that old bible story where King Solomon was asked which of two women should have a baby they both claimed to be the mother of? He said to cut it in half and give half to each mother. One woman was silent, the other said let the baby go to her rival. King Solomon gave the baby to the woman who was willing to give him up because she was the real mother, who put the good of the child over her own needs."

Melanie met her eyes. "What are you saying?"

"Mel, you and I share a special bond. We both lost a baby when you had your miscarriage. I know it was much harder on you, but that baby you lost was my son's child. That made the little critter very special to me, too. I never hoped to have a grandchild, but you gave me the chance to experience that wonderful anticipation. Through no fault of your own, you lost your baby. I felt your pain, Mel. I still do. But you can't let it destroy you. You're smart, beautiful, young and if God's willing, you may have that child yet. If not, you still have Gus. Don't fuck up your relationship with the one child you can be sure of in this uncertain world."

"How am I fucking it up?"

"Don't let him grow up hating you because you kept him from his birth mother and his father, no matter what your legal rights may be. Legal rights mean nothing to kids. Kids don't understand all that, but they do understand being separated from people they love."

"What about me? It's alright for him to be separated from me? He doesn't love me?"

"Of course he does, honey. No, it's not alright. You two girls need to work out these issues with Gus as the focus, not the football. Linds has to give, but so do you. You both have to compromise and make this transparent to him. She gave birth to him, Mel. You know what it's like to lose a baby who has been growing inside your body. Imagine what it's like to lose a baby you delivered and cared for since birth? The pain of that loss is indescribable."

Melanie sighed and leaned back, twisting a tissue in her hand. "Is this really about Gus and Lindsay and me, Deb, or is it about Brian? I know how you really feel about him, despite your bluster on that topic."

"Do you? I wish you'd tell me, because god damn it, I don't know how I feel about Brian Kinney! Never have. Part of me hates the smug, arrogant son of a bitch who uses his brains and his beauty like weapons. I resent the ruination he's brought to Michael's life, the bar he's fixed that no other man can top. That part of Brian, I hate." She sighed and smiled sadly. "But then I remember the skinny kid with the bloody nose who used to curl up to sleep on the swing on my front porch in the dead of winter because he didn't want to wake us, but he couldn't stay in the house with that drunken excuse for a father who would beat him senseless on a routine basis. He grew up in a home without warmth and without love, and he learned very early how to protect himself by building walls around his heart."

"And then I think of Brian as the man who was willing to give up his one centered relationship, his friendship with Michael, in order to give Michael a shot at happiness with David. Brian's the man who agreed to impregnate his old friend, Lindsay, and who gave up his parental rights to solidify her relationship with her partner. He lost his cold heart to a blond kid and whatever dumb things have happened between them, he's never wavered in his love for Justin. He's saved Ted's ass, he was responsible for Michael opening his own business, he made your wedding possible, he brought down a fascist, at great personal cost, and he supports and loves his child. And now he's going through the biggest crisis of his life, and he's facing it with courage and class. So you tell me how I feel about Brian Kinney, honey. I haven't got a fucking clue."

Brian awoke horny on Saturday morning, and rolled over, reaching for Justin. He was alone. Frowning, he noticed the time, almost eleven, and gave his rigid cock a comforting squeeze. He heard Justin's voice coming from the main room. Was he with someone or talking on the phone? Just in case, Brian pulled on a robe, and started to go out there, when he heard Justin say,

"No Deb, at least you tried. Who knows? Maybe it'll start her thinking. I really appreciate your help. Remember, don't mention it around Mikey, I don't want Brian to know. He's already pissed at me over the whole loan situation. Okay, thanks again. Bye."

He hung up the phone and stretched, pausing in mid-yawn when he saw Brian's glowering presence in the threshold of their bedroom. Justin smiled sheepishly.

"Uh, morning."

Brian continued to glare, his arms crossed at his chest. "Spill."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't fuck with me, Justin. What have you done now? And on the heels of your other fiasco, let me just say I'm beginning to take this personally."

Justin sighed. "This wasn't about you, really. This was for Lindsay."

"What was for Lindsay? What are you? The puppetmaster, pulling everyone's strings? For chrissakes, Justin! Can't you mind your own fucking business?"

Justin glared at him. "Don't get all mad at me before you even know what I did!"

"Okay, then, tell me what you did."

"Deb and I were chatting and we both decided it might help Lindsay's cause if she went over and talked to Melanie about Gus. Melanie is pretty close to Deb, you know. So she did."

"And knowing Deb's gift for subtlety, it was an unqualified disaster."

"I'm not so sure. I think maybe she made Melanie start looking at her motives and thinking about what is best for Gus. Who knows? It may be helpful, in the long run."

"How old are you, now? Nineteen?"

Justin glared at him. Brian knew how old he was. His pretending not to know was annoying. "I'll be twenty-one next month."

"Whatever. The fact is you may be a brilliant little fucker, but you haven't been around long enough to know what's best for everyone. And Debbie, God love her, has the common sense of a goose. So let me make a little suggestion. Butt the fuck out of it. All of it. Get a hobby. Pick up a paintbrush. Do something. Stop manipulating areas of my life where you don't belong."

"You have areas of your life that I can't be part of?"

"Yes, Justin, yes, I do. Just as you have areas of your life that are private to you. We have to respect that. I need that space, you understand?"

"Do you love me?"

Brian rolled his eyes and went into the kitchen, putting together a pot of coffee. "This is not about that."

"It feels like it is."

"Get over it, it's not. Let me ask you something, blondie."

Justin frowned at him, hating it when Brian called him that name. "What, slim?"

Brian restrained a smirk. "When are you going to start painting again or have you just decided that being a gofer for Leo is your ultimate goal in life?"

Justin looked at his lover for a long time, only now realizing how long it had been since he created anything other than an ad campaign for Brian. "Uh..."

Brian nodded. "Here's what I'm going to do. When we renovate the loft for the office space, I'm taking the second bedroom and cutting it in half. I'll have a tiny office for myself, and you'll have a tiny studio, where you can paint, along with your computer for your work in that medium. The art work for the business will be conducted in the cubicles we erect in the main part of the loft, this is for your own private creations."

"That room isn't big enough for that, Brian. You'll have room for a desk and chairs and nothing else if you cut it in half."

"So? I'll put in a glass wall to open it up. I don't need a palace. You should see where Mick works. It's nothing fancy, and yet she does great things there. You can't let our relationship or my problems stop you from painting, Justin. You have a true talent and you need to develop it. Are we together on this?"

Justin smiled wryly. "This has nothing to do with your desire for me to butt out of your business, right?"

Brian shrugged. "Tangentially."

Justin walked over to him and slid his hand inside Brian's robe, fondling his cock that had gone soft, but quickly sprang back to life. "But not all of your business, right? Some of your private life is still open to me, isn't it?"

Brian smiled, leaning back against the counter, his eyes half-closing as he responded to Justin's delicate fondling. "Just the most private parts."

Justin smiled and unsashed Brian's robe, dropping to his knees on the slate floor as he wrapped a hand around Brian's cock and masturbated him gently while flicking his tongue over the head and down the shaft. Once he was fully erect, he slid the whole organ into his mouth and down his throat, smoothing it against his lips and wetting it with his saliva. Brian moaned and buried his hand in Justin's hair, giving in to the extreme sensation as he felt his need build into a firestorm of passion. At moments like this, Brian thought to himself, even his shitty life was good.



Justin answered the knock at the door while Brian and Shea watched a German soccer game on television. Although Shea was pale and thin, he had enjoyed a pretty good week, with fewer side effects and a slight improvement in his blood levels. They all knew better than to suppose it meant a turn-around, having been through the ups and downs of this disease with him in grim detail over the last month or so. By tomorrow, he could be hospitalized again, knocked flat by a sudden infection.

On the other side of the threshold, Justin found a handsome, clean-cut young man wearing a business suit and carrying a heavy briefcase. "A-are you Mr. Kinney?" he asked uneasily and Justin laughed.

"No, I'm Mrs. Kinney," he teased. "I'm Justin Taylor, Brian's partner. Are you the D.A.?"

"Assistant D.A. Jim Jacobi."

They shook hands. "Come in, Jim. Bri, the heat is here."

Brian got up, checking out the stranger with a long glance. "Why don't you guys finish watching the game in the bedroom?"

Shea got up, understanding when he was being politely asked to leave.

Justin hesitated. "I want to stay."

Brian glared at him. "Go, please."

Justin frowned, resembling a young boy being told he couldn't do what he wanted by a stern parent. He grabbed a bag of chips and a can of dip and joined Shea in the bedroom, closing the door behind him.

Brian invited Jacobi to sit down and he motioned to the table, explaining they'd have papers to review.

"You're pretty young, aren't you?" Brian observed and the man shrugged.

"Next to you, the oldest one here. Your place always full of young men?"

"I should be so lucky," Brian said coolly, sensing that the judgment of a homophobe was behind that question. "Justin's my lover. He's older than he looks. Shea, the tall kid is just a friend."

Jacobi picked up a framed photograph of Brian holding a smiling Gus. He offered him a silent inquisition and Brian took it from him and replaced it on the ledge. "My son, Gus."

"Interesting family dynamic. You were married?"

"In-vitro fertilization. I was the donor. His mama's an old friend of mine."

"Brian, I'm going to make you hate me before this is over."

"You are? I thought you were on my side."

"I am. But you're what we call in the trade, a 'wild card'. You're key to the case, you can really make it a winning hand, but you're unpredictable and come with a lot of baggage, so it's a mixed review. I want to put this dude behind bars. You need to be ready when you're up there testifying. He's hired top-notch defense lawyers. They'll be gunning for your ass."

"Swell. How pleasant. So why will I hate you?"

"Because I'm going to put you through the wringer. If you can hold up to me, the true cross-examination will be a cakewalk."

"Will I be the first one up?"

"I'll determine the order of witnesses after I get to know you a little better. That's why I asked to meet with you in your home. I want to understand your environment. Have you ever testified before?"

"I gave a statement to the prosecution when my partner got bashed a few years ago. As far as I know, they never used it in the trial."

"You witnessed the bashing?"

"Yes," Brian said with a wince.

"He saved my life," Justin interrupted, accompanied by a nervous looking Shea. "He disarmed the basher and if he hadn't, if the jerk had been free to keep hitting me, I'd be dead."

"It wasn't that big a deal," Brian insisted. "I mean my part in it. Your injury was a very big deal."

"You know you saved my life, Brian. We're bored with the game. We're going to a movie. "

"Okay. Good idea. You need some money?"

"No," he walked over and kissed Brian squarely on the lips, ignoring Jacobi's stern expression. Brian smiled and patted Justin's rump.

"Have fun, guys. Bye, Shea."

"See ya, Brian."

Brian watched them leave and then cast a penetrating gaze at the prosecutor, raising one eyebrow, daring him to say anything. The man smiled slightly, understanding what had just transpired. "My brother's gay, Brian. He's been with the same guy for almost ten years. They've adopted two kids. His marriage has lasted much longer than mine did. And he's a better father than I could ever be. So don't pin a label on me. I'm straight, but I'm gay friendly."

"I used to think that was an oxymoron and I still have my doubts. But my business partner is a straight female, and my shrink is a straight female, and they are two of my favorite people, so I guess I'm softening on that stance."

"Let's talk about you, Brian. Always been gay? Out?"

"Yes, always gay, but I went through the usual youthful angst and experimented some with girls. Not much. I wasn't out to my family or coworkers at first. I'm all the way out now."

"And Justin, how old is he?"

"Let's get to where you really want to go. He was a seventeen-year-old virgin when I picked him up and fucked him. Isn't that where you're headed?"

"Is it true?"

"I'm not sure who picked up whom, but the rest is true."

"How did you meet?"

"Can you tell me how this is relevant?"

"They are going to come gunning for your character, Brian. Every aspect of it will be examined in excruciating detail. Your relationship to Justin is a cornerstone of their defense. They want to show you as a man who can't be trusted, who was in a relationship with this innocent young boy while pursuing Jeffrey Walker."

"It's not like that."

"Tell me how it is."

"Justin and I had a...an affair... in Pittsburgh. He left me for another man. I moved to New York City. Much later, he came here and we decided to give it another shot. But I was still reeling from his earlier rejection and couldn't quite commit. I was seeing a shrink about my intimacy issues. I still am. I met Jeffrey during this time. We became friends."

"How did you meet him?"

"I took my son to the Natural History Museum. He helped me get Gus in his stroller and then into the building. He has a daughter, Gus's age, and she was with him. We ended up walking through the museum together and then we had lunch in the cafeteria. We had a lot in common. We just seemed to click."

"Attracted to him?"

"He's hot. That didn't escape my notice. But I wasn't after that shit and I thought he wasn't either."

"You told him about Justin?"

"From the beginning."

"When did you see him next?"

"Not sure, but I think it was when he called me and asked me to meet him for lunch. He was late, and I was pissed. Then he comes in wearing scrubs and he acted very remote. He went to the bathroom and was there for so long I finally checked on him. He was sitting on the floor, crying. He had lost a young patient and he was really upset by it."

"How did that hit you?"

"I was surprised, frankly. You wouldn't think a doctor who specializes in cancer in kids would be so crazed by a death. You'd think he sees it all the time."

"Were you touched?"

"Yes, but also kind of confused. Lydia, my shrink, later told me that people suffering from narcissism often believe they can beat the fates and that it wasn't empathy for the child that caused him to act that way. Rather it was a belief that fate or even the patient himself had let the doctor down by causing him to fail."

"When did your relationship with Walker turn sexual?"

"He chased me, called me, sent me emails, and I held him off. But Justin and I were going through a rough patch and Jeffrey went to his family's cabin in the woods of Massachusetts and I followed him there."

"So you pursued him all the way to Massachusetts?"

"I guess you could say that."

"What would you say?"

"He sent me an e-mail and said he loved me. I felt like we needed to talk, he needed to understand my complex feelings for Justin, at least to the extent that there wasn't room in my life for that kind of thing."

"So you went all the way to Massachusetts to tell him not to love you?"

"To explain it was going nowhere."

"And then?"

"One thing led to another and we fucked for the first time."

"So your altruistic reason for going there turned into a seduction."

"Shit happens. It wasn't my plan."

"So what did you do after you slept with him?"

"I realized it was the wrong thing to do. I needed to be with Justin. I felt guilty, which is unlike me, and I felt...it was just wrong."

"Did you tell him so?"

"Yes, and I left."

"And then?"

"Justin's young sister Molly was diagnosed with leukemia. He had to go home to Pittsburgh to be with her and with his mom. It was very serious."

"Were you close to this kid?"

"Not then, but we became very close."

"While he was away, did you sleep with Walker?"

"Never. I couldn't. It would have been wrong on so many levels. But as Molly declined, I begged Jeffrey to get involved. By now, I did care very much what happened to her, and she felt very close to me. Justin and I had put our relationship back on track, as much as we could, under these horrible circumstances. Jeffrey came to Pittsburgh with the idea that I would be his lover if he treated Molly."

"Were you?"

"Not by choice."

"He raped you?"

"He drugged me and had sex with me. In my book, that's rape."

"Why didn't you report it?"

"Look, she was improving under his care. I realized I had a Hobson's choice. Either fuck Jeffrey and give Molly the help she needed to survive, or not fuck him and possibly cost her her life. So the answer was clear."

"You became his lover."

Brian shrugged, pinching the bridge of his nose, as if he found this whole conversation physically painful. "I tried. Oddly enough, I was no longer drawn to him at all, that way. I was exhausted, trying to work my job remotely, spend time with Molly and handle this crap with Jeffrey. The drugs he gave me were taking a real toll."

"What were they again?"

"I don't know, he injected me, they showed up in that medical report you have. One shot made me rage for sex, and the other left me flat, almost comatose. I don't see why he would want to have sex with someone he has to drug, but then I don't understand much about Jeffrey Walker. Molly had a bone marrow transplant, using marrow taken from Justin. That was the key time for her. Make or break. They took her all the way down, which killed off her immunities along with all the cancer cells, and then the marrow was supposed to regenerate the good stuff. But it was touch and go, and I wasn't dealing. I was on the edge of a complete breakdown."

"What was Jeffrey doing?"

"Separating me from Justin, making sure I believed that if he quit treating Molly, she was sure to die. He told me in no uncertain terms that I was to go back to New York with him, to be his boyfriend. He was getting this award for his humanitarian efforts and he wanted me to be there with him, to be his decoration in front of the world."

"Did you believe no other doctor could treat that child?"

"I wasn't alone in that belief. Her own mother thought so too. You ever had a child who was gravely ill?"

"No."



"Well, I hope you never do, but if you did, you'd find out any bargain is okay if it's to save their life. The fact is, Molly did improve under Jeffrey's care. Her mother believed she would've died if not for him, and I think she may be right. Who knows?"

"And he bargained with your sexual favors, is that it? You're a handsome man, Brian, but..."

"Look Jim, I'm not trying to tell you I'm God's gift to faggots. I do okay. But that's not what this is about. This is about control. He wanted to control me. For whatever reason, he wanted me to be his armhanger and he put his plan in motion to ensure I had no resistance. Not physical, not emotional."

"Why you?"

"I guess I fit some ideal of his partner, or maybe I was just a challenge. I can't tell you what motivated Jeffrey Walker. He's a spoiled rich kid who's used to getting whatever he wants. Maybe I was his flavor of the month. I don't know."

"Do you believe he was in love with you?"

"I'm not a big believer in love. But even in my limited experience, what Jeffrey felt for me wasn't love. It was a fucking obsession."

"So, this rich, handsome, successful man is so smitten with you that he's willing to risk everything to drug you and force you into a relationship with him?"

Brian leaned back with a shrug. "It may sound ridiculous to you, but it is what it is."

"Who was on top?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean who was the active sex partner?"

Brian smiled slightly. "Why?"

"It's not prurient, Brian. This is a sexual abuse case, among other things. If you were fucking him it's not quite as easy to prove you were being forced into something you didn't want to do. Not impossible, coercion still exists, but it's not as understandable to a straight jury."

Brian shook his head. He found it excruciating to discuss this personal information with a stranger, especially a straight stranger. "I don't see why you have to focus on who put what where and when."

"A criminal trial is a trial by ambush. In a civil trial, the parties go through a lengthy discovery period where they get the documents and statements and understand all the points of the other party's case. Not so in a criminal trial. Other than access to the exculpatory evidence in my files, if any, there's no discovery. Their goal is to make the state look like bumbling, vengeful buttinsky and the state's witnesses look like lying, self-interested scumbags. They will make you out to be Satan. Unlikely the jury will be fond of either one of you guys by the time it's over. The gay issue is an automatic negative to most people, so it will all come down to which one of you is worse. Who is most likely to lie."

"You can call me a promiscuous, cheating, cold-blooded faggot, but one thing you can't call me is a fucking liar. I use honesty like a blunt instrument. Even my worst enemies will tell you that."

"Really? Were you honest with your parents about your sexual orientation?"

"They presumed I was straight, and I let them. Until I outed myself."

"You let them presume a lie. You lied to your partner about why you went to Massachusetts, didn't you?"

"I fessed up."

"You lied to those girls you experimented with when you were younger."

Brian sighed. "Ok, I get it. Everyone lies sometimes. I am not a liar by trade. And I'm not lying about Jeffrey Walker. He's a fucking psychopath and he almost killed me."

Jim Jacobi smiled and withdrew papers from his briefcase, prepared to take Brian all the way through the evidence now that he was certain that the victim understood the goal.

Brian was rattled by the time the D.A. left his loft. The mock cross had been grueling and he doubted whether he could withstand the real thing. The truth should be easy enough to tell, but Jim Jacobi made him realize there was nothing as simple as one truth, there were gradations to everything. Justin had ridden to the Center with Shea to make sure he made it there safely and he wasn't back yet. Restless, Brian lit a cigarette and walked out onto the street, feeling a need to get away from his home.

He walked between two narrow brownstones, a shortcut to his favorite newsstand. The alley was always dark, dank and slightly forbidding. He hadn't gone far when he felt the pressure of a hard barrel against the back of his neck and a gruff voice said, "Stop right there, sport."

Brian was more annoyed than scared, not in the mood for a mugging. "I didn't bring my wallet. I have twenty bucks in my front pocket. It's yours."

"I don't want your fucking money," the voice demanded.

"Well, what do you want? I'm not wearing any jewelry."

"I don't want your jewelry either. I just want your fine ass." Brian started to glimpse over his shoulder, but the gun barrel dug deeper. "Don't turn around."

"And what the hell do you plan to do with my fine ass?" Brian asked as the man moved a hand across the back of his jeans, taking in his firm buttocks in one long stroke.

"I plan to stick my cock up it and fuck you ragged."

"Unless you plan on using a condom, you may as well pull that trigger, Sly."

"I don't have a condom. I guess you'll just have to take your chances."

Brian smiled. "Okay, tough guy, if you're willing to take the chance, I guess I have no choice. How do you want it?"

"Standing up."

"You gonna get yourself a box to stand on or something, half-pint?"

Justin giggled. "When did you know it was me?"

"When I smelled the soap. We use the same soap, brainiac, and not too many alley rapists import their soap from Paris." Brian turned and took the "gun" from Justin. It was a smooth rounded case enclosing a fine Cuban cigar. Brian looked delighted. "Where did you get this?"

"A British client of Leo's gave it to me yesterday. I forgot to take it out of my pocket and give it to you. He said they're legal in London."

"They're not legal to bring into the U. S. from London, however. Christ, it smells wonderful, I can even smell the tobacco over the stale piss and garbage in this alley. I'm saving it until later. Thanks, kid," he leaned down to kiss him and Justin spread his hand on the back of Brian's head.

"You want to do it right here? Against that damp brick wall with all those windows overlooking us?"

Brian considered it, then winced. "It stinks too bad. Let's go home."

"You're no fun," Justin moped and Brian swatted his rump.

"We may be forced to do it outside soon enough, when we have no home."

Justin giggled. "Don't be so dramatic."

As they reached the end of the alley, two men blocked their way. When one removed a chunky black Glock from under his jacket and pressed it to Brian's temple, for a split second Brian thought this was part of Justin's joke. But when the other slammed Justin up against the wall, restraining him with a hand on his throat, Brian knew this was for real.

"What the fuck?" Brian said, his heart hammering with apprehension the tone of his voice didn't reveal.

"Shut up," the man with the gun said. "You like your boyfriend's pretty face?"

"What?"

The man holding onto Justin removed a glass vial from a pocket and uncorked it, dribbling a couple drops onto the pavement where it sizzled and smoked. It was obviously a form of acid. Justin gasped and struggled, growing still when the man held the vial up to his face.

"Stop it!" Brian pleaded and the man with the gun said,

"You don't drop this shit against Jeffrey Walker, you'll be coming home to the Phantom of the fucking Opera."

The man with the vial tossed it onto the pavement where it hissed and burned into the stone. As quickly as they appeared, the men were gone. Brian and Justin remained where they were for a frozen second, and then Brian took a step back and leaned against the wall as his knees felt rubbery and his stomach flipped. Justin rushed over to him, placing an arm around him, and they clutched each other for a long, silent moment, and then made their way back to the loft, arms tightly wound around each other's waist.

Justin sat close to Brian on the sofa, his hand resting against his lover's thigh as they sipped Scotch with shaky hands and waited for the terror to pass.

"I'm okay," Justin finally reminded him, and Brian nodded.

"I know."

"We should call the police."

"I know."

"We should tell Mick."

"I know."

"It was just a scare tactic, Brian."

"It worked."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean they scared me. They were smart enough to threaten you instead of me. If they threatened me, I'd probably just get more stubborn, more determined. But they found my Achilles heel. They know I won't let anything happen to you."

Justin put his drink down and moved closer to Brian, resting his head against his shoulder. "You can't do this, Bri. You can't let them intimidate you by using me. It's bullshit. Some rich family is not going to hire thugs to stop your testimony. That's not the way they work."

"Life is cheap to people like the Walkers, babe. I put nothing past them. Maybe you should go to Pittsburgh for awhile."

Justin turned Brian's face to look at him. "Fuck that. This is my home. You're my partner. My life is here, with you. We face this together."

Brian's lips drew into a thin line as emotion threatened his composure. "You're a brave kid," he whispered softly. "Dumb as a box of rocks but brave."

Justin smiled. "Love makes you dumb sometimes."

Brian leaned over to kiss him, pulling him into his arms. He let his long fingers caress the velvety skin of Justin's perfect face, brushing the single pockmark left by a childhood bout of chicken pox, threading through his thick hair to find the thin, raised scar left by the bashing. He urged him back against the sofa with his weight, lying above him. He pressed a thigh between Justin's legs, feeling the bunch of his genitals against the long muscles of his own leg, pressing his cock to Justin's pelvis. Justin raised his arms over his head in a gesture of utter supplication, his body elongated under Brian's. Brian drug his kiss to Justin's exposed throat, pulling up his shirt to suck his tits and lick along the muscular wall of his armpit.

Justin flung a calf over Brian's hips, pressing even closer to his body. The fire between them was never quenched, never burned less bright, it just continued to flame and grow and consume. Soon they were both naked, the suede soft under Justin's back and hips, Brian's body hard above him. Brian ducked down to run the flat of his tongue up the length of Justin's erection, and down the other side, before popping the tip into his mouth and sucking eagerly on it. He'd retrieved the lube and he greased up two fingers, slipping them along the crease in Justin's ass until they hit home. He continued to suck Justin's cock as he slid the fingers inside, distributing the lubricant and stretching his tight opening. When he felt ready, Brian withdrew his fingers and spread the remaining lube on his own dick, penetrating his lover with easy finesse.

They fucked in a steady rhythm, Brian raised on his hands to stare down at Justin's blissful face, taking it slow, making it last. Justin's dick strained against his belly and he began masturbating as his passion overwhelmed him. Brian took that as a hint and increased the intensity of his pounding. Justin gasped, showering his belly and chest with a flood of cum, pushing Brian over the edge so that he broke his own dam.

Collapsed on top of Justin, both of them breathing hard and waiting for the thrill to pass, Brian laughed as Justin said, "We'll never get the lube and the cum off the suede."

"That's why we had it Scotchguarded," Brian teased, forcing himself to his feet and then helping Justin stand. They wiped away the traces with an errant piece of clothing, then retreated to the bathroom for a joint shower and round two.

Mick's apartment was located above the baths she owned and operated in Chelsea. There was a separate entrance from the street, an unassuming glass door up a set of steps. Her daughter responded to Brian's summons and buzzed him up. In the hallway on the landing there was a fine Oriental rug and a pair of blooming trees on either side of the double doors, that Gail answered before he could ring. Unlike many models who disappeared into nothingness without hair and makeup artists painting on a look, Gail had a natural, fresh prettiness even without help. She had Mick's coloring, but her features were more delicate, and her body was tall and slender in low-riding jeans and a

tummy shirt. Brian knew if he was straight, Gail would be his type. But he wasn't, so he could admire her good looks without conflict.

"Hi," she said with a big smile that assured him he was her type, too, except for one little thing. "Come on in."

"I'm here to see your Mom."

"Right. She's taking a shower."

"Where's Linds?"

"She just ran to the corner drug store for something. She hasn't felt well today, for a couple days in fact."

"Really?" he felt bad for not knowing that fact about his son's mother. "What's wrong? She didn't finally get our flu, did she?"

"I don't think so."

Brian looked around the spacious main room. It was far more conventional than he expected with plain mission style furnishings, lots of plants and some good art displayed under spotlights. The hardwood floors were stripped and pickled and Brian suspected Mick did a lot of the work herself. Since the fireplace was retired for the season, she put a vase of fresh cut flowers on the grate, and there was a black and white portrait of Mick and Lindsay framed on the piano along with some family snaps. He wondered when they had that made, and thought he'd like one like that with Justin and him.

Mick finally entered the room, wrapped in a monogrammed terrycloth robe, her wet hair slicked straight back. She greeted Brian with a little hug and offered him a drink, which he declined. Gail left them alone without being asked and Brian sighed as he sat down heavily in a chair.

"Sorry to bother you at home."

"No problem. It sounded important."



"I need your advice."

"That's what you pay me for."

"How big a deal would it be for me to refuse to testify against Jeffrey?"

Mick narrowed her eyes at him. "You can't refuse, Brian. You have no grounds, you're not his wife, you have no fifth amendment claim. They can subpoena you and you have to testify."

"But would they really want me to? If I didn't want to? Jim Jacobi told me how crucial my testimony is to the case. If I made a bad witness, not a liar, not perjury, but just bad, couldn't I sink their case?"

She sighed. "What's going on? Surely Jacobi didn't scare you that much with his mock cross. You're made of sterner stuff than that."

"It has nothing to do with that."

"What does it have to do with, Brian?"

"I can't win this fight, Mick. I don't have the firepower. Walker isn't just fooling around or making idle rich man threats. I think he's even more dangerous than his son, and that's saying a lot. It's not just me, I'm worried about Justin. Not just Justin, but Gus. Look, if I was alone in the world, it would be one thing. Bring it on. But I'll be damned if I'm putting people I love at risk."

Mick sighed and shook her head. "Something happened, Brian. You aren't usually this dramatic. Want to tell me?"

"No."

"I think you should."

"And bring you into the mix?"

"I'm in the mix, big guy. I'm your friend and your lawyer."

He sighed, and reluctantly told her the whole story about the incident in the alley. She showed no reaction as she listened. When he finished, she said, "He's lost it."

"Has he? What can we do about it, Mick? So Justin and I file a complaint. Walker denies it. They'll never find these thugs. And then we're really in danger."

She nodded. "I understand your misgivings, Brian, but...we can't just let it go. You have to talk to Jacobi about it. He'll know what to do. Maybe they'll put a guard on you two."

"Oh joy. Just what I wanted, to be trailed by a fucking cop."

"Remember, if Jeffrey is released, he's still a threat to Justin. Maybe more of a threat."

The door opened and Lindsay came in, carrying an overloaded bag and puffing for breath. She was unusually pale and Brian got up to help her, unusually solicitous. She met his eyes, said hello, then pushed the bag at him as she ran for the bathroom. He turned to look at Mick, who was giving away nothing with her expression.

"Excuse me," she said, getting to her feet. "I'd better go check on her."

Brian sat the bag on the table and it fell on its side, dumping the contents out the opening. He absently began stuffing them back in, then hesitated as he picked up a box and stared at it. His stomach clenched and he looked up as Lindsay came back to the room, Mick's arm around her in a protective embrace. Lindsay was chalk pale and she saw what he was holding, further blanching her color. Mick helped her sit down, and Brian shook the box at her.

"What the fuck is this?"

"Just what you think it is, Brian," Mick said, taking it from him. "A home pregnancy test."

"It had better be for you or for Gail."

"If it was for me it would mean a star was rising in the East. As for Gail, she's too savvy to get knocked up. I leave that stupidity to the thirty-something bunch."

They both looked at Lindsay, who began to cry, covering her face with her hands.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God protect me," Brian suddenly reverted to altar boy days as he felt one more nail being hammered into the lid of his coffin.

## Chapter 17

Doctor's Notes: At my request, I suggested a meeting with both BK and his life-partner, JT. Both appeared tense and body language suggested a rift.

Excerpt from transcript:

Doctor: Let me begin. I know you're both under a great deal of stress. How are you coping with it?

JT: (Shrugs, looks out window)

BK: (Glimpses at JT, stares at folded hands)

Doctor: Someone needs to respond, or this will be a very expensive silence.

JT: Brian is determined to protect me at whatever cost to our relationship and to himself.

BK: Brian can speak for himself.

Doctor: So speak, Brian. Protect him from what?

BK: We were mugged the other day. If you can call it that. Two men threatened to throw acid in Justin's face unless I agreed not to testify against Jeffrey.

Doctor: Did you inform the police or the DA or both?

BK: No.

Doctor: Why not?

BK: I have no trust in the system, Lydia. I've been rolled over by it before, and I expect the same now. Who would believe that a man like Jeffrey's father would orchestrate a couple of thugs? I have no proof.

Doctor: Then what are your options?

BK: I don't know. I can't get Goldilocks, here, to take it seriously.

JT: Because you're overreacting, just like they hoped you would.

BK: You don't know if it's an overreaction or not.

JT: It's a bullshit threat.

BK: That was real acid they had in the alley with us, Justin. It burned into the cement, and that surface is a hell of a lot harder than your skin.

JT: I'm not afraid of them.

BK: Because you're young...invincible.

JT: I'm not invincible. Chris Hobbs proved that point with a baseball bat.

BK: (Winces) Exactly. I lived through that too, you know. Every night, prowling the hospital corridors, avoiding your family, not knowing if you were ever going to come out of that coma. I'm not going through that shit again. I won't endanger you or Gus or anyone I care about.

JT: Then tell the police, Brian! I'm a witness too!

BK: My boyfriend is hardly unbiased. And nothing links them to Walker.

JT: At least try.

BK: Will you still say that when your face looks like the Phantom of the fucking opera?

JT: Would it matter so much if I did look like that? Is my face all you love about me?

BK: No, I'm fairly fond of your ass, too, but being an artist, you may just need those baby blues.

JT: Stop being a drama queen! You're doing exactly what they hoped.

Doctor: Okay, guys, go to your respective corners. Brian, is it possible that this threat is a convenient excuse for you to avoid testifying against Jeffrey and still save face and appear altruistic?

BK: Why the fuck would I want to do that?

Doctor: You tell me.

BK: I wouldn't.

Doctor: Not overtly, perhaps. But think about it. You have financial and other considerations at risk. You'll be exposed, publicly humiliated, forced to discuss intimate details of your personal life. Who would want that?

BK: No one, but I'm not a coward. Is it so strange that a man wants to protect his privacy?

Doctor: Not strange at all.

BK: Well then...

Doctor: But do you see that refusal to testify as the end of the Jeffrey saga? If so, you're very wrong. He'll be freed to resume his life and that includes his obsession with you. You think he'll forgive you for your part in this just because you didn't testify? It will only signal to him that he won again.

BK: So I'm fucked either way.

Doctor: That's one way of looking at it.

JT: There's another way. You testify, they convict him and you can live with yourself for the next twenty years, free of guilt.

BK: And you'll be maimed or blinded or both.

JT: There you go again. It was an empty threat.

Doctor: Brian, talk to your lawyer. Let her guide you on your next move. I'm sure there are ways to protect you and those whom you love.

BK: I'm not the trusting type and I don't like handing over control, although it appears that's all I can do, lately.

Doctor: So regain control. Your partner is telling you that he's willing to share whatever risk there may be.

BK: What if I don't want him to assume that risk? What about that? He doesn't even remember his fucking headbashing! You may have been the one in a coma, Justin, but I had to deal with the fear and uncertainty and guilt. I won't go through that torture again. I can't.

JT: (Reaches over to hold BK's hand.) It wasn't your fault the first time, and if something happened to me now, it still wouldn't be your fault.

BK: Sorry, Sunshine. I don't read it that way. Neither would your Mom or Deb or Molly.

JT: You can do no wrong where Molly is concerned. Debbie adores you, and so does my mom, at least she does now. Nice try.

Doctor: Brian, let's cut deeper than your superficial fears. Are you sure of your motivation? I don't question the depth of your feelings for Justin. Nor do I doubt your sincerity. But how much of this reluctance is just plain, old-fashioned fear of revelation?

BK: I'm afraid, I admit it. I'm afraid for him, for Gus, for all of us. And yes, the thought of opening up my life to the world is very hard for me. I have to swear an oath to tell what a dumb shit I was. How weak I was. It's hard. I can hear my old man cackling in his grave.

Doctor: What would you respond to your father's ridicule were you able to do so, Brian?

BK: If my father would think that testifying is wrong, that putting my dirty laundry out on the lawn is a mistake, then it must be the right thing to do.

End of excerpt.

Doctor's Notes: BK is importing his residual guilt and fear over his partner's gay-bashing incident to his present situation. Because I believe the threat to be real, I will continue to encourage him to involve the authorities. I believe he will testify against Walker, but at great cost to his emotional well-being. I continue to be concerned that BK's challenged emotional state will be subjected to more stress than he can assimilate. I'm uncertain in which direction the escape valve will be pointed, but I expect that fallout is inevitable.

Justin nudged his foot against Brian's under the cover of the table in the small café where they stopped for dinner after meeting with Lydia. Brian looked up as if emerging from a dream.

"What?" he asked, throwing back the rest of his neat scotch in one gulp. Justin reached over and threaded his fingers through the hand that Brian rested on the table. The café was not in a gay area, and the other diners appeared straight. The male couple drew a few looks, maybe even a snicker, but this was still Manhattan, and most people didn't care. Brian tightened his grip on Justin's hand. "Sorry. Lost in space."

"Danger Will Robinson," Justin quipped. "Want to order?"

"I'm not very hungry. You go ahead. I'll have another one of these."

"I'll order something for us to share, okay?"

"Whatever."

Justin gave an order to the waiter while Brian asked for another drink.

"Is there something on your mind, other than the Jeffrey situation, Brian? You've been so preoccupied."

Brian met his eyes and sighed. Why not tell him? Not telling him wouldn't change a thing. "Lindsay's pregnant."

"Pregnant?" Justin's eyes grew wide, then quickly narrowed. "No hope it's Mick's, I take it," he joked bitterly as Brian winced.

"We all wish."



"You guys weren't safe?"

"Justin, other than nuns and virgins, dykes are the least likely carriers of AIDS in the entire population. It wasn't planned, it just happened."

"There's still a bowl of condoms beside our bed, Brian."

"I'm aware of that fact."

"Then why didn't you reach over and grab one?"

"Because it didn't occur to me, frankly."

"You could have infected her! What about that?"

"With what? We both tested before we started barebacking, Justin, and I haven't been exposed since then, unless you're lying to me about your fidelity."

"Don't even try to turn this around on me. You're the one with the fidelity problem or you wouldn't be in this situation."

"Point conceded, Justin. Whether I should have played it safe or not, it's a moot issue. The fact is, she's knocked up."

"Is she going to have it?"

"We haven't had that discussion yet, but knowing Linds, my guess is yes."

"Wait until Melanie hears about this one."

The two men shared a glance and then Justin began to giggle and Brian winced. Soon, both were laughing at the sheer absurdity of their situation.

The movie was being shown in a small old theater in Soho that specialized in art films and revivals. A film noir classic from the fifties, the movie onscreen was full of fog, atmosphere and platinum blondes who led men astray. Since it was mid-week, the crowd was scarce. Brian and Justin were alone on the back row, seated side by side in threadbare maroon velvet seats. Their lips were locked in a hot kiss while their hands groped inside the opened flies of their jeans.

"Suck me," Brian whispered against his lover's ear, and Justin smiled and dropped down in a crouch between Brian's legs, partially shielded by the empty row in front of them. Brian leaned back, letting it happen for a few seconds. He then covered himself up and pulled Justin after him, into the men's room. There was only one stall, and three urinals, none of which were in use. Brian led Justin into the stall and slammed his lover against the metal door. He kissed Justin eagerly as he rolled up his own shirt, as well as Justin's, anxious to feel skin against skin.

Justin slipped Brian's jeans down his slim hips and masturbated him with increasing urgency as his own needs built.

"Slow down, Seabiscuit," Brian whispered. "Spit in your hand, make my cock slick."

Justin did so, distributing his saliva as Brian turned him to face the door. He held Justin's wrists over his head with one hand after sliding Justin's jeans down to his ankles. He penetrated with such force that he lifted Justin off his feet and Justin groaned, pressing his forehead against the cold metal of the door, as Brian's stiff cock pounded into him. After Brian came, he sat back on the toilet and pulled Justin towards him, impaling his face on Justin's rigid dick. Justin exploded down Brian's throat with little urging, and then lowered himself onto his lap, their detumescing cocks brushing as the two men kissed, languidly returning to normalcy.

"Hot," Justin whispered as Brian ran his hands through the shaggy blond mop and nibbled at Justin's ear.

"Always hot," he replied.

Before they separated, the stall door crashed in, banging against the wall and a man filled the open portal with his muscular frame. He flashed a badge at them and said, "You're under arrest. Public indecency and lewd conduct."

"Public?" Brian demanded as they both repaired their clothing. "The door was closed until you fucking kicked it in!"

"Come on, Nancy, don't give me any shit or I'll add resisting to the charge. Be a good boy and go quietly and I'll let the kid go."

"I'm not going without him," Justin insisted and Brian grimaced as the cop cuffed his wrists at the small of his back.

"Go home, Justin. Call Mick. Tell her what happened."

"But Brian..." Justin followed as the cop herded him out.

"Just do it!"

Justin watched helplessly as the cop shoved Brian into the back of an idling cruiser, driven by another cop, this one in uniform. Justin was terrified, but more than that, he worried about the look of seething rage on Brian's stony countenance. The proverbial final straw was reached by Brian Kinney. Justin was unsure of what the repercussions would be.

Brian was deathly quiet as he sat between Mick and Justin in the backseat of the cab as dawn broke over Manhattan. A night spent in a holding cell had done very little for his mood. Mick was talking about police harassment, an obvious set-up, an incident to be used to attack Brian's credibility as a witness, but he tuned her out. He stared straight ahead, his jaw set in a firm line. Justin just held Brian's hand firmly and kept quiet, knowing how to read his lover's needs.

Mick left them at the loft, where Brian took a long, hot shower, alone. Afterwards, he crawled naked into their bed. Justin slipped in with him after leaving a note for Cynthia explaining they should not be disturbed when she arrived at the loft to work. Brian spooned Justin's body against his, making no sexual move, as he quickly fell into a deep, and dreamless, sleep.

When Justin finally awoke, he was alone in the bed. He called Brian's name as he sat up, suddenly anxious. No response. He felt a raw sense of panic. Given Brian's current state of mind, he could be anywhere. Justin pulled on some clothes and walked headlong into Cynthia as he entered the main room of the loft. She was working on a pitch and she glanced up at him and smiled.

"I tried not to make any noise. You guys have a rough night? I saw your note."

"Where's Brian?" he cut to the chase.

"I don't know. I thought he was with you."

"Fuck!"

"Is something wrong?"

Just then, the front door opened and Brian walked in. Dressed casually in jeans, he removed his sunglasses and handed Justin a paper bag. "I bought some bagels. Eat up, then pack. We're leaving town."

"Uh, I have a job, Brian."

"So do you and we have a bunch of projects..." Cynthia began, but Brian cut her off with a glare.

"You're going to have to handle this on your own for a few days, partner. As for you, Justin, call Leo and tell him you're taking off. I need you to come with me."

Justin felt an unreasonable thrill over Brian's admission of his need for him. "Where are we going?"

"We can talk about that on the way. Just pack some comfortable clothes in a bag, enough for a few days. Cyn, you have my mobile number, but please don't call me unless it's an absolute barnburner. You dig?"

She nodded, and Brian offered her a bagel as Justin left the room to pack.

Once they had left Manhattan, Brian lowered the top of his vintage Corvette so they could enjoy the mild day despite the fumes from other cars on the highway. Justin stared at his lover's handsome profile and finally spoke.

"I feel like I'm being kidnapped."

Brian smiled slightly. "Yeah? Scared?"

Justin laughed. "Terrified. What the fuck are we doing?"

"Driving. Leaving town."

"I see that. To go where? The Pitts? To see Gus?"

"Nope. Well, we just happen to be passing through Pittsburgh on our way, so we'll probably stop for the night and visit Gus, if Melanie will allow it. We can see our friends, and say hi to Molly and your Mom. But then we hit the road again."

"To go where?"

"Do you mind if I don't say?"

Justin laughed. "Hell, yes, I mind."

"Noted, but will you drop it anyway?"

Justin smiled and nodded. He was relieved to have Brian talking again, no matter what nonsense he was speaking. He didn't really care where they went so long as they were together. At least they weren't headed for Boston if Pittsburgh was on their way. "What about Shea?"

Brian glanced at the blond. "What do you mean?"

"I feel bad just dropping out for days. He's feeling so low anyway."

"Good point. Call the Center and if he's available, tell him we had some business out of town and we'll be back by the end of the week. If he's not available, leave that message for him."

Justin did so, having to leave a message since Shea was at the clinic. When he ended the call, he glanced at Brian, dying to ask him about his night in jail. But he had become an expert in Kinney-to-English and he knew not to inquire. Brian would let him know in his own sweet time.

The dinner crowd at Liberty Diner looked towards the maven of the diner when she shrieked like a banshee as Brian and Justin walked in the door. Debbie flung a plate of food she was delivering on a nearby table, and ran to greet them, throwing an arm around each.

"Steady, girl," Brian said wryly, wriggling out of her embrace. "I keep telling you to give it up, I'm gay."

"Smart ass," she said, reaching up to pat his face. "How you doing, honey? Holding up?"

"Starving," he deflected her question. "What overcooked, deep fried poison can you offer me tonight?"

"Our special is your favorite, chicken and dumplings."

"When will you ever stop telling me what my favorite food is? You never get it right." He slipped into a booth with Justin as Debbie sat across from them, motioning to a transvestite waitress to pick up the slack.

"What are you boys doing here? Michael never said a word."

"He doesn't know," Justin explained. "It's a surprise."

Brian glanced at him and smirked. "To everyone."

"A wonderful surprise! Are you going to see Gus?"

Brian looked at his watch. "In an hour. Melanie granted me thirty minutes with him under her watchful gaze."

"She's had it tough, honey. She hasn't been the principal caretaker of the baby before now and Gus is giving her a hard time."

"Cry me a river. You think this has been easy on Lindsay? Or me?"

"I know, I know, but the last thing you need to do is to go over there and fight with her. This is the time for that smarmy Kinney charm."

He laughed. "Charm would roll off Melanie Marcus like water off a duck. But I promise to be good, okay, Mom?"

"You'd better be. How is Linds?"

Debbie saw Justin and Brian exchange a silent look and she zeroed in on it. "What's wrong with her?"

"Nothing," Brian insisted. "She's fine."

"Sunshine?" Debbie prompted, but Justin took his cue from Brian.

"Yeah, fine, Deb."

"Why do I think you boys are keeping a secret from me?"

"Okay, you got us, Deb," Brian said with a dramatic sigh. "Lindsay, against my advice, but acting out of a mother's devotion, has hired a gang of kidnappers to snatch Gus out from under the wicked stepmother's nose and if they happen to make Melanie disappear in the process, well, who's watching? You didn't hear this from me, I don't want to have to testify in yet another criminal proceeding."

She glared at him. "I see your bad luck hasn't improved your personality. So what'll you guys have? It's on the house."

"I can afford to buy dinner at the diner, Deb."

"It's not about money, Brian, it's about being glad to see you. Don't make me smack you."

"Being smacked by a parent figure? There's a novel experience for me."

They ordered, knowing the menu by heart, and after Debbie left, Brian took a long look around the diner. "It seems smaller," he concluded. "Pittsburgh seems smaller, like everything shrank. Well, everything but Deb's keister."

Justin giggled. "It's just that everything in Manhattan is so huge and crowded. Do you ever miss the pace here?"

"No, never. Do you?"

Justin shrugged. "Sometimes. I'm still a little intimidated by New York."

Brian looked uneasy. "You wish you hadn't left?"

Justin reached over and placed a hand on his lover's face. "So long as you're in New York, that's the only place I want to be." He kissed him and Deb beamed at them as she delivered their drinks.

"Now this is what I like to see. You boys are so cute together. Who woulda thunk the great Brian Kinney would be so schmaltzy over a little blond doll?"

Brian turned red as he glowered at her. "I'm warning you, old lady..."

"Yeah, big talk. Go back to kissing, I'm leaving you alone."



They watched her walk away and Brian sighed. "She's right. Who woulda thunk it indeed?"

Justin shoved an elbow into Brian's side. "I'm no fucking 'doll'."

"That's for sure. You're a demon. But I love you anyway."

"I love you too."

They kissed again, separating when a high pitched squeal of pleasure intervened. Emmett had arrived. He slid into their booth, a vision in lime green over jeans and wearing a hot pink scarf for effect. He reached out to grab each of their hands, but Brian quickly disengaged. "I cannot BELIEVE I not only see you two in here like old times, but I actually heard Brian Kinney say he loves someone. Take me out of the oven, I'm done!"

Brian glared at him. "Eavesdropping is so unattractive, Em."

"Oh yeah, I'm really worried about that. What are you guys doing here? Does Mikey know?"

They went through their routine again, and Emmett ordered the special when their food arrived. "Who are you fucking now?" Brian asked him, slathering his hamburger with mustard.

Emmett shrugged. "Since Ted and I split, it's been a little bit of this and a lot of that, you know, Brian, your old scene. But I'm still hopeful to find EXACTLY what you two share!"

Brian winced as Justin beamed at Emmett. "What's that? Half a loft and a dwindling bank account?" Brian demanded.

"No, silly. True love."

"Oh. That."

Justin laughed. "Don't act so cynical, Brian. You know you love me. You want to KEEEEESS me."

Brian avoided his puckered lips and smeared a fingertip of mustard over Justin's mouth instead of kissing him. "You aren't too big to spank."

"Oh yeah? I so deserve a spanking. When? Where? Let's go now."

Brian smirked at him. "Eat your hamburger, kinko. You'll have Em believing we're pervs."

"Wouldn't want that," Justin teased.

"How long are you here?" Emmett inquired, enjoying their easy banter.

"Just tonight," Justin responded. "We're on our way tomorrow."

"To where?"

"You don't need to know everything," Brian responded. "I'm going to see Gus while Justin visits his Mom, then I'll pick him up over there and say hello to Molly. After that, Babylon. Can you round up the gang?"

"Wouldn't miss it, honey!"

Debbie came back over, asking if they wanted dessert and the two ordered lemon bars without bothering to think.

Melanie sat upright and rigid as she watched Brian interact with his son. Her new lover, a dramatically beautiful Chinese woman, discreetly left them alone after being introduced.

"I suppose you're surprised to see that Gus is well and happy," Melanie said dourly.

"Frankly, yes," Brian said from the floor where he was seated, building a fort with Gus, using the toddler's colorful plastic blocks. "I thought I'd find him chained to a wall and starved to bone," sarcasm dripped from his words as she narrowed her eyes at him. "But then, some of the greatest inflictions of pain don't leave visible scars. I know that for a fact."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" She snapped at him.

"Don't f-u-c-k with me, Melanie," Brian spelled the word and kept his tone of voice modulated to avoid alarming Gus. "I have nothing to lose and I mean NOTHING to lose. You don't want to try me when I'm desperate."

"Where's Mommy?" Gus suddenly demanded, accustomed to seeing Lindsay when Brian was around. "I want Mommy!"

"Mommy's right here, sweetie," Melanie responded nervously and Gus rapidly turned into a thundercloud.

"No! Other Mommy! I want my other Mommy!"

"Gus..." Brian picked up his son as the baby began to cry and carried him over to the sofa. He spoke to him in soothing, low tones. Melanie strained to overhear, but she couldn't make out what he said. She watched as Gus stopped crying and sniffled then began sucking his thumb, his head resting on Brian's chest. Their physical similarity was striking. Suddenly, Melanie felt superfluous to the child. She wasn't related to him by blood and wasn't favored by him, emotionally. She bit her lip to keep from crying.

"Daddy take Gus home," she heard the baby say and Brian sighed and kissed the top of his head. Melanie saw an expression she had never seen before on Brian's face cross his handsome features, softening them as it went. She could only describe it as vulnerability.

"You are home, Gus," he replied in a tight voice. "This is your home."

"I want my Mommy!" The toddler said miserably and Brian patted his back gently, finally meeting Melanie's gaze as he answered his son's plea.

"I know you do, Gus. And your Mommy misses you too."

## Chapter 18

Jennifer greeted Brian at the door to her condo with a warm hug and a kiss on the cheek. He felt as if he had just returned from the wars, and maybe that wasn't far off from his confrontation with Melanie. Molly interrupted them, running up to him and laughing as he lifted her off her feet and held her up, smiling into her beaming face. She had some glow back, along with short, glossy strawberry blonde hair. She had turned into a pretty girl somewhere between childhood and adolescence.

"Have you been taking care of your bro's bone marrow?" he teased and she giggled as she pecked his cheek before he let her down gently to her feet.

"Yes. You look so handsome, Brian. As always!"

"Don't fill his head with flattery," Justin cautioned, leaning in the entry to the living room. "He's already hard enough to live with."

"Never hard enough," Brian quipped, drawing a wince from his lover. Molly took Brian's hand, leading him towards the stairs.

"Come with me, I have something to show you."

Brian cast a helpless shrug at her brother as he followed her up to her room.

Thirty minutes later, Justin went in search of his lover. He laughed at the incongruous site of Brian Kinney ensconced among the pink tulle pillows and plush stuffed animals that occupied most of Molly's bed. She sat cross-legged at his feet, meticulously leafing through a thick binder, a page at a time. It was her scrapbook of her illness, containing cards and notes and drawings from well-wishers, along with the enclosure cards from flowers and other gifts.

"Mom says you have to go to bed, Mol," Justin announced. "And we have people waiting for us, Brian."

"Noooo!" She complained. "I never get to see Brian anymore!"

"We talk on the phone at least twice a week, don't we?" Brian prompted her. "And we send each other emails."

"It's not the same as seeing your face," she grumbled, spreading her fingers on his cheek. Brian kissed the back of her hand, then stood up.

"I guess I'm being booted, Molly. Give me a hug."

She stood to embrace him and he held her gently, pleased that she felt far more substantial in his arms than she did at the height of her fragility. "You take care of yourself, Molly. That prince is lurking somewhere, waiting to pounce when you're a little older, glass slipper in hand. Until then, your loyal stand-in insists that you do what your mom and your doctors tell you to do to stay healthy."

"I will. I do. I love you, Brian. I'm sorry Dr. Jeff turned out to be so mean."

Brian sighed, wondering how much she knew. "Me too. Take care, princess," he kissed her forehead and Justin waved at his sister.

"Bye, Mol." He didn't expect the same enthusiasm that she showed Brian and he wasn't disappointed.

"See ya, Justin."

At Babylon, Brian and Mikey disappeared into the bathroom moments after Brian and Justin arrived. Unworried about what they were doing in there, Justin and Ben went to the dance floor. Emmett was already dancing and didn't even notice when Ted and Blake walked in together.

"Tell me again how those two found each other after everything that happened," Justin asked Ben, watching the couple snuggle together at the bar.

Ben laughed. "Remember when Ted went into rehab after his addiction to booze and pain killers? Well, Blake, who had kicked his crystal dependency, was working there as a staffer. He was a strong shoulder for Teddy and poor Em never had a chance. I think Ted has been hung up on Blake since the night he met him, and it appears reciprocal.

They both have been chemical-free, they don't even drink. Teddy is doing well with his financial advisor business and Blake has continued his work in rehab. It seems to be a good thing for everyone but Em."

"Poor Emmett," Justin said softly, glancing over at him, noting he was dancing with great abandon, still unaware of their entrance.

"Emmett always bounces back. How is Brian doing?"

Justin shrugged, telling him nothing. "Fine."

Ben let it go, respecting the position Justin found himself in through no fault of his own.

In the bathroom, Michael and Brian passed a joint back and forth as they sat on the round vinyl settee in the middle of the room. All around them men peed at urinals, made out, and had sex in booths after beginning the preliminaries in the open. But it was quieter than on the floor of the club, and they could talk.

"Jail?" Michael insisted, his eyes wide with horror. Brian shrugged. "Did you get raped?"

"I should be so lucky. I was alone in a holding cell. I didn't even jerk off."

"What did you do?"

"Honestly, Mikey, I thought. I thought a lot."

"About what?"

"About when my life went off track and why. About what I could or should do to fix it. About where I was going, what was happening. In a strange way, those motherfuckers did me a favor."

Michael sighed and leaned his shoulder against Brian's, touching his forehead to his shoulder. "That's an incredibly Brian thing to say."

"Whatever, it's true."

"How did they do you a favor?"

"Because they made me see what it is I have to do."

"Which is?"

Brian smiled down at his best friend. "Survive, Mikey. I have to survive. And I have to win."

"But..."

"Not just for me. Not just for my ego. For Justin, and for Lindsay and my kids. For Molly, even for Shea. I can't let them get away with this. No matter what it costs me personally, I will ride them all the way down."

"Kids? Plural?"

Brian winced. "Gus."

"You said KIDS, plural."

"Molly, Shea, whatever."

Michael narrowed his eyes at him. "Please tell me you and Justin aren't about to do that popular faggoty thing and adopt a baby!"

Brian snorted derisively. "Smoking crack again? Yeah, Mikey, adopting a baby is just what I need right now. I couldn't adopt a cat. Let it go."

"Brian please!" Emmett interrupted them, looking desperate as he tugged on Brian's hand. "PLEASE come dance with me and make it look like you mean it!"

Brian smirked at Emmett and pulled free. "I told you before, Em, I'm taken."

"It's not a joke. That fucking Ted is here with that fucking crystal queen, Blake, and you have to dance with me and make it look sexy! You must!"

Michael nodded, urging Brian to his feet, and he reluctantly followed Emmett to the dance floor to convince Ted what a mistake he had made with a single dance.

"Hotel sex," Justin said with a sigh, dropping back into Brian's arms following a heated bout of fucking. "I think it has a special hotness."

Brian laughed. "It's always hot with us."

"True. Now will you tell me where we're going?"

"What? And ruin your fun?"

"Brian..."

"We'll be there tomorrow. Isn't that soon enough?"

Justin sighed, not interested enough to push the issue. He was enjoying seeing Brian more relaxed and their destination was really unimportant. It was the time they spent together that mattered to him. "Did you tell Mikey about Linds being knocked up?"



"No, why?"

"I didn't think so, but he was pressing me, acting like he already knew something, to get the confirmation out of me. I didn't fall for it."

"Smart blond."

"A lot of us are, you know."

"I know you are. If I'm not awake by nine, wake me up, okay? I don't want to get a late start."

"Do you realize this is the same room you had in this hotel when Molly was so sick and Jeffrey was at his worst?"

Brian winced. "I didn't until now. Thanks for reminding me."

Justin giggled and snuggled up close to Brian's lean frame. "But even with all your trouble, things are so much better now, aren't they?"

"Explain."

"Molly's practically as good as new. Jeffrey's in jail. We're stronger than ever. Your health is a hundred times better than it was then, as is your mental outlook. Things were a lot worse then."

Brian nodded, absently stroking his fingers through Justin's silky hair. "You're right. Things were a lot worse. I guess we're lucky, in some ways."

"We're together, aren't we? We're lucky in every way."

Brian leaned over to kiss him goodnight, suddenly feeling peaceful enough to sleep.

Justin awoke from a nap and found they were on a small two-lane road rather than an interstate highway. It was evening, and all around them was a rural landscape broken by the occasional small town. "Where are we now?" He asked with a stretch and a yawn.

"On Highway 136."

"I mean what state?"

"Still in Illinois, you slept through the bustling town of Carthage."

"I'm sure I wasn't the first to do that."

Justin looked at a road sign advertising Nauvoo and the Mormon temple there. He remembered studying the Mormons, who began the long trek to Utah from Nauvoo following the martyrdom of Joseph Smith and the resulting backlash among the citizens of Nauvoo against the Mormon presence there. He suspected the historical significance of this place was not what drew them from New York City. Brian showed no signs of slowing down or stopping, and Justin winced.

"I need to pee."

"This minute?"

"Soon."

"We'll be there in a few. Can you wait?"

"Be WHERE?"

A large body of water suddenly stretched in front of them, spanned by a modern bridge. To his right was a dam that powered an electrical plant, and straight ahead was a small, picturesque town built high on a bluff. "What river is that?" Justin asked and Brian smiled.

"That's the mighty Missisip', Huck Finn."

Justin stared at the rapidly running water as they crossed the bridge, and were greeted by a sign that read "Keokuk, Iowa, Population 13,000." His eyes grew wide as he stared at his lover's impassive profile.

"What are you up to, Brian?"

"Who me? Don't be so suspicious. I just thought a little small town peace and quiet would be therapeutic."

"Right. And we went through how many small towns to get here? And it just happens to be Shea's hometown?"

"Help me find Grand Avenue. We can talk about the rest when we get where we're going."

They found a large room in a gracious mansion overlooking the river. The owner had converted the house into a bed and breakfast, and Brian had chosen this accommodation over the more sterile low-end hotel choices. There were no luxury hotels in Keokuk. Justin flopped down on the four poster king sized bed, watching Brian stare out the bay windows at the river.

"Brian, can you believe what the old lady said?" He sniggered and Brian shrugged.

"Homophobes are everywhere."

"I don't think she was being homophobic," Justin defended the sweet-faced old woman who owned the B & B and who checked them in upon arrival. She looked from one handsome man to the other and smiled.

"Are you boys brothers?" She had asked.

Brian said a firm "no" as he returned his credit card to his wallet after she imprinted it. Justin volunteered that they were partners, ignoring Brian's glare, and she beamed at them and said,

"Oh, you're my first homosexuals!"

Thinking back on it, Justin laughed again. "When she asked us what we liked for breakfast and you asked if she had any homosexual food, I thought she would drop through the floor. You can be so bad."

Brian glanced over his shoulder at him. "I'd show you how bad I can be if I wasn't so fucking tired from driving for two days."

"I told you I'd drive part of the way."

"You can on the way home."

"Come lie down with me for a minute."

Brian conceded to his invitation and stretched out beside him. Both were still fully dressed as they snuggled into a familiar embrace. Justin was silent for a moment, then said, "What are you hoping to accomplish with this visit?"

"Nothing, probably. But I have to try, Justin. I have to make those people understand their son is gravely ill and he needs them now. He's a kid. Whatever else he is and whatever else he's done, he's their son and he's sick and scared and alone. His old man works and Shea is still young enough to be on his insurance. He's only going to need more and more medical attention as this disease progresses. We can't afford to pay for it, and we can only give him so much of our time. If they won't step up to the plate, I'm not abandoning him, but god damn it, they need to look their callous behavior flat in the face."

Justin raised himself to one elbow, staring down at his lover. "Not everyone is as balls to the wall as you are, Brian. People live their whole life in denial and self-righteous fear. His old man just may punch you out."

"So? Let him. I've had a hell of a lot worse than that lately, and I learned how to duck a punch when I was seven. Shea's mother sounded as if she wanted to help, but was afraid of her husband. I want her to have to look at what she's doing, turning her back on her child because of her husband's brutish behavior. Bullshit. I thought about this a lot. There is nothing Gus could do to make me turn my back on him. He could be a mass murderer, and he's still my son. I'd still support him emotionally, even if I disapproved of every aspect of his life. It's blood."

"But you can't make someone feel something, Brian. Look at your father. Look at mine. They abused us both in different ways."

"Don't get me started on your old man, and as for Jack, I've made peace with that memory. Well, sort of. I know I can't make him embrace his son's gayness but I sure as shit can make them face his impending death."

"You think he's not going to make it?"

Brian met his eyes and nodded. Justin winced. Brian pulled him down into his arms. "I know. It's hard. But he just isn't combating it, and frankly, he's given up."

"That makes me so sad."

"I know, babe."

Justin reached up for a kiss. Brian kissed him back. A familiar thrill passed between them, and they both smiled as they realized what was coming next. They undressed each other, arranging the pillows to best accommodate their bodies as they started with leisurely kissing and gentle exploration of the other's body. As the heat increased, so did the intensity of their exploration. When the passion between them began to peak, they both shifted into the urgent pursuit of their goal of shared release. Brian butted Justin with his forehead as he dug his way to his neck, sucking lightly at his lover's tender skin. Justin groaned and squeezed Brian's hard biceps in his fists, memorizing the unforgiving hardness of his body.

Brian ground his steely erection against Justin's pelvis and Justin suddenly gripped Brian's face in both hands, staring up at his flushed, rapturous countenance.

"I want to fuck you," he said, and Brian smiled.

"No shit."

"No, I mean I want to fuck YOU."

Brian hesitated for only as long as it took him to reshuffle the erotic images playing in his brain, then he leaned down and kissed Justin before dismounting and stretching out on his stomach on the bed. Justin stared down at Brian's long, lean frame, running his hand across the firm rise of his butt. He preferred being the bottom, liking nothing better than feeling Brian's hard dick penetrate his body, but sometimes he needed this reassignment of roles. Not only was it erotic, but it also solidified his position of strength in their relationship, lest Brian start thinking of him as the "little woman".

He ran his tongue down Brian's spine, using his tongue to probe where his dick would soon follow.

Shea Hennessey's family lived in a house that was nothing like the elegant mansion where Brian and Justin were staying. The small shingled home was two rooms wide and several rooms long with a narrow front porch. Someone had taken a lot of time in the garden, which was in full bloom. The other houses on the block were almost identical with variations only in trim color and how well the place was maintained. A dog barked when Brian rang the doorbell, with Justin standing by, nervously.

Suddenly, the porch light was illuminated and the door opened, a screen door separating a tall, paunchy man and a German Shepherd mix dog from the visitors. The sound of a television playing in the background underscored the scene. It sounded like a baseball game.

"I ain't buying nothing," the man said, then snapped. "Shut up, Brutus!"

The dog stopped barking and slunk off into the interior of the house.

"I'm not selling anything," Brian said, watching the man look past him to the Corvette at the curb.

"Is that your car?"

"Yes."

"What year?"

"1971."

"Nice. So what do you want?"

"My name is Brian Kinney and this is Justin Taylor. We want to talk to you about your son."

"Which one? I got three."

"Shea."

The older man frowned. "Don't have no son named Shea. Are you that fairy who called me from New York?"

A woman joined him at the door, dark-haired and once pretty, faded by a hard life. She pulled her quilted robe close and looked worried as she focused on her husband. "What is it, Seamus?"

"Mrs. Hennessey, I'm Brian Kinney and I drove all the way from New York City to talk to you about your son, Shea."

"Is he...?" She pressed a shaking hand to her lips and Brian sighed.

"No. Not yet."

"Come in," she said, pushing the door open as her husband glared at her.

"What the hell are you doing, Mary?"

"At least we can hear them out."

"They have nothing to say that I want to hear. I'm watching the game."

"Well, I want to hear it," she said bravely. "Come in."

The barking dog was all bluff, sidling over to the strangers for a head rub as Shea's mother led them into a small parlor that appeared unused. The antique furnishings had obviously passed down through the family, threadbare and in need of refinishing, none of the pieces particularly unique, despite the age. She sat across from them, still clutching her robe. The television droning on in the den penetrated the tense silence. Justin looked at the family pictures decorating table tops and shelves, wondering which of these babies, these small children were Shea. They all looked similar, with dark hair and tall, lean bodies.

"How do you know Shea?" she asked.

Brian shrugged. "He tried to pick me up in a bar."

Justin winced at his unfailing honesty. Sugar coating things never had any meaning at all to Brian. Shea's mother looked confused. She obviously hadn't allowed her mind to enter the realm of all-male sexuality, and had no idea what men did together or why.

"I don't understand."

"He was a hustler, Mrs. Hennessey. A hooker. He was turning tricks, with men who paid him for sex."

"Brian..." Justin rested his hand on his lover's arm, but Brian shook his head. He had no intention of shielding these people from the cold truth.

"He came to New York City as a child, with no skills, no ability to get a real job. What did you think he did to survive?"

"I... I don't know," she twisted her hands together as if wringing out a rag.

"He peddled his ass. It's the only commodity he had to sell."

"To sickos like you," Shea's father lurked in the doorway, holding a fresh can of beer as he glared at them.



"Exactly," Brian again pulled no punches. "Except I don't do that anymore. I have a partner now," he covered Justin's hand with his as the older man winced in disgust. "When Shea tried to hook up with me, I realized he was sick. I was with a friend who runs a shelter for HIV-positive youths, and she got him a room there and arranged for a medical exam. The doctor verified what we suspected. Shea is not only HIV-positive, but he has full-blown AIDS."

His father snorted contemptuously, refusing to sit down in the same room with these unwelcome visitors. "Because of perverts like you."

"No," Justin angrily responded. "Because you ran him out of his home and let him live on the street like an animal, with no food, no shelter, no hope. Wherever Shea got the germ, the disease began in this house with your homophobia and cruelty that left him no choice except to run!"

"Listen, you little faggot, if you think I'll let you sit there and insult me in my own home, you're about to learn a lesson you won't forget!"

Justin stood up, drawing all of his one-hundred and forty pounds of strength into the contest against two-hundred and twenty pounds of power built up over decades of hard, manual labor. "Bring it on," he challenged and Brian grabbed the back of Justin's waistband and pulled him back down to the sofa. "Get a grip, Rocky. No one is hitting anyone."

"Don't be so sure of that," Shea's father seethed and Brian laughed at him.

"I grew up with a drunk, abusive mick father, Mr. Hennessey. Trust me, you don't want to take me on. I have a lot of repressed hostility to unleash."

Hennessey took in the tall, lean Irishman and calculated there was steel beneath that smooth flesh and the kind of blind rage that felt no pain and never stopped until someone was unconscious. Brian was over twenty years younger and in much better shape. Hennessey decided not to risk it.

"What the fuck do you want?"

"I want you to take some responsibility for your child who is seventeen-hundred miles away from home, dying." Brian said bluntly, and the silence that ensued was finally broken by a sob from Shea's mother.

"It's none of your god damned business!" Hennessey insisted to Brian, and then glared at his weeping wife.

"Yes, it is my business. It became my business when I sat there with him when he got the news. It was my business when Justin and I spent many hours at the hospital with Shea as he battled one infection after another. It's my business because I care about Shea, and I don't want him to die feeling as if no one in the whole fucking world cares if he's gone except for two virtual strangers."

Justin gripped Brian's hand tightly as he surged with pride for his lover, and Brian squeezed Justin's hand in response. Hennessey glowered at them. "What do you expect us to do? We can't cure him!"

"I expect you to sit by his bedside and hold his hand and tell him you love him and ease his fear and help him face the inevitable. Exactly what I would do if it were my son."

"If you fucking faggots had kids maybe you'd know better how they let you down."

"I do have a son, and another kid on the way, so don't even try to assume anything about my life. It's not important, anyway. What matters here is Shea. He needs your insurance, I assume you have it at whatever plant that employs you."

"Yeah, I got insurance. So?"

"So, he needs it to get adequate care. You need to bring him home. You need to get him a doctor here, or near here. You need to take on the responsibility you started when you knocked her up, because it won't end until he's dead. You will bury him, Mr. Hennessey. He won't bury you. And then your trial will be over. You wouldn't treat your dog the way you're treating your clan-blood, your bairn."

Hennessey flinched at Brian's invocation of the Irish connection. "I...I thought they had a cure for that crap, or the next thing to it. Some cocktail."

"It's no cure. And different people respond differently to it. Shea isn't tolerating it well."

"How long has he got?"

"I'm no mage. He could die tomorrow. He could get control of his levels and live for several years, I don't think anyone knows. He's getting one infection after another. It's not looking good."

His mother stood up, her tears stopped. "Will you drive me back to New York with you?"

"Shut up, woman! Sit your fat ass down in that chair!" her husband insisted, but she didn't waver.

"I will not, Seamus Hennessey. I am going to my son, and I am bringing him home, and if you don't approve, you'd better be out of this house when I come back."

"This is my house, you stupid bitch."

"You forget it was placed in my mother's name when you went through that lawsuit due to your drunk-driving accident. It's my mother's house, frankly, and I think she'd rather have me living here with my son than with you."

"And who is going to pay the mortgage?"

"You are, Seamus. One way or another."

Justin and Brian watched the stand-off, and then Brian said, "I have a two-seater, so I can't drive you to New York. But I can drive you to the airport and buy you a ticket. Go get packed."

As she went past her husband, he grabbed her arm, yanking it tightly. Justin felt Brian tense, as if to get up, but Mary Hennessey pulled free of her husband and walked upstairs to pack.

"You're busting up my family, you fucking faggot!"

Brian smiled at the man. "I'm putting your family back together, if you choose to bust out, that's your call. Either way, I don't give a shit about you. I only want Shea to get the care he deserves."

"You interfering queer!"

Brian ignored him, turning to Justin as he said, "You'll have to ride in the boot behind the seats to the B and B. I'll drop you off and take care of Shea's mom."

"I'll be fine, don't worry about it, Brian."

Brian glanced at Hennessey, then deliberately leaned over and pressed his lips to Justin's in an affectionate caress. Justin sighed and separated his lips beneath Brian's as he slung an arm around his neck. The older man cursed, turning away and leaving them alone as he stormed up the stairs. Justin leaned back and said,

"What if he starts whaling on her?"

"He won't."

"How do you know?"

"I know him, Justin. I grew up with him. His type is brave only as long as he knows he has the edge. Once I was as tall as he was, and able to flatten him, my old man never touched me or my mother again. Bullies are cowards by definition. Hennessey is afraid of me. He won't try anything while we're here, and maybe he'll turn human while she's gone."

"Or not," Justin said with a sigh. "Poor Shea. He'll be stuck here. What if his father remains abusive?"

"Once he's back, I think his old man will come around. Even if he never accepts him, he won't abuse him."

"How do you know?"

"I told you, I know him. Shea's the wounded now, vulnerable, helpless. The war is over. His old man will wait him out and after he dies, Hennessey will go on a bender and cry in his beer about how hard the world is to take a man's son before the man himself. And if someone makes a crack about the kid being gay or dying of AIDS, Hennessey will take him out. That's the way it works in a clan. It's an Irish thing. You wouldn't understand."

Justin smiled and patted Brian's hand. "I'm learning. Living with an Irishman has been an education."

"In a positive and life-affirming way?" Brian teased and Justin laughed and leaned over to kiss him again.

"Of course." Suddenly he wanted to be back in New York City, to their life together, as fractured as it was. Away from small town prejudices and their claustrophobic view of what was "normal". "Let's go home early tomorrow," Justin said softly and Brian smiled.

"Homesick?"

"I think I am."

"Me too," Brian agreed, realizing his own life, for all the gaping wounds recently inflicted, was still better than anything Shea would be facing.

## Chapter 19

Despite his reduced financial circumstances, Brian arranged for a car to pick up Mary Hennessey at La Guardia. He then put her up in a nice, if modest, hotel near the Youth Center. He couldn't picture her at his loft, even if the construction hadn't made it impossible. He and Justin took turns driving, not stopping for anything other than fuel until they reached Pittsburgh. Once there, they went to the diner, and as Brian talked quietly to Michael, who met them there, Justin borrowed the car. He explained he wanted to say hello to Daphne, whom he missed on the first trip.

"You really put yourself out for this Shea kid, Brian," Michael was observing, and Brian shrugged.

"Someone has to. Justin's been just as big a supporter of Shea as I have. I couldn't do it without his support. It would've been impossible. Look, I'm just trying to get his fucking family to step in and act halfway human with him. He deserves that much."

"But Brian, you know you can't MAKE a family be what you want them to be, or what they should be. Look at your own family."

Brian winced. "Yeah, I do know that, Mikey. But Shea is dying. It's not about hurt feelings and old abuses. It's about insurance, and having a roof over your head, and having someone to hold your hand at the end. His mother seems like a decent enough person. And his father needs to be responsible for his kid's care. Like it or not. I can't afford to do it, Mikey. I just don't have the scratch. And when things get bad, the Center can't keep Shea. Where will he go? I have no room anymore. It's a cluster fuck. I'm just doing what I can to give him the maximum shot."

"What makes you think he'll even go back with her?"

"What choice does he have, really?"

Michael shook his head. "It makes me grateful for how well Ben is doing."

"It should."

"And for the fact my promiscuous best friend is negative."

"Like you were never exposed yourself."

"True. We're both lucky."

"No, Mikey, we were both smart...as well as lucky."

"Careful if not smart."

"Yeah. Where is Justin?" Brian glanced impatiently at his watch. "We need to head back. We still have four hours on the road." He flipped open his phone and dialed Daphne's number when Justin failed to answer his own mobile. He identified himself, and asked to speak to Justin. She seemed perplexed.

"I haven't seen him, Brian. Is he in Pittsburgh?"

Brian frowned. "Uh, yeah. We both are. I'm at the diner. We're supposed to be on the road by now."

"Sorry, I haven't seen him. But if I do, I'll tell him."

Brian was playing various disaster scenarios in his mind as he ended the call. Everything from a car accident to a reunion with Brian's former rival tweaked his insecurities, and then, "Daddy!" He looked over as Gus ran up to the booth and climbed in beside his father, flinging his arms around his neck. Brian hugged him back, then allowed him to cop a cold French fry from his plate and munch happily on it as Justin strolled over and slid in beside Michael. His cat-who-ate-the-canary grin caused Brian to suppress a smile.

"Spill."

"What?"

"You know what, Patty Hearst. Did you kidnap him?"

Justin laughed. "Yes, it was the Lindbergh baby scene all over again. Except this time, the criminal didn't drop him and kill him on the way out. Should he be eating all that?"

Brian looked over at his son who was smeared with ketchup. He cursed and motioned for the waitress to take away the plate, using his napkin as well as Michael's to clean up his kid. He ordered a glass of chocolate milk for him, and Gus seemed content with it, as interested in the straw as he was in the milk. "I hope he doesn't hurl in your car. By the way, you'll have to drive the rest of the way alone. The car seat won't fit in the boot, and it's dangerous to put it in the front, so I'm flying back on the red eye with Gus. We should be at the loft roughly when you get there."

"Justin, what the fuck?"

"Language," Justin cautioned him, then shrugged. "Remember when you told me to butt out and I didn't know what was best for anyone, supposedly because I am too YOUNG to know what's up?"

Brian sighed, recalling that fight. "So?"

"I guess I'm not a total idiot, after all. I guess Debbie's little visit did some good, as did yours, believe it or not. Melanie wants Gus to stay with Lindsay while they work out the custody issues. She still wants visitation rights, but she believes he will be happier with his birth mother and she doesn't want to punish him. By the way, she and her new partner are discussing adopting a baby girl from China."

"And you found all this out exactly when?"

"She called me while you were driving Shea's Mom to the airport in Burlington."

"And you never said a word?"

Justin shrugged. "I had some fear she would change her mind. She's so volatile."

Brian smiled slightly. "You're so Machiavellian."

"And this is a surprise to anyone? I got you, didn't I? This was easy compared to that."

"No shit," Michael agreed glumly, as Brian leaned across the table and kissed his lover gently while Gus giggled at their affection.

Mick stood in the open doorway of her apartment, glowering at Brian. She was dressed in men's boxers and an oversized t-shirt. He found himself noticing her legs were not half-bad. She noticed he was in need of both a shave and a shower.

"Kinney, your out-of-control behavior has just used up your last chit with me. Do you know what time it is? Are you tweaked?"

"Only on exhaustion and road fumes. There's someone here who wants to see Lindsay."



"Well they can come back when normal people are up, bucko."

"He's not the patient type." Brian waved Justin out of semi-hiding to the left of the door. Gus, dressed in pajamas decorated with bright red fire engines, was sleeping peacefully against Justin's shoulder. Mick's eyes grew wide and she pressed a hand to her lips. Tears formed, and Brian realized it was the first time he had ever seen her phenomenal control crack. He beamed at her, thrilled to have found her vulnerability. "Now can I come in?"

She could only nod, stepping aside for them all to enter. Brian paused to pick up Gus's things before doing so. "I would have kept him at my place for what's left of the night, but it's chaotic over there, and there's no room. Besides, with the construction underway, it's not safe."

"Sit down," Mick had reclaimed her composure. "I'll be right back."

Brian took the sleeping baby from Justin without waking him, holding him in his arms and smiling down at him, feeling as if a large part of his stress had just been jettisoned. Justin watched them and restrained a grin. His work was done. Lindsay accompanied Mick back into the room, looking disheveled and disoriented, tying on a robe as she walked. She glanced at Justin and then the back of Brian's head. "Is something wrong?" she asked, and Justin grinned at her.

"No, something is right. Brian and Justin brought you a souvenir from the Pitts."

Brian stood and walked over to her, watching her face reflect stunned disbelief and then collapse into relief and joy as she rushed over to him and grabbed Gus from his arms. She hugged the baby against her body, causing him to stir, grab a handful of her golden hair and mumble "Mommy" before drifting back to sleep. She was crying, Mick was crying and Brian was biting back his emotions. Justin was just enjoying the moment with every fiber of his being.

"How?" she asked and Brian shrugged.

"It's a long story, and there are a lot of people to thank, not the least of whom is Justin. But it's late and we're all dead, so let's get together tomorrow and talk about it, okay? I need to sack out."

She nodded and Brian leaned over to kiss Gus's cheek, then touched his lips to Lindsay's, meeting her eyes with a smile. Mick walked them out, and they slipped into the cab they had paid to wait for them. Brian rested his head

against Justin's shoulder, too exhausted to say anything more about it. Justin smiled and rested his cheek against the top of Brian's head, sharing in his quiet fatigue.

Lindsay looked ten years younger when she breezed into the café where she had agreed to meet Brian for a late lunch. He felt as if he had picked up those ten years plus a few more, he was so tired. He met her greeting kiss with little enthusiasm, and then asked, "How did Gus do in yet another new environment?"

"He was perfect!" She gushed. "He slept soundly and this morning he COMMANDED Mick to make him her special banana pancakes. He loves those. I took the day off to spend with him, but Gail is watching him while we have lunch. Brian, can I say again how incredibly grateful..."

He held up his hand to stop her. "No. I'm telling you this was orchestrated by Justin with a boost from Debbie. Be incredibly grateful to them. Not to mention Melanie, who acted human, for once."

"I had my first good conversation with Melanie since all this trouble started. I think we're on track to work out a more conventional visitation schedule that will cause him the least disruption. And she seems to be eagerly pursuing the idea of adopting a baby from China, even though the process could take some time. Her new...girlfriend...has connections there that may speed things along."

"How do you feel about that?"

"Mel adopting a baby? I think it's wonderful."

"About her new girlfriend?"

"A little jealous, oddly enough. I know I have no claims, but Mel and I were together a long time. I can't say I feel nothing when I think of someone else sleeping in my bed. But that's just petty. I have Mick, and I adore her."

"No lingering doubts?"

"I'll always have some doubts, Brian, some thoughts of what might have been. But with Gus back, I've never been happier. I love Mick, love my job, love this city. I just wish I could make things better for you."

He shrugged. "My shit will work out. It always does. I have Justin to get me through it."

"I'm so pleased to hear you say that. You two are just so right together."

He winced. "Enough. Have you thought anymore about whether you'll have this baby you're hatching?"

"Is this the right time to have this discussion?"

"I think so. If you're ready."

"Brian, I can't go the abortion route. I'm sorry."

"Why are you sorry? I didn't ask you to have an abortion."

"I know, but it would be so much easier for you if I did."

"Why do you think that?"

"One less responsibility. Even though I'm telling you that you have no responsibility for this child, we both know you. You were to have no responsibility for Gus, and look at the two of you. Mutual adoration. With all you have going on..."

He reached over and grabbed her hand to shut her up. "I'm okay with this, Lindsay. It's more about you, your job, your relationship with Mick, your time. If you think you can manage all of that, then so can I. My part is minor."

She heaved a sigh of relief. "I saw a doctor yesterday. She says I'm in excellent health and there's no reason to think this won't be a smooth pregnancy and delivery."

"Did you tell Melanie?"

"Not yet. The timing was wrong."

"Your call."

"If the baby is a girl, I want to name her Brianna. If the baby is a boy, Brian Aidan Kinney Jr."

He shook his head. "No junior. Give the kid a shot at his own identity."

"I'll call him Aidan."

"Then name him Aidan, but no junior."

"How about Michael Aidan? For your best friend, and sort of for Mick too."

He looked up at her and said, "How about Justin Aidan?"

She smiled. "You are so in love with him."

"Shut the fuck up. I just like the name."

"Riiight."

They were both quiet, and then they both laughed. "I can't believe you got knocked up from one fuck," he said, shaking his head at his own luck. Lindsay shrugged.

"It's exactly like they warned us in junior high. It only takes once."

He nodded. "Irish luck. Are you going to keep working?"

"Of course I am, Brian. I feel fine and I plan to work up until delivery. I'll take off a few weeks when the baby's born, but I guess I'll have to break down and get a nanny to watch Gus when he's not in playschool, and to mind the baby while I work. I was opposed to it, having been raised by nannies myself, but I love what I do, and I think I'm a happier, more well-rounded person when I'm working, than when I stay home. Besides, I need the income and I want my own insurance."

He looked up at her and smirked. "You're about to be really well-rounded if your pregnancy with Gus is any omen."

She grimaced. "I plan to watch my weight very carefully this time. I don't want that post-baby weight loss struggle again."

"Christ, two kids. Three, counting Justin."

"Honey, you're as much Justin's kid as he is yours."

Brian smiled. "You got me there. I have to go, Linds. Thanks for the lunch. I'm doing my last good deed of the decade, by re-introducing another son to his estranged mother. At least this kid isn't mine."

He kissed her cheek as he got up from the table and she watched him leave, well aware that his "last good deed" was anything but that.

Shea wondered at Brian's awkward demeanor and uncommon inability to say what he wanted to get said. Finally, Shea interrupted.

"Are you telling me you and Justin are blowing me off? Because I expected this. Why would you want to hang with some guy who's always sick and complaining and isn't long for the world anyway?"

Brian rolled his eyes. "It's not like that, drama princess. But this is how it is. There are some very important people who would like to hurt me, to shut me up right now. Anyone close to me is under risk of being used as a tool to get to me. That includes you. On top of that threat, you have increasing medical bills that I can't afford to pay and that once the state steps in to pay those bills, it will result in your being put back into the foster care syndrome. You need insurance and you need a safe place to stay. So..."

"So what?" he asked suspiciously, and Brian sighed.

"So your mom is here, Shea. She wants to take you home."

"My mom?"

"Right."

"Here?"

"Right."

"And how would my mom get to New York City and know where to find me, Brian?"

"Because Justin and I went to Keokuk to talk to your parents about your situation."

"You had no right!"

"I realize that, Shea. And to the extent we invaded your privacy, I'm sorry. But the greater good was to take care of you for the long haul, and this isn't where you need to be. You can't live here indefinitely, I have no room at the loft, not with all that construction, and you need medical care."

"You think my parents will care about me? You think they give a shit if I live or die? You're fucking crazy!"

Brian put his hand on Shea's arm to calm him down, but the kid pulled free. Brian sighed. "Your old man is being an asshole about it, but your mom wants to help. She came all this way to be with you and take you home."

"Home to live in that house with my old man? I don't think so. I left there when I was a kid. I won't go back."

"Yes, you will."

"Fuck you! You can't make me! You don't rule the universe, Brian, and everyone doesn't have to jump to your tune! I hate them! I hate that town! I won't go back!"

"Where will you go instead, Shea?" Brian asked gently. "Live on the streets? You can't sell your ass anymore, not the way you look. And you won't last more than a few weeks without your meds. You want to end it that way? Why not walk off the top of the Empire State Building if you want to commit suicide? It's faster."

"The fences are too high. I tried it once," Shea said dully.

"Shea, you have to go home. I'm sorry. I know it's not optimal, and if it turns out to be more than you can stand, let me know, and I'll try to find another alternative. But for now, it's the only game in town."

Shea sighed and shook his head in defeat, staring down at his pale, bony hands. "You just don't know what it's like to be in a house where they hate you just because of the way you are. I didn't ask to be gay. I didn't want to be gay. But I am. And they hate me for it. And now they'll be telling me I deserve to have AIDS, because all faggots should have AIDS. All faggots should die."

Brian reached out and covered Shea's hands with his own. "My old man told me that when I came out to him shortly before he died of cancer. He said I should be the one dying, not him. I almost punched him. But I drew back, thinking I'm not sinking to his level. Later, he made a gesture towards me that wasn't exactly an apology, but it was his pathetic attempt to make amends. I think about that gesture often. Your mom loves you, Shea. Give her a chance. As for your old man, fuck him. If he comes around, he comes around. If not, it's his problem, not yours. He's the one who has to live with his hatred, not you. There's nothing wrong with the way you are, and you got AIDS because you were young and stupid and careless, not as a punishment for being gay. I believe your mom will control the situation. If I'm wrong, call me."

"Why? What the fuck would you do?"

Brian sighed. "I don't know, Shea, but I'd think of something."

"Bullshit. You won't ever speak to me again if I left here. You'll just write me off."

"That's not true. Neither Justin nor I would do that. We're still your friends. We're trying to help in the only way we know."

"Right. Get the sick kid out of the way. I can dig it."

Brian shook his head. "Hate on me if you want, Shea, but I really am doing this because I care what happens to you and I want to give you the best chance to survive."

"Whatever."

"Your Mom is downstairs in Frankie's office. I'm going to go get her, okay?"

Shea shrugged and Brian paused at the door when he called out to him. "Brian, thanks for everything you've done up until now."

Brian just shook his head and left him there as he went downstairs to escort Mary Hennessey. She seemed nervous, but determined to show her son a welcoming face, not a tragic mask, when they were reunited. "I'll just leave you alone with him to talk," Brian said as they knocked on his door. "But I'll be downstairs if you need me."

She nodded. When Shea didn't answer, Brian opened the door, and they both saw that the room was empty. He checked the bathroom. Nothing. He opened the closet. Shea's meager wardrobe was missing, as was his backpack. "He ran," Brian said with a frown as Shea's mother gasped.

"Where would he go?"

"I don't know, but we need to find him fast."

She began to cry as Brian wondered at his own blundering clumsiness in handling the situation. He flipped open his mobile and called Mick. If anyone had a clue where to start, he figured it would be Mick, or someone she knew.



Seated in the debris of the main rooms of the loft, surrounded by work and construction, Brian felt empty. Justin sat beside him while Cynthia packed up a presentation case to go home. It was late evening and there had been no word from Shea.

"I'll meet you at Edmond's tomorrow at eleven, Brian," she paused to remind him. "I'm taking the boards with me so you won't have to screw with them." In his present state of mind, she feared Brian might forget the boards. "I left the deck with the high points of the pitch on the counter in the kitchen. Give it a final scan before the meeting, okay?"

He nodded.

She met Justin's eyes and he gave her a reassuring glance as she left them alone. The phone rang. Justin picked it up, feeling as hopeful as Brian was that it was Shea. He was disappointed. "May I ask who's calling?" he said when he heard an unfamiliar male voice. "Hold on." He looked over at Brian. "It's someone named Mark."

Brian frowned, then recalled his peer from a rival agency, the man he lunched with and wanted to lure away from his agency one day. He took the receiver from Justin. "Hi, Mark."

"Brian. Do you have a minute?"

"I have nothing but time."

"Are you still litigating with Vanguard?"

"Yeah, why?"

"I want to offer to testify."

"What do you mean?"

"Just that. About how my boss was told not to hire you. About a meeting I sat through after you and I had lunch the other day. My boss told me not to be seen with you because you were a pariah and could cost us business if any major clients found out about it. It was so over the top, I wondered what was going on. I asked him. He said Boston

International has put the word out on you, and Felix was just following orders, doing what was best for the agency. He said he heard that not from Felix, but from his secretary, who is a good friend of Felix's assistant. He said BI is so powerful and the family is so wealthy and in so many pockets, that we can't risk pissing them off. For instance, one of our big accounts is MOMA and Walker is on their board."

"So why is any of that inspiring you to testify?"

"It isn't. It scares me, frankly."

"Then what is?"

"My wife."

"Your wife?"

"Yes, also known as Jiminy Cricket. We were discussing your situation, and she read me out. She asked me if the fact you were gay played into it. I said probably, that the whole thing between you and Jeffrey Walker Jr. set it in motion. That you really don't have the same champions in a firm as do the power brokers: the straight white guys. She asked me if I would feel any differently about it if you were African American, and that was what distinguished you from the others. If the younger Walker was female and Walker Sr. just didn't like his daughter sleeping with a black man. I said I could better identify with that. She said, 'prejudice is prejudice. You either fight it, when you see it, or you're part of it'."

Brian exhaled slowly. "That's a woman."

Mark laughed. "Oh yeah, that's a woman, alright. So, I want to testify. I'll tell my boss, of course. I suspect he won't like it much, but he won't fire me. He doesn't have the balls. So what do I do?"

"Let me talk to my lawyer. Don't tell your boss anything right now, Mark. If we settle this, why compromise yourself? But Mick, my attorney, may give you a call. Listen, man, I really appreciate your courage."

"Belated courage. So when are we getting together for that dinner? The wife wants to meet you."

"Any time."

"Friday?"

"Fine."

"I'll call you with the details. Take care, Brian. Hang in."

"Thanks, Mark." He hung up, then turned to Justin and explained the call. Justin smiled.

"For such a bastard, you sure have a lot of friends."

"I'm lucky. Sunshine, let's go out. Let's go to a club and dance and drink a little too much and come home and fuck ourselves out. I really want to get out of here."

"You have that pitch in the morning."

"I'm Brian Kinney. Ever met me? Staying out late has never interfered with my job."

Justin laughed, unable to argue with that truth.

The next day, Brian felt energized by his meeting with Edmond. The pitch had gone well, Edmond was thrilled with the ad campaign, and Cynthia was smart enough to have an invoice prepared and in her briefcase. Edmond insisted on writing them a check, without putting too fine a point on his awareness of their financial situation. Five figures would go a long way right now, for their fledgling enterprise. It would fund Cynthia's survival for awhile, and give them some cushion for expenses.

The day was beautiful, sunny and mild. Loosening his tie, Brian suggested they cut across the park and have a celebratory lunch from a hot dog cart while sitting on a bench in Central Park. She agreed, sharing his excitement. They were an attractive, if false, couple as they walked along and relived the high points of the pitch. As they sat on a bench overlooking the wide path crowded with joggers and strollers, Brian said, "What date is this?"

"The twentieth, why?"

"Jeffrey's trial is the twenty-eighth. Jesus. I have another long session with Jim Jacobi tomorrow. It's really going to happen."

She reached over and patted his arm gently, trying to read his expression behind his dark glasses, but failing in her attempt. "It'll be fine, Brian. And then it'll be over."

"It'll never be over," he said softly.

"Guess who called yesterday? I didn't have a chance to tell you." She deliberately changed the subject.

"Who?"

"Sports H2O."

"The guys who make that sport drink?"

"Yes, they want to talk. They said they were your client at Vanguard and that they are not under contract to them and they miss your slant on things. I think it's great that they tracked you down, Brian. It's a big account. I set up a meeting for next Wednesday at their offices."

"That's big."

"I know. Mixed media, national market, big bucks."

"We need to start thinking about what we would do with them. Come on, let's head back. We can get a cab at the street."

They started walking towards Park Avenue when a jogger approached. The runner zigzagged as if to avoid them, but collided briefly with Brian. Cynthia looked back, wondering at the source of an unfamiliar noise. Brian grunted from the impact, held in a momentary embrace by the man who ran into him. Then the jogger released him and ran on. She noticed Brian was still stopped. She looked curiously at him. He looked back at her. His expression one of utter surprise. The presentation case slipped from his hand and crashed to the ground.

"Brian?" She said with a hint of concern, and then she saw that he was pressing his hand to his abdomen, just above his belt. Blood began to flow between his fingers and down his cuff. A red stain spread out on his white shirt. "Brian!" She cried out, running over to him just as he collapsed on the path, the crimson flow spilling beyond his body to pool on the ground around him.

## Chapter 20

Justin ran down the hospital corridor, leaving Lindsay behind. When he found Cynthia, her pale, buttery yellow linen suit was stained with blood. Brian's blood. It had streaked her stockings and even her buff colored shoes. She seemed unaware of it, in shock, her skin pale and her expression strangely vacant.

"Where is he?" Justin demanded.

"He was just standing there, Justin. Just standing there and then he collapsed. I had no idea. I heard a funny sound, but..."

Justin gripped her arms tightly in his fists and gave her a little shake. "Where is he, Cynthia? I have to see him!"

"Justin," Lindsay pressed her hand to his back, trying to calm him. She could see in one look how traumatized Cynthia was, and this confrontation wasn't going to help get information from her. "Cyn, come and sit down with us. Come on," Lindsay put an arm around her, leading her towards some vinyl chairs in a waiting room in the surgical wing. Justin walked with them, but didn't sit down, scanning the corridor for someone who would talk with him, tell him where Brian was, how bad it was.

"I didn't understand what happened," Cynthia was saying to Lindsay. "So much blood, I've never seen so much blood!"

Cynthia was shaking so hard, Lindsay feared for her well being. As worried as she was about Brian, it was clear he was not the only victim. "Where IS he?" Justin demanded, unable to be mindful of Cynthia's condition when his lover could be dying or dead.

"They took him into the operating room the moment we arrived," Cynthia said softly. "He's still in there."

Mick joined them, summoned by Lindsay, who walked into her open arms and held tightly to her. A doctor in green scrubs joined them, and they all became very quiet as they tried to read something in his expression.

"Are you Mrs. Kinney?" he said to the blood-stained blonde.

"I'm Mrs. Kinney," Justin said grimly, and the doctor gave him a glance then nodded. "I'm Justin Taylor."

"Are you his partner?"

"Yes, how is he?"

"Please sit down. I'm Dr. Boyd. I'm his surgeon." They clustered around him in the sitting area, with Lindsay holding hands with both Cynthia and Mick while Justin deliberately sat apart from them, so coiled with fear and tension, he didn't want any kindness to shake his thin control.

"What happened to him?" Justin demanded and the doctor directed his comments to the young man.

"He was shot at close range with an automatic weapon. He was in shock from the trauma and suffered a significant blood loss by the time he arrived in ER. The bullet entered his body here," he indicated a site on his mid abdomen and passed just below his right kidney, miraculously missing that organ and his spine, then ricocheted off his eleventh rib, shattering the bone and entered his small intestines, finally exiting here," he touched a site in his lower back. "We performed what is called a laparotomy, which is exploratory surgery to determine the extent of damage from gunshot trauma. Because he had lost so much blood it would have been dangerous to attempt a prolonged surgery at this time. Therefore we do what we call 'damage control' surgery."

"What does that mean?" Justin asked and the doctor went on.

"We go in and get a clear view of what trauma he suffered and take temporary measures to stop the bleeding and make instant repairs. In his case, the bullet tore through his abdominal cavity as it made its trajectory through his body. It nicked his Iliac artery, which had to be repaired immediately. We temporarily patched some wounds in his bowel to prevent further contamination of his abdomen with fecal matter. We then cleaned out his abdominal cavity to prevent peritonitis, and we left open the surgical cut by using a kind of pressure bandage called a Bogata bag that temporarily covers the open wound without closing it so we can go in later without cutting him again. We've inserted drains to keep his abdomen clear, and he's being administered blood products as well as strong antibiotics."

"What happens next?" Justin inquired, trying to take it all in, picturing Brian connected to tubes and drains, his abdomen torn open and covered with some weird device, his life hanging in the balance.

"We'll now try to stabilize him in the Intensive Care Unit, ICU. Assuming he stabilizes in twenty-four to forty-eight hours, we'll go back in and remove the packs and dead tissue and definitively treat the injuries we've identified. Because the intestines curls in on itself, when the bullet tore into that organ, it left a series of holes, like swiss cheese. Each tear has to be patched and where the bowel was torn free from the rest of the intestines, it has to be reattached. By doing so, we can restore his intestinal continuity. Right now the end of his undamaged bowel is at the surface of his skin and connected to a colostomy bag. Hopefully once the surgery is complete, his intestines will perform normally and the bag can be removed. Once we accomplish that repair work, we'll permanently close up his abdominal wall."

"Why didn't you do all that now? Why do you have to open him up again?" Justin thought it would be less strain for Brian to undergo one rather than two major operations, and the doctor nodded.

"We've found that when a patient is as unstable as Mr. Kinney was when he was admitted, if we attempt prolonged reconstructive surgery immediately, the chance for survival is decreased. In shorthand, his body was too traumatized to survive several hours on the table."

"Then why open him up at all?"

"A laparotomy is the only way to definitively assess a gunshot wound to the abdomen. We have to see what's hit and we have to stop the bleeding and clean contaminants out of his abdominal cavity, or he'd surely die from blood loss and/or peritonitis and sepsis. This way, we patch him up to literally stop the bleeding, and then we go in later, when he's stronger, to fix what we found."

"What are you doing to him now?"

"As I said, he's in the ICU where he's being stabilized. He's on a ventilator to take the stress off his heart and lungs and keep his breathing regulated. We'll work with various fluids and drugs to restore more normal biochemistry and to keep him hydrated. We inject saline solutions because these injuries create a dreadful thirst in the victim. He'll be transfused and his vital signs will be constantly monitored for signs of decline in his condition and also to monitor what we hope will be an increased improvement. He couldn't be in better hands. Our trauma unit is top of the line."

"How bad is it?" Justin finally said and the doctor met his gaze as if gauging the strength of the young blond. The doctor finally responded.

"He's in critical condition. It could go either way. He's young, he's in phenomenal physical condition, he was immediately treated. All of these things are important marks in his favor. He survived the initial laparotomy. Another important milestone. But I won't sugarcoat it, Mr. Taylor. He's fighting for his life."

For the first time, the doctor saw a sign of weakness cross the beautiful face of the younger man. His lower lip trembled and his ruddy skin went pale. The doctor covered Justin's hand with his own. The doctor's hand was cool and incredibly soft. Justin tried not to think about that hand being inside Brian's body, mending shattered organs. "His family should be contacted."

"I want to see him," Justin said softly and the doctor nodded.

"When he's stabilized, one person can go in every hour for five minutes, unless the staff decides the stress on the patient is too much. He's not conscious, nor will he be. We're deliberately keeping him lightly anesthetized so that he won't fight the ventilator or experience stress over the pain. He may be able to hear you, but he won't be able to respond. He's not in a coma, this is a deliberate drug induced state. He'll appear unnaturally pale to you which is caused by the acute anemia brought about by a sudden, massive loss of blood."

"I don't care about any of that. I just want to see him."

"Hear me out, Mr. Taylor. He'll be hooked to a wide variety of tubes and bags, each of which performs an important function. He'll be restrained so that any involuntary muscle movement won't disturb these catheters and because his abdomen has to remain motionless since it's not fully closed. There may be some edema, or swelling, in his face and limbs because of all the fluids he's being given. His body can't process them out fast enough, but he has to have them. I don't want you to be surprised by his appearance. If you don't think you can handle it, don't go in. The last thing he needs right now is to hear tension and fear from his loved ones."

"I can handle it," Justin said firmly. "I want to see him. Now."



"When he's stable, Mr. Taylor. Not before. It could be several hours, it could be fifteen minutes. I need to go speak with his gastroenterologist now, but I'll be available."

"Dr. Boyd," Justin said softly. "Thanks. Thanks for saving his life and thanks for treating me the way you have."

The doctor stood and smiled at the younger man. "Don't thank me now, let's see how it goes. As for the rest of it, you're his partner, I respect that. I'll speak with you later."

Justin watched him walk away, and then looked over at the women. "Will you call Michael and Brian's mom and...Debbie...and my mom... and...who else should we call? Will you do it? And tell them? And I'll call Bill, Leo's lover, and see if there's anything else that should be done for Brian, since Bill's a doctor. I...I'm going to go have a cigarette while we wait. I'll be back."

"Justin, I'll go with you," Lindsay offered, but he shook his head, wanting desperately to be alone.

Justin stayed apart from the others as people continued to gather at the hospital. Bill, Leo, Frankie, even Shea's mother, were there. Soon, the people coming in from Pittsburgh would start arriving: Michael, Debbie, Jennifer and Joan Kinney. The police were questioning Cynthia who had changed into clean clothes brought by a friend. Bill had given her something to calm her, so she was able to discuss the event with less emotion. Mick was talking quietly to Jim Jacobi, the Assistant District Attorney. Justin just wanted to go to bed, sleep, wake up and find it had been a nightmare. Brian would be sleeping next to him, his arm flung across his body.

But sleep was impossible, and the nightmare never ended. He hadn't even been permitted to see Brian. They called a Code Blue on Brian once, causing medical personnel to run to ICU from various posts. It meant that Brian had flatlined, but the doctor later assured them he pulled through it and wasn't compromised long enough for any permanent damage to have occurred. Every second of that five minute ordeal was a lifetime for Justin, who refused to let anyone comfort him, pulling even deeper into his own world.

Finally, the medical team decided Brian was stable enough for one visitor, and Justin felt the others watch him in respectful silence as he walked towards the automatic doors leading to ICU. It had been five hours since Brian was admitted, and Justin's legs felt like rubber as he followed a nurse into an area that resembled a flight deck on a movie version of a space ship. It was in the round, with the patient rooms circling the nucleus of the medical station. The lights were low instead of fluorescently bright, and the machines that monitored the lives of the patients hummed and beeped from multiple screens.

When she left him alone with Brian, he started to tell her she took him to the wrong place. This wasn't his lover. But then he saw the name on his hospital bracelet: Brian Kinney. The victim in the bed had Brian's perfect nose, and Brian's hair, but where was the rest of him? He looked twenty pounds heavier, his face and neck swollen, as were his hands. Each slender, tapered finger looked as hard-packed as a sausage, while tubes and bags continued to pump fluids into him.

Beneath a thin white blanket, his abdomen appeared enormous, as if he were nine months into a pregnancy. Justin remembered the doctor saying they didn't even close Brian's abdomen after the surgery. Instead they covered the gaping wound with a clear plastic Bogata bag that served as a pressure bandage to hold his guts in place. The bag was packed around a series of drainage tubes and the resultant mound caused a large bulge where he was previously so flat. His skin was chalk white, his face partially concealed by the ventilator. Justin was afraid to touch him, not sure what he might accidentally dislodge. Finally he reached out and combed his fingers through Brian's hair, whispering, "I'm here. I love you. You're going to be fine."

He expected no response and he got none. But they told him Brian might hear more than he appeared to understand, so he thought of what Brian would want to know, if he could ask. Justin forced his voice to be matter of fact as he said, "Cynthia is fine. She wasn't hurt. You were shot, Brian. The bullet damaged your intestines and some veins or vessels or something, so you lost a lot of blood. They went in to see what was wrong and did some quick repairs to stop the bleeding and make sure your wounds were closed. As soon as the transfusion and antibiotics stabilize you, they'll take you in again and do the real repair work. The bullet missed all your other vital organs and your spine, so once they get you through this, you'll be fine. They have you on a ventilator, not because you can't breathe, but because they don't want you to breathe on your own, they want to take all the stress away from your organs. You aren't in a coma, they induced this state to keep you calm and let your body heal."

Justin carefully wrapped his hand over Brian's bicep, which was free of tubing. "You have to fight back, Brian. I know you always fight back, but you can't stop now. You have to have the right mind set to get well. I love you and I need you and..." he stopped as his voice choked with emotion. He continued stroking Brian's arm as he forced his tears to subside. "Anyway, I'll be here. We're all here. They won't let us visit but a few minutes every hour. You need to rest. I can't do this without you, Brian Kinney. We're a partnership. You owe me, god damn it. You'd better pay up by hanging around another fifty years or so. I need you."

The nurse was already back to shoo him away, and Justin leaned over to kiss Brian's clammy forehead, before taking one last look and allowing her to lead him out of the area. When he walked into the waiting room, his mother had arrived and she rushed over to him. He allowed her to embrace him, holding tightly to her as he finally permitted himself to cry.

Brian's mind would not stop churning.

Why can't I open my eyes? Why can't I move anything at all?

Ok,ok, I'm in the hospital. I can tell by the noises, I'm in the hospital. But why?

That guy in the park. The jogger. He hit me with something. He hit me real hard, and I went down. How bad can it be?

I feel no pain whatsoever. I'm not paralyzed, I can feel my limbs, but I can't make them move.

My stomach feels as if there's an elephant lying on it.

Why am I so fucking thirsty?

Why can't I wake up? Am I in a coma?

Am I dying? Is this what it's like to die? But why am I dying? What happened to me?

Where is everyone? Am I here all alone? Why isn't Justin with me?

I'm cold. Can't they cover me up or something?

This is crazy, I have to wake up!

I must be hooked to machines, because when I started to resist, I heard the beeping of my heart monitor go up. A nurse came in, and gave me something that feels like smack. It's almost worth it for drugs this good. I'm not in a panic anymore.

Is it the same day as when we met with Edmond? Is Cyn okay?

Why can't I open my eyes?

"I'm here, I love you, you're going to be fine." Justin! I hear his voice. I feel his fingers drift through my hair and touch my arm. I want to respond, but there's some fucking tube down my throat. Either that or I'm giving someone the longest blow job in history. I listen to what he says. His touch soothes me like no drug can do. He says exactly what I would want him to say. He tells me about Cynthia.

He tells me what happened to me.

Shot! That was a bullet? It felt like a punch! The fucker SHOT me?

He tells me what they did to me in the operating room and what they plan to do.

He explains I'm not in a coma, this is some deliberate drugging. I need to hear all of this. It helps me relax a little, put some parameters around it.

Too soon, they are making him leave. No! I need him to stay, why can't he stay? Let him stay...

I can hear the tears in his voice. He's crying. Don't cry, baby. He tells me he loves me. I love him too. He tells me we're partners and I'd better stick around. I can't think of anything I'd rather do.

"I need you," he says, and I need him too. More than he'll ever know. I feel him kiss my forehead. Don't go!

Justin, please, don't go!

They are giving me something...can't think anymore....

Michael sat down beside Justin in the small enclosed courtyard where stone benches beckoned smokers escaping from the hospital. Justin took a last puff off his cigarette and put it out. Dawn was breaking and he should be exhausted, but he was too numb to be tired.

"How are you holding up?" Michael said and Justin shrugged. Michael went on. "I remember holding Brian together when you were in the hospital. I never saw Brian cry like that. I've seen him cry a few times, but not like that. He was so scared."

Justin glanced at his profile. "Why are you telling me this?"

"I told Brian I just knew you'd pull through. I never doubted it for a minute, and I was right. I know Brian will pull through this too, Justin. I just know it. He's so tough, it'll take more than a bullet to stop him, even a silver bullet."

"He's not Rage, Mikey. He's just a guy."

Michael smiled. "Are you sure? I'm not. Seriously, when I saw him on that last visit, I think he looked better. The swelling's gone down a little. He seemed to be resting more easily and his temperature was 99. I could read it on the screen. The nurse told me he was in phenomenal shape, and that helped. All of his narcissism may pay off after all."

Justin looked at the pink horizon, trying to pull some comfort out of the fact Brian survived the night. "I can't do it without him, Mikey. I don't want to do it. For all the pain and craziness living with Brian Kinney can cause, the good so far outweighs the bad that there's no contest."

"You won't have to worry about it, Justin. He'll be fine."

"What if he isn't?"

Michael reached over and squeezed his hand gently. "He will be."

"Is Brian going to die?" A voice intruded and they both turned as a shadowy figure stepped out of the fringes, finally materializing as Shea. Justin sighed.

"Where have you been?"

"With some friends. Is Brian going to die?"

"No, Brian's not going to die!" Michael insisted angrily. "What kind of fucking question is that?"

"It's okay, Mikey," Justin quieted him. "Do you mind if I talk to Shea alone?"

"Ok, but you can see Brian in ten minutes. Don't be late. We don't want to give his mother another chance."

"I know the time and I won't miss a chance to see Brian," Justin said softly. "And thanks, Michael."

"See you upstairs."

Shea took Michael's abandoned spot and Justin glared at him. "Are you on your meds?"

"Yes, I still have meds, Justin. I'm fine. What happened? I mean I heard what happened but...is he going to be alright?"

"I hope so. I think so. You can't see him, Shea, I'm sorry. You've been ill with an infectious respiratory infection recently, and they don't want anyone who could be carrying visiting him."

"I don't care. I just want to be sure that he's okay."

"We don't know yet. If he holds up, he still has one more operation."

"It's that guy in Boston, isn't it?"

"What guy?" Justin said cautiously and Shea smiled.

"You guys think I don't listen, or don't comprehend, but I hear a lot and I get it. Jeffrey Walker, Senior. He's trying to shut Brian up. You think he did this?"

"Yes, Shea, I do."

"Me too. Let me guess. The cops don't give a shit."

"No, the ADA, Jim Jacobi, is very interested, but we can't know which way it will go. They're investigating."

"They'll blow it off. Walker is a rich white straight guy and Brian is just a faggot. They don't care."

"We'll see. Coming upstairs with me?"

"No, I know my mom is there, Justin. I'm not going near her."

"How do you know that?"

"I just do."

"Want to go to the loft?"

"No, but thanks. I'll call you on your mobile. I want to know."

"Okay, but where will you go, Shea?"

"I'll be around. Later. Be strong, dude."

"You too," Justin said, watching him slink away wondering at Shea's compassion for Brian when his own situation was so dire. He went back up, and entered the waiting room just as the surgeon from the previous night joined them. He had showered and shaved, but Justin didn't know if he had slept. He spoke to Justin, but they all listened intently.

"Mr. Kinney's condition has improved. He's been stable for several hours. His hemocrit, which measures the condition of his blood supply, has steadily trended upwards. We think the wise thing to do is to operate later today, so long as he remains stable. I'll go in and reattach his intestines after making repairs and cutting out any dead tissue that remains. The good news about a gut wound is that the body had enough intestines that you can lose a few feet and still function normally. The key is in the reattachment. At the same time, we'll clean out his abdominal cavity again to ensure any fecal or other contaminant has been removed. We'll retest his other organs in the vicinity of the damage to ensure no injury has been overlooked."

"It sounds like a lot to put him through. Can't it wait? He seems so fragile to me," Justin said nervously and the doctor smiled reassuringly at him.

"No, the sooner the better and we wouldn't get started if we didn't think he was strong enough to endure it. There are some bone chips from his shattered rib and some metal fragments from the bullet that I'll need to remove to prevent future complications. Following that, we'll close the abdomen. Because his abdominal muscle wall is so hard, I have a strong hope that he'll heal without our having to put steel mesh netting between his abdominal wall and his internal organs. I think he has enough strength to provide his own barrier. The forty-eight hour period following this surgery is critical. The surgery will impose a grave shock to his system and the anesthesia is always a risk, complicated by his weakened condition. But there's every reason to have hope. I'll let you know when we have an operating room, and you can see him for a few minutes before pre-op begins. Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

Justin nodded.

"Do you have any questions?"

"My son is Catholic," Joan Kinney intervened. "Should we call a priest."

"No," Justin said firmly. "Brian is a lapsed Catholic, at best, Mrs. Kinney, and if he really can hear and if he hears a priest talking to him, it would stress him out completely. He'd think he was dying. No priest."

"I'll go to the chapel with you, Joan," Shea's mother offered and Joan Kinney smiled gratefully at her.

"You really don't want to let anything happen to that kid," Debbie insisted, dabbing at her eyes. "I'm tired and grumpy and scared and you so do NOT want to piss me off!"

The doctor smiled at her. "I'll do my best."



He left and Justin looked around for Lindsay. "Where's Linds?"

"I made her take a nap," Mick insisted. "With the baby and all, she needs to watch her own health. They were kind enough to make a family room available for her. But don't worry, Justin. I'll get her up to date when she wakes up."

"Baby?" Michael and Debbie said in unison, and Justin sighed.

"Yeah, Linds is pregnant. It's Brian's baby. I've got to go in to see him now." Justin left them alone to sort through that news without him.

It wasn't until six o'clock that evening that Bill came from the operating room, where he was allowed to observe the surgery. He was often the anesthesiologist for Dr. Boyd's surgeries, so it wasn't difficult to be granted this dispensation. Dressed in scrubs, he sat down beside his lover, Leo, his mask dangling at his neck. He took off the cap, scrubbing his fingers through his gray hair.

"I'll let the surgeon fill you in on the details, but Brian is out of surgery and in recovery now. No one can see him. I think he tolerated it very well. His blood pressure and heart rate stayed relatively normal and his biochemistry looks good, suggesting no infection has started. They closed him up without incident and no screen was needed. From where I stood, it looked like a perfect re-sectioning and they found no damage to adjacent organs. He's still critical, this is an important time, but let's be grateful for the fact he made it through this very big step."

Justin stood up, then sat down quickly. "I feel funny."

Bill sighed and spread a hand on his knee. "Of course you do. You haven't eaten or slept for over twenty-four hours. You need some nourishment and some shut eye. You can only live on adrenaline for so long. I think you know we'll come get you as soon as he can have a visitor, or if there is any change. The surgeon will be out soon, but after his report, promise me you'll crash."

"I'll see to it," Jennifer said firmly and Justin just nodded, waiting for the surgeon to confirm Bill's report.

Justin napped in the bed Lindsay had used earlier, after eating a light meal that Jennifer and Debbie brought to him. He didn't think he would be able to sleep, but as soon as his head hit the pillow, he was out. When his mobile rang,

he wasn't sure how much time had passed, but it was dark outside the windows. He pushed the button to activate the call and Shea's voice penetrated his fog.

"Any news?" he asked.

Justin shared the surgeon's report and Shea was quiet for a moment. "When will you know if he's out of danger?"

"Not for awhile."

"Okay."

"Shea, where are you? There's so much noise."

"Later, dude. I'll call." Shea hung up and Justin sighed, splashed some water in his face and returned to the surreal world of the waiting room.

Brian made a vow to himself: he would never get drunk/tweaked again, because this was the mother of all hangovers. His head pounded, his stomach rolled, he was in serious pain. He felt as if his mouth and throat were lined in sandpaper and he was so weak, he couldn't lift his hand from the bed. Opening his eyes seemed equally impossible.

"Mr. Kinney? You're waking up. Brian. Can you open your eyes?" A female voice, amid strange mechanical noises. It was all starting to come back to him. Hospital, surgery, Justin's voice, and did he even hear his mother once? And was that Mikey or did he dream it? "Brian, open your eyes for me."

He dutifully squinted his eyes open and was grateful to be in a dimly lit area, looking up at the round, jolly face of a nurse dressed in raspberry scrubs. She was rubbing his arm gently, shifting her gaze to the monitors that broadcasted his vitality, or lack thereof.

"Thirsty," he managed to croak, his lips dry and cracked.

"Wake up a little bit more for me and we'll give you some crushed ice."

"Hurt."

"We'll increase your pain meds as soon as you wake up for us. Do you feel nauseous?"

He nodded slightly. She added something to his IV and it seemed to instantly settle his queasy stomach. "Want Justin."

"Your little blond friend? He's right out there in the waiting room. But Dr. Boyd will be here in a minute. He'll decide about that. Do you know where you are and why, Brian?"

"Hospital. Cunt shot me."

She smiled. "That about sums it up. Here's Dr. Boyd now."

Brian shifted his gaze to green scrubs on a diminutive, balding man. "Welcome back," he said, reading a chart and then scanning Brian's monitor and jotting down notes. "I'm Dr. Boyd, your surgeon." With the nurse's assistance, he rolled back the warming blanket and raised Brian's gown to examine the packing and drains covering his abdomen. He then covered him up again and rested his hand on Brian's arm. "You've just survived five hours of surgery, Brian. You tolerated it very well. The fact that you're in excellent shape is a factor. Your wound is clean, the bullet and bone fragments have been removed. Your bowel was re-sectioned in several places. The bullet tore through multiple areas, each of which had to be cut, dead tissue removed, sutured, and then reconnected to the whole. There was no other damage."

Brian squinted at him. "Sounds bad."

"It wasn't good. You lost a great deal of blood. But it could have been much, much worse. Your kidneys, spleen and liver were spared, as was your urinary system. We got to you quickly, which reduces the risk of infection. But that's the key for the next forty-eight hours. We watch to ensure no infection is present and that you continue to heal. You have a series of drains protruding from your abdomen. They siphon off peritoneal fluid and lost blood. We check this fluid to ensure it's infection-free. Soon, we'll remove the drains and close those small cuts. You have a hard abdominal wall, which will aid in healing and which made it easier to firmly close your surgical incision."

"Scars?"

The doctor smiled. "I'm pretty proud of my handiwork, minimizing the incision, but yes, Brian, you will have a scar. You can tell people it was a Caesarian," he joked and Brian flinched.

"Hurt, thirsty."

"We'll give you some pain medication, and a spoonful of crushed ice. Just suck it, don't chew it."

Brian tried to smile. "Know all about that."

The reference went over the doctor's head. "I'll check on you later, Brian."

"Throat's sore."

"You were hooked to a ventilator. It abraded your throat, but that should pass soon."

"Justin?"

"Soon."

"Now."

The doctor smiled. "Soon," he said and left Brian in the capable hands of his nurse.

When Justin entered post-op ICU, he thought Brian was still out of it, even though the doctor told him he was conscious. He leaned over to kiss his lover's forehead and Brian whispered, "Dr. Boyd, I told you, I'm taken."

Justin stood up, shocked by the fact he could not only respond, but joke. "Baby?"

"Do NOT call me `baby'," Brian chided him, opening one eye in a squint to focus on Justin, surprised by the feeling of peace and pleasure that it gave him, just to see that face, even when it was tired and in need of a shave. Justin smiled and threaded his fingers through Brian's hair, unable to speak for a moment. "I think I'm paralyzed," Brian said, and Justin had to laugh.

"You are not paralyzed, drama queen."

"I'm pretty damned numb from the neck down."

"That's the morphine. Enjoy it while you have it," he whipped a small pot of Carmex from his pocket and smoothed a sheen of it over Brian's parched lips. The relief it gave him surprised Brian, it seemed such a small but sweet gesture.

"Are you okay?" Brian asked and Justin smiled, holding onto Brian's hand, mindful of the tubes.

"I wasn't the one who was shot."

"I know. But I've stood in your shoes, when you were hurt, and it's almost as bad."

Justin nodded, squeezing his eyes shut as tears threatened. He pressed his free hand to his face, stifling a sudden sob and Brian added pressure to the hand he was holding. "I know, Sunshine. It's scary. But I'm going to be okay."

Justin took a couple moments to regain control, and then wiped his tears on the sleeve of his shirt and said, "I'm sorry. I'm supposed to be reassuring you. I know you'll be okay, Brian, but I was so scared and I realized again how much I love you and need you."

"I'm here. Battered, scarred, but here."

"I'll take you anyway I can get you, so long as you're still breathing. Nothing matters but being alive and healthy and together, Brian. Not your job, or Jeffrey Walker, or his father, or money, or any of that shit. All that matters is that we have each other and we're healthy."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Brian teased. "Pretty soon we're going to look like two old scarred up prizefighters, the way we draw crimes."

"You'll always be beautiful to me," Justin said and Brian smiled.

"Liar."

The nurse told Justin he would have to leave, and that when Brian was taken to a room, they would have more time to visit, but for now, he had to rest. Justin leaned over to touch his lips to Brian's, smoothing the residual Carmex over his own lips as he withdrew. "I love you."

"You too. Go home, get some rest."

"No way. I'll be right outside."

"Justin?"

He paused and looked back at his lover. Brian went on. "Be careful. They tried to kill me, for chrissakes. Tell Lindsay to be careful with Gus. I'm scared."

"She knows. The cops have been told. I'm being careful. Don't be scared, Brian. Not for me, or for yourself. I'm not scared anymore."

"No? What are you?"

"Mad," Justin said bluntly, then smiled at Brian and left him alone to heal.

## Chapter 21

A week after his last surgery, Brian stared balefully at the wheelchair Justin rolled into his room at the hospital.

"I'm not getting in that thing."

"It's a rule. Just until you get out of the hospital. They make you."

Brian sat on the edge of the bed, wincing as his jeans bit into a small sutured site where a tube had been removed. His entire abdomen was a minefield of painful traps, with the main redzone being the major incision that began a couple inches below his navel and ended at his pubes. The staples that once held the skin closed had been removed. In their place was a long straight cut with a series of puncture wounds on either side of it, marking where the staples had penetrated. He was told the puncture wounds would fade away without a trace, but the main scar was there for life. There were other smaller sutured sites that would dissolve on their own and eventually disappear, each marking where a drainage tube had been inserted and removed. The opening where his temporary colostomy bag had been attached was already healing.

He felt as patched together as the Frankenstein monster. The backs of his hands were black and blue from the IV lines, and he had lost at least ten pounds, bringing his bone structure into sharp relief, after all the swelling receded. The skin under his eyes was tinged with mauve. Justin believed Brian had never been more beautiful. He was going to recover fully, and that was all that mattered to Justin. His standard for judging Brian's beauty had undergone a major sea change.

"Brian, remember that talk we had last night?"

"The one where you said you wouldn't blow me because you didn't feel secure that the nurse wouldn't walk in? And so I suggested we go in the bathroom, but you argued that there was no lock on the bathroom door? Then I asked you to jerk me off, and you agreed, but she DID walk in during the middle of it and you were too traumatized to finish the job until I whined like a little girl and you finally took pity on me? That conversation?"

Justin glared at him. "I was thinking about the VERBAL conversation we had, after that embarrassing moment, when you promised me you would do absolutely everything they told you to do, and you wouldn't argue with me about anything related to your care if they let you leave the hospital ahead of schedule."

"Oh yeah, that. Justin, I've had my body poked and prodded, inside and out. My shit has been collected like Incan gold and measured by the gram to make sure everything is working. I even had a nurse congratulate me the first time I could do it because it meant all the works were back in place and operational. I've had my body sponged off from head to toe by a three-hundred pound grandmother from the Bronx, with a nursing degree from the Abrasion and Sandpaper School of Nursing, and who referred to my dick as 'Mr. Winky'. I want my dignity back, starting now. I'll walk out of this hospital under my own steam."

Justin met his eyes. "Mr. Winky?"

Brian glared at him. "If you ever repeat that to me again, I'll make you look at those pictures they took of my intestines."

"You win. You can walk, but I'll carry your bag."

"I can live with that. I got my final bill today, by the way. You can now thank me for making sure I kept up the COBRA payments that you thought were so outrageous. Remember when you said that we shouldn't pay the premiums? Well, this bill was in the deep five figures."

"Yeah, silly me for not being able to predict some rich son of a bitch in Boston would hire a hit man to shoot you in the gut at close range while you strolled through Central Park!"

"Shut up. I could've walked off the curb in front of a moving van. You can't risk it."

"You da man, Brian. Let's go. I never want to spend another minute here."

Brian stood, compressing his lips into a thin line. He was determined not to show any pain or weakness, despite the fact everything hurt and he didn't think he could walk three feet without stopping to catch his breath. His disability was frightening to him. After listening to everyone tell him how remarkable his recovery had been, he expected to be just like he was before the incident. Instead, he was so debilitated he wondered if he'd ever be restored to his former condition. Justin slipped an arm around his waist, as he said, "Lean on me. Don't be the Iron Man, Brian. Let me help you."

Brian met his lover's steely blue eyes and smiled slightly. He nodded and leaned his weight on Justin's smaller, but surprisingly strong body. They slowly made their way out of the hospital to a waiting cab. Brian was reminded of when Justin got out of the hospital following the bashing, and Brian had helped him recover his mobility by tossing a ball to him. He had also helped Justin overcome his fear of being out in a crowd by walking with him and forcing him to walk on his own. Maybe this was what being in a relationship was all about. It was one partner being strong when the other needed a hand. He had to admit, it wasn't the most unpleasant sensation in the world. Being alone right now seemed sadder to him than being hurt.



By the time Brian rode home in the cab and took the elevator up to his loft, he was utterly exhausted. Justin carried Brian's bag while Brian unlocked the door, dismayed to find the place crowded with visitors. The construction had been temporarily halted, on Justin's instructions, since he was convinced Brian needed calm in which to recover. Lindsay had said something about dropping off some food, and Cynthia was there every day to keep the work under control. The Pittsburgh people had gone home after it was clear that Brian would survive, but Leo and Bill had dropped in with DVDs they thought Brian would enjoy. Edmond put his expert chef skills to work and delivered several of Brian's favorite dishes, prepared for the freezer.

"Mark and his wife brought the flowers," Lindsay explained, motioning to the huge bouquets of fragrant summer flowers arranged on the mantle and on the bedside table.

"Daddy!" Gus ran over to greet him, his arms outstretched to be picked up, but it was Justin who swung him up and held him close enough to kiss Brian's cheek. "Daddy can't hold you, Gus. He hurt himself."

"Daddy fall down and go boom?" Gus asked and Brian snickered.

"Daddy went boom and then fell down. And daddy is gonna fall down, again, if I don't get off my feet pretty soon."

Justin handed Gus to Mick, who motioned to Brian that she needed to talk to him. He nodded before following Justin into the bedroom. Once there, Justin helped him out of his clothes and into his pajamas. Brian stretched out on the bed. His exhaustion crashed in on him with a physical force. "Pain med," he requested and Justin glanced at his watch.

"Not for another two hours."

"Oh come on, Marquis de Sade, be a little flexible. I hurt."

"I know, and I'm sorry. Turn on your side and I'll rub your back. Maybe you can sleep."

"You know what would help me sleep?"

"Brian, you're the only man in the world who can not only think about sex, but actually have sex when you're still so weak."

"Just lucky I guess."

"I feel funny about it. The doctor never really said we could do it."

"He didn't say we couldn't do it, other than the fact you aren't supposed to top me for awhile."

"I don't think he thinks it could even happen, not anytime soon, not as sick as you've been."

"Then he'll have an interesting tidbit for his scholarly paper on Brian Kinney's small intestines and what makes him tick when he finds out."

"We have a house full of people, including your son," Justin scolded gently as he reached under Brian's pajama top and rubbed soothing circles into his back and shoulders. He noticed again how thin his lover felt, his bones so close to the skin. Justin soon realized that Brian had fallen asleep. Justin leaned over to kiss Brian's cheek and covered him with the comforter. He quietly closed the door before he rejoined the others.

Boston

Jeffrey Walker, Senior watched the tennis match with little enthusiasm from the terrace of his country club. His wife leaned over and touched his arm, bringing him out of his funk. They had just won a doubles game against another couple. They always won, but then they always chose opponents his wife knew they could beat, because living with her husband if he lost a competition wasn't an easy thing to do. For the last couple of weeks, he had been even moodier than usual. She had no idea what was bothering him, and he wasn't forthcoming with a reason. It couldn't be their son's trial, because the date had been set back due to the unavailability of Brian Kinney, his principal accuser. She wasn't sure about the details, but apparently Kinney was mugged in Central Park and seriously injured. As scared as she was for her son's fate, she was horrified to hear that his accuser was struggling for his life.

"Jay, have you heard how Brian Kinney is doing?" She suddenly asked over a cold plate of cottage cheese and fresh fruit.

He cut a harsh glare in her direction. "Why ask about him?"

"I just wondered. I know he was badly hurt, and hospitalized. Is he recovering?"

"Yes, apparently the bastard in the park failed to do the job properly and he'll be fine."

"You don't mean that."

"Of course I mean that, Karen! Do you know how much better off we would all be if Kinney died?"

"He's a young man. He has a child. No matter what his role may be in Jeffrey's troubles, we can't wish him a tragic fate. That kind of thinking boomerangs."

"Don't be so damned superstitious." He grimaced as he rubbed his forearm lightly. His wife sighed and pushed back the sleeve of his white sweater. She examined the angry red scratch that marked three or so inches of his flesh. It was a deep cut, and the skin was just now closing, despite the fact it had happened a few days ago. She remembered when he came home from a walk with their dog, her husband's arm was bleeding profusely.

"I still think you should see the doctor about that scratch, honey."

"Don't be ridiculous. It's healing. I called and verified that I have a current tetanus shot. There's nothing to be done. It's just an annoyance."

"I'm still not clear how it happened."

"It was just clumsiness," he said, unwilling to describe the incident, even to her. He had been walking along the cobblestone streets, pausing occasionally to greet his neighbors on Louisburg Square. Suddenly, a thin, badly dressed teenager approached. Walker had long ago learned that even the scions of families rich enough to live in this pricey enclave often looked like drug addicts and street dwellers. They seemed to costume themselves to look the opposite of their natural privileges. Some form of ridiculous adolescent rebellion, he supposed. Walker presumed this was one of those costumed rich boys, not an invader into their closed community. The kid was pleasant enough, despite his gaunt demeanor, as he paused to stroke Walker's golden retriever, who was as sweet as he was dumb.

"Nice dog," the kid said, then raised blue eyes to look at Walker. "Are you Jeffrey Walker?"

"Yes," Walker responded with forced politesse. "Do I know your family?"

"Doubt it, but I have something for you, Mr. Walker." The kid winced as he drug an ice pick out from under the cuff of his sleeve, and then jabbed it into Walker's forearm, left bare by his Polo shirt. The pick didn't go far beneath the skin since it was driven with little force, but when Walker pulled back, the pick scratched his arm and clattered to the pavement. He cried out with surprise and pain, and took a grab at the boy. His assailant's hand was covered in the kid's own blood, which flowed down his arm from a wound he opened with the pick when he extracted it from his sleeve to jab it into Walker.

The boy ran off before Walker could stop him. He made no attempt to rob him of his money, or demand his platinum Patek watch. His motive for the assault was opaque to his victim, who ultimately just marked it off as the act of a crazy person. Walker went home to wash and bandage his wound, too embarrassed to have been waylaid by a kid to make an issue of it. Besides, the connection to Kinney after what happened in Central Park was still too fresh. He couldn't help but wonder if there was a connection, since every other explanation failed.

The whole incident was ridiculous. If the kid was sent by Brian Kinney in retaliation, Kinney had fucked it up. If the kid was supposed to kill him, his aim was abysmal. If he was supposed to inflict severe injury, his skill was minimal. Why hire a child to do a man's job? But then, after all, Walker's pro had failed him, too. His only fear was an infection from the slight puncture, and a call to his doctor verified that his shots were up to date. While still painful, the wound was healing, and probably wouldn't even scar.

Smugly satisfied over Kinney's failure, if in fact, that was what it was, and not just a random psycho with an icepick, Walker enjoyed the rest of his lunch with his wife. Meanwhile, deep within his body, changes were taking place. Viruses, coded with specific contaminants, were attaching to his cells. His body met this threat by manufacturing antibodies to resist the attack. The battle waged, invisible and painless, as Walker went from being a man who condemned the weak and the perverted for making themselves vulnerable to AIDS, to being a member of that community, united to those he mocked by the fact he was fast becoming HIV positive. Since he had long ago lost interest in slipping it to his wife occasionally, she would be saved from a similar fate.

Shea's work was done.

Soho

It was late evening, and the loft was quiet except for some reggae playing on the sound system while Brian soaked in the tub, lit by a score of candles Justin strategically placed around the bathroom. Justin sat on the edge of the oversized tub, sharing a joint with his lover. They had already shared one of Edmond's perfectly prepared meals, and they were feeling good.

"Get in with me," Brian invited as Justin reached down and gently stroked Brian's penis. Once again, he was amazed how the stress of injury, surgery and the numbing effect of pain medication did little to reduce Brian's phenomenal sex drive. Justin stood to remove his robe, when the door buzzer intruded.

"Be right back," he said with a sigh and Brian nodded, watching him go. Justin re-tied the sash of his robe as he opened the door to find Shea standing on the other side. The kid looked bad and smelled a little ripe. Justin ushered him in and offered him a Coke. Shea agreed, sitting down heavily on the couch.

"How's Brian?"

"He's getting there. He's taking a bath. How are you?"

"Tired." Shea took the Coke from Justin, who noticed how grimy the kid's hands were. "Is he going to make it?"

"Yes, Shea. Complete recovery. He was lucky."

"Yeah, getting shot is real lucky."

"Surviving it is, especially if there are no lasting effects from it."

"Will they try again?"

"The police tell us no, that they're confident it was either a one-off mugging or it was a hit gone bad, and most people won't risk hiring a hit man a second time, especially after they get questioned on the first attack. Besides, they preserved Brian's testimony when he was in the hospital so that even if he'd died, they'd have the goods on Jeffrey. It's called a dying declaration or something. Jeffrey's attorney knows all about it. One way or another, Brian will nail that bastard."

"Good."

"Are you still on meds?"

"Ran out."

"You don't look good, Shea."

"I'm alright. Did my mom leave?"

"Mick got her a job at a women's shelter. She also gets room and board there. She refused to leave the city until she had some word on you."

Shea sighed. "Can I use the shower in the guest room?"

"Sure. I'll get you some clothes. You can probably wear Brian's sweats, you're too tall for my wardrobe."

"Thanks."

When Shea emerged from the guest suite, dressed in Brian's sweats, that hung loosely on his thin frame, he found Brian sitting in the remnants of the living room that was fast undergoing a metamorphosis into office space. Shea hesitated, then went over to give him an awkward hug. Brian hugged him back and Shea sat down next to him on the sofa. "You look good," Shea said and Brian laughed.

"Liar. Want to see my scars?"

"Sure."

He opened his robe and Shea winced as he looked at the fading scars where the tubes had been inserted, and the main suture line that disappeared beneath the drawstring of Brian's silk pajama bottoms. "Ow. Does it hurt?"

"A little tender," Brian said, re-tying his robe. "But bearable. How are you?"

"Been better. Where's Justin?"

"He went down to the corner to get you a burger. He'll be back."

"He didn't have to do that."

"He knows what you like. Where have you been, Shea?"

He shrugged. "Around."

"More specific. Have you been hustling?"

"Just enough to pay my way. Just blow jobs, I'm not endangering anyone."

"You know you have to stop, right? You have to stop," Brian said firmly.

"I know."

"So what are you going to do?"

Shea sighed. "Go home with my mom, I guess."

"Just like that?" Brian was suspicious of this turn of events.

"I guess I have to, now. I can't be seen hanging around with you after what I did. They may catch me and if they do, I guess it could even get you in trouble."

"What do you mean by that? What did you do?"

"Nothing."

"Oh no you don't. What did you mean?"

"Nothing, Brian. I don't even know what I'm saying. My head is killing me." He massaged his temples with his fingertips. "I've had the worst headache for days now. I can't think." He wanted to tell Brian what he did, mainly to demonstrate how deeply he cared for him, that he cared enough to kill for him. But he knew confession would make Brian vulnerable, maybe even an accessory to his crime, and that was the last result he wanted to achieve with what he viewed as a selfless act of love. "I'll miss you. And Justin," he quickly corrected himself.

"We'll miss you too, kid," Brian responded, still suspicious of Shea's abrupt decision to go home. "You're doing the right thing. You'll have insurance to provide you with the best care, and you'll be with people who love you rather than staying at a shelter. Your Mom has a list of doctors in your area with experience in treating AIDS. Since I got hurt, I found out it really does matter if you're around people who care about you when you're feeling down."

Shea smirked at him. "What complete bullshit."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean it's crap. You know how horrible my Dad is, and my Mom can be sweet but he dominates her and she has this religious thing going on. There's no gay community in Keokuk. I'll just be waiting to die. I only hope it happens soon."

"Don't say that, Shea."

"Say what, Brian? I have full-blown AIDS. It's inevitable now. I'm not your muscle-bound friend who is HIV-positive. I have AIDS. I'm dying. Face it."

Brian winced and opened his arms to Shea, standing to hug him in a tight embrace. "Sometimes unexpectedly good things happen to people, Shea. I dodged a fatal bullet, maybe you will too."



"Your bullet missed the important parts. Mine hit home."

"I'm so sorry, kid."

"I know. I—I love you, Brian."

Brian smiled gently. "I care about you, too."

"No, I mean I LOVE you. I've never loved anyone before, but I love you. I know you belong to Justin and I never had a chance, but that's the way I feel and I wanted to tell you that before I disappear. I wish I could do more to make your life better. I want you to have everything, Brian. Everything. You deserve it."

Brian sighed, letting his fingers drift through Shea's damp hair. "You aren't in love with me, Shea. I was kind to you, and you turned those feelings of gratitude into something else. Don't worry for a minute about me. I'll be fine. Concentrate on getting better. Maybe you'll meet someone you can love and who's free to love you back. It's worth living for, I found out."

"I did meet someone I can love. You. I just can't have you."

Justin walked in, observed the embrace, and heard Shea's declaration. It didn't tell him something new, he suspected Shea was hung up on Brian from the beginning. Why wouldn't he be? Brian was the handsome, romantic figure who swept in to help Shea when he was in a crisis. Of course the lonely boy would fall in love with him. Justin was just his age when Brian changed his own life forever.

"Am I interrupting something?" Justin said softly and Shea looked guilty as he stepped out of Brian's embrace. He took the sack of food from Justin as he answered,

"Not really."

Brian gave Justin an almost imperceptible shake of his head, as if to say, "Not now." Justin read his signal and didn't push it. What was there to say, really? The crush was revealed. Justin sat down beside Brian as Shea devoured his hamburger.

"When do you go home?" Justin asked and Shea sighed.

"Tomorrow. One thing is for sure. No one will ever find me in Keokuk."

"Who's looking for you?" Justin asked, half in jest, and Shea met his inquiry with a solemn stare.

"Maybe no one, maybe everyone."

"That's a very Sherlock Holmes thing to say," Brian interjected some levity into the conversation and Shea smiled, offering him no more information. Brian went on. "Go home with your Mom and live quietly and get better. Once all these legal matters are behind me and my business is going, you can meet up with Justin and me on some beautiful beach somewhere warm and lazy, and drink sissy drinks as we beckon skin cancer." He wanted to take away the horrors this kid was facing, give him something to look forward to. Shea smiled sadly.

"Ok, Brian. Promise me something."

"What?"

"When you and Justin are sitting on that beach somewhere warm and lazy drinking sissy drinks, look out at the perfect sunset over the water and offer a prayer for my soul that will be burning in hell with all the other mortal sinners."

Brian walked over and pulled Shea into his arms, holding tightly to him. "There is no hell, Shea. Only peace. And you'll be on that beach with us, kid, enjoying the same sunset we'll be seeing."

Shea said nothing as he clung to Brian as if clutching at a last chance for life.

Two weeks later, Jeffrey Walker, Senior picked up the telephone in his office overlooking Boston Harbor with a gruff, "What is it, Tom?"

His doctor, who was also a personal friend, sounded uncharacteristically nervous, "Jay, I got the results back on your tests."

Walker had just undergone his annual physical required for key man insurance for his corporation. It was an annoyance, but his health was always exceptional, so he never worried about it. "So?"

"I, uh, we need to talk. Can you come by my office this afternoon?"

"Of course not, Tom! I have a full schedule. What is it? Don't be so mysterious. Is my cholesterol high again? I've been on that fucking low fat diet you recommended."

"No, but....Jay, I have to ask you something. Have you had unprotected sex with someone other than your wife?"

"And you expect me to answer that question?"

"It's not prurient. I have a legitimate concern."

"What the hell are you angling towards, Tom? Just tell me, god damn it!"

"Jay, your blood test shows you are HIV-positive. It could be a false positive, but we ran two failsafe tests and they both came back positive as well."

"Well then run a third one, you idiot! Of course it's a false positive! I haven't had sex with anyone in an eon, it's not important to me anymore. And I damn straight wouldn't have sex with some faggot!"

"Women are positive too, Jay."

"I don't give a damn. I'm not fucking anyone. Nor am I taking drugs, or using needles or getting blood transfusions. It's not possible. The only faggot I spend any time with is my idiot son, and I don't get that close to him. He's negative anyway. So it's impossible."

"The virus can be undetectable in your system for months, Jay. This encounter could have been as long as six months ago."

"I'm telling you I haven't fucked anyone or had any sex with anyone at all for over a year!"

"Why not?"

"Because I'm an old man and I don't have to indulge that nonsense anymore, that's why not. I have better things to do with my energy."

"Jay, you're HIV-positive. I'll run another test if you come in, but I'm convinced. Have you had dental work or an accident or..."

"Wait," Walker's stomach flipped as he recalled the incident with the skinny kid and the icepick. The kid had been bleeding. The icepick was bloody. The kid looked as if he could be a drug addict, he was so thin. What if...."Tom, if someone had a sharp instrument and they were HIV positive and they cut themselves with that instrument and then immediately cut you with it, could you get it that way?"

"If the cut breaks your skin and the instrument goes beneath the surface and contacts your bloodstream, yes. That's how it's done with needles. Very potent."

"Jesus Christ." Walker felt his heart sink as dread began to set in. "I'll be over there in fifteen minutes."

"But..."

"Fifteen minutes, Tom." Walker hung up, and rolled up his shirtsleeve to reveal the faded track of the cut opened by the boy wielding the icepick. He wondered if it were possible that such a small wound could effectively end his life. If so, match-point to Brian Kinney, a result Jeffrey Walker couldn't tolerate almost as much as he couldn't comprehend his own fate.

## Chapter 22

Doctor's Notes: It's been four weeks since BK was shot by an unknown assailant and left for dead in Central Park. After two surgeries, his recovery has been rapid, but he is only now beginning to deal with the emotional fallout of such violence. This is our first meeting since the attack.

Excerpt from transcript:

Doctor: Well, now, Mr. Kinney, you look pretty damned good for a man who was shot in the gut not so long ago.

BK: Yeah, but do I look pretty good for a man who WASN'T shot in the gut? That's the test.

Doctor: Yes, you do, actually. A little thin, a little pale, but I like the beard. That's new.

BK: (Rubs fingers through carefully trimmed moustache and beard) I like it too, even though Justin says it makes me look older. I think it makes me look butch.

Doctor: Is that important to you right now? Looking butch?

BK: (Shrugs) Seems to be. No one wants to look like a mark.

Doctor: Do you believe your looks had anything to do with the attack, Brian?

BK: Only indirectly. Whether they can prove it or not, I think Walker was behind it. And it was partly my looks that got me in tight with Jeffrey and set this whole fiasco in motion.

Doctor: That's a stretch, to blame your face for your troubles.

BK: I know. Look, the DA tells me I should shave before I testify, that it will make me look more reliable and credible and Cyn tells me the clients expect a more cosmo look, so I guess it's just a temporary affectation.

Doctor: I see. Are you off pain medication?

BK: Oh yeah, long time, now. They wouldn't refill it. You'd think I was an addictive personality or something. (Chuckles.)

Doctor: Are you still in pain?

BK: Not much. It still feels tight along the scar, and sometimes it itches or aches, but less and less. My biggest heartburn is fatigue. I have no energy. I work out for fifteen minutes and I want to take a nap. I go to bed at the same time the octogenarians issue lights out and I sleep late in the morning. I can't seem to get my strength back.

Doctor: What does your doctor say about that?

BK: (Shrugs) He says it's normal, that my body underwent a major trauma and that I lost a hell of a lot of blood, so it'll take me awhile to regain my vigor. I've been increasing my exercise daily, so I guess it's improving.

Doctor: How's your sex life?

BK: I may not be burning it up quite as fast or even as frequently as before, but that part of me always seems to function, no matter what.

Doctor: And Justin? How's he responding?

BK: Sexually?

Doctor: If you wish, but I was thinking more along the lines of emotionally. This had to bring back harsh memories for him.

BK: I know, I've worried about that. I remember what it was like for me when he was hurt, so I know he's gone through some of those same feelings. That, plus the burden of his own bashing coming back to haunt him.

Doctor: Has it placed a strain on your relationship?

BK: Just the opposite. We're closer now than we've ever been. I think we both got a rude reminder of just what's important.

Doctor: And what's that, Brian?

BK: Not the stuff you can put on a MasterCard, that's for sure.

Doctor: That's a big lesson.

BK: I know. So long as we have each other, and we're both healthy, I think there's very little that could take us down. We're each a lot stronger with the other, than we are individually. It pains me to admit that, but it's true.

Doctor: And you're both very lucky to know that and to share that knowledge.

BK: Yeah.

Doctor: So, are you angry?

BK: At what?

Doctor: At your assailant, at fate, at yourself.

BK: (Pauses) I'm supposed to be grateful to be alive.

Doctor: I didn't ask what you're supposed to be. I asked what you ARE.

BK: Yeah, I'm angry. I feel vulnerable and that makes me mad, and I feel singled out for punishment and it's not right that I should have to go through all this on top of everything else piling up in my life. Yeah, I'm pretty fucking angry, Lydia. Damn, I guess I really am angry. I don't think I realized just how angry until now.

Doctor: Anger is a natural response, Brian. Don't feel you have to conceal the fact you're mad about what happened just because you're a survivor. Let it out or it will come out in inappropriate ways, directed at the wrong people.

BK: What's the point, really? It's just a waste of energy.

Doctor: Do you feel fear?

BK: Of what?

Doctor: Of a stranger wielding a gun, of people out to get you, of anything.

BK: I have fears that people I care about are in danger. Justin, Gus or Lindsay. I fear they may try to get at me through them. That scares me.

Doctor: No fears about your own safety? Your own mortality?

BK: I know I have an ego, but I haven't thought I was invincible since I jumped off the roof when I was ten, convinced that I could fly like Superman. Broke my arm in two places. That convinced me I wasn't immortal. I never allowed fear to dictate my life. I wouldn't let fear of AIDS stop me from experiencing sex, I just tried to be smart about it. I wouldn't let fear of losing my job stop me from doing the right thing about Jeffrey. I wouldn't let fear of intimacy keep me from finding my way to Justin. I think I have a healthy respect for fear but I don't let it paralyze me.

Doctor: No night sweats, terrors? Unspecific fears? Feelings of unease or agitation at little provocation?

BK: Now you're describing my whole life.

Doctor: Seriously, Brian. The emotional responses of a trauma victim are classic. You've seen many of them with Justin. I want to help you cope with it when and if it becomes unbearable.

BK: I wish I had selective amnesia, the way Justin does. I remember every aspect of it. All of it. The man in Central Park, the way he smelled, the feel of metal against my body. I recall that I automatically pushed the barrel of the gun down from my chest, just as it discharged. There was a sensation of disbelief; it felt like he'd sucker-punched me with the force of a kangaroo. Falling down, feeling suddenly cold, the texture of my own blood as it congealed



around me. I don't really remember the ambulance ride or being at the hospital, leading up to the first surgery. Remembering isn't comforting. I think Justin's brain had the right idea: Forgeddabout it.

Doctor: But he hasn't really forgotten anything, has he? He just pushed those emotions deep beneath his surface. Ultimately they will find a way out and that's not always good. Better those frustrations come out as part of his analysis.

BK: You make us sound like a couple of nuclear bombs waiting for our warheads to be armed.

Doctor: The fact that both of you have now been through violent attacks may help you reach a deeper understanding of each other, Brian. The pain is no longer theoretical for either one of you.

BK: (Smirks) Isn't it nice when couples share everything? Like Intensive Care and seeing the light at the end of the tunnel?

Doctor: Be serious. How bad are the scars?

BK: (Lifts shirt and pulls waistband of his jeans lower to reveal a surgical incision that is flat and thin, beginning to fade) Pretty, isn't it?

Doctor: You're lucky to have fair skin. The possibility of keloid scarring is less likely with fair skin.

BK: And the hits just keep on coming!

Doctor: You've always traded on the fact that you're a very handsome man, Brian. What does that scar do to your self-image?

BK: (Shrugs) It doesn't seem to bother Justin anymore than I was bothered by that scar on his head, although his hair mostly covers it now. At first, when he touched it, I felt weird about it. I thought it was too ugly for him to acknowledge. But he said something that really helped me get past that feeling.

Doctor: What did he say?

BK: (Smiles slightly) He said it reminded him of how close he came to losing me and how glad he was that we were given this time together.

Doctor: That was a wise thing to say. Very caring.

BK: I reacted pretty strongly to it myself. After that, it seemed like no big deal to me. And if Justin isn't bothered by it, why do I give a shit what other people think? It's not like it's on my face. Besides, every pirate needs a good scar, right?

Doctor: You a pirate now, matey?

BK: I've always been a pirate, Lydia. I've always flown the skull and crossbones in society's face.

Doctor: That may be apt. What are you not telling me?

BK: What do you mean?

Doctor: Something is eating at you. I know you by now, Brian. I can read your moods pretty well.

BK: For your sake, I hope not.

Doctor: What is it?

BK: Nothing.

Doctor: You don't pay me to listen to your bullshit, Brian. What is it?

BK: (hesitates) I feel a tremendous amount of guilt about that kid, Shea Hennessey. You saw him a few times.

Doctor: Of course I know Shea. Why guilt? What's happened?

BK: He would've been better off if he never met me.

Doctor: How do you figure that? You didn't give him AIDS.

BK: No, but....

Doctor: Where is Shea now?

BK: He went home with his mother. To die. I have no doubt that he'll be dead within a few months. He's given up.

Doctor: I hope he rallies, he still has a lot of living left in him, but if he does die, how is that your responsibility, Brian? Grief is normal and understandable, placing blame on yourself is egocentric and unreasonable.

BK: You don't know the whole story.

Doctor: So tell me the whole story. Did you get involved with him sexually?

BK: (Glares) It's not always about sex, Lydia.

Doctor: That's progress. Okay, so what is it about?

BK: It's about a kid who never had much kindness in his life and when someone shows him some affection or interest or caring, he's so knocked out by it he's willing to risk anything to show his gratitude. No matter what the personal cost to himself.

Doctor: Explain.

BK: No, I've already said too much. I just brought a darkness into his life to overshadow whatever time he has left, and I feel terrible about that.

Doctor: Okay, Brian, let's assume your mysterious guilt has a basis in fact. What do you plan to do about it?

BK: There's nothing I can do that wouldn't hurt him more.

Doctor: Then let it go.

BK: How do I do that?

Doctor: You just do. You tell yourself there's nothing you can do to change the facts, you remain kind and supportive to him, and you move on with your life.

BK: Drink a toast to his memory on a beach in Barbados.

Doctor: What does that mean?

BK: Nothing. It doesn't mean a god damned thing.

End of Excerpt

Doctor's Notes:

BK has made a strong physical recovery from his injuries, but he is still battling the psychic demons created by a brush with his own mortality, and he will continue to have these issues to work through for some time. Added to his residual issues of self-image and fear of intimacy, he has an overlay guilt concerning his relationship with Shea Hennessey. Hennessey appears to be in an advanced stage of AIDS and has gone home to his parents. For reasons BK has not yet revealed, BK feels a strong guilt towards this young man, which he will need to face and overcome, especially if Hennessey dies and survivor's shame and grief cloud BK's emotions even more than today. Otherwise,

BK's relationship with JT appears to be strong, and he is coping with his employment issues. The upcoming trial and testimony against Jeffrey Walker will be a challenge requiring BK to summon all of his emotional as well as physical strength to prevail.

Cynthia looked up as Brian returned to the loft following his appointment with Lydia. The scruffy beard he had grown disarmed her. He never appeared effeminate, but the beard gave him a straight quality that left her slightly off-kilter. Long ago, she had learned to sublimate her attraction to Brian Kinney since it was hopeless and it interfered with their working relationship. The stress of seeing him gravely wounded combined with the beard left her reeling. Her protective feelings towards him melded with her unrequited attraction to make her feel a little defensive towards Brian.

The construction had resumed and the noise intruded as Brian sat down in a chair across from her desk and sighed with fatigue. "I rethought the campaign for Sports H2O. I think the current pitch is too much a Nike clone. We should approach it from a different perspective."

"We pitch in three days, Brian. We have the creative on boards."

"I'm aware of the schedule, Cyn. But the pitch has to be right."

"It's expensive to start and stop the mock ups."

"Why are you busting my balls over this? I don't give a shit if we punt a few hundred bucks in repro costs if it means we get the pitch right."

"I'm not busting your balls! I'm just trying to be fiscally responsible."

"The fiscally responsible thing to do is to land the account, and if I pitch them the current campaign, that's not fucking likely."

"You were okay with it twenty-four hours ago. What changed?"

"I was 'okay' with it, true. I don't want to be 'okay' with it. I want to be fired up by it, because if I'm not fired up, neither will they. My brainstorm is we take it out of the traditional sweaty jock arena and use the sports name tie-in in an amusing and untrad way. We zoom in on the bottle, hold the camera there, see the sweat rolling down the

container, and hear the panting and sounds of exertion in the background. Slowly, the camera pans to discarded sweats, running shoes, whatever, on the floor. Slowly pan to a couple in a bed, looking smugly satisfied. The man or the woman, I don't care which, reaches for the Sports H2O bottle beside the bed and sucks it down. A voiceover says something like, 'Sports H2O. No matter what the sport.' Something like that."

Cynthia stared at him, amazed by the way his mind worked. He mistook her silence for uncertainty. He continued with his explanation.

"That's choppy, but you get the picture. We pitch it with all the untraditional activities where people drink water. Not that many people are athletic in this fat, lazy country, but they all want to look like they work out and this would appeal to the couch potatoes too. Another ad could show a game underway, doesn't matter what game. Show the label on bottles or on a water cooler on the sidelines with the players, and then pull the camera back to show a guy seated on the couch, with remote in one hand and the bottle in the other. Again, pitch it to the line, 'no matter what the sport'."

"I like it."

"Yeah, me too."

"You really are good at this, you know?"

He chuckled. "Duh. Have you tried that water, by the way? I think it sucks. It has a funny metallic aftertaste. They're probably poisoning society, but what can we do? We don't make it, we just make people buy it."

She was silent for a moment, then she said, "Brian, I don't understand something."

"What? It's pretty straight forward."

"Not the ad campaign."

"What then?"

"I thought you were gay, not bisexual."

"I am gay. So?"

"You slept with Lindsay?"

He winced. "Moving on..."

"I know it's none of my business, but I'm trying to understand it. To understand you."

"And this helps you do that in what way?"

"I don't know, Brian. But it threw me when I found out you slept with Lindsay."

"And how did you find that out?"

She sighed. "Justin let it slip."

"And how did he do that?"

"I said something about it being nice that she was having another baby and I didn't know you were still in the sperm-donating business, because I might ask for a donation for my freezer just in case Mr. Right never comes along. It was a joke."

Brian winced. "Let's hope. And then?"

"And then he said that this was a direct deposit and that the results were unexpected."

"I see. Did he seem upset?"

She smiled, pleased that Brian's first thought was whether his lover was still fuming over the pregnancy. "No, bemused, I guess. He said he was mad at first, but now he's kind of excited about the idea of Gus having a sibling."

"Good. As for the rest of it, I really don't want to explain my relationship with Linds to you, Cyn. It's complicated. But all you really need to know is that it was an aberration between us, something that hasn't happened in over a decade and something that's never likely to happen again. But good, Irish Catholic boy that I am, I'm sure to be punished for a single sexual slip-up. As for donating, this kid is the end of the line for my genes. I'm out of the business. I'll stick to lovers who can't get knocked up."

"You mean you'll stick with Justin," she reminded him just as Justin came home from work. He looked from Brian to her and smiled.

"Go ahead and answer that one, Brian."

"I'm STUCK with Justin," he said with a smirk, and Justin came over and hugged him tightly.

"You're damned right, you are."

They kissed and Cynthia sighed and picked up her purse and briefcase. "Calling it a day. See you tomorrow."

They nodded a perfunctory goodbye at her, caught up in each other. "Are you hungry?" Justin asked with a shudder as Brian rolled up Justin's shirt and leaned down to nibble at his exposed skin.

"Starving," Brian said, reaching inside the waistband of Justin's pants to fondle him gently. "Feed me?"

"Sit down," Justin commanded, pushing him back into a chair. Brian smiled as Justin moved Brian's long thighs apart and stood between them. He pulled off his shirt and opened his pants, letting them slip down his hips. Brian lowered the waistband of Justin's tighly-whities to allow his hard cock to pop out of the cover.

"Looks like someone is glad to see me."



Justin smiled. "I know, and yet I don't understand what he sees in you."

"He likes hanging with a bad crowd," Brian responded, leaning forward and anchoring Justin in place by cupping his firm ass with both hands. He plunged Justin's turgid cock into his mouth, slipping all the way down on it, until his nose was tickled by Justin's rust-colored pubes. Brian closed his eyes, enjoying the texture of his lover's cock against his tongue, the roof of his mouth, the back of his throat. Slowly, he pulled back and let his full lips drag the heated flesh while his tongue worked Justin from below. Justin moaned and buried his fingers in Brian's hair, closing his eyes as he lingered over the sensation. Brian worked him like a maestro, fast and then slow, forming a tight enclosure and then releasing him to lick the length of it with his tongue. As Justin neared orgasm, he increased the intensity and speed, easing a long finger between his lover's clenched buttocks to glide up his tight ass as he pushed him into an ejaculation. Brian swallowed, sucked, swallowed the rest, then withdrew his finger and his mouth, leaning back with a satisfied sigh as he said, "Welcome home."

Justin leaned over and kissed him, tasting his own salty residue. "Thanks," he let his hand probe Brian's lap, gripping his erection. "Want to do something about that?"

"I thought I might."

"What did you think you might do?"

"I thought I might fuck you blind."

"I think that's an excellent idea." Justin knelt before Brian, unbuttoning his shirt as Brian let his hands wander Justin's silky, fair skin. "Lift up," Justin guided him, so he could slip Brian's jeans off his hips and down his long legs. He wore no underwear. "Going commando today?" he teased, and Brian smiled.

"We're behind on the laundry."

"You just like how huge your cock looks when it's free in those jeans."

"That too."

Brian's erection bumped his belly, covering his scar. He stroked it absently as Justin disappeared to fetch the lube. When he returned, he stopped Brian's masturbation and replaced his hand with his own, coating Brian's swollen

cock with a sheen of K-Y Liquid. It glistened in the light, and Brian smiled at the sensation of Justin's caressing hand. Justin straddled him, guiding Brian's gleaming phallus into his body as Brian held him in place by linking his fingers at the small of Justin's back.

Justin's feet were flat on the back of the chair beside Brian's head, creating maximum penetration. He used his lubed hand to masturbate, his eyes closing with pleasure as he felt Brian begin his long, slow strokes deep inside his ass. Brian looked over to nibble Justin's fuzzy calf as the fucking got hotter and faster and harder. It wasn't until Justin blasted a load against Brian's torso that Brian allowed himself the release of a shattering orgasm, his face clenched with such extreme pleasure, it resembled pain.

Brian looked down at his lover and smiled. "How was your day, dear?"

Justin laughed and pulled Brian into his arms. "Good enough for another round."

"State your name for the record," the agency's outside attorney said to Brian as the deposition began.

Brian was seated beside Mick in her small conference room, with the opposing counsel on the other side of the table. The agency's general counsel was there, along with Felix representing the client-side of the case. Felix was polite enough to inquire about Brian's health before the deposition started, but now the gloves were off.

Brian had deliberately dressed down in jeans and a black wifebeater under a white shirt, refusing to wear corporate drag to impress these assholes. Mick had primed him on what to expect and the broad reach of a deposition, telling him unless she interposed an objection, to go ahead and answer. She told him even if she objected, she would probably tell him to answer, if he could. He should take a clue from what she stated in her objection and on the rare occasion that she instructed him not to answer, he should do so on her advice.

Everything he said would be transcribed by a court reporter, and the deposition could be used to impeach his credibility if his testimony in court varied from the sworn transcript. Mick insisted he should only answer what he was asked, requiring the opposing counsel to pull the information out of him through probing. He should never volunteer information that wasn't directly solicited.

"Brian Aidan Kinney."

"How old are you, Mr. Kinney?"

"Thirty-two, almost thirty-three."

"Are you married?"

Brian smiled slightly. "No."

"Is that because you're homosexual?"

"No, that's because I don't believe in the sanctity of the marriage vows. I think people should decide for themselves whether they want to be together without the imposition of the state. And if I wanted to be married, I could be, gay or not."

Mick gave him a look, silently reminding him not to pontificate, rather to limit his answers to the parameters of the question asked.

"Do you deny you're homosexual?"

"No."

"Do you live alone?"

"No."

"Who shares your home?"

"My partner."

"As in sexual partner?"

"As in LIFE partner," Brian corrected him.

"What does that mean, Mr. Kinney? You aren't having sexual relations with this person?"

"No, it means it's more than a sexual relationship. We share a life together, that simple."

"And his name? I assume this 'life partner' is a man?" the lawyer made 'life partner' sound dirty.

"Well, I wouldn't be gay if he weren't, now would I? His name is Justin Taylor."

"How old is Mr. Taylor?"

"Twenty."

"How long have you been together?"

"Living together?"

"As life partners."

"About a year."

"Did you meet in New York City?"

"No, we met in Pittsburgh. We both used to live there."

"Isn't it true that when you moved to New York, you were alone? You had no 'life partner'?"

"Yes."

"And where was Mr. Taylor?"

"Still in Pittsburgh."

"When did you first meet? How old was he?"

"That's two questions," Mick intervened and the lawyer broke them up.

"Seventeen," Brian answered. "And I was 29."

"Was he sexually experienced?"

Brian frowned. "I'd like a minute to talk to my lawyer."

He and Mick retreated to her office, where he lit a cigarette nervously and glared at her. "Why do I have to answer intimate questions about Justin?"

"Brian, relevance is a lousy objection in a deposition, you always lose. They can range far and wide and since your gay status is a centerpiece of your claim, we'll never win that one."

"It's embarrassing for him."

"I think he can cope. Just be honest and don't give them more than he asks."

They returned to the conference room and Mick asked the court reporter to read back the last question. Brian responded, "No, he was not experienced."

"Were you his first gay lover?"

"I was his first lover, period."

"And he was underage at the time?"

"No, he wasn't. The age of consent in Pennsylvania is sixteen."

"Did he still live with his parents?"

"At that time, yes."

"And did he leave home to live with you?"

"No, he had a falling out with his parents because they couldn't accept the fact he was gay and I let him stay at my place for awhile. We never officially lived together until he moved to New York and we made the decision to give it a try."

"Is it a monogamous relationship?"

Brian frowned. "It's what we want it to be. If we want it to be monogamous, it is. If we don't, it isn't. It's not some static rules-clad relationship like that imposed by society. It's monogamous now."

"Do you know Lindsay Peterson?"

This time both Brian and Mick tensed. "Yes, I know her."

"Who is she?"

"A friend."

"What is your relationship with Lindsay Peterson?"

"I just told you. She's my friend."

"Is she your lover?"

Brian glanced at Mick who was giving away no emotion. "No."

"Has she ever been your lover?"

"We had a fling in college."

"Is that it?"

"What are you asking me?"

"Isn't she the mother of your child?"

"Yes."

"Conceived in college?"

"No. I donated sperm."

"So your son wasn't conceived via sexual intercourse?"

"That's right."

"And isn't she pregnant again? Now?"

Brian sighed. They had done their homework. "Yes."

"Is that your child too?"

"Yes."

"And did you donate sperm again?"

"Not the way you mean."

"How was this child conceived?"

"We had sex."

"I see. So you're gay. Is she gay?"

"Yes," Brian said, without looking at Mick.

"You're in a monogamous relationship with a man. Is she involved with someone?"

"Yes." Again, Brian didn't look at Mick.

"A woman?"



"Yes."

"And yet the two of you are having a sexual relationship?"

"No. The two of us had SEX. Once. In thirteen years. Which resulted in a pregnancy."

"So Mr. Kinney, you're neither gay nor monogamous, isn't that right?"

"I feel pretty gay and pretty monogamous when I have daily sex with my partner."

"But you still have sex with other people, too. Women."

"No. One woman. One sexual experience. I'm not bisexual. Neither is she. It's complicated. We have a history."

"Yes, it is complicated, Mr. Kinney. Hard for you to explain and even more difficult for an employer to understand, wouldn't you agree?"

"What does that mean?"

"I mean how is an employer supposed to understand that you're gay when you go around impregnating women the old fashioned way?"

Mick objected, and Brian sighed as the lawyers argued. So this is where they were taking it. They couldn't have fired Brian because he was gay when they didn't even fully understand the true nature of his sexuality. He shook his head slowly, reminding himself once again why he never wanted this fight in the first place. Now Justin would be embarrassed and Lindsay too. Mick's secretary brought her a note, then left the room. She read it, looked up at Brian, and then called for another break. The attorneys for the opposition griped about it, saying they were wasting their time with these constant interruptions, but Mick held firm.

"I have an emergency. You'll have to give me five or we'll just reschedule."

They reluctantly agreed and she left, followed by Brian, who had a sense of dread over this sudden change in plans. "What is it?" he asked as she punched a number into the speaker phone. Soon ADA Jim Jacobi's voice was heard on the other end.

"Jim, this is Mick and I have Brian with me. What happened?"

"Yesterday evening a team of our detectives, along with Boston P.D., visited Jeffrey Walker, Senior in his home to ask some questions about the Central Park shooting. He stonewalled them, as expected. They made a follow up appointment to meet in his office today. When they showed up, they heard a gunshot. They broke into his inner office and found him dead, one bullet to the brain, the gun still smoking in his hand. He left a note that said one sentence only: 'I've had enough.' The news will break momentarily. An autopsy is required, but there's no reason to believe it was anything other than suicide."

Mick met Brian's eyes that reflected his shock. "Holy shit," he said softly. With a promise to keep them informed, Jacobi rang off.

"Why would a man like that kill himself?" She mused aloud. "Unless they were closing in on him. His pride, perhaps. Or maybe he was ill. Hadn't told anyone yet."

"Ill with what?"

"I don't know, Brian. I'm just speculating."

Brian frowned, feeling a little ill himself as a stray sense of responsibility rose up to haunt him. Did he cause this in some way? Why should he care? Walker did all he could do to destroy Brian, and maybe even tried to have him killed. That's all he needed to know. He couldn't control the insanity in the world. He just had to let it go. "Maybe these assholes will settle now if Walker no longer has his foot on their necks."

She nodded solemnly, not yet certain of the ripples that would come from this unexpected news.

Brian squinted at the screen, finding the image as strange and disturbing as photos of an alien life force sent back to earth via satellite. Mick and Lindsay were far more enthusiastic as the sonogram revealed the tiny fetus.

"Is no one alarmed that it resembles a prawn?" Brian asked causing Lindsay to reach over and pinch his thigh while she giggled.

"Stop! That's what you looked like once, Mr. Wonderful."

The technician glanced over at the male component of this odd group and said, "Not exactly. This baby is a female."

"How the hell can you tell that?" Brian challenged her. "I can't even make out its limbs, let alone its genitals."

"At this stage, it's really more of a lack thereof," the technician explained. "The fetus is turned to give us a perfect view. While there always exists the chance of a misdiagnosis of gender at this stage, there is no sign of a penis, so the default is female."

"Well, if you would see a penis from this direction, and you can't, it must be a girl, because any son of mine would be showing off proudly."

Mick laughed. "You are such a caveman. A girl, Linds! How exciting! A sister for Gus. Are you thrilled?"

Lindsay beamed at her and squeezed her hand as the technician printed the screen to give them the image of the baby. Later, at an open air café in the Village, Justin joined them for lunch. Lindsay was still floating on the buoyancy of their good news.

"It's not that I'd have been disappointed if it were a boy. I couldn't adore Gus more than I do. But it's wonderful to have one of each, isn't it Brian?"

He winced as he took a sip of his latte and tried to picture himself with a daughter. "I don't know. I don't like the idea of watching any daughter of mine go out on dates, knowing she's going to be pawed and poked by a bunch of horny, pimply boys."

Justin laughed. "Not for a few years, I hope. I recommend against dating at birth."

Brian cut him a smirk. "You weren't much older than that when I met you, Sunshine."

"Gus will have the same issues," Lindsay reminded Brian, who shrugged.

"No, he'll be the one with the pimples and the poker."

"Christ," Mick said, shaking her head in disgust. "That is the most flawed, retro thinking. Completely sexist."

"Every man feels that way," Brian defended. "They're lying if they say otherwise."

"The important thing is that she appears healthy and perfect," Lindsay reminded them. "And I've never felt better."

"Or looked better," Mick beamed, leaning over to kiss her cheek.

"Oh I don't know about that," Brian teased. "When she was nineteen, and as slim as a whippet, she was pretty damned devastating."

Lindsay laughed. "As were you. Oh, damn, you're still slim as a whippet. I hate you."

"That's because I have the easy part of reproduction. How can anyone say God is a woman? If so, why would She put you guys through this? If men had to give birth, there would be no overpopulation problem." His mobile rang and he answered it. Cynthia sounded flustered.

"Felix just called," she informed him.

"That's odd."

"He wants to meet you for a drink this evening."

"That's even stranger."

"What should I tell his assistant?"

"Hold on," he lowered the phone to address Mick. "Felix wants to meet me for a drink. What do I do?"

"Go, listen, agree to absolutely nothing."

"Cyn, tell him yes, but make him come down here. In fact, make him meet me at Hot, Mick's bar."

Cynthia laughed. "A gay bar?"

"Hey, he wants to see me, we play on my turf."

He hung up and noticed Justin's piercing stare. "What?" Brian challenged and Justin sighed.

"Why would he call?"

"Shit, I left my crystal ball at the loft. How the hell do I know?"

"Don't snark at me, Brian. I'm just suspicious about the call."

Brian leaned over to kiss Justin's cheek by way of apology for snapping at him. "I am too. Why is he calling me, Mick?"

"He's a hard driving executive and schmoozing is his weapon. My guess is he wants to try and find a way to wiggle out of this lawsuit now that Walker is toast. Maybe even offer to re-hire you. After all, you've taken a bunch of his lucrative clients away from the firm. I guess he didn't anticipate that result."

"I'd give blow jobs in a bus station before I'd work for him again."

"Like you haven't given blow jobs in bus stations," Justin teased, ducking Brian's glare.

"What if he offered you a lot of money?" Lindsay asked and Brian shrugged.

"Money's cheap. If I learned anything from this debacle, I've learned what's important. What really matters are the people around this table and a handful who aren't here with us. I can always make money," he wrapped an arm around Justin's shoulders as his lover leaned against him affectionately. "This shit is irreplaceable."

"You should get shot more often," Justin teased. "It's improved your world view."

"Yeah, set that up, will you? Walker's hit man should be free now that the old man is dead," Brian responded, and then leaned over to kiss Justin as the two women smiled at each other, observing their shared affection.

Even though none of the patrons at Hot were the least bit interested in the overweight, balding ad executive, Felix felt certain they were all checking him out while he awaited Brian Kinney's late arrival. Felix was as nervous as a rabbit at a greyhound convention, prepared to spring for the door if one of these faggots made a grab for him. He noticed the crowd didn't fit his preconceived notion of men who would inhabit a gay bar. There were some who were obviously effeminate, but most looked as if they would blend in just as well among the fern bar crowds in mid-town.

When Brian Kinney walked in, accompanied by a smaller, younger blond, the crowd took notice. He was dressed casually in jeans and a denim shirt, but he had an élan that set these men on alert, or maybe it was the handsome blond they were noticing. Probably both. Brian called a greeting to the bartender and crossed the room to sit across from Felix at his table.

"I'll get us some drinks," Justin said.

"Wait," Brian reached for him and Justin draped himself over the back of Brian's chair, his arm casually slung across Brian's chest, his cheek pressed to Brian's hair as his lover said to Felix, "Have you met Justin? My better half?"

"Uh, no," Felix hadn't expected this wrinkle.

"Justin, Felix, Felix, Justin," Brian continued. Justin reached past Brian and across the table to shake hands. Felix shook his extended hand with perfunctory politesse.

"May I get you a drink, Felix?" Justin offered and Felix declined, motioning to his full shot of scotch. Justin left for the bar and Brian watched him retreat, and then turned his gaze to Felix. He lit a cigarette and Felix sighed.

"I didn't think you'd bring your...your...friend."

"My friend?" Brian laughed. "Surprise. How ya been, Felix? How's bid'ness?"

"Good, Brian. And you? Are you recovering from that....that incident in the park?"

"You make it sound like a purse-snatching. You mean from that attempted murder?"

"Uh...well, yes."

"Much better, thanks. Looks like I'll make it."

Justin returned with their drinks, handed one to Brian and sat down beside him. "Bartender wouldn't let me pay for them. He said it was worth the price of a couple drinks to finally get a look at the little stud who took you off the meat market."

"Little stud?" Brian responded with a laugh. "Whatever. This is your party, Felix. What's the agenda?"

"Brian, with Walker dead, Boston Industries is undergoing an internal shake up. Not sure how it will play out, because the stock that controls the corporation is still held within the Walker trust, and by his estate. The gossip is that his wife will step in. She has no prior business experience. I think it's a disaster."

Brian blinked as he took a sip of his drink. "I care about this because...?"

"I'll be honest with you. No reason not to be. Walker did pressure me to get rid of you. I have to look at the well-being of the whole firm, and if we lost BI, we'd lose jobs, lots of them, because we wouldn't have the budget to support them. I realize that made you something of a sacrificial lamb, but that's the way it goes, sometimes. You have to be able to make a hard decision in business. I hated it. You were always a top performer and..."

Brian held up a hand to stop him as Justin squeezed Brian's thigh under the table, restraining his own anger. "Stop it, Felix. Don't blow smoke up my ass. Too much water under the bridge for that. I knew Walker was manipulating things, this is no surprise to me. That's why I sued Walker, too. So?"

"So, I want you back, Brian. Let's just drop all this stupid, pointless and expensive litigation and go back to where we were."

Justin laughed and Brian glanced at him and then at Felix. "You're kidding me, right?"

"Of course you'd be compensated for the time you were, uh, away, and we'd also re-hire that blonde girl who worked with you."

"That 'blonde girl' has a name. Cynthia. Now why would I want to do this, Felix? Why wouldn't I believe that once I dropped the litigation, you'd come up with some other bullshit excuse and fire me again?"

"Won't happen. I'll give you a locked-down employment contract, Brian. More annual salary, increase your bonus level, increase your partnership shares. Money has to be tight for you now. I hear you're working out of your home."

"Oh yeah, money is definitely tight, Felix, but I've landed some sizeable accounts, including Sports H2O who signed on with me today."

Felix frowned as he heard yet another of his big clients had been lost to Brian Kinney. "Don't let your pride stand in your way, Brian. This could be a big move for you. You have to be tired of this lawyer bullshit."



"You have no idea how tired of it I am. My lawyer told me you'd make me an offer and that I was supposed to commit to nothing. But I have to say this," he shook his head as Justin reached over and covered Brian's hand with his, warning him to be silent. "I wouldn't work for you or that fucking firm if you were the last ad agency in the universe. I have a job. I work with people I like, Cynthia is with me now, and Justin is our de facto art director. I have expansion plans. I'm actually making money now. I don't need your job. I just need your clients, and I intend to get them all, one at a time, until the only thing you're pimping at Vanguard are pawn shops and parking lots."

"Don't be a drama queen, Brian. Think with your head, not emotionally."

Brian leaned back, rolling his lips in against his teeth in an expression Justin knew only too well. Justin waited for the inevitable. It finally came in a calm voice that Brian directed at Felix. "Like some silly faggot, you mean? Know what I think, Felix? I think you fired me because you were a slave to Walker, but I also believe you meant every single word you said to me when you let me go. Every homophobic word you said. So let me tell you in butch English what you can do if you want this litigation to go away. Make me an offer that has at least six zeroes in the number and we'll talk. Otherwise, you can kiss my tight, jiffy-lubed, homosexual ass! Come on, Justin, let's go fuck each other senseless."

"Nice to meet you," Justin said to Felix with a sarcastic smile as he wrapped an arm around Brian's waist and they left the bar together.

Brian sat on the floor in the living room of Mick's apartment playing with Gus and a fleet of small plastic cars while Justin watched with a bemused smile. He loved to see Brian with his son. There was a softness in him that came out around Gus that he never showed at any other time, even with Justin. Mick and Lindsay came in with a tray of sandwiches and some cold beers.

"Say goodnight," Lindsay said, scooping Gus up from the floor. "Give Daddy a kiss. It's past your bedtime."

"Night night, Daddy," Gus said, planting a wet kiss in the vicinity of Brian's mouth.

"Night cowboy," Brian responded, ruffling his son's hair as Lindsay carried the baby over to say goodnight to Justin and Mick. Brian got up and sat beside Justin on the sofa, reaching for a sandwich and a beer. He had already related the conversation with Felix to Mick and then Gus demanded his full attention, so they really didn't discuss it. Now she stared thoughtfully at her client.

"Brian, it's not too late. You can still go back. He'll up that offer."

"What is it you don't understand about 'I won't work for that agency'. Not ever. I like what I'm doing, Mick. I like the freedom of having both creative and marketing input. I like working with Justin and Cynthia. I like having the ability to try a few new things without clearing a committee of old farts. I want to get Mark into the firm. I think we honestly have a chance of hitting, and I also think Mark can raid his firm the same way I'm raiding Vanguard."

"But you'd be free of all the legal hassles."

"Fuck it. They're going to pay. Walker, or at least his family and his company, are going to pay. I'll get through the rest of it."

She smiled. She always admired Brian's ballsiness. She was glad to see the recent string of near-tragedies hadn't dulled his fighting spirit. "Felix's admission regarding Walker will certainly assist us in prosecuting that claim. Jacobi tells me the criminal trial is scheduled for next week. Are you up for it?"

He glanced at Justin and shrugged. "I just want it over with."

"I understand."

Justin patted Brian's thigh gently. "You'll do fine. Leo is giving me the time off so I can watch your testimony."

"I don't know about that. I'm not sure I want you to witness my testifying to what a dumb ass I was."

Justin smiled. "Don't worry about that. I already know what a dumb ass you were."

Brian chuckled. "Bitch."

"You made me what I am today." They kissed and Mick shook her head slowly, amused by their snarky, romantic style.

On the morning of the first day of the trial of Jeffrey Walker, Junior, Justin dropped a plate of freshly scrambled eggs on the hardwood floor of the kitchen, shattering the dish and scattering yellow shrapnel across a wide area. Brian's appearance was the cause of this extreme startle reflex.

"What the fuck?" Justin insisted and Brian looked perplexed.

"What?"

"Who are you?"

Brian's Italian-designed suit, handmade shirt and classic silk tie were familiar enough, but his hair was still damp and combed close to his head, and he wore a pair of rimless glasses that caused him to resemble a drop-dead gorgeous college professor.

"Where did you get those glasses?" Justin demanded and Brian frowned as he poured himself a cup of coffee, gingerly avoiding the egg splatter.

"I've always had them. Since I was about twelve, I've had corrected vision. I just wear contacts all the time."

"You do not!"

Brian glared at him. "Why would I lie about this?"

"I've never seen you put a lens in your eye!"

"I wear the disposable kind. You put them in and wear them all the time, then throw them out in a month or so and put in a new pair. Why do you care?"

"Because I can't believe I've lived with a man, loved a man, thought I knew everything about this man, and just now discover that he wears contacts?"

"You'll never know everything about me, Sunshine. Never."

Justin finished cleaning up his mess and leaned against the counter, observing his lover. "Why the glasses?"

Brian shrugged. "I've had them, I just don't wear them. Don't need to with the contacts. I decided to wear them today. You have a problem with that?"

"Actually, I think you look hot in them."

Brian chuckled. "You think I'd look hot in pork rinds."

"Hummmm...."

"Shut up. Wasn't this morning enough for you, you sex pig?"

Justin laughed. "Some wise man once told me, 'there's no such thing as enough'."

"You need to improve the crowd you hang with."

"Apparently. Want some breakfast?"

"Are you serious? Want to see me hurl on the witness stand? No, I'll pass."

"Brian," Justin came over to him and encircled him in his arms. "You don't have to wear a disguise. You can do this. You tell the truth. That's all you have to do, and no one tells the truth more often or better than you."

Brian smiled and leaned down to kiss him. "It could get ugly. They'll try to paint me as a reprobate and that means your name will be drawn in with mine."

"There goes my Supreme Court appointment," Justin teased. "I'm proud of what we share. I don't care who knows it or how much they know. And I know about all your warts, it's not as if there will be any surprises to me. Send that motherfucker to jail, Brian. That's all you need to do."

"Don't come to court. I don't want you to see me up there."

"Try and stop me."

"Justin..."

"You go. I know you have an appointment with Jacobi. I'm going to try this again with the eggs. Then I'll shower and dress and come down."

"They'll be doing preliminary stuff this morning anyway. Boring. They just picked a jury and I guess they have to do opening arguments or something. I probably won't be on until closer to lunch."

"Okay, I won't rush. Relax. Here, I have something for you," Justin reached into the pocket of his sweats and pulled out a blue rubber ball. Brian took it with a curious look and Justin smiled.

"It's my therapy ball. The one I used when I first got out of the hospital and I was trying to build the strength and flexibility in my gimpy hand. I've carried it around, squeezing it if I get nervous or worried. It helps."

Brian smiled. "Your 'therapy ball'? Lydia needs to hear about this," he tossed it from hand to hand and then grinned at his lover. "You're a whack job, you know that?"

"It's the head injury."

Brian leaned down to kiss him, then picked up his briefcase and slowly left the loft.

Brian noticed Jeffrey speaking to an elegant looking, silver-haired woman before the trial began, and he correctly assumed she was Jeffrey's mother. The look she gave Brian was not one of hatred, however, rather it was curious compassion. He was always amazed by the feminine capacity to forgive. When he went up to the stand, while he

was being sworn in, Brian looked towards Justin. His lover reassured him with a slight smile. Mick sat beside Justin, and at Brian's request, Lindsay stayed away. It was now time for Brian to tell his story.

After the preliminary identification questions, Jacobi led Brian into the heart of his story.

"Mr. Kinney, do you know the defendant, Jeffrey Walker, Junior?"

"Yes, I do."

"How do you know him?"

"I had a sexual relationship with him and he was also a treating physician on the case of my partner's little sister, who is suffering from leukemia."

"How old was this patient?"

"Twelve, at the time."

"Does she reside in Manhattan?"

"No, Pittsburgh."

"Do you know whether the defendant resides in Manhattan?"

"Yes, he does. But I asked him to get involved."

"Why is that?"

"I knew he was well-respected in the field of pediatric oncology, treating kids with cancer."

"Were you involved with him sexually at that time?"

"No, we had a very brief fling, before that, but I was in a relationship with someone, and it wasn't happening. I liked Jeff, and hoped we could be friends, but we weren't lovers."

"When did that change?"

"When I induced him to come to Pittsburgh to treat Molly."

"Molly is your partner's sister?"

"Yes."

"What was his response when you asked him to come to Pittsburgh to treat Molly?"

"He said he had a huge practice in New York, and if I expected him to disadvantage himself, then I would have to bargain something for his time."

"What was that?"

"He wanted to have a relationship with me. He wanted me to leave my partner for him, and if I would, he said he would cure Molly. If I wouldn't, he said he would let her die."

"Did you believe he could cure her?"

"I had already witnessed how she improved through some changes he made to her protocol. I was desperate to believe she had a chance, so yes, I believed him."

"Mr. Kinney, you testified that the defendant used his services as a doctor to bind you into a sexual relationship with him, is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Before he made that offer, how much time had passed since you were last intimate with him?"

"A month, six weeks, maybe. I'd told him it was over, and I meant it."

"Were you still in Manhattan when you had this conversation with the defendant about treating Molly?"

"No, I had gone to Pittsburgh to be closer to Justin, my partner, and his family."

"Did you take leave from your job?"

"The agency I worked for at the time had an office in Pittsburgh. I worked out of that office and stayed in a hotel."

"Did the defendant come to Pittsburgh to treat this child?"

"Yes, because I said I would honor his request."

"At that time, were you back in a monogamous relationship with your partner?"

"Yes."

"Prior to your temporary relocation to Pittsburgh, did your partner leave New York?"

"Yes, he went home to be there for his sister and his mom."



"While he was gone, did the defendant try to become intimate with you?"

"Yes."

"And were you intimate?"

"No, I wouldn't do it."

"Why not?"

"I didn't feel that way about him anymore, and I was being respectful to Justin. Especially with what he was going through."

"Why were you willing to acquiesce to the defendant's demands?"

"Because Molly was hovering between life and death and there was indisputable evidence that she did better when Jeff was guiding her protocol.. I would sacrifice everything to get her well, including my own happiness. I bonded with Molly. I couldn't let her die."

"At the expense of your own lover, her brother?"

Brian met Justin's eyes and sighed. "We had a vague hope that after she was well, there would be nothing to hold me to Walker. But I had a real fear of tricking fate, so who knows?"

"You became Walker's sexual partner, willingly, subject to this coercion?"

"Objection, there has been no evidence of coercion..."

"Let me rephrase."

"Were you able to perform sexually with the defendant?"

"I was physically and emotionally wasted. I wasn't sleeping at all, spending every free moment at the hospital with Molly. I also had to keep going on my job and try to maintain some relationship with Justin on the sly because he was all that was keeping me sane. When Molly went into isolation, before the transplant, she almost died more than once, she was so frail. I was distraught and having an affair with Jeffrey Walker was not high on my list."

"At this time, were you under the care of a psychiatrist?"

"Yes. I had been for months."

"Why were you seeking psychiatric treatment?"

"I went in because I was having trouble sleeping, but I soon realized I was suffering from extreme depression."

"Do you know the cause?"

"Superficially because my partner, at that time, had left me for another man. But it was more than that. I wanted to change my life. I wanted to understand why I was so terrified of intimacy and so unable to commit to anyone."

"Were you prescribed medication by your psychiatrist?"

"Yes, Wellbutrin, an anti-depressant."

"Are you still seeing that psychiatrist?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I'm still unraveling my own emotions, and I want my relationship with my partner to work more than anything. It would never happen without help. I was dealing with too many issues to rely on self-help."

"Did the defendant know you were being treated by a psychiatrist?"

"Yes, he knew all about it. We discussed it. He found it amusing that I would rely on a woman, and an African-American woman, at that."

"What was your response to that?"

"Lydia, Dr. Johnson, saved my life. Not only when I was so depressed when I first saw her, but also when Jeff took me all the way down."

"Objection!"

Brian tuned out the lawyer's arguments, glancing at Justin, trying to read his reaction. His lover gave him a sweet smile and Brian relaxed slightly.

"So, despite your fragile mental and physical condition, did the defendant expect you to have sexual relations with him?" Jacobi continued.

"Yes. I did have sexual relations with him. In my opinion, he didn't care about my condition. He wanted to dominate me. He would order me to perform oral sex on him, which requires no sexual reaction from my body, and ultimately, he started giving me drugs to get me interested."

"Do you know what drugs he would give you?"

"No, something he injected. It was like super-speed, it hyped me up until I was climbing the walls. And then he brought me down with a second shot of something else."

"Did you willingly submit to these drugs?"

"Not the first time, but after that, it seemed to be the only way I could give him what he wanted. I was on the verge of a complete breakdown by then. I was the living dead."

"How often were you given these drugs by Dr. Walker?"

"Five or six times, maybe."

"Did Molly improve?"

"Yes, she didn't reject her brother's bone marrow and she was on the rise."

"Why didn't you leave the defendant at that time?"

"I was afraid of tricking fate. I was out of it, and I believed if I went back on our agreement, she would slip away."

"Were you still in Pittsburgh?"

"We came back to Manhattan for a social function honoring Jeff's work with sick kids, and he wanted me there."

"Were you given anything to get you through the evening?"

"I was afraid of it, but he was determined I not be sullen and as he put it, in a 'Black Irish' funk. He wanted to impress his friends with his new boyfriend, I guess."

"So you went to this function?"

"Yes. And all my friends from Pittsburgh, and my lover, and his mother, they all trooped in and sat at our table. One of the men seated at our table had arranged for it. He was an old acquaintance of Jeffrey's but a new friend of my partner."

"What happened?"

"It was an intervention of sorts. My partner's mother stood up and thanked me for helping Molly and fired Walker in front of a room full of his associates. After that, the ruse just went away. I left with my partner, and I just bottomed out. It took me awhile to recover from the drugs Walker had been giving me, but my partner and I left the country on vacation after I filed charges, just to recuperate. Which I did."

"Mr. Kinney, let me ask you once more. Did you consent to the initial injection of drugs by the defendant?"

"No, I did not."

"And after you were injected, were you even capable of consenting freely to sexual relations with the defendant?"

"No, I was not. I was completely wasted."

"One more thing. Are you still with your partner?"

"Yes," Brian smiled slightly. "I am."

"Your witness," Jacobi said to the defense counsel.

The judge glanced at his watch and announced it was time for a lunch break. They would resume in an hour. The judge left and then the jury, and Brian watched them lead Jeffrey out of the courtroom before he stepped down from the witness stand where he was met by Justin who held him tightly in his arms, no words necessary between them.

Brian lunched with Justin and Mick when Jacobi decided to work on the case over the break. Brian ate nothing and only sipped at his Coke. Justin reached over and covered Brian's hand with his own.

"You did fine. Didn't he do fine, Mick?"

She met Brian's gaze and nodded. They both knew, even with Justin trying so hard to be supportive, that it was going to be hard to convince a jury of straight people to care about what had happened to Brian at the hand of Jeffrey Walker.

"You're very credible, Brian," she reassured him. "You come across as someone they can believe and you look credible because you give them the straight scoop, even if it's bad for you."

He smirked at her. "I am under oath, after all. What else can I do?"

"Exactly what you're doing. But you know this will get much worse on cross. She has to shred you to save him."

"I know."

"They say it's hard to feel sorry for the beautiful and the rich," Justin said with a sigh as Brian smirked at him.

"The rich part is certainly wrong now, and the beautiful part is fading fast."

"True," Justin teased. Brian glared at him.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Justin laughed. "I'm just fucking with you, baby. You know you're beautiful, and I don't give a shit if you're rich."

"God damn it, do NOT call me 'baby'!"

Justin laughed and leaned over to kiss Brian on the cheek, oblivious to the other diners, including Mick.

Back on the stand, Brian faced questioning from the icy blonde lawyer, who was dressed perfectly in a crisp Armani suit and Mikimoto pearls that were the size of chickpeas.

"Mr. Kinney, how many men have you had sexual relations with?"

"Objection," Jacobi was on his feet. "Mr. Kinney is not on trial."

"No," the defense counsel allowed. "But the defense asserts that it was Mr. Kinney, not Dr. Walker, who was the sexual predator in this relationship and that the intimacy was not only consensual, it was solicited by Mr. Kinney. Therefore, Mr. Kinney's sexual habits are very relevant to the defense."

Brian listened as they argued the distinction between this case and precedent shielding the use of past sexual history of a rape victim in trial. Walker was not on trial for rape, because the D.A. didn't believe he could make such a charge stick. Rather he had been charged with assault, by using narcotics as his weapon, so the protections were less apparent. Brian let his gaze wander past the impassive faces of the jury, over Jeffrey's smug countenance, to Justin's comforting presence beside Mick on the row behind the DA's counsel table. Justin gave him an encouraging smile, and Brian nodded slightly, relaxing a little. The objection was overruled and the elegant blonde engaged Brian once again.

"The question is, how many men have you had sexual relations with, Mr. Kinney?"

"I don't know."

"More than five?"

"Objection," Jacobi asserted. "He's answered that question. He doesn't know."

"I'll ask it another way. Can you give me a range, not an exact number, of men you have had sexual relations with? For instance, between one and ten? Whatever the number may be?"

"I've never counted the number of men I've been with. I don't keep a tally."

"Estimate, Mr. Kinney. More than one hundred?"

Brian glanced at Justin, and then said, "Yes."

"How many more? More than five hundred?"

Brian sighed, unwilling to sit there and let her tick her way up to a more likely number. May as well get the trash out there on the lawn for everyone to see. "Look, if I had to estimate, and I guess I do, the number is probably closer to three thousand."

Justin didn't visibly react, but the jury appeared shocked by that number. Jeffrey was glowering at Brian as the blonde let the testimony sink in and then said, "Three THOUSAND men? Are you talking about the number of times you've had sexual relations or the number of men?"

"Number of men."

"Were you a prostitute, Mr. Kinney?"

"Objection!"

"Withdrawn. Where did you meet all of these men?"

"Different places. Clubs, baths, parks, parties, the internet, parades, athletic events, airplanes...wherever people meet people."

"Would you agree that you're very experienced sexually?"



"Yes." The courtroom tittered at that statement of the obvious and the judge called for order.

"In the last year, how many men have you had sexual relations with?"

"Two."

"Just two?"

"Yes."

"Who are they?"

"Jeffrey Walker, and my partner."

"Ah, your 'partner'," she said with sarcastic glee. "Are you in a monogamous relationship now?"

"Yes."

"After literally thousands of sexual partners, you want the jury to believe you stopped cold turkey and went into a monogamous relationship?"

"It's the truth."

"And why did you change your ways, Mr. Kinney?"

"I grew up. I discovered what matters. I got psychiatric help to sift through my intimacy issues."

"And what is that matters to you, Mr. Kinney?"

"If you're lucky enough to find someone whom you care about and who cares about you, don't f...screw it up. It probably won't happen again," he glanced at Justin, who smiled and nodded.

"And yet you weren't faithful to this partner of yours, were you?"

"No."

"You had sex with Dr. Walker, isn't that right?"

"Yes."

"The first time you had sex with Dr. Walker, where was that?"

"In his cabin in the Berkshires."

"He invited you to go to the cabin with him?"

"Not exactly. I knew he was there, and I found him. I wanted to talk to him. I had a business meeting in Boston, and I just drove to the cabin to confront Jeff."

"About what?"

"He had confessed some feelings for me and I wasn't able to return those feelings because of my involvement with someone else. But I liked Jeffrey at that time and I wanted to explain things."

"You followed him all the way to a cabin in the Berkshires to explain things?"

"Yes."

"And once there?"

"We talked, but we also had sex."

"At who's instigation?"

"It was mutual."

"And then?"

"I realized it was wrong for me. I needed to be with my partner, and this wasn't working. I couldn't be the free-wheeler, sexually, anymore. I didn't want to lose Ju...my partner. Not for anyone. So I left."

"And when was the next time you had sex with Dr. Walker?"

"He came by my loft in Soho a couple days later. My partner and I had a fight when I told him what happened with Jeffrey and he went to stay with friends. I was alone and pretty fu...messed up. Jeffrey showed up and I reverted to a long-standing method of pain management and had sex with him."

"At whose instigation?"

"Mutual."

"And the next time?"

"That was it. My partner and I patched it up, and I wasn't going to risk it. But about that time, he found out his younger sister had leukemia, so things changed."

"Did you solicit Dr. Walker's help with her illness?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because she was gravely ill and he was a specialist in that area, and I was desperate to help her."

"And did he refuse?"

"No."

"Even though you seduced him and then rejected him, he agreed to assist your lover's sick sister?"

"Objection."

"Withdrawn. Did he agree to assist your lover's sick sister?"

"Not at first, but ultimately, yes."

"And did she improve?"

"She got a bone marrow transplant from my partner. That donation saved her life."

"So she did improve under Dr. Walker's care?"

"Yes," he admitted reluctantly. "I believe he made a difference in her outcome."

"And did he charge you for that care?"

"Not money."

"What did he charge?"

"He blackmailed me into having sex with him, in return for treating Molly. He said if I didn't, he would let her die. He wanted me to be his partner, to leave Justin, and he used Molly's life as his bargaining chip."

"I see. Dr. Walker is...would you agree with me that he's a handsome man?"

Brian glanced at Jeffrey's WASP profile and nodded. "He's handsome."

"Brilliant?"

"Yes."

"Do you know whether or not Dr. Walker is financially prosperous?"

"Filthy rich."

"And do you know whether he is respected in his field?"

"Yes, very."

"And yet you ask this jury to believe he had to blackmail you with the life of a sick child, after devoting himself to years of treating desperately ill children, in order to get you in bed? You? A man who admits to THOUSANDS of sexual encounters?"

"Jeffrey Walker is a sick puppy beneath all those advantages."

"Objection, unresponsive."

"Answer the question, Mr. Kinney," the judge instructed him and Brian sighed.

"What was it again?"

The Court Reporter read it back and Brian responded, "Yes, I'm asking you to believe that, because that's what happened."

"Mr. Kinney, have you ever used drugs before or during sex to enhance the experience?"

"Yes."

"What drugs?"

"I don't know. Different things at different times in my life."

"Ecstasy?"

"Yes."

"Special K?"

"Yes."

"Poppers or amyl nitrate?"

"Yes."

"Crystal meth?"

"Yes."

"Cocaine?"

"Yes."

"Viagra?"

"Yes, once."

"Did I leave anything out?"

"Not that I can remember."

"How often did you use a chemical to enhance your sexual performance or enjoyment?"

"I didn't track it."

"Ten per cent of the time? Fifty per cent?"

"More than ten, less than fifty. Maybe a third of the time. It's hard to say. Those disco drugs really weren't tied to a specific sex act, they were just part of a whole evening that often ended in sex."

"Were these drugs prescribed?"

"No."

"Have you been treated for addiction?"

"I'm not a drug addict, nor have I ever been."

"But drugs and sex, combined, are not unknown to you."

"No."

"Then, if Dr. Walker gave you drugs during sex, as you allege, how was that so different from your previous countless experiences with drugs and sex?"

"Because I didn't know what it was and didn't ask for it. And I didn't even want to perform sexually. The drugs pushed me over."

"Have you ever drugged a sex partner?"

"Not without being asked to do so by that partner."

"Do you know that possession of cocaine and many of the drugs you mentioned is a felony?"

"I'm not possessing any of those drugs. I was testifying about the past."

"Mr. Kinney, are you employed?"

"Yes."



"By whom?"

"I'm self-employed."

"Why did you leave your last job?"

"I was fired."

"Weren't you fired because you failed to carry out your responsibilities in a reasonable and predictable manner?"

"I was fired for two reasons: one, I'm gay, and they can't handle that, and two, Jeffrey Walker's family is a client of the firm I worked for and they put incredible pressure on the agency to get rid of me to punish me for filing a complaint against Jeff."

"Did you sue the agency?"

"Yes."

"And did you sue the Walker family and Jeffrey Walker, Senior, personally?"

"Yes."

"Tell me, do you know what happened to Jeffrey Walker, Senior?"

"Yes, he recently committed suicide."

"Was the pressure of this criminal prosecution and your lawsuit a factor in his suicide?"

"Objection!" Jacobi inserted and after an argument, she asked another question of Brian.

"One last thing, Mr. Kinney. How is Molly today?"

"She's doing quite well. I saw her recently. Her chances are good."

"Thanks to Dr. Walker?"

"In part."

"I have no further questions."

And with that, Brian was released.

Brian and Justin had dinner with Mick and Lindsay that evening. Lindsay and Gail cooked, and Brian was unusually subdued, spending quiet time reading to Gus and sipping at a glass of merlot as he awaited the meal. He ate very little, and helped Lindsay get Gus ready for bed, tucking him in himself. When he rejoined the adults, Gail was offering them Devil's Food cake, which Brian declined.

"It's your fave," Lindsay tempted him, but he shook his head.

"Not hungry. I feel like the scum of the earth after she finished with me today. Like some promiscuous, drug-crazed comic book stereotype. My guess is Jeffrey has had a fair number of tricks, too, and he's no stranger to party drugs. It's part of the culture. It may seem extreme to the jury, it would even be extreme to segments of the gay community, but it's not unheard of behavior in my world."

"Brian, you don't know those people on the jury. You'll never see them again. What they think of you is less than zero in importance," Mick reassured him. "We never thought this was going to be easy. You told your story, you told the truth, either they believe you or they don't. You can't control the outcome."

"I'm sorry," he said to Justin.

"For what?"

"For putting our private life out there for everyone to enjoy. For dragging you into it. For the whole fucking dog and pony show."

Justin sighed and went over to Brian, looping him in his arms. "Shut up. I don't give a shit about it. And I knew you had big numbers in your past, no surprises there. You were brave and you were honest. If they don't buy it, fuck them. Only one thing bothers me."

"What's that?"

"I feel like I should go out tricking tonight to try and close that cavern of experience between us."

Brian smirked at him. "Well, it'll be a busy night."

Justin laughed. "Makes me ache just thinking about it. Is there a circuit party in town?"

Brian chuckled. "Yeah, you're in luck. The Train Pullers of America are meeting at the Waldorf. You can still be the late floorshow."

"Okay, like I don't understand ANY of this?" Gail said with a perplexed frown and her mother sighed.

"And that's a good thing," the phone rang and Mick picked it up. It was Jim Jacobi. They talked briefly and then she hung up, and looked tensely at Brian. "His boss wants him to offer Walker a plea. He thinks they can't win this one. He wants to give him time served and community service if he pleads guilty to lesser charges."

"That is incredibly cowardly bullshit!" Brian exploded. "They put me through this pain only to cop a plea to this asshole?"

"It happens all the time, Brian. It's no reflection on you."

"The fuck it's not! You think if they believed that I did such a great job they'd still be offering him a plea?"

"You can't stop it, and he may not even accept it, Brian."

"Fucked again by the system," Brian said curtly and motioned to Justin to leave. As they went, Justin thanked them for the dinner, and then followed his fuming lover down to the street.

In the taxi, Brian said nothing. Justin allowed him that space, gently resting his hand on his thigh, just as a totem of quiet support. When they arrived at the loft, someone stepped out of a black limo idling at the curb. Brian automatically tensed, given his recent experiences, and protectively pushed Justin behind him. He relaxed when he saw the person was a slight, older woman.

"Mr. Kinney?" she asked tentatively. "May I have a word with you?"

Jeffrey's mother. Brian tensed. "I don't think we have anything to say to each other."

"I understand why you feel that way, but please. Will you give me five minutes of your time?"

Justin squeezed Brian's waist with both hands, as if to urge him to say no, but Brian relented. Whether it was his curiosity, or his acute instinct for people, he waved her into the building. As he opened the loft door, Justin apologized for the disarray, explaining they were in the midst of renovations. Brian introduced his partner, and she said her name was Karen Walker. In the light, she appeared tired, but she was impeccably clad in Chanel. She sat down on the edge of the sofa and declined their offer of a drink. Brian and Justin commandeered chairs from Cynthia's unfinished office, since the rest of the living room furniture had been moved out.

Brian wondered what this woman had been through, not only with the recent death of her husband and her son's lunacy, but her whole life, under the thumb of a megalomaniac like Jeffrey Walker, Senior. She seemed nice enough, not icy and remote. Her once-youthful beauty was still shadowed in her features, but recent events had rapidly aged her. "How's Hannah?" He asked about Jeffrey's daughter, and that brought a smile from her.

"Hannah is the light of my life. She's become reacquainted with her mother, my daughter, Susan. Susan has worked very diligently over the last two years to put her life back together. She went through an extended rehab and hasn't used drugs in eighteen months. She has a responsible job in a company unrelated to Boston Industries and pays her own way in an apartment not too far from where I live."

Brian nodded. Jeffrey made his sister sound like a flake and a whore. He wondered how much of that was his typical bullshit. How hard did he push to adopt Hannah, not out of love or a sense of responsibility, but because his image demanded a child and his ego required a blood connection? "I'm glad. My son is Hannah's age. She's a lovely child."

"Yes, she really is. She's so like Susan, when she was that age. I just hope...well, we were very unfair to Susan. My husband was a traditional man, and his son was his complete focus, when it came to the family. Jeffrey was brilliant, the spitting image of Jay, and driven to succeed. Jay never gave Susan a thought. She struggled so hard to be noticed, finally giving in to negative ways of seeking his attention. I don't just blame Jay. I was there. I failed her, too. But she's forgiven us both, as part of her therapy, and is on a solid path now. I was hoping she and Hannah....but...it looks like Jeffrey will be home soon, and..."

Brian tensed. "I'm sorry you had to hear all that in court. It couldn't have been easy for you to listen to, but whether you can believe it or not, everything I said in there today is the absolute truth. It happened exactly the way I said it did. It was, in fact, even worse, since I was the one living through it. It was the darkest time in my life, not only because Molly was so gravely ill, but also because Jeffrey took my soul from me. You shouldn't do that to a person. It's not right. If not for him," he reached over and took Justin's hand in his. "I would have been lost. His infinite patience and determination were what saved me."

Justin smiled sweetly at him. "Not true. You have an inner strength that you always discount. You wanted to find your way out and back to me as badly as I wanted that to happen. And you risked everything in a misguided attempt to save my little sister's life. That makes you pretty heroic in my book."

"Moronic, is more like it, in retrospect."

Karen Walker watched their exchange with a slight smile. "I'm very glad for you both that it worked out the way it did. And I'm very sorry for what you went through because of my son, Mr. Kinney."

Brian looked over at her, surprised by that apology, and even more surprised by the fact it meant a lot to him to hear her say it. "You are?"

"Of course I am."

"You believe me?"

She met his eyes and sighed. "Yes, I believe every word of your testimony, unfortunately. I wish I didn't. I wish that I could excuse Jeffrey, explain that he had a very hard time growing up in our home, with such a demanding and expectant father. I wish I could say that the cruel reaction he got from my husband when he finally admitted he was gay excused some of his behavior. I wish I could, but I can't."

"It isn't true?" Justin asked, and she shrugged sadly.

"It's all true. But it's no excuse, is it? Jeffrey had every advantage. The best education available, natural assets like a good mind and a handsome face, a personal fortune, and parents who loved him, even when they were misguided in that love. We weren't perfect. I could have intervened more with his father, I should've tried anyway. I could've called Jeffrey on some of his earlier signs of bad behavior. But what's done is done. He is who he is, and I accept my responsibility in what he's become. I just want to apologize for the imposition of my family into your life, Mr. Kinney. And for what you had to go through today. And for what will happen next, which is just wrong."

"You mean the plea?"

"If he takes it. If he walks out because of it."

"What do you mean, 'if'?"

"You don't understand the reach of his ego. It may seem like an obvious decision to you, and that would be true for almost anyone other than Jeffrey. He doesn't want to admit to any carry that blot on his record. He wants vindication."

"How does he get vindicated?"

"A 'not guilty' verdict."

"That would be an incredibly stupid gamble."

"Perhaps, but Jeffrey... Jeffrey has plenty of courage when it comes to enforcing his own ego."

"Well, I guess he'll do whatever he thinks is right. My part in this is over. I don't intend to go back into that courthouse. Let the jury decide what they will."

She nodded. "I suppose that's all we can do. But I have another reason for being here, besides wanting to apologize."

"What's that?"

She looked uncomfortable, trying to find a way to launch into her true motive. "I believe the only way Jeffrey will ever be humbled enough to truly look at the man he's become and change the path he's taken, is for him to be punished for his actions. If he walks away from all this with what he sees as a moral victory, his megalomania will only increase. That's the worst thing that could happen to him. At some point in his life, he needs to see there are repercussions for evil deeds."

Brian was shocked by her statement. "Uh, I think that horse has left the barn."

"Not necessarily," she responded. "I have many friends in very high places, Mr. Kinney. Will you hear me out?"

Brian nodded and gripped Justin's hand tightly as they both listened to Jeffrey's mother plot her own son's comeuppance.

## Chapter 25

"Not guilty."

The jury answered to each count lodged against Jeffrey Walker, Junior. Jeffrey, standing and facing the foreman, wore a superior smile of vindication. Extortion? Not guilty. Possession of illegal substances and illegal prescription of drugs for non-medical reasons? Not guilty. Assault, using narcotics as a weapon? Not guilty. He was clear, he was free to go. If only Brian had been in the courtroom to witness this exculpation, Jeffrey believed his victory would've been complete. The jury obviously didn't buy the medical evidence presented by the state, or any of the witnesses after Brian's testimony. The victor hugged his mother, shook hands with his attorney, and left the courtroom, a free man.

In the corridor, he was stopped by reporters who asked him about his win, and as he commented with jubilant glee, he spotted a tall, lanky figure who emerged from the pack, watching Jeffrey with cool disinterest. Jeffrey disentangled himself from the press and walked over to Brian, grinning broadly at him.

"I guess you can see what the jury decided."

"I guess I can."

"Do you know why they found me 'not guilty', Brian?"

"Because they're a bunch of morons?"

"Because I'm innocent. All that happened in that courtroom was that you were forced to give up so much of your privacy and humiliate yourself publicly and then they didn't believe you anyway. How does it feel?"

Brian shrugged. "It feels like a miscarriage of justice, Jeff."

Jeffrey laughed. "You still believe in that shit? There is no justice, Brian. There's only the winner and the loser in the game of life and you fucking LOST!"

"Round one, maybe."

"What does that mean?"

Brian shrugged and motioned for Jeffrey to look over his shoulder. Jeffrey turned to find two uniformed policemen and one rumpled, overweight plainclothes detective facing him. "Jeffrey Walker, Junior?" the rumpled detective asked and Jeffrey looked perplexed.

"Yes. Who the hell are you? What do you want?"



"I'm Detective Horvath from the Pittsburgh Police Department. You're under arrest for crimes committed in Pittsburgh against one Brian Kinney. I have extradition papers here to take you back to Pittsburgh to stand trial."

Jeffrey laughed. "Very funny, Brian. Couldn't you have hired a more convincing looking cop? Or at least a hunky one? Although the two in uniform aren't all bad."

Brian was impassive, and Jeffrey narrowed his eyes at Horvath. "In case you haven't heard, I was just found 'not guilty' of all charges. Last time I looked this country had laws against double jeopardy. You can't retry me."

"You were acquitted of other charges filed by the state of New York, Dr. Walker. You're now being charged with rape and sexual assault that took place in Pennsylvania. Your lawyers can argue whatever they want in court. My job is to take you back. In irons. Face the wall."

Brian stood back as the press recorded Jeffrey Walker, Junior being frisked, cuffed and led away by the Pittsburgh P.D. while his blonde attorney perused the extradition papers. She argued helplessly with Horvath. Jeffrey's mother followed a few paces back, exchanging a brief smile with Brian as she went.

Once Jeffrey was gone, Brian went over to Justin, who had remained in the background, and kissed him gently.

"Are you sure you're up to another trial?" Justin asked.

"Mick thinks it's fifty-fifty whether his lawyers will be able to spring him on legal grounds before he goes to trial. But if we survive that, then yes. I'm prepared. Mrs. Walker was able to convince her highly placed friends to charge him, I'm prepared to uphold my end of the bargain."

"But if he wins on legal grounds, what did he lose?"

"Justin, for a man like Jeffrey, being led away in handcuffs in front of the press, after what he thought was his vindication, and then transported back to Pittsburgh like a felon and thrown into yet another jail cell, to face yet another trial, is punishment enough. People will think of all the hoopla surrounding his string of arrests when they think of Jeffrey Walker, they don't much care about the outcome. They'll follow the old 'where there's smoke' line of thinking, which will haunt him forever. OJ may be out on the streets, but how many people really believe he's innocent?"

Justin sighed and looped his arm through Brian's as they walked out of the building together. "You have balls of steel."

Brian laughed. "Just this morning you were telling me how they felt like suede against your face."

Justin laughed. "That's true. Run those over me again, okay?"

"You little slut. You have a job, remember? And I have a meeting with Mick. Remind me later."

"If I have to remind you, the party's over."

Brian grabbed him and kissed him hard on the mouth, spreading his hands on his ass and ignoring the disgusted comments of some pedestrians who had to walk around them. When he finally released him, Justin sighed. "Cock tease."

"You know it. Later, Sunshine," he hopped into a cab going in a different direction from where Justin was headed, and Justin watched him ride away, once again amazed by his lover's guts.

The cleaners were at work in the bar, Hot, which was not yet open for business. Brian and Mick sat at a back table sipping coffee and talking. Her office was being painted, part of a renovation led by Lindsay, and the chaos was disconcerting.

"Just tell me your office is not going to be revamped in Lesbian Warm Colors," Brian teased. "Comfy botanical prints on the walls and lamps with silk shades."

Mick chuckled. "Whatever it is, it beats Bus Station Chic, which is how she describes my current décor. How's your place coming?"

"I've found that I'm allergic to dust. I sneeze constantly when I'm there, from all the shit they kick up in the atmosphere. But it's coming along. My back office is almost finished, the second bedroom has now been usurped, and so is Justin's small studio next door to it. The guest bathroom has been reconfigured to make it more of a business accessible place, and the temporary walls around the kitchen and the master bedroom and bath are up, but not yet sheetrocked. Justin and I will be living in the smallest apartment in New York."

"Are you kidding? Just your master bathroom and closet are bigger than some of the places I lived in when I first came here. Are you feeling alright other than the sneezing?"

"Yeah, Mick. I feel pretty good. I've stepped up my workouts, have more energy, I think I've turned the corner."

"Good. What did you want to see me about? It sounded important."

"It is."

"Go ahead." Mick wasn't one to waste time with small talk.

"I'm settling with Boston Industries and the Walker family."

She looked surprised. "You don't want to do that."

"Why not?"

"The case cleaves perfectly with your suit against Vanguard. You should pursue parallel paths. It strengthens both cases."

He shrugged. "Never the less, I'm settling."

"Are you telling me you've already talked to someone at BI?"

"No, not exactly. You'll get a call tomorrow. From their lawyers. They'll offer you two-hundred fifty thousand, and you'll take it. Skim off your cut and give me a check for mine."

"You can get much more than that, Brian. If you didn't talk to someone, how do you know this call is coming?"

"Mick, just do it, okay? Accept the two-fifty. I know what I'm doing."

"You are so fired. I warned you before about talking to the other side in these lawsuits and now..."

"You can't fire me."

"Why not?"

"Because you love me," he said with a charming smile and she winced.

"Don't flatter yourself, Kinney. I'm not Lindsay. You want out of this? Fine. I have real work. If you're not serious about this shit, then stop wasting my time."

"I am serious. I'm seriously settling with BI."

"Fine, less work for me, and then I can get your skanky ass out of my professional life. You can go browbeat Jeffrey Walker in Pittsburgh."

"Fine."

"How did you convince Pittsburgh to pursue that rape charge anyway?"

"You don't need to know everything."

"Did your mother read Machiavelli's 'The Prince' to you when you were a child?"

Brian chuckled. "I have my own way of exacting revenge, Mick. I'm Irish."

"No shit. So we're done with BI and the Walker family lawsuit?"

"Yes."

"You dumb ass."

"I love you, too."

"Fine."

"Good."

"And Vanguard?" Mick persisted.

"They'll come back with an offer. We'll talk when they do."

"Brian, you're not Sun Tzu and this isn't the 'Art of War'. You're a smart cookie, but don't think you can't be outsmarted."

"I don't think that. I know I can be outsmarted. But I have an instinct for people. That's one reason I'm good at what I do. I understand what people want and what they need. And I'm taking a flyer based on my belief in a certain person. You'll have to trust me."

Mick shook her head slowly. "Why the sudden urgency to get this over with?"

"I have my reasons."

"Fine, cut off your own nose, you're an adult. By the way, a little birdie gave me some interesting information about Jeffrey Walker, Senior."

"What little birdie would that be?"

"You have your secrets, I have mine. It seems his autopsy turned up a very interesting fact."

"What? He has no heart?"

She smirked at him. "He was HIV-positive."

Brian's eyes grew wide. "What?"

Mick nodded. "Seems the old boy had a secret life. Doesn't mean he was in the closet, of course, he could've become infected the straight way, not from another man. But since there was no evidence of IV drug use, the chances are pretty damned good it was sexually transmitted. That puts a new light on his suicide, doesn't it?"

"What do you mean?" Brian asked, still trying to absorb that information, wondering if Walker's wife had been exposed.

"He had to have a key-man insurance evaluation, annually, because he's the big cheese of a huge company. This little wrinkle wasn't on his last evaluation, according to my sources, but would've been a big risk factor this year. Rather than deal with that, and with the humiliation of being exposed as suffering from what he considered a disease of the perverted, he chose the easy way out. He left everything to his wife, and his granddaughter, except for a moderate trust fund for his daughter. Nothing to Jeffrey. Although it didn't really matter, because Jeffrey was already independently wealthy through funds he inherited at twenty-one and at thirty. What an incredible ego that old man must have had. He'd rather die than be tarnished with the HIV-positive tag. At his age, he could have lived out a normal lifespan without ever progressing to AIDS."

Brian leaned back, still stunned by that news. For some reason he thought of Shea, but he couldn't quite link the two, other than their union by way of a similar infection. Shea didn't know Walker, and the possibility that Walker was picking up rent boys for sex didn't jive with Brian's image of the man. Besides which, Walker was in Boston, and Shea wasn't. Still, something nagged at him. "I hope he didn't make his wife sick."

"So do I. The poor woman. She must be a saint."

Brian just nodded, lost in thought.

Karen Walker was a small, delicate presence in the vast boardroom of Boston Industries. The CEO of the company, along with the Directors, all male, seemed uncomfortable in her presence. Dressed in a classic black Givenchy suit, and a rope of black Tahitian pearls, each the size of a marble, she stared out at them with unflinching dignity. Yes, her husband was dead by his own hand, yes, her son had been publicly humiliated and charged with sex crimes against another man, but she refused to be bowed by those facts. No one had expected her to attend the Board meeting. As the principal stockholder, she had every right to be there and to vote her stock, but no one thought she would. They assumed she would give her proxy to a representative. Instead, she showed up in person, accepted their condolences, and then said,

"Before you begin your agenda, I'd like to say a few words," she requested and no one opposed. "I realize, of course, that I can never fill my husband's empty chair. Jay was a brilliant businessman, with years and years of experience. I don't share those traits. But I do hold not only the personal shares that belonged to him, but I also control the Walker Family Trust. My understanding is that, combined, this voting block swings any vote this board may take on any issue. Am I correct in that assumption?"

A lot of subdued mumbling ensued and she smiled. "It's alright, gentleman. You can say it. I already know. Moving on, I would like to be elected a member of this board, and then I would like to be elected Chairman, to take Jay's place. I'll vote my stock in favor of that result. Do I have a motion?"

Sensing the direction of the prevailing wind, a board member said, "Motion to nominate Karen Walker as a Director of Boston Industries."

"Seconded," someone else piped up and there were no opposing votes. She was then nominated as Chairman, and voted in. With that completed, she smiled.

"Now that I'm official, please continue with your agenda."

And with that, Karen Walker assumed control of a multi-billion dollar conglomerate. She had her own ideas of certain things the corporation should be doing that would've never occurred to her husband, and she was willing to be patient to introduce these ideas. Only one burning issue required her immediate attention, and she made a mental note to discuss it with the CEO as soon as this meeting ended.

Mark turned the check over and over in his hands, as if expecting it to bounce out of his grip, off the table and out the door of the restaurant where he met Brian for lunch. Brian watched him, smirking at his confusion. "It's real. I know it's not a huge amount of money, but my hope is it would provide you with enough cover to make the leap until your draw at Back In reaches your comfort zone."

"But where did you get this kind of money, Brian?"

"Does it matter? Let's just say a legal matter shook out in my favor."

"You can't afford to give me a signing bonus like this."

"I can't afford not to, Mark. I need you. I can't do it all. You're one of the best pitch men I've ever met. I want to be more involved on the creative side, it was always the creative that appealed to me, and with you in the lead on rainmaking, I can cut back a bit. Cyn's coming along, but she's still a newbie. I've learned this business really can be fun if you work with people you like and respect, people with ideas."

"Where are you officing?"

"My loft. I've had it converted to office space, all but a small part of it. So it's in Soho, very close to your home in Tribeca. And think of it, Mark, no old fart rules, we play the music we like at a volume we can tolerate, we wear everything from sweats to Armani, depending on the agenda, and we create edgy, out there campaigns for high ticket clients. It's fun, again. Half the time friends are coming and going, my kid is running around, your kids can run around with him, my lover is painting some masterpiece, its controlled chaos. Obviously as we get more billings, we'll have to ritualize our billing and collection practices and someone needs to check into benefits and shit like that, but that's the easy part. What do you say?"

"I say two things," Mark responded, leaning back in his chair and grinning at Brian's eager, handsome face. "First, I have to talk to my wife. I can't make this decision alone."

"Understood. I'd talk to my wife too, or he'd have my balls."

"He'd have your balls for calling him your 'wife'."

Brian laughed. "He'd know I was kidding."

"Second, I don't want this check. I don't need a signing bonus, I have some money put aside, and if I decide to take this job, I'll do so with the certain belief I'll make a fair living at it. You re-invest this in the business."



"Don't be a sucker, Mark. Take it."

"Nope, I mean it. I want to see it go back in the business. Use it to get us some group health care and some group life. Those are the kind of things my wife will be looking for. And tell me, what is Justin's role in this agency?"

Brian looked perplexed. "What do you mean?"

"I mean he does your art work, right?"

"A lot of the concept, yeah. He has a great eye for designing an effective layout."

"Does he do it because he loves you or because you hired him?"

Brian shrugged. "What does it matter?"

"It matters because he deserves to be paid, Brian, and I think we should lock him up with us before he gets a better offer."

"You know he's a kid, right? Still in school?"

"I think youth is an advantage in this game, not a disadvantage. Fresh eyes. He can work around his class schedule. Hire him."

"As what?"

"Art Director, I presume."

Brian sighed, surprised he hadn't thought of that himself. It was as if he just presumed Justin would continue to help him, gratis, as a lover, not as a business associate. How much of his pleasure in working in his new agency was built

on his joy in working with Justin? If that stopped, how much would he miss him and his creative ideas? Why not hire him? The fact that he was his life partner didn't mean he wasn't a talented artist and a bright young force. "I'll talk to him. And to Cyn, she has a vote, too."

"Good. I'll let you know tomorrow."

"Great."

"And Brian? Thanks, I'm flattered."

"I want you like I've never wanted a straight guy, and not in a sexual, fuck your ass kind of way, either."

Mark's eyes widened and then he laughed. "And that's a good thing."

They shook on it, the release of Brian's little joke ending the meeting on a lighter note.

The entire team of Back In had traveled to Boston to pitch to BI at the request of their CEO. The only person they left back in New York was Maria, their newly hired office manager/administrative assistant who was a wise-cracking Puerto Rican they met through Mick's work with abused women who were starting over. She had already earned her way by bidding out benefit packages and presenting them with the winning entries so they could make a decision, as well as automating a rudimentary billing system. They liked Maria. Maria could stay.

"It's like the fucking Rainbow Coalition around here," Brian grumbled good-naturedly as they packed up for their trip and Maria glared at him.

"Yeah, baby, two blondes, a white faggot in the big chair and a token Hispanic and African-American. We are the world."

Brian chuckled. "Token? I don't think so. And don't call me 'baby'."

"I can call you a faggot but not baby?"

"I am a faggot, I'm not a 'baby'."

"Whatever. Just go sell an account so we can afford that automated billing system and someone to run it."

"Empire builder."

Their pitch at the Boston Industries world headquarters, was effectively led by Mark and seconded by Cynthia, with Brian and Justin providing gossip material as well as substance, since everyone knew about Brian and Jeffrey Walker, Junior. The Chairman of BI, Karen Walker, was present, and following the meeting, the team from Back In was invited to her home on Louisburg Square for dinner. Brian felt very different about being there than he did the first time he visited these premises. The house was even more inviting, with fresh flowers brought in to break the elegant perfection, and candles providing a warming glow.

A maid showed them into the drawing room where Karen was waiting, joined by her daughter and Hannah. Brian beamed at seeing Hannah again, making an effort to charm her, noticing that Jeffrey's demonized sister seemed sweet and very pretty in a classic rather than extreme way. Karen put them at ease over drinks, and at dinner in the second floor dining room. The room was surrounded on all four walls by a series of large Monet water lily paintings, a fact that left Justin momentarily speechless. He couldn't imagine the wealth required to contain the art he had seen in this private home.

Conversation flowed easily, and never touched on Jeffrey or his current ordeal. The trial in Pittsburgh was scheduled to begin in ten days, but that subject was obviously taboo. As dessert was cleared, Karen made an announcement.

"I want to congratulate all of you on your presentation today. Brian and I had an agreement. He would be allowed to pitch his agency, and he would be given fair consideration. But the work had to sell itself. There were no prior agreements that we would shift any BI advertising business to your agency. Following your presentation, there was an internal meeting with Marketing and other executives and it was unanimous that we would award Back In the advertising work for three of our larger subsidiaries. After we see how those campaigns are received we'll decide whether we'll give more business to your agency. So, congratulations and let's raise our brandy glasses to toast a successful business relationship."

Glasses were raised, and Brian said, "On behalf of all of us at Back In, I want to thank you for giving us the opportunity to show what we can do, Mrs. Walker. We're all very serious about our little enterprise and I know you won't be disappointed. The Irish have a toast I'd like to propose, 'May you be poor in misfortune, rich in blessings, slow to make enemies, quick to make friends, but rich or poor, quick or slow, may you know nothing but happiness from this day forward'."

Justin beamed at him as they all acknowledged the toast and drank the brandy.

Back in their room at the Ritz Hotel, overlooking the park where the swan boats glided across the pond during the day, Justin came up behind Brian as he stood at the window, staring out at the night. He wrapped his arms around Brian's waist, and pressed his face to his lover's shoulder blades. He felt Brian relax in his embrace and cover Justin's hands with his own.

"Big night," Justin said quietly.

"Yep, big night."

"What are you thinking?"

"I'm worried."

"About what?"

"About Karen Walker."

"Why? She's a great lady."

"I know. But what if she was exposed by her husband? What if she doesn't even know?"

"Brian, I feel sure the authorities would tell her he was infected so she could take care of herself. There's no way she doesn't know. If you said something to her, it would just be an invasion of her privacy."

Brian sighed and turned around in Justin's arms to face him. He pulled him closer and kissed him on the lips. "You're right. Of course they told her, and if she is infected, it's a private matter. But it just makes me hate him all the more."

"Yeah, I know," he smiled and ran his hands over Brian's ass, cupping his buttocks firmly. "I want you so much tonight."

"You want me every night."

"True, but tonight most of all. I just want to be close to you, to touch you all over, to make love to you."

"Is this a topping request again, because...."

Justin laughed. "No, I want to assume the usual positions, but I want to get started now."

"Slut," Brian teased, walking Justin backwards towards the king sized bed.

"Frigid bitch," Justin teased back, lying back on the mattress, watching Brian undress. He loved the revelation of Brian's body, never tiring of seeing him expose it bit by bit as articles of clothing fell away. He raised one knee, his arms crossed behind his head as Brian stretched out, naked, beside him.

"Too lazy to undress?" Brian asked, and Justin smiled.

"I want you to do it. I like the way you peel me."

"I like peeling you, like a banana."

"Everything's a phallic symbol with you," Justin said and Brian laughed.

"Fucking A it is!" Brian nimbly removed Justin's tie, and unbuttoned his shirt, pausing to lick a slow circle around his nipple, and then gently pulling at his nipple ring with his teeth. Justin groaned, his eyes closing as the heat rippled down his body to pool in his groin. Brian opened Justin's trousers and leaned down to pose just scant centimeters above his lover's erect cock.

"I've never blown an art director before," Brian announced. "And that's the fucking truth."

"You'd better get used to it. With what you're paying me, it's the one perk that keeps me coming back to work."

"Why you romantic devil!"

"Brian," Justin reached down and cupped Brian's face in both hands. "It's time for your quarterly affirmation. Tell me."

Brian forced a look of annoyance. "Are you sure the quarter is up?"

"Positive. It's time."

Brian mimicked irritation as he looked up to meet Justin's eyes and said, "I love you."

"Once more, with feeling."

"I love you, you miserable spoiled little bitch!"

"That's my man. I love you too, you egomaniacal monster."

With that, Brian dropped down to engulf Justin's dick in his mouth, sucking him in with consummate skill.

Brian's mobile phone rang from its dock on the hotel desk where it had been charging while they slept. Startled from a deep and sated sleep, Brian squinted at the luminous digital read-out of the clock beside the bed. Three-thirty a.m. Cursing, Justin pulled a pillow over his head and turned on his side. Brian stumbled over to the desk in the dark and was guided by the flashing face of the cellular phone, picking it up and pushing the talk button with a gruff, "This had better be good."

"Brian, this is Mary Hennessey, Shea's mom. I'm sorry to call so late."

Brian tensed, instantly awake. "What's happened?"

As if receiving radar from his lover, Justin sat up and turned on the light, squinting at the sudden illumination. Brian glanced at him over his shoulder, betraying his concern as he combed his fingers through his hair in a nervous gesture.

"Shea is very sick. Very sick. I wonder if you could..."

"I'll be there as soon as I can, Mary. Give me a number to call," he wrote it on the scratchpad on the desk. "Tell him I'm on my way. I'm sorry. Be brave."

He pushed "end" and then sank into the chair fronting the desk, dropping his head into his hands in a gesture of despair. Justin rushed over and slipped his arms around Brian's shoulders, the two of them struggling to draw strength from each other.

## Chapter 26

Brian and Justin flew to Des Moines and rented a car for the drive to Keokuk. Before they arrived, a call from Mary Hennessey re-directed them to Burlington where there was a larger hospital where Shea had been transported by ambulance. Exhausted from the ricochet travel, they finally found the boy's mother in the ICU waiting room. She was with two younger men, who were each accompanied by a woman. Because the men resembled heavier, healthier, older versions of Shea, Brian presumed they were his brothers, together with their wives or girlfriends. Mary Hennessey hugged both Brian and Justin and then hastily introduced them to her sons. The brothers were gruff, but polite, as if suspicious that these invaders were somehow responsible for Shea's struggle.

Mary went in search of the family care coordinator assigned to Shea, a courtesy many hospitals offered to the families of patients hovering between life and death. This person was supposed to coordinate the family's needs and help them understand their options and translating complex medical information into plain English, since the family was obviously stressed and finding it difficult to function. The coordinators were medically trained with an emphasis in grief counseling. Mary wanted their coordinator to explain Shea's predicament to Brian and Justin, since she found the whole scenario overwhelming.

"We're here because of our Ma, not because of him," one of Shea's brothers made plain to the visitors. "He made his own trouble."

Justin placed a hand on Brian's forearm as he felt his lover tense, but Brian spoke calmly. "You think a seventeen-year old kid deserves this?"

"I think a seventeen-year old kid who decides to fuck faggots deserves whatever he gets. He asked for it."

"Your compassion towards your brother is admirable," Brian said dryly. "Maybe if you'd been there for him when he had nowhere to go and no one to turn to for help, he wouldn't be where he is now."

"You want to take it outside, pretty boy?"

"Not really, and thanks for noticing, but I'm not available." Brian squeezed Justin's hand as one brother restrained the other.

"Brendan Hennessey, stop it now! Have you no respect at all?" His mother returned, snapping at the burly young man who glowered at Brian as he returned to his chair. "She's on her way, Brian. She wanted to stop and get the latest information on Shea."

"What happened, Mary?" He asked as he kept Justin's hand firmly clasped in his own. Shea's mother dabbed at her eyes with a wilted tissue.

"It happened very quickly. He's been feeling lousy, weak, no appetite, food just runs through him. But all of a sudden, he developed a problem with his left hand. He couldn't hold things. He said his fingers didn't seem to work. He had terrible headaches. I thought he may have had a stroke. I took him to the doctor and he had a seizure in the man's office. It was horrifying. They took him to the hospital in an ambulance, and once there he had an MRI, and then a spinal tap."

The coordinator walked up to them and greeted Mary with a small hug. Mary introduced her as "Christy" and she smiled gently at the visitors. "The tests Mary mentioned confirmed that Shea is suffering from Progressive Multifocal Leucoencephalopathy or PML."

"What the hell is that?" Justin demanded.



Christy went on to explain, "PML is a serious viral infection of the white matter in the brain. It's caused by something called the JC virus. All of us have been exposed to this virus, but our immune systems battle it and therefore it never becomes active. In AIDS patients with seriously low T-cell counts, and Shea's count is under 100, the virus can trigger."

"If it's a virus, can't it be treated?" Justin asked.

"He is being treated, but as the doctors have told Mary, the virus is fatal in ninety per-cent of the cases. PML patients average about six months once they are diagnosed with the virus."

"What are they doing for him?" Brian asked and she directed her attention to him.

"Because of what is known as the 'blood brain barrier', the vessels around the brain that protect it from toxic substances, it's very difficult to get antibiotics or other medications past that barrier. There's no known cure. AZT can pass the blood barrier because it's fat, not water, soluble and has been known to help slow the disease in some cases. They're administering high doses of AZT combined with other antivirals. Some of the drugs they've tried have included beta interferon and heparin. PML progresses very rapidly. Shea's in a wasted condition, which makes it more difficult to treat him because these antivirals are so toxic."

"Is he in pain?"

"They're remediating the pain, but he's very ill, and very uncomfortable."

"He can look forward to six months of this?"

"He can look forward to six months only if he stabilizes."

Brian met her eyes with a nod. He could decipher that code. "Is he conscious? Can we see him?"

"He's in and out. But of course you can see him, but you'll have to wear sterile garb to protect him from the possibility of airborne contaminants."

Brian and Justin exchanged a look, reminded of Molly's bone marrow ordeal. "We can handle that."

Justin clutched Brian's arm tightly through his mint green scrubs as they went into Shea's ICU cubicle. The patient was incredibly thin and pale against the white sheets, his spindly arms threaded with tubes, his body functions monitored, while bags of fluid and medication were being dripped into him just to keep him alive. It was too soon after Brian's brush with death for Justin, and he felt a little dizzy, increasing his grip on Brian's arm. Brian winced and helped him sit down. He then went over to Shea and smoothed the boy's hair off his forehead. His skin felt warm and damp.

"Hi, kid. It's Brian. Justin's here too. Can you hear me?"

Shea's eyes fluttered open. The blue irises were dull, almost opaque, with no light to spark them from within. He tried to smile as he looked up at Brian's masked face. His effort was more of a grimace. "Hi," he whispered.

"You look like shit," Brian informed him bluntly.

"Feel like shit."

"Sorry. I'm really sorry, Shea."

"Me too. Did you win? Trial?"

"Still going on," Brian responded, not wanting to go into those details. Instead he started talking about the agency, the work they were doing. He made his settlement offer from Felix even more humorous than it was, and played up their successes. Justin joined in, and Shea seemed involved and interested until his eyes closed and he slipped back into a deep, heavily drugged sleep. They stayed with him a few minutes longer, and then left.

"He's dying," Justin declared as they deposited their scrubs in a hamper on the way out of ICU. "He's so young, but there's nothing there."

"I know."

"It makes me so sad, Brian."

"Me too," he pulled Justin into his arms and held him tightly. "I'm sick of hospitals," he said against Justin's pale hair. "I'm sick of life and death struggles, yours, Molly's, my own and now Shea's. I'm tired of the pain and suffering and the fear of dying or of losing someone you love. I'm over the whole fucking thing. I want sun and sand and ocean and sex and life. I want life, Justin. I want to feel alive again."

Justin tightened his grip on his lover, sharing in his desperation.

Brian sat across from Jeffrey in a small holding cell with a guard standing by. Jeffrey looked exhausted, but Brian had no sympathy for him. He used up all his sympathy on the people who deserved it, in Iowa. He decided to rent a car and drive back to New York, principally so he and Justin could have the time alone to decompress, but also because he felt a strong desire to visit with his old friends. The stopover to see Jeffrey was machinated by the lawyers. Brian was ice, impervious to any threat from Jeffrey. But Jeffrey was strangely unthreatening, rather he was almost cowed.

"Let's not put either of us through this again, Brian. You can't want it anymore than I do," he pleaded and Brian shrugged.

"I don't know, Jeff. I got raped by you, and then I got raped in that courtroom in New York. What's one more forcible fuck?"

"What would it take to make you stop?"

Brian laughed. "Are you bribing me? If so, forget it. That's just sad."

"An apology? A public statement to you and your friends? Just tell me. I have to get out of here, Brian. We both know you'll never sell a jury on a rape charge. Even if they can't let in testimony of your past, look at you. You're a big strong guy. It's just not feasible. Please!"

Brian leaned back, dying for a cigarette, but they took them away from him along with almost everything in his pockets. "What's this all about, Jeff? Why the sudden desperation?"

"They put me in with the population here, Brian. Do you know what that's like? Not only do they hate me for being white and rich and a doctor, but add to that a faggot. What do you think life is like for me in here? It's a death sentence! AIDS is rampant in prison, and safe sex is about as big an option as consensual sex. It'll be a miracle if I get out of this without becoming infected. I can't even tell you what I've been forced to do, the names they call me, the threats and physical attacks."

Brian frowned. This wasn't part of the plan. He never intended for Jeffrey to be sexually assaulted or exposed to HIV disease. He didn't arrange for this incarceration to make it a death sentence for his nemesis. "Why doesn't your lawyer do something about it? Isolate you? They must do something to protect gay men in prison."

"What grade are you in? This is real life, Brian! A side of life neither of us thought we would ever know. The whites hate the blacks and vice versa, but they both hate fags, so I have no protectors. Money is no barrier, because we're all in communal hell. It's a pestilent shithole! You've had your revenge, Brian, ten times over. Please, please get me out of here."

Brian leaned back in his chair, staring at Jeffrey's face and realizing how much older he looked. Thinner. Ragged, even. "I have to go."

"Brian, please! I'll do anything."

"Anything?" Brian said over his shoulder as he waited for the guard to unlock the door.

"Anything."

With that tantalizing offer, Brian left the jail.

Michael put the closed sign up on the door to his comic book store so he could be alone with Brian. They'd catch up and smoke dope and giggle like the adolescents they often became when no one was around to observe them. The dope was smoked, but there was no giggling, and the solemnity had no relation to giddy adolescence.

"It scares me so much to hear that about Shea," Michael said softly. "I can't help but think of Ben."

"I know, Mikey," Brian stretched an arm across his friend's shoulders as they sprawled on the sofa. "But their cases aren't even comparable. Shea has full-blown AIDS, Ben's still showing very little evidence of HIV disease."

"Yeah, but all that can change in a heartbeat. His viral load goes up, he develops a sensitivity to the toxic drugs, he just gets a bad secondary infection. Suddenly he's completely out of balance."

"Yeah, and you walk out that door into the path of a Mack truck. Life is uncertain. Get used to it."

"You always were Mary Sunshine."

"Don't call me Mary or Sunshine," Brian said with a smile and Michael laughed.

"Yeah, that's a whole other person. Speaking of which, where is the little brat?"

"If you mean Gus, he's in New York with his Mom. If you mean Justin, can we agree that he's past the brat stage? He's shown courage under fire like no one I've ever known, Mikey. So let's drop that shit, okay?"

Michael sighed, hating it when Brian defended Justin against him. "Okay, okay, Christ, can't you take a joke?"

"Not when he's the brunt of it and he's not even here to defend himself."

"So where is he?"

"Visiting Daphne. We're taking his Mom and Molly out for dinner tonight, and then we leave in the morning. I have work to do."

"When do you come back for the trial?"

"If there is a trial."

"What do you mean, 'if'? I thought he lost those motions to get out of jail. That's what the paper said, anyway."

"He did," Brian launched into his conversation with Jeffrey at the jail. Afterwards, Michael was pensive. Finally, he spoke.

"What are you thinking of doing?"

Brian met Michael's inquisitive brown eyes with a shrug. "I don't know. I don't think his mother bargained for this. I think her idea of tough love just went to the Freddy Krueger extreme. I don't relish the thought of getting up on that stand and telling intimate details of my life to a room full of strangers, either. Been there, done that. Maybe I should just walk away."

"That'll be a first. Brian Kinney walks away from a fight."

"Brian Kinney has had a hell of a year. He went through a reconciliation with Justin, the debacle with Jeffrey, Molly's illness, the threats, an attempted murder, the kidnapping of his son, the conception of a new baby, being fired, being broke, starting over, and suing the world. Not to mention the impending death of a kid he took under his wing. Brian Kinney is fucking tired."

Michael smiled sympathetically and rested his head against Brian's shoulder in a gesture of support and understanding.

Following dinner with Molly and Jennifer, Brian was quiet as he drove Justin back to their hotel. He lit a cigarette and Justin watched his lover's handsome profile in the hazy light from the dashboard dials.

"Want to go to Babylon?" Brian asked. Justin shrugged.

"Do you?"

"Not especially."

"Me either. We're leaving early in the morning. Why don't we just skip it?"

"Okay."

"Molly looks good, don't you think? She's really going into that adolescent thing now, looking a lot less like a kid."

"I noticed. She'll be a pretty girl. Like her mom."

"Yeah, I guess. Of course beauty runs in the family," Justin said with a chuckle as Brian cut him a glare.

"Right, on the female side, anyway."

"Bitch."

"You know it. Unlike my family, where only the men got the looks."

"Based on what I've seen of your sister, I'd have to agree with that," Justin responded and they shared a laugh at Claire's expense. "Brian, do you feel guilty leaving with Shea so ill?"

"Yeah, in a way. But to be blunt, he could die tomorrow or he could die in several months. No one knows. We can't live in the waiting room in Burlington, Iowa until the Grim Reaper shows up. I have a business to run. And nothing we do can prevent the Reaper from doing his job. So...we have to go on with our lives and stay in touch with Mary. But yes, I do feel guilty. I feel guilty for being alive when that kid has no chance. I feel guilty for being healthy despite my promiscuous ways. But guilt sucks. It changes nothing, so let it go."

"I'm glad you're alive and healthy, Brian. Where would I be if you weren't?"

"Better off."

"Don't even joke about that."

"Don't get maudlin on me. Come on, we're here. Our home away from home."

In the elevator, Justin reached for Brian and kissed him. Brian responded, pulling Justin's body tightly against his own. The doors opened and they separated as a middle-aged couple entered the enclosure. The man glared at the other two passengers, and then made a limp-wristed gesture to his wife, who smirked at his little joke. Infuriated by that dismissive exchange, Brian grabbed Justin and kissed him again, even more passionately. Justin responded with equal ardor and the other couple stared straight ahead, shocked by their boldness. As the doors opened at their floor, Brian and Justin stepped off and Brian said to the remaining occupants, "Eat your hearts out." Justin giggled, and pulled on Brian's hand, leading him towards their room.

Once they were alone, they undressed each other and took a shared shower first, wanting to wash away much of the day before they lost themselves together.

"Should we feel guilty about doing this?" Justin asked as he reached around to soap slow, wide circles into Brian's firm ass while Brian nibbled at Justin's throat.

"Guilt sucks," Brian responded. "And if Shea was well enough to give a shit, do you honestly think he would be mad because we're still fucking each other? Come on, it makes no sense."

"I know it doesn't, logically, but it just creeps into my head."

"Well, maybe I should fill your head with something else," Brian said with an evil leer, hoisting his lengthening cock on the palm of his hand to give Justin a hint at what he had in mind. Justin laughed and reached down to enclose Brian's dick in a soapy fist.

"I kind of had another place in mind for this thing."

"Yeah? Well, why don't you drop that soap and maybe you'll give me an idea."

Justin giggled and braced his back against the tiles, resting one foot on the ledge of the bathtub while Brian lifted him up slightly and then lowered him onto his waiting erection. As their passion increased with each thrust, Justin pulled too hard on the shower curtain and the hooks pinged as they came open and fell on the floor. The curtain rustled around against their bodies like an unwelcome third lover until Brian managed to fling it off of them with such vigor that it landed on the counter housing the sink. Water from the shower careened off their bodies, unrestrained by the curtain, to douse the room in moisture.



Justin took his foot from the ledge to wrap it over Brian's back and Brian lifted him off the ground, supporting his weight completely as he hammered them both into a shared orgasm.

"Heavy," Brian complained between gasps, slowly lowering his lover to earth, Justin laughed and switched off the shower, surveying the disaster that was their bathroom.

"It looks like some 1960's rock band stayed here."

"How would you know? You weren't even an egg then."

"Neither were you."

"Come on, just step over it. By the time the maids find it, we'll have made a clean getaway."

"Doesn't seem fair to them."

"I'll leave a generous tip. Are you coming?" Brian held out his hand to Justin, who took it, and walked with him to the bedroom, shutting the debris out of his mind.

"I thought you two were hitting the road early," Debbie paused at the booth occupied by Brian and Justin, early in her morning shift. They sat on the same side of the table, never quite able to keep from touching each other.

"I have a meeting with the District Attorney," Brian said, deliberately avoiding Justin's gaze.

"Talking strategy?" Debbie asked, filling their mugs with fresh brew.

"He's chickening out," Justin said with a sigh and Brian glared at him.

"Shut the fuck up. I'm not chickening out. I just want this shit to end. He's been through enough."

"The fuck he has!" Debbie proclaimed, filling a third mug for herself and settling into the empty side of the booth. "Maybe after he's served a few years in the pen and had his medical license lifted, maybe then. But not until."

"Debbie, you have no idea what it's like to be a fag in prison. He's been beaten up, he's been sexually molested, I think the point has been made. He's probably been exposed to HIV and may even have it now. I never intended for that to happen."

"What are you smoking?"

"A Marlboro. Want one?"

"It's an expression, Kinney. It means what is wrong with you? Who is filling your head with that bullshit? Molested? Beaten up?"

Brian looked confused. "I met with Jeff."

"Christ, when will you learn to stay away from him?"

"He begged me to talk to him."

"Who cares?"

"I hear that," Justin grumbled, ignoring Brian's glare.

"He's being held in isolation, Brian. His attorneys made a case to keep him out of the population on some horseshit theory about his open homosexuality and the notoriety of his family. He has his own room, probably nicer than half the places I've lived in. He has a television, access to books and computers, and visiting privileges. If he's been beat up, it's because he's banging his own head against the walls. Give me your mobile."

"Why?" Brian asked warily, his stomach clenching with anger over the possibility that he'd been played for a fool once again. Debbie answered by wiggling her fingers and he handed it to her. She punched in a number. Her expression went from frustrated to sweet as a voice answered.

"Hi honey. I'm at the diner. It's Brian's phone, that's why. Sweetie, can you tell me whether Jeffrey Walker has any exposure to the general population at the jail? None at all? Are you sure? Has he been injured in any way? Uh-huh. I see. No, no, just proving a point. Don't forget to bring the dessert tonight, and none of that sugar free crap. Love means never having to say you're dieting." She made a kissing sound, that brought a grimace from her audience and then she handed the phone back to Brian, who switched it off.

"Well?" He insisted as she beamed at him.

"Just like I said. He's being held in isolation. "

"So he lied to me."

"There's a surprise," Justin grumbled and Brian sighed.

"I'm an idiot."

His two companions agreed with his opinion, and he leaned back heavily against the booth, tapping a spoon to the rim of his mug. "Of course, if he's convicted, it won't be a lie, will it? He will be returned to the population. He will be victimized, sexually assaulted, exposed to HIV and other lovely diseases."

"My guess is he has the kind of criminal mind that will have him running that fucking pen within a month," Justin countered. "I don't see Jeffrey Walker as a victim. I see him victimizing other people. People in pain and turmoil. People like my sister, my lover, even my mother. That's how I see Jeffrey Walker, Brian. He's a monster."

Brian looked at the delicate blond and smiled slightly. "You have balls of steel, Sunshine."

"That's not what you said this morning."

"Not in front of mama," Brian teased, leaning over to kiss him on the lips. Debbie beamed at them, completely taken in by their unlikely love story.

"You still meeting with that district attorney, Brian?" she persisted, and he shrugged.

"Sure."

"Withdrawing your complaint?"

"Strategy."

Debbie held up her palm for a high five, and all three shared in a self-congratulatory slap.

Jeffrey looked up as Brian walked into the visiting room. This was an unexpected visit.

"They told me it was my lawyer."

"They lied. You look better today, Jeff."

"I, I slept. You know how it is. Sometimes you just collapse."

"I can see that. So, have you been to the infirmary or whatever they call it here? Have you complained about your treatment? Have you had HIV testing? What are you doing to protect yourself?"

"What can I do? It's hopeless. The only thing I can do is get out of here, Brian. Haven't you had your pound of flesh yet?"

"I thought maybe I had, Jeff. I thought maybe I got enough revenge, thinking of you being abused by the other inmates."

Jeffrey's handsome face looked almost beatific in the light, his smile radiant. "I knew you were compassionate."

"You're right, I am compassionate, Jeff. I really am. I hate to see anyone suffer, I'm just a big pussy underneath this gruff exterior, but then you knew that, didn't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You knew I'd be sympathetic to the fag-in-distress thing. Right? Comrades. After all, it could be me in prison. I would get the same treatment, wouldn't I? But then I thought wait a second, Brian. You won't be in prison, because you're not a fucking lowlife criminal. You aren't so interested in your own needs and your own prizes that fuck anyone who gets in the way and do it at any cost. My ego isn't quite that big."

"Oh, your ego is plenty big, Brian, don't kid yourself."

"Sure, plenty big, but not that big. You lied to me, Jeff. You aren't in the population at all. You have a private room all to yourself, spoiled little rich boy that you are. You don't even take meals with the other prisoners. So someone would need to have a mighty long dick to reach between your bars, Doc. You made a real big mistake by lying to me. I was sick of all this, and not looking forward to being on that stand again. But now? Nothing will keep me off that stand. Nothing."

"Brian, something might."

"What's that, Jeff?"

Jeffrey made a gun out of his thumb and forefinger and aimed it at Brian's head. Brian leaned back and smirked at him. "Is that a threat? Are you threatening me?"

"Not just you, Brian. You, that blond of yours, that brat you call your son...I may be behind bars, but I have friends on the outside."

Brian stood up and smiled down at Jeffrey's face that had assumed a hard mask of hatred. "You so crazy, Jeff. Look up there. That's a camera. And this entire room is wired for sound. Everything every prisoner and visitor says is recorded and filmed. How can anyone so smart be so stupid? And now you've threatened my life to keep me from testifying. Along with the lives of my lover and my son." Brian banged the palm of his hand against the table and then said, "That's the sound of the final nail, Jeff. You just sank the eight ball. It's over."

With that, Brian left the room while Jeffrey stared after him.

## Chapter 27: Finale

Justin was dreaming.

He was standing in a ballroom wearing an ill-fitting tuxedo. The music was piped-in, some old, old, old song about a last dance. A blue-tinted spotlight was on him, and the crowd had drawn back from the dance floor. He would have been alone, except for Brian, who was impeccably dressed in a dark Italian suit, with a white silk scarf draped against his lapels. They were dancing, their eyes never leaving each other, their bodies glued together in perfect rhythm. Suddenly Brian slipped an arm against the small of Justin's back and lifted him off of his feet. Brian twirled Justin as he held him against his body and Justin felt the greatest bliss of his life.

When he looked into Brian's eyes, he saw something that wasn't there before. He saw love. Brian loved him. He loved him enough to come to that dance full of adolescents, grab Justin and dance with him while the whole world stared. Brian loved him! The elusive, impossibly sardonic and cold Brian Kinney was expressing his love for Justin Taylor! And then he saw himself with Brian in the garage attached to the hotel, walking hand in hand. They paused at the Jeep, and they kissed, a gentle kiss, but the most important kiss of their relationship. They made plans to join up later. Justin was wearing the white scarf Brian had draped across his tux.

He looked back over his shoulder when he walked towards the hotel doors, grinning as Brian slid into the Jeep. He saw Brian watch him in the side mirror. And then....

Brian was startled awake as Justin screamed. He didn't murmur or moan or speak, he screamed. "What the fuck?" Brian said as Justin scrambled out of the bed in their loft in Soho and backed up until the window hit his back. "What's wrong with you?" Brian insisted, switching on the lamp.

Justin was chalk-white, his eyes wide with terror as he ran for the bathroom, barely making it to the toilet before he vomited. Brian had followed him and he pressed a towel to Justin's forehead and held it there until the spewing ended. Then he helped him back to bed, and sat beside him, stretching his arm across Justin's shoulders as his lover trembled with fearful agitation.

"That must have been one hell of a nightmare," Brian observed. Justin winced, slipping his head down to rest against Brian's chest, clinging to him as he listened to the reassuring sound of his lover's heartbeat.

"It wasn't a nightmare," Justin whispered hoarsely. "It was a memory."

"A memory of what?" Brian asked, threading his fingers through Justin's hair. The golden strands felt clammy.

"Of the prom."

Brian forced him to sit back so he could look into his tear-filled eyes. "Your senior prom?"

Justin nodded.

"Jesus, what did you remember?"

"All of it," Justin said, wiping his arm across his eyes. "The way you looked in that dark suit, the scarf you were wearing. You lifted me off of my feet."

"I what?"

"Don't you remember? While we were dancing, at one point you lifted me off of my feet and twirled me."

Brian sighed, recalling the maneuver. "I remember."

"So do I. Now. And when I looked at you, I knew. I knew that you loved me. That night, during that dance, you loved me. For the first time, you were telling me so."

Brian stood, it was his turn to react emotionally. He went over to the makeshift bar atop their dresser and poured himself a Scotch and one for Justin. He downed his in one gulp and gave the other to his lover. "Yes, Justin, I was telling you that I loved you. And you heard me. You returned that love. We kissed goodbye at the Jeep, and we both understood. And then my whole world fell apart."

"I felt the blow of that bat on my head, Brian. It was like running full speed into a freight train. More shock than pain. And then blackness. Nothing but blackness. I didn't see you rescue me."

"Belatedly."

"No," Justin walked over and put his hands on Brian's shoulders. "Just in time to save my life. Brian, I'm sorry."

"You're sorry? For what?"

"For forgetting that dance and what happened between us that night. For letting Chris Hobbs and his homophobia keep us from where we are now. Also for being such a prat about your efforts to make me remember. God, we wasted so much time."

Brian smiled and looped his arms around Justin's waist. "Yeah, you're so ancient now. Look, I believe in fate. Fate intervened for a reason. Maybe we weren't ready for it then. Maybe we were being saved from ourselves. Maybe you had to test it with someone else to realize how you felt about me. Maybe I had to see how it felt to lose you to understand how much I wanted to be with you. We have to believe things worked out the way they should. We're together now. We love each other. And for all the shit that's been thrown at us, we've managed to hold on to those feelings. Maybe we wouldn't have, then. I love you, Justin Taylor."

Justin smiled slightly. "It's not even the quarter."

"I just voted you an extra dividend."

"I'll take it. I love you, too, Brian Kinney."

"I know."

"Brian, is this forever?"

"Shut up and kiss me."



Justin did so, as the melody of that long forgotten song teased through his mind.

Doctor's Notes: BK requested a special session with both himself and his partner, JT. He told me that JT had a sudden recall of the prom experience in which he had been bashed by one of his fellow students. This event was seminal for BK, and his frustration over his partner's ability to remember was ameliorated only by his fear that the pain and terror of the attack would haunt JT. JT has undergone regression therapy, so it's not completely unexpected that he had a spontaneous recovery of that lost memory. They both appeared calm and sat together on the couch, holding hands. It was the first time I had seen BK show his affection for his partner around me, although he can speak of it rather easily now.

Excerpt from Transcript:

Doctor: You look a little tired, Justin. How are you handling this event?

JT: (Shrugs) Not so bad. It was hard last night. I woke up screaming, scared Brian to death.

BK: I thought Jeffrey had escaped.

(They share a laugh.)

Doctor: What happened?

JT: I puked.

Doctor: Not a completely unanticipated reaction to sudden and extreme psychic stress.

JT: Well, after that, we had a drink and we talked about it. That's why I look tired. We never went back to sleep.

BK: It wasn't ALL talk.

JT: Shut UP.

Doctor: Okay, so you talked and then you had sex. Tell me about the talking, I think I can pretty well imagine the sex.

BK: I like the sound of that. Lydia daydreaming about my fucking the brat.

Doctor: Don't flatter yourself. I was speaking professionally. What did you talk about?

JT: I told Brian I knew that he loved me that night at the prom. And that I was sorry I forgot.

BK: And I told him he was right about that, but the rest doesn't matter anymore. We're together now, I gave up my superstition about the prom with your help, Lydia.

JT: What does that mean?

BK: I used to think if you never remembered the prom, we could never be as close as we are now. You would never believe how long I've loved you and how much I care, and we'd lose all the voodoo of that dance.

JT: And now?

BK: Lydia helped me to see it was magical thinking. Real life doesn't work that way. Jeffrey can't save Molly's life if I bargain for it with my soul. Either she lives or she dies, depending on how well her little body combats the disease, not on magical bargaining. I can't base our relationship on a dance that happened on the best and worst night of my life. Our love for each other has to survive in the here and now, not based on the ridiculously romantic feelings we aroused in each other at your senior prom. I understand all that now, with her help. I can love you even without the prom, and I know you can love me, too.

JT: And now that I remember? What does that mean for us?

Doctor: What do you want it to mean?

JT: That everything I believed about Brian Kinney from the first night I met him was true. He was good beneath all that bad boy shit. He was capable of love, and beneath all that denial, he was the one; the only one for me.

Doctor: Brian, how do you feel about it?

BK: I think it was a beautiful moment in our lives, before we went to that garage. I want to remember it and end it in that ballroom. I want to be old with him one day, and hear that song come on to play and we look at each other and we can remember when we were young and beautiful and had fallen in love for the very first time. And for the last.

(JT leans over and kisses BK gently on the lips.)

Doctor: Justin, how do you feel about the dark side of the memory? The pain and the terror?

JT: (Sighs, tightens his grip on BK's hand) I understand why certain things make me skittish, now. Garages, for instance. Baseball, funnily enough. Homophobes. But the pain is long gone, and most of the after-effects are gone too. I don't want to linger on all that stuff. I want to get past it.

Doctor: It may take some work, but you will.

JT: I think so too.

BK: Maybe that means I'll be able to go to Central Park again someday, huh?

Doctor: I hope so, Brian. You need to be able to go to Central Park again, for your own peace of mind. Justin, I suggest you schedule a few sessions with your doctor to ensure you work through these issues with him. You may experience some things you don't even attribute to the memory recovery, and he can help you sift that out.

JT: I will.

BK: Justin, may I talk to Lydia alone for a minute?

(JT nods, exits the room. Brian sighs.)

BK: Is he going to be okay?

Doctor: He needs to work through the recovery in more detail, but yes, Brian. I think he'll be fine. How about you?

BK: He scared the shit out of me last night, screaming like that.

Doctor: No doubt.

BK: I had no idea what to do.

Doctor: Really? So what did you do?

BK: I held his head while he puked, I gave him a drink, we talked, I fucked him.

Doctor: That seems to have turned out rather well. What else do you think you should have done?

BK: I don't know! I don't know how to deal with trauma.

Doctor: I think you do, and you did. Does he seem okay to you today?

BK: Better, yes.

Doctor: Then you did good, Brian. And you brought him here just to be sure.

BK( Sits in silence for a long moment, then speaks.) Lydia, uh....

Doctor: What is it, Brian?

BK: Thanks.

Doctor: For?

BK: Everything.

Doctor: More specific.

BK: When I first started seeing you I was a fucked up mess. I was on the verge of emotional collapse. You bore in and got past my bullshit and helped me to look in the mirror and see the things I liked and keep them, and also see the things I didn't like and overcome them. If not for you, I wouldn't be with Justin now. I know that. I was too fucked up to be in a real relationship. I would have ruined it. Many is the time I would have fucked it up since he came to New York, but you pulled me back from the ledge.

Doctor: Brian, as much as I'd love the credit, it's not deserved. You did the work. All I did was help you unravel your own strengths and use them to your advantage. It was all there. It was just buried under years of doubt and denial. You were a very brave man to face up to that fact. To cry in front of me. To admit your fears. To admit your need for love. That takes guts. Especially from a man who was as damaged as you were while growing up.

BK: Well, then, I guess we're a mutual admiration society, huh?

Doctor: I prefer to think you're one of my success stories.

BK: Does that mean we won't be seeing each other anymore?

Doctor: That's entirely up to you, Brian. You're the only one who knows if you're ready for that.

BK: I'm not sure.

Doctor: I think we're definitely ready for you to see me less frequently. I'd like to see you once every four weeks for awhile, and if you have a crisis, you can schedule some time in between. I think that's often enough for now. How do you feel about that?

BK: A little nervous.

Doctor: Not uncommon. But have faith. If it starts feeling wrong, we can readjust, but I don't think that will be necessary.

BK: I'll miss you. I think of you as a friend, sort of.

Doctor: Remember what I told you, Brian? I'm your doctor, not your friend. That's still true. But that doesn't mean I don't care what happens to you, because I do. And maybe when your therapy is complete, maybe then we can be friends for real.

BK: I'd like that. I may be a fag, but I like women, you know?

Doctor: I know. And women like you.

BK: (Chuckles) Since I'm going to have a daughter, I guess I'd better like that gender.

Doctor: I haven't heard that! Congratulations! The baby is a girl?

BK: Yes, a girl.

Doctor: One of each. A nice family.

BK: I guess so. It didn't work out so well in my family.

Doctor: This is your family, now, Brian. You and Justin and Lindsay and the children and even Lindsay's lover. Just don't make the same mistakes your father made and you'll be fine.

BK: Right. Well, I guess I'd better get out there, or Justin will think we're talking about him. Four weeks then, Lydia?

Doctor: Four weeks would be fine.

End of Transcript

Doctor's Notes: BK has now had his wish fulfilled. He wanted his partner, JT, to recall the prom dance, and now he has. It was a traumatic event for them both, but it would appear they have weathered it well. BK and I agree that he can slow down the rate of his visits to this office. His coping mechanisms are securely in place now. He seems strongly grounded with JT, and very protective of their relationship. He has fielded severe threats to their happiness and they came through it together. He seems aware of his weaknesses and how to patch around them. He is no longer unable to express his emotions, and to state his feelings to those who matter to him. He is also able to accept that he is worthy of being loved and of being in a committed relationship. His need to medicate his pain with drugs, alcohol or promiscuous sex has been re-channeled into the ability to express that pain and work through his issues. He knows he can't control every outcome and is learning to cope with giving up some control to others, and to accept the intervention of unplanned occurrences. I am very pleased by his progress and hope that his self-awareness continues in the future.

Two weeks later, Brian and Justin sat on the first row in the courtroom located one floor above the courtroom where Chris Hobbs was given a wrist-slap for nearly killing Justin. There was no trial. Jeffrey Walker was entering a plea. But they both wanted to be there for the sentencing, to hear him admit guilt, to see what the Judge meted out as his punishment. While the District Attorney agreed to a sentence recommendation in return for pleading to reduced charges, the Judge still had flexibility on sentencing. Jeffrey looked tired, subdued, as he stood to face the court and the charge was read to him.

Justin reached over to squeeze Brian's hand, and Brian held tightly to his fingers, taking comfort in his close proximity. At their request, their other friends had stayed away. As did Jennifer. They wanted this moment to themselves. Judge Kimberly was an attractive, surprisingly youthful African-American woman who compensated for her petite size and young face with an iron will. According to Melanie, she had a rep as a smart, no-nonsense jurist who ran a tight ship and was fair but not lenient with criminals.

Brian was mesmerized by her as she went over the charges with Jeffrey. He thought of Lydia, of how much difference his shrink had made in his life. Of how Lydia made it possible for him to forge this relationship with Justin. He could never repay Lydia for the changes she led into his life.

"You have entered a plea of guilty to the charges of obstruction of justice, illegal prescription and distribution of controlled substances, and sexual assault. Is this your plea, Dr. Walker?" Judge Kimberly asked from the bench.

"Yes, your honor," he said softly.

It could have been worse, Brian knew. It could have been linked back to his shooting to make a case of attempted murder. It could have been rape. It could have been a flat dealing charge on the drugs. Jeffrey's attorneys cut the best deal he could get, but this was still serious.

"Dr. Walker, your attorneys have forwarded to me your plea for leniency. They cite your good work with desperately ill children, your impeccable past record. They refer to your daughter, and your value to the community and the reduced risk of recidivism."

Brian glanced at Justin, terrified of where this was going. Justin gave him a slight smile, trying to reassure him that it would be fine. Brian was squeezing his fingers so tightly that they ached, but he made no move to pull free. Instead, he moved his knee so that his thigh pressed against Brian's, drawing them even closer together.

"But I'll tell you what I see," the judge went on. "I see a man who was given every advantage in life. I see a man with a gift for healing, who misused that gift in an effort to satisfy his own carnal desires. I see a man who wants for no material item, who is educated in the horrors of what drug addiction can do to a person, but who used his knowledge of chemicals in an attempt to enslave another man, not for profit. But is that goal really less egregious than the corner dealer who is only in it for the bucks? I think not. I see a medically trained man who used his knowledge of leukemia to instill such fear and dread in others, that he convinced them a young girl would die if he didn't treat her and that he wouldn't treat her if he didn't get his way. And in the end, I see a man who, when cornered, threatened the life of not only this man he has tortured and vexed for months, but also that person's partner and even that person's infant child. Based on what I see, Dr. Walker, I am not inclined to grant your plea for leniency."

Brian released Justin's beleaguered hand to clutch his thigh instead and Justin beamed at him, prying his fingers off his leg and patting his arm in a soothing gesture. Brian couldn't take his eyes off the judge. She went on, her expression of contempt never wavering.



"And so, Dr. Walker, I have chosen to give you the maximum sentence allowed for these crimes, ten years in the state penitentiary, to be served concurrently, with no possibility of parole for three years. This court stands adjourned."

Jeffrey was speaking frantically to his attorney who was trying to explain something while the bailiff was slipping handcuffs onto Jeffrey's wrists. Brian stood, and instead of following Justin out, he stared at Jeffrey until he met his eyes. Jeffrey stopped talking and stared at Brian in mute horror over what just happened. Brian smiled and gave him the thumb's up signal, before he turned and left the courtroom, never wanting to see the man again.

That evening, Justin looked confused as Brian led him up the stairs to his old loft on Tremont Street. "I don't understand what we're doing here."

"Neither do I, really, but Emmett said 'come to your old loft', so that's what we're doing. It's strange being here, isn't it?" Brian asked, holding Justin's hand as they paused before the metal door. "I know this loft is much smaller than the one in Soho, but since we cut it up, this one will feel huge."

"I know, I..." they were interrupted by the sliding open of the door. Emmett stood in the doorway, beaming at them.

"Come in, boys."

"Surprise!" A cheer went up in the room as they stepped into the loft. It was beautifully done up for an elegant party, Emmett at his catering best. Cute waiters circulated among Brian and Justin's friends and family, serving champagne and canapés. Brian looked around at the old loft, noticing it was inhabited now, and by someone with very different tastes from his own.

"Who...what?" He and Justin each took a stem of champagne as Emmett looped his arms through theirs and led them into the heart of the party.

"We're celebrating your putting that nasty motherfucker behind bars! Sorry ladies."

"But who lives here?"

"Honey, I live here. Well, Brent and I live here. You remember Brent?"

Emmett motioned over a tall, handsome young man who kissed him on the cheek. Brian stared at him, trying to place him. Finally he shook his head. "Tell me again."

"We met at Babylon ages ago," Emmett explained. "We had a...moment. We were perfect together, but it went wrong. We only had a few hours together, but it was like an entire relationship. We lost each other after that. I saw him at the diner the next day and it was like the last scene from the Way We Were. I was Barbra, of course. Well, things intervened..." he glanced at Ted and Blake who were oblivious to this conversation. "But then I catered a party for an association of CPA's and guess who was one of them? That's right. Brent. My Robert Redford. When he was young and gorgeous, of course, before he got all craggy and sun-damaged. Anyway, we've been together for awhile now, and when this place came up on the market, it was fated. I always loved your loft, Brian. The kitchen is divine. I've done well with my little business, and Brent is a wonderful accountant, so...now it's in the family again. Isn't that super?"

Brian shrugged, still trying to assimilate the idea that Emmett was living in his old space. He said something pleasant to Brent and watched Justin escape to embrace Daphne. Brian found Michael and hugged him, before kissing him lightly on the lips.

"Why didn't you tell me Em was living here?"

"He wanted to surprise you."

"He did that."

"How do you feel after the sentencing?"

"Vindicated, actually. That judge was great."

"I told you," Melanie came over and even she bussed Brian's cheek. "Judge Kimberly's superb. I doubt if we'll be able to keep her long in our little judicial pool. She's destined for greater things."

"She should be," Brian agreed, noticing Melanie's beautiful Asian girlfriend was talking quietly with Jennifer. The two women could not have been less alike. "How's tricks, Mel?"

"Tricks is good, Bri. We've been approved for a baby in China. It's a long process, but within the year we should have her."

"Congratulations. We'll both have a daughter."

She smiled at him. "Poor little Gus will be overrun with sisters."

"You could always have..." Michael started to say, but Brian shut him down.

"The baby factory is closed, Mikey. This is my last one."

As if on cue, the door opened and Mick and Lindsay entered the party, fresh from New York. Mick was holding Gus, who wiggled out of her arms and made a bee-line to his father. Brian swooped him up, then kissed him and let him straddle his hip as the two women followed. Each received a kiss from Brian and Melanie looked closely at Lindsay, noticing the telltale bulge beneath her knit dress. "You're showing."

"I know. Isn't it great? But I'm being careful about my weight this time. I don't want the struggles of losing it later."

"You look beautiful."

"So do you, Mel."

They exchanged a friendly hug. Melanie then extended her arms to Gus. "Doesn't Mommy get a hug from you?"

Gus let Brian hand him off, and Brian and Michael walked over to the kitchen, refilling their champagne glasses at the counter. "They seem to have worked past the hatred and bitterness," Michael observed and Brian nodded.

"Lesbians: a model for us all. It helps a lot that Mel found someone. She moved on. Where's Ben?"

"He's coming. He has an evening class tonight."

"How is he?"

"Great."

"Is he well?"

Michael nodded, as they both thought of Shea. "Are you happy, Mikey?"

"I am, Brian. Are you?"

Brian nodded. "In a non-traditional, anti-social kind of way." Michael laughed and embraced his old friend.

"Can't you two stay away from each other? Come here, you." Debbie grabbed Brian and hugged him tightly against her ample frame. "How does it feel to have kicked that motherfucker's balls up the back of his throat?"

"Why Deb, you always have such a colorful and maternal way of putting things," Brian teased and she smirked as she wiped her lipstick smudge off of his cheek.

"I know. I should write for television."

"Definitely. 'Smut TV'. It felt great, to be truthful. I felt vindicated for the very first time. Excuse me, I see the girl of my dreams," he left them to cross the room and put his arms around Molly's slender form, lifting her off the floor in a slow twirl. She giggled and braced her hands on his shoulders, throwing her head back as she turned, her strawberry blonde hair now long enough to fall back as she did so. He lowered her to her feet and leaned over to kiss her nose. "How's the princess?"

"This is my first party since I got sick. They wouldn't let me go out in crowds, but now I can," she said, taking his hand and leading him over to the couch, where she sat beside him. He noticed so many features in common with her brother: the same little nose, perfect skin and even the same gentle cleft in her lower lip. She hadn't yet developed from little girl to young woman, her chest still flat and limbs still spindly, but all the promise was there. He felt suddenly protective, wanting to keep her safe from horny boys and broken hearts. He wondered if that's how he would feel about his own daughter?

"You look beautiful, Molly."

She blushed and poked his arm with a knuckle punch. "Not! Mom won't give me any details, but I know something bad happened to you, Brian, and I know it had to do with Dr. Jeffrey and my treatment. Why won't anyone tell me? I'm not a child."

He met her solemn eyes, thinking this was a person who faced her own mortality and struggled her way back from almost certain death. No, she wasn't a child. She was one of the bravest people he'd known. "It didn't have anything to do with your treatment, Molly. But Dr. Jeffrey got a kind of a crush on me, and he would stop at nothing to come between Justin and me. He misused his ability to prescribe drugs and he did some other bad things that really aren't important and have nothing to do with you. But now he has to pay for those mistakes. I'm glad, because he hurt me and worse than that, he hurt Justin. But part of me will always be grateful to Jeff for his help in making you better. I'd go through every bit of it again if it meant I'd be sitting here talking to you like this."

She took that in, then frowned. "Is everything okay with you and Justin now?"

"It was never not okay with Justin and me. No one can come between us. No one."

"Are you going to marry Justin?"

"Uh," Brian felt the shock of that question burn through to his spine. Molly stared at his expression, and then said,

"Gay people can get married now, you know. I read that somewhere."

"Yeah, in Toronto. Look, Mol, Justin and I have registered as what they call 'domestic partners'. It's almost like being married. In that way we can be sure we get rights to each other if one of us is ill, or if we need insurance or buy property together, whatever. It's an official thing to do, so under the eyes of the law, we're already a couple."

She shook her head. "That's boring."

"Agreed, but..."

"I want a cake. I want flowers. I want to be your maid of honor."

He laughed. "Tell you what, I'll be the maid of honor at your wedding. How's that?"

She giggled. "You'd look funny in a frilly dress."

"I'll have you know I have great shoulders!"

She giggled again. "Is that your baby Lindsay is having?"

Another hard subject, Brian realized with a wince. Molly was in rare form tonight. "Yep."

Her eyes met his and held his gaze. "I don't get it. Are you gay or not?"

"Yes, I'm gay, Molly."

"So how did your baby get there? The same way Gus did? By that artificial 'summation stuff?'"

Lying to Molly was not on Brian's agenda. "Not exactly, no."

"Explain."

"The baby got there the usual way babies get made. It's complicated, Molly."

She frowned. "It's not complicated, Brian. I know how babies get made. I thought gay people didn't do that with girls."

Justin suddenly flopped down on the other side of his sister. Brian heaved a sigh of relief for the interruption. His relief was premature. "Yeah, Bri," Justin goaded him. "I thought so too."

Brian glared at his lover who offered a sweet smile to him, as if completely innocent. "Well, Molly," Brian began, emphasizing her name. "I knew Linds long before I ever met Justin. She was kind of my girlfriend when we were in college."

"You weren't gay in college?"

"Yes, but maybe not quite as gay as I am now. So my relationship with her is very complex. But we don't really have sex with each other, haven't in years, and we never planned to make this baby. But Lindsay was going through some rough waters, we had too much to drink, and things happened. Let this be a lesson to you. Never get drunk with a guy and yes, you can get pregnant even if you only do it once."

"And never, NEVER cheat on your boyfriend," Justin added with a smirk. Brian glared at him, and mimed bowing a violin. Justin winced.

"Were you mad?" Molly asked her brother, who shrugged.

"I'm over it."

"Brian, I can never get pregnant," she announced. He narrowed his eyes at her.

"Not now, but someday when you're older."

"No, never. All of the radiation treatments and chemo made it where I can never have a baby. So no prince will ever come for me."

Brian glanced at Justin who nodded. The sterility was a fact. Brian then slipped his arm across her shoulders and she leaned back against him. "Mol, do you think your brother and I are happy together?"

"Yes."

"We're pretty lovey-dovey aren't we?"

"I think so."

"Unless they come up with a major medical breakthrough, Justin and I are never having kids together, either. He can share Gus and the baby, but we'll never have our own child. I don't love him any less because of that. I didn't choose to make a life with Lindsay, who could have my babies. I chose Justin, because I love him."

"But you're gay," she said logically and he nodded.

"True, but I'm talking about love. Love isn't defined by reproduction. And all babies don't have to come from your body to be yours. Adoption is a very important option. Lots of children need good homes. If some man doesn't want to marry you because you can't be his baby factory, then he wasn't a real prince to begin with." He met Justin's smile with a wink. Molly considered that statement for a minute, and then nodded.

"You think so?"

"I know so."

She leaned over to kiss Brian's cheek. "Okie-dokie. I want some cake!" She left them, able to engage that child's ability to shift from life-and-death issues to the frivolity of a sugary sweet with ease. Justin closed the gap between them on the sofa and leaned in to kiss Brian.

"I adore you," he said, making Brian wince in response.

"Shut up."

Justin took Brian's chin in hand and forced him to meet his eyes. "I mean it. You're a wonderful man."

"I mean it too. Shut up."



"Celebrating?" Jennifer interrupted them. Her son shrugged.

"I guess that's the point, Mom."

"Doesn't Molly look wonderful?" She asked, and all three of them looked across the room to where Molly was sharing her cake with Gus.

"She's a doll," Brian responded.

"You two saved her life. Justin, you gave her the immunities she needed to fight that horrible disease, and Brian you gave her the emotional support she needed to keep fighting when she might otherwise have given up."

"Jen, are you sorry Jeffrey was sent to the pen?" Brian asked unexpectedly. Jennifer stared at him in horror.

"How can you even think that?"

"Because he did help save Molly. I still carry some residual guilt because of that."

"Bullshit!" Jennifer said and Justin's eyes widened at his mother's profanity. "I'll admit, when things were darkest with Molly, I grasped at any straw to help her. It was easy for me to fall under Jeffrey's healing spell. And maybe he did help her. I hope so. But he bargained my son's happiness with the life of my daughter. He can rot in hell for all I care."

"How do you really feel about it, Mom?" Justin teased. She grabbed his hand and hauled him to his feet.

"Just for that, you have to dance with me."

"With a GIRL?" Justin protested with dripping sarcasm. Brian patted his lover's rump as he glided by.

"Come on, Kinney, it's you and me." He looked up as Daphne addressed him, wiggling her fingers at him. "Let's dance."

A slow song was playing on the sound system, and he took her gently in his arms, always amazed by how small girls felt when he held them, especially a petite thing like Daphne.

"I've always been your fan," she said.

He laughed. "Liar."

"Okay, not always. But once I figured out how much you love him, I became your fan. Let's face it, I figured it out a long time before he did."

"I'll give you that. I appreciate your pushing for me, Daphne. I know you were in my corner even when he was with the violin player. Thanks."

"It was easy, Brian. You're the real thing. I never could stand Ethan. He made my skin crawl. He was just a boomerang love affair, nothing more. Justin's always loved you."

Brian smiled. "Right, whatever."

"But if you ever hurt him, you are so dead."

"Why would I do that?"

"Shit happens."

"Daph, shit DID happen. The violin player happened, Jeffrey happened, the bashing, the incident in Central Park, it all happened already. What's left? Tony Soprano and Big Pussy in a dark alley? No, wait, we already had that pleasure. I think we've endured the worst of it."

She giggled. "Okay, Call me protective, but..."

"Protective Butt," he teased and then the music changed. Last Dance came on. Daphne met Brian's eyes and smiled. He smiled back and they automatically parted. He scanned the party for Justin who was walking towards him. Wordlessly, Justin glided into Brian's arms, and the others stepped back as they began to dance. The couple didn't notice. It didn't matter. They were alone in their world, in this loft, where it all started for them, with this song that defined their love.

Jeffrey had been in prison for three months.

Meanwhile, Brian was dozing in the last rays of fading sunshine, stretched out on a canvas beach chair. Beyond the pristine white sand beneath his chair, was a crescent shaped cove of clear, azure water, partially shaded by a stand of casuarina and sea-grape trees. Rockley Beach in southern Barbados was blessedly deserted that day. His snorkeling equipment was scattered on a towel nearby and Justin waded out of the surf to drip cooling water onto Brian's nut-brown skin.

A week on the island had darkened even Justin's fair skin, and turned his hair a gleaming shade of platinum. It contrasted well with his candy-red Speedo. Brian squinted up at his lover as he rubbed the drops of water into his warm skin. Brian's suit was a brief Aussie Bum that was the same lapis color as the ocean. They'd experimented with nude sunbathing but soon found out the disadvantages of burning tender places seldom touched by the sun.

"I think it's time for a drink," Brian observed. "Sun's setting."

They always found logical reasons to share a cocktail. Justin rubbed a towel across his damp body and then said, "This is our last day here."

"Don't remind me."

"Brian, it means it's time for the toast."

Brian met his eyes. "Yeah, I guess so."

"We agreed it would be the last day, at sunset," Justin looked past the trees to the little house overlooking the beach. It wasn't fancy, this place they rented, just a chattel house with white clapboard siding and a large verandah. "I'll get Shea and the champagne."

"You need help?"

"I can do it."

Brian forced himself to get up, feeling the residual warmth of the fine sand ooze between his bare toes. This was the life. The horizon was striped with bands of peach and mauve and sherbet orange. He had never seen such spectacular sunsets. Or maybe he just never bothered to look. Why couldn't they stay here forever? The sun, the sea, the good love of the one man who mattered? Still, part of him worried about his fledgling business. He knew Cyn and Mark would keep things moving, but he missed the excitement. He didn't miss the fact the remainder of the loft was currently being converted into office space. He and Justin had purchased another loft two floors up, which they were making their own oasis away from everyone. The money was good enough at the agency to make it possible, but added to that was Brian's sizeable cash settlement from his former agency.

"We're here," Justin brought Brian out of his reverie. Brian opened the champagne while Justin retrieved the crystal flutes from the basket he brought down with him.

"Well," Brian said as he filled the flutes with the bubbly amber liquid. "Here we are, just as we promised Shea, on a sandy beach at sunset about to drink a toast. I'm going to get very Irish on you, so forgive me. I know a man named Shea Hennessey can't fight me too much on that score," he raised his glass. "This is for you, Shea. 'May God grant you always, a sunbeam to warm you, a moonbeam to charm you and a sheltering angel so no one can harm you.' You've had enough harm in your life, Shea. Enough pain. You were cheated out of knowing the joys of a true love or your child's hand in yours, or even the peace of mind that comes from a loving family. But that's all behind you now. The pain is over. There's only freedom where you've gone. You'll never be forgotten, not by either of us. 'May the everlasting love we give you forever warm your soul'. Slainte!"

He faced the small silver urn Justin had placed in the beach chair as he raised his glass in a toast. Justin joined him in that toast and then sighed. "I learned an Irish toast too, Brian. For Shea. 'May joy and peace surround you, contentment latch your door, and happiness be with you now and keep you evermore. Slainte!'"

They downed their champagne and Brian looked hard at his lover. "It's time."

Justin put down his glass and picked up the urn. He carried it in the crook of one arm and held Brian's hand with his free fingers as they waded into the surf together. They kissed and then Justin opened the urn. He tipped it down over the water, watching the gray ash pour into the sea, swept away by the wind.

"May you rate a mansion in heaven," Brian said as the last remains of Shea Hennessey were borne away by the sea.

"Now he's really free," Justin whispered, throwing the urn as far as he could, watching it sink beneath the surface. He walked into Brian's open arms and they held onto each other, finding comfort in that silent embrace.

Jeffrey had been in prison for six months.

Brian was in a pitch as a soft snowfall blanketed the skyline of Manhattan outside the midtown offices of Boston International. His cell phone summoned him, and he saw caller ID announced Justin's number with the added on numerals "911".

"Karen, can you excuse me for just a moment?"

"Of course, Brian," Jeffrey's mother, the Chairman, responded.

He took the call in the hallway, and then came back in and announced. "I'm about to become a father. Again. So, where were we?"

Karen Walker glared at him. "Where were we? We were getting you out of here and on your way to be with the mother of your child!"

Brian smiled. "She's just gone to the hospital. She'll be in labor a while. Mick's with her and Justin's on his way over there."

The others in the room remained silent. They had no idea the complicated arrangements that made up Brian Kinney's life. They knew he was gay, the publicity surrounding their boss's son escaped no one, and so they also knew he had a partner. Most didn't know anything about a woman in his life or a child on the way, and most couldn't reconcile the two. Karen Walker closed her briefcase.

"I'll give you a ride to the hospital. I should really leave before this snow closes the airports. I want to get back to Boston. My granddaughter is in a little production at her pre-school later this afternoon."

Brian gave up, and accepted the ride in Karen's limo. On the way to the hospital, she glanced at his handsome profile. "Are you nervous?"

He shrugged. "I was just thinking, I met Justin on the night Gus was born. How fateful is that? Two life-altering events in one night. Now I'm about to have a daughter enter my life. I don't know the first thing about being a decent father with a son, but with a daughter? I'm completely lost."

"That's simply not true, Brian. And she'll add a dimension to your life that's missing now. You're very lucky."

He glanced over at her. "Have you heard from Jeffrey?"

"Yes, and I think his anger is finally starting to fade enough that he's beginning to understand what he did and why he's being punished. That's all I ever wanted. He's agreed to counseling, which he desperately needs. He's also agreed to allow Hannah's mother to raise her. That, too, is the right decision. And Susan, my daughter, told me yesterday she's become engaged."

"Hey! Congratulations! Do we like him?"

"We do. He's a vet, and by that I don't mean a veteran of the wars. She met him when he treated her dog for a kidney infection. He's a widower, with a young son, and he seems very devoted to Susan and Hannah. I'm thrilled for them both."

"Then I'm thrilled for you, Karen. Give Hannah my love."

"I will."

The car stopped at the entrance to the hospital and Brian waved goodbye to Karen Walker as he got out and asked at the information desk where he would find maternity. He saw Justin before he saw anyone else, and he greeted him with a hug. "How is she?"

"Kind of mad, I think. I mean she sounds mad. She's had some less than nice things to say about you," he said with a grin. "They told us the labor is going very fast, so you won't have long to wait. Mick's with her. They're in that room. I'm waiting out here. The whole thing makes me kind of nervous."

"Chicken shit," Brian responded with a laugh and went into the room he indicated. The hospital had decorated it in cheerful colors. It was called a "birthing" room because both labor and birth were completed here. Only in the event of an emergency would she be moved to an operating theater. Lindsay looked strained and sweaty, her pink floral hospital gown matching her rosy complexion as the effort heightened her color. Mick was seated beside her, coaching her on her breathing.

"You bastard," Lindsay said to Brian as he leaned over to kiss her damp brow. "You got me into this!"

He laughed. "I don't recall your kicking and screaming about it."

"I'm screaming now!"

"Where's Gus?"

"Gail is picking him up from pre-school later," Mick responded. "He's fine."

Brian sat down on the other side of Lindsay and winced as a labor pain wracked her. "How long?" He asked.

"Not long, they say. She's dilated and the baby is crowning," Mick answered him.

"Ick."

"Shut UP, you faggot!" Lindsay hissed at him and he laughed as the nurse came in and glanced nervously at the trio. She checked Lindsay's progress, then told them she was getting the doctor, because birth was imminent.

"You may want to cover up that Armani with a gown," Mick suggested. "Birthing babies is messy."

"Thanks, Prissy, but I ain't birthing no babies. I'm just watching. Is she going to spew across the room like the Exorcist or something? And just for the record, it's Prada."

Lindsay laughed and squeezed his hand. "Only you could make me laugh when I'm in excruciating, unrelenting pain! OWW! Where is that fucking doctor?"

"Right here," the doctor entered the room, exchanged a quick introduction with Brian and then assumed the position, aided by a nurse. The baby's portable bed was nearby, awaiting its new occupant. Brian loosened his tie, steeling himself for the more gruesome aspects of watching his child being born.

Justin had dozed in a chair in the waiting area, when Mick touched his shoulder. He jumped up, reading in her face that all was well. "Can I see her?"

"Sure, honey. Come on."

He walked with her to the room, recalling the first night he met Brian, Gus's entrance into the world, a hospital room full of lesbians. All evidence of the birth had been cleared away except for a tiny bundle in a pink flannel blanket cradled in Brian's arms while Lindsay beamed at them.

"Come meet Gus's little sister," she said to him.

Brian looked up at his lover, his face registering his amazement over this tiny creature he was holding. She was eight pounds of pink skin and a brush of platinum hair. She slept peacefully in her father's arms and when Justin touched her cheek, she didn't even flinch. "She's beautiful," he said reverently. "What did you name her?"

"Shayne," Lindsay responded with a smile. "We couldn't agree on Brianna, and no offense, but I don't like Justine, so Shayne was a kiss to our little lost friend."

"Oh, you have to tell his mother that, she'll be so pleased," Justin kissed Lindsay's cheek, then leaned over to touch his lips to Brian's. Brian handed the baby back to her mother and said,

"She'll want to eat soon and I lack the tits for it. Instead, I'll go feed this baby," he looped an arm over Justin's shoulders.



"Did you call the list?" Lindsay asked Justin as someone delivered a huge arrangement of flowers from Brian and Justin.

"I either talked to them all or left messages, so you'll be getting calls as soon as they let them through."

"Thanks honey, and tell Leo..."

"Lindsay, it's all under control. Leo assures me your gallery is in good hands until you return."

"Okay."

"You two go eat," Mick said, holding tightly to Lindsay's hand. "We have this under control, too."

Brian paused, kissed Lindsay, touched his daughter's pale hair, then kissed Mick. "Love you guys."

Lindsay beamed at him. "That's a big one for Brian Kinney to say."

He winked at her, and walked out with Justin, holding tightly to his hand.

"She's a beautiful baby," Justin said as they entered the elevator.

"Yeah, she looks like you with that blond hair."

"Or more likely her mother," he smirked as Brian laughed.

"More likely. Come here." He pulled him into his arms, kissing him until the doors opened on the ground floor. The startled people waiting to get into the car stared at the couple and someone muttered,

"Fags."

Brian laughed, kissed Justin again and said to no one in particular, "Yep, we're fags. And we're here to stay, America!"

"Faggots!" Justin shouted with a mischievous grin, raising his fist in the air. He then held onto Brian's hand as they left the hospital and walked out into the snowfall, together.

The End