**The Mask**

**By Sian265 & Sydney Alexis**

In order to escape the stigma attached to his reputation, Brian moved to Chicago and meets a young art student/gallery worker named Justin. Over time, Brian struggles to balance the happiness he's found in Chicago with the expectations still heeped on him by those in Pittsburgh. An accident his son is in forces those two worlds to collide.

Chapter 1

The mask had started to slip. He could feel the cracks forming, the barriers dropping, but so far no one else had noticed. Not his so-called friends, the tricks, or his employees. But it was happening, and Brian knew something had to give...

Chicago, IL

Justin sighed as the professor drummed on and on. Art History of Western Europe was his last class of the day, and, by the time it rolled around, he was always hungry, tired, and had to fight to stay awake. Today seemed worse. It was one if those beautiful spring days – highs in the 70’s with a pleasant breeze blowing in off the lake – perfect to paint outside on his tiny balcony, but not any time soon.

After class, he had to be at The Gallery.

MG, the owner of MG’s Gallery, was lenient with Justin. She’d always stressed that his school work came first, but Justin loved his job at the trendy gallery – even more so now that he had a couple of his own pieces on display.

Finally, the professor dismissed class, and Justin hurried over to Erie Street to catch the bus to Dearborn. Arriving at The Gallery, he quickly went to the employee’s section in the back. Tossing book bag down, he returned to the front to help.

Working openings was one if Justin’s least favorite parts of his job but that might change if someday if it were his own showing.

Alec Hinson, tonight's artist, was a pompous ass in Justin's opinion. His work was bland and original because he spent too much time trying to recreate the feel of abstract of old without ever trying new mediums or techniques. It wasn't Justin's opinion that mattered, however, and, right now, Alec was the Chicago art scenes’ darling.

Justin was just glad the artist was not here; Alec wouldn't demean himself by showing up this early, or hanging his own stuff!

"Hey, MG," Justin called, seeing his boss bent over a large crate, struggling to lift the painting.

"Help, Justin!" MG called. Laughing, Justin rushed over to help the small, blonde gallery owner, and accepted her hug of thanks with a smile.

"There's my Sunshine!" MG said with a great deal of affection.

"How was class today?" she asked, standing back so that the workers could unpack the rest of the paintings.

Justin joined her, not saying a word as Alec's paintings were uncovered, but he was unable to keep the grimace off his face completely. With a laugh, MG rolled her eyes at him.

"It was fine," he said, smiling. "But I thought Art history would never end! So what's the deal for tonight? Where do you want me?"

"Well, I thought I'd let you direct traffic tonight. Point out pieces when someone asked. Then, for the buyers, you can direct them to the back office for the sale. How does that sound?" MG asked.

She laid a hand on Justin's arm and led him away from the movers toward the back of the gallery. Stopping at the reception desk, she picked up the shows catalog and handed it to Justin.

Justin studied tonight's layout. "That's fine; I’ll set these out and get changed. Thanks MG," he replied.

She knew how much Justin enjoyed talking with the art patrons of Chicago, and indeed, the bright, smiling, young man was a favorite of the MG Galleries customers.

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The gallery atmosphere was strikingly different that evening. The usual hustle and hurried pace of its daylight operations gave way to dim lighting with spotlights highlighting the art. Black and white attired waiters circulated offering patrons champagne and canapés. Conversation was quietly carried out in small, select groups, as the Chicago art community judged and gossiped about each piece of art on display.

Justin managed to avoid Alec and his snotty comments and his lame half-ass come-ons. Alec circled the room like a shark--darting in when the slightest of interest was shown in a piece and strolling off with a smirk when a sold sign appeared. The gushing comments of ‘how original’ and ‘complex’ had Justin rolling his eyes. Alec wouldn’t know original if it bit him on the ass! He could see one critic busily taking notes, and Justin fought the urge to grab the guy and show him his own work hidden in the back. ‘There!’ he would point, ‘is an original!’ As an artist who came up with his own ideas instead of recreating others, Justin sighed, his time would come…he hoped.

Justin shook his head. He was always amazed at the customers who bought crap just because some critic in a newspaper told them to. He much more admired the buyer who couldn't care less who the artist was, but bought a painting because it spoke to them, brought out some emotion in them. To Justin, those were the type of buyers he wanted to have someday. Justin's thoughts were interrupted by a soft voice .

"Are there any works here not by this artist?" a husky voice asked.

Justin's eyes slowly rose up long, long legs, clothed in expensive gray wool, past the silk shirt with its inlay of gray and green, to finally meet a pair of twinkling hazel eyes.

Justin knew he looked like an idiot, standing there with his mouth hanging open, staring, but he couldn't take his eyes off the man in front of him. The face alone was stunning and had heat gathering in his stomach. The man’s auburn hair with its brighter highlights cried out for fingers to run through it. The red, smiling lips beckoned, and it took Justin immense self-control to resist that call.

Justin blinked, sure that this vision would disappear, but no, he was still standing there only now he was smiling.

Then the stranger’s words penetrated his thoughts, and Justin’s face broke out in his trademark smile, leaving the stranger standing, dumbfounded.

"Brian Kinney," the stranger said, holding out a long fingered, elegant hand for Justin to shake.

Justin flushed. "Justin Taylor, nice to meet you, Mr. Kinney," he answered, reaching out his own hand and placing it within the other man's.

Brian covered the blonde's smaller hand with both of his own. "It's Brian," he said, smiling at the vision in front of him.

Chapter 2

Justin couldn't look away from Brian's hazel eyes, nor did he pull his hand away from the warm clasp of the other man's. Justin couldn't say how long they stood there, gazes locked, hands clasped tightly. Gradually, the low murmurings of the other guest penetrated the Justin's mind, and with a self conscious look about, he regretfully pulled his hand from the older man's. He gave a soft laugh, and flushed, looking back up at Brian; he was happy to see remorse also in the hazel eyes gazing back into his own, as their hands parted. Justin half turned and with a twist of his head, indicated that Brian should follow.

"Brian, if you will follow me, I can show you some of the other works we have here at MG's," Justin led Brian away from the crowds, toward the rear of the gallery. The pair walked along silently, Brian eyeing the works on the walls, and Justin eyeing the brunette. The older man studied several pieces, but asks Justin no questions. Finally, Justin broke the silence. "Brian, what are you looking for?" Justin asked, and at the man's confused look, he clarified. "For example," he started. "Are you looking for pieces for home or a business setting?" Justin waved a hand toward a large section of wall, covered in bright canvases.

Brian followed Justin to the wall; he inspected the works there, pleased. "These are great," he said, "and it's for home." He answered Justin's earlier question. "I just bought a new loft overlooking the lake," he offered, silently assuring Justin, thought Justin would have never asked, the clothes alone telling the tale that he could afford any of the paintings displayed. Lake front property was the best to be had in Chicago.

Justin waved hand at a large canvas dominating the center of the wall. "These are works by Patrick Creighton. He is one of my favorites and an inspiration in my own work," Justin said, captivated and moved as always by Creighton work. Justin knew he should not be so familiar or open with a customer, not should he have remarked on his own preferences, but there was something about the hazel-eyed man that inviting and put him at ease.

Brain turned to Justin. "You're an artist," he questioned? "Are any of your works displayed here?"

Justin cringed. Shit, he thought. MG would kill him if he led a customer away from some very expensive art to look at his much cheaper paintings. "O-oh, uhm," he stammered. "That's okay-" but Brian stopped his words by laying a finger across Justin's lips. Justin flushed and shut-up. Only then did Brian remove his finger, and Justin couldn't resist. He licked his lips, the salty aftertaste of Brian sending a flash of heat to his groin.

Brian smirked at the telltale flash of desire he saw in the young man's eyes. "I want to see your work. If your boss asked, I insisted," Brian smiled down into Justin's blue eyes, letting the younger man see the answering desire in his own.

Justin nodded and led Brian to a corner, where two of his works hung. The first, Deceptive Blue was just that, deceptive. It appeared at first just some layers of different shades of blue, but if one looked close enough, a pattern emerged. It reminded Brian of the ocean, and watching wave after wave roll over each other. The second piece, Flashpoint, was all reds and oranges. It looked like a bright out of control Sun, burning, and in the center a figure being consumed by the fire. Brian loved them both.

Brian turned to Justin, who had been standing nervously behind the older man, hiding. He couldn't say why, but Brian's opinion mattered to him. Brian grinned at the nervous young man. "Not bad," he said. "Not bad at all!" Brian said, turning back to look at the two once more, he said. "I want both."

Justin's smile lit up the room and quickened Brian's heart. "Are you sure," Justin asked. He bit his bottom lip. "You're not just saying that?"

"No really," Brian reassured him. "They're perfect for my home."

Justin nodded and tried to act professional, but he knew the grin gave him away. "Okay, well follow me and I'll write them up and arrange for delivery." He led Brian back to the manager's office, so excited that he was almost skipping. This was his very first sale, unless you counted family and friends. But this was the first professional sale and he liked the idea of this gorgeous man having his work displayed in his home. Justin wrote up the tickets and got Brian's credit card information as well as the address and expected delivery date. Once completed, he led Brian back out into the gallery, very sorry to see their time together ending.

Justin turned to Brian, still beaming. "Thank you, Brian. That was my first professional sale."

Brian took the young man's hand once more, giving it a squeeze before releasing it. "Something tells me that it is the only the first of many, many more. You are very talented, Justin," he said, enjoying once more the pink flush that came over the boy's fair skin; and he wondered if the boy's entire body flushed that becoming a color when he came? Taking a chance, Brian reached in and pulled out a business card with only his Chicago information on it. He handed it to Justin. "Since I was responsible for your first sale, how about we celebrate? By allowing me to take you to dinner?" he coaxed.

If possible, Justin's smile got even brighter. "I'd like that, a lot," he said, beaming at Brian.

Brian couldn't help but smile right back. "Well, then why don't you give me call and let me know what night is good for you."

"I'll do that," Justin replied as he pocketed the card. Oh, he would defiantly being calling. "Thanks again, Brian, and enjoy the paintings," he said, not saying good bye. He didn't know why, but he did not want to say good bye to Brian.

"Later," Brian said with one last smile.

"Later," Justin whispered, watching until Brian got into a cab and disappeared.

Chapter 3

Brian picked up the phone only to slam it back down, for the third time. He had been sitting here for over an hour trying to work up the nerve to call. He was Brian Kinney for fuck’s sake! Never mind the fact that he had never actually been on a date. If anyone back in good old Pitts could see him now. The great Stud of Liberty Avenue, nervous about calling some blond twink and asking him out, for a DATE, not a fuck! He knew none would believe it, hell he couldn’t believe it. But there had been something special about the young blond, and he did come here to try and change after all…

Hell he was 34 years old. And for the last year, Brian had finally started to admit to himself that something was missing from his life. His friends and family had all moved on, and watching them settle happily had stirred something in him, perhaps the Peter Pan of Liberty Avenue was growing up? Mikey and Ben had settled into Queer married life, raising the littlest hustler. Lindsey and Mel were happy in Dykedom with the birth of Jenny Rebecca, shit, even Debbie and Carl had settled in Hetro-happy land. Brian had tried, he really had, to change his life’s direction, but it seems he had not only been facing his own demons, but his reputation, and the expectations of his family. Obstacles, that proved impossible to over come in glorious Pittsburg.

Brian thought back t his first tentative steps towards something different. It had been after a Friday night fuck that he had brought back to his loft. The trick had been good, so good in fact that Brian broke his first rule and ask someone to stay after he had pulled his cock from their body. He could still see the look of stunned disbelief on the tricks face, and his confused, “What for?” had Brian harshly telling him to get the fuck out. That had been the first blow. The second had come when he had expressed interest in another local gay business man. Patrick Donovan was Pittsburg first gay bank President. Brian had already used Pittsburg National’s services, but he had gone to the reception to meet and greet hosted for the new President. Kinnetic, being one of the banks best customers assured Brian of a personal introduction by the out-going executive, and Brian had shook Donovan’s hand warmly, his eyes immediately picking up on the interest in the other mans.

They had pussyfooted around for a couple weeks, running into each other at various business functions, and restaurants. There had been several “business” related calls, until finally, one night at a cocktail party for some local business; Brian worked up the nerve to approach Donovan. The other mans response had been regretful and he hoped his words would not effect their business relationship, but Donovan had went on to tell Brian that he was not into casual fucks, for which Brian was known for. It seemed that Brian’s reputation had beaten him to the punch, and Brian had been so pissed that he had not listened to any more of Donovan’s excuses. He just grabbed the nearest waiter and proceeded to get a medicinal blowjob in the men’s room. That had been his last attempt in Pittsburg.

Kinnetic had kept him so busy the first couple of years. Brian had worked liked a dog to make it the best Pittsburg had to offer, but after that challenge had been won, he had been left at loose ends. The business practically ran itself now days. The talented staff he had wooed and won dealt with the day-today stuff. Now Brian only worked on a few choice campaigns, and those he could have turned over to Cynthia. His once assistant now was his top-ad executive, and with Ted handling the financials, Brian had many a day been a third or even fifth wheel. Hell, even his once favorite playgrounds had lost their appeal. Babylon was now filled with twenty-something twinks. There was always some new stud looking to dethrone the King, and Brian had gotten fed up with the constant shit to stay on top. He began asking himself was it worth it? And then he finally admitted, at least to himself, that it wasn’t enough anymore.

Brown Athletic was still his baby, Leo Brown had flat refused anyone else, no matter how much Brian praised and reassured the owner. Thus, his trips to Chicago stayed a part of his life, and he feel in love with the city. He did not intend to move here, but he could see himself traveling back and forth. Hell his only joy left in Pittsburg was Gus. So he bought himself a penthouse loft with a fabulous view of Lake Michigan and began creating a life different and away from Pittsburg and Liberty Avenue. Here, there was no Stud of Liberty Avenue, just plain old Brian Kinney, successful, handsome, and best yet, a mystery.

Now, if he could just worked up the guts to call the blond. Brian could close his eyes and see those twinkling baby blues and feel the warmth that had shot through him when the young man had smiled- pure sunshine. Brian looked down at the business card from the gallery, earlier that week; the paintings had been delivered and hung to his specifications. Brian looked over at them, their silent messages to him making up his mind; and with a much more confident air, he once more picked up the phone.

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Justin had not been able to forget Brian. The past ten days he had done sketch after sketch, frustrated by his own inability to exactly capture the look in those hazel eyes. Their exact color and shape had mystified him. Everything else about the man had been amorously recreated, detail after detail; the perfect strawberry color and shape of his lips, the auburn hair with its gold highlights, the beautiful, graceful neck…leading down to his perfect form, with those long, long legs… Image after image flashed through Justin’s mind. He had wanted to call Brian; he could ask about the paintings, make sure the customer was satisfied, but he had been unable to work up the courage. MG had been overjoyed for him at his first sale, and had immediately had him fill the empty space with two more of his works.

Justin stepped back, cocking his head, he carefully studied the placement and angle of his latest work. MG had given him a much better slot in the gallery than his first two had held, and he wanted them to look just right. This time instead of abstracts, Justin had chosen two of his portraits to hang. The first was of his best friend, Daphne. The portrait had captured the sparkle of joy and life in his friend’s eyes, the abominable spirit that helped him survive high school. The second was of an old lady that feed the ducks along the banks of Lake Michigan. Every weekend during the warmer months, Justin took advantage of the scenery along the Lake. The old women had been a fixture at the Lake, and Justin could not resist the joy she showed in something as simple as feeding the ducks. Justin reached forward and slightly tipped one painting to the left. There, he thought, perfect!

Distantly, he heard the ringing of the phone. But Justin ignored it, Mark one of the other employees could get it. Justin sighed with annoyance when his name came over the intercom, the call was for him. “This is Justin,” he said, answering the phone.

Brian grinned at the young man’s professional tone. “Justin, this is Brian Kinney. We met-,” before Brian could get out any more, the voice on the other end called his name, excitement evident in the tone.

At the sound of the voice on the other end of the receiver, a shiver shook Justin’s frame. “Brian!” he said, unable to keep the joy from his voice.

Brian laughed his earlier anxiety about calling forgotten. “I’d like to take you to dinner, say this Friday night, 7 o clock?”

He listened, a huge smile on his face, and his surroundings all but forgotten. “I’d love to,” he answered honestly and perhaps a bit too eagerly. Justin gave Brian his address and once more confirmed the time. When he hung up the phone, Justin did a happy little wiggle right there in the middle of the gallery.

He had a date, and not just any date! It was with Brian!

Chapter 4

Justin glanced nervously at the clock, just ten more minutes. He had been ready for over an hour. Brian was due in exactly ten minutes, and Justin’s stomach grew more unsettled the closer the time came. He glanced in the mirror one last time. The soft dove-gray dress slacks and light blue Armani-exchange T-shirt looked dressy casual, and he hoped it was okay. He had not thought to ask Brian where the older man was taking him, too excited that Brian had called. Justin couldn’t remember when he had this much anticipation about a date. With his classes, work at the gallery, and his own art, there hadn’t been much time for dating, nor had there been anyone like Brian Kinney asking him out.

The older man was beautiful and obviously successful, judging by his clothes and the price he paid for Justin’s art. He just hoped they had something in common, this date would tell. The knock on the door stopped Justin’s mental wanderings, and with one last deep breath and a hand to his nervous middle, he answered the door with a smile. His smile grew at the sight before him. Brian look delicious in black pleated Prada slacks with a deep crimson pullover, and Justin was glad he had worn what he had. “Hi Brian,” Justin beamed.

Brian had done his own looking as well, and the vision before him brought a smile and had his dick stirring. “Hi yourself, Sunshine,” he replied.

“Sunshine?” Justin asked with a grin, moving back from the door and waving Brian in. He hadn’t been aware that the older man knew his nickname.

“I heard your boss call you that and it fits,” Brian answered, his hazel eyes already busy looking around Justin’s apartment. There really wasn’t much of it; just one large room with a closed door Brian assumed was the bathroom. But the young artist had placed his signature on it that was for sure! The walls were a deep emerald green with Justin’s art work decorating the walls. The blond had chosen bright-colored abstracts that surprisingly given the rich colors, lent the room a tranquil feel. The sofa-sleeper had bright jewel-toned pillows and the large bay window was bare except for a royal blue swag at the very top. It was a vibrant room and very welcoming.

“I like this, Justin,” Brian said, turning back to his date. “And I see you kept the best paintings hidden here for yourself,” he said, hazel eyes smiling into blue.

Justin couldn’t stop the blush or the rush of pleasure Brian’s words gave him. “Thanks, It’s not much, but it beats student housing,” he said, gesturing towards the kitchen, he asked. “Would you like a drink Brian?”

Brian shook his regretfully. “No thanks. We have to be going if we are going to make our reservations.” Brian waited by the door as Justin gathered his keys and cell phone. Brian opened the door to a sleek dark green Jag, and Justin sank into he buttery soft leather seats with a sigh. As Brian joined him and pulled into the early evening traffic, Justin once again inquired where they were heading.

“I thought we would go to the Blackbird, have you ever been there?” Brian asked.

Justin shook his head. “I haven’t. But I have heard great things about it. My boss, MG said that they have great works of art on the walls that change every month.” Justin watched Brian as he drove. He hadn’t been able to take his eyes off the older man since he had opened his door to him. He glanced down at the elegant hands on the steering wheel. Brian had long graceful fingers, and Justin shivered as he imagined those hands on his body. His eyes traveled back up to those raspberry- colored lips, and he blushed as he saw them curve into a smirk. Brian had been very aware that he had been watching him.

Brian shot Justin a smile as they waited for a traffic light. He said nothing of the looks, only remarked on the fact that the restaurant was supposed to have an excellent and ever-changing wine list. Justin relaxed, and enjoyed the smooth expensive ride, and sitting next to the equally smooth chic man. The ride to Randolph Street didn’t take very long, and before Justin knew it, the door was being opened by the valet and Brian’s hand was on his lower back, escorting him into the plush restaurant. The two beautiful men, a contrast in light and dark, attracted attention, eyes followed, some envious, but in the modern,” beautiful people” atmosphere of the Blackbird, none were disapproving. Brian seated Justin himself, and Justin couldn’t ever remember being this focused on a man.

Conversation flowed easily, at first. They discussed and admired the art work on the wall, and discussed their wine and meal selections. Justin told Brian of his classes, his art, and spoke about his dreams. But it wasn’t until Justin asked Brian about himself, that the air between them became tense and uncomfortable. Justin had ignored the shifts in conversation at first, how Brian kept turning the subject back to Justin, but finally, he had asked again, and Brian had grown silent and uncomfortable. Justin started to apologize, even though he was confused. But Brian gave him a nervous smile and started talking.

Brian spoke of his son, Gus, who was four. He explained that the child was a result of a favor to a lesbian friend and how he never knew he would love the boy so much. Justin relaxed at the affection and joy in Brian’s voice and on his face as he spoke of his son, and any unease dissipated. Anyone who could speak of their child with such love and acceptance could be trusted, Justin thought. Brian told him how he was from Pittsburg and had only recently settled in Chicago, but that he did travel back to the Pitts, as Brian called it, frequently to see Gus.

“I am not close to my family, my blood family, that is.” Brian shrugged. “I have a group of friends that are more of a family than my own have ever been,” Brian stopped as their waiter placed their dinners before them, he appeared to welcome the interruption, and Justin could see him release a relieved breath.

Justin had never met anyone who seemed to dislike talking about himself as much as Brian appeared to. It was kind of refreshing. Justin had been out with self-absorbed assholes enough to appreciate the difference. Dinner was everything promised by the Blackbird. Justin and Brian both had the chef’s recommendations, Justin the Lamb and Brian the scallops. They exchanged samples so both could enjoy the entrees, and for dessert, which only Justin partook in, chocolate tort with Bourbon liquor, was polished off.

“Yum, that was good!” Justin licked the last off the bourbon flavored chocolate off his fork, his pink tongue darting out and unknowingly, teasing the man across from him.

“Ready?” Brian asked in a husky voice, and caught at the tone; Justin looked up and became caught in hazel eyes light with desire. He could only nod yes in response.

The heat from the older man’s hand, again pressed against Justin’s lower back; grounded and provided a sense of safety to Justin, but it also had his cock twitching in his pants. Rather than getting the car right away, they decided to walk along the old bridges along the Chicago River. The fall evening was warm, but the brisk breeze off the River kept them comfortable; as was the silence between them. Justin could only smile as the older man took his hand.

“Thank you for dinner, Brian. It was great,” Justin smiled up at the taller man, shivering slightly as the evening deepened towards dark.

“You’re welcome.” Seeing the shiver, Brian pulled Justin close with an arm around his shoulders, and turned them back towards the restaurant and the car. Justin took a deep breath, his lungs filling with the enticing scent of Brian’s cologne. He could feel the blood rushing into his lower body at the older man’s proximity; and he tuned the world around him, focused on the feelings within his own body.

“Justin?” he heard at the same time Brian tightened his arm around him. Justin shook himself and flushed, looking up into amused hazel eyes. “I will be heading back to the Pitts this weekend to see my son, but I’d like to see you again when I return?” Brian asked a question in his tone at that last bit.

Justin’s smile grew and he slipped his own arm around Brian’s trim waist. He squeezed with affection. “I’d love that Brian,” he said simply, meaning every word and not hiding the happiness in his voice.

Brian seemed to relax even more at Justin’s actions and words. Brian once again held the car door for Justin, but this time instead of just allowing him to get seated in the car; he leaned forward and buckled Justin’s seatbelt himself, all the while eyes locked with Justin. It was on the ride home that Justin asked Brian what he did for a living. Justin turned half in his seat to address the other man. He saw Brian look at him briefly before returning his attention to the road.

“I am semi-retired. I own an advertising agency in Pittsburg,” was all Brian provided; and Justin frowned, wondering what semi meant.

“You still handle accounts?” he asked, confused.

“One or two,” Brian replied. “I have a couple of favorite clients who still prefer for me to handle their business, but most now deal with my staff back at the office,” Brian looked over and grinned. “You’ve heard of Brown Athletics?” he asked.

Justin nodded, of course he had. Their ads were on almost every billboard and bus in Chicago, their corporate home. “That’s one of your favorite client’s?” Justin asked, impressed.

Brian nodded and the rest of the ride he filled Justin in on their latest campaign. He had the younger man laughing with tales of the modeling woes that Brown had to deal with. Before they knew it, they were pulling up in front of Justin’s building. The pair grew silent and their steps were slow and dragging as they arrived at Justin’s door. Justin sighed disappointed by the evenings end. He couldn’t recall when he had such a good time and been filled with such a feeling of anticipation. He unlocked his door and turned back to Brian, looking up at the older man, he could see the same regret at the evening’s end that he felt.

“I had a great time tonight, Brian. Thank you,” Justin said, forcing himself to smile his sunshine smile.

Brian took a step closer, bringing their bodies into contact. “No, thank you, Justin, I enjoyed tonight very much.” Brian ran a finger across Justin cheek, enjoying the silky feel of the younger man’s skin.

Justin tilted his face up and met Brian’s lips. The kiss was tender and slow; at first just the barest brush of their lips, then Brian deepened it with a grown. Justin felt himself pulled flush against the other man’s body, and moaned himself as their erections brushed together. He opened his mouth to Brian’s tongue, curling his own sliding it along the other man’s. They kissed until breathing became a necessity. Pulling away, Brian leaned his forehead against Justin’s; both stood with their heads together, eyes closed, breathing heavily.

Justin finally opened his eyes, staring up into the almost black eyes, he whispered. “Would you like to come in?”

Brian gave a harsh sounding laugh and reluctantly pulled away. He placed one more to brief kiss on Justin’s plumps lips. “I’d love to, but I won’t,” he said.

Justin quickly covered his disappointment, but the older man saw it anyway, and kissed Justin forcibly once more before stepping back. “I want to take this slow, Justin. It’ll mean more.” Brian put a little more space between himself and temptation.

Justin let him. He couldn’t help the thrill Brian’s words brought and they went a long way towards easing his disappointment. “I’d like that,” he said simply. “Call me?” he asked, turning towards his door.

Brian nodded, and with one last smile and a “later,” he left. And Justin floated inside, already impatient for Brian’s return.

Chapter 5

Justin had to laugh at himself as he left his last class of the day. This entire day, school-wise, had been an utter waste He felt like a silly school girl. Thoughts of Brian and their date kept him absent-minded, and with a silly smile on his face. Even the knowledge that he would have to hit someone up in each of his classes for notes wasn’t enough to wipe the joy from his face.

Justin caught the bus to work and walked the block or so to the gallery from his stop. Upon entering, his eyes immediately were drawn to a large arrangement of deep-red roses that sat on the reception desk. The amber-colored crystal vase that held the flowers drew his eye, the rich reflective color complimented the dark scarlet of the roses. He drew closer to the flowers and couldn’t stop his fingers from stroking one soft petal.

“Who’s the lucky recipient?” he asked Sara, the gallery’s receptionist.

Sara smiled at Justin, and reaching over, plucked the card from its holder. Handing it to him, she joked. “We have all been waiting hours for you to get here! Everyone is dying to know who the admirer is.”

Justin grinned back. In his heart he knew who he hoped they were from, and opening the card, his smile turned to a full-fledged mega-watt smile. It was from Brian!

Justin, Thank you for a wonderful evening, and I look forward to seeing when I return to Chicago.

Brian

“Well? Share!” Sara demanded, but Justin just laughed and his smile grew, if possible, even brighter.

“Nope,” he laughingly said, placing the card back in its holder and picking up the arrangement. Ignoring the demands behind him, Justin carried his gift to his work area. If the date itself wasn’t enough to scatter his thoughts for the day, then the roses assured his concentration was shot. Justin couldn’t help it, his gaze returned to them time again. The bus ride home was interesting, the many glances and smiles the roses received, their scent making the usual stuffy bus much more pleasant. And the old lady’s comment as he passed her to exit, “Lucky boy,” had him flushing.

Arriving home, the flowers got a place of honor on the counter where they could be seen anywhere in the small apartment. Justin pushed the play button on the blinking answering machine and smiled when Brian’s voice came over the speaker.

“Hi Justin, its Brian. Listen I am on my way to Pittsburg and I’ll be back on Tuesday and would like to see you again. Hope you enjoyed the flowers. I’ll call you. Later.”

Justin went over his schedule mentally for Tuesday. He had to work until six, but maybe a late dinner? He wished he could see the hazel-eyed man this weekend, but he could understand Brian’s desire to see his son. He still couldn’t believe Brian had a child, and he found himself hoping that someday he could meet Gus. Justin took a shower and made himself a simple meal, sautéed chicken in angel hair pasta with a basil olive oil dressing. It was quick and filling. After cleaning up his mess, Justin sat down to tackle some homework, but just like at school and work, he found his mind wondering.

God, Brian was beautiful, and that kiss! Justin found himself getting hard just remembering it. He couldn’t ever remember responding to someone so quickly and from just a kiss! Justin fell back upon his futon, groaning. He could feel the heat settle in his groin at thoughts of the older man. Those hazel eyes that could pierce to the core and at the same time warm one with their gleam. Brian’s auburn hair had caught every available light, the gold and red strands revealed cast a halo about the other man’s head. But it was his red-cherry colored lips that had Justin moaning. He had seen them smiling, serious, smirking, and had tasted them; had them pressed tightly against his own lips.

Justin trailed a hand down his chest, past his hard nipples. He slipped under the waist band of his pants and eagerly grasped his thickening length. Brian’s tongue had been hot, silken, and oh-so-tasty. Justin could only imagine it wrapped around his length, teasing the tip and swallowing him whole. Justin’s hips rose as the pace of his stroking hand increased. Using his free hand, Justin pushed his shirt up, fingers finding his eager nipples stroking them. Justin could feel his balls tightening up, drawing close to his body, his thumb flicked once, twice across the head of his cock, and he came, calling out Brian’s name loudly in the silence of his apartment.

Justin settled back down on the futon, a smile curling his lips. He laughed out loud, it had been a while since he jacked off thinking of a man he had just met, but then again, he had never met a man like Brian Kinney. And it was with thoughts of hazel eyes, auburn hair, and red, red lips, that he slipped into sleep...

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The weekend seemed to drag on. Justin finished all his homework, worked at the gallery, even started a new painting, but it was the subject of said painting that occupied his thoughts, and for the first time, he looked forward to the end of a weekend. On Monday, he hurried from his last class, flying down the stares and heading for his bus stop.

“Justin!” he heard his name called, and stopping turned to one of his class mates, Matt.

“Hey, Matt, what’s up?” Justin asked as the other boy came to stop before him, breathing heavily from running to catch up.

“Where are you off to in such a hurry?” Matt asked, his eyes appraising the blond with approval. Matt had been trying to work up the nerve to ask his class mate out since the start of the semester.

Justin smiled back at the other boy. Matt was an okay guy. He and Justin had worked together on a couple of projects for class, and they had flirted casually back and forth. “Work,” he said simply. “Hoping to get an early start, maybe get off tonight a bit earlier.” Justin turned and started walking to his stop, the other boy walking along with him.

“Got plans?” Matt asked, secretly hoping not.

“Hum,” Justin answered absently, mind already on a certain burnet.

Matt reached out a placed a hand on Justin’s shoulder, halting the blond, who turned to him with a questioning look. “I was wondering if maybe you would like to get together?” Matt asked.

Justin’s attention retuned quickly to his companion. He saw Matt’s eager expression and mentally groaned. A week ago he might have accepted, but he wanted to see where it was headed with Brian, who sparked something in Justin that he had never felt before. He was looking forward, no eager would be a better term, to seeing it through, to whatever end. But now he had to let Matt down, and gently. He sat next to the other boy daily, relied on him for notes when he was absent, stressing that relationship was something Justin didn’t want.

“Matt,” he started, but at Justin’s apologetic expression the other boy spoke quickly, a flush spreading across his face.

“Hey man, no problem,” he said and quickly backed away. “I’ll see you Wednesday in class,” he called, already turning and practically running away.

“Mat-, “Justin started to call after the other boy, but he stopped what could he really say. That he had met someone and suddenly no one else would do? Matt would think him crazy. And Justin had to admit that the way Brian had memorized him so fast was a little crazy, but that’s what his heart wanted.

Justin quickly put the other boy from his mind once he arrived at work. The gallery was unpacking a new exhibit and MG was running around driving them all crazy as she decided what would go where. The night flew by, and with a grateful groan, Justin signed out and headed home. Throwing his things down on the counter, Justin hit the button on his machine. He winched when his mom’s voice came over the speaker. Shit! He thought she could really lay on the guilt! His mom’s smooth tone had held a hint of reproach as she reminded her wayward son that he had not called home in a week, and it would be nice if his loving and concerned mother knew if her only son was alive and well. Talk and laying it on think! And she called him a drama princess!

Justin started to strip, a hot shower sounding like heaven. But before he could get more that a step away from the phone, it rang. Thinking it was his mom, Justin answered it groaning with laughter in his voice. “Mom, I’m sure if I was dead you would have heard,” he said into the phone, laughing.

“Ignoring mommy, Sunshine?” The smooth voice asked on the other end, amusement heavy in Brian’s tone.

“Brian!” Justin said, unable to hide the excitement in his voice. “Sorry about that,” he said, laughter spilling forth fully now. “Mom’s weekly guilt trip phone message, I thought you were her calling to lay a little more on me. How are you?’ Justin asked, getting comfortable on the bed with the phone pressed eagerly against his ear.

Brian’s voice was still rich with amusement, but the seductive tones came through even over the phone lines. “Doing fine, Sunshine. I’ll be back in Chicago tomorrow. How was your weekend?”

“Busy,” Justin answered, not telling the older man that it had also been filled with thoughts of him. “You spend time with your son?” he asked.

Brian laughed. “Yes, scored major points with a trip to the zoo. So what’s your schedule like this week?”

Justin felt a thrill shot through him at Brian’s question. “I have class all week, but I am off at the gallery tomorrow and Wednesday.” Justin didn’t tell the older man that he had purposely arranged his schedule with Brian’s return in mind.

“Great.” Brian said, and Justin could hear the genuine pleasure in the other man’s voice. “How about you show me some of the city from a resident’s perspective?” he said, a hint of teasing in his voice that had heat pooling in Justin’s groin.

Justin had to take a second to catch his breath and control the urge to shout out his agreement. “I’d love to,” he replied, hoping he didn’t sound as eager as he was.

But Brian must have heard the huskiness of Justin’s tone, because he gave a low laugh that had the hair on Justin’s body tingling. “How about I call you tomorrow when I land?”

Even though the other man was hundreds of miles away, Justin still flushed at that laugh. “Sounds good, I’ll look forward to hearing from you. Night Brian,” he whispered.

Justin heard Brian’s “Later Sunshine,” before the older man hung up, and with a laugh and a rueful glance at his crotch, Justin once more reached for his cock...

Chapter 6

Justin laughed and his hands eagerly held tight to the slim waist in front of him. He slipped his fingers under the cashmere sweater and teased the warm flesh found there; drawing chuckles from the man he was tickling.

“Admit it,” he demanded, “you enjoyed the show.”

Justin gasped as his hands were caught and his arms pulled forward till he was flush against the older man’s back. Brian wrapped Justin’s arms tightly about him, enjoying the blonde’s embrace. He looked over his shoulder into laughing blue eyes, and gave a fake shudder.

“Hell no,” he said. “Those guys were creepy with their blue faces and only the whites of their eyes showing, it was freaking me out!” Brian pulled Justin to his side, wrapping one arm securely about the younger man’s waist.

Justin laughed and was still chuckling as they waited for the attendant to bring around the car. “Well, what did you expect, they are called the Blue Men, and you got us the tickets,” he replied and Brian grinned back at the boy, unable, and unwilling to resist the blonde’s infectious smile or joyous nature.

Justin sighed with pleasure, just enjoying being in the hazel-eyed man’s presence. The pair had seen much of each other in the past couple of weeks. Oh, Brian still went back and forth between Pittsburg and Chicago, but he had worked his absences around the younger man’s schedule. Justin had shown Brian about the city. They had dined at the best restaurants, explored the fabulous shopping Chicago had to offer, and enjoyed many a walk through the beautiful parks and along the lake.

Every evening, Brian drove Justin back to his apartment and the pair engaged in some passionate necking either in the Jag or at Justin’s door, but never anything further. Justin had to admit he was starting to go a little crazy! Being left at his door night after night with a raging hard-on, he wanted Brian so badly! But Brian seemed determined to take it slow. The too frequent jerking-off sessions, fantasizing about hazel eyes and strawberry-colored lips, only wetted Justin’s appetite for the real thing.

He would have worried, except that in their nightly embraces he had felt Brian’s heavy erection pressing against his own, so he knew Brian wanted him as well. Having boasted up his courage all evening, Justin decided tonight was the night, he would invite Brian in. Justin could safely say that Brian had swept him off his feet, utterly and completely, he had fallen for the older man. No one had ever treated Justin this special before. Brian listened to him go on for hours about his art, encouraged him regarding school, and generally treated him like a princess. If he had misgivings, they were quickly banished by the spell of sparkling hazel eyes and heated kisses.

Justin had gotten use to the evasive answers Brian gave when ask about his past, or his life in Pittsburg, and Justin determined that Brian’s family must have hurt the other man terribly. Brian never spoke of friends or what he did on those trips back to the Pitts; the only thing he did share with Justin was Gus, his son. Justin had just as quickly fallen for the smaller version of Brian. Hearing the stories of each new word, each new discovery by the littlest Brian made Justin long to meet the boy. But when he asked Brian about that all he got was some vague answer about lesbian mothers and fierceness rivaling that of mother lions.

Justin’s raging youthful hormones settled for that.

Justin jerked when Brian reached out and gently touched him on the shoulder, he blinked, looking around realizing the attendant had brought the car around and that Brian was holding the door open for him. He flushed and smiled his thanks, sinking gratefully into the cars plush interior. The ride was silent, and the closer they came to Justin’s place, the more anxious the blond became.

“You okay?” Brian asked, shooting him a concerned glance.

Justin gulped as they pulled up to his apartment. He realized that he hadn’t said two words the entire ride. Taking a deep breath, Justin reached over a rested a hand on Brian’s thigh. “I’m great. Sorry my mind was wandering,” he explained. One more deep breath and a firm decision not to think about his decision, and Justin blurted out. “You want to come in?” he asked, not looking at Brian as he issued the invite.

Brian reached over and cupped Justin’s chin, gently turning the younger man’s face back to him. Justin hesitantly met the warm hazel eyes, reassured by the affection he saw there.

“You sure?” Brian asked.

Justin gulped, but nodded eagerly, his groin tightening as Brian laughed softly…

Chapter 7

Justin attempted to unlock his apartment door with fumbling fingers, all too aware of the warmth at his back. Brian’s scent filled his lungs making concentration that much more difficult. Justin cursed at his inability to get the simple lock open.

“Here,” Brian said, covering Justin’s hands with his own and inserting the key, smoothly unlocking the door. The blond smiled his thanks softly with a glance over his shoulder.

Justin led the way inside. The apartment was dim, with only the light from over the kitchen stove lighting it. Brian stopped Justin in the middle of the room, turning the blond to face him. He pressed a light kiss to plump lips, “You okay?” he whispered, the whisper seemingly fitting in the darkness of the room.

Justin nodded and stepped into Brian’s arms, wrapping his own tight about the taller man’s waist. He stood up on tip-toes to meet Brian’s next kiss. It started with just a brush of their lips, each enjoying the softness of the other’s mouth. Brian’s hands had been loosely wrapped around Justin waist, but as the pressure of their lips grew, he groaned and fisted a hand in the blond’s hair, holding his head tightly.

Justin opened his mouth to Brian’s eager tongue, moaning himself at the older man’s rich taste. His lips grew swollen and red as his mouth was taken again and again. “Want you,” he murmured as Brian’s mouth sought out his neck, Justin all too eagerly throwing his head back to allow full access.

Their hands could no longer stay still. Justin slipped his under the Brian’s shirt, running them over the sleek muscles of his back, kneading and drawing groans from Brian. Brian cupped both hands under Justin’s plump cheeks, squeezing the firm flesh. His mouth denied by Justin’s shirt, Brian growled, “Off,” before quickly sliding his hands under the shirt and lifting off the blond’s head. Now his mouth had no obstruction, and he hungrily latched onto a pink nipple, biting it gently before rolling it in his mouth and sucking. Justin could only moan and hold on tightly to the other man.

This impassivity lasted only until his nipple was released, then Justin did some demanding of his own. “Want to feel you,” he explained as he swept Brian’s shirt off as well. Now Justin could press himself against Brian’s body, the heat coming off the other man drawing a groan from him.

Brian embraced Justin close, sucking in a deep breath to calm himself, he couldn’t remember ever wanting a man this much. He looked around the small apartment. “Bed?” he asked, chin rubbing softly over Justin’s blond hair.

Justin stepped back reluctantly, wiggling a little at the tightness of his paints. He moved without a word to the futon and quickly laid the back down. Turning back, he gasped as he was immediately pulled back against Brian. “That’ll do,” he heard before his lips were taken once more.

Brian sucked on Justin’s lower lip; giving it a demanding bite before he released it. Stepping back he put as little space as possible between them, he looked into Justin’s bright blue eyes. Seeing the matching hunger there, his hands went to the waistband of Justin’s slacks, opening the button slowly and pulling down the zipper, giving the younger man plenty of opportunity to stop him, Brian stripped Justin of the rest of his clothes. The sight took his breath away. Justin’s skin gleamed in the meager light, the pale-pearl tone of his flesh beckoning Brian’s touch. The younger man was slight in form, muscles almost delicate, but Brian knew that frailty was deceptive, that the younger man had a core of strength that Brian was just beginning to discover. He was beautiful!

Justin fidgeted, uncomfortable under the hazel-eyed regard. Did Brian not like what he saw? But at the other man’s whispered, “You’re beautiful,” he smiled a blinding smile and eagerly reached to remove the rest of Brian’s clothes, anxious to reveal the older man to his eyes, to touch him, and to taste him. Once he had Brian as nude as himself, Justin stepped back into Brian’s arms, sighing with pleasure as their bodies touched. “So are you,” he whispered, raising his face and meeting Brian’s lips fervently. Justin felt himself being laid back on the futon, and Brian’s delicious weight covering him, he couldn’t stop the moan as their cock’s rubbed together, or the excited thrust of his hips as his body demanded more. He willingly spread his legs, making a place for the older man between them, joyously giving a low laugh at Brian’s groan.

Brian couldn’t get enough of Justin’s lips. Their kisses grew wet and sloppy, but neither minded and it was only reluctantly that Justin released Brian’s lips when the other man began nibbling and sucking on his neck and shoulders. Brian paid homage to each pink nipple, spreading kisses and bites to one then the other until Justin was a whirling mess under him. He knew this was different, could feel it in each taste, every touch and hear it in their moans. Never could he recall wanting to know a man’s body like he wanted to know Justin’s. The boy’s gleaming skin begged for Brian’s mark and he dotted the flesh with love bites, each one drawing exquisite sounds from Justin.

Brian licked his way down, teasing Justin’s flat stomach, circling his bellybutton while holding tight to Justin’s squirming hips. Brian reached up and caught the small hands that had been tugging at his hair, fisting it tighter and tighter the more Brian teased. He brought them down on either side of Justin’s body, holding them there as he buried his nose in the soft curls around Justin cock. He inhaled deeply, drawing the sent of the blond into his lungs, fresh and sweet, and Brian couldn’t wait any longer to taste. He released Justin’s hands, squeezing once to let the boy know to leave them there. One hand rubbed softly in circles over Justin’s stomach while Brian used the other to stroke Justin’s cock. He fisted the length once gentle and murmured, “shush,” when Justin cried out. Brian blew lightly across the tip of Justin’s cock, before taking a slow lick, savoring the blond’s taste.

Justin was fighting hard not to beg. His hands dug into the futon and his hips strained against the need to rise and thrust. Brian was taking his sweet time torturing him and Justin could feel himself losing more and more of his control. “Please,” he whimpered as one more playful lick was placed on the head of his cock, hips rising despite his efforts at control. But Brian ignored him, enjoying himself as he learned through each lick and nibble every ridge and vein of Justin’s flesh. Finally, taking pity of the blond, he wet his lips and slowly let Justin’s length fill his mouth.

“Ah!” Justin’s soft cry filled the small apartment. “B-Brian,” he moaned as his cock slid in and out of tight, wet heat. He knew he wouldn’t last, not if Brian kept doing what he was doing. His hands went to the other man’s head, fingers sliding through the silken-auburn locks. He tugged gently, waiting for the hazel eyes to rise and meet his own. At Brian’s enquiring gaze, Justin whispered. “Won’t last, want to cum with you inside me.”

Brian smiled and gave Justin’s cock one final lick. He sat back on his heels, hands soothingly rubbing along Justin’s thighs. Keeping one hand on Justin’s knee, Brian reached down to his pants and pulled out a condom and a small tube of lube. Brian wet his fingers, warming the lube; all the while keeping his gaze looked with Justin’s. His fingers gently circled Justin’s hole before he slid one digit inside, halting at the knuckle, letting Justin’s adjust to the penetration.

Once the muscles of Justin’s entrance stopped gripping his finger, Brian moved it in and out, going further each time until he could move his finger in and out of the passage smoothly. Only then did he add another, thrusting in and out, enjoying the younger man’s groans.

“Enough!” Justin moaned, fucking himself with Brian’s fingers, hips rising and falling eagerly.

Brian could feel his own hands shaking with the need to be inside the blond, withdrawing his fingers Brian impatiently ripped open the condom, unable to prevent his own moan as he stroked it on his hard dick. Coating himself with the rest of the lube on his hand, Brian placed Justin’s legs on his shoulders and his cock at Justin’s hole. “Ready?” he hoarsely asked.

“Yes,” Justin answered his voice breathless. He halted Brian briefly with a hesitant hand on the other man’s arm. “Just go slow, please. It’s been a while,” he asked, soft blue eyes pleading for understanding.

Unable to resist the mute appeal in that azure gaze, Brian leaned down for a slow kiss, before his breeched Justin’s body, halting with just the head inside, allowing the younger man a moment to adjust. When Justin’s breathing grew a bit calmer and his body a little less tense, Brian thrust forward, filling him to the hilt, biting his lips to still his cry. Justin was tight and hot around his cock, gripping him with virgin like intensity, and Brian had to stop and take a deep breath, afraid of cumming to quickly.

“Brian,” Justin moaned and his hips lifted from the bed, hole clenching around the thick length filling it. All he could do was hold on as Brian began moving, thrusting in and out of him, wringing cry after cry from Justin’s lips. When the next thrust was angled to hit his prostrate, Justin saw stars and his stomach and balls tightened, signaling he was close. Sweat dripped off Brian as he thrust faster feeling his orgasm approaching. He reached between their bodies, taking Justin’s cock in his hand and fisting it rapidly, knowing neither one of them was lasting much longer.

“Harder!” Justin grunted, and Brian’s next two thrust sent Justin over the edge. He came with a loud cry, shooting all over his chest and throat.

“Justin!” Brian cried as the tunnel around his dick grew tighter, squeezing and forcing his own release from him. He thrust fast and hard twice more before collapsing on the smaller frame below, trying to keep most of weight on his arms so not to crush Justin.

They stayed like that for several minutes, each trying to regain their breath and slow their heartbeats. Justin rubbed up and down Brian’s damp back, enjoying the other man’s weight on him and the cock still inside him. He hummed with disapproval when Brian rolled off, and he immediately snuggled close as Brian removed the condom, tying the end and tossing it on the floor. Brian accepted the warm wiggling blond gladly back into his embrace, placing an affectionate kiss atop the mussed blond head. “Okay?” he asked.

“Wonderful,” Justin mumbled drowsily, the earlier nervousness and then later sexual release making him sleepy and content.

But Brian’s mind was not so peaceful, his thoughts filled with Justin’s plea for slowness and the blond’s apparent abstinence from sex. “Justin,” he said softly. At the younger man’s low “yes,” he asked. “How long had it been?”

Justin raised his head meeting hazel eyes, confused by the question. He frowned for a moment, not getting it, but then with a soft “Oh,” he laid his head back upon the other man’s chest. “Almost three years,” he answered not seeing the shocked disbelief in Brian’s eyes.

Brian fought not to tense at that news. He couldn’t believe that the blond hadn’t been with anyone in three years! “How come?” he asked, unconsciously tightening his hold on the boy.

Justin stroked a hand up and down Brian’s chest, enjoying the warm smooth flesh as he thought of how to best answer Brian’s question. “I met Ethan my first day of college. He was smart, funny, and talented. We hit it off right away. He took me for long walks, held my hand. We had picnics on the floor of his apartment and he serenaded me with his violin. I had never been treated like that before,” Justin shot a quick glance up at Brian and seeing the interest and encouragement in the other man’s hazel eyes, he continued.

“He filled my head with romantic promises and hopes. Said he only wanted to be with me. I feel hard, only to discover after I moved in with him that it was all a bunch of bullshit. We were apart one night and he cheated on me.” Justin grew quite as he recalled the pain of that betrayal. He still remembered his disbelief and anger that he had fallen for all Ethan’s lies. Justin rose up on his elbow and looked at Brian. “But you want to know the worst part?” he asked, voice still holding a hint of the hurt he went through. At Brian’s cautious nod he told him. “That he lied to me, and that I was stupid enough to fall for those lies. Nothing is worse than being lied to,” Justin said laying his head back on Brian’s shoulder curling into the comfort the auburn haired man unconsciously provided.

And Brian could only tighten his hold on Justin, dread curling in his gut…

Chapter 8

The buzz was immediate and noticeable. The air inside Babylon was now charged with that special something that could only mean one thing, the Stud of Liberty Avenue had returned. Ted was the first to spot him as the throngs of dancing men parted. He nudged Michael and Emmett, and they watched as Brian approached. Tight black jeans, black wifebeater, Brian stirred many a groin as he stalked the floor of his kingdom.

“Well look who decided to grace us with his presence,” Ted shouted over the loud thumpa-thumpa.

Brian accepted Mikey’s kiss and tight hug hello, smirking at the others. “Yes, I thought I’d stop in the glorious Pitts and see how the other half lived,” he drawled, signaling the bartender for his usual.

“When did you get back?” Mikey demanded.

“This afternoon,” Brian replied, shooting back the first but certainly not the last shot of Beam of the night.

He knew it was inevitable, but Brian still found himself smirking at Michael’s whining. “Why didn’t you call me?” Even with his happy stable relationship with Ben, the good professor, Mikey still ‘in Brian’s opinion’ demanded too much of his best friend’s time and attention. It was something Brian knew Michael would never grow out of.

He leaned back against the bar. “I spent the day at the Munchers with Gus,” and that was enough said. Even Michael knew not to push Brian when it came to his son.

“How long are you staying?” Emmett asked, quickly changing the subject.

“Till Friday,” Brian said, raising a brow at Ted. “Ted has a couple of things that need my attention, isn’t that right, Theodore?” Brian’s eyes didn’t leave the decadent masses whirling on the dance floor. He should have missed this, shouldn’t he? But as Michael’s whine sounded once more, something along the lines of how Brian was never home any more, he thought to himself, no he didn’t miss it, not one damn bit.

“Let’s dance,” he said, already moving to the middle of the room, effectively cutting off any thing else said.

Brian let the lights and the music swallow him. He felt a stab of longing, and closed his eyes, visions dancing next to him. Pale flesh gleaming, blond hair with a halo around it under the flashing lights, lithe hips swaying seductively and that ass, resting snugly against his cock. Brian could just envision the hungry gazes that Justin would elicit, but somehow the image of his Justin, in Babylon, didn’t fit, too distorted and unnatural. He blinked his eyes, and Justin disappeared. Brian shifted, adjusting his jeans from the growth in his groin, damn he missed Justin already! The blond had sent Brian off just that morning with a hell of a blowjob and a fast, furious fuck, but it wasn’t enough. Brian didn’t think he’d ever get enough of the boy.

The friends danced in a tight circle, an effective deterrent, almost like a large neon sign, screaming, not welcome! Brian’s eyes turned down hopeful after hopeful come-hither glances, content to stay in the bosom of his friends. He knew he wouldn’t get away with it for long, soon it would be noticed, remarked upon, but Brian had no interest in anyone in the room. The backroom would not see his presence that evening. His body still hummed, pleasantly sated with Justin touch of that morning.

They may ask, but Brian had not intention of explaining himself to his friends, Justin was too private and no way in hell would Brian allow his life here to touch, and spoil that beautiful young man. He enjoyed a couple of shots, danced a few dances with the guys. Finally, throwing back his last Beam and slamming the glass on the bar, he drawled. “Well boys, it’s been something.” Kissing Mikey and with one last smirk, he stalked away, ignoring the demands behind him.

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“What the fuck was that?’ Michael demanded staring bewildered after Brian’s retreating back.

“No idea,” Ted shrugged feigning disinterest, he knew more than he let on, but he wasn’t about to let Brian’s business out in the open, for anyone and that included Michael.

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The family had been shocked and skeptical when Brian had announced his intentions to semi-retire, his reason, the desire to travel. But Ted knew, before anyone else, of his boss’s plans and the fact that Brian was indeed serious. Brian had sat him and Cynthia down, telling them first of their promotions to full partners in the company, and then dropping the bombshell, his retirement and the decision to leave Kinnetic in their capable hands. Oh, he still planned on handling a choice few accounts, accounts that did not trust anyone but Brian; like Liberty Air and Brown Athletics. Ted kept his promotion to partner and Brian’s plans to himself. Telling the family, he decided was Brian’s privilege. Brian’s faith in the former porn King assured Ted’s loyalty to his boss.

Brian had not changed his mind. He announced his plans to the rest of the staff, signed powers of Attorney for both Ted and Cynthia and had disappeared. Brian would stay gone for a week at a time, returning only for a day or two to visit Gus and be available if Ted or Cynthia needed anything, and he never gave any details of his trips, saying only that he was having a fabulous time. After a few months of this, even Michael had to agree that retirement and traveling were obviously good for Brian. Each trip home brought a more relaxed and happier Brian Kinney. None of the family had ever seen Brian more at ease with himself and the world around him.

But Ted knew more than even Brian realized. Perhaps his boss forgot who handled his finances? Ted knew of the condo in Chicago, the charges for restaurants, theaters, and most curious of all, artwork by a Justin Taylor. Something else curious to Ted, there were no charges from anywhere else, just Chicago. This information, Ted kept to himself, not even sharing with Emmett, but he couldn’t help being very curious.

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Brian slid back the loft door, eyeing his home dispassionately. Yes, it was all the same, same expensive furniture, designer accessories, and cold, lacking, interior. The view held no more promise, instead of the vast blue lake; all he had were deserted, lonely, Pittsburg streets. The bed, with its blue light, brought no comfort. It also was too cold and too lonely, there was no blond here to share his space, to hold him, to love him, and at that moment, Brian could not figure out why he kept coming back…

Chapter 9

Each time Brian came back to the Pitts, his loft became a little colder, his bed more lonely. This trip lasted only a couple of days, that’s all he could stand before he headed back to Chicago and Justin.

As he walked through the door of his Chicago loft and sat his bags down by the door, he felt the tension leave his body. He was home, and he could breathe freely. The silence wrapped around him and Brian allowed his fatigue to show. Here, there were no expectations and no obligations to anyone except to himself and Justin; and the blond wanted nothing more than to be with Brian.

Brian figured he had about 45 minutes before Justin arrived; he had called the blond on the way home from the airport. Brian’s lips curled in a small smile as he imagined their reunion, being apart sucked but coming home only got better and better.

Ten minutes later, Brian had his bags unpacked; his clothes exchanged for a pair of jeans and a tank, and was relaxing into the soft leather of his sofa, his bare feet happily curling in relief. Brian gave a moan at the sheer comfort of his position. He was so glad he had picked this couch, not only was it long enough for his six plus foot frame, but the buttery-soft leather molded to the body.

His eyes traveled around his home. None of the family would believe this place; the duality of Brian’s life was clearly evident when comparing his two homes. It was so different from the loft. It hadn’t been purposeful. Brian had no preconceived ideas for decorating the place when he had bought the condo; he just told the decorator, to make it warm. He had been very pleased with the results.

The condo was open, like the loft, but that was the only similarity. Two heavy oak doors replaced the sliding door of the loft. The fixtures were black, cast iron, with the inside of the doors having two corkscrew bars that allowed the doors to be pulled inward, much like medieval doors of old. The entryway flooring was uncut black granite, the overhead lighting reflected off the clear bits of stone in the granite, bouncing bits of light off the doors and walls. Unlike the loft, the condo was divided into four rooms, with the bedroom and master bath on the second floor.

The floors off the entryway were a golden-hued hard wood. To the right was the living room. All the furnishings were earth colors with bits of dusky reds, blues, and greens in the pillows, lamps, and artwork. The leather sofa and lounge were a rich darker brown than the floors, with a deep, vibrant, red rug under them. The tables and entertainment center were oak, but instead of a traditional look the wood had sharp, clean lines giving it that modern look Brian preferred. Off to the left was the staircase leading to the second floor, but it wasn’t truly a full upper level. Instead, it bore more of a loft design, only a half floor space covering the kitchen and dining area. The stairs were rail less and rose seamlessly with the steps designed in the hardwood of the condo’s flooring.

The dining room was open and just behind the stairs. Three steps lead up to a raised platform that held Brian’s formal table and chairs. He hadn’t chosen a large dining set, the table only big enough for a party of four, but the area had its own private feel despite being open.

The entire back walls of the condo were windows, large bay-shaped windows in groups of three that overlooked Lake Michigan.

Brian had to admit, he had surprised himself in his choices for his home here, but the place seemed to relax him and welcome him home. When Justin was here, it felt even more like a real home - one that he was always so eager to return to.

Brian’s head lifted eagerly. He heard the key and started to smile as the condo’s heavy wooden door opened.

“Well?” he demanded. “Did you get them?”

Justin had told Brian that he was bringing his semester grades with him when he came over, and he knew the blond had been stressing over them.

Instead of a verbal answer, he got a lap full of joyful blond and an even more eager kiss. Pulling back, Justin waved the paper in front of Brian’s face. “All A’s,” he crowed.

Brian laughed as he wrestled the paper from Justin for a look. His eyes ran across the paper quickly, but carefully, studying the marks and comments unsurprised by the high grades or the excellent comments. Smirking, he laid the grades aside and gathered the blond tighter in his arms.

“I guess the only thing left to do is to celebrate then,” he said right before covering Justin’s lips with his own.

When Brian’s insistent tongue swept in to reclaim its territory, Justin moaned and shifted until he was straddling the other man’s lap. Their tongues twirled together till Brian’s shyly retreated, forcing Justin to chase it back into Brian’s mouth. Justin groaned at the taste and pressed forward even harder to grind his crotch against Brian’s. He felt a shiver crawl up his spine and sweat broke out on his upper lip. Justin knew if he looked into the mirror that his face and neck would be flushed red with the heat building in his body. Justin could feel Brian’s heart beating and it thrilled him to hear it pick up the longer they kissed. He didn’t thing anything could delight him more than the knowledge that this man wanted him.

Brian let Justin dominate the kiss for a moment, enjoying the friskiness of the younger man before taking back control. He caught Justin’s plump lower lip between his teeth; giving it a gently bite he reminded Justin that he wasn’t a passive participant. He felt the shiver that ran through Justin’s body and welcomed the additional flash of heat it sent to his groin; knowing that he caused the younger man’s reaction. His hands slid down to Justin’s jean covered ass, cupping both cheeks, he gave them a hard squeeze. His fingers were tingling and his hands shook, and he had to feel skin. Brian moved his hands up under the back of Justin’s shirt; the smooth silken skin there drew a groan from him. Brian could feel the damp flesh become wetter as his warm hands stroked it. He whisked the shirt up and off Justin’s head, throwing it aside.

Justin leaned his head back as Brian’s lips and tongue traced a path down his neck, across his collarbone, to his already pebbled nipples. He threaded his fingers through soft auburn hair, body trembling with need. He gave the cries Brian wanted as first one then the other nipple was teased and taunted with slow licks and sharp tugs from teeth. Justin gave a surprised shout when Brian lifted him around the waist, spinning him around, the room suddenly shifting, but he laughed when he landed on his back, Brian pressed heavily atop him. The laugh stopped abruptly as his lips were taken once more and nimble fingers attacked the button and zipper of his jeans.

Brian couldn’t get enough of Justin’s mouth; the boy had to have the sweetest, naughtiest tongue. Reluctantly, he released the blond’s mouth, leaning back to pull Justin’s pants off, taking the underwear as well; he still hadn’t been able to teach the boy the value of going commando.

Justin’s mouth wasn’t the only great thing on the blond, Brian thought. The boy had a beautiful cock, not as long as Brian’s, but thicker and smooth with a pink-tint, and it tasted oh so good. Brian wasted no more time on thought of that cock, but instead proceeded to swallow it whole, much to Justin’s delight.

Justin’s arms shot up and over his head. He gripped the armrest of the sofa, hanging on for the ride was all he could do. Each swirl and lick of Brian’s tongue had him swearing and panting. Brian hollowed his cheeks on the way down, only to suck strongly going back up. And when Brian swallowed carefully, easing Justin’s dick to the back of his throat, he lost it. Yelling out, Justin poured himself down the other man’s throat. He fell back flat onto the couch, breathing heavily, and stared with wonder at the older man.

Brian smirked as he made his way back up Justin’s form, capturing the youth’s lips, and let the blond taste himself. Justin moaned and wrapped his arms tight around Brian’s body. That’s when he realized that the older man was still completely clothed.

“You’re still dressed,” he mumbled as their lips parted.

Brian laughed low and amused and he ran a hand through Justin’s hair. “Someone was in a hurry,” he whispered against the boy’s mouth.

Justin grinned and slid his hands beneath Brian’s shirt. “Well I’m still in a hurry. Now fuck me,” he demanded and what else was Brian to do but compile with the blond’s demands?

\*~\*

Sometime later as they both lay panting on the floor - Justin still wasn’t sure how they got there from the sofa - he decided to bring out what he had wanted to ask the older man.

Justin knew they hadn’t talked much about their relationship. Although they’d only been dating for a few months, he thought Brian was happy. Justin was ready for them to be more to each other. He just didn’t know how, and had not worked up the courage to approach Brian about it.

Justin’s fingers played nervously along Brian’s chest. “I miss you when you are not here.”

Brian had been watching the emotions cross Justin’s expressive face. He could see the boy’s unease and apprehension and could very well guess at the cause. They had been seeing a lot of each other, and he knew he was the only one in Justin’s bed. But this was such uncharted territory for Brian. He had wanted this, had left his home to find it, but now that it was happening, he was scared to death. He, Brian Kinney, Stud of Liberty Avenue, was in a relationship! The scariest part was that he was enjoying it.

Brian ran a hand through Justin’s hair, drawing the blond attention back to him. He looked into those sky-colored eyes. “I miss you, too.”

Encouraged by Brian’s omission, Justin forged ahead.

He rolled over and threw one leg and arm across Brian’s chest. “Brian, I was wondering, could I come with you next time you head to Pittsburgh?”

He felt Brian tense, and the silence built between them. Justin felt a momentary flash of panic. Had he pushed too hard too soon? He rolled away, removing his hold of the other man. Brian had never really told him much of his time in Pittsburgh. He would be vague and only say, “Its business,” but Justin felt that there was something more to those frequent visits, something that Brian felt uncomfortable about. It had taken Justin a week to work up the courage to ask. It wasn’t like he was afraid of Brian, but there were certain things he had learned that Brian wouldn’t be pushed on, and their relationship was still to new for Justin to risk by pushing to far. He couldn’t help the unease that gripped his stomach at Brian’s reaction to his question. What was the older man hiding?

“It’s okay,” he whispered. “Sorry I asked.” Justin couldn’t entirely keep the hurt from his voice.

Brian had frozen at Justin’s request, but now hearing the hurt in the blond’s voice, he acted. Rolling to face the boy, he leaned up over the blond. Cupping the boy’s face and turning his sad blue eyes back to him, he mentally winced and dread spread through him.

Exposing Justin to the other Brian had never been in the plan.

He should have realized that this situation could arise. What Brian was about to do went against everything he believed in, but taking Justin back to the Pitts was not an option. Justin wouldn’t understand and Brian could not stand nor stomach the idea that his past or even his life in Pittsburgh encroach in any way here, not in this haven he had created. He had come to need this - need Justin - more than he had ever thought and Brian would do anything to protect this to protect Justin, even from himself.

So he lied.

“Justin,” he said looking down into those trusting eyes. “It’s not that I don’t want you with me, because I do, its business, and I promise you, you’d be bored shitless.” He leaned down and gently kissed the blond. “Besides it’s not like I am gone for very long,” he explained.

“I know, but even a couple days are too much,” Justin answered honestly.

As much as Brian loved hearing Justin say that, he couldn’t help but feel a pang of regret that he couldn’t say yes. Brian struggled for something to say to break the silence, and with a squeeze to Justin’s shoulder he took the plunge.

“There is something I want to ask you.” He smiled at the thinly veiled excite that leapt into Justin’s eyes. “Not that!” he teased, unable to resist those lips when Justin laughed and blushed. Suddenly serious, “I want you to move in here with me,” he said, releasing a breath at the flash of satisfaction that statement gave him.

Justin laughed and, with a strong grip, pulled Brian atop him. Smiling up with his sunshine smile into happy hazel eyes, Justin said one word, “Yes,” before his lips were taken once more.

Chapter 10

Brian stood in the midst of his once open, uncluttered condo. He eyed the piles of boxes stacked in every available space and corner with confusion. Brian looked over at his beaming roommate.

“I’ve been to your apartment. You didn’t have this much shi--,” he broke off, wisely and quickly rewording his comment. “Stuff,” he clarified. Brian shook his head. Where in the hell were they going to put all this?

Justin crossed the room, wrapped his arms about the other man’s trim waist, and firmly pressed himself against Brian. Ear against Brian’s chest, he listened to the comforting and reassuring sound of the older man’s beating heart.

Brian pressed a kiss atop the blond head tucked under his chin, and when the blond moved back a bit to look at him, he couldn’t help but return the beaming smile.

Giving a much too quick kiss, Justin moved away to begin rooting around in his boxes. “Well, some of this is from my mom’s and can go back into storage.”

Shooting a nervous glance at Brian, Justin hesitated before revealing the next part. “By the way... my mom wants us to join her for dinner.” Justin didn’t look at Brian again. He busied himself with unpacking his art books, hoping that Brian wouldn’t queen out over the invite.

Justin had been dreading bringing up her invitation. His mom had been hinting for a couple of weeks that she would like to meet Brian, and finally, after hearing that her baby boy was moving in with this mysterious Brian; well, she stopped hinting! The invite was really a thinly veiled demand for Justin to produce Brian for inspection, and Justin knew that inspection wasn’t going to be pleasant.

Chancing a glance at Brian, Justin winced at the older man’s expression. Brian’s eyes were hooded and his face blank. He knew this wasn’t going to go over well. Brian had not told him much; he hadn’t really needed to. The remarks he had made about his family and been curt and cold, and that more than anything else told Justin that Brian’s relationship with his parents had not been a happy one.

Justin remembered one afternoon, the pair had been browsing the galleries and small stores along the south side. They had been looking at a pair of wall sconces when the sales lady had approached them. The women had been rude and snotty, and Justin had remarked that they could freeze ice on her ass. Brian had laughed, throwing an arm around Justin’s neck he had said, “Maybe later, dear.” But the other man had quickly become somber, and said Justin didn’t no cold until he had met Brian’s mother.

Brian stared at the young man. Dinner, with mom, oh boy! He couldn’t say his was surprised, he had been expecting to have to have some contact with the women. He knew Justin was close with his mom. The young man had mentioned her often and even had outings with her at least once a week, it was just sheer luck as far as Brian was concerned that he hadn’t run into her yet, seems as though that luck has run out.

And what was worse in Brian’s mind was that he was going to have to be on his best behavior and try and make a good impression! Not that he doubted he could charm the women, but he was going in with several strikes already against him. First of which was the age thing. Second, was the fact that he and Justin came from such different backgrounds. Jennifer Taylor couldn’t know how different, hell even Justin didn’t know anything of Brian’s past.

Brian had met women like Jennifer Taylor; women who had grown up with wealth, married wealth, and expected their children to do the same. A man from a blue-collar, working class, Irish family wouldn’t fit in her world.

Brian‘s first instinctive response was fuck no, but looking at Justin’s nervous averted face, Brian quickly rethought that response.

“Uh, when?” he asked.

Justin bit his lip, looking up at Brian he spoke with a question in his voice. “Tonight?”

And Brian could only nod. Damn, this was why he didn’t do this relationship shit.

Justin grinned wickedly and once again moved over to embrace the brunet. He raised his face for Brian’s automatic kiss. “There’s a reward in it for you,” Justin whispered, nibbling on Brian’s lower lip.

Brian leaned back and raised a brow at the blond. “Oh really, how big of a reward?”

Justin smirked, and he captured one of Brian’s hands, bringing it down to press firmly against the bulge in his pants. Justin promised, “Huge,” before dragging an unresisting Brian to their bed.

\*~\*

The Metropolitan Club sat atop the Sears Tower and was one of Chicago’s most exclusive dining establishments. Brian had been there once or twice with clients and, although it was a bit too pretentious for his taste, he could appreciate the atmosphere that catered to the wealthy and privileged.

The heavy wood paneled elevator opened into a spacious foyer. Carpeted in rich oriental rugs, it led into an open reception area where a well dressed, polite, attendant greeted them.

There, cozy plush sofas and Queen Ann tables were grouped together inviting guest to relax with a cocktail and intimate conversations.

The dining room was dim and heavy greenery divided the large room into smaller more private dining areas. Tables were draped in white cloth and sparkling silver settings, and waiters, dressed in the black and white formal wear, moved about the room silent and attentive.

Brian had known Justin came from a WASP background--the blond’s polite responses and excellent manners giving that away, but this club spoke of money, old money. One look at Justin’s mom told Brian where that old money came from. Jennifer Taylor shouted breeding, from her perfectly cut and styled hair, down to her matching shoes and Gucci bag. She stood and smiled brightly as the maitre d’ led them to the table, but Brian knew he was in trouble when the smile that had been in her eyes vanished. Oh, she still had a polite closed mouth smile for him, but the look in her eyes…

Brian mentally grimaced.

“Justin!” she greeted her son happily, pulling the young man into a hug before releasing him and turning her attention to Brian.

Justin moved back to Brian’s side and wrapped an arm around his waist. “Mom, I’d like you to meet Brian Kinney, my partner.”

Brian controlled the instinctive wince and thrust out a hand, smiling through gritted teeth. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Taylor,” he said. How the hell did he get himself in this situation? Brian glanced down into happy twinkling blue eyes, oh yea, that’s how.

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Dinner went smoothly at first. Jennifer asked about Justin’s classes, his art, and his work at the gallery. She expressed polite interest in the details of Brian’s condo, listening with a forced, fixed smile as Justin gushed about his new home. Justin didn’t seem to notice or chose to ignore his mother’s lack of enthusiasm regarding his new address, but Brian felt that she was only waiting for the right moment. That moment came when Justin excused himself to the bathroom, and Brian fought the urge to go running after him. This was going to be fun!

“So Brian, Justin tells me you’re in advertising,” Jennifer said, turning to look him full in the face, a smile that could only be described as killer upon her lips.

Brian refolded his napkin, smoothing it along his lap. Now he knew how she was so successful in real estate. Justin had bragged that his mom was one of Sudler and Company’s top agents, the same company that sold him his condo.

Brian planted a smile on his face. “Yes, Jennifer, you don’t mind that I call you Jennifer?” At her forced acceptance, Brian’s smile turned charming. “I owned an agency in Pittsburgh, but now I’m semi-retired.”

Jennifer frowned. “Aren’t you somewhat young to be retired?” she asked, and Brian felt and accepted the dig silently, somewhat young indeed.

Brian wanted to turn and see if Justin was about to rejoin them, but he fought the need and settled a little heavily into his chair.

“Yes, I am young to be retired, but I started my own agency when I was quite young and was very successful with it. So now here I am,” Brian said spreading out his graceful hands before refolding them and placing them back in his lap. He watched as Jennifer looked down for a moment, and he just knew she was preparing herself to unload on him.

Jennifer turned a suddenly serious face to Brian. “Brian if I may be blunt here?” she asked and at Brian’s nod she went on. “Justin has told me how old you are and of course you can understand how that age difference concerns me, but what also concerns me is that Justin doesn’t seem to know much about you. Why is that Brian, if, like you both say, you are partners?”

Brian regarded the women across from him, nothing showing on his face. Well, she certainly doesn’t pull any punches. He told himself that he could just tell her to fuck off and that it was none of her business before storming off and leave Justin behind to comfort mommy. But no he wouldn’t. It was simple; Justin was worth fighting for.

He did, however, have to be careful; Jennifer Taylor was nobody’s fool.

“Jennifer,” Brian spoke gently and looked her straight in the eye. “I care for Justin very much, and we want to be together--that’s why he moved in with me. But we are also still in a fairly new relationship. Perhaps it was a little fast, asking him to live with me, but it’s something that we will work out together.”

Brian placed a great deal of inflection in his voice on the ‘together’ part, subtly letting Jennifer know that her opinion was only of value to Justin and that Brian would only share so much.

“As for the age thing, I’m sure you will agree that Justin is not the average twenty year old.” Brian could see that the woman was far from satisfied. It looked like she was prepared to say more, but Justin chose that moment to return.

“Ready for dessert?” the blond asked. Despite their stalemate of words, Jennifer and Brian looked at each and both rolled their eyes, the bottomless pit that was Justin, easing the tension.

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The ride home was made mostly in silence. Though he had a pretty good idea what his mother had said to the older man, Justin kept sneaking glances at Brian’s impassive face wondering what exactly had been said.

He allowed Brian to brood until the pair crossed the threshold of their home, then, before Brian could pour himself a double shot of Beam, Justin spoke.

“Brian, don’t let her come between us. She’s my mom, of course she is going to be overprotective, but I’m an adult and can make my own decisions,” Justin said keeping his voice calm and low while he crept closer to the older man. Finally, he stood directly in front of Brian. Grinning up into the shuttered hazel eyes, he stepped forward once more until they were completely pressed together. Justin licked his lips, feeling his groin stir as Brian’s eyes dropped to follow his tongue’s path.

“Want your reward,” He whispered huskily.

Brian growled and reached for Justin, who, with a truly unmanly squeal, took off running to the bedroom for the second time that day.

Chapter 11

Brian dropped his bags on the bed and headed straight for the shower. Every time he left Justin to return ‘here’ he felt dirty. Brian wasn’t sure if it was because he had lied to Justin or just this place and what it represented, a prison. Stuck, snared, like he was struggling to escape an endless pit. That’s how he felt coming back here. That trapped feeling just got worse the longer in stayed in Pittsburgh, but his son was here and that was enough of a draw to keep him coming back.

Brian stepped from the shower. Barely brushing the towel over his body, he went through the bedroom to the kitchen, his nude skin still damp. Grabbing a bottle of water, he went to his desk. Hitting the play button on his machine, he mentally discarded the calls he would ignore and stored the ones he wanted to bother with returning. As he listened to Mikey’s voice drone on about some contest or something at Babylon that Brian just couldn’t miss, his eyes traveled to the small cabinet hidden in a corner of the loft behind his desk. Mikey’s voice continued to whine through the phone as Brian opened the cabinet’s doors.

Brian might not carry around pictures of his son and pull them out like some breeder for everyone to admire, but here in front of him was the proof that he did love his son.

No one else had ever seen the inside of the cabinet. Glass shelves filled with photos of Gus from birth through the first four years of his life-- a mirror reminder that he was Brian’s flesh and blood.

Brian wasn’t in any of them.

Brian finished his water and closed the cabinet’s doors. Leaving the empty bottle on the kitchen counter, he moved back to the bedroom and pulled on a pair of jeans before lifting his bags onto the bed. Rummaging through one, he pulled a package from it and went over to kneel next to a bright red toy box. Lifting the lid, he added the new toy to the box, were it joined the many others, still in their packages.

Lindsay said he spoiled Gus, giving him too many toys. With every visit he made, he brought along a gift for the boy. Hell, Brian figured Gus was too young to see the checks he sent; this was the only way he knew how to show Gus that he cared. Besides, he could remember as a boy the envy he felt sitting in the class room listening to other kid’s go on about what they had gotten for their birthdays or for Christmas. Brian didn’t ever want his son to do without, not if he could help it. Mel would just roll her eyes when he showed up with another toy, or bitch and mumble something about adding another room just for Gus’ things. Brian knew it actually shocked the shit out of her, but also secretly pleased Mel that Brian always made sure Gus had whatever he wanted or needed.

Brian rested his hands atop the bright box. He had originally thought that the toy box would be perfect for Gus when he stayed with Brian at the loft, but, despite Lindsay’s offers for him to keep the boy, Brian had not been able to work up the courage. Not that he would ever admit that to another soul, but being alone with his small son scared Brian to death. He didn’t know shit about kids or how to care for them. What did he really have to offer Gus other than his money? Not like he had a shining example of a childhood to go by, hell that was all the more reason to stay away from the boy! One of Brian’s worst and deepest fears was that he would say or do something to hurt Gus, and Brian would rip his own heart out before he allowed that to happen.

Being with Justin had taught him that he could love and care for another person besides himself, but look at how he had accomplished that - by recreating Brian Kinney. No way would Justin love him if he knew the real Brian, not if he saw him here, saw how much of an absent father he really was... That’s what kept Brian fighting to separate his lives; he didn’t think he could handle Justin’s look of love and respect turning into one of disappointment and hurt.

Brian finally rose and went about the loft, shutting off the lights and setting the alarm. He was tired; the commuting back and forth and maintaining a double life was starting to wear him.

He had two calls he had to make and then he could go to bed. First to his blond to say goodnight and let him know he arrived safely. It still gave him a thrill and a slight flush of embarrassment when Justin insisted he call so he would know Brian was safe. Besides his pseudo-family, Brian had no experience with such caring, but he liked it.

The second call was to Lindsay, and ‘yes’ he was told. He could come over tomorrow to spend the day with Gus. Just like every other time he called, Lindsay said yes.

Surprisingly, Brian slept well that night, thanks no doubt to his lovers erotic goodnight and the promise of seeing Gus.

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Brian looked back at the toy box, shaking his head he returned to it and picked up the toy he had decided to take with him. This was the third time he had returned it to the box only to go back and pick it up again, unable to make up his mind. He couldn’t go over there empty handed, he thought, and with toy in hand he locked and set the alarm, not planning on returning to the loft any time soon. Brian was hoping to take Gus shopping; he just had to work up an approach to present to the Munchers. The idea of private mommy time always seemed to work; he just had to make sure it seemed like a favor he was doing them, that’s all. It especially wouldn’t do for Mel to get the idea that Brian might actually enjoy the father/son excursion.

Plan firmly in place, Brian rang the bell and waited for someone to open the door. It was the sound of the child’s shouted ‘I get it’ that had a large, genuine smile spreading across Brian’s face. That was the sight that greeted Lindsay and Gus as they opened the door. Gus’ loud ‘Da!’ did nothing to diminish that smile, and Brian gratefully accepted the boy when placed in his arms. Brian hugged Gus tightly, breathing deeply, he committed to memory that wonderful, all too soon lost, little boy smell. That the little boy was happy to see him still shocked Brian, but he soaked up that acceptance.

“Hey Linds,” he said, carrying Gus inside and brushing his lips against Lindsay’s cheek in passing.

“Bri,” Lindsay said, smiling, moving behind the pair and watching as Brian immediately joined his son in playing on the floor.

She loved seeing Brian and Gus like this -- happy to be in each other’s company. She knew no one else would believe this was Brian Kinney. The easy, open expression on his face would never be believed. That Mel didn’t see it, that Brian didn’t let anyone else see it, frustrated Lindsay, but then their relationship had never been easy or congenial. She felt a flash of guilt at the brief, thankful, thought that Mel was out, but the visit would be much less continuous now.

When it was just the three of them, Lindsay could just tell something in Brian’s life had changed. Any other time, the mask was firmly back in place, but around Gus, Brian let down his guard. It was as if he couldn’t hide from his son, or that he didn’t want to.

Lindsay had begun to wonder about Brian’s trips. He would be gone all week, returning only the weekends, then that time was spent with Gus. Lindsay had also heard that Brian had been absent from the local club scene, and that the gossip had been fierce when the stud of Liberty Avenue evidentially stopped tricking. The only thing that preserved his stud status and kept Michael from having him committed was that Brian told tales of his out of town action that seemed to satisfy his best friend.

During all this, Lindsay just shook her head. She knew when Brian was bullshitting them, and his stories of all the wild nights and numerous conquest rang hollow to her. Instead, to her, Brian seemed settled somehow. She couldn’t put her finger on it, but he seemed almost at peace. Lindsay was just shocked that no one else in their little family had noticed the changes. But then they had always been blind when it came to Brian. Hell, they even doubted Brian had real feelings. Lindsay, however, got to watch scenes like this one; Brian on the floor, allowing his small son to climb all over him as he growled and had the little boy screaming and laughing with glee.

Whatever it was in Brian’s life that he didn’t feel like sharing, Lindsay hoped he kept it hidden. If Brian was finally happy, finally had allowed himself to be happy, then Lindsay didn’t care at all if Brian needed to keep his secrets.

Chapter 12

Justin silently rose from the table. He took his and Brian’s plate, not even looking at the older man as he headed to the kitchen. He wasn’t petty, didn’t slam cabinets or dishes, but his displeasure could be felt regardless.

Brian sighed and leaned back. Justin had been giving him the cold shoulder ever since he had said no to Justin’s plea to go with Brian to Pittsburgh. His eyes followed the blond as he reentered the room, but Justin wouldn’t look at Brian, instead picking up a sketchpad, he curled up on the sofa. Brian frowned, he was getting slightly ticked off, and, before he could stop himself, the words poured out of his mouth.

“Stop being such a damn drama queen! You’re not my warden!” he snapped at the younger man. Throwing down his napkin, he rose and stalked over to the bar pouring himself a hefty shot of bourbon.

Turning back toward the living room, Brian winced at the look on Justin’s face. The blond eyed Brian like he didn’t know who he was and, in his eyes, was hurt. Brian set his glass down and sat beside Justin. Placing his hands on the young man’s knees, he looked into the swimming, blue eyes.

“I’m sorry, Justin,” he said running his hands soothingly up and down Justin’s crossed legs.

Blinking, Justin looked away. He still felt the sting of Brian’s words and at the older man’s inexplicable anger at him. Lately, he’d had an idea…a horrible idea, but it made sense. He had to ask even as his stomach rebelled at the very thought.

Looking back into regretful hazel eyes Justin gathered his courage. “Brian, are you ashamed to be with me?”

Justin’s head was filled with the doubts raised by his mom, his previous relationship with Ethan, and Brian’s own refusal to share any of his past with Justin. He didn’t want to believe that he was some kind of dirty secret, or worse some type of rent boy, hidden, for Brian’s pleasure.

He could hear Jennifer’s words - ‘you don’t know him,’ ‘he hasn’t introduced you to any of his friends or family,’ ‘what do you really know of this man?’ The ringing in his ears grew worse, and he knew his face was pale, upper lip dotted with beads of sweat. Ethan’s lies flashed behind his eyes, the night he found the groupie at the door, roses in hand, guilt written all over Ethan’s face.

Justin mentally added up everything he recalled Brian telling him of his past and his life in Pittsburgh. He almost bent double in agony as he realized that he could list what he knew of his lover on one hand, but he couldn’t look away from Brian’s eyes.

Brian shook his head back and forth, a heavy frown on his face. He looked into Justin’s eyes. He really thought that! Fuck, now what! Brian’s rage came back in full force, and he fought with himself for several seconds, needing not to strike out at the blond again. There was also the brief desire to run, not to deal with this shit, but that too quickly passed; he had already made the commitment to Justin. Brian wasn’t a quitter. He couldn’t treat Justin like he would anyone else who dared to push him like this, didn’t want to subject Justin to that Brian.

“Justin-“he began, stopping to shake his head again and gather his thoughts. Finally, he turned to look the boy in the eye. “Why the fuck would you think that?” he asked, genuine puzzlement in his tone.

“How the hell could I not,” he practically yelled. Jumping up from the sofa, he paced furiously in front of Brian. “Let’s see, you’ve told me nothing of your family, your friends, or your life before we met,” he said, ticking each off with his fingers, breath catching as he tried to control his emotions.

“You told me you have a son that you leave me to go see every weekend, but I have never seen a picture of him. You don’t get any calls from anyone not business related. And let’s not forget the big one! You won’t let me meet your son or go with you when you visit,” Justin continued, pausing to pin Brian with tear-filled eyes. He felt like with each word that poured from his mouth, he was one step closer to pushing Brian away, but he couldn’t/wouldn’t stop now. He deserved answers.

“What am I supposed to think, Brian? That you’re hiding me? That you are ashamed to introduce me as your partner?” Justin fought not to let the tears fall, he wouldn’t cry like some little faggot!

“Justin,” Brian said softly, rising, he stepped close to the furious blond and tried too hold him, but Justin turned away.

That hurt, Brian felt the stab of rejection as he gazed on Justin’s rigid back.

He didn’t intend for any of this to happen. He didn’t want to hurt Justin. He just wanted something untouched and untainted by his life in the Pitts. He should have known it would all go to shit! He was going to have to give Justin something he had never offered another, an explanation, but there was only so much he was willing to tell the blond. Brian took a hesitant step forward and carefully laid his hands on Justin’s shoulders.

“Please, sit down.” Brian turned the younger man, hating that he had put that look of hurt on Justin’s face, but the blond allowed him to lead him back to the sofa.

Justin looked into Brian’s eyes. He couldn’t recall ever hearing the other man say please before, but the expression in the hazel eyes was regretful and caring.

Brian took a deep breath. How did he admit that, after 30 plus years, there was nothing for him in his hometown? No family, friends that he wasn’t so sure were ever really his friends; and a child that he had to fight to see? That was his worth in Pittsburgh. Why wouldn’t he want to hide that from Justin, that nothingness?

Ha! Friends, Brian snorted to himself that was debatable. One didn’t have to pay for friends, or you weren’t supposed to have to. He did, constantly! Michael and Deb had been his haven, discovered at 14; they were who he had to run to when things at home got rough. But he had to pay for that haven. He had become a crutch for them both, a place to lay their blame and woes. It became Brian’s job to accept that blame and to correct those woes no matter what they cost Brian personally.

How in the hell it became Brian’s job to make Michael’s life easy and fulfilling, he had no clue. It had started in school; Mikey would have never graduated without Brian’s help or survived mentally intact. The bullies would have eaten Mikey alive without Brian’s threats to halt them. It became Brian’s task to manage Michael’s feelings, to walk the fine line of keeping his friend that he needed, close, but not as close as Mikey wanted.

Michael could never accept that it wasn’t to him that Brian would turn to for love and sex. So he told himself it was in Brian that the problem lay. If Brian didn’t believe in love, in happily ever after, then that would explain why Mikey wasn’t his choice. It couldn’t be Michael’s fault that Brian refused to grow up; it was too convenient for Michael. As long as he kept Brian in that time warp where it was just the two of them, then there was always hope; hope that someday it might be Michael that Brian turned to.

There was also the desire of Michael’s to never grow up himself. Debbie loved to point out that Brian never learned to let go, that he kept Michael tied tightly to him. Of course, the very idea that she contributed to his child-like view of life through her circulation-cutting apron strings never occurred to her. Oh she couldn’t possibly be at fault! If Michael failed at his latest relationship, it was Brian’s fault. Michael hated his job; blame Brian! The list went on and on…

Debbie may really want Brian to be happy, but she’ll never really believe him capable of it. She would welcome Justin to the family, but, at the same time, warn him of the evils of Brian Kinney before the night was over. She’ll never see him as anything other than that battered boy that ran to her house to escape. Brian couldn’t even count the number of times she has said he needed to grow up, but, when he would step out of the ‘Kinney’ norm, she would be the first person to say he would fuck it up!

Then, there was Lindsay. Talk about ties that bind; she came up with the perfect one to tie Brian to her forever, their son. They thought Brian blind, but he saw their motives all too well. Deep down, Lindsay would never be able to let go of that WASP idea of the husband, 2.5 kids and the white-picket fence. It didn’t matter that she called herself a Muncher. Fuck, even Mel knew Lindsay still harbored some hetero-fantasy with Brian as the leading man.

How she had known that Brian would fall so hard for Gus, Brian didn’t know, but he had, and, in doing so, had given her the ultimate weapon. ‘Be a good father for Gus, Brian’ he could hear her saying this, ‘but not so good that Mel feels threatened’ that was the tightrope Lindsay had him walking.

As for the others, life was never more interesting, never more such a great drama unless Brian was the uncaring asshole they could all point to.

It struck a blow to his pride to admit this, but Justin demanded some answers. Loosing the blond wasn’t an option Brian would even consider.

“There’s nothing for me in the Pitts, Justin.” Brian couldn’t look at the boy as he confessed, didn’t want to see the pity in those blue eyes. “If it weren’t for Gus, I would never go back there. One of his mother’s hates me, Justin, so it’s a battle every damn time I want to see him. I won’t subject you to that.” Brian stopped, he clasp the hand that was laid on his thigh, grateful for Justin’s forgiveness. The lie stuck a bitter cord through him, but the truth would be an even more bitter pill to swallow.

He couldn’t tell the Justin the truth. That it was him that was too much of a coward too spend time with his son, that he was afraid of a four-year-old boy.

“As for being ashamed of something?” Brian finally looked up, meeting Justin’s gaze head on. “I’m not ashamed of you, Justin. I am ashamed of where I’m from.”

Justin only nodded, keeping his gaze locked with the older man’s. He could see the cost of the explanation Brian gave, and he could also sense that the other man didn’t explain himself often. Justin’s stomach unclenched and the sickness eased. He could accept this, for now; but, sooner or later, he was going to discover what demons Brian was running from. And he was running, this Justin knew.

“Okay,” he said simply, but his remained serious. “But I still want to meet Gus.”

Brian almost let his body sag in relief. He nodded, letting Justin know that he heard him and understood...this was just a reprieve. “I’ll talk to his moms’ to see if I can arrange to bring him here for a visit.”

Justin nodded and leaned forward, brushing a soft kiss on Brian’s lips. He couldn’t stay mad at the other man, and he hated that he had hurt Brian.

Brian closed his eyes at Justin’s kiss, and Justin took advantage of this opportunity to press tender kisses to each closed eyelid. He trailed his lips slowly across high cheekbones and down Brian’s elegant nose to those red lips that waited eagerly for his touch.

They kissed leisurely and gently, no hurry in their exploration of each other’s mouths. Gradually, Brian leaned back, sinking into the soft leather sofa and pulling Justin with him until the younger man lay atop Brian, lips still connected. Justin broke the kiss reluctantly, but then his eager tongue swept down to taste and nibble along Brian’s graceful neck.

Brian kept his arms lightly wrapped around the blond’s waist, letting the blond have his way, enjoying Justin’s tender attention. Justin rose up, knees on either side of Brian’s hips. A small smile stole across his lips as his fingers danced down Brian’s cloth-covered chest. His once serious eyes were now twinkling with a familiar mischievousness that Brian well recognized. Brian laughed softly as Justin’s fingers began opening the buttons of his shirt; he much preferred this activity to the drama of a few minutes ago.

Justin spread Brian’s shirt open, revealing bronzed flesh and cooper-colored nipples. Despite the playfulness of his gaze, his lips and tongue were serious and soft as he laid kiss after kiss along Brian’s chest adding a slow lick to each nipple. Brian started to speak, his mouth opening, but, before he could get the words out, Justin laid a finger across his lips. Brian settled back down, content for now to let Justin lead.

Justin’s hands ran soothingly up from Brian’s stomach, across his ribs, thumbs brushing over his nipples, before settling on Brian’s shoulders. The blond slid down further Brian’s body, his mouth once more lowering to the other man’s chest.

“Fuck!” Brian hissed, his back arching up off the couch. The sharp teeth tugging on his right nipple hurt! He settled after a soothing tongue licked the sting, but his heart was still beating furiously. He removed his hand from Justin’s hair where it had fisted the strands at the first feeling of pain.

Justin felt Brian’s hold on his hair lighten and then the hand fell back onto the sofa. Justin finally left Brian’s nipples. Trailing his tongue down, he left a wet path as his mouth circled Brian’s navel, tongue dipping it and out.

Brian moaned and tried to arch away from that teasing tongue, but Justin’s followed and Brian’s stomach quivered at the play.

“Justin,” he growled, “stop teasing!”

Justin grinned, mouth full of Brian’s flesh, but the hand that once again tangled in his hair warned him he was pushing. His hands came down and his fingers made quick work of the snap and zipper on Brian’s pants. He folded the sides of the open jeans down, leaving Brian’s cock open to the air. Justin looked up briefly, meeting hazel eyes now black with lust.

“Is this what you want?” he asked before leaning down and drawing his tongue along Brian’s shaft from root to tip.

Brian’s chest was rising and falling rapidly. He felt light-headed as all the blood settled in his dick.

“Suck me,” he ordered harshly, voice rough.

Justin held the laugh inside but a wide grin spilt his face. Before Brian could take him to task for it, he covered Brian’s cock with his mouth.

Brian gave a grateful groan as his cock was surrounded with wet warmth.

Justin sucked gently, drawing his mouth up and off before flicking his tongue around the head of Brian’s cock. He gathered the taste of the older man in his mouth, humming in pleasure, the vibrations traveling through Justin’s tongue to the tip of Brian’s dick.

Brian shuddered in pleasure. He hadn’t had anyone who gave head like Justin or seemed to enjoy it as much as the blond did. He fought to keep the hand on Justin’s hair light, but the other clenched into a fist, digging into the soft sofa’s leather. Brian choked off the laugh that bubbled up at Justin’s humming. The blond didn’t give him a chance for much else before he again covered his cock with his mouth.

Justin sucked slowly up and down Brian’s shaft. He never let the head slip from his mouth, and he kept his tongue swirls slow and lazy, flicking the head once as his head rose up and again as he went down. The slow languid pace had Brian on the edge. Justin didn’t allow Brian a fast release. He’d bring Brian just to the point of cumming before he’d back off. Justin continued this, up until the hand fisted in his hair tightened, clenching and unclenching in the blond strands. With his own dick aching and wet, Justin knew it was time to end this. He let the cock in his mouth hit the back of his throat, stopping it just short of choking him, and he hummed once more and swallowed.

Brian gave a shout, and his body arched high off the couch. He felt like Justin was ripping his orgasm from his body. He shuddered for it seemed like an hour, emptying himself into Justin’s mouth. Finally, he felt the gently licks Justin used to clean him up before the blond released his dick and crawled up Brian’s body to share the taste. All Brian could do was lay there, chest heaving as he struggled to calm his racing heart. He let Justin’s tongue enter his mouth, enjoying the flavor of himself.

Finally, Justin pulled back. He smoothed back a strand of auburn hair that had fallen over Brian’s brow. “Good?” he asked in a whisper, laying his head on Brian’s damp chest.

Brian brought up both arms, wrapping Justin tightly in his embrace. He placed a kiss atop the bright head over his heart. “The best,” he answered.

They lay silent, content to hold one another until Brian’s breathing returned to normal. Brian moved a hand, cupping the blond’s chin and raising his head until their eyes could meet.

“I want you to meet Gus, and I want my son to meet you. You make me happy, Sunshine, and I could never be ashamed of you.” Brian knew he had said the right thing; Justin’s bright smile assuring him of that.

Chapter 13

Brian closed the door behind him in relief. It had been a hell of a day, and he had been anticipating getting home and shutting himself and Justin inside for the rest of it. He was exhausted, but Brown Athletics had been signed to a new lucrative, five-year contract. Part of the credit for that advertising feat was curled up on the sofa, and said blond flashed Brian a welcome home smile.

“Hey,” Brian said in greeting, fatigue heavy in his voice, but he smiled never the less.

Justin could read the satisfaction in Brian’s hazel eyes, but he also could see the weariness in the slump of the man’s shoulders.

“Hey, welcome home,” Justin replied, rising and meeting Brian in the middle of the room for a kiss and hug while the older man shed his coat and suit jacket.

Justin followed Brian up the stairs to their bedroom, and threw himself across the bed, prepared to enjoy one of his favorite pastimes, watching Brian undress. He waited until Brian had his pants down around his ankles before he asked.

“So, how’d it go?” Justin could hear the eagerness in his voice, but it had taken a great deal of restraint for him to wait this long and not jump on his lover when he first came in the door.

Helping Brian with a real advertising campaign had been thrilling, even more so if Brian got the contract. School could teach him all the ways of book learning, but turning that learning into practical application had given Justin a hard-on. It had just confirmed for him that he had made the right career choice, and he realized that not everyone got an opportunity like he had. Most graduates got into their chosen field only to find out they hate it. Justin loved what he and Brian had put together for Leo Brown, but the very best part had been working side by side with his lover. Justin could still feel the thrill he got when Brian said how proud and impressed he had been with his work and that he would hire Justin in a heartbeat.

But right now he just wanted to know if they got the damn contract or not!

Brian stepped out of his pants and placed his hands on his nude hips, and smirked at the impatient blond sprawled across the bed.

Justin saw that smirk, and knew what it meant. He decided to turn up the heat a little and do some teasing of his own. Rolling over on the bed and drawing up his knees, Justin spread his legs wide and grinned up at the older man.

“Not going to tell me?” Justin asked, the twinkle in Brian’s eye already letting him know how this was going to play out.

The smirk on Brian’s face grew, but he didn’t say a word.

Justin held Brian’s gaze. He licked his lips, slowly, first the bottom, then the top, making them shinny and wet. One hand slipped under the hem of his t-shirt and began playing with his nipples, making sure that his stomach was bare to Brian’s eyes. The other hand he slipped inside his sweats. Cupping his cock, he began stroking slowly, up and down.

Brian groaned at the wicked sight Justin presented. The boy sure knew how to turn up the heat, and get Brian’s motor running. Brian had been hard as soon as Justin’s tongue had appeared. Sliding a hand down his own flat stomach to curl around his leaking cock, Brian fisted it slowly, eyes roaming over Justin’s body.

“Take the shirt off,” Brian ordered, voice husky and low.

Grin spreading, Justin sat up and quickly pulled his shirt over his head, slinging it to the other side of bed. He lay back down and resumed stroking himself, sweatpants growing tighter the harder Justin got. He did this several more times. Recognizing and reciprocating the need and building desire in Brian’s gaze, Justin began inching the pants lower. The teasing was about to come to an end.

Removing his hands reluctantly from his groin, Justin rose up to remove the rest of his clothes. It was while he was tossing the pants aside that Brian pounced, pinning a laughing Justin to the bed. Catching Justin’s arms and raising them above the blond’s head, Brian covered Justin’s lips.

Justin’s gasped in Brian’s mouth at the fierceness of the kiss. He eagerly returned the kiss, matching Brian’s fierceness. Their tongues battled for dominance.

Brian rotated his hips against Justin’s, rubbing their cocks together and drawing moans from both men. Releasing Justin’s lips, he pressed one more firm, closed mouthed kiss on the boy, and then he set about payback.

He licked a trail down Justin’s neck, pausing briefly to dip his tongue in the hollow of Justin’s throat before moving across to lick and nibble upon the blond’s sensitive collarbone. All the while, his fingers went to work on Justin’s captive hands.

Justin had a spot on his body that Brian discovered quite by accident one night while holding Justin’s hand. Releasing Justin’s fingers only to rub his fingertips across the boy’s palm, Brian’s thumb stroked the soft skin atop Justin’s hand.

Brian still remembered how turned on Justin had gotten just from Brian caressing his sensitive hands, and he employed that knowledge to drive his boy nuts.

Brian grinned when he heard Justin’s moan and felt the fine tremor that shook the blond’s body under his.

Justin wiggled under Brian weight; he should have known Brian would go straight for the kill. He moaned aloud at the feeling of his palms being stroked it drove him crazy! He turned his head allowing Brian more room to lick along his neck.

“Brian,” he moaned, flexing his hands, wanting Brian to release them so he could touch the older man.

He could feel his cock leaking, making the slide against Brian’s smooth. Forgotten was the desire to know about the campaign, now all Justin wanted was Brian inside him.

Justin felt the sweat break out across his skin as he spread his legs beneath Brian so that he cradled the other man. Justin locked his ankles behind Brian’s back and arched his hips off the bed. Enough playing!

Turning his head, he captured Brian’s mouth in a hungry kiss.

Brian finally released Justin’s hands. He fisted one in fine blond hair, holding Justin’s head still while their tongues battled. The other went to the blond’s hip, curving around the flesh to hold Justin’s lower body still. The fast frantic pace almost undoing him before they even got started, he wanted to take time and savor his lover, but Justin was making that difficult.

Justin pulled his lips free of Brian’s, gasping for air. “Fuck me,” he panted, thrusting upward hard against the hand holding him still.

Brian chuckled low in his throat. His cock was rock-hard, and now the idea of slowing down didn’t seem all that important, not when his hot blond was practically begging for it. Brian leaned back, his hands going to Justin’s legs. He spread them high and wide apart. Reaching over to the nightstand, all the while keeping Justin’s gaze captive, he removed the supplies.

“You want me to fuck you, Sunshine?” Brian asked, handing the blond the condom.

Justin eagerly took the packet from Brian’s fingers. Ripping it open with his teeth, he quickly covered Brian’s cock, letting his actions speak for him. Justin flinched at the chill from the lube, but the discomfort changed when Brian’s finger’s entered him, stretching him. He loved it when they fucked like this, hard and fast, impatient to cum. It thrilled him that he could make his older lover abandon his control, make him shake he wanted Justin so badly, just as badly Justin wanted Brian.

Brian removed his fingers, spreading the remaining lube from his hand to his cock. Placing Justin’s legs higher on his shoulders and holding his cock in one hand, he pushed inside the blond in one long glide.

Justin’s breath caught and he moaned low in his throat as Brian filled him completely. His hands left the older man’s arms, where they had been gripping him to the back of Brian’s head, bringing it down so that their lips could meet. He thrust up his hips and tightened his inner walls around Brian, signaling that he was ready.

Brian kept their lips and tongues locked together as he began the slower pace he wanted earlier as he began to thrust in and out. Justin trembled more under him. Finally, he had to release the blond’s mouth, breathing heavily and hotly against Justin’s neck, the pace of his thrust picked up.

Justin groaned. At each thrust, Brian would change his angle, hitting Justin’s prostrate, until the only thing Justin could do was hold on.

“Want to cum,” he whispered, fingers digging into the flexing muscles of Brian’s back.

Brian bit his lip, so did he. His thrusts got faster, pulling almost all the way out, before slamming back inside. He could feel his balls draw up and tighten and that tingle start low on his spine. His hand moved between their bodies. Grasping Justin’s wet cock, he fisted it roughly, matching the pace set by his hips. The only sounds in the room were their harsh breathing. Brian felt the tale-tell clenching of Justin’s hole around his cock, and his fist stroked faster.

Justin cried out, he felt like his gut was going to explode. One, two, more thrusts and that’s all it took. Justin felt the wetness of his cum as it hit his chest and chin.

Three harsh thrusts and Brian was joining him, slumping on the blond, exhausted.

Justin let their bodies relax in that post-sex afterglow that he loved almost as much as the actual fucking. Justin reluctantly let Brian roll off him, but the older man quickly pulled Justin close. Justin happily snuggled his head on Brian’s shoulder.

“So, did we get it?” he asked, just then recalling the news that led to their lying on the bed, both seriously in need of an shower.

Brian laughed and his hand propped up his tousled head. He placed a kiss on Justin damp forehead. “Yep, we got it, Sunshine. Five year, very lucrative deal. Now I can still afford to keep you in the style you have grown accustom to,” Brian laughed again and quickly rolled away from the swatting hand Justin was trying to hit him with.

With a bounce in his step, he rose from the bed. “I’m hitting the shower.”

Justin groaned but got up himself. Sitting on the side of the bed, he enjoyed the view of his sweaty naked lover. “Dinner?” he asked, now that one appetite was fulfilled another was making itself known.

“Greek?” Brian offered before turning and heading into the bathroom.

Justin’s mouth watered and he hummed his agreement. Pulling on only his underwear, he headed for the kitchen and the takeout menus. Justin heard the ringing and glanced at the cell phone lying atop Brian’s suit jacket. Glancing back at the bathroom where the sounds of the shower could be heard, he bit his lip, wondering if he should answer it. Justin couldn’t recall Brian getting that many calls on his cell it must be business. He could take a message.

Mind made up, he quickly moved to the ringing phone before the caller hung-up. “Hello?” he answered.

There were several seconds of silence, and then a trembling female voice asked, “Brian?”

Justin spoke softly, the women sounded upset. “No, this is Justin. Brian is in the shower can I take a message?”

Justin heard the women breath catch and what sounded like a sob. “Could you go and get him, and tell him it’s Lindsay; it’s an emergency.”

His stomach clenched. Lindsay was Gus’ mother. Forgetting that the person on the other end of the phone had never met him, he asked anxiously. “Is it Gus?”

Silence from the other end of the phone had Justin clutching the small devise hard. “Hello?” he asked, thinking perhaps that the connection had been lost.

Then the women’s voice came back over the line, this time a bit clearer. “I’m sorry; who did you say you were?” Tone now holding a familiar waspness that Justin well recognized. It was for someone who stepped over a line, a polite upturn of the nose to let him know that the women’s patience was running out.

Justin heard the background noise of the shower stop and decided to let Brian handle the snob on the phone. “Hang on, Brian just got out.” Heading to the bathroom, he held the phone out to Brian. At his raised brow. Justin told him. “It’s someone named Lindsay.”

Brian frowned but took the phone. He waited until Justin left the bathroom. Bringing the phone to his ear, “Linds?’ he asked.

Justin returned to the kitchen, but he didn’t get out the menus or pick up a phone to order dinner. Instead, he stood at the counter gripping the sides so hard that his knuckles turned white. He had seen the silent signal that Brian was waiting for him to leave the bathroom before he answered his call, and that hurt. Just one more secret Justin wasn’t permitted to know, one more aspect of Brian’s life he wasn’t apart of. He didn’t know how much more of this he could take; it felt like he got half a partner.

“Justin!” He heard Brian’s shout for him, and despite being pissed at the older man he hurried to the bedroom. There had also been some fear in Brian’s voice. He climbed the steps and entered the room to find Brian hurriedly shoving clothes into a suitcase.

“Brian?” Justin asked, moving to his side he laid a hand upon Brian’s arm. “What happened?” He had never seen Brian like this before. The man’s face was tense, his lips clamped tightly together and what worried him the most was the darkness in Brian’s hazel eyes.

Brian only vaguely registered Justin words. He spared a quick glance at the blond before moving away to finish his packing. He didn’t think he could hold it together if Justin continued to touch him. All his focus at that moment was getting it together and getting to Gus.

“Gus is hurt and in the hospital. I have to go,” was all Brian said, and, more than the actual words, his tone scared Justin. It was blank, no emotion at all in it.

He moved to quickly help the older man. Justin had noticed when Brian moved away from him, and, despite a stab of guilt at the thought of worrying about them instead of Gus, he got angry at the timing of the call. Brian had only returned to Chicago this past weekend and now he was being called back, and, just like every time he got ready to go to Pittsburgh, he pulled away from Justin.

“You finish packing, and I’ll call the airlines.” He said his own voice carefully neutral. Now was not the time to get into that argument and that they would fight about, Justin knew. Besides, he had made up his own mind.

Justin called the airlines and got them two tickets for a flight leaving in three hours. Returning to the bedroom, he took down his own suitcase from the top of the closet.

Brian eyed the suitcase and then Justin. It took several moments before his brain could process what he was seeing. “What are you doing?” he asked.

Justin shot him one quick look before removing some clothes from the chest and placing them on the bed. “I’m going with you.”

He moved to the blond’s side, and, taking the clothes from his hand, he replaced them in the drawer.

“No, you’re not,” he said. “I’ve already called Liberty Air and their jet is standing by to take me to Pittsburgh.”

Brian picked up Justin’s suitcase and replaced it on the shelf. He gathered his own bags and went down the stairs to set them by the door.

“Brian!” Justin called as he followed the man downstairs. Moving close, he forced Brian to meet his eyes. “I want to go with you. If Gus is hurt, I want to be there for you.”

Brian smiled down into Justin’s earnest, caring, blue eyes. He gently kissed the boy once and pulled him into his arms. He had no intention of allowing Justin to step foot in the Pitts, but that Justin loved him so much and wanted to care for him, touched him deeply. He couldn’t remember the last time someone wanted to be there just for him.

“Thank you, Sunshine. But what you can do for me is to stay in our home safe and sound.” Moving away, Brian bent and picked up his bags. He gave Justin no more time to argue.

“I’ll call you when I know how Gus is doing,” he said. Opening the door, he left without a backward glance.

Justin stared at the closed door in disbelief. Brian had just left! Why wouldn’t he let Justin go with him? He fumed for several minutes, and then, berated himself, he remembered why his lover had to leave; his son was hurt. Despite what Brian had said, Justin was determined to be there for him, and mind made up, he went back upstairs to pack. He had a flight to catch.

Chapter 14

The hospital waiting room was packed with anxious waiting families, but Brian had never felt so alone. The kicker was that it was his own damn fault. He had never felt the need or desire for someone to hold his hand and tell him lies, like everything was going to be okay. Brian was no fool; those lies didn’t bring him comfort. But shit, he badly wanted a certain blond beside him right now.

Lindsay was inside Gus’ room, settling down on the cot the hospital provided. Mel had left long enough to bring some clothes back for her wife. All Brian wanted was for his chance to see Gus and say goodnight. The small body of his son had looked so lost and swallowed by the large hospital bed, but what had Brian’s stomach churning and threatened to undo all his careful control were the tubes and machines attached to his little boy’s body.

The accident had been bad.

Some stupid asshole decided to run a stop sign because he was late for work and ploughed right into the school bus carrying 17 pre-schoolers to the local children’s theater for a morning of Peter Pan.

Five kids had been injured seriously, Gus included. He had a broken arm, brushed ribs, and had to have emergency surgery to fix a collapsed lung.

Brian didn’t know about Gus’ classmates; he had been barely able to hold it together when they wheeled Gus by on his way to the operating room, let alone asked about other’s.

For once, he and Mel had put aside their animosity and had sat together waiting for word of their son’s condition. But while Lindsey and Mel had each other to comfort, to whisper words of encouragement, fetch coffee, and to just keep close for support, Brian had no such person to turn to, and he’d never felt Justin’s absence more.

He had known the time was coming when his two lives would collide, but Brian didn’t think he would be the one who wanted the secrets over. If he called Justin right now and asked him to come, Brian had no doubt the blond would be on the next available plane. It was the aftermath of such a decision that he dreaded. Losing the life he had built with Justin in Chicago, that was his greatest fear, and it had been that fear that had kept Brian silent, long after he had admitted to himself what the blond meant to him.

Could he live with what ever the outcome was? Brian knew, if he called right now, tomorrow, he’d have to finally come clean. Could he?

He wasn’t surprised to find that his hands were damp as he reached into his pocket for his phone. What had him silently berating himself was his pounding heart. Brian dialed the phone.

The flash of relief followed by disappointment had Brian clenching his fist. He shot up from the chair and paced out to the hallway and back again to his seat, over and over again. Was it unfair for him to suddenly be pissed at Justin? Yes, he knew it was. But when Brian had finally found the nerve and he needed the blond, Justin had not answered the phone. Where was he? Brian didn’t think he had ever felt this conflicted. Perhaps, not since his father had come to him with news of his cancer and imminent death.

He just wanted Justin here.

The truth could come out, the family could interfere, offer their opinion, their criticism, and their bad mouthing of him and everything he had ever done. Brian just wanted to hold Justin and have the blond tell him everything would be okay, even if it was only for one night.

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The captain announced the planes approach and imminent landing. Justin searched his memory one last time for any tiny bit of information that may lead him to Brian. So engrossed in his thoughts, he paid no mind to the flights landing or the captain’s words, missing that he could now turn his phone back on…

Justin shouldered his backpack and moved to the aisle of the plane to exit. In one hand he held the open notebook that contained all his clues to finding Brian in this strange city. The older man had given Justin more information than he bet Brian knew. Little bits of conversation and remarks added up. After careful thought, he had a pretty good idea where to start looking for his lover. Justin hailed a cab and once inside, turned to the driver.

“Liberty Avenue, please.” Justin sat back, his thoughts all ready spinning toward what he would say when face-to-face with Brian.

Justin wandered down Liberty, enjoying the colorful atmosphere and ruefully shaking his head no more than a few times at the blatant offers from some of the passersby’s. He could only imagine Brian’s impact on the masses, and, not for the first time, he wondered about his older lover’s life here in Pittsburgh. Did Brian enjoy the nightlife here? Justin could just see the hazel-eyes man leaning against a lamppost, lighting a cigarette and surveying his kingdom. The mere thought gave him shivers; he knew he wouldn’t be able to say no to that Brian.

He stopped, peering into the brightly lit windows. He knew this must be the place. The Liberty Diner. Justin had been amazed, once he had given it serious thought, just how many times Brian had mentioned the diner. This was the first place Justin had planned on looking, but, glancing again inside before he pulled open the door, Justin felt like it was a needle in the haystack shot that he actually found Brian. The place was packed, and, by colorful clothes and swishy walks, he knew this had to be the Gay Mecca of Liberty Avenue.

Justin hesitated inside the diner entrance; the bell that had rung upon his arrival drew no attention, the sound too frequent for the regulars to look up at. Peeking around a large leather-covered bear, Justin spotted an empty stool at the counter. Moving fast despite his smaller size, he managed to snatch the seat before the big bear could. Giving the guy a huge sunshine smile, Justin thankfully settled his pack at his side when all the leather man did was smile back. Good to know he thought that one of his best assets worked in Pittsburgh as well as it did in Chicago.

Loud laughter behind him had Justin spinning on the stool to face a smiling red headed waitress. “Get a lot of miles out of that smile sunshine,” she cackled and Justin knew his mouth was hanging open, but he had never seen quiet such a get-up, at least not unless it was Pride week or something similar. The face was friendly, and Justin closed his mouth and smiled back.

“You have no idea,” he replied, winking at the women. Then he registered what she had called him, Sunshine. Up till now, Brian had been the only one who named Justin such. But before he could asked any questions of the waitress, she was pulling out her pad, pen posed.

“What can I get you sweetie?” she demanded.

“Coffee and I hope some help?” Justin asked. At the women’s raised brow he explained further. “I’m looking for someone.”

“Coffee coming right up,” the waitress’ chewed her gum for a moment and eyed Justin until he was almost squirming in his seat. “Now for the help,” and hear she gestured with the very full coffee pot at the full diner. “That’ll have to wait for my break, but don’t you worry, Sunshine. I know every gay boy on Liberty Avenue.” Sitting down the pot briefly, Justin’s new source stuck out her hand. “I’m Debbie.”

Justin graced Debbie with another of his full wattage smiles. “Justin,” he said. “And I can wait. No problem.”

\*~\*

Brian had finally stopped his restless pacing and once again assumed his seat, staring silently at the closed door to Gus’ room. It was Mel’s rushed arrival and her entrance into Gus’ room that had Brian rising and moving toward the room. He stood outside the closed door. Maybe now he would get a chance to see his son, and, he hoped, sit with him awhile. The door opened and Lindsey and Mel stepped into the hall.

Lindsey laid a hand on Brian’s arm. “I’m going to walk Mel to the car if you want to go in and say goodnight.”

Brian started to protest, but Lindsey cut him off. “Brian, the doctor said Gus won’t wake up until morning. Were all exhausted, and, I’m going to try and sleep when I return. Go home, eat something, and get some sleep.”

Brian ignored Mel at Lindsey’s side. “I can stay Linds.”

Lindsey smiled softly at her friend and reached up to kiss Brian’s cheek. “Please, go home. Come back early in the morning and hopefully Gus will be awake to see his daddy.”

Brian nodded, swallowing thickly around the lump in his throat. “I’ll just go in and say goodnight,” he murmured, stepping around them he carefully opened the door to his son’s room.

He heard Mel start to say something, but Lindsey’s shush had her shutting up, and Brian didn’t turn back; he didn’t want to argue with Mel tonight. Exhaustion crept up upon him and all he wanted was for his son to be all right and to call Justin and hear the blond’s voice.

The room was dim. The only sounds were of Gus’s breathing being assisted by the whirl-click-hiss of the ventilator and the constant beeping of the machine monitoring the boy’s heart rate.

Brian swiped a hand across his mouth. The urge to vomit strong as he took in his son’s white face. He glanced away taking little notice of Lindsey’s cot made up and ready, the bag Mel brought, and finally the lone chair beside the bed. He pulled the chair close and gingerly picked up Gus’ small hand.

Brian tenderly laid his other hand atop Gus’ small head. He smoothed back the bangs that had fallen on Gus’ forehead, taking note of how large his hand looked on his little boy’s head. He had not wanted this responsibility. This feeling of helplessness. So much of his heart wrapped up in this tiny being’s care. But since the moment he held him, since the first time Gus’ eyes landed on his, Brian had been lost, so captivated by this miracle, his blood, that the question of love for his son was a mute point.

There were two beings that held a tight hole on Brian’s heart, and that one was hurt and lying so vulnerable and that Brian could do nothing about it. He wanted to rage, to scream, something, but all he could do was sit here and hold his son’s hand.

“Hey Sonny Boy,” Brian whispered. “Dada’s here.”

\*~\*

Justin took little notice of the group that entered the diner and took a booth right behind him. While he waited for Debbie’s break, he went through the phonebook she had provided. He moved through the Peterson and Peterson-Marcus entries, writing each phone number and address down in his notebook.

The diner slowed down and individual conversations could be heard as the noise level died down. It was from the booth behind him that Justin heard a name that had his head shooting up and his interest sharpening.

“Brian,” one of the voices said behind him.

Chapter 15

Justin’s entire body was taut with tension. His hands gripped the phonebook so tight that his fingertips were white as he strained to catch every word of the conversation in the booth behind him. So focused was he, that Justin ceased to notice the crowd or noise in the diner, he didn’t pay any attention when one of the booth’s occupants got up and joined the waitress, Debbie, at the counter.

“I’m going over to the loft later to take Brian to Babylon.” Michael dropped his fork pushing his plate to the side.

Ted looked up from his plate in surprise. “Isn’t he still at the hospital?”

Michael shook his head, wiping his mouth before answering. “No, Lindsay called and said she was going to try and convince him to go home. She is staying at the hospital, and Gus won’t wake up until morning; there’s nothing Brian can do.”

Ted shook his head at Michael. “Still, I don’t he’ll be up for the thumpa thumpa. I mean shit, Michael, his son just got out of surgery.”

It amazed Ted that Brian’s best friend couldn’t see that Brian had changed, or was it that Michael didn’t want to see Brian changed? But, despite what Michael firmly believed, Brian wasn’t the same man he had been at 29. Shit! None of them were.

Michael wasn’t alone however; many of their ‘family’ refused to believe that Brian had grown up. Perhaps it was only because Ted had worked with Brian for years. Ted saw the wildness and restlessness of a 20-something Brian settle into a driven 30 year old committed to making Kinnetik the best.

There had been many small things that slipped by unnoticed unless you added them up. Ted saw a lonely and often solitary Brian, though it would be a cold day in hell before Brian ever admitted that. Sometimes they would be sitting together in the diner just talking about their partners of in his and Emmett’s cases, their latest love interest, and it would seem that Brian started to say something, only to stop himself and look away.

Ted didn’t know if it was his imagination, but he swore that he saw a longing flash across Brian’s hazel eyes more than once, almost as if Brian was searching for someone, or missing someone, but it seemed like Ted was the only one in their small group who noticed this. Despite Michael’s assertion that Babylon was the answer to Brian’s woes, the actual trips Brian had made to the dance club had dwindled down to almost none.

Ted could well remember the jealousy he used to feel when Brian’s face would take on a predator mode. The fire and sexual heat in his hazel eyes would scorch anyone they fell on. That fire had been absent from Brian for some time now, and for a few hours only, after he returned from another of his mysterious trips, Brian’s eyes would have a peacefulness in them that Ted had never seen his boss exhibit before.

Michael, per-usual, dismissed Ted’s comments, if he even heard them.

It wasn’t that Michael didn’t see the changes in his oldest friend, he just couldn’t accept them let-alone admit them out loud. If you asked him what he was so afraid of, Michael wouldn’t be able to tell you, but the darkest would be being left behind; if Brian moved on, Michael just knew he wouldn’t be beside him. That Brian could find someone else to take that journey with him never occurred to Michael, and he wouldn’t have accepted it even if he were hit in the face with it.

Ted leaned back in his seat, eyes roaming around the diner, unaware of the blond at the counter who stiffened noticeable at Michael’s remarks.

“Brian needs to take his mind of Gus and unwind. A couple of bumps, a few shots, and a few trips to the backroom to get his dick sucked, and he’ll feel like his old self. I know what my best friend needs.”

Michael sighed and rubbed a hand across his face; the family had been at the hospital for hours waiting for word about Gus. He looked back at Ted.

“You didn’t see him when his dad died. Brian was a fall down mess, drinking and drugged out every night. Hell, he was tricking three and four a night. I had to drive him home at night and pour him into bed.”

Ted nodded his head, he remembered that time, but what Michael refused to realize was that event had happened years ago.

Michael gave a slightly biter laugh. “I’d be prepared for some late night at Babylon.”

Justin couldn’t believe what he had just heard. It was his Brian the men in the booth behind were talking about he had no doubt; there couldn’t be two Brian’s who had a son in the hospital. But what they were saying! They didn’t sound like great friend’s to have to Justin, not and talk about Brian like that.

Justin’s Brian would never leave his small son in the hospital to go party. There had to be some mistake. The waitress Debbie, the flamboyant man she was talking to, all the too curious ears that were listening, disappeared as Justin rose and turned to face the men. He took a step closer to the booth, drawing their attention to him immediately.

Justin tried to keep the anger from his voice, but his fist clenched and unclenched. “Excuse me, but are you talking about Brian Kinney?”

Two pairs of eyes swung to regard the small blond, and most ears perked up at the mention of the Stud of Liberty’s name.

Michael rolled his eyes in annoyance, not another one! Once more it fell to him to get rid of some love-struck twink who thought he had a second chance at the great Kinney. But there was something about this blond’s tone and the look of anger in his eyes that had Michael’s hackles rising.

He couldn’t control the anger in his tone. “What the fuck business is it of yours?” Michael couldn’t believe this guy had just walked right up and interrupted them.

Justin frowned and looked at the other man in the booth, he didn’t like the other man’s attitude. He started to address Ted, but was startled by Michael’s next comments, and the look of pity he saw clearly in the man’s brown eyes.

“He’s had you. Brian doesn’t fuck a trick twice.” Michael turned away, dismissing the blond. If he only a dime for every time he had to repeat that to one of Brian’s hopefuls.

Jesus! Justin looked at this guy in shock; he couldn’t believe how rude the man was and the shit Michael was spouting! They had to be talking about someone else. Justin looked at the other man who had been silent through the whole exchange; Justin also saw a flash of pity in that man’s eyes as well.

Ted had seen Michael more than once send one of Brian’s tricks on their way; and ignoring the stab of unease he also got at witnessing these scenes, Ted could blame Michael’s rudeness on their late night and the stress of Gus’ injuries. The blond was beautiful; Ted could well admire the golden hair, pale skin, and blue eyes, not to mention the blond’s great ass. But the young man wasn’t Brian usual type. Ted couldn’t shake a feeling of misgiving.

Justin didn’t see Debbie and Emmett approach the booth; his attention was on the other two. “There must be some mistake. You obviously are talking about a different man. My partner, would never leave his injured son to go get his dick sucked.” Justin started to turn away, convinced that there was some mistake.

A few shocked whispers broke out at the blond’s announcement, but most in the diner were too busy listening to this newest drama to react. Michael looked at his mom and Emmett over Justin’s shoulder. Rudely pointing a finger at the blond, he laughed once more.

“You believe this guy? His partner!”

Emmett winced at the volume of Michael’s voice. He met the blond’s eyes, slightly embarrassed by Michael’s actions. He heard Ted’s hissed, ‘Michael!’ and he felt for the blond.

Michael ignored his mother’s frown and his friend’s embarrassment. He was almost mumbling to himself about Liberty Avenue getting weirder every day, his rant moving slowly to cleaning up messes and twinks who had no clue.

Ted shifted in his seat, like Emmett, he was uncomfortable with Michael’s rudeness, and, despite his friend’s dismissal, Ted couldn’t help but look at the blond seriously, the confident tone the young man spoke with and the certainty in his eyes told Ted something else was going on here.

There was a lot Justin wanted to say to this fucker, but, on the off chance that the little asshole really was talking about his Brian and was possibly a friend, he decided to just ignore him.

Smiling his blinding smile, Justin held out his hand to Ted. “Hi. I’m Justin Taylor.”

Smiling, Justin also introduced himself to Debbie and Emmett. He noticed their hesitation in accepting overtures, but they all shook his hand and mumbled their names to him.

He continued. “I just arrived from Chicago. My partner had to return here for an emergency; his son was hurt, but he didn’t get a chance to tell me which hospital.”

Ted nodded, thoughtful. It did sound like their Brian, but it was something else that blond had said that caught his attention. Justin Taylor and Chicago. Those two things had Ted immediately reevaluating the blond in front of them. It took Ted only seconds to remember where he had seen that name; on papers - Brian’s papers - when he had added the name to ownership of the property.

Ted’s eyes widened. He was almost positive the blond in front of them was telling the truth. “There couldn’t be two Brian Kinney’s in Pittsburgh with a son in the hospital.” Ted saw Debbie nod at his words.

Michael tossed his napkin on the table in disgust. “Oh get real!” he snorted in disbelief. “Partner?” he demanded, “Brian Kinney doesn’t do boyfriend’s.”

Justin started to reply, but his name, whispered in shock behind him, stopped Justin cold.

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The coffee induced, burning in his stomach was what prompted Brian to stop at the diner. He hadn’t planned on staying, only picking up something to take back to the loft with him. There was another reason. One he was loathed to feel, but he did never the less; Brian didn’t want to go back to his empty loft. The sterile atmosphere held no appeal; instead what he wished for was their warm comforting home in Chicago. After checking his phone one more time and frowning when there were no calls, Brian pulled open the door to the diner. The overhead bell’s chiming going ignored by the diner’s occupants; all were riveted by the commotion unfolding as the blond fought over the stud of Liberty Avenue.

At first he thought he was seeing things, imagining him here because that was what Brian had been so badly wishing for. But there was no mistaking that blond hair or slender build, or, as Justin turned, that blinding smile. Brian felt something in him shift and then settle; it was okay now.

\*~\*

Justin could see the strain, worry, and exhaustion in Brian’s eyes and ragged appearance. Justin said nothing, just smiled gently. Now was not the time to demand answers or explanations, particularly not in front of these people who had such a low opinion of his partner. Justin could wait, for now he was just thankful, especially when Brian’s arms opened and welcomed him in.

Brian closed his eyes and just breathed in the younger man’s scent, taking in the comfort so freely given by Justin’s embrace. He drew back reluctantly. Looking into Justin’s eyes, he could clearly see the worry, love, and uncertainty. Justin never hid what he was feeling.

Like Justin, Brian knew this wasn’t the place to address those worries. Instead, he held just a little tighter to the blond. “You forgot to turn your phone on again, didn’t you?” he whispered in Justin’s ear, smiling for the first time in hours as the blond laughed.

Justin couldn’t help his soft laughter. He hugged Brian tightly for a moment before leaning back to look up at the brunet. A small smile touched his face and he murmured a soft, ‘sorry’.

Neither paid any attention to the open-mouths and stunned expressions behind them. Brian dropped a quick kiss onto Justin’s lips before turning and leading the blond out the door.

“Let’s get out of here,” Brian said ignoring the loud demand behind him. Michael’s ‘Brian!’ went unanswered.

Saying nothing, Justin let himself be steered out of the diner; now that he had found Brian, Justin could wait for the rest.

Chapter 16

Yep, he was a cowardly-assed fag with no balls, but damned if he could raise his head and meet those impossibly frank blue eyes. Brian also couldn’t get his mouth to open to break the silence that had fallen inside the jeep. No, all he could do was reach over and buckle Justin’s seatbelt. With his bowed head so close, Brian could feel Justin’s breath stir his hair.

Then, a hand lifted and cupped his face, raising his chin so Justin could peer into Brian’s eyes.

“Gus?” Justin asked softly, his face and eyes concerned.

Brian closed his eyes briefly, just long enough to clear the suspicious moisture that had gathered in them. He was so damn thankful - thankful that Justin had balls big enough for the both of them, that the blond would only be concerned with what was most important to Brian.

Brian pulled away reluctantly. Starting the jeep, he left behind his ‘friends’ and began filling Justin in on Gus’ condition. Justin’s ‘thank god’ effectively ended the conversation.

Brian couldn’t and didn’t know how to ask what had went happened in the diner, so he just silently drove to the left.

Justin saw the glances Brian snuck his way, but he also let the silence build; his mind still trying to wrap itself around what he had heard. Justin couldn’t believe that such two different men could be the same person. He tried to organize his thoughts, but what the hell kind of questions should he begin to ask? At least Brian’s son was going to be okay, but that was a whole other can of worms. Justin didn’t where to start.

Brian pulled up in front of the loft. “We’re here,” he said simply. Unbuckling his seatbelt and getting out, he went around to the passenger side. He didn’t touch the blond, only gestured for Justin to follow him inside.

Justin’s first impression when he ventured further inside was ‘no one lives here.’ He saw the similarities, the openness, the simplicity of design, but there were worlds of difference between this place and their home in Chicago. This wasn’t a home; it was a showplace. An image. What image Justin wasn’t sure of yet, but one he didn’t like. ‘Untouchable,’ the white furniture and simply lines screamed out to him.

Then, Justin saw the bedroom.

It was an altar, a stage that dominated the entire space as if were the central purpose of the loft.

He couldn’t make himself step further into the room. All too easily, he could picture the man Michael described in this place, and it was this place more than anything else that had happened since he stepped off the plane in Pittsburgh that threw him.

He didn’t know the man who lived here.

“This is your home?” he asked Brian. Justin knew his face wore his shock and his eyes held pain.

“No,” Brian answered honestly, not hiding anything anymore. “It’s where I used to live. My home is in Chicago, with you.”

Justin nodded, and the pain on his face eased somewhat. He looked around at the cold, sterile loft. “I don’t know this man,” he said, his eyes finally coming to rest once more on Brian.

Brian felt the exhaustion catch up with him. He had been riding a nervous high since he first spotted Justin in the diner, but now, the long day and night worrying about Gus was catching up with him. He knew they needed to talk, and that he was going to have to offer explanations, explanations that he hoped wouldn’t send Justin running for the door, but all he wanted right now was to crawl into bed, with Justin.

“I don’t know him anymore either.” Brian ran a hand through his hair. “I know we need to talk, but for now, can we just rest?” he asked, and it was as close as Brian would ever come to pleading.

Justin searched Brian’s face, thinking how tried he looked. He nodded and wordlessly held out his hand to Brian. Saying no more, Brian crossed the room, and, taking Justin’s hand, led him up the three steps to the bed. They both stripped down, needing to sleep skin to skin, and they were silent. But it wasn’t the expectant silence that had filled the jeep; this one was comforting and familiar.

Brian didn’t have to ask; Justin found his usual spot, head on Brian’s chest, one arm and leg across Brian’s body. Brian’s breath released with a heavy sigh, and it took only moments for him to drift off, Justin’s hand rubbing soothingly up and down his chest.

Justin listened to the wheeze of Brian’s breathing, finding comfort in the steady heartbeat under his ear. Nothing he had seen or heard tonight made any sense, but he couldn’t figure any of this out until he heard what Brian had to say. Justin just hoped he could live with what he learned.

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At first, Justin wasn’t sure what had awoken him, but he then became aware of the tension in the body under him. Shifting his head from Brian’s chest to his shoulder, he ran one hand soothingly up Brian’s body. It was his silent signal to Brian that he was awake and would listen.

There was quiet for a while, no movement from their bodies except for Justin’s hand caressing Brian. Then gradually, with one hitched breath to start, Brian began to speak of his life in Pittsburgh, and Justin kept his promise; he listened. When finished, they lay there, once again wrapped in silence, with Justin’s comforting touch luring Brian to sleep.

\*~\*

It was his name spoken softly and a hand on his face that pulled Brian from sleep. He blinked owlishly up into Justin’s smiling face. Despite the painful burden he had shared in the middle of the night, or perhaps because he had finally shared it, Brian had slept peacefully.

Brian looked towards the loft windows; the light was dim so it must be early still. He looked back, questioning at Justin.

“I know you wanted to get to the hospital early this morning. The shower’s ready,” Justin rose and held out a hand for Brian, and, with a thankful smile, Brian took it, allowing Justin to pull him from the bed.

They didn’t allow themselves much time to fool around, just a few kisses and a long embrace under the steam. Brian was anxious to see how Gus was, and Justin more than ready to meet the two women he had heard about last night in Brian’s story. A cup of coffee and a promise of drive-through for Justin, and they left the loft. They didn’t speak much; Justin had already decided to silently observe these people who made up Brian’s friends and family. With his touch constantly on Brian, he let the older man know he was there with him, and that they were fine.

Brian pulled into the family parking area of the hospital. He turned off the engine and unhooked his seatbelt, but he made no move to get out of the jeep.

Justin unhooked his seatbelt and started to open the door, but he stopped and looked back at Brian. It didn’t take the words being said for Justin to recognize the look of worry in Brian’s eyes, or a genius to know the cause. Justin had tried all night and this morning to let Brian know with his touch that nothing he heard here would change how he felt for the other man, but maybe this once, Brian needed the words.

He leaned over and kissed Brian gently, pulling back he smiled up at Brian. “It’s okay. I love you and nothing anyone here says will change that. They don’t have the power.”

Brian tried to smile back as he followed Justin out of the jeep, but the closer he got to the front entrance of the hospital, the more anxious he became. He didn’t want to have to do this -- defend himself and his choices, Brian though as he took a hold of Justin’s hand. He would have to do that over and over again the longer he stayed in Pittsburgh. If it wasn’t for his son, Brian knew he would have dragged Justin to the first plane out of there. Just the thought of the peace he always felt when he stepped inside their home in Chicago had Brian biting back the urge to turn around and run away from here as fast as he could.

Like it or not, it seemed that despite his best efforts, Brian’s two worlds had collided, and it was time for him to drop his mask and let his friends and family see the man he really was. The sad part was Brian knew they wouldn’t understand. He hoped yes, but, just like their expectations of him were so low, his own of their acceptance and understanding were nonexistent. Being told, often, not to fuck up, or ‘you’ll ever change’, can do that to a person.

Justin could see that Brian was a million miles away, and, not wanting to face people he had only just heard of alone, Justin squeezed Brian’s hand. He knew there wasn’t anything else he could say to reassure Brian, but then actions always mattered more to the older man. The best thing Justin could do was what he was doing, standing beside Brian.

Brian’s eyes stayed trained straight ahead, but he griped the hand he held just a bit tighter. They bypassed the help desk and took the elevator to the third floor. Walking the down the bustling children’s ward, they passed a small waiting room.

“Brian?” a woman’s voice called.

Brian and Justin turned towards the voice. Justin saw a tall blonde woman dressed in a rumpled blouse and slacks. He knew immediately by the worried, pinched look on her face that this was Gus’ mother. The door to the room behind them opened and a smaller, dark haired woman joined the blonde. She scowled at the sight of Brian, and Justin figured this must be Melanie.

Brian didn’t give the women a chance to speak. “What’s wrong? Is Gus awake?” His tone was worried, and he half turned towards the room that held Gus. However, Lindsay’s voice stopped him.

“He’s fine; the doctor is in with him now. I stepped out to get some coffee; Mel was with him.” Lindsay might have been speaking to Brian, but her gaze was firmly on Justin.

Justin recognized that he was being sized up, and, by the slight turn up of her nose that Lindsay did, he wasn’t measuring up. Well accustomed to the WASP way of a polite put down, Justin returned the scrutiny. Lindsay had nothing on some of Justin’s mother’s friends; he’d been trained by the best. He slid an arm around Brian’s waist, and felt a perverse flash of pleasure at the displeasure in Lindsay’s eyes. Justin had already recognized the look of possession that had filled the blonde’s gaze when it landed on Brian. But she was wrong; Brian wasn’t hers and would never be hers. But it was Melanie who said what Lindsay was thinking, without hiding behind polite manners.

“What? You’re bringing tricks to the hospital to visit your son now?” Her voice was sharp and her stance as she came to stand next to her wife was aggressive, almost as if Melanie was staking her territory.

Justin had to hold back a bark of laughter; little did Melanie know that she had nothing to worry about! He could feel Brian stiffen next to him. Justin moved his arm from around Brian’s waist, letting it slip down until their hands met and clasp together tightly, a move that didn’t go unnoticed by the two women.

Brian’s eyes were glaring at the two women. He tightened his hold on Justin. “This is my partner, Justin Taylor. Justin, these are Gus’ mothers, Lindsay and Melanie.” Brian’s tone was firm and gave the women no encouragement to argue with him.

But again, Justin fought the urge to laugh. Both women’s eyes had widened, Melanie’s with disbelief, Lindsay’s with shock. Melanie gave a sharp laugh, “Get real!” she sarcastically replied.

Lindsay’s eyes darted from Justin to Brian and back again. “S-since when?” she stammered.

Brian’s tone was curt. “We live together in Chicago, have for almost a year. Now, if that’s all about my personal life, I’d like to see my son.”

Justin could see Lindsay’s eyes widen at the knowledge that they had been together that long. Justin could tell from her expression that she wanted to demand more information. However, Brian’s tone did not invite further enquiry, and she wasn’t brave enough just yet to push him.

Not so for Melanie, she had to snarl her remarks. “Our son, asshole.”

Justin glared at her, “Excuse me?” he demanded, and as his smaller body tightening up and he clenched his free hand into a fist. “Unless you both lied to Brian and used someone else’s sperm, I’d say Gus is his son.” Both women’s mouths fell open, and Melanie started to take a step in Justin’s direction. At Brian’s deadly look, she hesitated.

Brian wrapped his arms around Justin. “It’s okay,” he whispered in the outraged blond’s ear. Then looking back at the two women, “We’re going in to see Gus,” he announced, daring them to object.

Lindsay just nodded, and pulled a furious Melanie with her towards the waiting room. Justin could hear their whispered argument as he and Brian went into Gus’ room, and he knew this was just the beginning for his trip to Pittsburgh.

Chapter 17

There are some sights that are so horribly wrong that they freeze you in your tracks. You can’t cry out. You can’t do anything but clutch your chest and pray that you aren’t having a heart attack. It hits you like a ton of bricks. Your breath catches, and you can’t look away, the sight is just too appalling. And, if you looked away, you would have never believed it could look so terrible.

That was what Justin thought as he took in the so-small body of Brian’s son in the large, generically white hospital bed. He shook his head. It wasn’t right, no way in hell it could be right - seeing a child in a room he should not be in. Justin could only stand and silently watch as Brian pulled a chair close to the bed, and picked up his boy’s small hand, and held it. What in the world could he possibly say to comfort Brian?

Was it cowardly to want to flee the room?

Justin watched as Brian whispered something softly to his son that was too low for Justin to catch, but the emotions were clear. How could anyone doubt that Brian loved his son?

It took Justin a minute to realize that Brian was speaking to him now, but finally, tearing his eyes away from Gus lying so still and pale, Justin focused on what Brian was telling him.

“I never thought I would love him, you know.” Brian didn’t look up at Justin, just kept gazing at his boys face. “I was the sperm donor; I wasn’t supposed to be anything more than that. In and out – a favor for a friend, but then I held him for the first time…”

Brian did look up this time and meet Justin’s watery blue eyes, and the hurt in those hazel eyes almost undid Justin.

“’Heart of stone’ she said.” Brian gave a harsh laugh. “As much as I loved him, he scared the shit out of me. Me! Brian Kinney scared to death of a small pissing and pooping machine who couldn’t even hold up his own head yet!“

Justin took a step forward. “Brian,” he whispered.

“No!” Brian held up a hand as if he could stop anything else from smacking him in the face. He looked almost pleadingly at Justin. “I know I’m a for shit father. Hell, look at the example I had, but he doesn’t deserve this!”

Justin ignored the ‘do not touch’ vibes and crossed the room. Taking Brian’s upraised hand, he brought it to his lips where he tenderly kissed it before firmly taking Brian’s hand between his own. Brian seemed to settle after that gesture; his attention returned to the body of his still son.

“It’s one of the hardest things I’ve ever done – admitting that I’m too much of a fucking coward to be a real father to my own son.” Brian whispered his confession, and the hand that gripped Justin’s trembled.

Justin didn’t say anything; there was nothing that would ease the grief or the guilt Brian. He wanted to tell him that it wasn’t too late, but he knew Brian wasn’t ready to hear that optimism. Leaning over, he pressed a gentle kiss to the top of the auburn head.

“I’m going to give you guys some time alone, and get us some coffee.” He felt Brian briefly squeeze his fingers before letting go. Justin turned back for one more glance before he softly shut the hospital door behind him.

Once in the hall, Justin leaned back against the door and closed his eyes. Justin had known that this trip might bring some things to light that he hadn’t planned or even imagined, but he’d never expected this! He wanted to be there for his partner, share in his life, and know everything there was to know about Brian, but now, Justin wasn’t so sure he could help the hurting man he had just left alone in the too quite hospital room.

These people, this town, weren’t at all what Justin expected. He knew realistically that Brian had a history; the man was in his 30’s. However, never in Justin’s wildest scenarios had he pictured something this painful.

It had taken Justin less than 24 hours of being in the Pitts to completely understand why Brian left this place and why he hated coming back.

He escaped down to the cafeteria before the two women could spot him, but his luck ran out on his return. Lindsay’s voice stopped him.

“Hum – Justin isn’t it?”

Justin turned to face the other blonde. He didn’t smile. “That’s right, Justin Taylor.”

She attempted a smile, though it was strained. “Why don’t you come have a seat with me, give Brian some time alone with his son.”

Justin started to point out that he was out here, with her, for that very reason. Instead, he followed her to the waiting room, taking a seat next to her. Justin looked around.

“Where’s Melanie, it is Melanie, right?” he asked. Justin wasn’t sure he had gotten the name right, but he was also surprised that the woman wasn’t there waiting for them to come out of the room. Her hostility has been that scorching.

Lindsay smiled and nodded her head briefly. “She went to call the office. Mel was supposed to be in court this morning, but had another attorney cover for her.”

Justin nodded and looked around the mostly empty room. An awkward silence fell between them. Then with a clearing of her throat, Lindsay spoke.

“So, how long have you known Brian?”

Justin kept his face turned away so that she wouldn’t see his amusement. He had decided sometime during the morning ride to the hospital that amusement was the way to deal with these people in Brian’s life. Last night he’d been angry, furious actually, but that had only resulted in more anger at the sheer blindness and arrogance of the individuals he had met who thought they knew Brian. Being amused at them seemed a much happier and less stressful plan.

He gave her a well-mannered smile. “Almost a year now.”

She looked away from Justin towards the hospital room. The silence built between them for a few minutes before Justin broke it with his own question. “So, Brian said that you guys have been friends since college?”

Lindsay turned back around and smiled. “Yes, we’ve known each other since freshman year. He’s my best friend.”

Justin frowned briefly and tried not to make the rebuff he felt fill his voice. “Brian is my best friend also, but then I firmly believe that ones partner should be ones best friend.”

He went on before Lindsay could formulate a response. “But it’s a real achievement and testament to your bond that you guys are still friends. I mean most close friends in college seem to lose that bond as they grow older and apart. I know what I think and feel now won’t be what I think or feel, say, when I’m thirty.”

Now it was Lindsay’s face that wore the frown. Justin could see the wheels turning. “So I guess he’s told you all about Gus?” she asked.

Her tone was almost snappish, but Justin ignored it; he didn’t want to piss off any more of Brian’s friends, and the woman’s son was in the hospital that made him cut her a little slack.

Justin nodded. “He has. Brian loves Gus very much. Anyone who catches a glimpse of them together can see that.” Brian may not have shared much of his life here in Pittsburgh with Justin before last night, but his feelings for Gus were something shared from their first meeting.

Lindsay looked back towards the closed hospital door.

“I just wish he were around more. I’ve tried and tried to get him more involved in Gus’ life, but he continues to be just a drop-in-dad.”

Justin bit his lip and fought to control the temper that threatened to erupt. Jesus! These people were blind! If you spent your entire childhood with the worst examples of parenting that Justin could ever imagine, of course you would doubt your own abilities to be a parent. It didn’t take a genius to figure this out, and these people were the ones who claimed to know Brian best.

But, perhaps they didn’t. Perhaps all they saw or were willing to see, was the mask Brian showed them; never bothering to see what’s behind it, or to notice when it cracked.

Could Justin make Lindsay see that? Should he even try? He didn’t know the answer to that. He wouldn’t share confidences that Brian had entrusted him with. Justin didn’t give a damn that these people thought they knew his partner best, but Lindsay was the mother of Brian’s son, a son that Justin had every intention of getting to know and love.

“My father was a great dad, for the first 17 years of my life anyway. We spent a lot of time together, and I always thought he’d be there for me. When I told him I was gay, he threw me out of the house, even thought I had nowhere to go. I haven’t spoken to my father since that night.” Justin met Lindsay’s gaze, letting her see a little of the pain that still existed and always would.

“I think about someday when I might have a child. I tell myself all the things that I will do right, all the mistakes that I would avoid. But still inside of me is a small knot of doubt. What if I’m no better than my dad?” Justin shrugged his shoulders and looked away.

Did she get it? He didn’t know, and frankly Justin didn’t care. He wanted to go to Brian and be held and in return hold his partner. Justin almost wished he had stayed in Chicago, but that thought quickly vanished as the hospital door opened and Brian stepped out, his gaze immediately searching for and finding Justin.

\*~\*

The relief was enormous. He was still here. Logically Brian had known Justin would be, but every time he stepped back into this town it seemed his old fears tried to take hold again. He watched Justin rise from his seat beside Lindsay, smiling softly and somewhat sadly at him like Justin knew what Brian had been thinking.

Brian couldn’t let this place or his demons do that to the blond. He refused to hurt Justin or have any part of this place effect what they had together. So he smiled a real smile that so few got to see and opened his arms, needing to give and even more receive the embrace that would make all this worth it. And Justin came without a word or a question.

They stood tightly wrapped together, oblivious to the sad gaze of one woman and the envious eyes of others. Brian took a deep breath and opened his eyes, meeting Lindsay’s gaze he softly spoke, the happiness very clear in his voice.

“Gus is awake and asking for his mommy.”

Justin kept his arm wrapped tightly around Brian’s waist as they started for the elevators. Neither noticed as Lindsay paused once to look back at them before she opened Gus’ door and disappeared into the room.

Chapter 18

The old, vinyl, wooden chair had long since grown uncomfortable, but the man inhabiting it was loath to move; all of his attention was on the too tiny boy in the hospital bed, buried in tubing and vivid bruises.

The same horrible, cruel thought rattled through the man's mind. What if.

What if he'd lost his son.

The little boy was his one great tie to Pittsburgh. The one reason he kept coming back. The one reason he'd struggled so hard through chemo.

As awful as Jack Kinney had been and as much as Brian had proven to be a drop-in dad, there was one inescapable truth --

Brian Kinney loved his son and had come far too close to losing him.

A sharp intake of breath and a shaky exhalation as he took in his son's pallid skin, dotted with deep, black bruises.

How long had he sat here watching simply watching his son breathe just to assure himself that Gus was going to be okay? It was basic rite. One any parent would do given the situation, and it was one he'd wholly been prevented from doing since the night of his arrival.

And only Justin has questioned the justice of the Mommies' actions.

Brian swallowed down a wave of bitterness. He might have been dazed the night before, but he'd clearly seen the shock, the jealousy, and the disapproval on several people's faces throughout the day. And, while he expected them from strangers or tricks of years past, it hurt in a way he couldn't even begin to describe when his 'friends' were the most obvious about their feelings.

The most obvious of whom were Michael and Lindsay.

Brian knew without a doubt that those particular relationships would be sorely stretched in the days to come. Whether they would last was unsure.

All thoughts of impending confrontations fled Brian's mind when the tiny hand curled in his tensed his own hand and squeezed back. Sooty lashes fluttered open to reveal sleepy, hazel eyes.

"Daddy?" The voice was raspy and filled with confusion, but was so welcome.

"Hey, Sonny Boy," he replied, smoothing the hair on his son's forehead.

"Where are we?"

"The hospital. You were in a school bus accident."

"Ac'dent?" Gus slurred.

"You were on a field trip. A truck ran into the bus you were on," Brian explained, tightening his hold on Gus' hand.

Gus blinked owlishly at his father, letting the information sink through the haze of painkillers.

"Oh no! We were s'pose' t' see Peter Pan!" The sad tinge to his son's voice made his heart clench.

Smiling weakly and trying once again to tame the sleep-made cow-lick on his son's head, Brian said, "You'll get to see it when you're better."

Gus met his father's gaze, eyes wide with hope.

"Promise, Daddy?"

"Yeah, Sonny Boy, I promise," Brian responded, swallowing thickly. Even if he had to rent out the theatre and pay the actors himself. "Now what do you say I go and get your Mom? She's been waiting for you to wake up."

"'Kay," Gus responded sleepily, already struggling to stay awake.

Brian stood on legs that had long since fallen asleep, leaned forward, and kissed Gus' brow. The boy offered a sleepy smile.

"Love you, Daddy."

His heart clenched, and he closed his eyes just for a moment to let the emotions roll over him -- relief that his son was all right, sorrow he wasn't more involved in his boy's life, but the most overwhelming was love for the little boy who had so thoroughly wrapped his daddy around his little finger.

"I love you too, Gus."

The scene that greeted him outside of his son's room was a polar opposite. Justin's arms were crossed in front of him, lips thinned, and eyes blazing defiantly. Lindsay had her hands on her hips, a frosty smile on her face, and an aura of disapproval and anger.

Brian, unwilling to get into what promised to be a rather loud blow out in the middle of a hospital, redirected Lindsay's attention.

"Gus is awake and asking for his mom."

The trip to the diner for lunch was a silent one; after the emotional upheaval of the hospital, neither were really prepared to discuss anything of import.

And so, it wasn't that large of a surprise to find the entire gang lying in wait for them.

"Well if it isn't Brian and his new toy. Tell me, Boy Wonder, how much does a 'date' in Chicago cost," Michael accosted them the moment they stepped through the door. His comment was met with titters from the gathered crowd.

The swarm of emotions that had been simmering inside of him felt ready to boil over the moment Michael opened his mouth. Clenching his jaw, Brian ground out, "Michael, Outside. Now."

The voice was harsh enough to make all conversation stop in the diner. It wasn't the seductive, bored, or cocky tones Brian so calmly used around Liberty Avenue.

It wasn't the authoritative voice used when pitching ads or dressing down workers.

It was the voice of someone that had seen too much and been pushed too far, and it was enough to make Justin shiver and watch the two leave the diner with worry.

The diner remained silent after the door slammed shut, every eye turned towards the window where the two former friends stood yelling back and forth, the conversation growing more heated.

Justin started towards the door only to be stopped by Ted's hand on his shoulder.

"This has been a long time coming. They need this to happen for closure."

"But his son--"

"I know Gus was just hurt, honey," Emmett interjected. "But Teddy's right; Brian's finally hurting enough --"

"--and focused on someone else enough," Ted interrupted.

"Not to mention angry enough to tell Michael how he feels."

"And that is?" Justin asked, eyebrow raised in question.

"That Michael's a selfish prick for having a husband and resenting his best friend from having one, too."

"Especially when the partner Brian picked wasn't Little Miss Temper Tantrum, himself."

"I take it you don't approve of the way Michael's acting?" Justin asked looking sharply at both Ted and Emmett.

"Michael is of the mistaken belief that Brian's suffering some kind of mental break and that you're just some random twink who got his claws into him," Ted started, shrugging a little at the end. "Personally, I think Brian's happy with you. I seriously doubt he'd spend thousands on art or add anyone's name to his riverside condo if it wasn't more than just a friendship with benefits."

Justin blushed slightly.

"And let's not forget he took you to see his son," Emmett added, leaning against the table. "It's all fairly obvious once you get past the shock."

Justin looked at Em in question.

"Brian Kinney has a heart and it most certainly belongs to you," Emmett explained, looking directly at Justin.

Meanwhile, outside the diner:

"--I just can't fucking believe you! You disappear to go God knows where for months at a time, you only stop in to see your son instead of your friends, and let's not forget that blond twink who appeared out of nowhere," Michael exclaimed, finally drawing his two minute long rant to a close by drawing himself up straight, looking Brian firmly in the eye, and demanding, "Who the fuck are you and what happened to my best friend?"

Brian took a long, deep breath and counted backwards in an attempt to reign in his temper. Yes, Michael was his friend, and yes, Brian had expected some level of jealousy but Michael's pure vitriol reaction was totally uncalled for.

When he finally did allow himself to speak, it was with a cold voice that he'd only reserved for dealing with his own family.

"The Brian Kinney you know doesn't exist anymore because I can't live like that anymore, Michael. I was fucking miserable."

"So what? You move somewhere else, build a new life, and just move on?" The 'without me' heard but unsaid.

"Yes," Brian replied without pausing to think. Michael sucked in a breath, clearly gearing up for another tirade. Brian, however, carried on with an explanation. One, in his opinion, Michael didn't deserve and would wholly ignore. He knew, however, those in the diner were listening, and maybe just maybe one of them would be able to talk some sense into his old friend after he'd calmed down enough to hear reason.

"I don't have to pretend when I'm with Justin. There is no Stud of Liberty Avenue in Chicago," he started, taking a breath before continuing. "I didn't pick him up in some club, fuck him, and move on. I didn't want to. He didn't expect me to either which is exactly what would have happened if I stayed here. I would have always been nothing more than my reputation."

"So that's it? You just packed up and moved on," Michael asked, crossing his arms and staring angrily at his friend.

Brian closed his eyes and shook his head. The guilt his friend was trying to heap on him was palpable.

"You have your dreams -- the comic shop, a husband, even the fucking white picket fence -- why can't I?"

"Because you're Brian Kinney," Michael exclaimed, throwing his hands in the air.

Brian looked sadly at his childhood friend, feeling the chasm spread between them. Here was the only boy to ever befriend the poorly dressed classmate that was always covered in bruises, here was the teenager whom he'd taught the rules of Liberty Avenue to, here was the man whose childhood crush blinded him to the truth.

Liberty Avenue had made Brian Kinney the man he was, but it was a lifestyle that had been killing him.

"I want to be happy, Michael. I deserve to be happy," he said slowly, pausing, throat suddenly tight. He locked eyes with Michael, begging his best friend to try to understand, to hear and listen for once.

"Don't ask me to chose between you and Justin," he said with a finality to his voice.

Michael's eyes went wide with shock. "You'd throw away years of friendship on that stupid twink?" Michael said, throwing his arm up to point at where Justin was seated inside.

"I love him, Michael." Brian admitted.

Michael gasped, his face going flushed with anger to sickly pale.

"He must be one hell of a fuck."

Brian's eyes met Michael's, hands clenching at his sides. The old Brian would have punched him. Laid Michael out on the cement for having the audacity to say something so crass about someone Brian cared about so completely.

The new Brian shook his head. "I care for you, Michael. Enough that I backed you when you ran off with the professor because I knew he was a good man, that you loved him. I'm asking you to do the same."

"And if I don't?"

The defiant tone, the jaw jutting with anger. Brian already knew what Michael's answer would be before the man had opened his mouth.

Brian swallowed and looked away for a moment before meeting Michael's gaze. It all felt like goodbye. Like a hundred little pieces of him being shattered because this was Michael. His friend. The one that was always supposed to be there for him.

"Then we'll have nothing more to say to each other."

With that, Brian turned on his heel and left Michael outside the diner window.

Brian drove back to the loft as if the devil, himself, was on their tail -- speed limits, stop signs, none of it seemed to matter.

And Justin realized that, for the first time, he was seeing the reckless, Pittsburgh version of his partner.

He was utterly terrified.

They arrived home within minutes and Justin watched sadly as this incarnation jumped from the car and entered the building, before he had even finished unbuckling his seat belt.

It was with much caution that Justin approached the still-open loft door. The scene inside hurt him more than he cared to admit; Brian was drinking, and, by the looks of things, he'd already imbibed a fair amount.

Justin watched as Brian froze mid-motion, the shot glass halfway to his lips before an expression of disgust filtered across his eyes.

In the blink of an eye, he let the glass fly, hitting the wall a few feet away, and shattered into a thousand shards.

Brian stood among the splintered glass breathing hard. His clothes and skin where flecked with alcohol and tiny spots of blood from where the glass impacted.

He didn't seem to notice any of this as a shaky hand carded through his hair.

"I can't...I just can't do this anymore."

Justin breathed in sharply. The tone was so utterly broken sounding.

"I feel like I'm being pulled in two directions, and I can't...I won't give you or Gus up," Brian said after a long, long silence.

Heart hammering in his chest, Justin crossed the loft, ignoring the crunch of glass beneath his shoes.

Cautiously, he stepped up behind Brian, wrapped his arms around his waist, and kissed his shoulder.

"Then something will have to give."

Brian let out a shaky breath and looked at the mess he'd caused, finally seeing it for the first time. There was no longer any question of what track his life would take now; he'd never allow himself to become that Brian again -- real or imagined. He had far too much to lose.

"As soon as Gus' out of the hospital, I'll talk to Lindsay about visitation."

Justin released a silent breath of relief and squeezed Brian's waist slightly in support.

They were quiet for a long moment, Brian soaking up the silent comfort Justin was so readily offering. It was Justin who broke it several minutes later.

"Promise me something."

Brian turned, eyebrow raised in question.

"The next time you're angry, you'll let me drive. I don't think I've been that car sick ever."

Rolling his eyes, Brian huffed out, "Yes, dear."

The grateful look in his gaze though told Justin everything that he needed to know -- his partner was going to be okay.

Chapter 19

They'd been in Pittsburgh for four days, studiously avoiding the diner, Babylon, Woody's, and any other place Michael was likely to frequent as both Brian and Justin wanted to enjoy the relative calm that had come in the aftermath of the horrid confrontation in front of Liberty Diner.

But there were only so many days one could spend cooped up inside before they start to go mad.

And so, on a Wednesday afternoon, Brian announced he was bored and wanted to head over to Kinnetik 'to make sure they hadn't fucked up his company.'

When they arrived, Brian steered Justin through the corridors towards his office. Or at least tried to. Justin kept stopping to stare at his art on the walls.

"But...but...you only bought the two," he started.

To which Brian rolled his eyes. "I only bought two of your works from you. Your boss, however, was more than pleased to send me a copy of gallery listings."

The expression Justin shot Brian was easy to read -- a mixture of pleasure at his work being displayed and being slightly miffed that his partner had never bothered to reveal purchasing a good portion of his art. Brian smirked and guided his partner past the lobby and down the hallway towards the heart of the business -- the art and copy departments -- only to be stopped by a wide-eyed Ted walking quickly towards accounting.

"I wouldn't go down there if I were you; Cynthia's indoctrinating the new intern," he said, shivering a little before ducking into his own office.

Smiling broadly, Brian clasped Justin's hand and started dragging him towards the commotion.

"This you have to see."

Eyebrow raise in disbelief, Justin silently followed his partner another turn in the hallway to find the intern sitting, shoulders slumped, head down, and a pink-tinged face.

And Justin couldn't help but feel sorry for the kid.

Not only was he getting a very public dressing down, but Cynthia Moore -- from her perfectly tailored suit to her stylish Manolo Blahnik heels -- instantly struck him as the type of woman not to be trifled with.

She towering over the poor, unfortunate soul's drafting table and spoke in a voice so quiet but so commanding he couldn't help but shiver.

"I know you might have been able to get away with turning in this kind of crap while you were in college, but this is a business. Not just that but the top advertising firm in the area. Do you really think we would have been able to attract the kind of companies we have if we turned over this...this garbage when pitching an ad," she asked, gesturing towards the poorly laid out artwork on the easel behind.

The boy sunk even lower in his chair causing Cynthia's eyes to narrow even more.

"If you don't stop partying all night and start focusing on what we hired you for, than you better believe I'll toss you right back into the intern pool at PIFA , and I can guarantee, with the letter I put in your file, that no one in the business will hire you.

"Use your last chance wisely, Mr. Jenson," she said, turning on her heel and started stalking down the hallway. The scowl that remained on her face promised a serious tongue-lashing to anyone stupid enough to get in her way...

...at least until she spotted Brian in the hallway.

Justin knew the moment Cynthia saw them because the grimace on her face brightened into a smile.

"Brian! How have you been?"

"Just fine," he replied, smirking as he watch his old assistant's face dart from him to Justin's in question.

"Cynthia, I'd like you to meet my partner, Justin Taylor. Justin, Cynthia Moore, my partner in crime and business."

To her credit, Cynthia didn't bat an eyelash at the pronouncement of Brian and Justin's relationship. Then again, she did work with Ted, and it wasn't exactly a secret.

Country club training kicking in, Justin shook her hand and said, "Brian's spoken highly of you."

The smile on Cynthia's face turned into a downright scary smirk. "He has, has he?"

"Of course seeing you in action is far more illuminating than any story he's told me."

At this, Brian snorted. "Please. That poor kid probably had to rush home to change his shorts."

Cynthia rolled her eyes. "I wasn't that bad, and you have to admit his work was far below par."

"I'll say. That background was too close to cutesy baby-blue, the font was two points too large, and the main graphic should have been off-center more to maintain theeye-line."

Blinking slowly, Cynthia raised an eyebrow in question. "You work in advertising?"

"No. He's an artist."

"One who's thankfully already done his internship," Justin said with a wry smile. "MJ was so pleased with my work that she hired me on full time at her gallery," he continued at Brian's questioning stare.

"An artist. So that would explain the sudden influx of canvases around here," Cynthia replied, smile growing wider at the tale-tell coloring on Brian's checks.

"Right. So you've met my lovely assistant --"

"--hey!"

"And now we really should continue on with the tour. Why don't I show you to my office," Brian said, a suggestive look on his face before grabbing Justin's belt loops and dragging him in the opposite direction.

"Lovely to meet you, Cynthia," Justin called out over his shoulder.

"You too. And be sure to keep it down in there; some of us actually have to work for our paychecks," she called out, giving Brian a pointed look.

"So you've seen the art department --"

"--and their state of the art graphics program--"

"--accounting and payroll, the minions who write copy--"

Justin snorted. "Not to mention Ted and Cynthia."

"--all that's left really is my office."

From the doorway, Justin took in the sparsely decorated office. It was a balance of white, glass, and steel. Clean. Sterile. Utterly void of any warmth whatsoever.

"It reminds me of your loft," Justin said softly before reaching for the only thing out of place -- a post-it on the desk.

"Looks like Ted works fast," he said, handing the note off to Brian who scowled at the thing before balling it up and chucking it in the trash can.

. . .

It was Friday night, and Woody's was packed. Pushing their way through the crowd, Brian finally spotted Emmett and Ted sitting at a table near the back.

"Well...it's not exactly the Metro Club," Justin quipped, eyeing the plastic-y seats and graffitied table tops.

"The Metro Club," Ted repeated, eyebrow raised in question. If Ted was surprised that the two of them actually acknowledged his post-it made invite to drinks with Emmett, he didn't show it.

"It's the restaurant in Chicago where all the 'right' people dine," Justin replied, rolling his eyes. "My mom's rather fond of it."

"Charming woman, Mrs. Taylor," Brian started, smirking a little at Emmett and Ted's look of astonishment that Brian has actually met the in-laws. "She's a cross between a pit bull and a viper."

Justin smacked him on the arm in retaliation. "My mom's not that bad."

"She spent nearly the whole meal questioning me about my stock portfolio and what my intentions are with you."

This pronouncement caused Justin to blush and Ted and Emmett to laugh in delight.

"Okay...so maybe she's a bit much, --"

Brian's eyebrow raised in an unspoken version of 'you think?'

" -- but she does mean well."

"'Means well' as in Debbie force feeding you tuna casserole well," Ted interrupted.

"Or Ben trying to psycho-analyze you," Emmett chimed in.

"Or was it the 'you are an insignificant fool' vibe that Cynthia give off every time someone screws up?" Ted asked.

They all laughed at that particular image.

"I suppose it could be worse; Justin could meet your mother," Ted said, shivering.

"Ah. Mom," Brian drawled. "The last time I saw her, she told me I would burn in the fires of hell for all eternity for my unnaturalness. That my cancer was a Sign from God that I should repent and find my way back to the Light." The bitterness in his voice was hard to miss.

Up to this point, Justin had remained silent, but the way in which is partner spoke and the suddenly sober expressions on both Ted and Emmett's face let him know that Brian was in no way lying about Joan Kinney's reaction.

Reaching across the table, Justin touched Brian's forearm in support.

"She's that bad?"

Both Ted and Emmett had expected Brian to answer with some pithy, sexually filled come back, to push Justin away, and rebuke him for daring to ask about such things, but, instead Brian shocked them both by delving more into the truth.

Eyes locked with his partner, Brian nodded once before looking away.

"Not as bad as Dear Old Dad. When he finally died I'm sure that the bookies and bartenders were beside themselves."

Justin simply squeezed Brian's hand in silent support to which Brian gave him the smallest of smiles.

Across the table, Ted and Emmett shared a look.

Later that evening, while Emmett and Justin had gone off to the restroom, Ted watched Brian's utterly besotted gaze as their pair wove through the tables towards the back end of Woody's.

Ted stared down into the mineral water in his hand. "Ah. To be young and in love. Just think; this time next year you'll be running off to Canada to join all the others in marital bliss."

Brian snorted and turned to look at Ted. "Because the answer to every marital problem is to run off to Canada."

"You never know. You might."

"Just because Mikey and the Professor decided they needed a ceremony and a certificate to validate what they have doesn't mean everyone else does," he replied, voice a little sharper than he intended.

Ted shrugged. "He's an amazing guy. Just be sure you don't fuck it up over some holdover of the old you, or I might try and steal him away."

The corners of Brian's mouth quirked in amusement. Ted had assumed he would be hearing something along the lines of 'in your dreams, Theodore,' but, instead, Brian shocked him once again that night.

"I don't intend on losing him, Theodore."

. . .

It had been an awful week. Mid-terms had come and gone, and Ben had been left with a waist-high stack of papers and tests to grade.

Normally, he could get through them all without too much trouble, but, this time, he was having trouble concentrating on the task.

And all because of his loving partner, Michael.

Who, ever since the appearance of one Justin Taylor, spent more than half of his day, pacing and ranting about 'that damned little twink.'

When he had first started dating Michael, the entire gang had warned him about Michael's infatuation with his friend, and, while Ben had been quick to spot it as well, he had thought that, after years together and getting married, it had been tempered somewhat.

And then Justin Taylor arrived in Pittsburgh.

Not only had Ben begun to realize just how right the others had been, but he was starting to feel like a third -- or should he say fourth -- wheel in the relationship.

Sighing, he pushed the stack of papers from his introduction to gay lit class aside and rubbed at his weary eyes.

Michael was in the kitchen, cooking dinner and seemingly banging every pot and pan they owned. He had been in that state since they had had lunch at the diner hours before. Debbie had been foolish enough to mention that Brian hadn't been back since the afternoon of the confrontation and that she hadn't had a chance to 'get a good look at that fucking adorable boyfriend of his.'

Ever since then, Michael had been working himself into a froth.

His own mother, he had said, was against him as were Ted and Emmett who had both announced they had a night out planned for later.

Though he would never admit it, Michael was starting to remind him of Henny Penny running around screaming about the sky falling.

It was utterly annoying.

With yet another sigh, he pushed away from the table and stood, walking slowly into the kitchen. Leaning against the door jam, he watched Michael cutting -- no, obliterating -- the tofu.

"I was thinking we could go out for dinner tonight."

Michael started, sending an angry gaze up at his partner. "Oh. So now my cooking's not good enough for you?"

"Actually I was thinking that it's been awhile since you and I went out anywhere but the diner to eat."

The series of emotions that filtered over Michael's face were easy to read after so many years together. First came indignation at the fact that his partner was subtly putting down the diner, shock and happiness at the suggestion at an evening out, and then the most troubling -- a smirk.

Ben had no doubt that Michael would drag him to Woody's that night knowing that the rest of the gang would be there.

Smiling, Michael said, "I'll go get my coat."

Ben watched his husband leave the kitchen and climb the stairs to their bedroom with a sad smile knowing that, for better or for worse, things between Brian and Michael would be coming to an end soon.

Chapter 20

Michael stopped halfway through the doorway at Woody's, eyes narrowing at the sight in the far corner; Ted and Emmett talking calmly with Brian who had his arm wrapped around the twink's waist as if it was an everyday occurrence.

He took a single step towards the quartet only to be halted by a hand falling on his shoulder.

"Michael, please don't do this," Ben murmured in his ear.

Spinning on his heel, eyes dark with betrayal, he stared down his partner.

"Brian has a right to his happiness."

Michael pulled himself up to full height. "It's a mistake! That stupid twink is just using him!"

"And so what if he is?" Ben asked, pulling away from his partner. The defeated look on Ben's face -- the one that clearly said he knew he had lost already -- almost made Michael pause.

"If their relationship is a mistake then it's one Brian's happy to make."

"That little shit will hurt him," Michael replied hotly.

"Like Dr. Dave did to you? Everyone warned you that the relationship with David wouldn't end well but let you continue on. They all supported your move across the country even though they knew it was a mistake because they respected your friendship. You ought to give him the same courtesy."

Ben watched Michael deflate slightly at the mention of Dr. Dave.

"And if I want to try keep him from that?"

"You're not his parent and you can't keep all the evils of the world from him," Ben said, pausing. His gaze was drawn across the crowded bar to Brian and Justin who were laughing at some joke Ted had just made. How they felt for each other was so obvious to anyone willing to look.

"He's already told you who he would pick," Ben said quietly, refocusing his glance on his partner.

Michael's face darkened once again.

"I can't believe he'd just throw away all those years of friendship --"

"He hasn't," Ben interjected, voice sharp. "You're the one who's doing it. A real friend would support another when he enters into a relationship with someone they genuinely care about just like Brian and Ted and Emmett all did for us."

Eyes narrowed, Ben watched Michael swallow heavily.

"It's getting late, and I still have a ton of things left to grade. I'm going home. I suggest you do the same," he said, giving a pointed look first at Michael and then at the table full of their friends before turning on his heel and leaving his partner on the threshold of Woody's.

Michael stood in the threshold of Woody's for a good, long moment watching his partner slowly disappear up Liberty Avenue. He was utterly torn -- part of him wanted to follow his partner back to their house, another wanted to go across Woody's and confront the twink.

But Ben's warning rattled around in his head.

He loved Ben and trusted him like no other, and, as someone somewhat distanced from the confrontation, Michael couldn't help but believe the words of warning to be true. That his friendship would suffer or cease to exist if he tried to drive a wedge between Brian and his boy toy.

Taking a deep breath, he walked into the bar, but, rather than racing over towards the quartet in the corner, he elected to take a seat at the bar and observe Brian and Justin interact.

It proved to be an utterly painful thing to watch; the part of him that still harbored a crush made his stomach twist and his heart ache.

He hadn't wanted to see it, but there it was. In the easy way they interacted, in the casual touches, in the way they looked at each other when they thought no one else was watching.

The old Brian would have rolled his eyes and grumbled about how Lesbianic they were acting.

The old Brian, however, had never laughed so openly like that.

The old Brian would have already been on at Babylon by now and on his second or third trick of the night.

The old Brian had never been in love.

But he had been there for his best friend during the rough start to his own relationship -- especially when Debbie had realized her son's prospective boyfriend was positive.

Brian had been the one to lighten the situation by joking about it all. Brian had been the one to talk the others into giving Ben at least a chance, and it had been Brian and Vic who had pointed out to Deb that it was awfully hypocritical of her to want her brother to have a love life regardless of his HIV status and yet not wish the same for Ben.

Sighing, Michael threw enough bills on the bar to cover his drink and then slipped out of Woody's.

If Brian and the twink -- correction Justin -- were meant to be together, he wouldn't stop them, but, when...if things fell apart, he would be there to help Brian pick up the pieces again.

He just hoped he wasn't right.

. . . . .

Buzz. Buzz

Buzz. Buzz

Buzz. Buzz

He'd never noticed what an ungodly wracked the buzzer for his apartment made. Normal people didn't make social calls at 7:30 on a Saturday morning.

A fist knocked on his door followed by a 'You gonna open your fuckin' door or not?'

Then again, Deborah Novotny had never been normal.

Grumbling to himself, Ted hauled himself out of bed, threw on his robe, and shuffled towards the front door.

Still bleary eyed, he tugged the door open to find Debbie standing on his doorstep with a bright smile and a covered dish of some sort. Without a second thought, she brushed past him into his apartment and made straight for his kitchen while Ted stood next to the door, hand on the doorknob as his eyes followed her progress.

"By all means, come in," he mumbled to himself.

Shaking his head, he closed and re-latched the door and followed Debbie into the kitchen to get some coffee.

"I brought you a cobbler," she said, opening the fridge and displacing several of his carefully labeled Tupperware containers to make space for the too-large-for-an-army-of-men dessert.

Completely used to the event, Ted just rolled his eyes and waited for her to come around to asking what she really wanted. Which, if held true would happen the second she closed the fridge.

"So. I heard from KiKi that you and Emmett went out last night."

"A couple of us went out for drinks after work," he said, hiding a smile behind his coffee cup.

"And?" She prompted.

"And it was a typical Friday night -- lots of hot guys looking for 'dates' and Jell-o shooters were a buck a piece."

Debbie's eyes narrowed. Hands falling to her hips, gum snapping, she stared Ted down with a look that said she was less than pleased with him. The exasperated expression she wore was one she would generally only get when dealing out advice -- usually loudly and in front of others.

"Don't give me that shit; I know you and Emmett were out with Brian."

My the Liberty Avenue Grapevine was working overtime.

"Yes. We did," Ted said, intentionally putting his kitchen counter between himself and Deb. Not that he was afraid of her and her manicured fingers of doom. Oh no.

"Well? What do you want? A fucking engraved invitation? Out with it already!"

Ted took a sip of his coffee as he carefully considered his options; there was no doubt that he wouldn't get away without telling her something. On the other hand, pissing off the boss was never a good idea.

Then again, Emmett would probably crumble under Deb's heated stare and a box of pastries.

Right. Option one then -- tell the obvious.

"They seem happy."

"And?"

"Comfortable together. They just sort of fit," Ted said shrugging his shoulders.

The nervous energy around Debbie seemed to melt in that instant, a broad smile and pleased expression crossed her face.

"Finally!" She said, before redirecting her attention to Ted again. Leaning forward on the counter, she pinned him with a glance. "Now tell me all about Sunshine."

Groaning, Ted collapsed onto his sofa and launching into a semi-detailed account of the night.

An hour and a half later, Debbie finished her inquisition and left. Ted, now more awake, walked into the kitchen and opened the fridge to make a late breakfast when he spotted the cobbler that had taken over the second shelf.

For a brief moment, he considered bringing it in to work...

...and then the image of Cynthia angry at him for bringing in such a temptation and letting him know as such flashed through his mind.

Shaking his head, he backed away from the fridge; it was far too early to deal with the only other truly frightening woman in his life.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21

The expression on Lindsay's face changed from happiness to barely concealed disapproval when she opened her front door and found not only Brian but Justin as well on her front stoop.

"Can Gus come out and play?" Brian drawled.

"Daddy!" Gus yelled, running down the stairs loudly before launching himself into Brian's arms.

Minding the cast on Gus' arm, Brian picked his son up and kissed him on the forehead. The relief he felt to have his son alive and whole after the accident and subsequent hospitalization was palpable. Two days after being released, however, and the little boy was back to his normal, rambunctious self.

"Hey, Sonny Boy. Ready for an afternoon out?"

"Uh huh," he responded distractedly.

Following his son's gaze, he offered a soft smile to Justin who was hovering in the entry way. Setting Gus back on his feet, he took the little boy's hand and lead him towards his partner.

Still clutching shyly to his father's pant leg, Gus took a step forwards, held out his hand, and said, "Hi! I'm Gus."

Smiling brightly, Justin knelt and shook the little boy's hand. "Nice to meet you, Gus. My name's Justin. Your Daddy has told me a lot about you. I'm glad you're feeling better."

"Me too! The hosp'tal was boring. They wouldn't let me do nothin' but stay in bed!"

"I think they did that because they wanted you to get better fast so your Daddy could take you to see Peter Pan," Justin told Gus in a conspiratorial whisper.

"Really?" Gus giggled.

Justin nodded.

"Good! 'Cause I can't wait!" Gus said, bouncing on his heels.

Gracing Gus with one more large smile, Justin stood and caught Lindsay's expression. Lips thinned, hands on hips, she looked just about ready to start yelling but stopped herself so she wouldn't upset Gus. Brian must have caught it too because, without much hesitation, he started guiding both Justin and Gus out the front door.

"We'd better get going if we don't want to miss the opening," he explained.

Justin shot Brian a look of relief at the lie; there was still nearly an hour before the curtain. The truth was that neither one of them were in the mood to deal with Lindsay's insecurities at present.

With well practiced ease, Brian led his son out to his jeep, buckled him into his child seat, and took off towards the theatre downtown.

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Convincing the stage director to hold a second afternoon presentation just for the children affected by the school bus accident and their parents had been fairly easy. It was, after all, good PR for the theatre and the acting troupe, and Brian had been more than willing to call his associates at the local news stations and papers to ensure their good will was widely known. Good news was, as always, difficult to come by, and a positive spin on such a tragedy was too much for them to pass up. Or so Brian had convinced them.

Watching his son and partner's utter enjoyment of the play made it worth it.

And, secretly, he had to admit that the troupe of actors were pretty good. The sets were imaginative, the costumes colorful, and the story easy enough to follow for a child but still held an adult's attention as well.

He hadn't counted on all the dark thoughts the play would bring on though.

Lindsay had always seen herself in the role of Wendy -- the girl who had enjoyed the fun and games of Neverland but chose to return to reality, and it was she who had cast him in the rather static life of Peter Pan -- a wild boy who was utterly unwilling to face adulthood and the responsibility that came with it.

It was a persona he'd worn for her, for them all. And none of them had been willing to see beyond it.

They had forced him to do something he'd never done before in his life -- run away from it all.

He'd left behind his friends, his family, and his loft -- a place he'd been so fucking proud of because it was his. Years of living first with his abusive parents then in a series of rat trap apartments while working his way up the food chain at Ryder.

When he'd bought his new loft in Chicago, he'd thought of it as his escape. A place to go when the weight of being Brian Kinney, Stud of Liberty Avenue got to be too much.

Slowly but surely though, it became his oasis. His sanctuary. His home.

He allowed himself to relax, to fall in love, to move on with his life.

But, in truth, he had deluded himself into thinking that these two worlds he had built would never cross. It had worked for awhile. There was, however, one thing he hadn't counted on -- how much he loved his son.

Swallowing thickly, his gaze was drawn once again to the little boy at his side.

Two weeks ago, he'd nearly lost Gus. Eyes shuttering closed, he recalled the night Lindsay's call had sent him into a blind panic and how the horrible, clenching fear in the pit of his stomach hadn't settled until he had laid eyes upon his son in that hospital bed.

As the days progressed, Gus had gotten steadily better, but his relationship with Lindsay had grown decidedly frosty.

He felt the bitterness of his previous argument with Michael well up. He knew it was only a matter of time before he was forced to confront Lindsay if this morning's clear disapproval was anything to go by.

It made him so weary.

He had fled to Chicago because he hadn't wanted to fight them. Deep down he'd always suspected that he might lose everyone he cared for. And, while his argument with Michael resulted in a loss of a long friendship, fighting with Lindsay in the same manner would undoubtedly bring a horrible consequence -- loss of visitation with his son. At least in the interim.

But this trip back to Pittsburgh wasn't like all the others; he'd sworn to himself that something had to give.

This time though...this time it wouldn't be him. Not now. Not ever again.

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Ted had thought his visit to the Mommies was going to be a simple one -- a discussion on investing. What he'd gotten was yet another interrogation on Justin.

Just as with Deb, he told both Melanie and Lindsay what he knew and was willing to share -- that the two really did love each other, that they really were living together, that Brian had, to his knowledge, stopped tricking altogether, and that disapproving of the relationship had cost Michael his long-standing friendship with Brian.

To say Lindsay didn't react well to anything he said would be a major understatement.

And the conversation had disintegrated from there with Lindsay all but advocating an intervention and Melanie, bizarrely enough, taking Brian's side.

Finally, Ted had taken it upon himself to tell Lindsay the full and complete truth.

"If you do this, if you make him choose, I can guarantee you won't like the consequences."

"Things might not have worked out for Michael, but they will for Brian and I," Lindsay said with absolute certainty.

Melanie sighed and rubbed her forehead in frustration. "Lindsay..."

"No. I'm not just going to let this go. He shows up with this...this child out of nowhere and I'm just supposed to accept it," she exclaimed, launching herself from the sofa and pacing agitatedly.

Melanie and Ted shared a look. Both knew this wouldn't end well.

"He loves Justin. Even I can see that," Melanie said slowly.

"And you also know that Brian doesn't love or trust easily." Ted continued.

"Then I'll just have to show him the truth! Make him see things clearly." Lindsay replied.

Leaning back against the club chair he was seated in, Ted all but groaned. They'd been going around in circles all afternoon -- Lindsay trying to convince them that Justin was after Brian's money or to use Brian's business connections to launch his artistic career. Melanie and Ted had been trying to convince Lindsay otherwise.

Finally, Melanie's finely tuned patience snapped. Rising from her perch on the edge of the sofa, she rounded on her partner.

"At what cost? Jesus Christ, Lindsay. The man might have been an absolute shit at one time, but he's the reason we're still together, that we still have this house, that we have a son at all. Do you realize what would happen if he took us to court? It could ruin us."

"Brian wouldn't do that," Lindsay said fervently.

"Do you honestly believe that? He would do anything for his son. And, if he loves Justin a tenth as much as he loves Gus, I bet he'd do the same for his partner."

"Then we'll fight him! With all the drugs and the drinking he's done -- not to mention the tricking, it'll be easy to prove our case."

"And we haven't done our fair share?" Melanie said, meeting Lindsay's heated stare.

"That was a long time ago!"

"Really? And how many times have you thought about doing it again?"

Lindsay blanched and looked away. "That's not the point."

"No, it's not. The point, Lindsay, is that you're trying to shove everyone into a corner just like you always do. You're expecting everyone to fall into their convenient roles just like we always do. You're acting like a jealous lover whose spouse cheated on them, and I, for one, and sick of it.

"If Brian's happy, if he wants to be in a partnership, then let him have it. If he wants to visit with his son, then I have no problem with it, but I will not let him or you put me or our son in the middle of your selfishness anymore," Melanie said, voice cold as she spun on her heel and left the room.

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After the performance and subsequent meet and greet where Gus babbled endlessly to the cast and crew about how pretty the costumes were and how the sets were so cool, Brian drove the three of them to the park for a picnic lunch. The idea had been Justin who, after eyeing both the 'toy drawer' and the multiple breakables throughout the loft, had quietly suggested it so Gus could burn off some of his extra energy somewhere that was more kid friendly.

Watching Gus bounce in his seat, trying to talk and eat at the same time (and spreading juice and crumbs everywhere), Brian had to admit that his partner was a genius.

"Daddy, what do you think Peter Pan'll do now that Wendy's gonna grow up?"

Brian met Justin's eyes across the table and smiled gently. "Maybe Peter will find a new, special friend who he decided he liked playing with," he replied, giving Justin a pointed look. "Someone who he loves."

Justin smiled brightly mouthing 'I love you, too' just as Gus piped up again.

"Do you think Wendy'll miss Peter?"

Lips twitching, Brian turned and met his son's inquisitive gaze. "I think Wendy will have to learn to live without him. Make new friends."

With a nod, Gus went back to inhaling his food as quickly as possible in an attempt to get to the playground as fast as possible.

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It was an exhausted, half-asleep Gus that Brian plucked from the sandbox and carried to his jeep. The boy was equally uncooperative during the subsequent shower to remove the pounds of sand that had somehow found their way into his hair.

Finally, after what seemed an inordinate amount of time, Brian finally got Gus tucked into bed for his nap. Of course, being the little imp that he was, Gus used his father's noticeable moment of exhaustion-brought-weakness to strike.

"Daddy? Is Justin my daddy too?"

Brian paused in smoothing down Gus' blanket to gaze at his son with a deer-in-headlights look.

"'Cause you and Jus look at each other like Mom and Momma do sometimes and you smile a lot more around him, and he pushed me on the swings like both Mom and Momma do. I can tell he cares 'bout me 'cause he listened to me talk all about school."

Brian took a deep breath and looked at his son.

"Are you okay with Justin and I being together?"

Gus scrunched up his nose. "You ask silly questions, Daddy," he replied as if his father's question were the most ridiculous thing that he had ever heard.

Brian started to ask Gus what he meant but the little boy beat him to it.

"You love Jus, and Jus love you. He takes care of you and he takes care of me. That makes him my, daddy."

Brian sighed. Lindsay wouldn't exactly be pleased with this latest happening.

"Gus..."

His son shot him a mulish expression before it shifted into a mischievous smile. Kissing his father on the cheek, he pulled the covers up to his chin and said, "Now where's my story?"

Groaning, Brian dropped the matter. Once Gus set his mind to something, he generally got his way. Not to mention that Brian was rather looking forward to seeing the Munchers' reaction when Gus pronounced Justin as his second father.

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Hours later when Lindsay finally came over to collect Gus, it was Justin who answered the door. She took one look at him and raise her eyebrows in question.

"Are you painting the walls?"

Justin glanced down at his paint-spattered clothing and grinned sheepishly.

"Actually, I'm working on my final project for my portrait class," he said, tugging the door open a little wider and motioning her inside.

From the foyer, she spotted the easel set up in the living room.

"I didn't realize you were a student." It was said in such a tone that Justin knew what she meant; she didn't realize he was that young.

Without being invited to, she strolled across the loft and glanced at the half-finished painting with a critical eye. Lindsay hummed -- either in approval or disapproval Justin wasn't sure -- before stepping in for a closer view.

"Your brush strokes are a little uneven in a few spots and your shadowing needs some work. It's clear your more comfortable in interpretive paintings rather than more reality based ones."

Justin bristled slightly, but, before he could come up with a reply, she had already turned towards him.

"Where's Brian?"

He noticed this too, of course -- a mother more interested in his partner than picking up her son. Motioning towards the bedroom, he explained with a wry smile, "He fell asleep reading a story to Gus."

From their place in the living room, both could make out the still, sleeping figures. Brian was on his back with Gus half on/half off his father's chest. Seeing them like this made Lindsay's face soften slightly.

Justin felt a sickness in his stomach at that look; it was very similar to the one Michael had worn during his fight with Brian outside the diner -- one of longing.

Closing his eyes, he forced himself to remain calm and think of the utterly destroyed look Brian had held days before when he had come to the conclusion that things couldn't continue as they had.

Maybe. Just maybe he could convinced Lindsay, to make her see the truth.

Sighing, he ran a shaky hand through his hair, licked his lips, and jumped into a confrontation with Lindsay.

"He's a good father when given half a chance."

Lindsay startled slightly, eyes flashing with anger before settling back on Brian.

"He deserves to know his son. To spend time with him like any parent would."

"I never kept him from his son!" She whispered harshly, face flushing in anger.

"Then why won't you let Gus visit his father in Chicago?" Justin replied coolly.

"Gus is too young to fly by himself."

"Children fly across the country to spend time with their parents all the time. If you're truly worried about it then someone can fly to and from Chicago with him. Or Brian can charter an airplane if need be," he replied reasonably. It was a prepared answer to an objection he knew she'd offer.

"We don't know the first thing about this loft of his -- where it is, if there's even space for Gus. And Brian's never had him for more than an afternoon."

"He'll never know if he can handle being a parent if you and Melanie don't give him a chance," he said, pausing, watching her gear up for yet more objections. "But that's what you want, isn't it? You're worried that as soon as you give Brian rights to see his son that he'll distance himself from you, that he'll build a family without you in it."

"How dare you!" She screeched.

"And I imagine seeing me with him made you realize it. You probably thought his time away from Pittsburgh was just a passing thing. That he'd see the light."

Seeing her widening eyes, he realized he'd touched on the exact truth. The one that he had suspected all along from the moment Brian began opening up and talking about his 'family.'

"Brian loves me. He loves his life in Chicago. For the first time in his life he's happy, he's putting himself first," Justin replied, intentionally softening his voice and stance. He'd attacked and wound her up. Now it was time to drive the point home.

"Michael's unwillingness to see any different cost him his friendship. Are you going to do the same?"

"What I have with Brian is totally different..."

"You're right; you have a child to use as emotional blackmail."

"I have never..."

"Haven't you? I know about all the times you've asked me for money to get Gus things or for tuition or for medical bills for him and yet you're standing here in Donna Kern, Gucci, and Manolo Blahniks. You and your wife claim you can't afford the basics of raising a son you chose to have and yet you're wearing designer clothing."

Lindsay reared back as if he'd physically hit her, and Justin knew it was time to move in for the kill.

"What you're doing to Brian, what you're doing to Gus isn't fair to them, to yourself, or to Melanie. You all deserve to be happy. The only way that's going to happen is if you all do what's right."

"Oh and I suppose you know exactly what I need to do then," she ground out, arms crossed in front of her.

"Share custody with Brian. Let him be a father..."

She opened her mouth to interject, but Justin raised a hand to stop her. "Look...why don't you and Melanie take some time off? You can fly out to Chicago, see where Brian and I live. If it works out maybe we could do it again."

She opened her mouth to reply one, twice before shutting it with a harsh click.

"If you let Brian visit with his son, it would give you and Melanie some down time. Time to focus on your partner rather than on just Gus."

Lindsay glanced from the bedroom back to the painting -- a half finished rendering of Brian and Gus sleeping in the other room. Gaze even and steady, she looked at it for a long, long moment as if she were really seeing it for the first time. The angry stance she'd held since their confrontation started slowly left her and a weariness crept in.

Justin spotted it for what it was -- defeat. Lindsay, as Brian had always said, was an intelligent woman. He'd planted the seeds of doubt, and he knew without question that she'd drawn the right conclusions -- refusing his offer no matter how hostilely it was made would equate with a loss of friendship with Brian, a lengthy and expensive court case, and the possibility of losing her son altogether.

They both had far too much to lose in the process, and, while the money for paying attorney's fees could eventually be recouped, the other two were too precious to gamble away.

Taking a deep breath, she turned and looked at Justin the way she had looked at his painting just moments before.

"You really do love him, don't you," she asked in an almost wistful way. "I was prepared to hate you, to try and talk him about of having anything to do with you. I'd assumed you were in this relationship for the money or power..." she continued, shaking her head a little as her voice trailed off.

She paused, swallowing thickly. "I'll talk to Mel if you promise me something," she said, pausing for just a moment to turn and look at him.

He stiffened beside her, fully expecting the worst, but, for the first time that day, it was he who was thrown for a loop.

"Take care of him for me."

Offering her a brilliant smile, Justin nodded once. "I already do," he said before steering changing the conversation to common ground -- art.

Chapter 22

Chapter 22

Three weeks after Brian and Justin had returned to Chicago, Justin returned home from working on the gallery to find Brian and an unfamiliar woman standing in one of the previously unoccupied spare bedrooms looking over paint chips, fabric swatches, and furniture catalogs.

Upon seeing Justin hovering uncertainly in the doorway, Brian offered his partner a bright smile and motioned for him to join the pair in their discussion.

"Lindsay called while you were out. They're flying out here next week with Gus to see the city."

"They are?" Justin replied, trying to appear surprised. Apparently, it had worked as all Brian did was nod before motioning to the woman beside him. "Margaret here is helping me decorate this room for Gus."

Nodding absently at the woman, Justin couldn't help but feel happiness and hope bubble up inside of him as he watched the bright twinkling in his partner's eyes. Maybe, just maybe things would work out.

The Munchers arrived at O'Hara Airport exactly one week to the day they called. Melanie's face was carefully neutral, Lindsay's was falsely happy tinged with the barest traces of exhaustion, and Gus was his usual, energy-filled self.

After greeting them, Brian and Justin led them out to the parking lot and then to his loft.

The reaction to their home was anything but subdued. Lindsay couldn't stop pawing at the fabrics and exclaiming over the artwork while Melanie just stood stock still, eyebrows rising as she took it all in.

It was painfully obvious that the pair of them had expected a version of his Pittsburgh loft -- a place built as a fuck pad.

"It's stunning," Lindsay said, gazing out the window at the fantastic view of Chicago's skyline.

During their week-long stay in Chicago, the five traveled to parks, aquariums, zoos, galleries, and planetariums. The city tour was rather like the one Justin had taken him on the previous year only this time he was able to share it with his son.

And he couldn't seem to rid himself of the permanent smile etched on his face.

Of all the places they visited, Gus enjoyed their trip to Wrigley Field the best. Brian had managed to get top box seats that offered five star food and wine for the adults and standard baseball fair for Gus. Loaded down with t-shirts, hats, and a foam finger that were bigger than he was, Gus sat excitedly by Lindsay and his father, jumping and singing and shouting as the game progressed.

From where they sat at the bar, Lindsay and Brian watched Melanie alternatively watch the game and Brian with some amount of amusement. It was something Justin had caught both mommies doing throughout their stay as if they couldn't rectify the differences between the Pittsburgh version of Brian with the Chicago one.

"I was dead set against coming at first, you know," Lindsay said seriously. "Coming here...I knew it would make it all real, and I wasn't entirely sure I could handle it."

Brian nodded not even bothering to hide the scowl her words brought. After all, it wasn't exactly a surprise she was less than pleased.

"What convinced you to come?"

Lindsay shot him an apologetic look before answering. "Teddy. He came over to give us suggestions on investing. We ended up talking about the fight you and Michael had."

"Let me guess -- the blow by blow version," Brian said, a quirk to his lips.

Nodding, Lindsay continued. "You've been friends for nearly twenty years. You two have had your fair share of disagreements," she said, pausing as she grasped for the right way to word what she was thinking. "You always forgave each other, always made up. The two of you always had such a solid relationship that I thought you'd be friends forever.

"I begged Mel to come," she said, swallowing thickly before meeting his gaze. Brian, appreciating just how hard it was for her to speak her mind, stayed silent.

"I still love you. I think I always have," she said, casting her gaze back towards where Gus, Melanie, and Justin were sitting. "Seeing you here...it's like I'm seeing you for the first time."

She sat for a long moment, silent and still before turning slightly and meeting his steady gaze with tear-filled eyes. "You helped all of us live like this...made sure we were safe and happy," she said, swallowing thickly before taking his hand in hers. "I want that for you, too."

Another silence stretched out before them that was filled with raucous cheering from the crowd as another player scored a home run.

Lindsay took an uneven, shuttering breath that made Brian squeeze her hand in support. Still, he remained silent; having known Lindsay as long as he had, he knew that she still had something to say, and that waylaying or distracting her would be disastrous.

"Mel and I discussed it last night. We agreed to let Gus spend some time here. Summers for sure. We'll have to discuss holidays."

The knot of unease in Brian's stomach loosened. For so long, he'd worried his relationship with Lindsay, Melanie, and Gus would turn into a horrifyingly long custody battle. He'd even gone so far as to hire a lawyer.

And then, Lindsay had called and asked to come for a visit. Even then, he didn't allow himself to hope.

But this...

This was so unexpected.

"Thank you," he said, voice suddenly hoarse as he fought back the tears in his eyes.

Lindsay offered him one, sharp nod before changing the subject to something far more neutral.

Finally, finally everything in his life was falling into place completely.

The next morning, just before Brian drove Melanie, Lindsay, and Gus to the airport, Lindsay announced that Gus could spend the summer with his father.

That evening, as Justin was painting, Brian came up behind him, wrapped his arms around Justin's waist, and kissed the crown of his head.

"I don't know what you said to convince them, but thank you."

Closing his eyes for just a second, Justin turned and looked at his partner with a sheepish expression.

Epilogue

Nearly a year had past since Lindsay, Melanie, and Brian had reached a visitation schedule for Gus. True to their word, the Mommies had delivered Gus to Brian and Justin's Chicago home before boarding a connecting flight to their own vacation destination -- the Bahamas.

Slowly but surely, Brian's collection of friends-made-family grew to accept the changes in his life, and Brian was gifted with a newly-found peace he'd never known.

Which brought Brian to make a choice he never thought he'd consider -- selling the loft. The entire place reminded him far too much of the person he had been, the former life he had lead, and so, without much hesitation, he'd listed the place...

...and sold it within a week to some up-and-coming idiot trying to fill his old shoes.

According to Emmett, Brandon Trent was steadily but surely trying to take over the title of King of Liberty Avenue that Brian had so willingly left behind.

Part of that, apparently, was snapping up his very own fuck pad. And what better place than the original king's?

The wanna-be had gone so far as to bid well over asking price.

Brian had happily accepted the offer and set about packing up the few things he wanted to take with him -- his computer, a handful of mementos, Justin's art pieces, and the hand-me-down pan set Deb had given him when he'd finally moved out of Jack and Joanie's place.

A knock sounded on his door and Brian crossed the loft to open it, half expecting a teary-eyed Deb with yet another casserole.

Instead, it was Michael.

Brian sucked in a surprised breath.

"Hey," he said softly, hands tucked into his pant pockets.

Brian remained silently and stared at him, expression weary.

"I...um...came to apologize," Michael said, fidgeting. "I said a lot of things I shouldn't have."

Lips thinned, Brian glared down at his former friend. "You acted like a jealous asshole."

Flinching slightly, Michael nodded in agreement. "I had no right to treat you or Justin the way that I did."

"It's a bit late for an apology," Brian said, sliding his hand down the loft's door frame.

"I know that...I realize it. I just didn't think you were ready to hear one or that either of us were ready to try to rebuild our friendship again...assuming we still have one," Michael explained, his voice slightly self deprecating.

Silently, Brian agreed. Had Michael apologized months before, they would have rebuilt their friendship based on the old one which was on precarious ground already, but maybe, just maybe this one could be built on something other than hero-worship (Michael) and a need to feel loved, appreciated, and needed (Brian).

"I'm not the old Brian you fell in love with," he said, quietly, voice tinged with sadness and not a little bit of grief.

"If there's anything this past year has taught me, it's that I love Ben. He's my best friend, just like he should be," Michael said, smiling. "But I could use another," he continued, holding his hand out to Brian.

After a moment's hesitation, Brian took it, pulling Michael into a one armed hug.

"You idiot," Brian murmured into his friend's shoulder, feeling Michael relax more into the hug. A moment past before he felt the smaller man begin to cry quietly onto his shirt.

A long, long moment later, Michael stepped back, wiping furiously at his eyes.

"Right. Let's get you packed up so you can get home to Justin," he said, stepping past Brian into the loft towards the picture frames Brian had been in the middle of packing.

Had he paused and looked at his friend in that moment, he would have seen the look of utter surprise on Brian's face.

It was in those months that followed that a new, if somewhat shaky, friendship was forged. One where Michael made every attempt to include and accept Justin's place in their lives not only because he dearly missed his friend but because it was the right thing, the adult thing to do.

And, while Michael learned to appreciate the man his friend had become, Brian learned what it was like to live, truly live without a mask.

The End