

Pocket_Rocket_

QAF Stories

Building Blocks

Justin works in construction. Their newest job: Brian's loft. He's attracted to Brian right away, but somehow, makes the mistake that Brian's straight.

Chapter 1

Justin

Of course Daph and I are the first to arrive. I can't believe Mr. Chanders has us working with the biggest fuck-up in all of Pittsburgh.

I huff and turn to Daphne, who's tightening her tool belt around her waist. I can't help but grin at her. "God, Daph. You look so butch."

She glares at me and I laugh, feeling better already. Fuck, if it wasn't for Daphne, there's no way in hell I'd be working here. I never, in a million and one years, thought I'd be a fucking carpenter. Or that I'd be good at it!

"At least one of us looks butch," Daphne smirks, nodding in my direction. She's right. No matter how hard I try to look buff and masculine, I fail miserably. It's 'cause I'm small and blond and...

Because I'm supposed to be an artist, damnit. An artist! Not, I repeat, not a goddamn carpenter for my best friend's father's construction company. But rather this than the alternative: a businessman.

"I can't help that I'm delicate," I practically whine, pulling up my work pants. They never fit properly. Either my ass is too big or my waist is too small. I was mortified when Mrs. Chanders suggested I try the women's clothing line.

"Don't let your dad hear you say that, Justin. You'll have to go to reparative therapy... again."

I cringe. That was the worst. Did you know people do that? That parents send their gay children to these "clinics" to cure their homosexuality? Like being gay is a fucking choice. And the doctor, Dr. Anderson... God, what a fag. He practically begged for a blow job my second night there. If he wasn't fat, ugly, and about eighty years old, I might've dropped to my knees, just to get out of there faster.

"The whole idea of curing homosexuality is a joke. My father knows this. Which is why I'm here, working one of the manliest professions available and not in New York becoming the next Picasso," I grumble, pulling my own tool belt out of the bed of the truck. I wrap the heavy leather around my waist and secure it. "I look kinda hot, though, don'tcha think?" I ask, running my hands down my hips and kissing the air dramatically, earning a loud laugh from Daphne.

"You are such a fag, Justin."

"Duh."

We lean against our truck and wait. Glancing at her watch, Daph says, "Fuck, if they don't come within the next five minutes, we'll miss meeting our client. Patty says he's a real hottie." She stands in front of me, facing away. "Hey, crack my back."

I sigh, but then grab her from behind and lift her up. She giggles.

“Do me,” I insist, turning away so that she can crack my back. “What are best friends for?” I ask, kissing her quickly. “Oh, look who finally decided to show up.” I point at the dirty truck pulling up in front of ours. “About time, Hobbs,” I yell at Chris.

“What? Gonna be late for your pedicure, Taylor?” He bites at me. “You shouldn’t waste your time with a fag, Daphne. You should spend it with a real man.” He puts his hand on his obviously small dick and squeezes. Next to me, Daphne makes a disgusted noise.

“That’s precisely why I hang out with Justin and not you, asshole. Now, hurry the fuck up,” she demands quickly, before Chris has time to react. “Hey, John.” She knocks on the passenger window of Chris’ truck. “Say good-bye to the wife and let’s go up.”

I like John. No, not in a I-wanna-fuck-him way. He’s nice. It’s too bad he’s stuck working with a loser like Chris Hobbs.

“Sorry we’re late, guys,” John apologizes, grabbing a couple tool boxes from the bed of the truck. “There was a huge accident downtown and Chris refused to take a different route.”

The four of us stand in front of the building on Tremont. It’s not exactly Buckingham Palace.

“They said it’s better on the inside than it is on the outside,” John tells us. “It’s a converted factory. So, it’s like, historical or something. Think of it that way.”

“It’s a piece of shit,” Chris mutters. For once, I have to agree with him. The lobby isn’t much better and the lift looks like it will break if all four of us ride it at once.

“Why don’t we stick the boxes and tools in the lift and take the stairs. It’s the top floor, but there’s only four stories...” John offers.

We drag our tools and equipment into the elevator. Thank God we don’t have to bring up any wood. We’re not building, we’re just destroying today. Chris complains the entire time it takes us to use the stairs, meaning Daphne must be in a good mood, because she only threatens him with her hammer twice.

We end up waiting for the lift. “Fuck, that piece of shit is slow,” Chris sighs.

“But it does the fucking job. Are you with Chanders’ Construction?” A voice behind us asks.

I turn around and am literally floored by the man in the doorway. The first thing I notice is that he’s tall, not gargantuan or awkward, simply taller than I am. I like them with height, that way, when they fuck me from behind, they practically cover me, like a blanket...

No. I don’t notice his height first. It’s his skin tone. Olive, tan, dark, and light all at once. An artists dream. He’d make an amazing oil painting.

But as I let my gaze roam his toned body, I’m drawn to his eyes. Holy shit, man. They’re a beautiful brown, but not just brown. Green and gold and... speckled with some hidden amusement. Like, everyone and everything in life is here for him. Like, he’s special and we’re all just minor peons in his own personal game.

He’s like a god.

And dressed to kill. Black suit, red shirt and tie. Damn. I wonder if he’d let me run my fingers across the material. I just wanna know how soft it is. How stiff it is...

Stiff. Oh, shit. I can feel my cock start to grow. Fuck. This is the last thing I need. Instead of introducing myself, I step casually behind Daphne. She shoots me a confused glance and I blush appropriately. Her eyes widen and when I bring my hands up to cover my hard-on, she giggles. Fucking giggles.

John's beginning the introductions, apologizing profusely. Brian lets his excuses settle, before saying, "Well, those two have been here for almost half an hour. If they made it on time, you could've too." He raises a perfectly shaped brow and I find myself smiling.

How cute. He has quirky little facial expressions. I have a feeling, though, that he's the type of guy who would deny ever being "quirky." Or cute for that matter. Not that he's cute. Hot, yes. Sexy, mm hmm. Devastatingly handsome, uh huh. But, cute?

And then he sticks his tongue his cheek and smirks; I immediately change my mind. This guy's fucking adorable.

He's giving us a tour of his loft. John's right, the interior is gorgeous; in a minimalist sort of way. There's only bear essentials here, but it suits Brian. Ha, I'm already talking like we've been friends for years.

I shift in and out of listening to them discuss the plans he has for his loft. I do, however, hear something about adding a room for his son and I swear to God, my jaw drops to the floor. Of course he's fucking straight.

A son.

I wonder where the little lady is.

I must make some disgruntled noise, because they all turn to stare at me. Daphne reaches behind and pinches my ass. Hard. Fucking bitch.

Glancing at his watch, Brian curses and grabs his briefcase, leaving us with quick instructions and slams the loft door behind him.

"Damn," Daphne whistles. "He's hot."

"He's a stuck-up, rich daddy's boy who's never wanted for anything," Chris shoots back, unrolling the blueprints.

I snort. "You're one to talk."

The plans are rather complicated and I find myself excited at the prospect of a challenge. Finally. Because if I have to do one more goddamn koi pond, I'm gonna slit my wrists.

We argue over the music, of course. Daphne and I always vouch for something upbeat and danceable. But, fucking Chris. Always country. Which would be okay, I guess, if it wasn't for the fact that he picks the same album every time we work together. If I never hear that stupid song ever again it will be too soon. Why not Johnny Cash? Hell, even Dolly Parton or the Dixie Chicks would be better than this.

"I fucking hate this song," John whispers to me and Daphne. Chris has it on repeat and is breaking down the wall in time to the music.

Daphne smirks. "Join the club."

Pretty soon, the repetition has us all working diligently. I love how hot construction makes me feel. It's a better workout than any routine I would use at the gym. I remember standing naked in front of my closet mirror, and noticing, three months into my employment with Chanders' Construction, that I had muscles. So, I'm never going to be buff; it's just not an option considering my body type and the fact that I love to eat. But damn, I have a great body. I love it when I take home some guy and he undresses me for the first time. It's that look in his eyes that really turns me on--surprise and then appreciation. My body... men appreciate my body. It's an extra "fuck you" to all the

jocks who used to make fun of little old me in high school. I bet I can bench press more weight and with greater consistency than they've ever dreamed of.

Jesus Christ. This job is fucking with my mind. I'm thinking like some stupid breeder boy from Boy Hunk, Texas or something. Muscles... Bench pressing... What next? Pussy and beer?

Or worse yet, football.

I shudder. Leaning over to Daph, I say, "My dad's gonna have his perfect man-son yet."

She gives me a weird look, but I don't offer any explanation. Instead, I just smile mischievously. She nudges me with her elbow. When I turn around, she pats my cheek and whispers, "You'll always be my little fag."

"With you as a hag?"

"Always."

God. I love her.

She's been my constant. The one person in my life who lets me believe that I'm still the same Justin I was before I came out. I sort of sprang up my homosexuality on her one day while she was trying on a dress at some small store in the mall.

"Daphne," I remember calling out to her over the stall door. "I'm gay."

"Okay." That's all. No big production or tears. No, "Oh my God! We must check out boys together and paint our nails!!" Just... acceptance.

My dad, on the other hand... First, denial. Then, anger. After that came the shrink, the reparative therapy, and then, ultimately, the life-style demands. I am not allowed to talk about being gay or refer to any aspect of my gay life in front of him. I will not become an artist and embarrass him by "speaking with a lisp and flopping my wrists"--his words, not mine. I will not wear tight clothing or make-up. The make-up part cracks me up every time. Some days, I'm tempted to show up at the country club, in black leather and red lipstick, just to piss daddy off.

Okay. Yes. I made a mistake coming out to my dad when I was still seventeen, still a minor, and still dependent on him. And yes, that was three years ago, but nothing's changed. I moved out; found a place with Daphne. But, I have no extra money. I can't afford school and unfortunately, my asshole father makes too much for me to receive any help from the state. I have to wait a few years until I can declare financial independence from my dad. But by that time, there will be no scholarships available for someone like me and all the available financial aid will go to some low-income, fresh out of high school little twat.

I always become sad when I think that this is the life I will lead. I will never show my paintings in a gallery or sketch nude models. I will never have a studio and no one will ever pay me to recreate their likeness on canvas. I will work nine to five, every week day, pounding, sawing, scraping, and drilling.

My sister Molly called me the other day. She has a boyfriend. Her very first boyfriend. I could hear my parents teasing her in the background and I couldn't help the tears that filled my eyes. Because that, that camaraderie and happiness... I will never share that with my parents ever again.

And all because I like cock.

I can't help it. It's... what I want. It's what I dream about. What I've dreamt about since puberty. I love flat chests and muscular backs. I adore that smell that envelopes men when they're on the brink of an orgasm. The way they kiss me, the way they dance, the gravel of their voices, the roughness of their faces as the day progresses... Men...

I'm willing to sacrifice my art, my career, and my future to keep my father under control, but I am not willing to sacrifice my sexuality. My sexuality defines who I am. I make huge decisions based solely on who I want to fuck. I could never deny that.

Fuck. Why do I have to think about this shit when I'm working?

"I need to pee," I tell the others. I take off my gloves and clumsily climb out of my belt. This is always a moment of bliss--the moment when I stretch my body from all that weight and manual labor. Daphne says I'm like a cat.

I'm surprised by Brian's bedroom. It's like, being showcased. The whole loft is centered around his bed. Hell, it's like on a pedestal or something.

No door. What kind of person wouldn't have a door on his bedroom? A bachelor, I guess.

Oh. This is a fuck pad, for sure. There's a bowl of condoms on his night stand and very discrete pegs on his wall above his bed. For handcuffs, probably. Damn. I didn't think straight men are as devoted to sex like we queers. You learn something new every day, I guess.

Chapter 2

Brian

I wake up and notice two things. First, this is the first full night's sleep I've had in probably over ten years and second, my answering machine says that I have seventeen new messages. I'm almost tempted to delete all of them without listening, but I know that phone calls will just persist until I either finally answer the phone, or until my friends come and pound my door down. I press play and it's just what I expect.

Two from Emmett. One from Ted. One even from Debbie, exaggerating, "Where the fuck are you? The boys have been waiting half the night?" and then a dozen or so from Mikey. They need to get lives. What? Babylon won't stand on its own without me holding the back room wall up while someone sucks me off?

It's a decision I made last week when it suddenly dawned on me that I'm going to be thirty... Holy fuck me! Thirty!... in less than a year and here I am, acting like I'm twenty-one with balls of steel and a metabolism that never quits. Thus, I choose to go out with a bang rather than slowly flicker until I become too old and wrinkled and gray for even the most despicable queer on Liberty.

So, I've limited my prowling to the weekends only.

Not like I'm looking for a relationship. Oh, hell no. This isn't some fairy tale story where I change my wicked ways and become a God fearing homo with a little hubby and three kids. That's never going to be the life for me. I'm just... changing. It happens as you get... older.

Which is why I'm sitting here on a monday morning, drinking my coffee, reading the paper, and waiting for the damn construction company to come make my loft livable for Gus.

That was a big decision, and surprisingly, the easiest one I've ever made.

I did really well with the loft. It suits my needs perfectly, but I have a son to think about. I look out the windows, the heat from my coffee decorating them with small patterns of steam. It's so fucking early and I'm so fucking aware of everything around me. I should get a full night's rest every night, 'cause this is wonderful.

There's this blond guy and a brunette girl leaning against a white truck. It's fairly difficult to make out the words on the truck, but I think they're here for me. I mean, that they're here to renovate the loft. I squint. Yeah, I can just

make out the words on the truck. They seem so young. I shrug my shoulders and sip my coffee, watching them with interest.

The girl's playing with her tool belt. She's determined.

The blond seems bitter.

Fuck, I'm insightful today. Maybe I'll nail that meeting I have this morning.

Another truck screeches to a halt and the two look none too happy to see it. They throw some words around and finally settle outside my building. Even from here I can tell that aren't impressed. Well, fuck them. It's better on the inside. The building's ugly, but it does prevent theft. What do they say about an judging a book by its cover?

Glancing at my watch, I become impatient. What the fuck is taking them so long? I stride over to the loft door and wait, until I finally hear voices. They took the stairs? As I slide open the door someone says, "Fuck, that piece of shit is slow."

"But it does the fucking job. Are you with Chanders' Construction?" I ask. The blond guy and the chick check me out openly. I have to bite my cheek to keep the smirk off my face. The blond isn't too bad himself. I'd fuck him. Although, he looks about twelve. I give him a moment to continue his scrutiny before introducing myself.

He doesn't say a word and instead, hides behind the girl, Daphne. She looks at him and then giggle. I don't know what the hell that's about, but it's obvious they're still very young because... giggling? I shake my head slightly and then usher them into the loft.

They're sort of a motley crew. I wonder how well they work together.

The blond... Justin, I think... has this half-glazed look on his face and I doubt he's really paying attention. When I mention Gus, that look disappears and another one, something close to disappointment, takes its place.

Huh.

He probably doesn't like kids. Fuck, at that age, neither did I. I still don't. Just Gus. I love Gus.

I leave them with simple instructions, but very difficult ground plans. Daphne and Justin, in particular, seem excited at the prospect of this job. As I walk to the jeep, I wonder about them. Why are kids that young working at a construction company instead of going to school? They don't seem like the type of people who would normally work construction. Then again, I don't know any other construction workers. Maybe all construction workers are as eager.

The minute I walk into Vanguard, Cynthia's riding my ass about this client and that meeting. She hands me a small stack of memos. "They're from Michael," she tells me. "Coffee's brewing. I picked up the soy milk like you asked." More like demanded. "Call him back now, before he starts calling every three minutes again."

This is my life. A great job, a healthy, happy son, an awesome loft, and an obsessive best friend. With some good always comes some bad, right?

I talk to Michael for ten minutes. Something about his shop and Ben. It's so typical, I've stopped listening. Instead, I'm going over the latest contract. My red pen circles the same grammatical error I've found in the last three drafts. Growling silently, I snap my fingers at Cynthia, who comes rushing in. I point to the error with my pen and hold up three fingers. She rolls her eyes, but takes the contract from my desk. I snap my fingers once again and she turns around warily. I bring my hand to my throat and pretend to cut it. She smiles and shakes her head.

I know it'll be fixed. I think it's time for Cynthia to get another raise. I'll talk to Gardner about that--

"Brian!" Michael yells into my ear. Fuck! I forgot.

I causally lean into my chair. “Yeah?” I ask.

“Were you even listening to a word I said?”

“Not really.”

He huffs and I imagine feeling the spittle hit my cheek. “Brian--” He begins.

“Look, Michael. I’m at work. A novel concept, I know. But I have to go. I’ll see you later.”

I hang up before he can get another word in and stall me. He’s good at that.

When I return home this evening, I expect to find a huge mess. My loft, after all, is being renovated. But, I’m impressed. Yes, there’s plastic covering half my furniture, a huge fucking hole in my wall, and tools spread out haphazardly. But, I sigh, nothing that will have me twitching with the need to clean up.

I walk to my bedroom, tearing off my clothing as I go. I love my expensive Prada and Armani, but after spending close to twelve hours restricted in suits and ties, my favorite part of the day is slipping out of them into something more comfortable. I pull out some worn jeans and a black shirt, but change my mind and instead, take out sweat pants and a tank top. I don’t plan on going anywhere tonight.

I notice the wallet on my bathroom floor the minute I enter. Opening it, I’m assaulted by the blond worker’s gigantic smile. Justin, was it? Yeah. Justin. Jesus, who in their right mind would smile this big for a fucking license photo? It’s a good one, though. Instead of looking like it’s his mug shot, the lighting works in Justin’s favor. Lucky bastard.

I take the wallet to the kitchen and throw it on the counter. Then, I can’t help myself. I pick it up and begin rifling through it. The poor kid has like twenty dollars in his bank account and even less in his wallet. And he lives in a shit part of town. What self-respecting fag would ever live there? There’s a beat up emergency contact card. Pulling it out, Daphne’s name is on top, her address the same as his. How sweet, they live together. There are two other contacts on the card, but both are crossed out with a black marker. Holding it up to the light, I can faintly read the names of two people that can only be his parents. I wonder why he’s crossed them out.

I should take the wallet to him. Or at least call him and tell him that I have it, but I’m too lazy. Instead, I put it back out the counter and turn on my computer. There’s research I have to do for our newest client.

A knock at the door thirty minutes later interrupts me.

Don’t let it be Michael. Or Linds. Or, God forbid, Melanie. Oh please, don’t let it be Debbie.

But instead, it’s Justin. He looks... hot. All dressed up. He’s breathing heavily, probably took the stairs again. What an idiot. His eyes wander my body like it did this morning. Hm. I wonder what he’d say if I tipped him over the bar and fucked him like he’s never been fucked before. Laughing silently to myself, I know exactly what he’d say. “Yes” and “please” and “harder” and there’d probably be an “oh, God!” somewhere.

I raise my eyebrows. “What?”

He shakes his head, his hair flying with the motion. “Sorry. I... Did I leave my wallet here?” He asks, his voice low and breathy.

“Yeah. Come in.” I open the door wide and he ducks under my arm before I have a chance to move it. “You know... There’s this thing called an elevator. You should use it.” I say, leading him to the counter where I left his wallet. “Instead of the stairs.” I pick up the wallet and he holds his hand out in gratitude.

“Your elevator scares me,” he tells me, opening his wallet before thinking the better of it and blushing.

“What? Afraid I might steal your thirteen dollars?” I ask.

He blushes. “No. No. Of course not... You... Went through my wallet?”

I shrug my shoulders. Damn. Yeah, I forgot about doing that. “Had to find out who it belongs to.”

Pulling out his cell, Justin looks up at me. “But, uh... you didn’t call me to tell me you had it. I went all over town looking for it.”

“Huh. Yeah. Sorry.”

He opens his mouth to say something, but instead, lets out a frustrated sigh. “Well, thanks anyway, Mr. Kinney.”

Mr. Kinney? God, that makes me feel old. I watch him as he moves toward the door. He’s got a great ass. “Well?” I stop him. “No reward?”

Justin spins around. “What?” His voice raises and he nervously fumbles with his wallet. “I’ve only got thirteen dollars. That’s supposed to last me until pay day. I, uh--”

“Justin. I was kidding.”

“Oh.” Justin pauses and then lets out a laugh. “Sorry. I didn’t know.”

“Yeah. I can tell.”

We stand there in silence. He’s pretty fucking cute, if you ask me. I wonder where he’s going all spruced up.

“Where’re you headed?”

He smiles this unbelievable smile. Damn. “No place special,” he drawls, licking his lips and then blushing.

Ah. He’s off to Babylon. “Well, don’t party too hard. You still have to rip apart my loft tomorrow.”

Justin lingers near the door a moment longer before throwing out a quiet “later” and leaving.

“Later,” I repeat to an empty loft.

I’ve never really noticed how empty my loft is until just now. Weird, huh?

Chapter 3

Justin

Would you believe I look forward to work?

All this week, I’ve been up before Daphne--showered, dressed, and fed before she even thinks about her morning cup of coffee.

I can’t help the fact that I have the major hots for our new client.

Brian Kinney. He’s got to be single and, even though I know it’ll never go anywhere, he doesn’t vomit when I shamelessly flirt with him.

That’s why I get up early. If we leave around seven-thirty, there’s a good chance that we’ll catch Brian before he leaves for work. And he always invites us up for coffee and whatever food is laying around. He’ll even join Daphne in making fun of my metabolism.

I don't know. Sometimes I get that look from him, but I swear he's straight. Daphne thinks he's queer through and through and God, I'd like to believe her. It's just that he doesn't act gay...

God, I can't believe I thought that. He doesn't act gay. How disgusting is that? I know better than most that there is no "one way" to being gay. But, it's just that there's nothing... queer... about him at all. If I were to describe the ultimate American male, it would have to be Brian. Smart, successful, handsome, rich... Every woman's dream, right?

Well, dammit, it's every gay man's dream, too. Except that I don't really care about the rich or successful parts. As long as he looks good and can hold his own in a conversation... And Brian? He does both fabulously.

There's no traffic today and I'm embarrassed that we get to the loft before he's even finished dressing. He's in pants and an undershirt, his hair still wet and slicked back from his shower. I love how strong his cologne is in the mornings and how it lingers in the loft even after he leaves.

"Don't you two like to sleep in?" He grunts around his toothbrush.

Daphne searches his empty fridge and shuts it with a sigh. "Don't you ever like to eat?" She whines. God. I'm so jealous at how she's able to banter with him.

"I've got to keep up my girlie figure," he jokes in that false falsetto he'll use occasionally.

He has a bitter sense of humor. It's biting, dark, and intelligent.

I notice an art portfolio on the breakfast bar and can't help my curiosity. It's already open and some presentation boards are carefully piled on top. Right away, I can see that the slogan's color is wrong. The font and size is perfect, but the coloring... I crinkle my nose. Orange. It should be orange, definitely.

"What do you think?" Brian asks, slinking up to me as he knots his tie.

"It's... uh... good," I answer, swallowing as his hands smooth his shirt over his chest. I can make out the faint ridges of his chest and taunt stomach when he does this.

Lifting an eyebrow, Brian picks up a board. "Just good?" He asks quietly, as though he's seeking my approval.

I snap myself out of whatever trance has me drooling over his clothed body. "No. No. It's ingenious..."

Brian leans against the bar really fucking close to me. Behind him, Daphne grins at me, fluttering her lashes. "But?" He asks.

"No buts."

"Uh huh." He's staring intently at the boards and now I just feel bad.

"Fine. There's something a little off about the slogan."

I watch as his gaze focuses on the words. "What about the slogan?" He insists, holding the board away from his body for a different perspective.

"There's something wrong with it."

I try not to stare at the intensity plastered on Brian's face. Brian's eyebrows scrunch together and his teeth scrape at his bottom lip. "And I suppose you know what's wrong with it?"

Shrugging, I run my hand along the edge of the bar. "The color, I guess."

Annoyed, Brian tosses the board back on the pile. “Fuck, you’re right. Now I’m going to have to spend half the day-
_”

“Orange,” I interrupt before he can finish.

Brian stares at me, then picks up the board.

Or maybe red. Or, shit, yellow.

But, instead, Brian grins uncharacteristically and laughs. “You’re so fucking right. Orange. Who would’ve thought?” He reaches out and pats my head. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think his hand lingered longer than it had to.

He begins to gather the boards together and the moment, or the possibility of that moment, is lost. I feel a pout escaping my lips and before I can recover, Brian’s studying my face with that hidden amusement he seems to find in everything.

“What?” I ask. I avoid the impulse to straighten my shirt and pat down my hair.

“You’re pouting,” he points out, smiling as I suck my lip back in.

I really like him. He’s... friendly. Well, no. Not really. He’s one tough mother fucker and tries to hide behind snarls and sharp comments, but underneath it all, he’s just as soft as the rest of us. Okay, he’s a bit harder than I am, but he’s still human.

And goddamn if he doesn’t know how to flirt.

I don’t let myself make a big deal out of this. He flirts with Daphne, too. It just... It seems he pays more attention to me, is all.

Keep dreaming, Taylor.

A knock on the door announces John and Chris’ arrival and ends our bonding time. I sneak one last peek at Brian and he’s giving me that look again.

“You seem in an unreasonably good mood,” Chris snarls at me. The more we work together, the more he’s openly hateful to me. “Suck a lot of cock last night?”

Brian’s head snaps up and his eyes narrow.

Oh please don’t let him be another fag-hating breeder. Please. Please.

“Interested in sucking a lot of cock, Hobbs?” Brian asks.

Is he... coming to my rescue? Daphne steps beside me and places a warm hand on my arm. She notices it too. Oooh, we’re gonna gossip about this for hours after work.

“I’m not a fag,” Chris is quick to answer.

“Rrrright.” Brian lets the word dangle in the air, before turning to the rest of us and saying, “I’ve got to get to work. You guys are doing a great job.”

“What an asshole,” Chris announces once the loft’s door is shut.

“Takes one to know one.” Oh, Daphne. That was so bad, but for some reason, it shuts Chris up.

During lunch today, Daph, John, and I play cards. Chris is scoffing at us from the corner, playing some stupid hand-held game. It's beeping and whooping, filling the loft occasionally with an annoying victory song.

The loft door slides open and in walks this short, dark haired guy. He doesn't see us staring at him from over our cards, which is strange, 'cause we're right here in the living room. It's kind of hard to miss us. Instead, he kicks off his shoes and walks into Brian's bedroom. Hmm.

Chris mutters something under his breath, turning off his game as we all stand up. I'm the first to reach the bedroom, receiving a small push from Daphne. "Go see," she hisses, handing me a crowbar.

I roll my eyes but grip my hands firmly around the steel. I take a tentative step forward and Chris huffs loudly. "Come on, faggot. Let's see what ya got." Asshole. The rustling of... clothing? disturbs the stillness of the loft. I can't help the fact that my palms are sweating.

Peering in, I see the strangest sight imaginable. The guy has stripped down to his boxers and pulls the duvet off of Brian's bed. He runs his hands across the mattress and then finally lays down, nestling deep under the covers.

He sighs and that's it. I tighten my hands around the crowbar and march into the bedroom. "The police are on their way. We'll give you until the count of three to get your ass out of this bed."

The man's form jumps. He rips off the covers and, like a deer caught in headlights, stares at us with a mixture of both fear and disbelief. "Who the fuck are you?" He sneers at me, giving me the once over before pulling the covers over his half naked body. He has an erection and that really creeps me out.

"No. I think the question is: who the fuck are you?" I raise the crowbar above my head.

"What are you doing?" His voice squeaks.

"One..." I begin my count, taking a courageous step toward the man. "Two..." His mouth has dropped open and he glances around me to the others. "I'm not fucking around, buddy." Wow. I really enjoy being macho. He seems scared and this makes me so fucking pleased with myself. He doesn't move, though. "Dude," I emphasize. "You are breaking and entering--"

The man snorts. "You can't be breaking and entering if you have a key."

My step falters. "You have a key?" I ask. "Where?" He makes a movement and I swing the crowbar. "Don't fucking move. Where?" I repeat.

He glares at me and then sighs. "In the right pocket of my pants."

Daphne rushes over to us and picks up the man's pants. Sure enough, a set of keys falls out.

"Which one?" I ask the man. He rolls his eyes, so I ask louder, "Which one?"

"The square one. Jesus."

Daphne leaves the room. I hear her open and then close the loft door. "It works," she calls out.

"Get dressed," I tell the man, lowering my arms and leaving the bedroom.

"Whoa, Justin," John laughs, taking the crowbar out of my hands. "That was awesome."

The man follows us, pulling his shirt over his head. "Did you really call the cops?" He asks, nervously tucking his shirt into his pants.

"No," Daphne shakes her head. "But we could have. Who the fuck are you?"

"I'm Michael," the man says flatly, as if this explains everything.

"Well, Michael. That really doesn't answer the question." I'm enjoying the role of aggressor. I hardly ever get to play one.

The man sighs and folds his arms across his chest. "I'm Brian's best friend."

"Well, I'm Justin's best friend," Daphne begins. "But that doesn't mean I go into his room and climb into his bed when he's not home."

"Uh... Don't you guys like, live together?" Fucking Hobbs.

"That's not the point, Chris," Daphne bites out. "The point is, I wanna know if Brian knows Michael here is coming to his home and sleeping in his bed when he's not here. That's all."

Even Chris is interested. The three of us stare intently at Michael. He squirms and then, finally, huffing, practically whines, "I have a key. It's no big deal."

We're silent momentarily. Then John speaks up. "If it's no big deal, then you won't have a problem with us calling Brian and telling him about this..."

Michael's eyes widen and that tells us enough.

"Gross," Chris grumbles.

Yes. Gross. Weird. Creepy. And oddly enough, curious. I find this whole situation to be very curious.

Michael's pulling on his sneakers without tying his laces. He finally notices that one whole half of the loft is under construction. He walks over to our blueprints, but Daphne slaps his hand away. "That's private," she sneers, gathering the prints and rolling them up.

"Look. I'm Brian's best friend. He won't care if I look through that shit or not."

He seems pretty protective for being a best friend.

"Well, we do," Daphne mutters. She obviously doesn't like him, which is strange, 'cause Daphne's the type of girl who'll give everyone the benefit of the doubt, even weirdoes like Michael. "Now, if you excuse us, Michael. We have work to do. And I suggest you leave now, before I change my mind and decide to call Brian just for good measure."

Michael's taken aback. His gaze roams between the three of us and decides that we aren't worth his time.

"Freak," Daphne says, once the loft door is locked behind Michael. I sit down on the floor for a breather and she slides down next to me, leaning in so close that I can smell her too sweet lip gloss. "He obviously has the hots for his best friend..."

"Yeah, well, join the club," I sigh. My head hits the wall of the loft harder than I expect. Ouch. I begin to rub the back of my head, but I can feel Daphne's eyes studying my face with so much intensity it makes me nervous. "What?"

"You... You have the hots for your best friend too?"

She looks like she doesn't know what to do with herself. "Oh. No! Ha. I mean, you're fucking gorgeous, Daph. But, uh... I was talking about Brian."

"Oh..." She lets out a long, relieved sigh. "Thank God. I was worried."

"Why? Don't you think I'm sexy?" I ask her, crawling around her body to settle on my knees in between her legs. I run my hands up her arms and lick my lips. "Don't you... want me?" I whisper.

Daphne bites her lips. It's a game we play. Sick, I know. But it's fucking fun. And confuses the hell out of people.

"You know Daphne's not a faggot, right?" Chris yells at us. See? Fun. Especially if we can get on Chris' nerves. All in a day's work.

I lean in and give Daphne a peck. "Come on, gorgeous. Let's get back to work." I stand up and yank Daphne to her feet in one fluid motion.

"Oh, Mr. Taylor," she giggles. "You're so strong."

"Fuck off." I'm working on it, dammit. I'm getting there.

We all get into the flow of things, smashing and tearing down the remainder of the wall, when John turns to me. "I think you should tell Brian about his friend anyway."

Chris ignores us and continues pounding while Daphne and I stop. The sweat is already forming above my brow. "What? Why? We told him we weren't going to."

John shrugs. "'Cause it's creepy and he should know about it. You don't have to tell him it was Michael. Just... that a friend came to his loft and... uh... got into his bed half naked with a raging hard-on. I'd want to know..."

"Yeah," Daphne agrees, thrusting her cell phone into my hand. "You don't have to tell him who it was. Just... tell him."

My voice cracks when I desperately ask, "Why me?"

John laughs. "'Cause you've got a crush on him and he obviously likes you the most."

I open my mouth for a rebuttal, but Chris interrupts, complaining, "Why am I the only one working? Does that mean I get all your wages for the day?"

Daphne rolls her eyes, but starts to work again. John gives me a push to the door. "Do it outside. It'll be loud in here."

God. I settle on the top of the stairs and flip open Daphne's phone. Scrolling down, I find Brian's work number. I really shouldn't be as nervous as I am.

Chapter 4

Brian

“Brian? A Mr. Taylor’s on line two,” Cynthia knocks on my door.

“Taylor?” She shrugs, so I pick up the phone, “Kinney.”

“Mr. Kinney?” I recognize his voice almost immediately. “Hi, it’s Justin Taylor from--”

“The construction company? What can I do you for?”

He breath hitches, pausing, and I hold back a laugh. Man, this kid is fun to play with.

“There’s a situation we collectively decided you need to be aware of.”

The smile leaves my face. Well, that doesn’t sound too fun. Shit. “What’d you break?”

“What? Oh,” he laughs slightly. I just notice how deep his voice is. “Nothing like that. We just... Do many of your friends have keys to your loft?”

“Not many,” I tell him slowly. Two, in fact. Lindsay and Michael. “Why?”

“We’ve just thought you should be informed that one of your friends... came over today...”

That’s strange. “But they all know I work during the day.”

“Yeah... Obviously...”

I don’t know where this is going, but I know I don’t like it. “And?”

“And your friend... uh...”

“Man or woman?” I ask.

“What?”

“Man or woman? The friend?”

“Oh, uh... man?”

Michael. I have a sense of foreboding. “Okay,” I say slowly.

“He... didn’t see us and uh... went to your bedroom and... crawled into your bed.”

“What?”

“I thought he was a thief or a psycho or something, so I threatened him with a crowbar...”

“You what?”

He’s quick to answer with, “Well, I didn’t know he was a friend and I thought it was kind of weird that this guy--”

“No. I just... I can’t imagine you threatening someone with a crowbar, is all.”

Justin lets out a puff of air. Relief? Humor? Annoyance? I can't tell over the phone. "So," he begins. "We weren't gonna tell you, but... it's kinda creepy, right? Someone crawling into your bed half naked--"

"Naked?" What the fuck, Michael?

"Well, down to his... panties..."

I snort.

"Anyway, that's it. Just thought you should know." He seems hesitant, like he doesn't want to go yet.

"Yeah. Thanks, Justin."

Sounding immensely pleased with himself, Justin smiles through the phone, "You're welcome... Mr. Kinney. Well, I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yeah. Tomorrow. Oh, and Justin?"

"Hmm?" His voice is husky.

"It's Brian."

I know he's glowing. What an ego trip this kid is. "Okay... See you later..."

"Later."

"Later... Brian..."

He hangs up and I'm left listening to the dial tone until the operator picks up.

My mind is reeling. What the hell was Michael doing? And, more importantly, how long has he been doing this? Shit. Justin's right, it is creepy.

I have to talk to Michael about this, huh?

"So, Michael came to your loft, knowing very well you weren't home and... what?" Lindsay asks, disbelief seeping into her words. We're both pushing Gus in his stroller casually down Liberty Avenue; my left hand, her right hand. We must look like two of the biggest hetero wannabes, but you know what? The men of Liberty know who I am and know for a fact that I'm the furthest thing from a breeder they'll find.

"And stripped down to his briefs," I smile despite how I'm feeling when I think about Justin's description of Michael's briefs as panties. "Then he crawled into my bed." I shudder thinking about what was going on under his briefs. Was he hard? Leaking?

I've never been physically attracted to Mikey, sexual or otherwise. That's one reason I've never fucked him. I think, ultimately, I made up the rule about never fucking friends just to avoid telling Mikey that I don't think he's... hot. He's just not my type. I think of him more like my brother than anything else, and although I'm into many things sexually, incest isn't one of them.

"Did he do anything in your bed?" Lindsay asks, cupping her hand over her forehead like a visor. She squints as she looks at me, the setting sun painting her face a soft pink. She's really is beautiful. I know if things were different, if I wasn't most decidedly a fag and she didn't prefer pussy, we'd be living that happy hetero lifestyle.

“Jesus, Linds. That’s...” I can’t even begin to describe how gross it is to think of Mikey... doing stuff in my bed.

She shrugs her shoulders. “Well, you never know with Michael. I mean, if he’s not against sneaking into your bed when he thinks, no, is absolutely sure you aren’t home, then what’s going to stop him from masturbating in it? Or worse yet--”

“Worse? There’s a worse than sleeping in Michael’s dried come stains?” Okay, this is too perverse and disturbing, even for me.

We walk in silence. Gus is playing with the spinning toy attached to his stroller, gleefully shrieking at the twisting colors.

“How do you know?” Lindsay asks me suddenly. “I mean, if you were at work...”

“Oh. I’m getting some changes done to the loft. One of the construction workers told me. I guess they weren’t going to call, but then decided it was in my best interest to know...”

“Yeah. Good choice.” Gus bores of his toy and reaches out to me. I glance hesitantly at Lindsay, who gives me a small smile and nod. We stop walking and I crouch down, unlatching Gus from his stroller and gathering him in my arms. God, was I ever as small as he is?

“He’s getting so big,” Lindsay laments, caressing Gus’ cheek with the back of her hand.

I snort. “I was just thinking how small he is.”

Laughing, Lindsay nudges my shoulder with her own. “That’s ‘cause you don’t have to deal with him every waking moment. You’re not there to witness the little bit he changes every day.” There’s no sting or anger in her voice, just adoration. Sometimes, when I’m bored or feeling lethargic, I head over to the munchers. It’s amazing how much love they have for Gus... my son.

“What are you thinking now?” Lindsay asks, searching my face for God knows what.

I shrug my shoulders and look at Gus, “Mommy’s prying again, Sonny Boy.” She laughs and we continue to walk, Gus secure in my arms.

“So, what kind of work are you getting done to your loft?”

I knew I couldn’t hide it from them forever. “Just... work.”

She raises her brow, a very Kinney-like expression. Bitch. Can’t fool the king.

But, obviously she’s the queen, ‘cause I find myself telling her about adding a room for Gus. Lindsay doesn’t say anything, just nods her approval. She lags behind me as we walk, and damn it all to hell if I don’t feel her fucking beaming into my back.

“And they all thought Brian Kinney would be a bad father.” We stop in front of the Liberty Diner and she leans in to kiss my cheek. “God, I love you, Brian. I’m so glad we’re friends.”

I roll my eyes and feel infinitely more nervous than I did before. I hate moments like these, and when one of my best friends is a gushy dyke... well, let’s just say I’ve experienced more tears and sappy declarations with Linds than I care to admit; than I will ever admit.

The diner is fairly crowded and our usual booth in the back is taken up by two kids. Fuck. “Let’s go somewhere else...” I begin to say, but one of the kids in the booth turns around and it’s Daphne, from the construction company.

“Brian?” She calls out, her voice raising to a question. I curtly nod. Justin whips his head around and offers me a glorified smile. Jesus, that thing’s gonna be the death of me.

“Oh, my God,” Lindsay whispers, leaning into me. “He’s fucking... wow...”

I snort and roll my eyes, biting my tongue from saying anything truly nasty that will ruin this evening’s mood. Instead, I saunter over to the booth. “Hey, kids,” I greet them. “Mind if we join you?” I ask, nodding to Lindsay and Gus.

Daphne smiles and gestures to the empty booth across from them. Justin seems a bit subdued.

Lindsay makes quick introductions and, after whispering in my ear that Daphne isn’t “half bad either,” starts up a conversation with ease. I’m somewhat proud of her ability to talk to people from all walks of life.

Not that I think Justin and Daphne are below me. That’s ridiculous. I just think... Oh. I’m digging myself into a hole here.

I’m so busy chastising myself, I almost miss Justin’s emphasized question of, “What are you doing here?”

“Out for a stroll. Decided to get a bite to eat. Same as you,” I tell him, hoping that I don’t look as confused as I feel about his question.

Justin gives me a half-smile and says, “I somehow doubt that,” turning to Daphne for affirmation.

Affirmation for what, I do not know.

“You guys are with the construction company that’s working on Bri’s loft?” Lindsay asks. They nod their heads and she continues, saying, “But... you’re both so young.”

Justin gets a look of defiance in his eyes. “We’re both twenty. Nearly twenty-one,” he mutters defensively.

Daphne clicks her tongue and elbows Justin. “Sorry, Lindsay. Justin doesn’t like it when people make a crack about his age...”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to offend you,” Lindsay says directly to Justin. She smiles at him until he visibly eases and smiles back. Fucking WASPs. They have all the control in situations like these.

“My dad owns Chanders’ Construction. It’s been handed down for three generations.”

“Ah,” Lindsay’s so fucking polite. “And you?” She asks Justin.

He fidgets in his seat.

“Justin didn’t have much of a choice,” Daphne laughs, rolling her eyes at the heated glare Justin gives her. “It was either work with me or go to Dartmouth--”

“That’s a good school,” Lindsay interrupts.

“Justin doesn’t want to be a businessman,” Daphne tells us, placing her hand around Justin’s shoulder and pulling him close to her, kissing the side of his temple. “He didn’t want to lose his family completely, so he chose to work the grind with me and the boys.” She smiles lovingly at Justin, who grimaces back at her, pushing away and slouching into the booth.

“I’m sorry,” Lindsay says. “I don’t understand. Why would you lose your family?”

Justin sighs loudly. He reaches for his soda and plays with the straw. “‘Cause I’m a fag. Daddy wouldn’t pay for art school and mommy wouldn’t stand up for me. So, here I am, far from the artist I imagined myself to be at this age. But you know what? I like it. I like working with Daphne. And I like getting all beefy,” Daphne giggles. It must be an inside joke. “And it’s as close to art as I’ll get without actually losing my family for good. Everybody has to make some sacrifices.”

Lindsay’s eyes are filled with unshed tears and she shakes her head remorsefully. “Oh, Justin,” she moans. “I’m so sorry. Parents can be rough. Especially about sexuality.”

She’s such a dyke.

Justin shrugs, but before he can respond, one of the diner drones asks for our order. I sit back and watch as Daphne and Lindsay make small talk. If I didn’t know better, I’d say they were flirting. I look at Justin and he glances between Daphne and Lindsay, raising a brow.

“Lindsay,” I say, leaning into her. “You’re married.”

Lindsay looks away from Daphne, flushing. She puts her lips to my ears and whispers quietly, “I can still look.”

Justin is watching us with huge eyes. I’ve never noticed how blue his eyes are. They’re clear and large and... very pretty. His pale skin contrast his blue eyes, making the color stand out more than it would on someone like me.

“Is that your son?” He asks suddenly, motioning to Gus. “He looks just like you.”

I nod, picking Gus up from his stroller. “Wanna hold him?” I ask. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Lindsay try to hide her surprise.

Justin nods, holding out his arms for my son, who takes an immediate liking to him. He reaches out and grasps Justin’s finger, giggling like a demon. “Wow,” Lindsay says, her voice filled with awe. “Justin, Gus doesn’t really like anyone. That’s amazing.” We watch as Gus clings to Justin’s chest, bouncing happily on his lap, tugging on his nose, lips, ears, and hair.

Justin inspects Gus for a moment before turning his gaze to Lindsay. “He has your nose. And chin.”

Lindsay puffs out her chest proudly. God, what a mother hen. Then she turns to me and nuzzles my cheek with her nose. “We did well, Bri,” she says.

When our food arrives, I’m amazed to find how much food Justin can actually wolf down. He orders half the menu and I’m surprised to see that not only does he finish it all, he picks at Daphne’s meal too. “Fuck off, Justin. I’m hungry.” She pushes his hand away for the third time. He scowls at her before eyeing my sandwich.

I push my plate toward him and he grins. What a great fucking smile he has.

Justin inhales my sandwich and after, leans against the booth and groans.

“No one forced you to eat that much, Justin,” Daphne admonishes him.

He flips her off, happily sedated.

“You know...” Lindsay says quietly to me as we watch Justin and Daphne shoot insults back and forth. “They remind me of us when we were their age.”

I nod, “Although I doubt they’ve fucked.” Lindsay blushes and pushes my shoulder.

“It was only once,” she huffs. “We were so drunk. And you didn’t even come.” She crosses her arms and glares at me.

Before I can remark, Michael's voice echoes loudly in my ears. "Brian! I thought you had to work!" He rushes over to us and stands, tapping his foot, glaring at me.

"Yeah. I did. And now I'm having dinner with my son and his mother." I raise my brow, trying to decide how to make it through this situation. I wave my hand in Justin and Daphne's direction. "This is Justin and Daphne. I suppose you guys met before?" I ask.

Michael does a double take when he sees them. His face burns red and he nervously shoves his hands in his pockets. "Oh. Uh. No."

"No? Look harder, Mikey."

Lindsay scoots closer to me and places a hand on my knee.

Michael barely glances at Justin and Daphne. "Nope," he shakes his head insistently.

"Really?"

Michael nods and Justin rolls his eyes, scoffing.

"Well..." I have to tread this carefully. "They've informed me otherwise."

I don't think I've ever seen Michael look as angry as he does the moment I say this. He focuses on Justin and glares, but then, allows a small smile to entertain his face. "Oh, yeah. Yeah, I remember you. Nice to see you again."

Justin pulls out a wad of the most horrible mess of money I've ever seen, somehow finding a couple twenties. He throws them hastily on the table and pushes Daphne not so gently out of the booth.

"What the fuck, Justin?" Daphne asks, almost falling to the ground.

"We have to go," he bites out, smiling apologetically at Lindsay and myself. I make a motion, as if to reach out for him, but stop. I guess I don't want him to go.

I watch them leave as Michael takes their place in the booth across from us. I wait until Justin and Daphne are out of my sight before I turn my attention to Michael. He doesn't return my gaze, choosing to pick up a sugar packet and open it, piling the sugar on Justin's empty plate.

"What's going on, Michael?" I finally ask, annoyed that he's ignoring me when he's chosen to sit here.

"Nothing. Just got off of work. Thought I'd get something to eat," he says, raising his arm and waving to our waitress.

Lindsay pinches my knee slightly and I sigh. "I mean, Michael," I begin again, making sure that I use his full name, not his nickname. "Why were you at the loft this morning?"

And why the fuck were you sleeping in my bed half naked?

"Just needed to borrow... something..." He pauses, taking in the look of disbelief on our faces. He stands up suddenly, "You know, I forgot I have to be somewhere. I think I'll get my food to go. Later," he calls out, rushing to the register and motioning with his hands.

I lean back against the booth and let out a long sigh.

"You should confront him, Bri," Lindsay says. "Don't let him off the hook this easily."

“Whatever. You know Michael. He’ll just evade any form of questioning until I give up. At least he knows that I know... what he’s been doing... He probably won’t be doing it again for a while.”

Lindsay nods and then stretches. “I should get home, Brian.” I move to let her out of the booth, watching as she makes sure Gus is strapped into his stroller. “They’re cute,” she says absently, although I know exactly who she’s talking about.

“Yep.”

“Especially Justin.” She glances up at me and smiles mischievously. “He’s got a crush on you, you know?”

“Yeah, well... Who doesn’t?” I grin.

Shaking her head, Lindsay laughs. “God, you’re so conceited.”

I smile and wave good-bye to Gus. My mind wanders back to Justin.

A crush, huh? How... interesting.

Chapter 5

Justin

“She’s so gorgeous,” I tell Daphne, picking up a elongated piece of wood. We’re finally putting up the frame for the new room at the loft. “And his son... Oh my God! Have you ever seen such a perfect family before?”

I know Daphne’s getting a little weary of me talking about Lindsay and Gus, but I can’t help it. They literally blew me away. Even if Brian was a fag, there’s no way I’d ever be even in the same league as him.

“They’re not a family, Justin,” Daphne sighs, helping me hold the board into place while John and Chris nail it into the frame. “At least, not in the traditional sense.” Her voice is strained from the effort of keeping the wood in place. “I mean, so they have a child together. So what? In this day and age, that means less and less.”

We both pull away, gasping for breath. I wipe the sweat culminating around my hairline. Fuck, this has to be the worst part of construction. “No. They were close.”

“So? You and I are close....” She motions to another piece of wood. “But we’re not together. Aren’t you even a little bit curious about why they were hanging out on Liberty. And eating at the diner? That’s pretty bold of them--Jesus, Justin! Bend with your knees! You’re gonna kill your back!” God. She can be such a Nazi when it comes to this shit.

“Yeah, Taylor,” Chris laughs. “Use your knees. A fag like you should know how to do that.”

I bite my tongue from saying something totally vicious. Chris has been worse the past few days, if you can believe it.

I flip him off and bend my knees, lifting the board with a straight back. She’s right. This is better.

As we work, I think about Brian and Lindsay--how happy they seem together. Together. I wonder if I’m ever going to be as happy with someone.

They obviously love each other, but there wasn’t the passion between them that I expected to find. Especially since Brian’s so fucking hot and Lindsay is so beautiful. If I had a lover half as good-looking as Brian, I’d be all over him, all the time.

They seemed conformable together, but there was no fire.

I'm looking for fire.

"What're you thinking about?" Daphne asks me as we go for more wood in the truck downstairs. I grimace and shake my head. "Oh, Brian. I should've known. Why'd I even ask?"

"Fuck off. This is hard."

"You're always hard when you think about Brian," she jokes, messing my hair with her grimy hands.

"God, you're such a perv, Daph. I meant this as in this whole situation. Brian... Lindsay..."

"Why don't you just ask Brian what his relationship with Lindsay is? Make it easier on all of us. Especially on me, who has to listen to you ramble about him constantly."

"I already know what their relationship is."

"No you don't. You assume you know. Two completely different things. I'm telling you, Brian's gay." Yeah. I wish. We start stacking wood on the wheelbarrow. "Why do we always have to do the dirty work?" She complains, grunting as we try to carry more than two pieces together. "What'd you do to Chris to make him so... hard up on you lately?"

We drop the boards ungracefully into the barrow. "Come on, Daph. You know I didn't do shit to him. He's just being as ass 'cause he can..."

"Yeah, 'cause you're scared of him."

"I am not!" I practically yell, lifting the front of the barrow while she grabs the back. Fucking stairs. Isn't there such a thing as a handicap ramp? I should complain to management.

"You are, too. But, you have reason to be. Chris is one of those scary homophobes."

"Closet cases usually are," I huff.

"Ooh, don't let him hear you say that."

We wheel the barrow into the lift and take the stairs. John insists it's perfectly safe, but the noise it makes and the weird smoky smell that emanates from it after it's used is enough to keep us away.

When we finally get the wood into the loft, Chris is standing there, his arms across his chest, glaring at us. "What the fuck were you guys doing out there? You've been gone forever. Some of us have to work."

"We weren't gone that long," I answer carefully. "The wood's heavy and--"

Chris snorts and turns to John, his voice layered in contempt when he says, "Never send a faggot to do a man's job."

Daphne and I are emptying the wheelbarrow. I let the wood drop from my hands, wincing as it clanks noisily to the floor. I straighten my back and look Chris in the eyes. "Faggots are still men, Chris. Maybe even more so 'cause we take it up the ass and don't complain about the pain. In fact, we welcome the pain. You wouldn't last one minute in my place," I tell him. I can't help but grin maliciously as his face pales.

"I don't want to hear about your filthy lifestyle," he grimaces, sticking out his tongue and wrinkling his face up in disgust.

Sighing, I walk up very close to him, his breath foul on my face. "Oh, I think you do. I mean, you keep talking about it. All the time. I think you want details. I think you wanna know what it's like sucking cock... or what it's like to be fucked by a long, thick, hard dick... ramming into you so fast and so deep that you lose your breath... you wanna

know what it's like fucking an ass so tight you feel like your dick's gonna clamp off... you feel like you're gonna lose yourself in that never ending cavern of warmth... you wanna know what it's like eating ass--"

I'm actually kind of surprised that Chris lets me carry on as long as I have. It happens so suddenly, I don't even realize I'm being attacked until he has me on the floor, pounding the back of my head ruthlessly into the hard wood. Daphne screams my name repeatedly somewhere behind me and I can barely make out John's form, grasping desperately at Chris' enraged body.

Apparently, Chris thinks I'm some weak little faggot who's gonna take it laying down. Well, he's in for the shock of a lifetime.

I lift my knee and crunch it over and over between Chris' legs until I hit home. He lets out a growl of pain, jumping off of me. I sigh in relief and sit up, gasping for breath. But then his hands reach out for me and he lifts me up by my hair, pushing me dangerously into the frame we've been building. Even amidst the fight, I'm proud at how resilient our wall is.

I punch Chris in the face, making contact with a sickening crunch and he howls, momentarily lost in the pain. He looks up at me, face drowning in red--huh, we do have the same color of blood after all--and punches my own face once... twice... stopping himself only to pick up a discarded piece of wood the size of a baseball bat. Before I have time to cover my head, Chris swings, but he never makes contact.

My eyes can't focus, but my ears are in perfect working order. I hear cursing, yelling, heavy breathing, sobbing, and then nothing. I blink multiple times, shaking my head to clear it of the fuzziness that's enveloped it. I look up cautiously and there's Brian, looming over me, his mouth moving rapidly.

My name. He's saying my name. I open my mouth to calm him down, but blood flows from it instead of words. I start to choke and Daphne runs over to me, rubbing my back, screaming at Brian to "do something! Help him!!" Brian pulls Daphne away from me and lifts my chin, his strong hand encasing my face delicately.

I squint at him out of my left eye, my right eye rapidly swelling shut. God, I hope I don't scar. I must be really fucked up right now if that's all I can think about.

"Are you okay?" Brian's voice echoes in my head. Ouch.

I nod vigorously.

"I should get you to a hospital," he says, turning my face slightly in his hands to inspect it.

"No. No. No," I repeat, pulling away from him and attempting to stand up on my own. "No hospitals." I shudder and swallow some blood, gagging at the taste.

"Shit, Justin," Brian cries out. "Don't throw up on my floor!" I double over. He turns to Daphne, "I think a hospital would be best..."

"No," Daphne says quickly. "He hates hospitals. Don't do that to him."

I'm right here, I want to say. Don't talk about me like I'm not here. But, the pain in my head is so acute, I feel like I'm blacking out. Maybe I am.

"Then take him to the bathroom and clean him up. There's a first aid kit behind the toilet," Brian tells Daphne hurriedly. "Fix him."

I can feel Daphne hesitate. As much as I hate hospitals, she hates blood. God, what a pair we make.

Daphne steps away from me, looking down at the blood on her hands. She starts to shake. "I'm... bad about... blood," she says, dry heaving for an added effect.

“Je-sus Christ,” Brian sighs. I stand up, trying to recover some dignity. He seems to take pity on me, though, because his face softens, and he reaches out, grasping my hand gently. “Come on, Sunshine. I’ll take care of you.”

Sunshine? I follow him, hardly able to lift my feet. I’m so tired.

Brian can feel me lagging behind him. “Sleepy?” He asks me. He places a hand on my head and starts to press gently all around. It feels pretty good until his fingers caress the back of my neck--

“Ouch,” I practically yelp, stepping out of his grasp, touching the back of my neck tenderly. It feels soft... and wet. Oh no. My hand returns, red with blood.

“Did he hit your head?” Brian asks. I look up at Brian, my eyes filling with tears and I nod. “Are you bleeding?” I nod again and feel the tears spring from my eyes. I try to blink them back and let out a trembling breath, which sounds more like a restrained sob than anything else. “Justin...” He begins, stepping next to me and placing a protective arm around my waist. “We’re gonna have to go to the hospital.”

Probably. But, I’m not going down without a fight. “No!” I cry out. “I’m okay. I’ll be...” My step falters. “Okay...” I look around the loft. Everything seems so hazy, like a watercolor. Brian starts to walk away. No. I reach out for him, grasping violently in his direction. I lose my balance.

“No?” He asks me, sarcasm tainting his voice as he hoists me up.

I glance at Daphne, who’s scrubbing her hands fiercely under the faucet. She meets my gaze, “I’m sorry,” she whispers.

I really don’t want to go to the hospital, but as Brian runs his arms behind my knees and hugs me to his chest like a child, I stop caring. He smells so good. The acrid smell of my blood and sweat mixes with Brian’s husky cologne. “Mmm,” I moan, breathing in deeply. He shoots me a startled glance and if I were in my normal state of mind, I’d probably blush. Instead, I grasp his suit lapels with my dirty hands and whimper.

“Sometimes I really am just a weak little faggot,” I huff as we wait for the lift. Daphne runs down the stairs in order to get Brian’s jeep ready for our arrival.

Brian shakes his head. “Are you kidding?” He asks, his voice full of wonder. “You beat that kid to a bloody pulp. I’m pretty sure he’s in a worse spot than you are. You were very brave, trying to hold your own like that.”

I can hardly keep my head up. I let my eyes close and my mind drifts back to that look on Chris’ face when I punched his nose. Ah, bliss.

Something sharp hits my cheek and I snap my eyes open. What the fuck?

“You need to stay awake,” Brian demands, stepping into the rickety lift. It nearly knocks us over when it begins its descent.

“Okay,” I mumble weakly, my eyelids fluttering as I strain to keep them open. That warm darkness begins to welcome me again as he walks me toward the jeep.

“No sleeping, Justin,” Brian says again, climbing ungracefully into the jeep with me still in his arms.

Everything’s foggy and surreal. The only things I can make out with some realistic accuracy are Brian’s strong arms around my body and the softness of his lips that occasionally brush against my sweaty forehead. He’s a good dad.

I hear Daphne laugh. “He’s not your daddy, Justin. Far from it.” I must have said something out loud. I glance wearily at Brian, who’s glaring at me in mock anger.

“Asshole. I’m not old enough to be your father.”

I giggle. To me, it sounds distorted. Reaching up, I run my shaky hands through Brian’s beautiful hair. I need to take advantage of this situation as much as I can. His hair is smooth and softer than I imagined it ever to be. Like a baby’s hair. So perfect and addictive.

He leans his head against the seat, opening his mouth to let out a sigh. What a fucking gorgeous man. With all the strength I can muster, I wrap my arm around Brian’s head and lift myself up, pressing my lips sloppily against his own. He quickly pulls away, surprise etched on his face. My embarrassment is swallowed up by the blackness as I let myself fall into a deep sleep.

Chapter 6

Brian

They make him change out of his clothes and Daphne and I smirk while he slips into that tasteless hospital gown. The doctors were afraid that he had a concussion, but it turns out the little twat passed out from excitement. Yes, he fainted. If one little peck on the lips knocks Justin out, I wonder what a whole night of fucking would do to him. Kill him, perhaps.

“Let’s see, Justin,” Daphne laughs when he doesn’t emerge from behind the screen.

“No.”

It’s my turn to chuckle. “Come on. It can’t be that bad.”

I don’t know why, exactly, Justin is afraid of hospitals. When Justin awoke and found himself on the cold, crisp hospital cot, he freaked. I’ve never seen someone as terrified as Justin was. But, they gave him a shot of something which has made him amiable and happy, so we’re able to joke with him right now.

His voice is soft. “It’s... rather small...”

I raise my brows and jump off the counter. Daphne grins and together, we tiptoe to the screen. She mouths a count off and we pull it back, causing Justin to let out a startled yelp.

Damn. It is small. But... damn. I mentally smack myself for being so inappropriate. The kid needs x-rays and probably stitches, but he looks so fucking hot in the stupid, little smock. It seems to hug his chest, defining his slightly muscular body perfectly. I let my eyes roam openly. He has great legs. Powerful. I take in a silent, deep breath when I think about what he must look like from behind.

Holy shit. When did I start thinking about him so objectively?

“What?” He asks self-consciously.

“It doesn’t look bad, Justin,” Daphne tells him, circling him. “Especially from here,” she whistles.

This really can’t be jealousy that I’m feeling as she eyes his naked ass, can it? No. Definitely not.

Justin covers his ass with his hands. “You’re gross, Daph.” He snorts. His smile disappears and his face pales considerably.

“Need to sit down?” I ask him, reaching out and grasping his shoulders protectively.

He nods. Together, Daphne and I help him to the little cot in the corner of the room. "Lie down," I tell him, pushing him against the pillow. His breath is shallow and quick as he studies the sterile room.

Daphne reaches for the call button, but I stop her, shaking my head. "You'll be okay," I tell Justin, pushing his bangs away from his face. "Right?"

"If you stay with me," he whispers. I'm not sure if he means both me and Daphne, or just me. I chose to ignore the implications in his words.

"We'll be right here," I promise as the doctor enters the room.

It turns out the only stitches Justin requires are on the back of his neck, just below the hairline, from where Hobbs pushed him up against the frame in the wall. Lucky little fuck.

He emerges from the bathroom draped in the extra set of clothing I had in my gym bag, his own bloody clothing disposed of in the trash can.

"You're bigger than I am," he says, laughing at the way my jeans scrape against the floor with each step he takes.

"You're just short."

He's been in considerably good spirits since he found out they wouldn't have to shave his head and he wouldn't need any surgery. They gave him an second dosage of what Daphne has now dubbed as Justin's "Happy Drug."

His grin is wide as he scoots next to me. "Can we get the fuck outta here?" He asks hopefully. "I fucking hate hospitals." He shivers dramatically.

"So I've heard," I mumble.

Daphne enters the room and I laugh at the sight. She's pushing a bright pink wheelchair.

"Okay, Justin, doll. Climb aboard," Daphne draws. "I chose pink special. Just for you."

He clenches his fists and shakes his head adamantly. "There's no way in hell I'm getting on that thing."

"You haveta, Justin," Daphne sighs, dropping the humor in her voice. "You're physically weak and are on a lot of drugs right now. Doctor's orders."

"Fuck the doctor. I'm not getting on that thing. It's... pink."

I can't help but laugh. Here Justin is, in complete hatred of hospitals, refusing to leave because his wheelchair is pink.

"Justin," I tell him. "We must pick our fights wisely. Now get on the fucking wheelchair so we can get you home."

He shakes his head and stomps his foot, much like Gus does when we don't give him his way. "No," he tells us. "And you can't make me."

I wait for him to stick out his tongue and call us "meanies" when we insist that he get on the wheelchair, but he never does.

"I can walk on my own, thank you very much."

“Yeah, well,” I say, swooping down and throwing him over my shoulders. He lets out a startled cry. “That’s not an option right now.” I dump him into the chair and push it out the door before he can regain balance, with Daphne giggling behind us.

He grumbles the whole way, refusing to acknowledge the flirtatious nurse as we sign him out. He hides his face in his hands as we push him through the waiting room and into the parking structure.

“Can I drive?” He asks as we stop next to the jeep.

I shake my head, unlocking his door. “Not on those drugs. Now get in the damn jeep, Taylor. This is not how I intend to spend my evening.” I sound harsher than I mean to and the look on his face tells me he’s taken my words to heart.

An apology is on the tip of my tongue as we pull out of the structure, but I refuse to say it. We drive in silence. I adjust my rearview mirror, fixing it on the back seat. I think the drugs are wearing thin because Justin’s lips are turned down in a small frown. Daphne leans in and whispers something to him. It does the trick. He smiles and nods, rolling his eyes.

We drive through a long tunnel and when I glance back in the mirror, Justin’s lazy gaze stares back at me. He raises his eyebrows, smiling softly at me.

During the rest of the ride, Justin continues to look into the mirror, refusing to look away whenever our eyes meet.

Justin

“I can’t believe you kissed him!” Is the first thing Daphne shrieks to me once Brian leaves our apartment. I was embarrassed by the mess our apartment had become over the past few weeks, but Brian merely grinned and called us “children.” I’m crawling onto the couch when Daphne says this and my limbs seem to stop working.

“What?” I ask slowly.

“Brian. You kissed him, Justin,” she tells me. Her face lights up and she chuckles. “Oh, my God. You don’t remember, do you?”

I stop my movements and think, hard. Kiss. Kiss. Kiss. Did I really kiss him? I try to focus all my memory on his amazing lips. “When?”

“In the jeep on the way to the hospital. You were pretty far gone by then, though--”

“What did he say? Did he do anything? Did he kiss me back?” All this excitement is making my head throb. I’m going to need some of those pills the doctor gave me sooner than I imagined.

Daphne opens her mouth, as if to say something, but instead, shakes her head and mumbles something about checking our messages.

I slump into the couch. When Daphne avoids answering a question like that, it can only mean one thing. I was rejected. “Did he say anything?” I ask quietly.

She sighs and settles down on the couch next to me, flipping on the TV. “Nah. He just... looked surprised. He pulled away rather quickly, though.”

“Shit.” I rest my head against the arm of the couch, curling my legs into my body. Thank God I can’t remember kissing him.

“He wasn’t disgusted, Justin. Don’t worry about that,” Daphne tells me, turning to watch me as I try to get comfortable on our old couch. “Just surprised.”

I nod my head and close my eyes. We watch some mundane comedy, until the phone rings. Daphne's dad calls to inform us that Chris wouldn't be working at the loft with us anymore. Apparently, Chris tried to blame the whole thing on me, but John came to my defense. Mr. Chanders gives me the option of missing work tomorrow, but I want to go. I want to see Brian.

"You should really get some rest tomorrow," Daphne says, shaking her head as she hangs up the phone. "Brian won't mind."

"No. I want to go."

"You want to see Brian."

"Maybe." I close my eyes and pull the blanket we keep on the back of the couch over my body. "Wake me up when it's time to go."

Brian's eyes widen when he answers the door and sees me, grinning, next to Daphne. He lets us in, but grabs my arm. "What the fuck are you doing here?" He asks. "Shouldn't you be at home, resting?"

I shrug my shoulders. "I have a job to do."

"Yeah, to relax and get some fucking rest. The doctor said no manual labor the first couple days."

God. He's worse than a mother. "I'll be okay, Brian."

Brian shakes his head and turns to Daphne. "I'm not taking him to the hospital again when he loses wind or opens his stitches 'cause he's acting like a childish twat," he bites out, releasing my arm and stomping into his bedroom.

Daphne raises her eyebrows. "Ooh, he's worried about poor, little Justin," she whispers.

"Probably doesn't want to be sued or something," I say grumpily. The back of my head is starting to throb. Fuck.

I sit on a stool at the bar, messaging my temples. "See?" Daphne says, pointedly. "Told ya it wasn't a good idea to come here today, but nooooo--"

"Shut the fuck up, Daph," I grumble, taking in a deep breath. There. That's better. I eye the corner of the room where Chris and I fought; it's clean. "Hey, Brian?" I call out. He peeks his head from around his bathroom door. "Who cleaned up the mess we made last night?"

"Who do you think?" He disappears once more into his bathroom.

Fuck. Daphne climbs onto the stool next to me and pulls my head towards her, capturing my head beneath her talented fingers. "I think he's mad at me," I sigh, leaning further into her.

She tugs my hair once and then kisses my cheek. "Nah," she whispers into my ear. "I'm telling ya, he's just worried." She gets up and pulls back the loft door.

John steps in. "Hey, looks like it's just me and you tod--" He sees me at the bar. "What the fuck are you doing here, Justin? You need to get some rest."

"I was just going to take him home," Brian says, stepping down the bedroom stairs, gathering his briefcase. "He's a little ambitious."

"I can work," I tell them, sliding off the stool, taking a moment to balance myself. "It's just these fucking pills," I remark, pulling the orange bottle out of my pocket and throwing it angrily onto Brian's counter. "I hate being on medication."

Brian picks up the bottle, which has rolled dangerously close to the edge of the counter. Reading the label, he grins happily. "Well, lookee here, Justin. 'Do not operate heavy machinery.' There's no way in hell you're going to be working today if says right here on the bottle that you can't." He looks at me as if he's won a gold medal. "Come on, Sunshine. I'm taking you home."

I drag my feet all the way to his jeep. "Stop acting like Gus," he snaps, pulling open my door for me.

I sigh and climb inside. Traffic's pretty bad once we get downtown. I dare to glance at Brian. He doesn't look too pleased. "I'm sorry about this," I tell him, refusing to meet his gaze while we wait at a red light. "I should've stayed at home."

Brian takes a practiced breath, but then shrugs, releasing some of the tension. "Whatever. It's not like I wouldn't have hit traffic anyway."

"So..." I begin. "You dating anyone?"

Brian lets out a belt of laughter, not answering my question, and I don't have the balls to bring it up again.

He's pretty casual about me being gay. I don't know a lot of breeders like him.

He remembers, fairly accurately, how to get to my apartment. He even walks me to the lobby. "You shouldn't live in such a slum."

I shrug. "It's the only place Daph and I can afford without going to our parents for help."

"Independent?" He asks, lingering near the front door.

Nodding, I sigh. "As independent as I can be."

We stand awkwardly in silence. "Well..." he starts. "I'll see you soon. Get some rest," he calls out, waving as he leaves.

I don't make my way to the elevator until I'm sure he's gone. I don't know what I'm waiting for. Or why I stand here, like an idiot, fussing with my hair, hoping he'll come back. For what?

I remind myself about Lindsay. And Gus. And the fact that he likes pussy.

Why do I always do this to myself? Every guy I've ever been attracted to has some sort of set back. Like, being closeted. Or being heterophobic. Or being straight. Goddamnit. I push the elevator button and feel the slight tug in my gut before it begins its ascent to my floor.

I jam the key into the door, slamming it closed harder than I mean to; small bits of plaster snow down on my head and shoulders.

I need to get laid. I swoon slightly. But first, I need to get some sleep.

Chapter 7

Justin

It's sad when you're a gay man and the only friend you have is a straight chick.

"If you're gonna complain all night about me," Daphne huffs, "Then maybe you should start looking around for more friends." Right now, she's rummaging through my closet, helping me find the perfect outfit. She, that bitch, looks great in just about anything--even the dark jeans and plain black top she's wearing tonight.

"What kinda guy are you looking for again?" She asks, throwing about four pairs of pants onto my bed. "'Cause your outfit should mirror that." She holds up a pair of tight black leather pants and I shake my head. "Okay, so leather is out. What about these?" She pins a pair of brown plaid pants to my waist. No, I've had enough starving artists in my life.

"What else did you pick?" I wander over to the bed. Displayed on my bed are a pair of jeans and my baby blue Dickies. Hm. I don't normally wear the Dickies when I go out clubbing. I run my hands over the light blue pants. "I think I'll wear these tonight," I decide, holding them out for inspection. Clean. Wow. That's unusual.

Daphne smiles. "Good boy. Blue is most definitely your color." We have this conversation every time she helps me find an outfit. She's right, though, blue is my color and these pants, from my previous experiences, have no limits to the type of men they attract. I don't know what I'm looking for tonight, but I know I want it to be special. "Besides, it'll go well with that nice shiner you've got," she teases, pointing to the fading black eye Chris gave me. "Now, unless you wanna go for the twink look, I'd rule out tee-shirts." Sometimes I think Daphne's chromosomes were mixed up; she's really quite gay.

She loses herself in my closet again, eventually tossing me two shirts, both collared work shirts; one black, one white. "If you wear the black, you can wear the boots. Those things are hot. But if you wear the white, you wear those cute sneakers we bought the other day."

"We bought? You mean that you forced me to waste my money on." They didn't have them in her size, so Daphne insisted I buy them instead. I'm such a pushover.

She chooses to ignore me and sifts through my closet again. She pulls out a funky dark indigo sweater that has a weird curved zipper running down the neck and up its side. I bought it on impulse and have yet to wear it. "This is it. Wear this," she demands. She grabs my boots and tosses the ensemble to me. "Wear black panties." I smirk at her. "What? Gotta be color coordinated."

I change while she does her hair and make-up in the bathroom. "Are you sure you don't mind coming with me tonight?" I ask, my voice muffled by the sweater.

"Like I have anything better to do on a Friday night, Justin."

Sometimes I wonder if I'm holding her back; that if it wasn't for me, she'd have a steady boyfriend and maybe some really great girlfriends.

"Beside," she says, walking back into my room as I'm zipping up my pants. "I love hanging out with you. You're my best friend." She smiles sweetly and I'm filled with a deep sense of admiration for her. "Now," she smacks my ass, "What are we gonna do about your hair?"

Everywhere I look, there are hot men, many of which show obvious interest in me.

“See?” Daphne says, as we avoid the long line and slip past the bouncer with identical smiles. “I told you that outfit is hot. Plus, the black eye gives an edge about you. The mysterious, tough twink. I’m a genius.”

“Yeah,” I agree. “What would I do without you?” I grab her hand and lead her to the bar. She orders her usual mixed girly drink and I get my whiskey, straight up.

“Cheers,” we say together. I order my second shot, while Daphne slowly sips her drink. She is, after all, my designated driver.

“Looks like you’re getting some attention,” I tease her, nodding to a somewhat good-looking man dancing at the edge of the dance floor.

Daphne laughs, leaning against the back of the bar comfortably. “Uh, I’m guessing it’s you he’s been eyeing, Justin. This is Babylon, after all.”

Hm. I look back at him and he smiles. A glint of metal flashes under the bright lights. He has braces. I’ve had a bad experience with braces and quickly lose interest in him.

“Hey,” Daphne nudges me. “Isn’t that Brian’s friend Michael?” She asks, pointing to the entrance of Babylon. We stare as Michael, smiling, glides into Babylon as if he owns the place. Draped across his shoulders is a very handsome man who totally looks like Superman. “Oooh,” Daphne says suddenly. “I get it.”

I offer her a curious look.

“Michael’s gay and in love with Brian. Brian doesn’t love him like that, so he sneaks into Brian’s loft and sleeps in his bed in order to remain close. He probably settled for that guy ‘cause he can’t get the one he really wants.”

“That’s twisted, Daph,” I mutter. But I have to admit, she’s probably right. “Luckily, Brian’s not gay.”

Michael and Superman order some drinks very close to us. Daph and I both stand and watch them, not caring how obvious we’re being.

“Hey! Isn’t that Emmett? From that one store on Liberty?” Daphne asks me, nodding to the tall man that just joined Michael and Superman.

He must hear us because his eyes land on us and he smiles. Wide. He claps his hands and rushes over to us. “Hi!” His voice is full of excitement. “I was wondering if I’d run into you guys again.” Emmett gives Daphne the once over. “Wow, honey. You look beautiful.” She blushes slightly. He turns to me and licks his lips. “And you. Wow!” I give him a polite smile. I’m definitely not attracted to him and don’t want to send him the wrong signals. Although, he’s definitely the type of guy I would be friends with. He leans close to my face and gasps. “Oh, my God. What happened to your eye?” He examines me a little longer and then grins. “You know what? That’s kind of hot. Come on! Lemme introduce you to my friends,” he says, grabbing our hands and pulling us toward Michael and Superman. Fuck.

Daphne sneers silently as Emmett drags us. We end up being pushed into a somewhat bored looking man who’s just joined Michael.

“Sorry, Teddy,” Emmett laughs. “Justin. Daphne. This is Ted Schmidt. Teddy, this is Justin and Daphne.” We shake hands.

Recognition dawns on Michael’s face and he grimaces. It’s not obvious, but I think it’s because I’m staring at him so intently that I notice his reaction. Well, good.

“This is Ben,” Emmett tells us, introducing us to the man who looks like Superman. “And this is his partner, Michael.” Michael shakes our hands.

“We’ve met Michael before,” Daphne announces to the group, smiling sweetly.

Michael pales and then a dark blush covers his cheeks as the rest of the group look at him expectantly. “Yeah,” he explains. “Uh, we met at Brian’s loft.”

“When was this?” Ben asks. He’s not being accusatory, just curious.

Michael blushes some more when Daphne answers, “Sometime last week. Michael came by the loft unannounced while Brian was at work--”

She’s interrupted. “Can’t I ever get rid of you two?” It’s Brian.

What the hell is he doing here?! I spin around to face him and my mouth dries up. He looks so edible. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him in casual clothing. Well, beside that first night when I lost my wallet. But he wasn’t really dressed. Sweats don’t count. Although, he did look pretty tantalizing then, too.

Brian’s talking to the group, but I can’t seem to focus on his words; only that sweet mouth saying them. All around us, men are checking him out. How is it a straight man can hold his own at a club like Babylon?

“First the diner and now Babylon,” Daphne jokes. “You better watch out or Justin’ll think you’re gay and try to fuck you.”

Brian drops the beer he’s ordered, stepping away from the bar quickly before any of the liquid can stain his clothing. Confusion washes over his face as he turns to look at me. The rest of the group begins to snicker.

And then Brian grins.

Have you ever been hit with a sudden sense of dread? Well, that’s just happened to me. And for some reason, I have a feeling that it’ll be followed closely by humiliation.

“What? But, Brian is...” Emmett doesn’t finish whatever he was going to say because this guy comes up to Brian and whispers something in his ear. Brian pulls back and looks him over.

He turns back to me and raises his brow. “Straight?” He asks, licking his lips suggestively, holding my stare for a moment longer before grabbing the guy’s belt loop and leading the man towards the... back room? What?

“Where’s he going?” Daphne asks.

“To his wicked ways,” Ben answers, following Brian with his eyes.

I turn to look at Daphne, my mouth open. “What?” I can’t quite comprehend what they’re talking about.

Daphne laughs and pats my back.

“You’re telling me you didn’t know that Brian’s family?” Emmett asks, mouth agape in wonder. “I mean...” He trails off as I blush a mortifying shade of red. “How could you not know? He’s so... gay.”

I wheel around. “One more,” I yell at the bartender.

Of course, one more turns into three more and I find myself dancing a storm with half the men in Babylon.

I’m a fool.

The alcohol in my system has yet to erase the utter embarrassment I feel right now. I really need another drink. Maybe two more will do the trick. I can’t face them anymore.

I stuck around long enough to hear that not only is Brian gay, he tricks like there's no tomorrow. And, get this, he doesn't "do" love or relationships or anything... well... normal. Which, I guess, is good. I mean, at least I won't have the option of making a fool of myself even more by trying to date the man.

Oh my God. It hits me. I could date Brian. In theory. Because he's... gay.

I still have so many questions. Like, what about Lindsay? And Gus?

I haven't felt this confused in a long time.

"I could use a drink," I say to the man dancing in front of me.

He smiles. "I could buy you one." Generous. I nod and he rushes off. Mm, the power. He comes back moments later, a beer in his hands. I down the beer, letting the cold liquid glide down my throat. Some of it leaks out of my mouth. I use my arm to wipe it off, aware that the man is watching me intently.

"What's your name?" I ask him, handing him the beer, but he shakes his head.

"Trevor," he answers. "Here." He pulls out a plastic bag full of little pills.

I know I shouldn't, but I still can't swallow the humiliation I felt when I found out about Brian. What kind of homosexual doesn't have gaydar? So, I hold out my hand for some of the drugs. He grins, pouring out three of them and nodding to my beer.

"Take them with that. They'll work faster that way."

I do as he suggests, finishing the rest of my beer in one horrifyingly huge gulp. I sputter, dropping the bottle to the floor and kicking it away from me.

He places his hands around my waist and pulls me closer. We dance and finally, all the alcohol I've had tonight is taking effect. But, has to be the drugs that's making the club around me hazy and muffled.

I'm starting to lose balance; to lose control of my body. I decide that I don't like these drugs. Trevor's watching me intently and, fuck, I know I just walked into a trap. "I woulda let you fuck me anyway," I slur. "This wasn't necessary." Is it really that much easier to drug someone up than it is to pick them up?

At least he has the decency to blush. "How was I supposed to know that?"

"I'm dancing with you, aren't I?" I ask. Wow. It's like everything around me is so clear, but... not. Like those dreams where you know what you're looking at, but you can't quite see it.

Trevor shrugs. "Had to make sure."

What a fucking loser. I shake my head and turn from him, ready to walk away.

"Where do you think you're going?" He asks, gripping my arm until it hurts. The tone of his voice alerts me.

"To my friends. I'm going home."

"With me."

"No," I demand, tearing my arm away from his grasp. "With them."

I stumble blindly on the dance floor, instinctively making my way toward the bar. Trevor's behind me the whole time.

Finally, I see Daphne, giggling with Emmett, who's talking with loud gestures. They lean against each other and I reach out.

"Daphne," I croak, practically falling into her confused arms. Trevor backs away, the crowd covering his tracks. "I'm high," I tell her.

She sighs, "You're drunk." She's about to say more when her eyes widen and she looks back at me, biting her lip. Brian must've returned. That's the only explanation.

Sure enough, he's sauntering over to us as if nothing has changed. He even fucking smiles at me. I guess for him, nothing has changed. But for me... it's like my whole concept of reality is off kilter.

Especially with these drugs in my system.

He orders himself a shot of whiskey and I take personal pride in the fact that we both drink the same type of alcohol.

No one mentions my little blunder; my huge mistake. Good. I start to giggle at my stupidity.

Brian studies me, holding my gaze before glancing at my chest to check out my breathing, I suppose. "What are you on?" He asks.

Daphne explains, "He's drunk, Brian."

But I shake my head. "No, no, no. Only had a few," I tell him, holding up my hand and verbally counting off the alcohol I've consumed.

"You shouldn't mix hard liquor with beer," Brian leans in. "You'll get a nasty headache."

"I'm high," I try to tell them again.

Amused, Brian settles against the bar, pulling me closer. I must remember to mark this occasion as the first time Brian touched me out of his own volition. I mean touched me. Like in a flirtatious, teasing way. Yeah. Now it's painfully obvious that he's queer. "Oh?" He asks. "On what?"

"Dunno. Trevor gave 'em to me."

All the humor leaves his face. "Who's that?" He asks.

I shrug. "Some guy I was dancing with. Kinda cute."

Daphne's suddenly next to his side, talking to me with rushed words. "You know you shouldn't take drugs from strangers. Especially if you don't know what's in the drugs. What if you're allergic? You could die, Justin."

At least these drugs aren't making me paranoid. "Calm down, Daf-IH-nee," I pronounce her name with great accuracy. Brian's arm is still holding me in place. This really shouldn't feel as good as it does. I mean, God, he's hardly touching me. But his hands are on my body and he's gay and that makes it incredible. "If I was 'llergic to 'em, which I'm not, I'd already be having a reaction."

"But--"

I shake my head. "Don't worry, Taffy Laffy Daffy," I giggle at my own stupidity. "This isn't as bad as some drugs I've taken. Remember our Winter Formal junior year?" I have the sudden overwhelming urge to sit down.

"Justin," Brian begins, placing his hands beneath my arms to hold me up. "This isn't exactly the safest place to sit."

“Brian,” I say slowly. “Bri... an... Brian... Siren... Lion... Zion... Uh... Hawaiian...”

Daphne laughs nervously. “He’s talking in rhymes. That means he’ll soon be out in the next stratosphere. I need to get him home.”

“Come on, Sunshine,” Brian tells me, standing me up straight, wiping imaginary lint off my clothing. “I’ll help you to your car.”

“This is the second time you’ve saved me. My hero,” I tease, nodding. Before he can lead us out of the club, though, I press my hands firmly against his face. “I thought you is... was...” I stumble, trying to find the correct word. “Straight.”

He snorts, the noise echoing beautifully in my head. “Yes. I know.”

“You aren’t though,” I tell him rather than ask. I might as well be slobbering over him. “That’s good.” He helps me walk, wrapping an arm around my waist as I make a clumsy bee line for the exit. “I was embarrassed. So I drank. Then Trevor came ‘round and I couldn’t forget bein’ embarrassed yet so I asked for a drink. I drank. Then he offered me some pills. I took.” I stop walking and look at the dance floor conspiratorially. “His drugs are bad,” I whisper.

Brian nods, humoring me, I’m sure. “I’ll punish him later,” he promises.

“No,” I disagree. “You should punish me instead.”

Chapter 8

Brian

Christ, this kid’s gonna give me an aneurysm.

Justin’s right, this is the second time he’s found himself in my arms, on the verge of passing out. I’m practically carrying his bumbling ass outside. Let’s not talk about the level of responsibility I feel for him. Or why I feel this way. Instead, let’s talk about Justin thinking I’m straight.

Me. Brian Kinney. Straight?

Either he doesn’t have gaydar or I’m losing my touch.

Daphne turns to me. “My car’s around back, Brian. Can you wait with him while I get it?” Like she has to ask.

I lean Justin up against the brick wall, underneath the neon glow that brightly announces Babylon to the world. Placing one hand on his stomach to keep him upright, my other hand reaches into my pocket to pull out a pack of cigarettes.

“Want one?” I hold the pack in front of Justin. His eyes are glazed and he merely smiles at me.

Never take free drugs from some trick trying to fuck you. Everyone knows this.

And never drink so much if it turns you into a pool of rambling idiocracy. Yet, there’s something so endearing about the way Justin’s been stumbling and babbling.

Still. What an idiot.

Justin’s voice is soft, but strangely sober considering his condition when he asks, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

The side of his face is rubbing against the cool brick, his eyes huge.

“How could you not know?” I tease, turning on my side to look at him. He has such white skin. And his hair, it reflects all sorts of lights. God, he truly is a gorgeous creature.

Justin’s reaction is slow. “But... you have a son,” he states, as if that is the end all.

Shrugging, I grin at him. “Mere formalities.”

Daphne’s small black car drives up to the curb and she honks the horn. I hate small cars. I hate how even their horns sound cute.

“Come on,” I tell Justin, pushing off the wall and carefully gripping his elbow. I steady him and then we slowly make our way to Daphne’s car.

I pull open the door, but before I can tuck him in, he wheels around. “You should’ve told me,” his voice is strong, even though his words slur together.

His words make me feel... bad. Ashamed. As if I meant to deceive him. “Why?”

I’m expecting a big production. Hell, I’m used to this type of shit. What with Mikey and Lindsay...

But what Justin says... surprises me. He throws me a brilliant smile and lets out a near seductive laugh. “Because, Mr. Kinney,” he runs his hands down my shirt, resting his fingertips inside the top of my pants. “We could’ve been fucking weeks ago.”

Before I have time to react, he tangles his hands in my hair and pulls me down quickly for a searing kiss. Even with all the drugs and alcohol in his system, his kiss is perfect. He’s caressing the inside of my mouth with determination, moaning in such a sexy and tempting way, it’s almost dangerous.

Justin’s hands leave my hair too soon. His tongue brushes the roof of my mouth one last time before he slides out of my arms and into Daphne’s car.

I’m left, breathless and amazed, watching them drive away.

“Well, well, well,” Emmett’s voice startles me out of whatever daze I’m in. “That was some kiss, Brian.”

“Fuck off,” I tell him, wanting, so badly, to go back inside, but I can’t. I’m still staring in the direction Justin left, my mouth open in wonder.

Emmett glides up next to me, following my gaze before I have a chance to look elsewhere. “He’s cute.”

“Mm hmm.” The way Emmett’s looking at me, as if he knows something important, is making me nervous. I place another cigarette in between my lips, offering him one before I light up. He declines, which is to be expected.

“And nice,” Emmett continues. I roll my eyes. “He and Daphne came into Torso a couple times. He’s such a sweetie. Smart, too. And personable. You should’ve seen--”

“Emmett,” I cut him off. He straightens his back in a mock butch pose, ready to argue. Instead, I surprise him and say, “I know all this.”

Emmett’s mouth drops open, but he recovers quickly. “So...” Emmett trails off. So... what? I turn to him and hold out my hands, indicating that he should continue. “I bet he’s stellar in bed. With that ass, I can’t imagine him to be anything less than a fabulous fuck. What do you think?”

I could just ignore him, but instead, as I’m inhaling the smoke, I mutter, “How the hell would I know? After all, he thought it was straight.”

“But you knew he’s gay right away?”

“Yeah.”

“But you haven’t fucked him?”

“Yeah.”

Biting back a smile, Emmett wraps his arms around his body and says, “Let make sure I’m understanding this whole situation. He obviously thinks you’re the best thing since vibrating dildos, but mistook you for being straight. All the while, you think he’s a little hottie and, in a manner so unlike yourself, you decide... not to fuck him?”

“It never came up.”

He raises his eyebrows and laughs. “You? Or him?”

I can feel my eyebrows furrow with confusion and then I realize he’s joking. “Not like that. I mean...”

He’s laughing hysterically now, clutching my arm to balance himself as he wipes his tears away. “You should’ve seen your face. Priceless.”

I shake him off and flick my cigarette into the street. “You can continue your fit out here and freeze your ass off. I, on the other hand, am going back inside and getting laid.”

Emmett follows me, stopping me before I can reenter Babylon. “Wait,” he demands, breathless. “What about Justin?”

“What about Justin?”

“Well, he... I mean, you... That kiss was... Incredible... Aren’t you going to...”

“What? Follow him home and fuck his brains out?”

Emmett looks taken aback “Well, yeah. I mean, you’re never one to back down from something like that. I’ve seen men proposition themselves before, but you’ve never... been so affected.”

I wasn’t affected, dammit. I was surprised, is all. “Look, Emmett. You can live in your own little romantic queer kingdom, but me? I’d rather just get my dick sucked.”

“Tell that to Justin,” Emmett cautions me as I open the door. “He’s looking for a happily ever after.”

“Then he’s going to have to look somewhere else. It was just a kiss, Emmett. I’ve been kissed before.”

I leave him outside and let the familiarity of Babylon warm my skin.

My lips are burning from Justin’s kiss and I can’t help but think that maybe, in fact, I haven’t been kissed like that before. Like it meant something.

Even after all the shit I’ve just fed Emmett, I can’t help but feel as though I’ve told the biggest lie of my life.

Oh.

Wow.

What the hell am I thinking? He’s just a kid.

A kid with a great ass and even greater smile; a wonderful laugh and perfect sense of humor; determined skills and a brilliant mind.

No. This isn't usual. I don't think these things.

It's probably because I've cut back on tricking so much, it's affecting me mentally. I haven't had dick in a week, that has to be why I'm pining away. I let my eyes search Babylon for a fix; something to help me stop thinking like... someone with a crush. I don't do crushes. I do men; many men.

There's a tall brunet in the corner, smiling suggestively at me. Yeah. He'll do.

Justin

Daphne and I are eating breakfast at the Liberty Diner. She has this amazed look on her face as she studies me pick at my food. Not that I blame her. Because I, Justin Taylor, kissed Brian Kinney. I kissed him with more passion than I ever thought possible; than I've ever felt in my entire life. And I have a witness, and she's eating breakfast right across from me.

Even though I spent half the night hugging my toilet, I'm in such a chipper mood this morning. When I emerged from the bathroom, hair tousled, breath rank, the only thing I wanted to do was die. And then, while I was drowning in coffee, I remembered Brian. I remembered that he's gay. And that I kissed him. I conveniently pushed aside the memories of me being a complete fool. Who cares about that when I had my tongue down his throat?

"He's gay, Daph," I inform her for the umpteenth time.

"And you kissed him," She repeats, grinning madly. "I mean, really kissed him."

We're both feeling pretty damn proud right now.

A shadow hides my breakfast and I look up. It's Lindsay, with Gus in a carrier. "Justin?" She asks, hesitantly. "I don't know if you remember me..."

"Yeah. Lindsay, right? Want to join us?" I ask her, scooting closer to the wall in order to make room for her.

"No. Actually..." She trails off and blushes. I'm immediately intrigued.

"What?" I ask, grinning at Gus, who's drooling happily onto his bib. "Hey, Gus," I say. "I'm Justin. Remember me?" He giggles loudly and reaches out for me. Ah. If wonder if his father is anything like this. Yeah right. I remember what all his friends said about him last night. Brian is not the type of guy who would be in a relationship. Dammit, a kid can dream, can't he?

"He really likes you," Lindsay smiles, taking Gus out of the carrier and handing him to me. He shrieks and starts to gnaw on my neck as I hold him against my chest. "Listen..." She begins again.

I smile encouragingly at her. "What is it, Lindsay?"

She sighs. "My wife left some important papers at our house and she needs them for a trial. Unfortunately, the courthouse is quite the drive from here. I have to drive them to her, but Gus hates long car rides. I can't get a hold of Brian or any of our other friends and I really need to do this for Melanie. I know you don't know me that well... Hell, I don't know you too well, but Brian seemed to like you well enough and you seem pretty laid back and Gus really likes you--"

"You need me to baby-sit?" I interrupt, gripping Gus tightly as he begins to dance in my lap.

She's glowing. "Could you?"

“Sure,” I shrug, glancing at Daphne. “I have nothing better to do.”

“Oh, my God. You’re a lifesaver. But, listen, I have to leave like right away...”

“Oh.” I start to slide out of the booth, but then stop. “Uh, Lindsay. I... We don’t live in a very good neighborhood--”

She laughs and shakes her head. “Don’t worry about that. If you want to come home with me right now, you can stay at my place and watch him. Actually, I’d prefer that. I’ll leave a message with Brian, so hopefully he’ll come relieve you as soon as he can.”

Brian. I almost forgot about him for like, a minute. Personal best, I think.

Daphne laughs softly. I so want to glare at her, but instead, I grin widely.

“Can Daphne come?” I ask, standing up, cradling Gus to my body.

So, Lindsay’s married... Not to Brian, or any man for that matter.

That’s good.

Daphne’s curled up on the couch, watching TV while Gus naps in his playpen. I’m snooping around, of course. Not going through their drawers or anything, just checking out the space. Lindsay and her wife, Melanie, have done well for themselves. This is a great house. But, God, what is it about lesbians and earth tones? This place could really use some color. And if they tear down this wall, they could make the kitchen so much more spacious--

Ah. Spoken like a true carpenter.

There’s a wall covered in family photographs. Brian’s in many, some of which I can tell were taken when he and Lindsay were around my age. He hasn’t really changed. I squint as I look at a photograph of them in graduation robes. No. Brian’s gotten better looking with age.

I’m tempted to go upstairs, but I feel like that’s invading their privacy too much. Instead, I wander back to the living room and settle next to Daph on the couch.

“Oooh,” I exclaim, when I see the screen. “Turn this up! I love this show!” I kick off my shoes and lay on my side, my head in Daphne’s lap.

We eventually drift off, the soft talking on screen lulls us to sleep.

Gus’ sharp cry wakes me up with a start. Daphne’s a deep sleeper, so it’s no wonder she doesn’t stir as Gus beings to wail. A tall figure bends over to pick Gus up and when he turns around, I see that it’s Brian. I don’t think he sees us on the couch because he starts whispering to his son, bouncing him gently in his arms.

I’m given a rare moment to watch Brian unreserved and it’s a wonderful sight. “You’re so good with him,” I whisper, sliding off the couch. He jumps, but recovers quickly.

“I didn’t see you,” he answers, glancing over at Daphne, who’s begun her soft snoring. “Deep sleeper?”

“A fucking log.”

He smiles softly at me, searching my face, making me self-conscious. "Want some coffee or something?" He asks, motioning to the kitchen.

"Sure." My heart thunders in my chest. I'm beginning to feel inadequate again. He's so... high maintenance, it seems. His fancy loft, expensive clothing, top of the line jeep... it all calls out money. Something I don't have. "I'm sorry about last night," I blurt out after he hands Gus over to me so that he can start the coffee.

His hands stop moving and I expect him to make some snide comment, but instead, he shrugs his shoulders. "I just hope you learned your lesson. Don't take drugs with people you don't know."

"I was apologizing for kissing you."

"Oh," he remarks. "Don't apologize for that." He pours water in the coffee machine and presses the on button. He jumps onto the counter, his long legs making the movement easy for him. "Beside, I liked it."

You know those moments when you feel as though you can die right then and be absolutely content? When he says that, I swear I'd die happy.

"I did, too," I whisper, hiding my joy in Gus' soft hair.

"Hey."

I look up and he's watching me, a sweet little smile softening his face.

"What?"

"I'm gay," he answers, shrugging his shoulders and leaning into the cabinets behind him. "I don't want you to feel like... I deceived you."

"No. Of course not," I'm quick to answer. "I should've known."

He laughs. "Yeah, you should have. But, I'm not some nelly queen..."

"Obviously, my gaydar needs some improvement."

"Or, perhaps, you lack gaydar all together?"

I laugh, relieved that there isn't any awkwardness between the two of us. I really like him. "Probably."

Daphne stumbles in, rubbing the back of her neck. "Fuck, that couch is the most uncomfortable place to sleep," she yawns, unaware of Brian's presence.

"I could've told you that." He laughs when she jumps a foot off the ground.

She throws a furtive glance between me and Brian before smelling the air. "Mmm, coffee," she sighs.

"How long have you been asleep?" He asks, amused.

Shrugging, Daphne studies the clock on the microwave. "Two hours."

Brian snorts and rolls his eyes. "Are you always this glazed when you wake up?"

I nod behind her back as she denies the statement's validity.

Gus begins to whine impatiently. "I think it's time for you to feed my son," Brian tells us.

Daphne pulls out a bottle from the fridge and heats it up. I wonder how she's gotten this good at being a mother, considering how very little time she spends with children. I'm almost frightened to think about Daphne having her own children because I don't think she'd ever stop. I doubt she'd settle for anything less than three. Looking at Gus, I can't imagine being able to take care of even one.

She tests the bottle on her wrist, grinning in satisfaction. Instead of gathering Gus in her arms and feeding him, however, she smirks and walks over to Brian. "I think it's time you feed your son."

He grumbles, but accepts the bottle, sliding off the counter. "I'm telling Lindsay about this. This is why you're getting paid," but the softness in his face as he reaches for his son takes any of the bite out of his words.

"Actually," I say. "We're doing this for free. Out of our own goodwill."

"That's..."

"Kind? Sweet? Nice?" I offer.

"Stupid."

Huffing, I cross my arms over my chest.

Before I can give my witty retort, Daphne laughs. "Come on. Let's watch some TV."

"God," Brian says. "Kids and their TVs." But he follows her out to the living room, settling on one end. Daphne sits on the other end, leaving me no choice but to squeeze in between them. Brian's bare shoulder brushes my arm and I close my eyes briefly, reveling in the touch.

With my eyes closed, all my senses become more acute. I can hear Brian breathing softly next to me; slow and heavy. His warmth is shooting into my body in waves, pulsating through me. The smell of cigarettes is faint underneath the musky odor of his cologne. I inhale deeply, the scent making me feel reminiscent for something I've never had before, but have wanted desperately my whole life. I pull my legs up to my chest and wrap my arms around them.

"That can't be too comfortable," Brian says. My eyes snap open. He gestures to my chosen position and I hug my legs tighter.

Brian complains a little while later. "I think my son needs to be changed."

When I don't rush to volunteer, Daphne sighs, hoisting herself noisily off the couch. "I'll do it," she says, holding her arms out for Gus.

Brian looks amused. He sticks his tongue in his cheek before asking, "You like changing diapers? Kinky?"

"Shut up," Daphne snickers. "I like children, that's all."

We watch her retreating back. I'm pretty sure I should scoot over and give Brian some room, but my body won't move. I enjoy being pressed against him like this. Every once in a while, he shifts, causing his jean clad legs to rub against my bare arm. I can feel the small hairs on the back of my neck lift with excitement.

Resting my cheek on top of my knees, I take a risk and use our time together to contemplate Brian's features. He has such a strong profile and for the first time in weeks, I have the sudden desire to draw. Everything about him is so prominent--his nose, chin, and lips. I want to capture it all in charcoal. Or maybe ink. I'm so focused on the way his jaw attaches to the back of his ear and the perfection of it that I don't notice Brian slowly move his head to look at me until I'm staring into his eyes.

“What?” I ask, my stomach knotting up with anxiousness.

“I could ask the same thing.”

Blushing, I lift my shoulders and let them fall again in a lazy shrug. “Just... admiring the scenery.”

“I could say the same thing,” he repeats.

“Shut up,” I practically whisper, my mouth dry from nerves.

He turns to face me completely, his back resting against the arm of the couch. “You’re beautiful,” he tells me, reaching out to run his fingers through my hair.

“Not as beautiful as you,” I argue, boldly changing positions so that I’m facing him, knees spread around his legs, almost straddling him.

His hand moves from my hair to my cheek, brushing against it with the pads of his fingers.

I don’t know what he wants from me and I’m not quite sure what, in the long run, I want from him, but I know, at this moment, the only thing I need is to kiss him. So I do. I, again, initiate our kiss. His lips open to mine immediately, as if he’s waiting for this and I grin before losing myself in his warm, soft kiss.

I feel his tongue brush my lips and that does it. I fall into his lap, pressing my body firmly into his own, moving my hand down to cup his groin. He makes a soft noise of pleasure, wrapping my body in his arms and dipping his hands into the back of my jeans. His hands are hot and dry, just how I like them. He slides them underneath my briefs and grips my ass firmly, causing me to moan loudly. I can feel him smirk against my lips.

My hands fumble with the button of his jeans, finally able pull the zipper down. The slowness of my movement causes Brian to lift his hips in anticipation. He’s not wearing anything under his jeans and I break the kiss to glance down, my hand cradling his semi-hard cock. He butts his forehead against mine and I look into his eyes.

“Don’t start anything you can’t finish,” he whispers, moving his own fingers to a certain part of my body.

I gasp, “You too.” He digs deeper and my eyes flutter shut. I go from thinking Brian’s straight to having his fingers up my ass in less than twenty-four hours. Awesome.

His cock twitches in my hand and I give it a tight squeeze before forcing my eyes open. His own eyes are boring into mine with such intensity that I can’t breath. I wonder what he’s thinking. What does he see when he looks at me? I lose all rational thought as his tongue creeps out of his mouth and pushes into mine. I practically swallow his tongue, stroking his penis with renewed urgency.

Brian’s fingers push against me and I gasp. “Yeah,” I murmur, sighing as he brushes against that spot deep inside me.

I’m about to open my mouth to his tongue once more when I hear a laugh behind us. We tear away from each other and find Daphne, covering Gus’ eyes with her hand, laughing hysterically.

What a way to ruin the mood.

Chapter 9

Brian

I can still hear Daphne giggling as I close the bathroom door.

I stumble to the toilet and sit down, ready to spend the rest of the day in this small, tiled room. Anything's better than being out there with them.

I can still feel him, tight, around my fingers. God, my lips must be shredded. I resist the urge to bring my hand to my mouth in order to feel the swell of my lips. I sigh and open the little window next to the toilet, searching my pockets for my cigarettes.

It's like I lost all control out there.

Jesus Chris. When did I become so attracted to him?

I light my cigarette and inhale deeply. I really should quit. I spend a small fortune each year on these fucking cancerous piece of shits. I must buy a pack every other day now. That's three times a week. Twenty times four... I spend close to eighty dollars a month on cigarettes.

Doing this sort of mundane math has calmed my nerves--like what counting sheep is supposed to do when you can't sleep.

What I don't understand, though, is why my nerves are all shot? I am, as Mikey has reminded me thousands of times before, Brian Kinney for fuck's sake. And being Brian Kinney means usually being immune to whatever has been happening to me since I met Justin.

I scratch my head thoughtfully. I know I found him attractive since that first moment I opened the loft door, but when did it become so... overwhelming? And, really, if I'm so attracted to him, why haven't I fucked him yet? My hands press against my temples. I'm getting a headache.

There's a knock on the bathroom door.

"Brian?" Justin's voice calls through the door. "Are you going to come out?"

I snort.

"I mean, out of the bathroom," he laughs at his word choice. "You can't hide in there forever. Or, if you do, you should let me in. I can't face Daphne alone."

I contemplate telling him to fuck off. I even start to feel my mouth open to let the words roll off my tongue, but instead, I find myself reaching across the sink and unlocking the bathroom door, turning the handle slightly as an invitation. He slides in without opening the door completely.

"Smoking in the bathroom. How very high school of you," he smirks, grabbing my pack from between my legs. He picks up the lighter off the sink and expertly lights his cigarette, settling across from me on the large tub, content, it seems, to just be in here with me.

The added smoke from Justin's cigarette is too much for the small bathroom. The air around us becomes foggy and my eyes begin to sting. Justin's blinking rapidly and I wave my hand in the air to move the smoke around.

He laughs, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. "Yeah. Fuck. This is just like high school. Except normally we'd be in a single stall, practically sitting in each other's laps." He stops rubbing at his eyes and blushes, glancing quickly at me before flicking his ash into the tub behind him.

I toss my cigarette into the sink and turn on the faucet, letting the water run over the embers. I stand up and stretch, noticing how Justin's eyes follow my every movement. "We can make it just like high school," I tell him in a low voice.

"Oh?" He asks, grinning in confusion. "How's that?"

I move toward him until my the top of my calves brush his bent knees. "Like this," I say, pushing him into the tub, stretching out, my hands rushing to cover the back of his head before it hits the bottom. I step into the tub and slowly slide down to my knees, straddling his stomach. I'm enthralled by the way his pupils grow and his eyes darken. A natural flush warms his face and neck as his breath quickens. I tuck my hands beneath his arms and help him lift into a semi-sitting position.

"I don't know what high school you went to, but we didn't have whirlpools in the bathrooms," he jokes and it's the casual way he's handling this situation that tips the scales for me.

I want him. And I'll have him.

I lean down, my lips only brushing his. He makes a disappointed noise and juts out his chin. I run my tongue down his chin and across his neck, laving at the skin right above his collar. He sighs and offers more of his neck to me, so I pull down the neck of shirt and nibble at his collarbone. Justin has such soft skin. I don't think I've ever been with someone who's skin is as unblemished and perfect as Justin's.

He lets out a small whimper when I bite, hard, at the skin between his neck and shoulder.

"Brian." He can hardly say my name.

I swirl my tongue behind his ear and then pull back to study him.

"Brian," he repeats, obviously wanting to say something.

And I want to let him talk, but I have the sudden urge to bite his earlobe. I swoop down and gather the soft skin in my mouth. He gasps and stretches the back of my shirt.

"Oh, Brian," he moans as I lick my way across to his other ear. It really should be illegal for someone to taste as sweet as Justin does. There's no trace of a soap or cologne; nothing chemical-like burning my tongue.

The noises Justin makes are low... quiet. Like he's trying to keep this between the two of us. As I suck on his neck, leaving my signature on his body the way I've never marked a man before, I find myself addicted to the small sounds of pleasure he makes. They're so private and restricted. God. I want to make him scream. I want him to wake up this boring, conventional neighborhood.

Finally, I lower my lips to his, kissing him gently. His full bottom lip begs for attention.

He mumbles something, his words sucked into my mouth before I can understand them.

"What?" I gasp.

"I want you to fuck me," he whispers, pushing his groin into my ass. He's as hard as a rock.

"And I want to fuck you," I answer back, reaching into my back pocket for a condom and some lube. I show him the items and he groans, licking his lips. "I'm going to fuck you right here."

He nods hungrily, sliding his hands under my shirt, lifting it away from my body. I raise my arms and help him take my shirt off.

“Your pants,” he demands. “Take off your pants too.”

“Patience.” It’s difficult to maneuver in the empty bathtub, no matter how big it is.

“No. No patience.” He’s already unzipping my jeans and trying to push them down my spread thighs. The zipper brushes against my cock and I grab his hands to still his movements.

“Careful,” I warn him. “Or I won’t have a dick to fuck you with.”

“Yes, fuck me with it.” He’s losing coherent thought.

Because of me.

And that’s so hot.

I hoist my body onto my knees, dragging my pants down as far as they can go.

“No. All the way,” he bites out. “I want them all the way off.”

I’m agreeable. I stand up and rip off my shoes in order to get my jeans off.

“Oh, God,” he moans, eyeing my naked body like a hawk. At least I know he likes what he sees.

I help Justin move so that he’s laying vertically in the tub, allowing his body to stretch out. “Do me,” he says, struggling to sit upright. “I wanna be naked, too.”

I grin. “Oh, there is no question that that’s gonna happen.” I sit across from him and pull off his shirt.

“I see construction has done your body some favors,” I grin, running my hand along his surprisingly well-defined muscles. Oh. He has his nipple pierced. He bites his lips when I twist it.

The rest of his body proves just as rewarding.

I don’t know what’s happening to me, but I find myself thinking that he is the most gorgeous man I’ve ever laid eyes on.

I push him onto his back and the expression on his face makes me bark out a laugh. I don’t think he expects me to fuck him in this position. Maybe he’s even a bit self-conscious about it.

He seems so innocent and inexperienced as I place his legs on my shoulders. It’s... sweet.

But that faux naivety disappears after I prepare him and push into his body for the first time. His eyes almost fly out of their sockets before he closes them and moans. There’s a brief moment when I think that all he’ll do is lay there while I fuck him, but that’s gone after I force myself all the way inside.

He opens his eyes and nods, pulling away as I pull out and then pressing his ass onto my dick as I return. He clenches me so tightly that, when he first does it, I think I might come before I can leave his body for a second thrust.

Justin senses my urgency and relaxes his muscles, still meeting each thrust, but not torturing me with an iron grip. At least, not until I’m fucking him at a frantic pace, his damp body rubbing noisily against the bottom of the tub. He makes it more difficult to pull out--his muscles clamping down on my cock with unbelievable force. I’m growling,

from both the effort of pushing against the hold he has on my cock and the pleasure of being gripped with such force.

I spit on my hand and begin to tug on his cock, which has been rubbing against my stomach, aching for attention. He lifts his back and moans loudly... but not loud enough. I swivel my hips and reach out to grasp his nipple ring.

He screams.

Yes. Much, much better.

I groan.

“Brian,” he gasps, our breathing almost swallow his words. “Must. Come. Now.” He screams again and, with one last stroke of my hand on his dick, comes.

It’s like an avalanche. Every muscle in his body tightens, his hands squeezing my arms and ripping at my hair. I come not seconds after he does, both of us still groaning as we collapse.

Finally, after many long minutes of recovery, I stand up, yanking a whimpering Justin to his feet. Pulling the curtain around the bath, I turn on the shower.

“I don’t think I ever did that in high school. I think I like your version a lot better,” he laughs, leaning against the wall. He glances down at his hands. My eyes follow his gaze and I see that he’s shaking. “Wow.”

I want to say something witty. Something he’ll remember, but instead, I let out an incoherent moan. I move to lean into him, but my legs aren’t working. “I’m jelly,” I tell him, grinning nervously. I didn’t mean to say that.

Smiling, Justin pushes off the wall and into my arms. “At least I’m not the only one.”

I nod against his hair, inhaling deeply.

“Brian,” he begins. “I’m glad you’re not straight.”

I can’t help it when I start to laugh.

Hell, I’m glad I’m not straight.

“Brian,” Lindsay’s greets us as we exit the bathroom. Justin nearly trips when he hears her voice, uneven blotches of red paint his face while he refuses to look at her. “Daphne said you were giving Justin a tour of the house.”

Daphne grins from over Lindsay’s shoulder. “Yeah, next time it’s my turn for a... tour.” She exaggerates the last word, raising her eyebrows. “It sounded like you guys were having loads of fun.”

Justin clears his throat. “Loads,” he agrees, weakly.

Daphne laughs heartily and takes Justin’s hand. “We have to get going,” she tells us.

Lindsay follows them to the door. “Thank you so much.” She stops Justin from leaving. “Are you feeling okay?” She asks, concerned.

“I’m fine. Great, actually.” For the first time since we leave the bathroom, Justin smiles. There’s something in that smile that makes it shine so bright. I have to resist the urge to yell at Justin to go home; to stay in his apartment and

never leave; to hide under his blankets and deny even the sunlight to affect him, because I don't want anything to hinder that smile.

Post-coital mental retardation. Yes. That's what this is. That's what this feeling is.

Daphne tugs on Justin's arm, pulling him outside. "Bye," she calls out to us.

I can literally feel my face droop when I hear their car start.

"What's the matter with you?" Lindsay questions when I continue to stare off into space for a good minute.

Shaking my head clear, I grin hesitantly. "Whaddya mean?"

"You," she inspects my face. "You look like your dad ran over your kitten."

That's pathetic, even coming from Lindsay's mouth. I walk into the living room and settle onto the couch, flipping on the TV and searching aimlessly for something decent to watch. Lindsay's ogling me from the doorway, her face giving away her curiosity. Slowly, I see a wide smile stretch across her face.

Here we go.

"Did something happen?"

Refusing to take my eyes off the TV, I shrug. "Nope."

She's silent and just when I'm beginning to think that I got out of that interrogation too easily, she snickers. "Something did happen."

I turn up the volume of the TV and she begins to giggle. "So, you're gonna ignore me. In the rare and difficult to understand language of Brian Kinney, that means something important happened and you're not ready to talk about it, but it's eating you alive."

"No, in the common and fluent language of Brian Kinney, that means fuck off." I lift myself off the couch and brush past her, heading for the door.

"Where are you going?" She asks, following me into the hall.

"Well, Gus doesn't need me now that Mother Dyke is home. I thought I'd leave."

Lindsay nods, opening the door for me. Right before I can slip out, she grabs my arm and says, "I'm going to get to the bottom of this. And when I do, you can bet your ass that I'll be making fun of you about it for the rest of your life." She raises her eyebrows, mocking me, and smiles that little deceptive grin she saves for only special occasions. Like when she thinks she's one over Brian Kinney.

"Good luck," I answer, smirking.

I can feel her eyes on my back as I walk to my jeep. "See you tomorrow," she calls.

Chapter 10

Justin

"In the tub?" Daphne asks, her voice shrieking with excitement. "You fucked Brian Kinney in the bathtub?"

"No," I say slowly. "He fucked me."

"Same thing," Daphne insists absently. She keeps glancing at me and I can catch a little bit of jealousy seeping through. Who wouldn't be jealous? Brian's fucking amazing. That was the most spectacular orgasm I've ever had.

I laugh. "Uh, no, Daph. It's not the same thing. To be fucked by someone is entirely different than to fuck someone," I tell her in that snobby way I tend to use when I know something she doesn't. It's rare, so when it happens, I milk it for all it's worth.

She waves her hand, dismissing my statement. "So... do you love him?"

"I don't know. I mean, I didn't even know he was gay until a couple nights ago. I know I like him... a lot..."

Daphne's silent for a moment, before saying, "Do you think you could love him?"

"Yes," I answer right away. Because I could. I just don't know if I do yet. Love... love is such a fickle concept.

"I have to ask this, Justin," She grins. "How was it?"

I shrug. "Good," I reply. She doesn't get to know how phenomenal it was. The special way Brian made me feel, well, that's all for me. Me alone.

"C'mon, Justin. Don't be like that. Give me details," she begs, opening her big brown eyes and fluttering her lashes.

"Shouldn't you be paying attention to the road," I ask. Dammit. I hate when she does the whole I'm-Bambi-and-my-mommy-just-died-so-pity-me-and-do-whatever-I-say thing. 'Cause it works every time. "Fine," I grumble. "What do you wanna know?"

But before Daphne has time to ask the most embarrassing questions, my cell phone rings. I don't recognize the number. Raising an eyebrow, I flip it open. "Yeah?"

"Justin," a female voice asks. "It's Lindsay Peterson."

"Oh. Hey, Lindsay. Is something wrong?"

Daphne mouths "What's going on?" But I hold up a hand to stall her as Lindsay proceeds to say, "No. Nothing's wrong. I wanted to call and thank you, again, for taking care of Gus. That was really thoughtful of you and I appreciate it."

"He wasn't any trouble. Especially... with Brian there," I can feel my cheeks heat up thinking about what we did in her bathroom. Shit. In her bathtub. I wonder, vaguely, if they use it on a regular basis.

Lindsay laughs softly into the phone. "Sometimes Brian's a bigger handful than Gus."

I pause, unsure of whether or not I'm supposed to answer that.

Lindsay continues, saying, "Anyway, I think you and Daphne are great kids--" I huff and she corrects herself. I can hear the smile in her voice when she says, "You are great people. I think the rest of the gang would love you guys if

given the chance. Listen, we're having a family breakfast tomorrow at a friend's house. I wanted to know if you and Daphne were interesting in joining us."

I shoot Daphne a look and lower the phone, covering the mouthpiece with my hand. "She's inviting us to some family breakfast thingy tomorrow."

"I'm in," Daphne replies right away. Before I can open my mouth and argue, she says, "What? It's free food, Justin."

That's true. I nod my head and put the phone back to my ear. "Sure. What time?"

Daphne makes me change out of the suit I initially put on this morning.

"It's an informal breakfast, Justin. We're not going to a wedding banquet or anything."

I'm grumpy about this right until we walk down the narrow cement pathway leading to a small house near Liberty Avenue. But when I hear the easy laughter and jovial voices from within, I'm glad Daph made me change.

My hand closes in on the doorbell, but before I have a chance to push the button, an older man opens the door.

"Welcome," he says happily. "I'm Vic Grassi."

"Daphne." Daphne stretches out her hand to introduce herself.

I do the same. "Justin."

Vic has such a warm smile. I'm reminded of my dad, for some reason. Oh, yeah. That Christmas when I was seventeen and he bought me a laptop. I remember him being so eagerly compliant, waiting with an expectant grin on his face as I tore off the wrapping. It wasn't what I asked for. I wanted a stainless steel, adjustable paint easel and I remember... well, being a bratty teenager about it, but now... Now, I wouldn't replace that look on his face for the most expensive art product in the world.

I have to look away from Vic because he reminds me of a life, and a father, I will never have again. As if sensing my distress, Daphne places a comforting hand on the small of my back. She grins softly at me. God, I love her.

Vic ushers us into the living room and everyone stops talking to take in our presence, smiling and waving as they recognize us.

"I think I'm the only person you haven't met," a brunette woman says, crossing the room. "I'm Melanie Marcus. Lindsay's wife. We appreciate all that you did for us yesterday."

It really wasn't a big deal.

Lindsay drags me further into the room, squawking noisily with Melanie and Daphne.

"Who the hell are you?" A woman screeches from behind us. I bite my tongue when she comes into my line of sight. She's, uh, unique, to say the least. "You are to die for!" She painfully pinches my cheeks. I smile warily at her and she snorts. "C'mon. I'm sure you've got a better smile than that laying underneath this beautiful face, Sunshine." Even though I'm frightened by her, I have to smile when she says that. Sunshine. There's that name again. I like it much more when Brian says it. "There it is! Wow. You're fucking adorable. I'm Debbie. Debbie Novotny, Michael's mother."

Oh, that's too bad. "Justin Taylor. And this is my friend, Daphne Chanders." Daphne smiles shyly at Debbie. "We're..." I don't know how to introduce us. Friends of Lindsay? Of Emmett? Of... Brian? Brian's employees? This has all suddenly become so complicated.

"They baby-sit for us," Lindsay comes to my rescue, petting my head like she would a child. I really hate being coddled. I've had enough of that growing up; being blond, small, and pretty. I pull out of her grasp and she grins, shaking her head. I don't know if she keeps doing shit like that to tease me, but whatever the reason, I'm not amused.

"Well, technically..." It never takes long for Daphne to warm up to strangers. "We work for Brian."

And that's when I become painfully aware of Brian's absence. I search the room, attempting to be as nonchalant as possible. My eyes meet Lindsay's. "What?" I ask.

"Who're you looking for?" Although, from the humor in her eyes, I can tell she already knows the answer. Her breath is warm on my ear when she whispers, "He's outside, smoking. Maybe you're a smoker, too?" Lindsay holds my gaze and searches my face expectantly. "I don't know what happened yesterday, but Brian's been... weird... ever since. I thought you might enlighten me."

Daphne clears her throat. God, she must be biting her tongue. I'm not ashamed that Brian and I fucked. Mmm, no, quite the opposite. It's just that... well... We fucked in their bathroom, in their goddamn bathtub, while we were supposed to be looking after Gus.

"Actually, Justin does smoke," Daphne states, her voice devoid of any emotion.

Lindsay smiles brightly and points at the kitchen. "The back door's that way."

I've always worried about being able to distinguish the difference between lust and love; between like and love; between knowing and experimenting. I can still recall the first time I read "Romeo and Juliet," thinking that it was a crock of shit. Kids that young... they can't understand what real love is. They made the fatal error of mistaking lust for love.

Still, in my immature youth, I loathe to admit that I, too, have acted brashly out of what I thought to be love.

Never again.

I stand out on the patio, secretly observing Brian. He's leaning against a tree, his long, lean figure the perfect opposite of the thick, gnarly trunk. A cigarette is pressed between his lips and his hands are flying across his phone. The faint sound of a familiar theme song reaches my ears and I smile. I would never have thought Brian likes to play video games. He grunts and closes his phone, reaching up to pull his cigarette out of his mouth.

When I first saw him at the loft, I thought he was the hottest man I've ever seen. I've now confirmed that suspicion: he is the hottest man I've ever seen, but...

Is that all? I think back to our early morning meet and greets at the loft before work, I remember the way he makes me laugh and the way he, without complaint, welcomed Daph and me into his home. And when he rushed me to the hospital, when he drove me home, when he lingered by my door, and when he allowed himself to flabbergasted by my kiss...

I move to step off the porch and join him when an amazingly colorful butterfly glides past me. You don't ever see those in real life and I can't help but feel humbled by it's beauty. It hovers in front of me for a moment, before making it's way to Brian, tumbling in the air in front of his face.

“Wow,” he whispers softly, stretching his hand out slowly, holding it in the air, waiting. The butterfly lands on his hand and he reels it in, holding it close to his face and staring. I wish I was right there, next to him. I can only imagine the look of wonder and curiosity. I bet he looks just like a little kid.

My heart warms and I know. I know.

I’m the type of person that needs this sort of confirmation. I need to know, for a fact, that I don’t just like someone; it’s not only lust. I’m beginning to love him.

And fuck whoever says Brian Kinney doesn’t do love, won’t do love. Because as I watch him watch the butterfly sail away, his face revealing a hidden remorse, I know he will do love. He will do it for me, if I ask him to.

For the first time since I came out to my parents and the only dreams I’ve ever known were smashed, I’m happy and excited.

“God, Brian,” I practically whimper, closing the distance between the two of us. He looks up, startled. An emotion swims briefly in his eyes. Fear? “God,” I say again as he swallows and glances around the yard like he doesn’t know what to do. “Brian...” Finally, he meets my gaze. “I’m falling in love with you.”

He opens his mouth and I ready myself for a gruesome attack on my feelings, but it never comes.

Brian

If it wasn’t for the drumming of my heart and the way my palms begin to sweat, I would’ve told Justin to fuck off. Instead of saying something, I twist my hand into his shirt and drag him over to me. He presses against my chest, happy surprise etched on his features. Unsure of what to do, I nuzzle his face with my own and then, before I can revel in the smell and texture of his body, I push him away.

“Want a smoke?” I ask him.

He settles against the trunk of the tree. “Sure,” he answers softly. I try not to stare as he brings the cigarette to his plump lips and inhales. He pouts his lips and blows the smoke out, wetting them before once again inhaling. He has the most flawless mouth I’ve ever kissed. I want to kiss him again.

Catching him by surprise, I turn my head awkwardly and press my lips to his. The smoke wafts between our mouths, spouting carelessly as our lips part. I ignore the questions running in his eyes and light my own cigarette. My hand falls between us, caressing his leg. I don’t move it, even when I feel his fingers brush against mine and curl around my hand.

His shoulder meets my arm and I realize that he’s leaning into me. Slowly, his head falls onto my shoulder and he sighs, once again inhaling his cigarette. “I’m comfy,” he tells me. He nestles his head against my skin, his soft hair tickling my arm.

My life, it’s so busy and complicated and sometimes it seems like everybody needs something from me. My money, my time, my power, and hell, even my sperm. They get what they need and then leave me alone until something else comes up. I never have a moment to just... relax. But, right now, standing with Justin under the old tree in Deb’s backyard, smoking cigarettes and saying absolutely nothing, I feel all the tension in me simply erase.

Despite Justin’s rather melodramatic moments, he’s normally pretty laid back. He seems so content and peaceful. And that rubs off on me. I’ve talked to him less than I have Daphne, but I feel like I know him so much better than her. Because what he doesn’t say vocally, he more than makes up for in body language.

His hand tightens around my own and it snaps me back to reality. I can feel the blood rush to my face, which is so unlike me, but God, I was really on another planet, daydreaming about some kid who’s standing right here, next to me, holding my hand like some breeder, or worse yet, like some sappy dyke and I’m not doing a thing to stop it.

I slide my hand out of Justin's and shift so that his body falls away from my own. He steadies himself and glares at me. I like that look in his eyes; a moment of heated anger. His eyes narrow even more when I begin to laugh.

"What?"

I shrug my shoulders, "Nothing."

He licks his lips and looks up toward the sky, as if trying to find the correct words to say hidden in his memory.

"Brian!" We're interrupted. Michael steps onto the porch. "Come on! We're gonna eat..." His eyes jump back and forth between Justin and myself, trying to gauge the situation. "What're you doing?" He finally asks, placing his hands on his hips defiantly.

"Talking," Justin replies. "What's it to you?" So, there's some tension between my best friend and my...

Calling Justin whatever it was I was going to call him came way too naturally, but I find myself not really caring.

"Michael," I warn. His eyes widen.

"What are you doing 'Michael-ing' me? Shouldn't you be harassing the twink?"

"No."

Michael runs his hands through his hair and then sticks them in his pant pockets. "Whatever," he grumbles, moving back into the house.

"Let's go," Justin says, already walking toward the house.

When we reach the door, he turns to face me and smiles. "I know that you don't do love or relationships. And that's okay, for now. I can even accept that you have an obsessive best friend. None of it will stop me from falling in love with you. You have no control over something like that."

I nod, waiting until he turns around and opens the door. "Maybe I don't want you to," I tell him, sliding by, rubbing my crotch against his ass.

He stands in the doorway, stunned, as I take a seat next to Lindsay. I don't know what I'm doing with him. Saying something like that will only encourage him, but damn, it felt good. Especially when he explodes with a brilliant smile as my words sink in.

"Justin?" Vic asks, pulling him away from the door. "Aren't you going to eat with us?"

Justin ends up seated directly across from me. Through Debbie, who has the audacity to ask some of the most private questions, I learn a lot about him. I'm amazed that he's as centered as he is considering the shit his father put him through after he came out.

"So, Justin," Melanie begins, cutting her breakfast patty as if it were a pizza. I hate how she does that; the meticulous manner in which she studies each piece to make sure they are all the same size. And they call me anal. "Do you have a boyfriend?"

"You can bet your ass he does," Debbie laughs. "A kid this cute? There's no way the boys of Liberty would leave him alone long."

Daphne chuckles into her milk. "Justin's very picky. Only the best," she teases.

“You should come to the GLC,” Melanie ignores my amused snort when she says this. “A lot of great guys hang out there.”

Justin smiles politely. “Thanks for the help, Melanie,” he says, reaching out for the pepper. “But, I don’t really think I need help finding a man. I’m pretty capable on my own, thank you very much.”

I smile around my coffee, taking a quick sip when I notice Lindsay watching me intently.

Michael snickers and our attention focuses on him. “If you’re so capable,” he says, leaning proudly into the back of his chair, “Why don’t you have a boyfriend?” Justin merely stares at him and Michael takes that as an open invitation. “Or maybe it’s because the men you’re interested in,” he glances briefly at me, “Are unattainable and will never be in a relationship with you.”

“Or maybe,” Justin bites back, “That’s just you.”

“Whoa,” Ted laughs. “Cat fight.” He curls his fists to mimic claws and hisses weakly. His joke falls flat when he notices that neither men are amused.

Justin, apparently the better man, shrugs and returns to his meal. The table is silent for a moment, attempting to understand Michael’s bitterness, but quickly boring of it. Everyone falls into their own hushed conversations, making sure, though, to include Justin and Daphne whenever possible.

I settle into my chair, about to say something to Lindsay when I’m distracted by Justin’s watermelon. He cuts into it with his fork, shaking out the juices before bringing it to his mouth. I can’t take my eyes off the way his tongue darts out to wrap under the melon. His chewing is slow and careful, as if he’s savoring every last bit of the fruit. My eyes follow his lips’ movements, as if trying to memorize them.

He licks his lips once. And once again. The third time he does it, his tongue lingers in the middle, his mouth open as if gasping slightly. He mouths my name and, startled, I look up into his eyes. They’re shining wickedly.

Another piece of watermelon is closing in on his mouth. He opens, wide, as the fruit touches his lips. He spears the melon with his tongue before running it along the soft edges and finally sliding it in.

I bite my lips. Two can play at this game.

Searching the table, my eyes land on the platter of vegetables and I let an evil grin escape my lips. He raises an eyebrow and follows my gaze.

I reach over and grab a handful of the baby carrots, dropping them onto my plate.

“That’s not all you’re going to eat today,” Debbie chastises me. “Have some toast, too.” She picks up the plate and nudges Ben with it. “Give this to Brian.”

“I already had toast, Deb,” I answer, my words harder than I mean. She just ruined any possibility of hot foreplay with food. “And eggs. If you weren’t so busy drooling over the two of them, “I nod towards Daphne and Justin, “You would’ve known.”

She huffs. “Well, exc-use me. What climbed into your pants?”

Justin throws his head back, his hair moving gracefully with the motion, and lets out a fucking amazing laugh. I watch his body tremble with amusement and I begin to laugh as well.

“I don’t think I wanna know,” Debbie sighs, shaking her head after we calm down.

Justin grins at me, pushing his chair away from the table and standing up. "Where's the bathroom?" He makes his escape to the small bathroom down the hall.

I stand up moments later.

"Where're you going?" Michael asks. "We're not done yet."

"I have to use the bathroom, too."

I start to follow Justin, but Debbie calls out, "You have to wait until Justin's done."

I smirk at them before entering the hall. The confusion in their voice is evident even though their words are muffled. They're smart; they can figure it out.

Justin's standing in the doorway. "What did you tell them just now?"

I press against him, molding him into the door frame. "Nothing."

"But--" I quiet him with a deep kiss, shoving my tongue unceremoniously in his mouth. The sweetness of the melon mixes with his saliva and I find myself drinking it, sucking that taste into my mouth like I would a drink. He groans, pushing away and wiping his chin with the back of his hand. "What are you doing?" He's self-conscious and I find it irresistible.

"Kissing you." I reach for him again.

His hands meet mine and he intertwines our fingers. This time I don't day dream. I stay right with him, squeezing my fingers around his.

"I felt like you were trying to eat me," he grins, butting his forehead against my own.

"No," I whisper, shaking my head. "I was trying to drink you. Totally different thing."

He still seems confused. "Don't worry about it," I tell him. "It's a good thing."

"Oh." He pauses and glances over my shoulder, peering down the hall. He watches, and when no one comes after us, he smiles at me. "I think I'd rather you eat me instead," he teases, pulling me into the bathroom with him.

Chapter 11

Justin

"Let's all go to Babylon tonight," Emmett claps, breaking the silence that looms in the room after Brian and I return to the kitchen. Our clothing is somewhat tousled, and our hair is a mess. We didn't take too much time after our second heated union in a bathroom to appropriately fix ourselves up. If Brian's friends can't figure out what we were doing in the bathroom, then our sloppy appearances will surely help.

I glance at Daphne, who's worrying her lips between her teeth. "Babylon?" I ask slowly.

Emmett smiles kindly at me. He's the only one, beside Daphne and Lindsay, who's not staring at Brian and myself as if we are complete strangers. "Yeah. We can dance, get to know each other, get drunk..."

I do the quick calculation in my head: three meals at the diner, two late night snacks from McDonald's, the prescription for my drugs after my fight with Hobbs, three packs of cigarettes, gas, groceries, and after the disastrous

affair at Babylon a couple nights ago, I'd say that my bank account is somewhere in the single digits. And by the look of it, I'd bet my last few dollars that Daph is in the same position.

The cover charge alone will leave me with a negative balance in my checking account.

"Nah," I tell Emmett, feeling Brian's gaze as it bores into me. "Some other time."

Michael huffs. "Whassa matter? Afraid to play with the big boys?"

"You know, some people have lives outside of Babylon." Debbie smacks him on the back of the head as she says this.

"C'mon, Justin," Brian teases me. "No one will remember that you can't hold your liquor."

"It's not like that."

His eyebrows climb up his forehead. Brian uses his eyebrows to express many of his emotions. I'm starting to understand this.

"We don't bite," Emmett laughs, forcing me to take my eyes off of Brian's face. "Unless you want us to. Of course, I have a feeling there's only one guy here you'd want biting you..."

"I promise to save you a dance," Brian says softly, running a hand through my hair.

I don't think he realizes how possessive a simple action like that can seem. Aside from Daphne, and Emmett, everyone else, including Lindsay, is honing in on Brian's hand and my hair. Michael looks like he's either constipated or jealous, I can't decide which, and I can't seem to revel in his anger because I'm too busy leaning into Brian's touch.

Fuck Babylon I wanna say. I just want to go home with Brian and continue what we started in the bathroom. I'd be nice to finally have sex with him on a mattress and to finally be held in his arms after he pounds into me like his life depends on it--like our lives depends on it.

Above all, I really want to be comfortable; the cold tiles on bathroom floors aren't.

Brian's eyes are burning a giant hole in my face and I choose not to look at him. "I can't."

How do you I explain to a man who wants for nothing that I can't afford to go?

"Yeah, you can," he insists. "You know you want to."

"Of course I want to. That's not the issue." I pull my head away from Brian's hands. His caresses are slowly whittling my resolve and I must be adamant about this. I must. Even though, God, I want to dance with Brian. I want to buy him a drink and look the other men in the eyes and be able to growl that Brian's mine. I want to stick out my tongue at Michael behind Brian's back as we grind into each other on the dance floor, as I lead him to the back room. I want to lay my claim on the massive hunk of flesh and blood and sex and perfection that is Brian Kinney. What better place to do this than Babylon? But I have my livelihood to think about. Which is, ultimately, more important than nya-nya-ing the boys of Babylon.

Somewhat.

"Then what is the issue?" He's getting defensive.

"I..." I can feel the sign of a telltale blush creeping into my cheeks. "I can't afford it," I say quickly, hoping my words are jumbled together. Hoping that I can leave before anyone makes a big deal out of it. Before Brian realizes that I'm not worth the effort.

Lindsay's the first person to say anything after my announcement. As if breathing a sigh of relief, she laughs, "Don't worry about that, Justin. I'm sure Brian will have no objections paying your way--"

"But I would," I tell her.

Michael clucks at his seat by the table, but says nothing. I turn to him and glare. "What, Michael? Do you have something you'd like to share with the class?" There's something about him that makes me act like I'm ten.

Maybe it's the fact that he's still stuck in kindergarten himself.

"Yeah," Michael says, lifting himself in his chair, puffing out his chest. "Now that Brian's your sugar daddy, you may as well milk it for all it's worth."

I cringe inwardly when he says this. There's no way in hell Brian will ever be my sugar daddy. I need him for something much more important than money. I open my mouth to tell Michael just this, but Brian beats me to it.

"I'm not his sugar daddy, Michael. And if you ever say that again, I swear to God I will never help you financially ever again." He's pissed. I know by the way his jaw tightens. "Justin hasn't asked for one cent from me and you can bet all your fucking collectibles in the world that he never will."

Before I met Brian, no one stood up for me. Daphne would, on occasion, but she's more of a Live and Let Live type of girl. It feels good to have someone defend me. To have someone who cares.

And as I look at Brian, his eyes shooting fire at Michael from across the room, I smile. I know I fucking glow. I can feel the light emanating off of my body and reflecting off of all the stupid little glass menageries Debbie has lined up on her shelves. The room's aglow and I feel happy.

I reach out and cup Brian's chin in my hand. Immediately he draws back into himself. "Babylon's your stomping ground. Go. Have fun. I'll go home and paint. I'm suddenly... inspired." I start to push myself up on the toes of my feet, to kiss Brian, but I remember we aren't alone and choose not to make the situation any more uncomfortable for Brian than it already is.

I think part of me is disappointed when Brian asks, "Are you sure?" But, I'm not going to trap Brian into the type of monogamous, bullshit lifestyle I've never fully believed in myself.

I nod, grinning as I release his chin from my grip. "Yes. You have fun though." I turn away from him, proud of my reaction, and say to the group, "You all have fun."

Brian

It's fine that he can't afford to go to Babylon--well, no... not "fine." It's actually kind of sad that he can't afford to go, but I understand. I understand his reasoning, I just wish there was a way I could've convinced him to let me pay without taking away his sense of independence. And without making him believe I was asking him out on a date. I don't do dates.

And if I did, I wouldn't be taking him to Babylon.

All everyone can talk about is me and Justin. Lindsay and Emmett are proud, Ted's curious, Ben's happy, Debbie's confused, Vic's just sitting there, looking smug, and Michael... Well, I'm going to have to deal with Michael sooner than later.

I just don't know why they're making such a big deal out of the kid. Out of us. It's not like we exchanged rings. We've just fucked. Twice. Both times incredible. Both times mind-blowing. Both times life-alternating. I wonder what I third time will bring. Don't they always say that the third time's the charm? I wonder if that pertains to sex also?

A small voice in my head is telling me I should be worrying about even considering a third time, but I don't want to. I want to think about fucking Justin on a bed, on a couch, on the hardwood floor of the loft, on the kitchen counter, against the pole, in the lift, on the stairs, in my closet, under my table, on top of my table, in the jeep, in Daphne's car, in the lobby of Justin's apartment, in the half-finished room of the loft, in the back room, on the dance floor, on the bar, on a pool table--

"What are you thinking about?" Ben asks me, sliding, undetected, out the back door. Of course I'm outside, smoking, while everyone is inside, cleaning. They accept this. Always have. Always will. I wonder if Justin would let me get away with such bullshit. I doubt it. I can imagine him handing me a sponge and making such a domestic chore like washing dishes into fabulous foreplay-- "What are you thinking about, Brian?" He repeats, a small smirk--my smirk--playing on his face.

"Sex," I answer. At least it's not a lie.

"With Justin?" He asks. I wish Ben was smaller than me. I hate when he makes me feel intimidated, stupid, immature-- "He's sweet."

I roll my eyes. "That's what Emmett said, too."

Ben shrugs his shoulders, sitting down on the porch, looking up at me, waiting for me to join him. I sigh dramatically. Here we go: lecture 101 with Professor Bruckner. "I bet you can think of some better adjectives for him, huh?" He grins after I join him.

Sometimes I wish Ben was healthy for selfish reasons. I wish he was healthy every waking moment of my life, but for moments like now, I wish he could smoke with me and drink with me, kind of like a big brother. But, disease has taken away that side of life from him. Even through all his "live in the moment" mumbo jumbo, he's still quite reserved.

"I know I can't smoke with you," Ben says, surprising me. I lift an eyebrow. "But I can give you some very good advice."

We wait together in silence. "Well?" I finally ask as I light another cigarette. Thank God Justin smokes. I don't think I could be in a rela-- "Jesus," I mutter, yanking the cigarette out of my mouth and blowing the air violently from out of my lungs.

"What's the matter?" Ben asks.

He's a very patient man. I think that's why he's so good with Mikey; 'cause he has the patience to wait for him to grow up. Maybe he is growing up, slowly but surely. Maybe he isn't. There are times when I look back at the Michael I knew when I was fourteen and I can't recognize any of that Michael in the Michael I know now. But, then there are other times when I can't distinguish between the two. Times like tonight, when he berated Justin. Times like when he sneaks into my loft...

"Brian? Where have you been going tonight? You're all over the place," Ben inquires, leaning in to study me. The gang has rubbed off on him. When he first hooked up with Mikey, he was so detached, afraid to set me off. And now, here he is, rubbing his Zen-Ben wisdom in my face.

"Have you always been a Dr. Phil wannabe?" I bite out, annoyed that he can meet the best of my stares head on.

He lets out a quiet laugh. "Someone's feisty today. Must be the weather," he grins, wagging his eyebrows in such a non-Ben manner that I have to laugh with him.

"You're a freak, you know?"

He smiles. "Kinda have to be to be with Michael," he says softly, chuckling. "But don't you tell him I said that."

“Won’t. Don’t care. ‘Side, it’s not like he’d believe me.”

The smile disappears and I realize that I’ve just stepped into a serious conversation without looking. “They’re always quick to blame you, huh,” he’s not asking. I know to remain quiet. “Or to ask for things from you. They want and want and want, right? And you give and give and give because that’s all your good for.” I shrug. “So, is that why you like Justin--”

I snort. “Like? What are we? Children?”

“Fine,” Ben smiles mischievously. “Fine, is that why you loooooove Justin? Because he doesn’t ask?”

“He’s asked for plenty.”

“Oh yeah? What? Harder? Faster? More?”

I pause. “More. Yeah.”

“Is it so bad for someone to expect more from you? Not expect something from you, but to just expect more of whatever is in you? I find that those are the most rewarding people to be around. People who expect you to live up to your fullest potential--”

“Thanks for the after-school special, Professor,” I cringe.

“Well, I’m just telling you--”

“I know what you’re saying. And I appreciate it.” I see the look of disbelief on his face and I smile. “No. Really. I do. But the stuff you’re telling me... It’s not anything I haven’t already figured out.” I wait for my words to register on his face before I continue. “Yeah, I’m all over the place tonight, but that’s to be expected. I mean, I’ve come to some very scary realizations today. I just need to smoke and drink and allow these things to settle.”

“And when they do?”

“One step at a time.”

Ben gets this soft look on his face. “Why him, Brian?” He asks.

I don’t even pretend to not understand his words. “I guess it’s ‘cause he does ask for more. And because he’s fucking gorgeous,” I grin, relieving some of the tension that’s been hovering.

“Does he know?”

I shrug, tossing my cigarette onto the lawn. The afternoon sun’s starting to burn its way through my clothing, heating my skin. I kind of like this feeling. I lean back, tipping my head to drink in the sunlight. The sunshine.

Chapter 12

Justin

There’s nothing like a visit from my homophobic father to ruin what was starting to be the most exemplary day of my life. Because he’s here, in our apartment, when Daphne and I return from Debbie’s.

“How did you get it?” I grumble while at the same time, Daphne offers a cheery wave and a sugarcoated, “Hi, Mr. Taylor.”

He nods stiffly at the both of us. Daphne takes a water out of the fridge and hops onto the counter, opening the cold bottle. My father stares at her until she sighs and slides off the counter, patting my belly to wish me luck as she makes her way out of the living room and into her bedroom, shutting the door lightly behind her.

I don't join him on the couch, even though he's obviously waiting for me to do so. Instead, I yank off my shirt, tossing it carelessly onto the floor. I'm putting on a show for him. Sick, I know. Perverted, probably. But, I want him to see my hot body, to know what construction has done to his little boy. I especially want him to see the bruises, bite marks, and hickeys Brian's mouth and agile fingers has imprinted on my neck and chest. Little love bites scatter from the base of neck to the tip of my cock, but my father will never see that much. My ring is upside down and when I reach up to flip it, I glance at my father. His eyes narrow.

"What have you done to yourself?" He asks, shaking his head, biting his tongue from saying something truly nasty. I have to admire him for that.

"What are you referring to, Craig? The nipple ring or the hickeys?"

My father visibly cringes. "I don't suppose a woman gave you those hickeys. And that... what is that? A bite mark? On your chest?"

"Don't suppose anything. You'll only be disappointed," I tell him, crossing my arms over my chest. I'm attempting to look as casual and unaffected as possible, even though I can literally hear my heart pounding in my chest. "What do you want? How the fuck did you get in here?" I repeat my earlier question.

"Your landlord let me in."

"I'm going to have to talk to him about that."

"I'm your father, Justin. I'm allowed access into your life."

I jerk back. "Father? Really. And which life is that? My queer, cock-sucking life or the made-up, unhappy life you've envisioned for me?"

"You seem to be doing well for yourself, son." I despise him most daring moments like these. Moments when I'm trying my damndest to piss him off, and he doesn't even blink. No wonder he's got my mother wrapped around his little finger so tightly; he should've been an actor.

"Don't call me that," I hiss. "I haven't been your son since I was seventeen. Not really, anyway. So, why don't we just cut the bullshit and you tell me what's really on your mind."

I almost think he's going to argue with me. He leans against the back of the couch and lets out a long, tired sigh. But then that all changes and he stands up, walking toward me with such ferocious power. I hate that I can still be intimidated by him.

"Fine, Justin." Thank God he's cut the "son" crap. "I talked to Mr. Chanders today. He told me about your fight with Hobbs. Did you know that Chris is now unemployed?"

"Good," I shrug, retreating from his hovering form by grabbing the nearest pack of cigarettes and walking to the window.

He's right behind me. "I heard from a very reliable source that the fight is your fault."

"Then either you need to check your hearing or your source isn't that reliable, because Hobbs is totally at fault. He attacked me. He insulted me, pestered me, and finally cracked the back of my head open on a piece of wood." I turn around to show him my stitches, taking the opportunity to light my cigarette. Inhaling deeply, I face my father and blow the stale smoke into his face.

“You shouldn’t smoke,” he says. And for a moment, it’s like old times. Back before I cared about sex; back before I knew I was gay. He seems so genuinely concerned for me that it nearly breaks my heart when his face hardens and he once again becomes the asshole I’ve grown to know so well. “I heard you were talking about... about...”

“My disgusting lifestyle?” I help.

He nods.

Inhaling, I say, “Yeah.” Exhale. “So what?”

“I’ve told you a thousand times not to flaunt your irregularities in the faces of normal people. It’ll only get you into trouble.”

“Oh, so it’s my fault?”

He nods again. “Of course. No one wants to know what a faggot does with another faggot in... bed. Keep those kind of perversions to yourself.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Craig.” I’m ready for an argument. I smash my cigarette out and lean against the window. “He wanted to know. He practically begged me.” I lower my voice and run my fingers slowly up and down my chest. “Chris Hobbs has a major hard-on for me. He wants me. So. Bad.” I tug on my nipple ring and let out a puff of air. My father’s eyes widen and he steps away from me. “He wants me to suck his cock and eat his ass and--”

But my father’s had enough. He’s storming away from me, grabbing his jacket from off the couch. When he reaches the door, he turns back to me and says, “If that’s how you spoke to him, then you deserved what you got. You deserved a lot worse. I’m surprised he didn’t kill you.”

I follow him out the hall and to the elevator. “Surprised, dad? Or merely disappointed?”

The elevator opens and he enters, holding the door with his hand. “I expect you to call Mr. Chanders and ask him to give Chris his job back. You are to take full responsibility for your actions.” I’m about to argue with him, but he presses the button, releasing the door. Right before they close on him, he calls out, “Right now, I’m just disappointed.”

It takes me a while to realize what he meant. But, as I enter my apartment, I start to shake. I let out a frustrated cry and slam the door, the movement forcing one of my art books off the shelf on the wall next to me.

“What’d daddy dearest have to say?” Daphne asks softly.

I look up at her. “Nothing,” I whisper, but when she pulls me into her warm arms, I begin to cry. “Everything. I hate him, Daph. I hate him.”

“Shh,” she says, petting my hair. “I know. I know.”

I begin to think in colors. Dark green and a midnight blue. The colors become a shapeless image and, suddenly, I have a great idea for a painting. “Daphne,” I begin.

She pulls away, using her sleeve to wipe my face. “Gonna go paint? Are you sure you don’t want to meet up with the boys at Babylon later?”

I shake my head, leaving the comfort of her embrace and walking over to the fridge. At least we have good beer. No matter how poor, Daphne and I make it a point to have at least one good lager in the house at all times. “I don’t have any money,” I sigh, leaning against the fridge, twisting the cap open with my shirt.

“Well, I have some. You could--”

“Nah, Daph. You saved up your money. I didn’t. End of story. Beside, I really want to paint. I have a great idea...”

“Gonna paint Brian?” She teases, smiling widely.

Shrugging, I push off the fridge and head to my room. “Who knows?” I call over my shoulder.

Once in my room, I open the drawer of my dresser. Hundreds of oil paint tubes rest in the drawer, longing to be mixed on a pallet and spread with precision over a new canvas. Or perhaps it’s just me yearning to hold a paint brush so tightly in my hand that my fingers begin to cramp. Whatever the reason, art has always called out to me.

I’ve never used my drawers for anything other than art supplies. My clothing lay crumpled on the floor of my closet, occasionally finding their way onto a hanger when I get the rare inspiration to clean. As long as my art supplies are readily available, who cares about anything else?

I sift through the drawer, pulling out the greens and blues which flashed during my brief interlude with my father. But, it’s Brian I’m going to paint. The pain and sorrow I feel for my father will be present, but under shadowed by Brian’s strength. His beauty. And then, when I’m done, I’ll send it to my father. And he’ll get it. I know he will. He’ll look at the painting of my... lover, a painting utilizing his colors and he’ll understand.

It’s not about him, my father, anymore. It’s about my life as a gay man. With a gay lover.

And it’s about me being so fucking happy.

Proud to be gay.

I shut the drawer with my hip.

Oh, yes. My father will see how fucking happy I am, how fucking needless he is, that his eyes will fill with tears. Tears of regret. Tears that prove he’s no longer the deciding factor in my life. Because once I’m done with this painting, I’m going to school. To art school.

Mr. Chanders will give me a scholarship and I will become the world’s best artist.

And then, when I’m super famous, the first interview I give will talk about my disgusting lifestyle.

Won’t dad be proud?

Brian

I don’t plan on being monogamous. If this thing I have with Justin goes anywhere, I’m still going to trick. And right now, I’m horny as hell. Half-naked, gyrating men surround me and the stench of their sweat, salty and hot, culminates in the air, burning my nostrils with teasing words. Words like fuck, want, now, me, and come. There’s this guy, tall, built, and beautiful, making eyes at me from over his dancing partner’s shoulder. Classy, I know, but, damn, he’s sexy. My eyes roam his body. Big. Nice. I nod at him, lifting a brow as he pushes away from his partner and presses himself against my chest. It’s awkward. He’s too tall, too large, and doesn’t fit there. I step back and trace my finger down his naked chest. Everything’s so prominent. So obvious. Like, “Looke me! I’m hunky!” I don’t appreciate the unsubtle way his body screams “I’m a good fuck.”

Justin’s body: so smooth, so flat, and yet so perfect. Everything about him is real! and manly! and mine! This guy... he’s nothing special.

And I lose the last of the interest I have in him as I look into his brown, not blue, brown, eyes.

“Sorry,” I mutter, walking away from him.

There's no way I'm ever going to monogamous. I'll fuck who I want to, wherever I want to, and no piece of blond boy ass will tell me different.

But I guess my feelings for said blond boy ass will tell me different.

Because, right now, the only person I want to fuck is him. Look me in the eyes and tell me that this isn't a pretty big deal?

"That guy was really hot," Emmett yells at me as I join them at the bar.

I shrug.

"Why didn't you fuck him?"

I shrug again. "Not what I was looking for."

Michael laughs that annoying, high-pitched guffaw he uses when he finds something ironically funny. "You weren't looking for a hot piece of ass to fuck?" He asks. "That's a first."

Ben looks over the top of Michael's head and smiles. "Maybe not the right hot piece of ass."

I smirk, turning back to the bar to order a beer.

"What does that mean?" Michael asks. He moves to stand next to me. "What's he talking about?"

Emmett giggles, stepping in between me and Michael to say, "Ju-ustin." He practically sings Justin's name.

"That twink?" Michael looks between Emmett, who's grinning madly, and me, who's biting back a smile and screeches, "You can't be serious, Brian!"

I gulp my beer, letting the thickness of the liquor warm my body before turning to Michael and saying, "Let's dance."

Michael grins, nodding excitedly. He's already walking to the dance floor before I can put my beer down.

"Good luck," Emmett whispers, pushing me toward Michael.

Ben grabs my arm as I follow Michael. "Let him down easy. If you hurt him more than you have to, I won't be happy."

"If you bruise me," I sneer, ripping my arm out of his hold, "I won't be happy."

We have a small conversation without words, glaring at each other. Emmett laughs with appreciation. "Whoa, you boys are hot when you're acting butch! You should do it more often."

Emmett's words break us apart. We smile at each other and I go to join Michael, who's waiting impatiently at the edge of the dance floor.

We push our way through the throng of sweaty bodies and find an empty space in the middle. He brings his hands to my shoulders, but I keep my distance. It doesn't take him long to figure something's wrong, because he gets that look of childlike confusion in his eyes. It's one of the reasons I like Michael so much; he's so easy to read.

"If you think about it," I begin, finally wrapping my arms around his waist to pull him closer, "I'm not really the one you want. I want to be friends--friends forever--so, please. Stop."

I allow him to pull away. "What are you talking about?" He asks, his voice timid and quiet.

“My loft. My bed. Your silly crush. It’s all futile.” Michael studies my face intently. “What?”

“Cause of him?” He asks weakly.

“Among other things.”

“Like what?”

“Like the fact that’s it’s creepy. Jesus, Michael.”

Michael’s more interested in a button on his shirt than he is in the desperation in my voice. He takes a deep breath. “But--”

“There isn’t a ‘but,’ Michael.”

He nods as I hold his gaze. “Okay,” he finally declares. The smile on his face is strained, but it’s a start.

“Thank you,” I tell him, quietly. Just quietly enough for Michael to wonder if he really heard it.

He lifts his shoulders and begins to walk away. “Michael!” I call after him, pushing to make my way through the dancing men. I catch up to him at the edge of the dance floor. “What do you think?” I ask, waiting as a smirk replaces the look of amazement on his face.

“You asking for my permission?” He teases, grabbing my hand and leading me to the door.

“No... not... really... Michael?” I stop him. “Where are we going?”

“We aren’t going anywhere. You are.”

“But--” I gesture to the dance floor, to the bar, to the back room, to Babylon.

“Obviously, none of this is doing it for you,” He opens the door and pushes me out, harder than I expect. I think he’s a little pissed about my confrontation, if you can even call it that, but when I glance up at him, he’s smiling honestly. “If you turn into a mushy, flower-arranging, love-sick lesbo, I will personally castrate you.” He points at me.

“Puh-leese,” I drawl. “Like that would ever happen.”

Michael throws his head back to cackle. “Remind me of that when you’re planning your wedding and signing adoption papers.”

“Ah, spoken like a true lesbian,” I tease. “Bye, Mikey.”

I have a feeling he watches me until I fade from his sight. But, then again, maybe not.

Chapter 13

Brian

Daphne's eyes pop out of her head when she opens the door. She glances at her watch, then at me, and then back at her watch, as if unable to grasp onto the fact that, yes, I'm really here when I should be at Babylon, fucking my brains out. "Brian," she begins, opening the door slightly to let me in. "I didn't... We didn't know you were... Why aren't you at Babylon?"

Despite the shitty neighborhood, their apartment is warm and well-decorated. I didn't get a good look at it when I was here after I dropped them off from the hospital, so I take my time scrutinizing their choices. I wander around the living room, taking in the color and design, completely ignoring her question. "I like what you guys did to this place." I stop in front of a huge oil painting of the ocean, only the seascape is yellow, not blue. "Nice. Where'd you find the art?" I ask.

"Didn't. Justin painted them."

"Really?" I turn again to the oil painting, taking in the practiced brush strokes. "All of them?"

Daphne sighs, dropping onto the couch. "Yep."

He's incredibly talented. "Does he ever sell his work?" I'm completely serious, but Daphne lets out a derivative snort. "What?" I ask, turning to face her. "He's good."

"You really think that if he sold any of his art he'd be working where he works. Or living where he lives?"

I study the painting one last time before moving to join her on the couch. "Nah. Probably not."

It's not really uncomfortable, the silence that looms in the air, it's just unusual. "Why are you out here with me? Didn't you come here to see Justin?"

"Well, yeah..."

She smiles at me, placing a soft hand on my arm. "He's addicting, huh?"

I have to laugh at that because of all the words I can think of to describe Justin, addicting wouldn't even have entered my mind and yet, it's the most appropriate of them all. Addicting he is. Like a drug, without the bad side effects. Or like your favorite TV show, the one that makes you decline any plans the evening it's aired. Addicting like coffee. You don't realize you need it, depend on it, until you're drinking three cups before work every morning. And even more on the weekends because it's that good. "Addicting in a good way?"

"The best."

We look at each other and grin. I wonder if she likes Justin the way little girls are supposed to like little boys. The way I like Justin. The way he likes me.

Okay, so maybe I lied way back when saying that this wasn't a fairy tale or a love story because that's what it's turning out to be.

This should be my cue to leap out of the couch and fly out of the door, never to see or talk to Justin again. Never to touch him. Or fuck him in a bathroom. Ever again. But, the couch is surprisingly comfortable and I've had a long day.

Daphne's regarding me with so much intensity that I can literally feel her gaze under my skin. "What?"

“Don’t you think it’s funny that like, three days ago Justin thought you were straight and now...”

She trails off, leaving me incredibly interested. “And now what?”

“I don’t know. I’ve heard so many rumors about you the past couple days--”

“They can’t be rumors if they’re true.”

Daphne does a sort of double take, “But--”

“It’s who I am.”

“Your past?”

I look at her slowly. “No,” I drawl out. “My past, present, and probably future...”

“But...” Her face tightens. “What about Justin?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never done anything like this before. All I know is that I want to. And that’s never happened to me. I’ve never wanted to try to form any sort of relationship with a trick. Not that... Not that Justin’s a trick. I don’t know.”

She turns to face me, reaching out to put her hand on my shoulder. “You’re not going to throw him out after, are you? I mean, it’s different with him, right?”

“Do you think I’d even be here if it wasn’t?”

She lets out a bright smile. Not bright like Justin’s, but bright as in honest and happy. “Good. His room’s that way,” she points down the hall. “He’s painting in the studio.”

“You guys have a studio?”

“Yeah,” Daphne giggles. “It’s Justin’s balcony. We’ve turned it into a makeshift studio. Being a carpenter has some advantages.”

I nod and make my way down the hall. I lift my hand to knock, but Daphne calls out, “Don’t bother. He won’t hear you. Just go right in.”

So I do. I turn the knob and enter Justin’s bedroom for the first time.

It’s not what I expect. For some reason, I expect posters and cluttered books and piles of magazines, but instead, I find bare cream walls, a messy closet, an unmade bed, and drawers full of art supplies. The room smells strongly of my high school art class--turpentine, oil, chalk, and canvas. Surely this can’t be a healthy smell to live with.

It suits Justin. He identifies himself not by his decorations, but by the way in which he lives: simple, economical, and stripped to the bare essentials. He doesn’t need flashy clothing or fancy furniture to declare himself independent.

I feel humbled.

And that’s a rare form to find me, indeed.

The only light source is coming from behind a giant tarp covering Justin’s balcony doors. And it’s not even a true light source, not really. The light is merely peeking through the cracks from around the tarp. There’s not enough light in here to do anything productive.

I hear a noise, something plastic-like, and then music. The tunes remind me of the trance-goth music they used to play in dance clubs when I was in college. A female singer wails much like a violin, long and high. It's kind of nice, taken out of context. The music makes my legs feel heavy as I walk over to the tarp.

I stand in the bedroom, listening to the music and the soft scraping of Justin's brush against canvas. Slowly, I pull back the tarp and step through. No sound is made and I'm able to watch Justin unnoticed.

I've never seen an artist hug a pallet the way Justin does. It's as if he's trying to embrace the colors, mixing and swirling them so close to his chest that his shirt is splattered with erratic variances of blues and greens. His teeth clutch a small brush, occasionally switching it with the large one in his hands. The angle in which he stretches allows me to trace the muscles in Justin's body. From hand to bicep to shoulder, down his back to his ass, thighs, calves, and ankles.

I never knew painting could be so erotic.

I'm so entranced by the way Justin's painting that I don't even look at the what until he stops moving to inspect his progress.

And even in it's crude form I can tell. He's painting me. He's painting me with these dark, foreboding colors and for some reason, having me on the canvas eats up the sorrow and fear those colors represent. He's painted me a tint of yellow and Goddamn if I don't want to cry.

He's painted me a beacon of light. Talk about paying homage.

I don't know what to say, so instead, I say nothing. Expressing myself through words has never been my strength anyway.

I step closer to him, waiting for him to notice me. The song changes and his strokes quicken with the music. He takes a step back. One more. Another one and his ass bumps my groin and all I want to do is lean over him and envelope him.

He turns around in my arms, startled at first, but then smiles this fucking brilliant smile, allowing the brush to fall from his mouth. And I don't even look down to see if the paint stains my pants when I feel the brush hit my leg. His hands reach out to grip my biceps, leaving a small ring of blue fingerprints on my shirt.

"Shit," he exclaims when he looks down at my painted shirt. He tries to rub the paint out, but only ends up rubbing the paint in more. "Shit! I'm sorry." He bows his head sheepishly. "Got some on your pants, too."

"S'okay," I tell him, lifting his chin to meet me in a soft, wet kiss. Wet kisses are the best. They're so personal and territorial. "Maybe you can sign my clothes and I can say that I have a Justin Taylor original."

He laughs. It's deep and guttural and such a fucking turn on. "I've never met anyone who can laugh with such honesty as you do."

He squints his eyes and scrunches his nose in disbelief. "Daphne says I cackle."

"I'd say that you guffaw more than anything--"

Justin punches my arm, affectively painting my face with his wet brush as he moves his fist away from my body. "Shit!" He pulls the bottom of his shirt up and licks it, bringing it dangerously close to my face. He stops himself and blushes, letting the material slip out of his fingers. "Oh my God. I was just going to do something that my mother used to do to me when I was a kid and I hated it! Shit." Justin decides instead to use his fingers, and smears the paint into my cheek.

I twist my head out of his grasp. "Just leave it."

“Are you sure?” He asks tentatively. “You can clean it up in the bathroom.” He points by way of his bedroom. “I think I have some Goo Gone in there...”

“To use on my skin?” I ask.

Blushing again, Justin shrugs. “I’ve used it before... I didn’t think...”

I stop him from saying anything else by taking the brush out of his hand and painting a long, blue stripe down the center of his forehead to the tip of his nose. “Now you’re like Braveheart.”

He giggles, touching the wet paint on his face. “Braveheart?”

“Or whatever the fuck movie where they paint their faces blue and scream a lot.” I barely dodge his painted fingertips as they stretch to touch my face. “Hey, you already got me.”

“You’re right,” he smiles softly, tilting his head back in order for me to kiss him. Suddenly, I don’t know if we’re talking about the paint or something more... romantic. Something deeper. But, he doesn’t make a big deal out of my words, my claim that he already has me, and I lean forward to kiss him. He wipes his painted fingers down my cheek.

“You little--” But he’s giggling, ripping back the tarp and bounding into his bedroom.

I follow his laughter, watching him from the doorway of his studio. “No paint in the bedroom,” he snorts, sneering at the dripping brush in my hand. “What are you waiting for?” He asks, crooking his finger to entice me to enter his room.

“I’m waiting for you to get your bubble butt outside so I can dunk your head in a bucket of paint,” I answer honestly. “It’s the least you should let me do for ruining my Armani,” I motion to my shirt. “And my Calvin Kleins,” I motion to my pants.

“I thought you wanted a Justin Taylor original.” He lifts the hem of his shirt, the skin on his stomach untouched by paint. “Come on in, Brian,” he whispers, pulling the rest of his shirt off, tossing it to the ground with a practiced twirl. “I’ll let you mark my body all over.” He gets up on his knees and starts to unbutton his pants. When his thumbs clip under the waist of his pants, I throw the brush onto the studio floor and stalk into the room.

“Turn on some lights,” I tell him, walking up to the edge of the bed. “I want to see my canvas.”

Justin

You already got me. Brian’s words sing praises in my head, repeating themselves over and over. Of all the things any man has ever said to me in a moment of heated passion or mellow lovemaking, it’s Brian’s teasing words that warm my heart to its core. Because I don’t think Brian Kinney has ever said anything like that to anyone before and I can’t help but wonder whether or not he meant it the way he said it. You already got me. I’ve got him. I got him. He’s mine.

I see a flicker in his eyes and know that he catches what he says and that he’s waiting. For me to make a big deal out of it? Probably.

So I ask for a kiss and paint his cheek instead. The possibility of a very serious moment is torn away from us as I run, screeching with giggles, into my bedroom, away from the sopping paint brush hanging in Brian’s hand.

Brian is so easy to seduce. At first, I think he’s going to be obstinate and continue playing our somewhat juvenile game, but the minute I have my hands on my clothing, peeling them off with a playful smile, I know he’s willing. He stalks into the bedroom, like a predator.

“Turn on some lights,” he tells me. I want to argue. I like playing in the dark. He senses my hesitation and says, “I want to see my canvas.” I want to groan with those words.

I turn around, pants halfway down my thighs, and flip on the switch by my bed. Our eyes come into focus and he smirks. “Red sheets?” He asks, motioning to the blood red matching sheet set Daphne gave me for my birthday.

“Uh huh. Sometimes I get sick of blue.”

He pushes me onto my back, pulling off my jeans so that I’m completely naked. “You look good against red,” he whispers. I feel a blush creep across every part of my body that he studies as his eyes wander freely. “So hot.” He lifts my feet and pulls me across the soft sheets until my ass is flush against his groin. “You should--uh--wear red.” His words are stunted as he thrusts his clothed cock absently against my naked flesh.

I groan when he hits my balls.

I decide that I like Brian this way. I like that his need for me is so great that he can’t even undo his zipper to fuck me. I like that his desire is so overwhelming that he absolutely must thrust and thrust and thrust.

He falls down on top of me, crushing my erection almost painfully between the two of us. I take in a deep breath of air, hissing with its release. He looks down at my throbbing cock and huffs a laugh. Pushing himself onto his elbows, hovering over me, he says, “You know, I read somewhere about this guy who literally broke his cock when he missed his boyfriend’s ass. It snapped in two, like a pencil.”

“Are you trying to comfort me?” I ask, lifting my hands to tug gently on his ears. I’ve never noticed how wonderfully soft and detailed his ears are. He has text book ears.

Brian breathes warm air on my face and I drink it up. “Did you come?” I ask him after he allows himself to fall into my neck, his tongue swiping out occasionally to lick my skin. He likes to lick my skin.

“Do you think I’m in grade school? Of course I didn’t come. Beside,” he pushes his upper body up and straddles one of my legs, running his hands up and down my chest, “You said I could mark your body.”

Slowly, he unbuttons his shirt, removing it from his hot skin quickly and efficiently. He takes my hands in his and brings it to his zipper. “Undo my pants.” His voice is husky and deep. God, I could come just from the sound of it.

I free his body from his pants, licking my lips as more skin--hard skin--hard, pulsating skin--is revealed.

Brian only lets me push his pants down to his knees. “No more,” he demands, leaning away from my touch. His cock is pointing straight at me and my own stretches to meet it. I watch, eyes huge, as Brian’s hand crawls down his stomach and onto his cock. He weighs it in his hand, teasing me by wiggling it around.

“Mine,” I whimper, grasping once again for his body. He giggles, leaning away from my hands.

And starts stroking. He never does the same movement for long, alternating between squeezing and pounding and tickling. I watch as his cock drips, leaving tiny stains on my sheets.

I swallow. “That’s a waste,” I huff as he uses his pre-come to lube his cock. “That’s mine.”

“Hungry?” He asks. And it’s so dirty, so private, so wrong, that I almost want him to stop. Almost.

I nod my answer, snapping my teeth at him and then licking my lips. I’ve never been so hungry for someone.

Brian drags his cock and balls across my belly and chest, hitting my chin before feeding my open mouth.

He's sweet and salty and spicy all at once. And hot. So hot his cock leaves small blisters of heat on my tongue and down my throat. I gag in surprise when he shoves more of himself, more than I ever dreamed there was, into my mouth. I can feel him moving away, so I grab his thighs and ass, moaning my contentment.

If I choked to death on his cock, at least I wouldn't die hungry. At least I'd die content.

He's rocking frantically in my mouth and when his movements become shallow, I tighten my throat, willing him to come. He doesn't. My hand moves up to his ass.

Before I can stick my fingers in his body, he pulls away. "No," he groans. He takes my hands in his and together, we masturbate him.

When he comes, he marks me just as he said he would. "That was dirty," he nearly whimpers, falling back, his clothed legs resting on my torso. His leg rubs against my cock and I come, a startled yelp escaping my lips before I crawl, gasping, over to Brian. "What was that just now?" He asks, wrapping his arms around my body, allowing me to collapse onto his chest.

"I came."

"Ah."

We wait in silence, our heavy breathing eventually evening out. "From just my leg brushing your cock?" He's silent, but I feel his body shaking with laughter.

"Shut up," I lazily slap his shoulder. "I'm still young. And that was so fucking amazing. The way you came."

His response is silent, but it speaks volumes to me. He speaks volumes to me without ever saying a word.

I don't think either one of us expect it to end up being so gentle or sweet. It just happens that way. We both want hard and push and ouch, but when he rolls me to my side and slides in so deep that his chest is flush against my back, it changes. Everything changes.

I can feel his nipples like needles poking into my back. His heartbeat is like a fucking hammer between my shoulder blades. His pubic hair scrubs against the small of my back, brushing me intimately as he pushes deeper and deeper inside.

I don't think a man has ever been as deep inside of me as Brian is right now.

When he comes, I can feel his moan, not just hear it. It shakes down my spine, triggering my own release and when he pulls out of me, my body follows his as he lays flat on his back. Our wet skin suction together perfectly.

I roll the condom off, holding it to the light. He has so much come, I'm almost tempted to drink it. But I don't. I squeeze it in my hands, letting his juices flow over my fist and down my arm, onto his chest.

I lick us clean.

Glancing up at him, Brian's eyes meet mine with something like embarrassment. He swallows and I know whatever he's going to say will be big. Huge.

"I don't think I've ever fucked anyone like that before," he says, his voice cracking from the honesty of it all.

I settle onto my elbow. "That's 'cause we didn't fuck. We made love." And it sounds so lame, even to me, that I'm not surprised when he raises a sculpted eyebrow, his tongue dipping inside his cheek.

“Making love, huh.” He lets the words roll off his tongue. “Making love. Is that what you call it?”

“I think so,” I whisper.

“I could get used to that.”

“So could I.”

“Good,” his voice smiles. He twists his body and snuggles up onto my chest, his face once again in the crook of my neck. “You’re gonna have to get used to it.” He yawns, kissing my shoulder before I feel the flutter of his lashes and he’s breathing evenly.

I lied. I don’t think I could ever die content. Because every time I’m with Brian, he surprises me. God, I want to be around for it all.

And when his arms subconsciously tighten around me as I shift positions, I have a feeling Brian wants me around.

For it all.

End

Soaring

Brian and Justin meet on a totally obnoxious flight and can't seem to get out of each other's heads after they part.

Chapter One

Justin's POV

On top of everything else, I find myself sitting next to the hottest man I've ever seen. He's got to be a good five inches taller than me, lean build, broad shoulders, impeccably dressed, soft hair, and beautifully expressive eyes. He's been with me the whole flight. You'd think after all this time, I'd get used to sitting next to this amazing man. But it just seems as each second passes, I get more and more nervous.

This was supposed to be a straight flight to Pittsburgh. But weather conditions or other such nonsense has turned my trip back home into a ride that could rival the best at Disneyland. After announcing that our one-way flight had turned into a changeover, they promised only a half an hour wait in Texas. That half an hour turned into four and half. Since Texas, it seems as though we've been on a wild goose chase to find Pittsburgh. I've seen more of the United States on this flight than I have in my entire life. Texas, North Dakota, Illinois, Virginia, and now we're leaving North Carolina. It's been guaranteed that North Carolina was our last stop before we hit home.

"It better be," the handsome man next to me muttered when the flight attendant made her announcement as we sat in the plane in Virginia.

"There's really no where else for us to go," I whisper to him, hoping my voice doesn't crack or sound nearly as anxious as it seems in my head.

The woman in the aisle next to us laughs a little. "They could decide to take us back to California and hit all the other states we've missed."

I personally think it's a good sign if the passengers are making jokes about our misfortune. Either that, or it's a good sign that we are slowly going insane.

He's my flight buddy for this trip, I guess. Luck would have it, we've been seated next to each other each flight. Which is also a little freaky, if you think about it. But I'd just as rather revel in his warmth, which is searing my left arm because our shoulders have decided to lean into each other.

Just now his right foot knocked my ankle. I think my heart stopped beating.

He's doing important looking stuff on his lap top. I've made it a point not to peek at the screen, no matter how tempted I am. Instead, I've pulled out a sketch pad and started doodling. A small doodle of a flower has slowly emerged into an overgrown Japanese garden--a recent obsession of mine ever since I found this awesome Japanese garden book at this used bookstore on Wilshire.

"That's incredible," He suddenly breaths on my neck. His voice sounds husky and dark, as if he's just woken from a deep sleep.

I think my heart just dropped out of my ass.

A hoarse "thanks" is my lame reply and his attention returns to his work.

Damn it, Justin.

I try to remedy it by saying, "I like to draw gardens."

Oh my God, now I really sound like a retard.

He laughs and I feel the sound reverberate in my head. "I can see that," he responds and then gestures to my pad, "May I?"

All I can do is nod as our fingers brush against each other before he eases the pad out of my deathlike grip. I can't remember what else I've drawn in that particular pad and my heart starts to pound. I just pray there isn't anything too embarrassing. I listen to him as he praises each page.

And then I remember what's on the page before my garden.

He is.

I know he's nearing it as the pages turn. And then suddenly there he is, leaning against the Starbucks counter in Illinois. At that moment, I think all the blood in my body rushes to my face.

"You're a good model," I stutter, trying to snatch the pad away before he could inspect it further and see the minute details I painstakingly tried to capture on the page.

"Holy shit, I'm hot," he snickers, pulling the pad away from my desperate fingers. "I should charge you."

I know I'm acting like a child, but I can't help it when my bottom lip juts out a little and I begin to pout. Folding my arms across my chest, I huff and look away, all the while burning in agonizing embarrassment.

"Well," I can hear the smirk in his voice, "At least you didn't turn me into a monster."

He places the pad back on my tray where I'm forced to stare at my drawing of him. All I can see are the mistakes. One of his hands is disproportionate to the other, his jeans should have more creases, his hair needs to be flatter around the ears, the counter should be lower. But he stops my brooding by repeating, "It's really good. Stop analyzing it. Go back to drawing your flowers."

"I'm an artist. I'll never be happy with the finished product."

"Then you'll never have a finished product, will you? What's the point, then, of drawing, if you have no final outcome you can be proud of? Why do it?"

My lips automatically turn into a smile. "That's the best part about being an artist: I can be as vain and unhappy as I want and it's expected of me."

"Interesting. You seem neither vain nor unhappy."

"Then I guess I'll never be a good artist," I mockingly slump into my chair.

I like making him laugh, I decide. It's slowly becoming my favorite sound in the world.

We've run out of things to say. As he begins to type again, I try to think of something to keep our conversation going, but I don't want to seem desperate. I don't know why, but the way he just eased out of a conversation with me makes me nervous. I unlatch my belt and stand up, stretching out the kinks and nerves. "I'm going to use the restroom," I inform him, although I have no clue why he needs to know that I'm going to piss.

Maybe I'm making it up, but I think I can feel his eyes watching me as I walk down the aisle. My imagination gets the best of me and I begin to strut, putting on a show for a man I know isn't watching.

Chapter Two

Brian's POV

He's got to be the hottest piece of ass I've ever seen.

And he's sort of funny in a bizarre kind of way.

We were in the nut store at the O'Hare airport in Chicago. I watched him as he pulled out his phone, dialed a number and screeched, "Nuts! Nuts! Nuts!" into it. I think perhaps I'm going a little insane on this flight, because that's still making me smile two states later. It was totally random and one of those "you had to be there" moments, but really, that about sums up our flight--nuts, nuts, nuts. Well, more like, fuck this sucks worse than a twink who forgot to cover his teeth.

I watch him meander down the aisle like he owns this plane, which, considering how long he's spent in it, I think he does. Hell, we all do. His bathroom expedition is an obvious invitation, but this flight has taken any fun out of any potential trick. I just want to make it back to the loft without another tour of this grand ol' country. If they make one more fucking change to our flight there may be a chance none of us will make it to Pittsburgh alive--because I will have killed them all.

I put away my lap top and slide my tray into place. His sketch pad is open on his seat and I take a good look at his drawing of me. He's a truly amazing artist. I see the annoyance, anger, and weariness etched into my features. But I also see something stronger, something which sort of makes me proud to look like that. It's like I see resilience and dominance in his portrayal of me. Hm. I wonder if he would notice if I took the drawing.

He's standing over me. I missed my chance, if I was going to take it, to see if I could get a quick fuck out of his cute ass.

He's stretching again and I try to ignore the tantalizing bit of flesh that's slowly being revealed as he reaches heavenward. It's a never-ending stretch and his pants have joined the teasing, inching slowly down his thin hips. Bone and flesh.

Did he notice me lick my lips?

He probably didn't have time to notice anything because suddenly he's forced into my lap as the plane hits a rough patch. I feel his warm breath on my crotch and his hands on my hips. I will myself not to get a hard-on.

Christ, I can't believe this is turning me on.

"Sorry," he grumbles into my crotch, but makes no attempt to move. The plane is still shaking like crazy and the seat belt light just made an appearance.

"Here," I say, reaching to push on his shoulders. I help him turn around and he's halfway off my lap when the plane jumps again. It's his ass that meets my lap this time.

He's blushing again. He's done that a lot since we've met. It's kind of sweet.

"I guess you should just stay here," I remark, pushing my tongue into my cheek as I not only see, but feel his blush deepen. I wrap my arms around his slight waist and pull him tightly against my chest.

It must be the turbulence that's making my heart beat as loudly as I think it is.

We sit in silence as the lights flicker in the cabin and the plane jumps around in the sky. I couldn't be happier, though, because I have a hot blond in my lap. Well, I can think of a few positions that would make me happier, but this will do, for now.

"So," he begins. He twists in my lap and faces me. His breath is moist and sweet on my face as he asks, "Why were you in California?"

"Business."

"Ah." There's a silence.

"Do you live in Pennsylvania?"

I nod.

"I see." I like that he acknowledges my nod as if I verbally answered him.

"What about you?"

"I was born in Pittsburgh, but I've been living in California since I was seventeen. This is my flight home. I mean, I'm moving back for school."

Shit. He's younger than I thought he was. I study his upturned nose, pouty lips, prominent jaw, his seemingly endless blue eyes, and I wonder just how old he is.

"For graduate school." He's read my mind. "I'm twenty-four. I took a year off between high school and college to work. Then I went to UCLA for visual arts. They have an awesome arts program."

"So I've heard."

"I minored in business, though. Advertising."

This is interesting. "Why advertising?"

He shrugs a little and shifts on my lap. The plane is still hopping around and my slowly hardening dick must be making him uncomfortable.

"I don't know. I can't see myself as a starving artist or anything. I need to do something in my life that would stimulate me both artistically and intellectually."

"I'm in advertising," I decide to admit.

His eyebrows shoot off his forehead. "What do you do?"

"I own an agency."

"Holy shit. How old are you? You seem so young, but you own your own agency?" He demands. His cheeks flush, but it's not the embarrassed blush I've seen before. It's the same kind of flush I see on Mikey when he gets a new comic in that he loves. Or when Lindsay talks about Melanie. A flush of excitement.

But I hate that I'm almost thirty. And I hate to tell him that I'm almost thirty. No matter what, he's still younger than me.

"How old do you think I am?" It's a mean question, I know. He's going to have to think of an age that would be appropriate but not offensive.

But he surprises me by answering right away. "You don't look older than thirty. That can't be right, though, because you're so accomplished--"

"I'm twenty-nine."

His eyes widen. "But how--"

"I'm the best," No point in being modest. "A rival agency based in New York tried to snatch me up. My boss would rather have made me partner than lose me and then, just this year, he retired and I bought him out. Pretty easy, actually."

"That's amazing." His face is etched with awe.

It's only then that I notice the plane is once again flying smoothly and half the passengers are staring openly at our seating arrangement. "Don't look now, but it appears as if we're this evening's entertainment."

He strains his neck to look and then jumps off my lap, slamming into his own. His face once again grows scarlet.

"You blush a lot," I tell him.

"It's the curse of having pale skin," he jokes, but his hands make their way to his face, pressing at his hot cheeks. He sees me staring at him and he covers his face completely. "Stop it! You're only making it worse."

I chuckle and am going to tease him again when the captain's voice fills the plane, telling us that we're about to land in Pittsburgh.

"Finally," I grumble, settling back into my seat. I choose to ignore the look of disappointment on my neighbor's face. Nor do I pay attention to the tightening in my chest.

It's only after we get our luggage and shake hands in parting do I remember that we didn't even exchange names. I swirl around, hoping to see him before he disappears into the sea of travelers, but I don't.

I'm sure he would have been fun.

Life sucks sometimes.

Chapter Three

Justin's POV

It isn't by choice that I find myself at Babylon a month after I arrive in Pittsburgh, nursing a beer, feeling sorry for myself. The constant thumpa-thump-thump of the music is slowly ripping out my insides and replacing them with something reminiscent to lead.

I haven't been to Babylon since my first week back. Five days I spent here, desperately searching for this man that Daphne insists I made up. But there's no way, no matter how artistic I am, could I have made up those haunting eyes and that incredibly sexy laugh--a laugh that sounds as though it comes from somewhere deep inside; as if it hardly ever surfaces. And there's no way I imagined his cock hardening against my ass. "Come on, you don't even know if he's gay!" It's true, I have the worse gaydar known to mankind, but after spending some time on the man's lap, feeling his arousal grow, I can figure it out.

And now... he agonizes my every thought.

God. I'm such a twat for not getting his name. At least his name, Justin! You could've done that! Flight after flight and I never once thought to introduce myself properly.

Daphne says that tonight is my inaugural visit to Babylon: my first night here that I'm not looking for him. I agreed to be here because even I'm starting to see how pathetic I've become. The few tricks I have had since coming home left me unsatisfied and I found myself comparing them to him. Even though I've never had him. Even though I probably never will.

But can I help it that my eyes trail to the door when I think no one is looking? There's been so many 'almosts' tonight. That guy almost looks like him, but he isn't as tall. Or that guy almost looks like him, but his hair is lighter. The closest thing here is the guy to the right of the bar, but he has way too many muscles. He's not as smooth, lean, or firm as him.

"Are you waiting for someone, Justin?" Emmett asks me, following my gaze.

I open my mouth to deny his inquiry, but Daphne beats me to it. "Justin! Jesus Christ! Get over it already!" She looks at Emmett and mutters, "Airplane."

Daphne did well for herself. Everyone expected her to study medicine or biology--you know, sciences. But instead, she went into business. Advertisement, actually. It's just one other thing we have in common. If I wasn't a fag and she wasn't a dyke, I'd totally marry her.

Daphne's lucky. She interned for an agency while in college and they liked her so much, she became a permanent feature. It's owned by a friend of theirs, Brian Kinney. Daphne claims to like working for Brian better than her old boss. I have yet to meet Brian, but I know all about him.

Emmett sighs, "Still? Are you sure he's real, Justin?"

I grumble nonsensical words into my beer and take a huge drink, excusing myself from answering; from being any more pitiful than I already am. I hate the look of sympathy I receive from Ted. I haven't known them that long, but I know that if Ted pities you...

Well, that's just pathetic.

I like Daphne's friends. She met Ted at her work. And because Ted and Emmett are best friends, she became friends with Emmett also. Since I've moved back to Pittsburgh, it's like even though I've been disowned by my biological family, because of Emmett, Ted, Daphne, and all the others, I still have one--a family, that is.

"Is Brian here yet?" Michael asks as he pulls his partner, Ben, off the dance floor. Ben is likable enough, but he's so boring. For instance, one time they left me alone with Ben and he talked to me for an hour about homosexuality in nineteenth century France.

"Oh? Do I finally get to meet the illustrious Brian Kinney?" I tease Michael. Out of all Daphne's friends, Michael and I get along the best. He's so down to earth and even though he whines constantly, he's a good listener and an obviously loyal friend.

Plus, he's the only one who takes my airplane story seriously. I guess he's a romantic at heart or something, because he was especially interested in this guy.

I can't help but notice the gleam in his eye when I ask about Brian. "Oh, you'll meet him."

It's when I turn around to order another beer that I feel it. I can't explain the sensation, only that the small hairs on the back of my neck begin to tingle and my groin tightens.

"Brian's here," Michael informs the group.

"You're late, Kinney," Daphne says and I hear her place a kiss on his cheek.

I'm about to turn around when he says, "Fashionably" and laughs. My knees go weak.

I don't have to turn around to know it's him.

Would it be rash of me to rip off all of his clothing right fucking now? Because that's what I'm going to do if I turn around and see him. Brian. No wonder Michael has been so interested. Like a fucking idiot, I've been pining over his best friend for the past month. Drooling, dreaming, sighing--and Michael's seen it all.

Well fuck me with a pogo stick. I'm going to kill Michael slowly and painfully.

"Who's the new addition?" Brian ponders. It's got to be me he's talking about, right? If I don't turn around then I don't ever have to face this, right?

I know. I know. I've been fantasizing about this all month. But, I never actually expected to actually meet him again.

Can I just run away and hide forever? Please?

Michael's trying to make the introductions, but I can't turn around. Why did I have to wear these crappy cargo pants? Why didn't I take Daphne's advise and wear that sexy button up I own? And my hair--ugh.

"Justin?" Michael pokes my back.

"I don't feel so well." It's a terrible excuse, but I'm totally preparing to flee.

"Hey," his voice stops me. It has that same tone, that sexy, God-I'm-so-fucking-hot-there's-no-way-you're-going-to-get-away-from-me tone that he used a couple times on the airplane. That tone that makes all the blood rush out of my face and into my dick.

"I know you, right?" Brian asks. Refusing to look at him, I catch everyone else's eyes on me. They're curious. I look at Michael and find him more humored than anything else. "Hello?" Brian waves his hands in front of my face in order to get my attention. "I do know you, right?"

"Not really," I sigh.

"Are you sure? 'Cause you seem really familiar to me."

"We might've met, but we don't know each other." I turn back to the bar. "Double beam." Surviving this night will require lots of whiskey.

This is not the way I imagined it. I imagined sunshine and cheesy romantic music. I imagined us running toward each other, happy tears trailing down our faces as we embrace for the very first time.

I imagined him to be searching for me, as eager as I am in connecting again. I never once imagined him to be Brian fucking Kinney. Of course I have to get a crush on the one guy I can never have.

"Make that two," he says, close enough to make my entire body break out in tiny bumps.

My left arm is resting against his chest as he turns to stare at me. He waits until I drink my Beam to ask, "Have we fucked?"

It's like that movie When Harry Met Sally. You know, when Harry sees Sally at the airport years later and he sort of recognizes her, but can't quite figure it out. I let out a bark of a laugh and I see Brian scoot back, a look of confusion settling in on his chiseled features.

"Should I take that as a 'hell no'?" He's obviously offended. I watch him as he quickly throws back his drink and turns to lean against the bar, looking very much like the drawing I did of him in Illinois.

He must see something that's caught his attention because he pushes away from the bar quickly, and gracefully saunters toward the dance floor. I can't decide if I imagine the quick glance back at me before he disappears into the sweaty bodies, or not.

I royally fucked that up.

The others crowd around me and I make sure not to look in Brian's direction again.

"How do you know Brian?" Daphne asks, her eyes narrow to slits as she regards me with interest.

I shrug. "I don't. Not really."

"Seemed like you do," Emmett drawls as he swirls his very pink martini.

Michael takes a place next to me, watching me out of the corners of his eyes for a few moments. "Not how you imagined it?"

"Hardly," I grumble. "I'm an artist, though. It's probably in my nature or something to romanticize everything."

"Look," Michael turns to look straight into my eyes, leaving me no way to ignore him. "He's just being an ass. I know that he recognizes you. He just doesn't want to seem all wishy-washy in front of everyone. This is his stomping ground, you know."

"So I've heard."

Michael heaves a heavy sigh. "I know what everyone has told you about Brian. Normally, I'd try to dissuade someone from pursuing him. Yeah, Brian claims not to do romance or dating or relationships, but he's never really had anyone who's tried. Besides, I remember how he was when he came back from California. You'd think with a flight like the one you guys experienced, he'd be a total shit, but he wasn't. As a matter of fact, for the first like two weeks, Brian seemed more at ease than I've seen him in a long time. I think that's your doing. I think you'd be good for him. Even if Brian doesn't realize it yet, it's there, subconsciously or something. If you want him, if you're interested, I promise to do everything I can to help you get him."

"Wait a minute," Daphne shrieks. "Brian Kinney is the guy you've been obsessing over for the past month?"

Michael grins and nods.

"Oooh," Emmett whispers, looking between me and the direction Brian disappeared to. "That boy's gonna be in trouble."

Chapter Four

Brian's POV

I was being honest. I didn't recognize Justin at first. The lighting in Babylon is quite the opposite from the lighting in a fucking airplane. He seemed familiar to me, but I couldn't put my finger on it. Then it all came rushing back. That's why I grabbed him. He's not someone easy to forget. That ass. Those eyes. That hair. Fuck me, that smile.

Holy shit. When did I turn into such a dyke?

I'm not going to lie and say I wasn't hoping to run into him again. It's just that I sure as hell didn't expect to see him at Babylon with my friends. And for obviously wanting me in that plane, Justin was being pretty fucking nonchalant at Babylon.

When I finally did recognize him, all I wanted to do him was grab him and stuff him into my pocket and never lose him again. He's so fucking cute...

Hmm.

I'm totally going to ignore whatever thinking that might insinuate.

God, fuck him for being such an ass. Could I have been any more foolish? Standing there, trying to see if he remembered me.

Get this: now, Justin's everywhere and I don't understand why. He's at the diner, at Debbie's, at Babylon and Woody's. He even shows up at Kinnetik three days a week to eat lunch with Daphne. Really, if he wants me to fuck him, all he's got to do is ask. And it's pissing me off that he doesn't. Instead, he just watches me with those big blue eyes. To top it all off, I was so sure that he would be openly disapproving about the number of tricks I have, but unlike Michael and the others, he never says a word. He just watches. And sometimes smiles when I get someone super hot, as if rooting me on.

He's a fucking enigma.

It's embarrassing enough that I want him as much as I do, but what's worse is that he's now invading my dreams. Last night, I dreamt that we were in this huge castle with all these stained glass windows. He was naked and the multitude of colors were reflecting off his body. He was beautiful.

And I'm starting to look forward to him just popping up like he has the tendency to do. That's just pathetic.

Today, I can finally get away from Justin because I'm meeting Michael at his shop for lunch.

"Hey, shop keep!" The bells hanging off Michael's door ring loudly. I've tried to convince him time and time again to get rid of the damn bells, but he likes them. They were a gift Ben brought back from Tibet.

Instead of being greeted with Michael's chipper face, though, I'm standing in front of him. What the hell?

"Where's Michael?"

Justin offers me a small smile. "He had to take Vic to the doctor or something."

"Uh huh."

Ah. I'm starting to get a feeling that this is some sort of conspiracy.

"Why are you here? Where's the kid that normally works Fridays?"

"He works Friday evenings. I think he's still at school and since I don't start for a couple weeks, I offered my services."

His cheeks taint red and I can't help smiling. "Is he paying you enough for said 'services'?" I tease.

Justin lets out a snort, "Please. He wouldn't be able to afford me." He starts restocking a display and I watch in amusement for a while.

"Oh? He couldn't afford you, huh?" I let my eyebrows raise. "Well, could I?"

A couple comics fall out of his hands and slip onto the floor. We both lean down quickly and at this close proximity, I can see his hands are shaking a bit. "Relax, Justin," I draw out his name. "I was just joking."

He begins to sputter excuses, quickly scooping the dropped comics. As he stands up, he says, "I didn't know you were coming here."

"Oh? This wasn't part of the plan? Is Michael becoming slack on his matchmaking skills?"

"What?" He almost squeaks. His body twirls around and he's staring intently into my eyes. It makes me uncomfortable. I don't know what it is about Justin that's driving me insane. He's making me feel a gambit of emotion; emotions that I've never really taken the time or energy to feel before.

I feel like there's this weird internal tug, like I'm some kid in a candy store, begging for the biggest and best. Something deep inside me, squealing, "I want that one! I want it now!"

This isn't me. These aren't my feelings. I'm pretty sure it's because I haven't fucked him yet. In my mind, he's been lifted onto a pedestal and if I could just spend one night with him, I'm sure all this would go away. Feeling this way makes me anxious.

"What?" Justin asks nervously, and I realize that I've been staring at him.

"What is it about you?" I ask him. Justin looks honestly confused, so I continue. "I mean, you're really fucking hot--" I pause to watch the telltale blush creep into his features. "But I don't think I've seen you once hit on someone. Why?"

He shrugs. Looking up at me he says, "We're all different, Brian." I think that's the first time I've heard him say my name. Does he have to say it all gruff and deep like that? "That's your way. Not mine."

I think I'm staring at his lips. They look so soft. "What's my way?"

"Tricking."

"So your way's what? Relationships? Or, God, monogamy?" I let out a small shutter. How boring.

He laughs heartily. Okay, now I'm really confused.

"I don't give a shit about monogamy, Brian." He really needs to stop saying my name. "It's just that tricking has never sexually satisfied me. So I just don't trick that often."

"I don't understand."

"I find someone I like and we fuck."

"That's what I do too."

He bites his lip. As if that's going to help me understand. "Never mind," he sighs.

Oh no way. "Come on."

"It's not the whole 'faithfulness' thing that attracts me to relationships. It's not about monogamy. I don't know." He's frustrated. "I like getting to know someone's body. Finding his hot spots. What turns him on. What turns him off. How to make him come in thirty seconds. How to make it last all night. I guess for me, half the pleasure that comes from fucking is giving him the best orgasm of his life. That's what I like and you usually can't get that from a one night stand."

Holy shit. I need to get out of here.

The bells on the door indicate that we have company. "Shit, Brian. I'm so sorry. I forgot we had plans," Michael apologizes as he comes up to us. "Is it too late to get a quick bite?"

“Yeah. I’ve got to go. Bye,” I say this as I’m walking to the door. I glance over my shoulder and see Michael turn to Justin for explanation, but Justin just shrugs and looks a little lost himself.

No way is some blond twink going to get the best of me.

Chapter Five

Justin’s POV

The sexual tension’s still here. The uncertainty is still here. The attraction is definitely still here. But something’s changed. He used to joke with me; we used to flirt. Now we behave as though we’re strangers. Awkward strangers, but strangers nonetheless. I hate how fucking polite he’s been to me. It’s kind of freaky, actually.

I’m pretty sure I said or did something to piss him off. Whatever it is, it sucks.

Because I really like him.

At first I thought it was just that I wanted to fuck him. And I do. I still do, of course. Who wouldn’t? But I like him, you know? I like who he is.

Brian Kinney is complicated. He’s like a difficult riddle or logic puzzle that you just have to figure out. The kind that has you sitting on the couch for half the day as you add and subtract and multiply until you finally come up with the solution.

No, wait. He’s more like a Sunday New York Times crossword puzzle. You know you may never finish it, but you force yourself to try because of how proud and happy and accomplished it will make you feel.

I can just imagine his cute half-assed sneer if he ever heard me say that.

That’s another thing. His facial expressions are priceless. I’ve never met anyone who can ask a loaded question with the raise of a brow. Or who can make you feel like an absolute fool with a slight twist at the corner of his lips. He personifies tongue-in-cheek humor.

I like Brian Kinney because he’s three-dimensional.

“I think you scare him,” Michael leans over to yell in my ear. We’re at Babylon, of course, and I’m watching intently as Brian dances with his latest conquest. A conquest who, I notice, looks somewhat like me. Only, he’s wearing an obviously expensive outfit. He’s slightly taller and darker than me.

More muscles too.

Okay. He looks nothing like me. But if I squint and lean my head to the left slightly, I can see the resemblance.

“Really? Are you sure it’s not because I’m short? Or translucent?” I yell back sullenly. The trick is hot, that’s for sure.

It must be sexual tension that’s gotten me all wound up tonight. I’m so fucking horny.

Michael laughs at me. “Yeah, you certainly aren’t Brian’s type.”

I’m pretty sure I shoot daggers at Michael, who scoffs and then pulls me close. “Brian likes hot things. You’re hot. Really. You’re on fire, kid. Trust me. It’s not a matter of physical attraction.”

The trick now has his tongue down Brian’s throat.

“He’s scared of you.”

“Great,” my voice falls flat.

“I think he’s confused because he wants you. And I don’t just mean to fuck. Because if Brian Kinney wanted to fuck you, he would. I think he’s torn because he’s been starting to consider you his friend, and we all know--”

“Brian doesn’t fuck his friends,” I grumble. “So I’m either a trick or his friend, huh. I can’t be both?”

Michael gives me this weird look. “You want to be just another trick?”

I shake my head vehemently. “But I do want to fuck him. I want it all.”

“I know you do. And Brian knows you do too.” Michael places a hand on my shoulder, offering silent support. We both glance at Brian and he’s staring intently at us, forgetting about his trick for a moment. When our eyes meet, though, he’s all over the guy again. “Yeah, he knows. And what I think he’s beginning to understand...” He pauses as we watch Brian lead his trick into the back room. “What he’s beginning to understand is that maybe he wants it all too.”

“Bullshit.”

“I’ve known him like half his life. He’s almost thirty. People change, Brian included. Believe me, you’re not the first to want to have a relationship with him. There have been other men who’ve been interested in Brian as more than just a fuck. Men Brian was so sexually attracted to, it drove him insane, so to speak. But he’s never had Sunday brunch with those men. Or shared friends with those men. Because those men were just tricks who wanted more than Brian was willing to give them. He’d just fuck them and leave them.”

I shrug my shoulders. “I know all this.”

“Let me put it this way,” Michael sighs. He’s frustrated with me. “You’re still here.”

“Yeah, but we haven’t fucked yet.”

“Exactly.”

“What?” That makes no sense. Honestly. I try to count back the beers Michael’s drank tonight. Not that many. Not enough to be babbling as bad as he is.

“Brian likes you, Justin. That’s why he hasn’t fucked you. That’s why he lets you keep hanging around him; around us. Because he wants you around. He likes you being around.”

I stuff my hands into my pockets and pout. “Then why doesn’t he ever really talk to me anymore? It seems so awkward now.”

Michael chews on his lips, as if weighing his options. “I’m not supposed to tell you this because I’m not supposed to know...” Okay. Now, he has my full and complete attention. “But Brian told Lindsay what you said to him at the shop. About tricking and relationships. Brian said that the way you put it... That if being in a relationship means better sex, then it mustn’t be that bad.”

If I were drinking something, I think it would shoot out of my nose. “Are you fucking with me?”

“No.”

I’m speechless.

“You’re challenging the beliefs that he’s lived by his entire life. That’s enough to scare anyone.”

Well, shit.

Chapter Six

Brian’s POV

It’s like I have no control. Control over my body, my thoughts, my actions.

An example: last night, at Woody’s, this guy tried to drag Justin home with him even after he was rejected. Of course I didn’t let that happen, that’s not the issue. I would have stopped the guy even if I didn’t know the kid he was trying to fuck. It was my reaction that bothered me. It wasn’t just that I helped Justin. It was how I felt when I saw the guy grab Justin’s arm. I was angry, for sure, but more than that...

I was fucking jealous.

I’m sitting as far away from him as possible this morning. Sometimes I’m able to just blot him out of any given situation and it’s not so bad. But right now, I can’t get rid of him. I blame the munchers entirely. They keep going on and on about this violinist they met and how “perfect” he would be for Justin. It’s obvious that he’s more than a little uncomfortable.

Good.

“He’s so sensitive, Justin. You’d love him.” Lindsay is all but swooning over the violinist. “I told him about you and he seems very interested.” She winks in his direction.

I must be scowling openly because she turns to me and says, “Jesus, Brian. I’m not trying to hook you up with Ethan. Or with Justin, for that matter.”

“So keep your cynicism to yourself this time.” Stupid Melanie.

Justin glances furtively in my direction. Our eyes meet for a moment before he looks away. He lets out a heavy sigh when he realizes that everyone seems to be waiting for his answer. He sort of mumbles something, then clears his throat and says, “I’m not sure I like sensitive men, Lindsay.”

Debbie laughs at this. “Honey, sensitive men are the best. They’re the easiest to control.”

“Ma!” I can’t help but smirk. You’ve got to love Deb.

“If you don’t like sensitive, then what do you like?” Mel asks him.

“He likes tall, dark, and brooding,” Daphne explains knowingly. “He likes men who are emotionally unavailable and don’t show open interest in him.”

The tips of Justin’s ears paint pink and he sneers out a “Shut up, Daphne” before returning to his meal.

“Well, those kind of men aren’t worth the effort,” Lindsay sighs. “It’s men like Ethan who prove to be fruitful in a relationship.”

Melanie laughs. “How do you know so much about men?”

“Look who are friends are,” Lindsay sweeps a hand across the table, “All men.”

“You’re right. We need to broaden our horizons.”

The room erupts with laughter and all I can think about is Justin being happily married to some romantic twat with a violin.

“So, what do you say, Justin? Do you want to meet Ethan?”

We let Justin trip over his words for a while, shifting food hopelessly across his plate, until Emmett says, “I think our boy’s interested in someone else.”

Justin doesn’t deny this, he just continues to play with his food, turning redder.

What? Well, now. Interesting. How come I didn’t know about this?

“Oh? I didn’t know you like someone.” Debbie leans into the table conspiratorially and asks, “Who is it?”

“Shut up. Jesus.” Justin’s obvious embarrassment makes everyone laugh.

Where have I been that I don’t even notice Justin interested in someone? Great. Here I go, getting all jealous again. If I stay here much longer, I’m probably going to say or do something that they will never let me forget. I push my chair back and everyone looks at me. “I’m just going for a smoke.”

Outside, the air is cold and my breath forms little clouds as I exhale the smoke. My silent reverie is only for a moment before I hear the backdoor open and someone climbing down the steps to join me.

It’s Daphne. She pats my jacket pockets and pulls out the pack of cigarettes. “You’re pissed off because Justin is interested in someone, huh?” She asks.

I huff out a laugh. “Not really.”

“You’re very dense, Brian.”

“What?”

“And that surprises me, because in the working world, you’re so sharp. I guess your street smarts need some work.”

“What?”

“It’s you he likes... A lot.”

Uh...

Oh.

“Well. He’s shouldn’t. That’s stupid.” Even I think I sound twelve. God.

“I agree.”

What? What a bitch. “Fuck off.”

Daphne bursts into laughter. “Not really. I think you’re good for him, Bri.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I know you don’t want him to meet this violin player. You looked like you were going to burst when Lindsay started talking about him.”

Shit.

“It’s not that obvious, Brian. Don’t worry.” She pauses and we smoke in silence for a couple minutes. “He doesn’t think you’d want him. It’s killing him, Brian. And me. He’s getting to be so annoying. You need to just tell him that you like him--”

“This isn’t junior high, Daphne.”

“Tell him that you like him. Or at least show some interest. He hasn’t known you as long as I have. You can be pretty impossible to read.”

“Look. I don’t want a relationship... I don’t want to be all domestic and shit. And I definitely don’t want to be monogamous.”

“Well, I don’t know what Justin really wants in a relationship. But I do know this: you would be very fucking happy with him. And I know he doesn’t give a flying fuck about monogamy as long as you can satisfy him in bed. You like him, too, right?” I don’t answer, instead, I take a long drag of my cigarette. She sighs. “However, if you really don’t want him,” I can even hear the smirk that’s spreading across her face. “If you look deep inside yourself and you see absolutely no desire to be with him in any way, then you need to make it clear. That way he can move on.”

“What do you mean by ‘move on’?”

“I mean, get over you.”

“Well, I’ll have to think about that.” Daphne opens her mouth to argue, but I stop her by saying, “Because I don’t know if I want him to move on.” I pause and think. “Or get over me... I just... I just don’t know.”

Chapter Seven

Justin’s POV

I’m in the bathroom at Kinnetik, washing my hands. Daphne and I just had lunch and the sandwich I ordered made my fingers smell impossibly of onions, even though it didn’t have onions on it. Taking that into consideration, we’ve decided not to eat there again. I’m scrubbing my hands furiously under the hot water when this guy walks in. His name is Andrew or Aaron or something that starts with an A. He nods in my direction, takes a piss, and then stands right next to me.

“Can I help you?” I ask, shaking my hands out, spraying the mirror with water.

“I totally want to fuck you,” he leans down to whisper in my ear. He runs his hands quickly under the water before reaching for a towel.

Oh yeah. That’s sanitary. You’re supposed to use soap, buddy.

“I totally want to fuck you,” he repeats. “But he’d kill me if I even tried.”

Adam or Alan or whatever opens the bathroom door and slides out. I decide he’d be kind of cute if he wasn’t so damn creepy.

Shaking my head, I grab some paper towels.

Wait. What?

I throw my towels away and run to the door, yanking it open and colliding with a hard body. Looking up, I see Arthur or Anton or whatever smiling at me.

“Where’re you headed, little boy?”

Yeah. Definitely creepy. But I need to know what the fuck he’s talking about.

“Who’s he?” I ask and take a step away from him.

As his eyebrows scrunch up. There’s only one man who can do that and make it work. Fuck. I have it bad.

That sort of realization comes to me at least three times a day. It’s official. I’m pathetically obsessed with Brian Kinney. I like him so much.

“You said that ‘he’d’ kill you.”

A look of disappointment flickers in his eyes. “Oh. That. Well, Kinney. Of course.”

I swear to God, my heart leaps out of my throat, onto the floor, and slides ungracefully along the floor to Brian’s office.

“What makes you say that?” I ask cautiously.

“You guys are together, right?” Anthony or Abraham or whatever asks, a sly smile forming on his lips as he sees that, perhaps, Brian and I aren’t together.

“What makes you say that?” I say again.

“Look, if you aren’t together, great. Let’s fuck.” He puts a rather small hand on my arm, stroking it up and down.

“What makes you say that?” I repeat in an exasperated tone, ripping my arm out of his touch and stepping away from him.

He sighs. “Fuck. I don’t know. Maybe it’s the way you guys look at each other. Or touch each other. I don’t know.”

“Touch each other?”

“Yeah. You guys always press up against each other. I just assumed you were together because that’s what people do when they like each other, you know? They constantly touch one another.”

“You’re pretty observant.”

His grin is too oily for me; zero confidence, one-hundred percent creep. “Of course. I do marketing research. I’ve got to be observant.”

I take a quick inventory in my brain to find that he’s right. Brian and I behave like children with crushes, almost... But that’s what it takes for me to get it.

And I do. I get it. Oh my God. I get it.

It’d be kind of ridiculous if I wasn’t so excited.

“So, what do you say? Wanna fuck?”

“You?” He nods, his smile growing. “No.”

He does this small double-take. Like he didn’t understand that I’ve just rejected him. Then he scowls for a small moment before walking away.

I get it. Michael's right. Brian does want me.

I replay all the times we've brushed up against each other. How many times in the past few months has Brian reached out to touch my hand as I've passed him? How many times have I nudged his arm with my shoulder?

Oh, yeah. Life is fabulous, especially when Brian Kinney wants you.

I don't think screaming this out loud at Brian's office would be a very good idea, though. Instead, I go back to the bathroom to lock myself in a stall and begin a series of extremely lame jumps and cheers. I'm in the middle of doing a sad impersonation of a fourth grader singing that kissing song-- "Justin and Brian sitting in a tree"--when I hear the bathroom door open. I still my movements, feeling my face grow hot. Thank God I went to a stall.

I hear whoever it is pee and then move over to the sink. I squint my eyes and look between the crack of the door to see that it's Brian.

Oh happy day.

Without really thinking, I unlock the door and walk up behind him.

"Hi," I say, timidly, but really fucking excited.

Brian jumps and then looks into the mirror, smiling a little when he sees me.

"Hey." He shakes his hands out too, just as I did minutes before.

I'm doing that thing where every little similarity we have is magnified ten fold and suddenly, we're so meant to be that I can't even see straight.

"Would you kill him?" I ask, smiling wide, making my face hurt from the stretch.

"What?" He looks so confused that I almost feel sorry for him. Almost. Too little, too late, I guess. He's not going to get away from me. Because he so wants me.

He turns around, leaning a little on the sink and asks, "Are you high?"

"Mmm. On you, I guess."

Okay, that was too cheesy, even for me. So let's just pretend that I didn't say that, but instead I just shake my head and grin as an answer.

Only I did say that and he's got that cute bemused look on his face. That look which, sure enough, brings his tongue into his cheek.

I can't stop staring at his full lips. It's like they're drawing me towards him and before I know, I'm pressed up against him, nuzzling his face with my own. Instead of kissing his lips, I begin to kiss his jaw. That beautifully prominent jaw. And then those high cheekbones. His well-defined eyebrows. His prefect nose. Mmm. And then those lips. Full, slightly parted, soft lips. Just a quick peck, not enough, though. Never enough. So soft.

But that's it. That's all I'm going to do. After months and months of waiting and flirting and teasing and uncertainty, we kiss. Short and sweet. But God, it felt fucking good. So good, in fact, that my jeans are beginning to tighten around the crotch.

I can't help myself. I move one of my hands so that it's covering Brian's cock. I just have to know if he feels it too.

Which he does. And not just in his groin. His whole body has taken on this unnatural flush. God, if that's what one small kiss will do...

"What are you doing?" He asks in that gruff voice I've only heard a few times before.

"Something I've been wanting to do ever since that goddamn flight of ours." I lick my lips. They don't taste like me. I lick them again. "I want you so much." There, I said it. "But I don't want to be just another fuck. So, I'm going to leave it up to you. I'm not going to push. I'm just letting you know." I lick my lips once more. They taste like me again. Damn.

"Letting me know?" He's panicking. I didn't want that.

"That I really fucking like you. And I want you."

Brian nods and time sort of pauses.

"I don't know what I want from you," he finally admits.

"I know. I'll give you time."

It's his turn to lick his lips. It's silly how jealous I am that I'm not the one doing it.

"How much time?"

"How much do you need?"

We look at each other for a long time. Then, "Meet me at Babylon, tonight," he says, before biting his bottom lip and walking out.

Chapter Eight

Brian's POV

Well, I didn't expect that when I went to take a piss.

The boy's set an ultimatum. I don't do ultimatums... Just like I don't do the same person twice or relationships.

"You don't do a lot of things," Michael tells me, when I visit him at the shop after work.

This is why I hate having a best friend. "I just--"

"Don't want to take any chances?"

"No. It's just--"

"For celebrating this grandiose life-style of--what it is you say?-- 'no apologies, no regrets,' you sure don't take very many chances. You don't ever give yourself the opportunity to regret something, or apologize for it."

"Fuck off."

"Well, it's hypocritical of you to have this 'I don't give a fuck attitude,' but then totally give a fuck."

Did I already say I hate Michael? Because right now, I really do.

"You're supposed to be on my side." God, I'm whining now. What next?

"I am on your side. I want you to be happy. I don't want you to be alone for the rest of your life, getting old and gray without someone there to... I don't know... Comfort you or something."

I scoff. "I won't need comforting, Mikey. And with any luck, I'll be dead before anything grays."

Michael's been setting up a display behind his counter, but stops when I say this. He turns around and I see what can only be disappointment in his eyes.

He's like the father I never had sometimes.

"You don't mean that, Brian."

Turning away from him, I walk over to the rack of Japanese comics and pick one up. I'm greeted with two male police officers butt-fucking. Holding it up, I say, "You've gotta love the Japanese. This is nearly pornographic."

"It's not pornography, it's art. And don't think that you're going to get me sidetracked. We need to talk about this. About Justin."

I shrug and put the comic away. It's by a woman, anyway. What does she know about gay male sex? Hell, probably more than I care to--God, I'm getting myself distracted, not Michael.

"I don't want to talk about Justin."

"Then why the fuck are you here? I mean, you nearly break down my door to tell me that he kissed you! Just give the guy a chance. Take some time, think about what you really want."

"But I don't do ultimatums."

"Giving someone an option isn't an ultimatum."

I shake my head. "You weren't there. He was so demanding."

"So, he's a bossy bottom. You yourself always say that that's the best type of bottom."

"He's just a kid."

"He's twenty-four. Look, Brian. What's the big deal? I mean, if you don't want him, then you should've made it clear from the beginning. Right? And if you only wanted to fuck him, then you would've already. Just admit that you like Justin. It'll make your life so much easier, Bri. I promise."

"Of course I like him. What's not to like? But that's not the issue." I see Michael clench his fists. Uh oh. I've fallen into the danger zone without even knowing it. I need to tread this carefully. "It's that I can't give him what he wants."

"Can't? Or won't?"

"Why do you care so much?"

"I like Justin."

"So, what? You're really on his side?"

That did it. Michael rests against his counter and glares at me. It's the glare he learned from his mother. The kind that makes me feel two inches tall. I've only been privy to this glare twice before, and both times it was like my heart was ripped out of my body and thrown into the garbage disposal. Fuck this. But Michael doesn't attack, like I

expect. Instead, he folds his arms across his chest and says, “Fuck you, Brian. I’m not taking his side. I really shouldn’t have to take a side. I’m just trying to stop you from making the biggest mistake of your life. Hell, if you weren’t so obviously interested in him, I’d probably tell him to fuck off. I just... He’s a good guy, Brian. I really I don’t want to see him get his heart broken because of you, like all the others.”

I swallow a laugh. Michael’s ready to deck me, so laughing at him would not be a good idea. “I haven’t broken any hearts.”

“You know you have.”

We look at each other, staring each other down, but really, there’s no way I can beat Michael when he’s like this. “I don’t want to deal with this, Brian. This melodramatic bullshit. We’ve had enough of that growing up, wouldn’t you agree? So, why don’t you just tell me what’s really on your mind? Because I know you didn’t come here to argue with me. You know you can’t win this one.”

I’m about to say something insanely stupid when his words sink in. God. He’s right. I didn’t come here for an argument, I came here for...

For his fucking support.

That’s it. I’m fucked.

“What?” He mimics me by raising an eyebrow. I wonder when he learned to do that.

“I think I’m... I’m...”

Michael laughs softly. “Oh? You think? God, Brian. I know you are. We all do. You just need to work up your courage to tell him. Take your time. He said he’d wait.”

Defeated, I explain, “Well, I already asked him to meet me at Babylon tonight. So, it’s kind of a now or never situation.”

“What? I don’t--”

“I don’t need that long to decide. I’ve had months already. Months of fucking torture,” I admit to him, offering a small grin. “I just... I want someone to tell me not to do this.”

“Then you came to the wrong person.”

“Yeah? Probably.”

“Or maybe you knew I wouldn’t talk you out of... Whatever you plan on doing. That’s why you came to me.” Michael’s face erupts into a huge smile. “So, you’ve already made up your mind... And you knew I’d tell you to knock your socks off... Then, what the fuck do you really need me for?”

“Personal cheerleader?” I ask, and my voice sounds so... needy, I almost don’t recognize it.

“Always,” he smirks and leans in to kiss my cheek. “So,” he begins, pulling away and returning to his display. “What are you going to wear?”

I snort. “Bye, Michael.”

“Bye, lover-boy.”

I walk out of the door, only to poke my head in one last time. “I still don’t do fucking ultimatums,” I call out, but leave before the comic he’s hurled at me hits its target.

Chapter Nine

Justin's POV

There are these two twins making a stir on the dance floor. They've got half the club riveted, watching their every move. I'm not really attracted to them, but they'd make fabulous models. According to Brian though, they're terrible in bed. What a shame.

We're all at the bar, surveying the dance floor. I notice most of the guys that aren't watching the twins are watching Brian, who isn't doing anything other than leaning against the bar, sipping his whisky. But damn, he'd look sexy with a pitchfork and fucking overalls. He hasn't said anything to me. He hasn't really even acknowledged my presence other than a curt nod when he first came in. I want to ask, but I told him I'd wait.

I forgot how bad I am at waiting.

The twins are now dancing with this bear of a man. He's so huge and hairy, I wish I had some pencils and paper to capture the moment. They're working a number on him and it makes me giggle slightly. The way they've made a bear sandwich, the look of utter ecstasy on his face, the crowd's bemused expressions--I want to encapsulate it all.

Oh. Brian moves to stand in front of me and I stop mid-laugh. We stare at each other for a long moment until it becomes too intense and I have to look away. His hand finds its way to the back of my neck and he pulls me closer and closer until I'm flat against his chest.

His smell overwhelms me. Spicy. Smoky. Mmm.

I open my eyes slightly as I take in Brian's scent and I see Ted and Emmett standing next to me, staring at us with open mouths. Michael, on the other hand, is trying to hide a smile by biting his lips.

"Let's dance," Brian whispers in my ear. He moves his hand from my neck to my drink, pulling it out of my hand and placing it on the bar. "You looked so hot just now. The way you were watching them dance; so intense. Like you were memorizing every movement. Fuck, I've never seen anything as sexy as you."

No one's ever said shit like that to me. As if I couldn't be more nervous. I think I'm going to vomit.

His perfect hands run down my shoulders, across my biceps, over my knuckles, and rest in my own calloused ones for a moment. I'd say we were holding hands, but knowing Brian, he would probably kill me. His fingers tighten around my own and he steps backwards, pulling me with him. He offers me a small grin, then rests an arm over my shoulders and I timidly place my own around his waist. Despite being terrified, I have to admit it's all kind of romantic.

"I get the feeling that I make you nervous." He comments with obvious humor in his voice once we're on the dance floor. He's been trying to get me to make eye contact with him again, but I can't. After all that, I think I've finally lost my wits. I mean, this is it. The moment I've been waiting months for. The moment I was so sure would probably never come. This is it. I know I can't control my body right now and I don't trust myself not to maul him.

I nod when he says that.

"Why?"

I shrug.

"Quite verbal today, aren't we?" Silence. I look at his chest, his neck, his right shoulder, his left ear, but I still can't look at his face. I hear him sigh and quickly, without any time for me to react, his hand is on my chin, forcing me to look at him.

We stare at each other awkwardly before he places his arms back on my shoulders. Brian begins to move to the music effortlessly and after watching him for a long moment, I wrap my own arms around his waist again and start to move with him.

I swear to God, my body is acting on its own accord because I find that, without any coercing, my hands are reaching for his head, pulling his lips down to meet my own in a scorching kiss. A kiss that leaves both of us breathless and bruised. I don't give him any time to question my actions or pull away completely. I just throw myself at him, jutting against his leg and plunging my tongue deep into his mouth. He pauses for only a moment before he returns my touch with the same amount of urgency.

His kisses awaken every part of my body. It like even my knees have become erogenous zones as they brush against his legs. The awkwardness of our position has him moving his arms around my waist in order to press me closer to him. He's so fucking tall that I'm nearly pulled off the ground. The added sensation of being weightless makes me shiver and he moans into my mouth.

I eat his noises as if I'm starving.

I feel my shirt being raised from behind and his warm hands are finding their way underneath it. One moves up and one moves down, as if to paint my body with boiling passion. I can't help but whimper as his fingers move lower and lower, expertly tracing that part of my body.

Brian shifts slightly and his mouth is now trailing down my chin, across my jaw, around my neck. Oh. I gasp loudly as his fingers prod me with more force than I expect. I crane my neck and he's all over it--licking, nipping, sucking. For the first time in my life, I pray that he leaves his mark on my body. I hate hickeys, they're tacky and ugly. But, fuck, Brian could tattoo his name on my forehead and I'd be on cloud nine.

My mind is working overtime. Before I get lost in this, I need to figure some things out. I know that I don't want to force him to bite off more than he can chew. Baby steps, you know? So I decide to let him choose the place we first fuck. I don't want him to feel obligated to bring me home, or to come home with me.

He's not making any suggestions, though. And the longer we stand here, kissing and touching, the harder I get.

His hands and mouth are doing wonderful things to my body and it's better than anything I imagined. Needles in my fingers and toes, I feel something ignite deep within me. I lick his lips one more time before I take the final plunge and ask, "Isn't there a back room here?"

Brian stares at me, his eyebrows knitted together in contemplation. "You want me to take you to the back room?" He doesn't look happy. I can feel the fire slowly die as he backs away from me. "The back room? No."

"What?"

So, maybe he doesn't want the back room. I would suggest some place else, but now it seems as though he doesn't want any of it. Which is wrong, because I know he wants me. I mean, I haven't been more sure of anything in my entire life. But there he is, backing away from me and looking totally disgusted.

I'm not quite sure what's going on, but I know that Brian walking away from me isn't right, although that's what's happening. What the hell?

"I'm not taking you to the back room." I can see Brian swallow hard and I'm unable to read his eyes. He takes another step away and studies me carefully. Then he says softly, "Fuck you." If I didn't see his lips form the words, I would never have heard it. He shakes his head and walks away, leaving me on the dance floor, with a hard-on like I've never had and a million questions wracking my brain.

Chapter Ten

Brian's POV

Jesus Christ. This is why I don't do this shit. It gets too confusing. And someone always gets hurt.

Not that I'm hurt or anything.

It's just, that's what happens.

You know, he could've saved both of us time and energy, but what he did just now was ridiculous.

I try not to think about how hot that kiss was, how warm his body was, the way he trembled under my hands, because I'm not about to give him the satisfaction of knowing that... Well, just of knowing.

It's never been very hard for me to hide my emotions. But to ignore them, that's not quite as simple. And right now, above all else, above anger and embarrassment, I feel betrayed. Betrayed by Justin, of course, for making me feel like a silly little faggot, if only for a moment. But mainly, betrayed by Michael and Daphne, who insisted that I was making the right decision by letting Justin into my life.

And if I'm completely honest with myself, into my heart. Even just a little. Even for only a moment.

There's a chance it could have gone a lot further than it did.

"Brian!" I hear Justin cry from behind me. I should have known he'd come after me. There's no get out of jail free card.

If anything, Justin's one determined mother fucker.

He follows me off the dance floor and wraps his hands around my arm, trying to pull me to a stop, but I shake him off. "Brian. Please," he almost whimpers.

He reaches for me again and I turn around to face him. "Fuck. You," I repeat. "And you know what? Fuck off."

"I will, okay? But first let me--"

"Good." I make a movement, as if to turn away from him, but he stops me again.

"First let me explain--"

"There's nothing to explain. I'm not naive. I'm not some teenager with a crush or anything, okay? I get it."

"But..." Justin trails off. His face scrunches up as if he's thinking. I glare at him, tapping my foot impatiently. I shouldn't even be standing here, waiting for him to finish his sentence. I should already be out that door and he should already be out of my life. "Then just tell me what I did wrong," he demands.

"You didn't do anything wrong--"

"But--"

"I was just stupid enough to think... God. I don't know. But this is not what I expected." This time I successfully move out of his reach and head for the door.

“So, that’s it?” he yells after me. I guess there’s no way I’m going to get out of this without a fight. We’re quickly gaining attention as bored club-goers stop to watch.

“Yep.”

“But...” He gestures to the dance floor. “But what was that?”

That was you, making a slight fool out of me.

“A good time?” I sneer.

Justin shakes his head defiantly. “No. That was more.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way.” Why is he pushing this?

“I’m sorry you’re being a fucking asshole.”

I’m being a fucking asshole? I try to control my anger by taking deep breaths. In. Then out. There are a couple ways I can get out of this. I take the easiest route. “That’s who I am, Justin,” I practically spit out his name. “Anyone here can tell you that. Any of our friends can tell you that.”

“So, I’m wasting my time?”

I shrug because I don’t really get where he’s going with this.

“But--”

Justin’s making me seriously angry. I storm over to him and stare directly into his eyes. He flinches. “You didn’t have to play all those games.” I watch as the blood drains out of his face. He shivers slightly, but as a result of what, I’m not sure. My voice is dangerously low when I say, “If you wanted me to fuck you, we could’ve done that on the plane. You wasted my time. Our time.”

“I didn’t--”

“Yes, you did, Justin. And on top of all that, you made me feel like a fool. I don’t appreciate that. So, do me a favor and fuck off.”

Since I’ve known Justin, he’s done some strange things, but I usually understand where he’s coming from. What he does next, however, throws me.

He starts to sob. Uncontrollably.

It makes me want to scream. God, what a cliché this has become: crying on the dance floor.

It’s borderline depressing the way Justin seems so despondent. He begins to sputter nonsense. “Daphne w-would say no man is worth this, but I thought... No, I still think you’re worth the fight. J-just one more time.”

“What?”

“Why’d you meet me here if you don’t want to be with me?” He asks, his voice high and desperate.

I tilt my head and just stare at him. “What are you talking about? Why did you put me through all that if all you wanted was a fuck?”

I watch as Justin visibly calms down. His sobs start to recede and he’s no longer on the verge of hyperventilation. “You don’t understand.” He’s stopped crying, although his face is blotchy and red. “I didn’t think it would be such a

big deal. But, well... I obviously made the wrong decision when I offered the back room. I was just trying to make it easier. You just don't understand."

Maybe if I grab his shoulders and shake him, he'd start making some sense. "You're right. I don't understand."

Justin's lips stretch into a blinding smile. How obnoxious. "Well, I do. I get it. Wow, I'm on a roll." I must look utterly confused because that's how I feel. "I don't just want you for a fuck, Brian."

My face becomes, hopefully, devoid of any obvious emotion; a skill I know I've perfected.

"Yeah, I want you. I want you to fuck me. Of course. But, that's not all I want, Brian. Not at all."

"But--"

"I suggested the back room because I didn't want to scare you off. I mean, it's kind of neutral territory, right?"

"But--"

"I want to be with you. I... I like you. More than I've ever liked any guy. I like you, Brian."

I raise my eyebrows, then huff and look away from him. That smug look he's got on his face only increases as he watches me slowly comprehend what he's telling me.

"I didn't know you were such a drama queen, Brian."

"I'm not a drama queen, I just..."

"Queened out?"

That brings a genuine smile to my face and once again, Justin starts to cry. God. "Now who's being a drama queen?"

"Fuck off." He uses my line from earlier tonight.

"Only if you come with me." I just blurt that out. But, I don't want to take anymore chances. Before we have another meltdown, and before we become the juiciest gossip on Liberty Avenue, I want to take him home.

"Where?"

"How about my loft?"

"Mm. Yes, please."

So, I guess Daphne and Mikey were right. I should apologize for mentally damning them to the lowest level of hell. Even though I don't do apologies. But, I guess Michael was right about that too. And really, above all else, I hate hypocrites. Hypocrites and liars. If I deny what's about to happen, then I'll be both.

Justin smiles that sweet, nervous smile he gave me when we first met on the airplane. Fuck. I have no clue what I'm doing, but then he leans up to kiss me softly. I get the feeling he'll give me an eager helping hand.

Chapter Eleven

Justin's POV

I have the post-coital nerves--the kind that make me silent and afraid to touch him again. So instead, I stare up at the ceiling, pretending to be more interested in it than I really am. Brian shifts over, flipping a switch near his side of the bed, and these awesome blue lights shine down on us.

"Pretty," I say, enthralled.

"You're pretty," Brian emphasizes and I snort.

Man, I can be so charming.

"So..." Brian pauses for a moment. This is a little silly. I mean, we've just fucked. He was inside of me. I really shouldn't be so scared. "Now what?" I know I must be imagining the slight blush forming on his cheeks.

I reach out tentatively and brush a damp hair off his forehead. "What do you mean? What do you normally do?"

"Normally?" He takes in a quick breath and then sighs. "Well, in all honesty, I kick my trick out, change the sheets, and take a shower."

"Okay... You want me to help you change the sheets or leave or something?" I say this partly joking, but it's not really funny so it comes out flat.

Brian's body jerks around to face me.

Yeah, I'm fairly certain Brian's blushing. "Uh..." He seems to be at a loss for words. "Oh. Uh, are you trying to make it easier for me again?"

I grin and nod.

"Ah. Well, uh, stop doing that. It's confusing me. And sort of... Never mind."

"Sort of what?" I urge him.

"It's sort of making me nervous."

"I know." After he raises his eyebrow for an explanation, I say, "You're blushing."

His eyes narrow and he flips me off. I just shake my head, giving him a crooked smile. I'm slowly realizing that we're participating in what some romantics have affectionately coined as pillow talk. Brian's pretty good at it, too. And it's effectively making me less nervous.

"What?" He asks when I begin to giggle.

"I can't tell you."

"So, you'll laugh at me, but you won't tell me why? That's pretty mean."

I push on his shoulder a little so that he rolls over. "Fuck off." He's so fucking warm. I remember that warmth covering my entire body not half an hour ago and I begin to blush.

"Now you're blushing," he comments, making me turn even redder. "Why?"

“Just thinking.”

“About?”

“Oh. Uh, you know. This and that.”

He reaches for my cock, which, from the way I feel it begin to stir, is going to be up for another round sooner than I expected. “This?” He asks, petting the head for a moment. Sticking his tongue effectively in his cheek, he moves his hand around to my ass before asking, “Or that?”

“A little...” I trail off as his finger begins to send small sparks of excitement throughout my body. “A little bit of both, I guess.”

Brian wraps his arm around my back and pulls me on top of him. “You guess?” He asks with mock disdain in his voice. “You should be more decisive.” Raising his head, he kisses me lightly on the mouth.

As we pull away, I can’t help but lick my lips. Brian tastes much sweeter than I imagined he would. His mouth: warm, wet, and oh so inviting. “Mmm. You’re right. I guess I’ve always been more for ‘that’ than ‘this.’ Although, I’d never turn down a ‘this’ if offered...” I raise my eyebrows. “Were you offering?”

Brian has a sly little grin on his face. “If we’re talking about you topping me, then the answer is no.” Barking out a laugh at the pout I have on my face, Brian says, “I have a reputation to uphold. What do you think all the boys on Liberty Avenue would say if I got a boyfriend and became a sissy bottom boy all in one night?”

I become very still and extraordinarily quiet.

Did he say ‘boyfriend’?

Boyfriend? Brian wants to be my boyfriend? Or is he already my boyfriend? Because I have no problem with--hey! Not all bottoms are sissies. Asshole.

“Breathing is sort of essential, Justin,” Brian teases me.

I clear my throat and let out the air I didn’t even know I was holding in. “Not if my heart stops beating.”

“Now why would it do that?” He nearly purrs as he runs his hands over my naked arms.

I have to tread this carefully. Do not make a huge deal out of this. I wrack my brain and try to think of a response that won’t scare Brian away. At least I know for a fact that clapping my hands and letting out loud cheers of victory would not be the correct approach. Instead, I dip my head and let my tongue snake out to lick Brian’s mouth. “God, I could kiss you forever.”

“But that’s not kissing. That’s licking.” I can hear the challenge in his voice. I shift on his body so that I’m straddling his belly and then I pin his arms above his head.

I start the kiss slowly. It’s soft, gentle, and quick. Each time I pull away from his lips, I let my own linger a little longer on them until finally, our mouths open and I slide my tongue in. Brian lets me control the kiss.

“What would you call that?” I ask, pulling away from his mouth and gasping for breath. “Kissing? Or licking?”

“Shut the fuck up.” He grabs the back of my head and meets my lips halfway.

I really could kiss him for hours. I love when men explore my mouth, and Brian’s tongue does that masterfully. He traces my teeth and gums, lingering a bit on the molar I chipped when I was twelve. He tickles the top of my mouth, making me shiver. I slide my body further down his own until I can feel him, hot and hard, against my ass.

Yes, I think I'll keep him.

His body shakes a little as we make contact, but then he pulls away from my mouth. "Lie down on your stomach," he says, moving his arms from out of my weak grasp.

That's not really what I had planned.

"I..."

"What?" He asks as he lifts his body to a sitting position. I shake my head and start to slide off him, but he stops me. "Tell me. If you have another idea, I want to know."

"Well... I sort of wanted... To fuck like this. With me on top. Straddling you. Controlling the movements... I want you in... Deep..." Well, shit. That's embarrassing.

He laughs and I can't handle it. I move my hands to my face and try to hide. "Hey," he says gently, trying to tug my hands away. "That sounds like a great idea. It's just... You're so... I don't know. I wouldn't have expected that from you, I guess."

"So, what? You expected me to just lie there and take it?" I ask through my hands, more angry now than embarrassed. "Or is that what you want?" God, first night together and we're already arguing.

"No. No. Neither. Jesus, Justin. You didn't just 'lie there and take it' before. I certainly don't expect you to do it this time. And no, that's not what I want. I want you to ride me. I bet you can really control that lithe, hot little body of yours. And that tight ass..." Brian runs a hand down my crack again and I bite my lips, still hiding my face. "I love your tight ass." He tugs on my hands again, and this time, I let them fall into my lap. Making sure I'm watching his every movement, Brian brings a couple fingers to his mouth and then seeks out my ass once more. Fuck. I shift a little, pushing down on his hand. "If you want to ride me now, I'm all for it. Obviously," he laughs. "But... There's something I want to do that we didn't do before."

The way his fingers are manipulating my body makes me care less about which situation we fuck in, as long as we do it soon. "W-what's that?"

"Have you ever been rimmed?"

Okay, fucking can wait.

"No," I answer. Which is true. I haven't. I have rimmed other people on occasion, though.

He pulls out and etches his hand across my ass, his fingers only slightly dipping into the crack. "Do you know what it is?"

I let out a laugh. "I'm a fag, Brian. Of course I know what rimming is."

"Can I rim you?"

I swallow hard and my cock twitches as I nod my head. "Yes. God." My voice cracks. "Yes."

We change positions so that I'm lying on my stomach. He stretches his body out and pushes his face in front of my ass. Brian's lips curl into a savage grin against my ass as he parts my cheeks. I hear his breath hitch and then, ever so slowly, Brian leans forward. Starting at the top of my crack, he moves down with tiny kisses, but skips over the entrance. My hands squeeze the pillow in anticipation and my heart pounds in my chest. For a moment, that's all I feel. But then something exciting runs throughout my body and I feel... God, I feel wonderful.

It's a subtle feeling, but so concentrated on that sensitive part of my body. A tingling begins at the base of my spine as Brian's tongue hardens and presses inside, demanding admittance.

I let out a small “oh,” and then Brian’s inside me. Not deep--he can’t go that deep--but just enough to make me feel so fucking good. “God,” I whisper. “God.”

My legs being to shake as Brian’s movements become more fierce. I sigh this deep, guttural noise when one of his hands cups my balls. I can feel his cock twitch against my leg, kissing it with trails of pre-come.

“Don’t stop,” I nearly whine as he slowly begins to withdraw.

“I thought you wanted a ride.”

Oh, yeah. That. I nod my head vigorously.

He turns me over and licks his lips. “You taste so fucking good,” he tells me and I totally have to blush at that. I mean, who says that? “Here,” he leans over my face. “Taste yourself.”

We kiss gently, until Brian forces his tongue into my mouth. “See?”

I nod again, my breath’s becoming erratic and my cock’s pretty fucking hard again. “I want to ride you.” I rest my tongue on my lower lip and bite down. For some reason, I really want to do that. Brian reaches over me and grabs a condom and some lube. I hold out my hand. “Not a lot,” I say. He gives me a confused look. “I’m still open from before. Still a little slick, you know? And... I kind of like it... Dry...”

Picking up the condom, he hands it to me. “Want to put it on me?” To say that his voice sounds sexy doesn’t really do it justice, but that’s exactly how it sounds--sexy. Husky and an octave lower than normal. My blood flows a little quicker when I remind myself it’s because of me that he sounds that way; that I’m the one making his cock so hard.

And then I remember the boyfriend comment.

Yep. I was right. They were all right. He wants me. Life is fucking good.

I take the condom from him and sit up. I can feel Brian’s blood flowing, beating inside him. I stroke up and down, reveling in his soft moans of pleasure. With a huge smile, I run my finger up the large vein, stopping at the head. Brian allows me only a few moments to play before he grabs my wrist.

“Do you want me to come now or while you’re on top of me?” He teases, motioning to the condom, which I open hastily and roll on him.

He settles down on the bed. “Let’s see what you can do.”

I throw him a feral grin as I crawl up and settle astride his body. Grasping my ass firmly in his hands and then spreading the cheeks, Brian helps me maneuver on top of him. “God,” he moans. “You’re still so fucking tight.”

We make it past that initial barrier. It’s still a little bit painful, even though I’ve been prepared, even though he’s working hard to make sure it’s minimal. You know: brushing a hand comfortingly across my belly, making sure I don’t move too quickly, whispering words of encouragement--all of which is necessary when you’re fucking someone in the ass. I sincerely appreciate his tenderness, but damn it, I want it now. I push down and he’s all the way in. Ah, yes. As we wait for me to adjust, I’m clearly reminded of what being filled to the hilt means.

He gasps when I try to pull him in deeper. “More. I want more,” I demand, pushing myself down harder. We begin to move in a frantic pace. My cries and his grunts echo throughout the loft. It’s a very hot orchestration, I must admit.

“Brian,” I can hardly form a sentence. “I w-wanna come, Brian.”

“Fuck,” he moans. “Say it again.”

What? I look at him oddly, small whimpers coming from my throat as my legs break out in sweat from the workout they're receiving.

"Say my name, Justin," he reiterates, lifting his hips as best he can. That added pressure and the angle we're at hits me so perfectly that I scream. God, I fucking scream.

I scream his name, my body shaking, fingers gripping Brian's arm in a deadly vice.

"That's it," Brian laughs, ignoring the pain in his arms. His laughter turns into a loud moan as I squeeze around him and move in small circles. Removing an arm from my waist, Brian takes my cock into his hand and starts stroking it.

I can feel him inside every part of me: my fingers, my belly, my feet, my mind. Everywhere.

My balls shoot into my body and I come, covering him in my semen. Brian moans loudly and follows quickly. His body stiffens and then shakes as he empties himself into the condom. "Fuck."

I collapse on top of him; the force draws a quick breath out of him. "Jesus, I'm sorry," I apologize and am about to pull off when he stops me.

"No. You can stay."

Smiling, I wrap my arms around him and push down again. We stay like that for a moment, coming down from our high. But my body is trying to expel him and we have no choice. Gripping the base of the condom, I lift off of him, sighing.

"So," I say after we lay in that silence again. "Are you really my boyfriend?"

"Do you want me to be?" Brian asks, turning around to face me.

I nod. "Yeah. Definitely."

"Okay then."

"So... Can I be your boyfriend?"

Brian laughs, shaking his head. "Doesn't it kind of work that way?"

"Well, you don't really do boyfriends--"

Brian interrupts me with a sigh. "Michael says I don't do a lot of things. And he's right, you know? So, forget about it..." He pauses, then glances at me nervously. "But, I'm not really romantic," he explains. "I don't really like romance. Or domesticity. Or monogamy. I mean, that part of me is real..."

"I don't want to change you. I didn't fall in love with you because of who you aren't."

"Love?" I swear to God, Brian looks like he's about to run away.

"Well, yeah. I'm at that point where I'm pretty sure I'm in love with you. I can wait for you to figure out how you feel about me, so don't worry about saying it back or anything. In fact, I'd be kind of disappointed if you said it right away. It wouldn't be you. I expect it to be just as hard to get you to admit you love me as it was to get you to admit you want me."

Brian rolls his eyes and chuckles. "You're not going to make any of this easy for me, huh?"

"You said not to. Besides, I know what a drama queen you are. I doubt you'd make it any easier for me."

“True,” he nods, then slides over next to me. “So, let me ask again?”

“What?”

“What are we going to do now?”

“Well,” I turn to my side and let Brian spoon up against me. His stomach is cold and wet. I’d forgotten... I made him all wet and sticky. “Ew,” I complain. “That’s gross.”

“Hey, this shot out of your body.”

“Not really comfortable, is it?”

“Nope. Now you know how I feel, being used as a loading dock for your come.”

I laugh for what seems like the hundredth time today.

“Well... You said no to changing the sheets... How about a shower?”

“Now?” He pulls me closer to him. “I’m sort of comfortable. Or rather, comfortable making you uncomfortable.”

“So, then, what’s left? Didn’t you say you kick your trick out?” I swallow, even though I know he won’t. I am his boyfriend, after all. That thought makes me smile. Brian and Justin sitting in a tree...

“Please,” Brian scoffs, but tightens his grip around me. “Like that’s even an option.”

I knew it.

“I can feel you smiling against my arm, what’s up?”

“I’m just happy.”

Snorting a little, Brian pushes me down so that I can look at him. “Is this where I’m supposed to bust out the ring and tell you how much I wub you?” The sarcasm is dripping off his voice.

Damn, even being a prick, he’s hot.

But two can play at this game. “No. No. Of course not. That comes later.” I lean in to kiss him. “I like platinum, by the way.”

For a split second, Brian looks horrified, then his face breaks out in a gigantically uncharacteristic grin. “You almost had me there.”

“I’ve had you since the flight.”

“You seem pretty sure of yourself.”

“I am... I want you to kiss me.”

“Bossy bottom.”

“I hear that’s how you like them.”

Brian shakes his head. “I’m going to kill Michael.”

“Nah. He’s a good friend.” Brian nods in agreement, then rolls on top of me, running his fingers through my hair. “That’s kind of gross,” I complain, moving my head away from his hands.

“What?”

I cringe jokingly and say in my most scandalized voice, “You had those hands up my ass. Now you’re putting them in my hair. Nasty.”

Brian laughs and reaches down to twist my nipple. “Come on, little boy. Let’s shower.”

“Then you can play with my hair all you want,” I agree, sliding out from under him, heading toward his bathroom.

“Oh can I? You’re so fucking generous.”

“You don’t know how generous I can be.”

He gets up to follow me.

I put an extra zing into my walk, knowing for sure that this time, he’s watching.

END.

Invasion

Lindsay's cousin, Justin, comes to Pittsburgh to watch the children while she and Melanie try to work out their problems.

Chapter One

The design, lighting, and music of Babylon is just like all the other gay dance clubs Justin's been to. When he asked his cousin where a young gay boy could get some action, she was quick to answer with "Babylon." The line to get in was crazy and Justin wondered if it was truly worth the wait. But since he hasn't had sex in at least four days, he was determined.

Nothing impressive, Justin thinks to himself upon entering Babylon. That was until he lays his eyes on him. A god among a rank of men. Sex personified. A walking orgasm. Just what the doctor ordered. And many other clichéd phrases leap into Justin's mind when he sees him.

Justin's been watching him for the past two hours, still nursing the same beer he bought when he first got there. It's flat and warm now, but he pays it no heed.

The guy has danced with a dozen or so men, making a trip on three separate occasions to the back room. Finally. Someone who'd be able to keep up with me. When it comes to sex, Justin isn't humble. Three relationships and one abusive boyfriend later, Justin needs no humility. It's all about sex. And this guy... Damn. This guy is like... Yum.

Justin's always a little incoherent when he becomes attracted to someone. Like, strongly attracted. Like, fuck me from behind, flip me over, and do it again attracted. Like, I'm going to eat you up and swallow you down attracted. Like--

"His name's Brian Kinney and he doesn't go for blond twinkies like yourself," a petulant voice interrupts Justin's mind ramblings.

Mind ramblings. That's what Daphne called them when they were in junior high and he'd just blank out in the middle of a conversation. Sometimes his mind is too loud and he has to ignore everything else and listen to it, otherwise it just won't shut up. It's gotten better with age.

Justin looks into the brown eyes of a frowning man. Not bad, Justin muses, eyeing the man up and down. Pittsburgh, by far, has the hottest men.

"And I don't go for blond twinkies either," the man huffs, but blushes slightly under Justin's gaze.

Nodding toward the muscular man who's arm is draped over his new friend, Justin smiles. "No. I see you have a hunk of your own. Don't worry. I'm just looking." His gaze wanders back to... Brian? Was that his name? "Besides, aren't twinkies like twenty-one, at the oldest?"

The brown-eyed man's frown grows. "So?"

"So, I'm twenty-five. Well beyond twink, I hope."

"You sure don't dress it."

And that's how their relationship begins. A little more whiny than Justin prefers, there's something about Michael that's ultimately likable.

Justin learns that Brian Kinney is, as quoted by Ben, “The Stud of Liberty Avenue.”

“And a nonstop, glorified sex-machine,” another man saddles up to the bar. Justin’s eyes widen at the man’s attire. Pink and orange? Justin’s got to give the guy some props, though, because he wouldn’t be seen dead in something that disgustingly bright.

“I was just looking,” Justin reemphasizes. Brian heads to the back room yet again. “I’m normally into smaller guys. Artsy types. Not... him.”

They all just shake their heads at Justin’s obvious desire.

“Look, kid,” Michael begins. Justin’s youthful appearance is already an inside joke. “Don’t mess around with Brian. He’s probably a great fuck and all--”

Justin raises an eyebrow--a motion that immediately reminds the others of Brian. “Probably?”

Shrugging, Michael replies, “I wouldn’t know.”

“But I do. And he is. A great fuck,” Ben offers, wrapping his arms around Michael’s waist from behind and pulling him closer. He begins to grind his hips slowly. “But you seem like a nice kid. You should stay away from him.”

“Yeah,” Michael’s eyes glaze over as Ben continues his hip jutting. “It’s easy to fall in love with Brian Kinney. It’s not as easy to fall out.”

“And it’s even harder to get him to like you. And impossible to get him to love you,” Emmett finishes, sipping his very blue drink. He winks at Justin.

“Do I have ‘romantic’ tattooed on my forehead or something?” Justin asks, furrowing his brows together. “I’m not looking for a relationship. Just a fuck.”

They shake their heads. Michael mutters something like “kids these days” and they all fall into a comfortable silence.

Justin turns to watch Brian again. The trick in front of Brian is trying desperately to keep his attention. Brian’s eyes lift up, off the trick’s ass, and he gazes around the room with practiced boredom. For a split second, Brian eyes Justin. But he suddenly grabs the trick and is dragging him out the door. Justin isn’t sure if they really made eye contact, or if it was just wishful thinking.

Slowly, his new friends drift away too, eventually leaving him alone with a nasty tasting beer and a feeling reminiscent to disappointment.

A somewhat attractive redhead glides over to Justin and after some persuasion and a couple shots of whiskey later, is able to convince Justin for a trip to Babylon’s notorious back room.

He isn’t bad, either.

Justin thinks he’s going to like Pittsburgh.

Brian ambles into the diner the next morning, a dark pair of sunglasses shading his bloodshot eyes from the world. The rest of the gang have been there for almost half an hour, waiting patiently for the last member to make his appearance. They had planned on meeting an hour earlier, but from experience know to always arrive a half an hour late, accepting that Brian will never show up on time.

“Glad you could make it, your majesty,” Ted grumbles.

Sliding into the booth next to him, Brian grins brightly, “Who said you had to wait? The only reason I can get away acting like a king,” Brian steals Ted’s coffee, gulping it down quickly, reveling in the burn, “Is because you let me.” He hands Ted his cup back and reaches for the one Debbie just set down for him.

The rest of the them roll their eyes, but there’s some truth in Brian’s statement, so they offer no witty retort.

“Have a good time last night, oh great one?” Emmett smirks, cutting into his newly arrived pancakes.

“Same as the night before, I guess. It’s always the same.” Brian orders some toast and, to everyone’s surprise, some eggs. “It’s getting boring,” Brian admits as he leans back and stretches his arms toward the ceiling. They all can’t help but stare as Brian’s skin and muscles shift with his new position. Letting his arms fall back to his lap, Brian smiles. “It’s always so... I don’t know... It’s like, nothing new. I can time everything before I get there. Like I know what’s gonna happen. Arrive at such and such time, get such drink, such and such trick will try, yet again, to get me to fuck them, dance, fuck, dance, fuck, drink...” Brian trails off. “I just want something different for once.”

They sit in amazed silence until Emmett says, “It’s ‘cause you’re getting ol--” But upon seeing Brian’s eyebrows raise, he retracts his statement and declares, “You’re finally growing up.”

Brian snorts, “Gee whiz. Thanks, dad.” He looks around the booth. “Where are the girls?”

“They want us to meet them at their place after breakfast. They have something they want to talk to us about.”

Their breakfast runs smoother than usual because Brian is in a particularly good mood. Silently, they hope that whatever Melanie and Lindsay have to tell them won’t ruin Brian’s good mood. They all reap from the benefits of a happy Brian.

Chapter Two

They’re all more than a little surprised when Justin answers the door.

“What the fuck are you doing here, Boy Wonder?” Michael asks, glancing at his equally confused boyfriend.

“Waiting for you, grandpa.” Justin stuns them with a glorifyingly beautiful smile. “I’m Lindsay’s cousin.”

Justin tries everything not to stare at Brian. Even in his casual Sunday clothes, Brian still looks immensely edible.

“Aren’t you just the cutest thing!” Debbie squeals, pushing past Michael and Ben to yank Justin into a terrifying hug. “I’m-a call you Sunshine, Sunshine. ‘Cause you are just too cute for words.” She pulls back, pinches his cheeks and squeals again. For a split second, Justin wonders if this will be the way he’s to die: squeezed to death by an overzealous fag hag.

“Let him go, Deb. You wanna kill him?” Brian reaches over and gently unwraps Justin from Debbie’s death-grip. “I’m Brian, Sunshine. I see you’ve met Mikey and Ben. The others can introduce themselves.” He’s all smiles today. A rarity for Brian, but Justin doesn’t know this. Immediately, he’s put at ease.

“You’re so kind, Brian,” Ted rolls his eyes and holds out his hand. “I’m Ted.”

Quick introductions and then they are ushered into the house. The girls are waiting nervously in the living room.

Brian breaks the thick silence. “What the fuck’s going on?”

Glaring at him momentarily, Lindsay clears her throat. "Um. I know most of you guys don't know this, but Mel and I have been dealing with some... shit..."

"That's an understatement," Melanie mumbles, shifting further away from Lindsay.

"We're trying to work things out, but it isn't easy with the kids and work and... stuff... So, uh, we're gonna go on a vacation... alone."

"Ditching the kids for a fuck-fest, stellar parenting skills, maw and mommy." Brian's voice drips with sarcasm.

"Fuck you, Brian. You know what we've been going through--" Lindsay's voice cracks.

"You knew about this shit from the beginning. If you only tried to help, nothing would've happened."

"Ah, I see we're using the old blame game today. Fabulous. You could've warned me and I would've brought my raincoat. You guys tend to spit when you ream me out for shit I've never had any control over."

Justin eyes Brian and it's pretty obvious that he's hurt. At least to Justin; the rest of the room hushes Brian with obscenities and smacks.

"I agree with Brian, Mel. I mean, whatever happened is between you and Lindsay." Justin surprises himself when he says this. He refuses to meet Brian's interested gaze. "Just tell them what your plans are and get to it. I'm sure they have better stuff to do."

Instead of biting Justin's head off, Melanie sighs and says, "Look. We're not running away from being parents, even though that's what some people want to believe." She casts an angry glare at Brian before continuing. "We're trying to save our marriage and we can't do that if we're... distracted."

Justin sees Brian bite his lips and huff silently to himself.

Interesting, Justin thinks.

"We love our kids. And we're doing this for them."

"Doing what, exactly?" Ben asks, his hand rubbing Michael's knee in comfort.

"We're going away for a little while."

"How long?" Brian's voice is strong.

"As long as it takes."

"Days? Weeks? Months? And who's going to look after the kids? Mikey and Ben sure as hell can't. And I can't even see that I'm properly fed, let alone two babies--" Brian stops himself, his breathing labored.

Very interesting. Justin's studying Brian carefully. He wonders if any of Brian's friends really know who Brian is. Because the man he sees before him is nothing like the man they all described.

"Brian," Lindsay starts. "We know you're concerned. But that's why Justin's here. He's going to watch the kids. He's going to stay here while we go and try to keep our family together. It's not as bad as you think. We need to do this."

"Don't you have school or something?" Brian addresses Justin, eyeing the blond wearily.

"No. I graduated a couple years ago. I'm an artist. I don't really... do anything. I only work when I'm inspired..." Justin stops himself before he lectures the man on the fine principles of being an artist.

“You’ve ever taken care of a baby?” Michael asks, feeling the same sort of anxiety that Brian is.

“Yes. My little sister. And my friend, Daphne, her kid. I’m the godfather. My neighbors in L.A. had a three month old son I used to baby-sit on a regular basis. It’s no problem.”

Lindsay smiles at her cousin. “And we trust Justin.”

“Explicably.”

The rest of the conversation moves smoothly. Brian keeps his mouth shut and instead, stares out the window. While the others are distracted with the girl’s vacation plans, he sneaks out of the back door and stands next to the swing set in order to smoke a cigarette.

Justin goes to join him. They nod at each other and smoke in silence.

“So, you’re just going to go along with this bullshit?” Brian asks, startling Justin.

“I think it’s important they try to work this out.”

Brian takes off his sunglasses and pushes them into a pocket in the back of his jeans. “Right.”

“What? You don’t think they should work this out? You don’t want your kid to have a stable home?” Justin knows he sounds accusatory, but he’s just curious. Brian’s more complicated than anyone told him.

“Fuck you.”

Justin lights another cigarette, putting out his arm to stop Brian from storming off. “I didn’t mean it like that. Have another smoke with me. I was just wondering why you’re so against this.”

Sighing, Brian takes one of Justin’s cigarettes, even though he has a whole pack of his own. “You really think they’ll work this out? That going away will fix this?”

Justin nods slowly. “Well, I did..”

“Well, you don’t know shit. Because it isn’t going to help. It’s not that Lindsay cheated on Melanie. You know that’s not why Mel’s mad, right?”

Justin stops, the cigarette halfway to his mouth. “Oh. I didn’t know Linds cheated on Mel...”

Brian waves him off. “She did. And that would’ve been okay... Well, no. It probably wouldn’t have been okay, but Melanie’s also done her share of fucking up. It’s that Lindsay fucked a guy. And that’s something Melanie will never get over. It will always nag her. It will always sit in the back of her mind as she anxiously waits for the day that Lindsay leaves her for dick. So, going off on some little fantasy lesbian love retreat isn’t going to do shit. They’re still going to have to come home to the stress of having two children, high maintenance jobs, and insecure feelings. It’s gonna ultimately rip them apart.”

Justin stares at Brian, mouth open in wonder. “Are you a psychologist?”

Brian’s laughter is emphasized with a puff of smoke. “God, no. I hate doctors. I work in advertising.”

“Oh. You seem so... knowledgeable, I guess. I was just wondering.”

“It’s ‘cause I know them.”

Brian watches as Justin makes smoke rings. "I've always wanted to do that. I never could, though." He shows Justin his attempts at smoke rings. It's just one huge spout of gray smoke.

"Yeah. You suck."

Brian flips him off and lights another cigarette. "Are you famous?"

"Huh? What?"

"You're an artist. So, are you famous?"

"Oh." Justin blushes slightly, making Brian grin. "I... My work sells."

"That's good."

Justin nods and turns a little redder. He's comfortable around Brian, but he hates talking about his art.

"Lindsay used to draw."

"Yeah. I know. She was pretty good."

"Not great, though."

Justin bites his bottom lip and shakes his head. "No. Not really. Her portraits are okay."

"She can't do form very well, though. And her abstract work..." Brian trails off into a mock shudder. "Scary."

"Yeah. She resented me for a while. But I think she's over that. 'Cause of Mel. I get along really well with Melanie."

"Wow. One in a billion."

"Yeah. She's a bitch. But I like her. She's... strong."

Shrugging, Brian flicks some ash. They watch it hit the grass.

"I saw you at Babylon last night," Brian admits, crushing newly fallen ash with his boot. "You were all buddy-buddy with Mikey and them."

"Yeah. They're pretty cool." Justin can't stop his heart from pounding quickly in his chest at Brian's admission.

"You fuck anyone?"

"Last night?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah. Some redhead. He was pretty good."

Brian nods and looks around Justin, to the house. "They're beckoning us, Sunshine. We'd better go back." Justin trails behind Brian, following him closely.

"You two have fun?" Emmett asks, eyebrows wagging a little.

“‘Twas brilliant. Had a couple smokes. Talked about the weather.” Brian leans over to pick up Gus. “Hey there, Sonny Boy. Missed you.” The child laughs and licks Brian’s face. “You’re a natural.” He chuckles and gives Gus to Justin, wiping his face with the back of his hand. “Here. You’re gonna need the practice. He’s a handful.”

“He’s not that bad,” Lindsay admonishes, while at the same time Melanie says, “He gets it from his father.” They look at each other with quick smiles and Justin wonders if Brian is correct in his assumption that they will eventually break up.

He’s going to hope for the best.

Emmett slinks up next to Justin. “So, what do you think?”

“What do I think about what?”

Emmett motions to Brian with a curt nod.

“Oh. Him. He’s... complicated. I like him. He’s nice.”

“Nice? Brian Kinney?”

Shrugging, Justin watches as Brian jokes around with Michael and Ben. He thinks that maybe they could be good friends.

Even though he still desperately wants to fuck Brian.

Chapter Three

Brian gets a call from Justin at three on Wednesday morning. It’s a frantic phone call and Brian jolts up in bed, effectively knocking the phone of its perch and kicking his trick awake.

“Get the fuck out of my home,” Brian says into the phone and for a moment, Justin is confused. “Not you,” Brian explains, confusing the situation even more. “Him. Yeah. You. Go. Yeah? Fuck you, too. I would’ve kicked you out sooner if I didn’t fall asleep. Bye.” There’s a slight pause, then Brian asks Justin, “Who’s dying?”

“I don’t know. She wouldn’t stop crying and I can’t get a hold of Michael or Ben or Debbie. And Gus is being all fussy and keeps screaming for you and I can’t calm him down and the girl’s cell phone is unavailable--”

“Justin?” Brian hears deep breathing and loud wailing in the background. And noises that sound suspiciously like a hospital. “Where are you?”

“At the hospital. Look... I don’t... I don’t do well in hospitals. I need you... to come and take over before I freak out and have a panic attack or something.”

Brian’s already out the door before Justin can finish. He arrives at the hospital ten minutes later. Justin is visibly shaken and Gus is sitting, crying, on the chair next to him.

“Hey.” Brian crouches in front of Justin, putting a hand gently on his thigh. “You okay?”

Justin recoils from Brian’s touch, his eyes fearful for a moment, but then he registers that it’s Brian and he relaxes, slightly. “Hey. She’s really sick. An ear infection or something. Gus needs to sleep. Thank God the girls called the kids’ doctor before they left. Otherwise, I doubt they would’ve taken her.”

“Are you okay?” Brian presses again.

Justin nods, but says, “Not really. I’ve had some bad hospital experiences and would rather not be here.”

Brian moves to sit next to Justin, gathering Gus in his arms. The child promptly falls asleep. "He's exhausted."

"Yeah. I woke him up. He was sleeping so peacefully. The past couple nights he's been calling out for his mothers... and you, even. Tonight was the first night he didn't do that..." Justin trails off and scoots a little closer to Brian, closing his eyes.

"He called for me?"

"Mmm. Every night. Why don't you ever come over to visit?"

Brian nuzzles his son's soft hair. "I do. Occasionally. The girls don't like me to come over too often. Probably 'cause I interfere or something. If they want me to see him, they'll usually call."

"Oh. Well, you should come over more often. He likes you." Justin reaches over to pat Gus' back. "He's a good kid. Not like Jenny. God, she's a brat."

Brian snorts, "She's like, eight months, Sunshine."

"Whatever. That kind of behavior stems early. It's 'cause everyone spoils her. Gus seems well rounded."

"Yeah... Look, if you want to get out of here, I can wait for Jenny and the doctors."

"I'd love to the fuck out of here. But, I have papers giving me permission to take Jenny home. You don't."

Brian nods. "I don't even have papers giving me permission to take Gus home."

Justin lifts his head to look at Brian. "You can take him home now. I'm giving you permission. It'll probably be another half an hour or so, then Jenny and I can grab a cab and meet you at the house."

"Cab?"

"Yeah. The girls took their car and I'm without transportation."

"Cab?"

"Yes, Brian. A cab."

"Like hell you're gonna take a cab at four in the morning. I'll just wait and give you a ride in the jeep."

"Okay." Justin isn't about to argue. He's tired and unhappy. "I'm going to sleep for a bit. You should, too."

His head hits the back wall with a resounding thump, but he doesn't open his eyes. Moments later, his breathing evens out and his hands fall from his lap to his sides. One hand stops on Brian's leg. Brian doesn't make any movement to shake him off. There's a news program on the television and Brian watches as grotesque pictures from Iraq flash on screen. He shakes his head. That's appropriate viewing material in a fucking hospital.

Justin's head slips from the wall onto Brian's shoulder. An older woman passes them and shakes her head, so Brian flips her off and runs his hands over Gus' back.

It's subtle. A slight movement in the right hand and, at first, Brian isn't sure it's happening. But then Justin's hand forms a tight fist and his whole body starts to shake. Brian cradles Gus gently and leans over to put him on the chair, covering him with his jacket. He turns to Justin, watching as the younger man's features shift from scared to absolutely horrified. He chooses that moment to wake him.

Brian tentatively reaches out and places a hand on Justin's shoulder. Justin jerks awake, his whole body leaps a couple inches from the chair. "Don't fucking touch me," he hisses. Brian quickly moves away from Justin. As Justin becomes more lucid, he looks around, stopping on Brian. "What are you doing..." And then he remembers and he covers his face with his hands. "God, I flipped out, huh? Shit. I'm sorry. I told you I don't really like hospitals."

Brian's about to respond, but the doctor comes out, little Jenny enfolded in an obnoxiously gender-stereotypical pink blanket.

"She's going to be fine. It was just an ear infection. Some water got into it and irritated her. We flushed the fluids and gave her some medication." The doctor looks at Brian and Justin, holding out a piece of paper between them. "This is a prescription for her medicine. And her ears need cleaning three times a day. We were able to get a hold of the mothers. The bill will be sent to them."

Brian grabs the paper and then motions for Justin to take the baby. "Bullshit. I'll pay the bill right now." He turns to Justin. "I'll be right back."

In the jeep, Justin opens the window and weaves his hand rhythmically in the wind. "I like this song," he tells Brian, smiling tiredly. "They're good. More people should listen to them."

"Yeah. They're one of my favorite bands," Brian agrees, raising the volume. The children are sleeping like logs.

"S'kinda domestic, huh?"

"What is?"

With a grand sweep of his hands, Justin says again, "This. All of this. The whole... situation, I guess."

Shrugging, Brian answers with a soft, "I don't really know."

They don't say anything else and after putting the kids to bed, Brian pats Justin's shoulder and leaves. Justin watches through the window as the jeep becomes a mere speck in front of a gray horizon.

Chapter Four

"Brian paid for Jenny's hospital bill?" Michael asks incredulously. He and Ben listened to Justin's frantic messages the next morning and made plans with Justin for lunch that day. Justin has dark bags under his eyes and the kids are hyperactive.

"Yeah. Why? Doesn't he help out ever? Linds told me once that he did."

"He's not supposed to. Not anymore. Not since he signed away his rights."

"Oh. That's what he meant," Justin mutters. He sees the confusion on their faces and explains. "Last night, at the hospital, he mentioned not having any papers saying that he could take Gus home or something like that."

"Yeah. They've been jerks about letting Brian spend time with Gus. Even though Brian's the one who kept them together in the first place. Mel cheated on Linds. So, Lindsay was going to marry this French guy to help out with the bills and the only way Brian could make her think rationally was offer her his rights. That way they could be a real family, like they wanted from the beginning." Michael cuts his huge burger in half. "God, I love greasy food."

"The girls tend to take a lot from Brian, so we convinced him one night not to offer anymore," Ben told Justin, glancing longingly at his boyfriend's dripping burger.

"Oh," Justin looks down at his spaghetti. He doesn't really have an appetite. "I think this was different. A different kind of situation. I think he just wanted to get out of that place without any hassle, you know?"

“Sorry about that. If we remembered to turn the ringer back on...” Michael trails off and bites into his burger. He looks up and his eyes brightening at the sound of the diner’s door opening. “Brian!” He calls out over a mouthful of burger.

“Didn’t your mother ever tell you not to talk with your mouth full?” Brian smirks, climbing into the booth next to Justin. “Hey, Sunshine. Long time, no see.”

Justin nods, handing Gus over to his father. “Take him. Please.”

“How’s parenthood?”

Justin answers with his middle finger.

“How come you’re not at work, Bri?” Michael asks, suspicion in his voice.

“Too tired. That’s the great thing about being your own boss. You make your own hours.”

Justin swirls some spaghetti around his fork, bringing it begrudgingly to his mouth. What he wouldn’t give for something other than greasy diner food.

“Didn’t you get any sleep last night?” Brian asks, leaning in to inspect Justin’s face. “You look like shit.”

“Feel like shit, too. Kids are wearing me out.”

“Already,” Michael laughs.

“Long night last night.”

Gus begins to babble to his father. Brian pretends he’s interested, snagging a fry off of Michael’s plate every few minutes. “Have you heard from Mel and Linds?”

Justin shakes his head. The movement makes him a little nauseous. He needs some sleep.

“Why don’t you go home and get some sleep? I’ll bring Gus home later. I’m sure Debbie and Vic would love to keep Jenny for a couple days while she’s recovering.”

Justin’s about to protest, but Michael interrupts. “He’s right. You should rest. Ma loves Jenny. She’ll jump at the chance to take her.”

Brian gets out of the booth and tugs on Justin’s arm. “Up and at ‘em, Sunshine. Go home. Get some sleep.”

Justin nods, sliding out of the booth. “I think I’ll take the bus home instead of waiting for a cab.”

“Bus?” Brian’s face twists in disgust. “You’re kidding me?”

“I told you last night I don’t have a car.”

Brian hands Justin a key. “Here, take the jeep. It’s just me and the kid today, I can use my other car.”

Justin looks at the key like it’s diseased. “I don’t know how to drive a jeep.”

“It’s easy. Right pedal is gas, left pedal is brake. D means drive. R means reverse. P means park. Easy.”

Justin grabs the keys and walks out without a second glance. Brian watches him with concern, then falls back into the booth, letting Gus play with Justin’s uneaten spaghetti.

"I like him. He's a good kid," Brian tells the others.

"Yeah, but he's not a kid, Brian. He's twenty-five. Only five years younger than you."

Brian tilts his head and looks at his friend carefully. "So?"

"Well, I mean... If you like him..."

Brian snorts. "Save your breath, Mikey. I'm not turning into some love sick queer. I'm just telling you that I find him tolerable. I'm not gonna marry him."

"Brian," Michael says seriously, placing the last of his burger back on his plate. "You gave him the keys to your jeep," he says slowly, as if speaking to a child.

Brian shrugs. He knew Michael would make a big deal out of that, but he didn't want Justin taking the bus home when he's about to drop from exhaustion.

"It's too early for those kind of feelings, anyway," Ben smiles around his sandwich.

"Fuck off, professor. There are no feelings beyond civility. Jesus Christ, you guys are worse than Debbie."

"Who do you think we learned it from?" Michael sticks his tongue out at his friend, who loses himself in wiping off the sauce from Gus' small hands.

When Brian carries a sleeping Gus into the Muncher's home, he almost trips over Justin's shoes, which were thrown carelessly in front of the door. He curses and turns on the hall light, the rest of the house is sleeping in darkness.

"Justin?" He calls out, unsure. He waits a moment and says Justin's name again, louder. No answer.

Brian climbs the stairs and puts Gus into his bed. The child cuddles his pillow, rubbing his face against it before stilling. Brian watches Gus sleep for a few minutes.

He turns on the night light and leaves the door cracked open. Stopping in front of the largest guest room, Brian knocks on the door. He hears a noise and then some groaning. Moments later, Justin opens the door, shirtless, his hair falling every which way.

"Have you been asleep this whole time?"

Justin, still in a sleeping stupor, smiles groggily at Brian. "Mmm," he mumbles. "You look hot." He slowly presses a finger to Brian's chest, running it up and down the hard body. "Wanna sleep over?"

Brian's eyes furrow. "Justin," he says, loud and clear.

Justin jumps back. "Oh. Hey, Brian. What're ya doing here?"

Raising a brow, Brian tells him, "I came to drop off Gus and just wanted to tell you that he's home. You're a deep sleeper, huh?"

Justin rubs his eyes like a little kid, then looks up at Brian in wonder. "Yeah. My parents told me I used to sleep walk. And sometimes I talk in my sleep, too. I don't think I do it anymore, though... Oh. God. What'd I do? Something totally embarrassing, huh?"

Brian laughs. "Oh, it wasn't so much what you did as it was what you said..."

"Oh, no," Justin groans, leaning against the door frame. "Ignore it. I was sleeping."

Brian decides not to comment on subconscious behavior and instead asks, "Are you going back to bed?"

"I don't know. I'm not tired anymore, but I still wanna just crawl into bed and sleep for another three days. Why? You wanna watch a movie or something? They have a pretty good selection. Plus, they have the animated Yellow Submarine. I love that film."

Scoffing, Brian says, "Nah. It's close to midnight. But, I wouldn't say no to a cigarette."

"Mmm. Yeah. That does sound good. Hang on." He retreats into the room and comes back with a pack of Camels and a sweater. "It's cold in Pittsburgh during the night."

They settle on the backyard porch, sitting on the cold steps in silence. Brian isn't sure whether it's his breath or the smoke or a mixture of both that's creating the small clouds that come from his mouth every time he exhales. Justin's still trying to get his lighter to work. Leaning over, Brian flicks his open and Justin smiles gratefully.

"Thanks. God, I knew I should've gotten a BIC. These things are for shit," he complains, tossing the lighter into the trash can in the corner.

"Nice shot."

"Thanks. I used to play basketball in high school. Until they found out I was queer and kicked me off the team."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. I fucked this guy who was best friends with the biggest asshole on campus, Chris Hobbs. I don't know why the fuck the guy thought it would be a good idea to tell Chris... Well, made my life a living hell."

Nodding, Brian turns slightly to Justin. "So, you missed your chance at a lucrative career in sports? Am I sitting near the next Kobe Bryant and don't even know it?"

"God, no. Unlike Kobe, I know how to play on a team. It's a solo game with him."

Brian chuckles. "You don't look like a sports fan."

"M'not. Not really. Just basketball. And if you live in L.A., like I did for so many years, you sort of are required to watch the Lakers." Brian tries another smoke ring, making Justin laugh and shake his head. "You're hopeless."

"Probably. So, do you like Pittsburgh?"

"Born and raised. It's nothing new for me."

"Really? Why'd you leave? No, wait. I understand why you'd leave. How come you're back?"

"L.A. is too involved. I don't give a fuck about half the shit those fuckers in Beverly do. I'm too much an east coast boy. All the way. I missed the snow. And my mom, my sister, and even my best friend Daphne are still here. Besides, being an artist, my home is expendable. I can be here or there. It doesn't matter. I just prefer here. Plus, I don't have to pay rent living with Linds and Mel. How about you? How come you're not in L.A. making your fortune? Or New York for that matter?"

"I've had my chance at both, but... they're all here, you know? Mikey, Linds, Gus, and Deb. They're my family. And I have Kinetik. It's making a big splash. I'm pretty comfortable here."

Nodding, Justin whispers a soft, "Yeah."

The night is quiet. Justin moves his head to the open door, listening to see if Gus woke up.

"He won't wake up; he's a deep sleeper," Brian tells him, reaching for another cigarette. "Must get it from his moms."

"Sorry about last night. I know you had company. That must've sucked."

"What? I didn't--Oh. Him. Yeah. Whatever. He was just a trick. Nothing special."

"How come you're not with Michael? I mean, it's obvious you guys like each other and everything."

"We're best friends. We wouldn't make good lovers. I could never offer him the stuff he wants in that kind of relationship. Plus, I could never love Mikey that way. Ever. And Ben's really good for him."

"I can tell, though." Brian glances over at Justin, who's playing with the foil from his cigarettes. "I can tell that Michael loves you. That way."

"Maybe. But, it's not the same kind of love he feels for Ben."

"Did you always want to be a father?"

"Jesus," Brian laughs. "You ask a lot of fucking questions."

Justin smiles genuinely. "Sorry."

Justin borrows Brian's lighter for another cigarette and they inhale/exhale together. "I saw you, too," Justin tells Brian, turning away, pretending he's more interested in the fog covered roses.

"Saw me? Where?"

"At Babylon that night. I was watching you for a long time. That's why Michael came up to me. To warn me."

Brian shakes his head. "I'm not as bad as they made me out to be."

"I know."

"Oh."

Justin wants to reach out and touch Brian's hair. He wants to trace Brian's lips with his fingers and cover his eyelids with kisses.

"My last boyfriend hit me," Justin blurts out. For some reason, he feels Brian should know. "I have a lot of baggage."

"I know."

"Oh."

"About the baggage. I didn't know about... That sucks. I'm sorry."

Justin's shoulders lift up and then fall heavily. "Yeah. But, I sort of brought it upon myself, you know?"

Brian grinds his teeth. "No, I don't know. Why don't you explain it to me?"

"I don't mean I deserved it," Justin reiterates, noticing Brian's reaction. "I just meant... that I knew what type of person he was and what would piss him off, but I went for it anyway. Whatever. I'm over it."

"Why'd you tell me that?"

"Dunno. Thought you'd understand, I guess."

Brian nods stiffly.

Justin silently curses himself for bringing up something that obviously makes Brian uncomfortable. "I was bashed at my senior prom." Justin wants to smack himself. "I'm not trying to make you pity me or anything--"

"Good, 'cause pity makes my dick soft."

A breeze throws Justin's hair in his eyes and the ash on his cigarette goes flying and lands on Brian's arm. "Sorry," he smiles, leaning over to wipe the ash off Brian's arm and instead, places a soft kiss on his lips. Brian doesn't do anything to stop him. "You're the only guy I've ever really been interested in."

"I'm honored." Brian's lips tighten into a frown. "You shouldn't expect much, though. 'Cause I don't do relationships or boyfriends or anything like that."

"I know. I just... I wanted you to know. So if I blush over something you say or do something extremely embarrassing, it's 'cause I like you. Just... warning you."

"Thanks," Brian all but whispers. "I should get going." He stands up abruptly.

"Oh. Uh, yeah. Thanks for giving me the day off--" But Brian is already in the house and out the front door.

"Damn," Justin says to himself, pulling out another cigarette and, forgetting that he threw it away, searches aimlessly for his lighter. "Damn," he repeats, tossing the cigarette onto the grass and moving into the warm house. "Stupid."

Brian slams into his trick with an almost reckless abandon. The guy's making these disgusting rutting noises and Brian loves it. He reaches down to pull his trick's hair and for a moment, imagines the curly black hair as a soft blond. He stalls, his dick buried deep into his trick's ass, and watches as the dark skin turns pale and the muscular body becomes lithe and small. But then the guy grunts and pushes back. Opening his eyes, Brian is comforted with the fact that this guy isn't blond. And isn't small.

And isn't his best-friend's cousin.

Chapter Five

A week later, Debbie offers to take the children for the weekend. "Go out. Dance. Drink. Fuck. Whatever it is you boys do on the weekends. You need a break."

Justin would've argued, but he wants to go out. He wants to dance, drink, and fuck. He especially wants to fuck. His own fist is only satisfactory for a short time.

Justin stands in the middle of Liberty Avenue, debating between Woody's and Babylon.

“Come with us to Woody’s,” Ben says, startling Justin out of daze. “We’re gonna shoot some pool. We usually don’t end up at Babylon until after eleven. That’s when it really starts thumping.” He smiles kindly at Justin. “Everyone’s there already.”

Justin follows Ben into the bar. The children have made him antsy and nervous. He sends grateful thought to Debbie. He needs this break.

“Hey, Justin,” Ted calls out, waving them over. “Good to see you again.”

Justin nods.

“What’s your poison?”

“Beer or Beam.”

Ted gets him both.

“Hey, Boy Wonder,” Michael greets him as they make their way to the pool tables. “Wanna get in on this?” He motions to the game he, Brian, and Emmett have already started.

“Nah. I don’t know how.”

Brian does a quick double take. “You’re kidding. Every boy from the Pitts knows how to shoot pool.”

“Not me.”

“That’s pathetic,” Brian grumbles, carefully aiming his cue. He hits the white ball and they all watch as three balls roll into three separate slots. “I’m surprised you don’t play.” He hands his cue to Emmett, who manages to get a ball into a slot.

“Why’s that?”

“‘Cause you’re an artist. Pool’s all about precision and angles.”

Justin nods slowly, watching as Michael leans over the table, missing his shot completely.

“Obviously Mikey here isn’t an artist,” Brian grins, taking the cue away from Emmett and again, sinking the balls into the goals.

“Fuck off. I’m usually not this bad. I’m really batting zero here tonight.” Michael steps in front of Ben and they kiss, momentarily lost.

“Get a room!” Ted yells, laughing as Michael pulls Ben into a deeper kiss.

“I thought you were into exhibition, Theodore,” Brian teases the man. He lifts his beer to his mouth and makes a disgusted face. “This is for shit.” He reaches over and takes Justin’s beer from his hand. Bringing the bottle slowly to his mouth, Brian takes a huge gulp. “Much better.”

Justin looks away as Brian licks his lips. “Keep it. I’m not thirsty.”

“Good. C’m’on, Sunshine. Play a game with me,” Brian insists, taking Michael’s cue and handing it to Justin. “We’ll teach you.”

Justin stutters over his answer as Brian sets the table up for a new game. “I’ve always wanted to do that,” he tells Brian.

“Do what?”

“Take the triangle thingy off the balls. I like how they stay in formation even after you take the triangle away.”

Brian raises his eyebrows and grins. “Then do it.” He moves away from the table and gestures for Justin to lift the triangle up. “You’re a natural, Sunshine.”

And he is. Justin finds that not only does he like to play pool, he’s good at it too.

“I should warn you,” Justin says as Brian walks around the table, surveying his potential shots.

“What’s that?”

“I’m very competitive and get really pissy when I don’t win.” He frowns as Brian makes a perfect shot.

“Is that a threat, Sunshine?”

“Well,” Justin says, leaning over the table, carefully gliding the cue back and forth before making a shot. “I am taking care of your son.” Justin looks into Brian’s eyes seriously for a moment before breaking out into a huge grin. “Fuck off, I’m kidding! Do I really look like the kind of guy who’d get all pissy over some game?”

“I dunno. You’ve been hanging out with children all week. Who knows what they’ve brain washed you with. And I have first hand experience with Gus’ competitive nature.” Noticing a flash of humor in Justin’s eyes, he asks, “So, you beat him at Go Fish yet?”

“Yeah. And once is enough to learn never to win again. God. Where’d that demon come from? He’s usually such a good child.”

“He gets it from his dad,” Emmett laughs.

Brian wins the game--barely.

A tall, dark haired man saunters over to their table. “Hey,” he says to Brian, leaning seductively against the table. “You play a good game--really know how to aim those balls.”

Justin almost snorts at the man’s pick up line. He thinks Gus could do better.

Brian looks the potential trick up and down, sneaking a quick glance at Justin, who’s amused, if anything.

“It takes practice. As do your pick up lines. Not interested. Sorry,” Brian tells the guy, picking up Justin’s beer and finishing it off. The man’s still there when he puts the bottle back down. “I’m serious.”

“Oh.” The guy bites his lip and frowns. “You sure?”

Brian reaches around and grabs the guy’s nonexistent ass. “Oh, yeah.”

Justin bursts into laughter when the guy leaves. “That was cruel, Brian.”

“The man has no ass!”

“Cruel.”

Shrugging, Brian leans into Justin and whispers, “You, on the other hand, have a great ass.” He pulls away and winks, before saying, “Let’s go to Babylon.”

The others glance curiously between Brian and Justin before getting up.

“What was that about?” Emmett asks Justin in a stifled whisper.

Justin merely shakes his head. “He’s just joking... I think...”

Babylon is packed.

“God. Everyone and their grandpa is here tonight,” Ted yells over the noise.

Brian pats him hard on the back. “Then maybe you’ll finally get laid.”

At least three men approach Brian before they even reach the bar.

“I didn’t know you were in such demand, Brian,” Justin yells into his ear, pulling back and smiling as another man comes up.

Brian shrugs it off and, after a few drinks, accepts a dance with a young brunette. Justin watches out of the corner of his eyes for a minute before heading to the dance floor himself.

“Where’ya going, Princess?” Emmett asks, pulling on his arm to stop him.

“I want to dance.”

“Alone?”

“I won’t be alone for long. Someone will come around.” He grins and offers his friends a small wave before disappearing into the sea of sweaty men.

And he’s right. Not thirty seconds after Justin hits the dance floor, an older man comes up from behind and starts grinding into him. Another man presses his groin against Justin’s and they dance like that for a few minutes.

“Wanna go to the back room?” The trick in front of him asks, lust apparent in his eyes as Justin’s body moves fantastically to the music.

Justin shakes his head slightly. He still wants to dance. The trick behind him moves away and no one takes his place. Justin looks into the eyes of his dance partner and smiles.

“You’re friends with Kinney?” The man asks, swaying his hips to the music.

Justin nods.

“He’s an asshole,” the trick insists, placing his hands delicately around Justin’s waist. “Why do you hang out with him?”

“He’s nice to me.” Justin doesn’t want to think about Brian. He wants to lose himself to the music.

“Wanna go to the back room now?” The man asks again, gently tugging Justin toward the back room.

“Wait--”

“For what?”

Justin pauses, looks around. None of his friends seem to notice him. Sighing, Justin leans forward. "I don't bottom."

"That's fine. I will," the man laughs.

Justin nods and the man leads him into the back room.

Brian's receiving a blow job from some guy in the corner. Justin's not sure, but he thinks that his trick positions them so that Brian will see them. He prepares the man swiftly and enters him in one quick thrust.

His eyes close with pleasure as he stabs once, twice, three times. The guy's into it, groaning appropriately and squeezing his muscles every few thrusts. Justin's eyes open momentarily and he meets Brian's lustful gaze. Brian's mouth is slightly open, his chest heaving up and down. Justin watches as Brian's eyes fall to the guy he's fucking. Looking back at Justin, Brian's eyebrows raise and then he smiles.

The smile eggs Justin on. He feels a tingle at the base of his spine as he moves his hips in small circles, making his trick cry out. "Jesus Christ," the man calls as he comes.

Justin's no where near being done and continues pounding into the man as he watches Brian's dick being swallowed by the guy on his knees. Justin comes when Brian comes and they share a small smile before zipping up.

Brian holds the curtains open for Justin. "I didn't know you're a top."

"It's the hair. People assume that just because I'm blond, I'm automatically a bottom."

Brian laughs. "It's not just the hair, Sunshine."

He ushers them to the bar.

"What's that mean?"

Brian turns to their friends. "So, do you guys think Justin's a top or bottom?"

He's answered with a chorus of "bottom"s.

"What? Why?"

"Well, you're so... fragile... looking..." Emmett trails off.

Michael agrees. "Yeah. And small."

"And blond," Ted says, raising his beer in salute.

"Well, guess what?" Brian announces to the group. "Justin's a bona-fide top."

"No shit?" Emmett squeals. "You any good?"

Justin blushes and orders a beer.

"Do you ever bottom?" Michael asks incredulously. They all lean in.

Justin's face pales. "Uh... No."

"Wait. Have you ever bottomed?" Emmett asks, his face scrunching up in disbelief.

"Oh. Ah... Once or twice."

“That’s too bad,” Brian sighs. The group falls into an awkward silence as Justin stares at Brian in disbelief. “We could’ve had some fun.”

“You’ve gotta stop saying shit like that, Brian. It isn’t fair.”

The others’ eyes shift between Brian and Justin.

Brian winks and walks back to the dance floor, grabbing a guy at the edge and disappearing with him into the crowd.

“You know... I think I’m going to call it a night,” Justin grins uneasily at his friends. “See you tomorrow... Maybe...”

“Where’s Justin?” Brian asks the minute he returns. He flips his hair out of his eyes and it sticks to his forehead. His shirt’s open and sweat is dripping down his chest.

“He left a while ago. You shouldn’t fuck with him, Brian,” Michael complains.

“I’m not fucking with him.”

“You do know he likes you, right Brian?” Emmett asks wearily. He brings his martini to his mouth and looks at Brian over the lip of his glass.

“Nah. He just wants me to fuck him. He’ll get over it. We talked about it.”

The others just roll their eyes.

“What?” Brian asks in an exasperated tone.

“Did you really ‘talk’ about it, Brian? Or did you just walk away like you always do?”

Brian takes a deep, calming breath. “Why do I get the feeling I’m being grilled?”

No one responds. They just linger around the bar for a while, each lost in thought.

“He’s hot, though, huh?” Emmett teases the man, nudging him with his shoulder.

Brian turns around quickly and orders a shot.

“Mm hmm,” Emmett says in an annoying know-it-all voice.

Buttoning up his shirt, Brian turns to face his friends. “You guys are being asses. Nothing’s going to happen. Jesus.” He shoots back his liquor, surveys the room, then waves to his friends. “I’m heading out.” He pushes away from the bar and leaves through the front door, dodging the reaching arms of desperate men.

“Well, this’ll be fun,” Ted sighs. “How much you wanna bet he heads over to Mel and Linds’?”

Justin doesn’t even enter the house. He waits, leaning against the gate, smoking a cigarette. The headlights of Brian’s jeep blind him momentarily, then darkness again. He hears the crunch of Brian’s footsteps.

Brian takes the cigarette from his fingers and the sound of the tobacco burning echoes in the stillness of the night. "I like these. What kind are they?"

Clearing his throat, Justin says, "Camel Turkish Gold 100s."

"They taste better than reds."

"Yeah. Marlboro'll kill you."

"They all do, eventually."

"Yeah."

Justin lights another one and hands it to Brian, their fingers sliding against each other's. "Thanks."

Brian's mind was reeling on the ride over. He had thousands of speeches planned about queers and love and fucking, but now that he's next to the blond, he can't remember a single one. And it's pissing him off. His anger is rolling off him like waves and Justin senses the disturbance.

"I didn't mean to act like such a dyke."

Brian grunts his response.

"It's just that so many people think it's funny to fuck with my feelings. I'm sort of sick of it."

"I was kidding."

Justin takes a long drag from his cigarette. On the exhale, he responds. "You don't know me too well yet."

"So, what? You've got a stick up your ass or something?"

"Perhaps."

"I told you I don't do this shit."

"Yep."

"Then why're you making a big deal out of it?"

"It's just how I'm feeling, Brian. Don't worry. I'll get over. I don't expect you to fuck me or anything."

"Do you want me to fuck you?"

A pause, then, "No."

"Liar."

It's almost a whisper and Justin isn't sure he hears it.

"I talked to the girls today. Lindsay told me you're quite charming, but not to fall for your crap."

"Whatta sweet friend."

"What does it matter, Brian? Nothing's gonna happen anyway. You said so yourself."

"God. Stop that."

“Stop what?”

“Throwing what I say back at my face.”

“Then, don’t say it if you don’t meant it.”

“I do mean it!”

“Then, what’s the problem?”

Brian huffs loudly. He tosses his cigarette onto the floor and stomps it out, smashing it underneath his foot. He does this for a long time.

“Why’d you have to tell me that you like me?” He asks angrily. “I didn’t even think of you as a possibility until you said that. I don’t--” He exhales heavily. “Besides, Lindsay would kill me if I even touch you. She gave me a death threat before they eloped.”

“I’m a big boy, Brian. I can make decisions for myself.”

“Look. I just came here to reiterate that I’m not going to fall in love with you.” He sees Justin flinch. “I don’t want to love you. I’m not going to love you. So, stop trying.”

Justin’s eyes unwillingly fill with tears. “I’m not trying,” he whispers honestly.

“Well, it feels like you are. I mean, Jesus, why would I love you?” The venom in Brian’s voice has Justin opening the gate and walking up the path to the house.

Brian, of course, immediately regrets saying what he does. He wants to chase after Justin. Say that he didn’t mean it. That he’s just being retarded. That he doesn’t want to love anyone. That that doesn’t mean Justin’s unlovable. But his feet stay firmly rooted to the ground and his voice never leaves his throat.

“Good night,” Justin hollers hoarsely, his voice bouncing off the houses around them. He turns, slides the key in the lock, and securely shuts the door behind him. Sliding down the door, Justin crumples into an emotional mess.

It’s pretty easy not to love me, he thinks dramatically to himself. The thought makes him laugh, but then he’s hit with a sudden wave of irrational fear and loneliness. Who’d want to. Brian’s voice screams in his head. “I’m not going to love you... Why would I love you?” And sounds too much like it has in the past. Too much.

Chapter Six

Painting has always been a form of catharsis for Justin. When the world becomes too demanding, he likes to lose himself in his art. That’s what makes him a good artist--his constant need to paint.

But today, Justin stands in front of the blank canvas, his brush dripping black and his creativity... nonexistent.

He wants to hate Brian for saying what he said. For being stoic and reserved and, well, so much the asshole everyone says Brian is. But he can’t. He’s caught up in soft touches and humorous glances--the little nuances that aid in the making of a terrible crush.

Justin’s arm reaches out and he paints a short down stroke in the middle of the canvas. He connects that stroke with another, only slanted. Brian’s last words appear on the canvas like some sick horror film. He starts to blot out the canvas until it’s a textured black hole, the words leaping out in disdain.

Justin feels so self-absorbed.

Well, his professors would always tell him to “paint what you know.”

He leans against the desk in the studio and studies his painting. He thinks back on his career as an artist and realizes that he has never once painted happy love. It’s always been bleak, painful, and dark.

Paint what you know.

Only, for once, he wants to be able to paint something colorful and bright and... trivial. Trivial is good. He’d welcome the mundane.

He didn’t have to be so mean.

Stupid Lindsay. Why’d she have to fuck some guy and ruin her marriage? Justin decides to blame Lindsay entirely for the shitty weekend he’s been having.

A repetitive, annoying noise keeps interrupting his thoughts. Looking around the room, his eyes land on the house phone, the antennae blinking red as it ceaselessly rings. Sighing, he walks over to it and wills that it shut up.

“Hello?” He asks weakly.

“Sunshine! What are you doing this afternoon?” Debbie’s shrill voice forces the phone away from Justin’s ear.

“I’m painting.”

“Well, take a break and come to my house for lunch. Everyone’s gonna be there. I’d love for you to come!”

“Oh... I don’t...”

“Come.”

Justin sighs. “Fine. What time?”

“Two.” Debbie snaps her gum in victory.

“Fine. I’ll see you later.”

Justin arrives later than Brian. He runs into the house, breathless, cheeks bright pink from exertion.

“Sorry! I missed the bus and then I couldn’t get a cab, so I had to walk here!” He places his hands on his knees and breaths deeply. He just can’t seem to get enough air into his lungs.

“You walked? Sunshine, you shoulda called. Someone woulda picked you up,” Debbie says, concerned. She puts a hand on Justin’s back and starts rubbing it. Justin’s beginning to wheeze. “Are you okay?”

“F--fuck--fucking asth--asthma--” His voice is stilted. “Just... need... room.”

“That means get the fuck away from him, Debbie,” Brian calls out, annoyed. “Jesus. Don’t you know anything about asthmatics?”

Debbie throws Brian a heated glare. “I’m just trying to help.”

Brian shakes his head and goes back to his magazine, trying to ignore Justin's stunted breathing. Eventually, it evens out and Justin stands upright, his watery gaze instantly finding Brian's.

Justin's the first to look away and Brian sighs inwardly.

"How come you didn't meet us at Babylon last night?" Michael asks. "I called and called, but you never answered."

Waving a hand in the air, Justin settles on the couch, sitting as far away from Brian as humanly possible. "Oh. I was... Busy."

Brian makes a weird tsk-ing noise in the back of his throat. There's a moment of uncomfortable silence, then Justin turns to Debbie and asks about the children. The rest of the room glances meaningfully at each other.

Lunch is awkward, to say the least. There's no longer that carefree camaraderie between Brian and Justin.

Debbie's the first person to say something.

"What the fuck's the matter with you two?"

Justin shrugs. "Nothing."

"Well, how come you guys aren't flirting shamelessly like you usually do?"

Casting a small glance at Brian, Justin says, "We don't flirt."

"Uh huh. You keep telling yourself that and maybe it'll come true."

They don't respond and Debbie lets it go. For now.

Brian's staring at himself in the second floor's bathroom mirror. He prays for it to be over. He hates feeling this way. He hates feeling regret and apologetic. He wishes Justin would just shrug the other night off.

Brian keeps telling himself that it's only because he likes Justin's company. That's why, try as he might not to, he keeps thinking about Justin.

The hot water from the sink steams up the bottom of the mirror. Brian takes one of his hands from under the running water and wipes the mirror off, leaving an uneven streak. The streak twists his reflection into something unidentifiable.

That's not me, he insists to himself. Grabbing a towel from the rack, he cleans the mirror, the surface gleaming smooth and normal.

Normal.

God, what he wouldn't give to feel that way again.

To not feel so bad.

To not feel at all.

He wonders to himself what it is about them, that family, Lindsay and Justin, that makes him behave differently. To think, feel, act so unlike himself.

Or, so unlike the self everyone else knows.

Or... so like himself.

Maybe.

Shaking his head, Brian momentarily recalls a class on Buddhism he took in college. "When you do something, you should burn yourself completely, like a good bonfire, leaving no trace of yourself." He's never been quite sure what that means, but it's like his mantra. It's about humility, he assumes. Or maybe it's about good deeds. Fuck. He really doesn't know. And he really doesn't care. He just likes the part about leaving no trace of himself. He's been doing that for years. Coming and going out of men's lives, disappearing once they orgasm. They eventually forget his face and the feel of his hands, mouth, and cock. He eventually floats away like ash and dust.

Maybe that's why the whole thing with Justin pisses him off. Because Justin won't let him go. Justin's words, the pain in his eyes, the cracked good-bye; they swarm restlessly through his brain.

It's always drama with Lindsay, too. Is it just innate in their family? Or is it a blond thing?

But good's always coming out of the drama. Sticking by Lindsay has brought Brian a strong friendship, a kinship, and a son. But, Justin...

Brian sees his eyebrows press together. There's nothing with Justin. And it's so goddamn confusing.

Slapping his cheek lightly, Brian insists that he stop thinking like a lesbian. To stop thinking about it. He's an asshole to almost everybody. Hell, he's even an asshole to Michael and Deb on occasion, but it's never been an issue. It's who he is.

"Right?" He asks his reflection out loud. His reflection raises an eyebrow and then shakes its head slowly. "Fuck you. It is." Brian throws some water at the mirror in retaliation.

Justin bursts into the room, pulling at his zipper frantically. "Uh..." His ministrations stop when he realizes he isn't alone. "I'm... God... I'm sorry! I really have to pee..." He slowly backs away, cheeks red. He's almost to the door when Brian reaches out, wrapping his arm around Justin's waist and pulling him back in, slamming the door behind them. "What are you--"

He stops when Brian pulls him into a hug. "Stop being like this," Brian whispers. "I'm... I didn't really handle that whole situation the way I wanted to..."

Justin's eyes are wide. He pushes Brian away. "How were you gonna handle it, then?" He asks, searching Brian's face until it's too much for Brian and he has to look away. "What? Were you gonna give me the same speech I hear you give every trick who starts imagining himself in love with you? About one night only and relationships and what a fucking loner you are? 'Cause if that's what you're gonna say, save your breath. I've heard it a million times."

Brian's confusion is evident and he opens his mouth to ask something, but Justin cuts him off. "You're just like all my other boyfriends," Justin spits out. "Good, at first. Nice, at first. Then vicious. Vindictive. Selfish. I'm used to it, don't worry. But I'm not going to accept it anymore, Brian. It's not what I want."

"Then you're going to be very disappointed in life, Sunshine." Brian's jaw tightens and he swallows hard.

"Who says I'm not already?"

Brian looks at Justin, his mind reeling. Justin thinks for a minute that Brian is going to defend himself, but instead, Brian steps aside and walks to the door. "You have to pee. See you downstairs."

Brian shuts the door lightly behind him and Justin hears his footsteps fade down the hallway. His bottom lip is quivering slightly. His need to pee has all but vanished.

“Fuck!” He leans back against the door. “Fuck,” he says again, rubbing his hands over his face in frustration. He bangs his head lightly against the door, willing all this unexpected drama out of his life.

There’s a knock on the door and before Justin can move, Brian’s soft voice is heard through the door. “Listen. Just because I’m scared... and acted irrationally on that fear doesn’t make me vicious, Justin. Or vindictive and selfish. It makes me... human... And fuck you for making me feel bad for being human. For once in my life, I react to my feelings and I get trashed for it. I don’t believe in apologies, Justin, otherwise I’d be apologizing like crazy right now. But I just can’t. Do you get it? I can’t.”

“Why?” Justin isn’t sure he actually spoke the word out loud.

“Because that’s not who I am.”

“But--”

“No, Justin. It’s not who I am.”

“But--”

“Justin! Why can’t you just accept the fact that I want to apologize?”

Justin pauses, his palms caressing the door, imagining Brian doing the same thing. “How is that any different from apologizing? By admitting you want to apologize, isn’t that like apologizing?”

“I--” There’s a long moment of silence. Brian pulls his bottom lip into his mouth and looks up to think. After a minute he says, “Huh... I’m not... I don’t know...”

Despite himself, Justin snickers. “God, we’re being real drama queens about this, huh?”

He hears something that sounds suspiciously like Brian giggle, then, “I’m never a drama queen, Justin. It must be all you.”

“Sure,” Justin says, snorting. “You know,” he pauses, then continues. “No one’s ever offered me a non-apology before. It’s kinda funny, but... your non-apology seems more sincere than anyone’s so-called real apology.”

“So,” Brian raps on the door lightly. Justin pushes away and opens it a crack. They look at each other, grinning softly. “Do you accept the fact that I don’t do apologies?”

“Sure. If you accept the fact that I don’t do drama queen.”

They both smile real smiles for the first time since they’ve spoken.

“Suddenly, I have to pee again.”

Justin can hear Brian’s laughter echo down the hall as he walks away.

Chapter Seven

“When did you two become such good friends?” Michael mutters to Justin after Justin and Brian come back from a couple hours on the dance floor. They’re soaked in sweat and Brian leaves a giggling Justin to buy them ice cold beers.

“What?” Justin asks with a slight drunken slur. He leans into Michael, breathing heavily on his face. “Who wouldn’t want to be friends with me?” Justin guffaws.

Michael pushes him away and begins to peel the label off of his beer bottle. “Be serious. You guys were all mad at each other and suddenly, you’re best friends? It doesn’t make any sense.”

Justin stops swaying to the music and narrows his eyes at Michael. “What? Are you jealous or something? Wittle Mikey’s jealous a wittle bit? Hmmm?”

“Please. Get over yourself.”

“Not over me, stupid.” Justin shakes his head and then points toward Brian, who’s at the far end of the bar. “Over him.”

Michael rolls his eyes and steps aside, ready to join Emmett on the dance floor.

“‘Cause I know you’re in love with him.” Justin’s voice is sure and steady, quite a change from his tipsy giggling moments before. Justin sees Michael’s fists clench into tight balls and makes the wise decision to shut up.

Brian returns with three beers. “One for you, Mikey.” He kisses his friend’s cheek sloppily. “Thought I’d forget you, huh? But I’m a good boy.” He winks and then downs his own beer like it’s water.

Justin follows suit.

“You guys better slow down. ‘Cause I have to be at work for an early shipment and I’m not gonna drive your drunk asses home,” Michael growls, grabbing his beer off the bar and marching out of sight.

Justin and Brian watch him retreat with the same bright eyes. They glance at each other, busting out into a fit of giggles.

“I think dad’s mad,” Brian whispers, putting his fingers to his lips in order to hush a snorting Justin. “I think we should behave.”

Brian’s finger falls from his mouth as a hot blond passes by him. “Hey,” he calls out to the guy, who stops and turns around slowly.

He looks between Brian and Justin. “Wanna fuck?” Brian asks, a huge grin on his face.

Justin clicks his tongue and stomps his foot. “I wanna fuck him, too. That’s not fair.”

“Shoulda said something, Sunshine. I saw him first.”

“Actually,” the man interrupts their silly bickering. “I could do you both.”

“Like, me first and then Justin?” Brian asks, the liquor clouding his mind.

“No. Like one of you can fuck me and I can fuck the other. At the same time. You guys are fucking hot.”

“I’m a top,” Brian and Justin say together.

“Ooo-kay. Well, one of you could fuck me and I could suck the other one off?”

Before they can answer, Emmett and Michael slide next to their drunken friends. “I wouldn’t do that. They’re too drunk. It wouldn’t be worth it,” Michael tells the guy, pulling Brian toward the door. “I’ve changed my mind. I’m going to take you home. Emmett will take Justin home.”

Justin looks at Emmett when he hears this. “Do I really have to go home?” He asks, a pout taking over his boyish features. “I wanna stay out longer. Please?” He almost whines the word.

Laughing, Emmett tugs at Justin’s arm, following Michael’s lead. He offers an apologetic shrug to the potential trick and effectively gets Justin to follow him by promising, for some odd reason, a snow cone.

The cold air hits their faces with an intense rush. Michael and Brian are waiting for them by the jeep. “So, you take the twink home and I’ll take Bri home,” Michael nods at Emmett.

“I’m not a twink! Are we really getting snow cones?” Justin’s hopeful voice makes Emmett smile.

“If we can find a store that’s open and sells snow cones, I’ll get you one.”

Emmett takes Justin’s hand into his own and they start walking in the opposite direction.

“Wait,” Brian calls out. “Why does he get a snow cone and I don’t get jack shit? I didn’t even get laid tonight. That’s really not fair.”

Justin sticks his tongue out at Brian and says, “It’s ‘cause they all like me more than you.”

Michael rolls his eyes. “Go home, Boy Wonder. Sleep well.”

“I don’t think Michael likes me very much anymore,” Justin’s voice is quiet.

Emmett denies the impulse to look at him, trying to focus on the road. He’s beginning to think that driving after four drinks isn’t such a great idea. Especially if they’re going to talk about the dynamics of the Brian and Michael Show.

“Oh, he likes you plenty.”

“He did.” The drive is sobering Justin up.

“It’s just that... well, I think maybe he thinks you’re taking his place in Brian’s life.” Emmett drawls. Justin opens his mouth to argue, but Emmett cuts him off. “And you are. In a way. I mean, you guys get along really well. You share a lot more interests with Brian than Michael does.”

Justin shakes his head vigorously. “Yeah. But. That’s not my fault.”

“Michael’ll get over it. He gets it from Deb. You know, that protective mothering crap they like to pull. He’s not really in love with Brian, despite what we all might believe. He loves him, yes. But he knows, deep down, that it would never work out. They’re too different. And their friendship is too important. Just... uh... don’t fuck Brian. Because if you do, I think Michael will really stop liking you. You know... ‘cause Brian supposedly doesn’t fuck friends...”

Justin doesn’t answer. Instead, he lets out a huge sigh and places his feet on the dashboard, unrolling the window in order to smoke.

“You don’t like that idea, do you?”

The lighter makes a clicking noise and the car is filled with a sudden wisp of smoke. “Not really. No. But Brian isn’t ready for anything more. I don’t think...” But he trails off and doesn’t finish his explanation.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Justin...”

“I just... I don’t think Brian will ever be ready for anything more. He’s going to have a sad, lonely life.”

“Well, I wouldn’t be sure about that. I know many single people who are happy.”

“Yeah, but... Ah, never mind.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Emmett makes a frustrated noise. “Justin. I’m trying to have a conversation with you. I’m trying to help you. So, just say whatever it is you want to say and get it done with already.”

“All right. But, don’t tell Brian I said this, okay? He’d be pissed.”

“Fine.”

Justin places the cigarette in his mouth and inhales deeply. Letting the smoke glide through his lungs for a moment, he finally exhales and says, “Brian thrives off of attention, you know? I mean, that’s why he and Michael are such good friends. ‘Cause Michael’s the perfect little lap dog. But what happens when Michael finally grows up or moves away or realizes how important Ben is to him? Then what happens to Brian? Brian would be happy being single if he was guaranteed a regular fan base of drooling admirers.”

“That’s quite perceptive, Justin.”

“Psychology 10B.”

“But I think you’re wrong.”

Justin shrugs and says nothing. Then, turning to Emmett, a slight feral grin on his face, he says, “That guy was really hot, huh?”

“Who?”

“That blond guy that wanted us to fuck him. He was damn good. Tasty tasty.”

Snorting, Emmett pats Justin’s head affectionately. “You’re really fucking cute, you know that?”

“So I’m told,” Justin answers, shrugging his shoulders in nonchalance. They’re at a red light and Emmett’s able to study his expression. Justin’s nose scrunches up and he bites his bottom lip, slightly shaking his head.

“What now?”

“I just...” Justin trails off and nods to the road. “Green.”

“Oh.” Emmett shifts gears and turns left. “Sorry.”

“I want...”

“What do you want, Justin?”

“Well, all my life people have told me I’m cute. I have a cute smile, a cute laugh, a cute body, blah, blah, blah.”

“You don’t like cute? What? You’d prefer hot? Or sexy?” Emmett grins at his own joke, but notices Justin nervously fiddling with his lighter. “Or what?”

“I just wish it wasn’t an issue.”

“What? You being cute? Honey... most people would kill for your looks.”

“Yeah. But that’s all, you know? All the guys I’ve ever been with... well, they pursue me ‘cause I’m cute. I’m a cute, middle-class white boy from the suburbs. No one ever sees anything else.”

“Well... you’re an artist, too.”

Justin lets out a sharp breath. “Yeah. I’m your typical art fag. Blond hair, blue eyes, soft spoken, cute bubble butt. I’m like a VW Bug. The newer ones, you know? Everyone thinks they’re so fucking cuuuuute. But no one really takes them seriously. I mean, you don’t buy a Bug for its performance. Not really. You buy it ‘cause it’s cute and comes in cool colors. And all your friends love it. But once you grow up... well, can you imagine a fifty-year old business man driving one of those things?”

“Damn. Alcohol makes you bitter.”

“I’m actually a bitter person.”

“Yeah right.” Emmett slows down and pulls into the driveway. “Well, here we are.”

“I hate being here when it’s just me. I get lonely. I’m not used to having so much space.”

“Uh... you’re not... gonna invite me up, right? ‘Cause we’re just friends and I think Brian would flip a lid if we fucked.”

Justin’s smile lights up the inside of Emmett’s car and calms him down. Laughing softly, Justin opens the car door and unlatches his belt. “Sorry, Em. You’re really not my type.”

Emmett watches Justin stumble down the pathway and finally unlock the front door. He doesn’t pull out of the driveway until the door shuts and the porch light flicks off.

“I might not be your type,” Emmett says to himself. He puts his car into drive and heads to his apartment. “But it’s obvious who is.”

“You shouldn’t string him along like this, Brian. You know nothing will come of all that flirting you guys do.” Michael’s helping Brian into his loft.

“Who? What?” Brian slips off his shoes, leaning heavily into Michael. “I don’t flirt.”

“Yeah, you do.”

Brian slips in his socks and reaches down to rip them off, dangerously close to falling. “I hate--fucking--socks!” He cries, flinging them across the room. “And I might flirt,” he calls over his shoulder as he walks up the stairs to his bedroom. “But it’s just for play. For fun. You’re right. Nothing’s gonna come to it.”

Michael edges closer to the bedroom, watching Brian change through the partitions in the wall. “So... uh... you know who I’m talking about, then?”

He sees Brian stop unbuttoning his pants. Heaving a loud sigh, Brian says, "Justin."

"Yeah."

"Yeah."

Brian goes to remove his pants, looks over and sees Michael watching him. Instead, he grabs some sweats out of this drawer and heads to the bathroom. "I can take over from here, Mikey. You don't need to stay."

"I don't mind. I'll stay 'til you're in bed."

His voice muffled, Brian answers. "Uh... okay... just... make sure you lock up." He doesn't need to see Michael's smile to know that it's there. "Look, Mikey..." He begins, stepping out of the bathroom shirtless and cautious. "I don't need you to tell me to watch myself. I can take care of it."

Michael joins him in the bedroom. He runs his hand over the soft blue duvet as Brian slides into the bed. "I know that, Brian. I just... I don't want to see the tw--Justin... I don't want to see Justin hurt."

Brian gives him one of those looks. The one where he raises his eyebrows in wonder and stares until the recipient has to look away from embarrassment. Over the years though, Michael's learned to hold his own. "What?" He asks Brian, sitting down at the edge of the bed.

"Like you give a flying fuck about Justin's feelings."

A little harsher than he expects Brian to be, Michael gazes at him before quickly looking away. "I just don't get why you've been hanging out with him so much lately. You hardly know him."

"Well, that's why I'm hanging out with him so much. So that I can get to know him," Brian says matter-of-factly.

"But why? Why waste your time? Your energy? You know he's more than willing to fuck you. Why not just get it over with? Why play hard to get?" Michael's voice raises an octave. He gets up to start pacing the room.

"Jesus, Mikey. I'm not playing anything with him. We're just friends. I want to be his friend. He's nice. Talented. Intelligent... Funny. God, he's fucking hilarious. He almost got us kicked out of a restaurant tonight 'cause he was being so--"

"You went out to dinner with him?"

"Well, yeah. Just like I go out to dinner with you."

"Don't compare our relationship with each other to your relationship with Lindsay's cousin. God. She's gonna be so pissed."

"Why? That I'm friends with her cousin. I doubt that, Michael."

"Just be careful, that's all."

"Of what?"

"Well, you know his types. Blond, cute, and young. He's probably used to everything being handed to him on a silver platter. God knows Lindsay is."

Brian sinks into his pillow and reaches over to turn off the light. "He's not Lindsay, Michael. And he's not you. Everyone has different experiences in life. And unless he's told you all about it himself, don't make any assumptions. Make sure you set the alarm before you leave."

Michael trudges over to the door and listens to the stillness of the loft for a moment before punching the alarm's code and locking the door behind him.

Chapter Eight

For the first time since he's moved back to Pittsburgh, Justin is hanging out with Daphne. They're sitting on the porch outside, watching Gus and Daphne's daughter, Lauren, play on the sturdy swing set at the far end of the yard. Their giggles and shrieks echo sharply, making Daphne and Justin smile and roll their eyes.

"God," Justin moans, pulling out a cigarette. "Everything's so simple for children."

Daphne reaches out to smack the cigarette out of his mouth. After giving Justin a stern look when he huffs at the loss, Daphne smiles and asks knowingly, "Why? I thought you said you were ready for, and I quote, 'the simplicity of Pittsburgh' after so much drama in California. Is life not treating you well, Justin?"

The teasing tone in her voice irks Justin and he groans, leaning back on his hands and lifting his head to the sky. Daphne studies Justin intently, seeing his eyes move back and forth behind his closed lids. She watches as he shakes his head slowly and pouts.

"Oooh. There's a man involved! Come on! Dish it out!" Daphne leans into Justin, cornering him between the porch and her soft body.

Justin laughs nervously. "There's no one, Daph."

"Mm hmm."

"There isn't!"

"Sure, Justin." She does that annoying thing where she pats his knee like he's a child in need of comforting. She knows how much it pisses him off.

"I'm serious!"

Instead of answering, Daphne allows a small smile to play on her lips. He watches as her smile slowly grows. "Is he hot?"

Justin shakes his head in frustration.

"So, he's not? Is he a troll?"

"No, he beauti--" Realizing that he fell for her trick, Justin claps a hand over his mouth and closes his eyes.

Daphne jumps up from her seat. "I knew it! I so knew it! Who is he? Where'd you meet him?"

Tugging at the hem of her skirt, Justin says, "Shut the fuck up, Daph! God. Be quiet!"

"What? There isn't anyone here but me, you, and the kids."

"Just... shhhh... okay?"

"Fine." Daphne sits down. They're silent and Justin's happy for the reprieve. "What's his name?"

Groaning, Justin peeks at her through half closed eyes. "You're not gonna let this go, are you?"

"Nope. So, you might as well tell me everything."

“So, let me get this straight--”

Justin snorts at his friend’s choice of words.

“Okay, not ‘straight,’ but... gah! Fuck it. You know what I mean. So, he said some really mean shit, but then admits to saying it because he’s scared? And when I say scared, I mean scared of you? Of what you represent? And now you guys are like, really good friends?”

“For the most part.”

“But he likes you right? I mean, like... in a non-platonic way?”

“God. I don’t know. I mean, sometimes I think that he does. But, other times... I think he just wants a friend who understands him; who lets him be himself without any of the usual bullshit the rest of his friends put him through.”

“But.. that’s sooooo not you. It’s obvious you’ve already strung him though a hell of a lot more than he’s been known to put up with. Why do you think that is?”

“Well, ‘cause he likes me as a friend, of course. I mean, we get along really well.”

“But you guys don’t fuck?”

“Nope.”

“Kiss?”

“Just that once.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah.”

“So, it’s kinda like your relationship with me, then, right?”

Justin lets out a bark of laughter. “Uh, no. Not quite.”

Pouting, Daphne asks, “Why not?”

“‘Cause I don’t want to suck your hard hot cock.”

“Oh. This is true.”

Gus runs up to Justin and hands him a weed that he found in the grass. “It’s pretty. Like you.” The boy smiles and claps his hands when Justin places it behind his ear.

“He’s a charmer,” Daphne giggles, pointing at how silly Justin looks with the weed adorning his hair.

“Just like his dad.”

They watch as the kids play on the slide. They slide, one after another, on their stomachs, shrieking like banshees.

“He such a good kid,” Daphne nods to Gus. “He’s so... comfortable with being a kid, you know? Like, he knows his boundaries and works with them.”

“He’s just a kid, Daph.”

Daphne shrugs her shoulders. “He’s very handsome.”

“He gets that from his dad, too.”

A wailing from Jenny’s baby monitor tells them that it’s time for lunch. Reluctantly, the two friends call the active children into the house, hoping that lunch will calm them enough for a short nap.

After effectively putting Gus and Lauren down for their afternoon naps, Justin and Daphne are watching the television quietly. The door bell rings, making the two friends jump.

“Expecting anyone?” Daphne asks, getting up with Jenny in her arms and following Justin to the door.

Justin cracks open the door and his face breaks out in a gigantic smile. “Brian!” He opens the door wider. “I didn’t know you were coming!”

Unnoticed, Daphne takes a moment to check Brian out. So far, so good, she thinks as her eyes graze his toned body and beautiful face. Very good, she smiles devilishly to herself. Clearing her throat, Daphne steps up to them.

“Oh! Brian,” Justin begins. “This is my best friend, Daphne.” The two look each other up and down openly. “Daphne, this is Brian.”

Brian is the first to extend his hand. “I’ve heard so much about you,” he smiles.

“Likewise,” Daphne grins. They both stare pointedly at Justin.

“You’ve been talking about me, Sunshine?” Brian asks, his face completely serious, but his voice full of mirth.

“Sunshine?!”

“Yeah. My best friend’s mom called him that one day and it... sort of stuck,” Brian explains, rubbing his hand on the back of his neck in slight embarrassment. Justin’s eyes wander to that hand and can’t help but think of other things it could rub. His cheeks redden a bit and he turn away abruptly, wandering back to the living room.

“It fits you, Justin. Or should I say, Suuuuunshine,” Daphne drawls out. She looks at Brian and the two of them immediately crack up.

“God,” Justin groans. “I knew it would be a bad idea if you two met.”

A half an hour later, Brian and Daphne are hollering with laughter at Justin’s expense.

“And then,” Daphne finishes her story, “He has the nerve to call me that night and lie his ass off! Not knowing, of course, that I saw them! I fucking saw them, Brian!”

Brian’s eyes are wide with humor as he tries to stifle his laughter. “Slick move, Justin.” He bites his bottom lip to keep from laughing more after Justin flips him off.

"I could tell you a shit load of stories about Daphne," Justin begins, glaring at his friend.

"But, Suuuunshine," Daphne sighs, "Brian doesn't know me like he knows you. It wouldn't be as fun."

"But--"

"She's right, Suuuunshine," Brian agrees.

Their laughter dies down and they sit in comfortable silence for a long time. Daphne keeps shooting furtive glances between Brian and Justin, trying desperately to figure out their relationship.

"So, Daphne," Brian begins, breaking the silence. "You've heard mine and you know Justin's, what's yours?"

"Oh," Daphne's cheeks twinge red. "It was Justin. I asked. He agreed."

"Really?" Brian's eyebrows shoot off his forehead. "And that didn't cause any... uh... problems?"

"Oh, it caused plenty," Justin says before Daphne can even think of a response. "For one thing, Daphne insisted that she loved me and wanted me to be her boyfriend." He leans back into the couch cushions, happy to finally have some dirt to dish out on his friend.

Brian looks at Daphne who's blushing madly and then at Justin, who's grinning happily. "Musta been good, then, huh, Sunshine?"

"Oh," Justin answers, looking Brian straight into the eye. "I'm the best."

"Gross," Daphne mutters. "Get a room."

Justin shoots Daphne a heated glare. A look which doesn't go unnoticed by Brian. Before Brian can fulfill his duty of changing the subject, a sheepish Gus enters the room.

"Hey, Sonny Boy," Brian smiles at his son, who refuses to get any closer than a few feet of them, despite his father's welcoming arms. "What's the matter?" Brian asks, worry in his voice.

Daphne watches Brian easily slip into father mode and can't help but like the man.

"I went potty," Gus whispers, quickly looking away from Daphne and Justin in embarrassment.

"We all do," Brian explains, getting up. "It's natural."

"In the bed," Gus told his father pointedly.

"Oh..." Brian pauses as his mind wraps around this new information. "Oooohhh."

Getting up quickly, Justin says, "I'll take care of it."

But before he can reach Gus, Brian holds up a hand to stop him. "No. That's okay. I'll take care of it. I used to wet the bed, too. Poor kid. It's probably hereditary. The first time I did it, though, my dad smacked me across my face with my baseball mitt and made me stay up all night and wash the sheets by hand." Daphne's mouth drops in alarm. Brian turns to look at them, "This is my chance to make it right, you know? Do what my father never did?" He picks up his wet son and carries him out of the room."

"I think I'm in love," Daphne sighs, leaning back and placing her head over her hand.

“Too bad!” Justin snaps before turning bright red and hiding his face in his hands. “Oh my God, Daph. I’m sorry. God. I know you’re kidding. I mean, he’s most emphatically gay.”

“Oh man, Justin,” Daphne starts, getting up to sit next to him. “You have it so bad!”

Justin shakes his head for a moment, then looks out at Daphne from over his fingertips. “Yeah,” he finally sighs. “I know.”

It’s late. Brian and Justin are sitting on the couch in the living room, admiring the mess two children can make in a mere two hours.

“I like Daphne. She’s got... spunk,” Brian tells Justin, kicking one of Gus’ toys over with his foot. The kid has more toys now than Brian thinks he’s owned his entire life. He tells Justin this.

“His parents obviously love him.”

Brian nods his head slowly and surveys the room. “So, it’s how much a parent buys his child that proves his love?”

“What?” Justin’s head turns sharply to look at Brian. “No. Of course not! I mean, my dad gave me everything in the world and now look at us. We hardly talk and when, on the rare occasions that we do talk, it’s only to fling angry, hurtful insults at each other. No. I was just saying...”

“Relax, Sunshine. I understand.”

Justin nervously fiddles with a snag on his jeans for a minute before sighing. “What a bitch Daph is for leaving me with such a mess.”

“Us.”

“What?”

Brian gets off the couch and stretches, his long arms almost touch the ceiling. Justin can’t keep his eyes off the way Brian’s entire body elongates itself. He wonders what Brian’s body looks like underneath all that clothing and blushes appropriately.

They work well together. Justin finds Brian a rather efficient cleaning buddy, accepting Justin’s barking orders in stride and happy to put together the smaller toys. Justin takes a break to watch as Brian sits on the floor, gathering up the Barrel of Monkeys, lost in his own little world. Justin grabs his sketchbook from the drawer in the coffee table and begins to draw Brian. Smiling to himself, Justin thinks that he has a sketch of Gus in the exact same pose from a couple weeks ago.

“What the fuck?” Brian whines when he sees Justin on the couch. “Why do you get to sit merrily on your plump ass while I have to slave away?” He complains, throwing the completed toy into the toy box.

“Brian, you weren’t working. You were playing.”

Brian shrugs and grins at Justin. “Just making up for lost time.” He starts to put away Gus’ Lego set, but gets a better idea. “Care to join me, Sunshine?”

Justin looks up from his drawing and rolls his eyes at Brian’s childlike excitement. “And we’re how old?” He asks, but slides down off the couch to join Brian on the floor.

“It’s what’s in the heart that counts,” Brian smiles. “What’s your favorite color?”

“Blue,” Justin answers, clearing away an open space on the floor. He looks up with surprised eyes as Brian slides all the blue Legos in his direction. “Thank you.” His voice his filled with awe.

They compete with each other to see who can make the tallest, largest building. Brian plays just as dirty as his son, Justin discovers. Brian’s foot “accidentally” knocks over Justin’s much better piece of architecture. It’s when Justin reaches out to slap down Brian’s building that his hand cramps in unbelievable pain.

“Fuck!” He cries out, cradling his hand against his chest. His cheeks are glowing red and his eyes are washed with unshed tears. “Jesus Christ!”

Brian quickly puts the Legos away and crawls over to sit next to Justin. “What’s the matter?” He asks calmly, almost lazily. Justin holds up his throbbing hand and winces. “This?” Brian asks, reaching out to uncurl Justin’s fingers. “Here.” He takes Justin’s smaller hand in his own and massages it.

The pain slowly subsides and Justin’s left with only a slight aching. “Thanks,” he whispers. He pulls his hand away from Brian’s and shakes it out. “That felt awesome. The massage, I mean.”

Brian nods and gets up. He quickly puts the rest of the toys away. By the time he’s done, Justin has recovered and is sitting, embarrassed, on the couch.

“Sorry about that,” Justin laughs, his face red. “Left over from the bashing.”

Shrugging, Brian reaches into his pocket to take out a tin can. Justin sits up a little straighter when Brian pulls out a joint.

”God,” Justin laughs, moving his legs so that Brian can join him on the couch. “I haven’t smoked weed in ages.” Brian leans forward and offers Justin the joint. “I don’t even know if I remember how.”

Brian chuckles. “Bullshit. It’s like learning to swim. Weird at first, but you get the hang of it. And then you never forget how.”

“Most people use riding a bike as an analogy.”

“Yeah, well,” Brian tosses Justin a lighter. “I never learned how to ride a bike.”

“Shut up!”

“It’s true.”

“But you know how to swim?”

“Yep. My dad threw me in the pool one day and I taught myself. It was either that or drown, so I figured...”

Justin picks up the lighter and looks at the joint, still in Brian’s outstretched hand. “You go first.”

Brian rolls his eyes, but takes the lighter away from Justin and lights up. Justin watches as it sparks and a small trail of smoke explodes from the end of the joint. Brian pulls it away from his lips and holds his breath, hollowing his cheeks to keep the smoke in. Justin’s eyes follow the greenish smoke as it slowly glides out of Brian’s mouth. “Your turn, Sunshine. Just remember, hold it in.”

Just places the slightly damp joint in his mouth and lights it. He feels the knowing tickle in the back of his throat and fights the urge to cough.

“Good boy,” Brian grins as Justin inhales sharply a couple times, trying to keep then smoke in his lungs. He lets out the air with a quick gasp and Brian laughs heartily. “Okay?” He asks, stroking Justin’s arm a moment before taking the joint back.

Justin nods his head slowly, waiting eagerly for his next turn.

Paranoia starts to creep in after they quickly finish the joint. Justin claims he hears two grown men arguing over a woman in the kitchen and vividly freaks out when he swears he hears gun shots. Brian grabs Justin’s arm when Justin gets up to investigate. “Hold it there, Fox Mulder. There’s nothing going on. It’s just the drugs.”

“You’re no fun.” Justin sticks out his tongue and crosses his arms, but his interest in the “voices” soon wears off as that comfortable heaviness creeps in.

They talk about everything. The new Star Wars. Brian’s newest business venture. Their favorite food and drink. Justin is pleasantly surprised to learn that Brian is knowledgeable when it comes to art and Brian almost falls off the couch when Justin regales him with the inner workings of marketing strategies. They discuss music, politics, books, friends, and family. Finally, they slip into a cozy silence.

Brian becomes aware of Justin’s foot resting lightly against his thigh the same moment Justin does. Justin quickly moves it and stuffs as much of himself as he can into the corner of the couch. “Sorry,” he mumbles.

It’s like Justin’s foot left an indentation on his leg. Brian can still feel it there moments later and even as he moves his leg, the feeling’s still present. He turns to stare openly at Justin, taking in his beauty and intriguing delicacy.

Justin, aware of Brian’s scrutiny, stands up suddenly. “I have the munchies. You want anything?”

He turns around to watch as Brian saunters over to him. The drugs make, in Justin’s mind, Brian’s features more pronounced. More elegant. More gorgeous. Justin licks his lips as he watches Brian raise an arm to scratch his back. Damn, Justin thinks. Out loud, he asks again, “You want anything?”

Brian stops his itching and stares directly into Justin’s eyes. “Yeah,” Brian answers slowly.

“Good. I hate eating alone. What do you want?” Justin asks, making a break for the kitchen.

Brian grabs the back of Justin’s shirt and pulls him flush against his chest. “You,” he whispers huskily into Justin’s ear.

“W--what?” Justin questions timidly, unsure if he heard correctly.

“I said I want you,” Brian repeats louder. “You’re... God! I don’t know...” He leans down and inhales Justin’s hair.

The intimacy combined with Brian’s words cause Justin’s skin to break out in small bumps. He groans as Brian nuzzles his neck, his mouth dangerously close to Justin’s skin. Brian’s hand’s wander around Justin’s waist and up his chest. He runs them up and down languidly. Justin reaches around and grasps the back of Brian’s thighs.

“Brian,” he says with a staggering breath. “Do something.”

Brian continues to breath on Justin’s neck and starts to slowly rotate his hips against the small of Justin’s back.

“Oh, God.” Justin’s breath catches. His shirt has ridden up his back and he feels Brian’s clothed erection stab at his skin.

“Jesus,” Brian stutters, pressing his nose to the back of Justin’s hot neck.

They stand like that for a long time; not kissing, not really touching. Brian finally places a hand on Justin's cheek and turns Justin's head to face him. They begin to lean into each other, but are interrupted by the shrill ring of the house phone.

Justin leaps out of Brian's arms and dives for the phone. "Hello?" He asks, his voice breathy and his heart beating rapidly in his chest. "What? Oh. Hi. Yeah. I'm fine. I was just... you startled me, is all. Yeah. Tomorrow? Oh. Okay. No, that's great."

Brian listens to Justin's one sided conversation with hidden interest. Finally, Justin hangs up the phone and turns to Brian. "That was Lindsay. She and Mel are coming home tomorrow."

For some reason, that breaks whatever spell they were both in. Justin walks Brian to the door and they say sloppy good-byes.

"Shit," Justin breaths once the door closes behind Brian.

It's only when Brian's in his jeep does he realize that his hands are shaking.

Chapter Nine

"Were our children demons?" Lindsay asks good-naturedly as she and Mel drop their bags on the living room floor.

Justin shakes his head. "Gus is a dream. He's a perfect kid, really. You couldn't have done better."

Melanie comes up behind Lindsay and wraps her in her arms. "And Jenny?"

"Uh... Jenny's..." Justin trails off.

"That bad, huh?" Mel laughs. "She gets it from her father, I think."

"Sure, Mel. That's it," Justin smiles. "So... Are you two... okay?"

The two women regard each other with smiles and then look back at Justin. "Yeah. We talked."

"A lot," Lindsay adds.

"We're better."

"Good."

Lindsay unravels herself from her wife's arms. "So, did anything interesting happen while we were gone? Any big revelations?"

"Not really. The hospital thing was scary. But, Brian came and--"

"Brian?" Mel asks, her head shoots up in surprise. "He went to the hospital?"

"Uh... yeah. I was freaking out and couldn't get a hold of anyone else." Justin takes one of the suitcases from Melanie and starts to drag it up the stairs.

Lindsay wanders around the living room, breathing in the familiar scent of her home when something catches her eye. The drawer of the coffee table is slightly open and, reaching in, she pulls out a sketchpad. "Is this one of yours?" She calls out to Justin, who doesn't answer.

Flipping to the first page, Lindsay is greeted with a rudimentary drawing of Melanie and Gus playing outside. She's always admired Justin's talent. An admiration that used to be jealousy, she is able to admit. Turning the page, she finds a beautiful rendition of herself in her robe, drinking her morning coffee. As she gets further into the sketchbook, Lindsay is surprised by how many drawings there are of Brian.

Brian and Gus. Brian and Michael. Brian and Deb. Brian eating breakfast. Brian smoking. A lot of Brian smoking, actually. Lindsay's eyebrows lift at some of the more sensual drawings.

The Brian that Justin has drawn beautifully is unlike the Brian Lindsay knows so well. This Brian, the Brian on paper, is much like the Brian she's seen around Gus; the Brian that only Gus has the privilege of knowing.

Gus... and maybe Justin, Lindsay admits as she studies the many nuances of Brian Kinney captured on paper.

"Did you say something--" Justin begins to ask, but stops mid sentence when he sees what Lindsay is looking at.

Lindsay holds up the sketchbook and smiles. "You're so talented, Justin. Tell me when you want that show at the gallery and it's yours." She carefully avoids talking about Justin's obviously favorite subject.

Justin walks up to Lindsay and almost rips the sketchbook away from her. Her surprise is evident. "Do you always snoop through other people's personal belongings?" He snaps at her, hugging the sketchbook in his arms.

They stare at each other without saying a word. Lindsay's eyes narrow as she watches Justin grip his sketchbook possessively.

"So," Lindsay clears her throat and stands up, walking around the couch. She stops in front of Justin and smiles. "Did you see a lot of Brian?"

Justin's face pales slightly and then begins to redden with realization that Lindsay had, indeed, gone through his entire sketchbook. "Not much," he whispers.

"Justin," Lindsay starts, placing a tentative hand on his arm. "I thought I told you to stay away from him."

"God! I'm an adult Lindsay."

"Yeah. I know that. And you can make your own decisions, but... Brian's not like other boys. He... He's not looking for what your looking for."

Justin huffs like an angry teenager. "We're just friends, is all."

Lindsay nods her head stiffly and then exits the room. "Fuck," Justin whispers.

"I'm coming! Jesus Christ!!" Brian throws open the loft door, which slams into the wall with a deafening crash, only to find a stern looking Lindsay on the other side. "Lindsay," Brian momentarily stutters. "Wow. Didn't you just get back?" He leans in to kiss her cheek, but she avoids it, walking stiffly into the loft. "Ooo-kay. Come in."

She glides over to the bedroom and peeks in. "I'm not... interrupting anything, am I?" Finding the room empty, she continues without waiting for a response. "I love you, Brian. You know that. You're a great friend and a wonderful father and I couldn't be more pleased about how my life with you has turned out..."

Sighing, Brian grabs a glass off his drink cart and fills it with whiskey. "But?"

"But... I don't want you to fuck with my cousin. Or fuck him, for that matter."

Brian nearly chokes on his drink. "What?" He asks, his voice raising in pitch. He wonders, briefly, if Justin talked to her about... him.

"You're charming. And handsome. And... I don't know... rich..."

"So, you think he wants me for my money?" Brian jokes. He can't think of a more ridiculous explanation.

"No. No. Of course not. But, it's part of the package."

"What package?"

Lindsay drops to the couch and takes Brian's drink out of his hand. She sips it lightly and shudders. "This is gross."

"What package?" Brian asks again, his voice dropping low.

"The Brian Kinney Package."

Rolling his eyes, Brian scoffs. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that you're a dream come true to Justin. He's only had it bad in life, Brian. He's had shitty relationship after shitty relationship and I know for a fact that he still isn't over the bashing. Then here you come: calm, smart, together, and he thinks... God... I don't know what he thinks... That you're some god or something."

Brian's raises a brow and stares at his friend's exasperated face. "Well, I know he likes me. What's the point here, Lindsay?"

"My point is... I don't want you to see him."

"What?"

"I don't want you to be alone with him. I don't... I don't want you to hurt him."

Brian sucks in sharp breath and nods grimly.

"And I know you'll hurt him 'cause I know who you are, Brian. I know. I know you. I know what you want and I can promise you it's nowhere near what he wants. So, please, I'm begging you. Friend to friend, mother to father... Don't do anything with him. I don't want to see him hurt. I'd like him to experience some good in life before he gets more of the bad."

"That bad includes me?" Brian asks. He hides it well, but his throat constricts and he feels something undeniably close to pain. "That's... that's fucked up, Lindsay."

"It's the truth," she whispers. They sit uncomfortably with each other, neither one knowing what else to say. "So," Lindsay suddenly exclaims, slapping her thighs in finality. "That's it." She gets up and turns to Brian. "We're having a huge family breakfast this Sunday. You had better be there."

"Yes, Debbie," Brian sneers.

Laughing, Lindsay pulls back the loft door and skips down the stairs, her good deed done.

Only when he's sure Lindsay is gone does Brian react. Setting down his whiskey, Brian slumps onto the couch, letting out a shattering sigh before falling over on his side and curling his legs under his body. "Bitch," Brian whispers, shaking his head. "I'm not that bad."

The girls pay for Justin to make a night of it. Handing him a wad of bills, they tell him to go out and party with all the other “hot young studs on Liberty Avenue,” as Melanie puts it.

Before Justin can get a foot through Babylon’s door, he’s being propositioned. They’re hot, he notices. But he only wants one person. And that person is standing at his usual place near the bar with the usual people.

“Hey,” Justin smiles, grabbing a spot next to Ted.

“Out on a week night?” Ben teases Justin. “I guess that means you’re done with parenting?”

“For now,” Justin winks. He’s greets the rest of the gang, noting that Michael is attempting to play nice, before turning to Brian. “Hey,” he repeats somewhat hesitantly.

He doesn’t really know what to expect. All he does know is that he’s been hard ever since Brian wrapped his arms around his body and thrust his erection against his back.

Brian responds with a curt nod, refusing to look Justin in the eye. “I’m going to dance,” he tells his friends, placing his empty beer bottle on the bar. “Later.” Justin watches in dismay as Brian saunters off to the dance floor, already in predator mode.

“Did I do something wrong?” Justin asks his friends meekly.

Emmett shrugs it off. “He’s been like that all night. Forget about it. Want something to drink?”

A small half-smile adorns Justin’s face. “Yeah. Look,” he pulls out the money Lindsay and Melanie gave him. “It’s on me. Or rather, on the girls.”

He throws back two whiskeys in a row and hold up his hand for a third before Emmett tenderly reaches out to stop him. “Slow down, Justin,” he insists. “You have all night.”

Justin rips his arm away from Emmett. “Leave me alone. I’ll do what I want.”

They all stare at Justin when he says this. They’re not used to such open hostility. At least, not with him. “What?” He asks. “Fuck. I’m going to dance.” He storms off. But instead of going to the dance floor, he heads over to the back room and grabs a guy near the entrance. “Suck me,” he demands, settling against the wall and closing his eyes. He tries to lose himself in the warm mouth and somewhat talented tongue.

“Starting early, are we?” Brian’s familiar voice interrupts.

Justin cracks an eye open to see Brian leaning on the wall opposite of him, no trick in sight. “You in here alone?” Justin takes in a deep breath as his trick brings up a hand to cup his balls. “Or just waiting for the first willing piece of ass?”

“Isn’t that what you did?” There’s a hint of anger in Brian’s voice which causes Justin to open his eyes all the way.

“What do you care?”

“Good question,” Brian mutters before pushing off and leaving the back room.

“Bri--! Stop it,” Justin hisses to the guy servicing him. He zips up and runs out of the back room, following Brian out the door. “Brian!” He calls out as the man nears his jeep. “Wait.”

“Go back in, Sunshine.”

“No. Not until you talk to me.” Justin’s now standing in front of Brian, blocking the jeep door.

“About?”

“About the other night.”

“I was high.”

“On pot! Pot doesn’t make you do things, Brian. That was all you.” Brian turns his face to look away from Justin, but Justin won’t allow this. He reaches out and places a hand on Brian’s chin, grabbing it and forcing Brian to look at him. “You want me to leave? I’ll leave. I promise. Just say the words.” He’s still gripping Brian’s face. The minutes pass by and neither one make a move. “What’s the matter? Trying hard to think of a good lie to get rid of me.”

“I don’t lie,” Brian insists, his voice flat and emotionless.

“Then why aren’t you acknowledging me?”

“Cause.”

“I don’t think so, Brian. That might’ve worked in grade school, but it won’t work now.” Brian remains silent. Justin allows his hand to release Brian’s chin and slide down his arm, caressing Brian’s hand with the tip of his fingers before he takes a step away. Trying another route, Justin whispers, “I asked you what you wanted that night and you said me. You said you wanted me. Don’t you want me anymore?”

Brian’s eyes widen and he opens his mouth slightly, as if to say something, then decides the better of it and looks at the ground.

“Then there’s my answer,” Justin sighs. He shakes his head and takes another step back.

“Justin--” Brian stops him. “I... I can’t.”

Rolling his eyes, Justin mutters, “Not this again. Jesus, Brian. Just admit that you won’t and get this over with. ‘Cause can’t leaves room for possibility and I’m very obstinate.”

A ghost of a smile plays on Brian’s lips. He knows how obstinate Justin can be; what a determined and driven man Justin is. “I won’t because I can’t,” he explains, moving aside to let Justin pass.

“Scared?” Justin asks, his voice loud and steady.

Brian turns back to him, forcefully. “A little,” he admits, surprising even himself. He pushes Justin away from his door lightly.

Before he can shut the door, he hears Justin whimper, “Take me with you.”

His hand hesitates as he thinks of the possibilities. Shaking his head, resigned, he reiterates, “I can’t.” He shuts his door and starts the ignition. The clouds overhead darken threateningly and a strong wind blows Justin’s hair every which way, an image Brian doesn’t stop watching in his rearview mirror.

A steady knocking on the front door has Justin running down the stairs and throwing it open in record speed. At first, he’s unsure of who he’s looking at, but then, the visitor takes a step forward. It’s Brian, his clothing clinging from the rain and there’s an almost animalistic look in his eyes.

Justin clears his throat and then greets Brian. Holding the door open for him, Justin tries not to stare at the way Brian's shirt molds his body or the suggestive way his pants drip off of his legs. Brian turns around, his breathing heavy and his cheeks red.

"What's going on?" Justin asks, concerned. He walks over to Brian and studies his face. They stare at each other momentarily and then suddenly, they're in each other's arms, mashing their lips together with unexpected urgency.

Brian slams Justin against the wall, knocking down a couple family photos. The crash doesn't stop them from attacking each other's mouths. Brian's hands roam to Justin's ass and moves down his thighs. Using his own body to hold Justin's up, Brian brings Justin's legs around his waist. They continue crushing their lips together, all hopes of breathing lost as their tongues and spit become intertwined.

Justin takes small desperate breaths through his nose as Brian presses him impossibly closer to the wall, groaning loudly when Brian's hand begins to squeeze and tug at the crotch of his pants, making him impossibly harder. His arms move off of Brian's shoulders and make their way under his shirt. He relishes in the feel of the warm, wet skin and allows his hands to wander up Brian's chest.

Brian's tongue explores Justin's mouth. He can't believe how much he likes the taste of Justin; the feel of Justin's tongue against his own; the smoothness of his teeth; the softness of his lips. It makes Brian incredibly hard. They begin to rock in succession, finding a strong rhythm. Justin's nails rake his chest and he shivers, groaning when Justin's strong fingers clasp onto his nipples.

Neither one can breath, but they don't care. There's so much passion and lust and wanton energy. The hall begins to heat up as they gasp and rut and pound against each other.

They don't notice Emmett entering through the open door, shaking the rain off his umbrella, unaware of the coupling against the wall until he looks up. "I knew it!" Emmett shrieks, staring at the two men desperately clinging to each other.

It takes a moment for Brian and Justin to realize they have an audience. Justin's legs slip from around Brian's waist and they stand there, breathing heavily, face in neck.

"I knew it!" Emmett says again, only much louder this time. A manila envelope falls from his grip as he presses his hands to his mouth and giggles.

Still gasping for air, Brian settles against the wall next to Justin. Their lips are swollen and their mouths glisten. "We... We weren't..." Justin tries. He can't seem to control his breathing. "We weren't... doing anything..." He assures Emmett.

"Bullshit!" Emmett cries loudly. "You guys were practically swallowing each other whole! Oh my God! How long has this been going on?!"

"Emmett?" A voice from upstairs calls.

Emmett watches, grinning, as Brian and Justin scramble to make themselves presentable as Lindsay walks down the stairs. She smiles at Emmett and then turns to see her cousin and best friend looking very disheveled.

"Brian? What are you doing here?" She asks suspiciously, taking in their flushed faces and still heavy breathing.

"I was just leaving," Brian almost gasps. He doesn't move, however. His hand brushes against Justin's and it takes all his control not to attack Justin again.

"And I'm going with him," Justin insists, grabbing his jacket from the coat rack and heading to the door. "Come on, we can beat the storm," Justin addresses Brian, holding out his hand hurriedly.

Emmett tries to hide a smile as Brian dashes quick glances between Justin and Lindsay. "He's right, Brian," Emmett tells the man, placing his hand on Brian's shoulder and pushing him gently. "You should go now, before the storm gets worse. They say it might snow later."

The situation seems to register with Lindsay and she's a sudden flurry of anger. She stomps over to Justin and shoves him toward the stairs. Glaring at Brian, she points to the door. "Get. Out," she breathes, her words bitter and staggering.

"What's going on?" Melanie asks from the top of the stairs. She looks from Justin to Lindsay's pointing hand to Brian's wet body and then to Emmett, her eyes pleading for some sort of explanation.

"I was just leaving," Brian says again, following Lindsay's outstretched arm to the door. Justin takes a step in his direction, but the look in Brian's eyes make him stop cold. "Alone." Brian nods to Emmett and leaves, practically running to his jeep.

"What was that about?" Melanie asks again.

"I just came by to give Lindsay the party plans for the gala event," Emmett explains, picking up the envelope he dropped earlier and handing it to Lindsay.

"What was Brian doing here?" Melanie wonders, completely confused when Justin pushes past her and stomps up the stairs furiously. "Justin?" She calls after him and then turns to Lindsay. "Did I miss something?"

"Fucking Brian," Lindsay mutters, slamming the front door shut at the same time Justin slams his bedroom door. The walls shake.

"Uh... Isn't that my line? I mean, I'm the one who's usually mad at Brian. What'd he do?"

"He... Justin... Messy..." Lindsay huffs, trudging to the living room and falling onto the rocking chair. "Bad."

"Uh..." Melanie's really confused. She turns to Emmett. "What's going on?"

"Oh. It seems Lindsay's cousin and best friend have a thing for each other." He waits, continuing only when Melanie's wide eyes register understanding. "I guess they finally decided to take the next step. Who knows. But, I think there could be something there."

Lindsay snorts.

"Come on, Linds. He's your best friend. Justin could do much worse."

"Wait a minute," Melanie interrupts. "You mean... Brian and Justin are... fucking?"

"No. I don't think they've fucked--"

"Yet." Lindsay's voice is bitter.

Melanie wanders over to the couch and sits down. "Huh. You know... that's kind of... I don't think that would be so bad."

Both Emmett and Lindsay stare at her with open mouths.

"I mean, I don't really like Brian, but... I think Justin'll be good for him."

"But Brian'll just fuck him and ditch him."

“You really have no control over that, Lindsay,” Melanie tells her softly. “You know how it goes: tell someone they can’t have something and they’ll go after it even worse than before. And I know you. I know you probably already figured that there is something going on between the two of them and told them that they can’t... do whatever it is they were planning on doing.”

“So, I should just let Brian hurt my cousin after he’s been hurt so many times before?”

“That’s not really your problem, Lindsay,” Emmett explains, sitting next to Melanie. “If Justin wants Brian, he’s going to get Brian.”

“But Brian... He has... rules... there’s no future with him.”

“I don’t know. I think he likes Justin. A lot. Like, likes Justin.”

Shaking her head, Lindsay insists, “Brian doesn’t do boyfriends or love or anything like that. We’ve heard him say that millions of times.”

“That’s ‘cause he hasn’t met anyone that he’s wanted to be a boyfriend to or that he’s wanted to love,” Emmett grins.

“Until now,” Melanie whispers with small smile. “Maybe. Who knows. He’s so fucked. I can’t wait.” Melanie’s smile grows.

There’s a noise in the hall and Justin sticks his head into the room. “I’m going out,” he tells them, his eyes daring them to argue. When they don’t, he smiles shyly and says, “Don’t wait up.”

“Justin!” Lindsay calls out, getting up from her chair and walking to the door. “Take the car.” She hands him her keys. “Oh. And... don’t... don’t let him hurt you.”

Justin’s eyebrows raise and he smiles. “I won’t.”

The pickings are anything but slim at Babylon and yet Brian’s standing there more indecisive than ever. Not that he’s not horny. Because he is. His dick is causing his pants to tent from the strain, but nothing’s really sparking his interest. Nothing, that is, except his hot make-out session with Justin.

“Fuck,” he admonishes himself. His dick is pulsating and he bites his lip until there’s blood in his mouth.

“Need some help with that?” A voice asks him. An older man, about thirty-five, is grinning at him, licking his lips and lifting his eyebrows suggestively. Brian eyes him, a quick up-down, and then grins back. They don’t say a word as Brian leads them to the back room, but the man makes a noise of disapproval when Brian stops abruptly.

“Maybe we should go to my place,” Brian says to the man. When the man opens his mouth to protest, Brian narrows his eyes and deepens his voice. “I think it’s gonna take a while.”

“Just point the way.”

Brian finds it more annoying than sexy, the way the man is kissing his neck. He can’t punch in the code to the entrance hall with the guy’s large body blocking his view and confining his arms.

“Can’t you stop it for just a minute?” Brian asks sharply, pulling away from the man’s grasp.

"I can't keep my hands off you," the man whines, leaning in again. "You're so fucking hot."

Brian manages to punch the correct code in and the door buzzes open. "Thank God," he mutters, grabbing the guy by his belt and dragging him into the building.

"Let's just take the stairs," the man groans into Brian's neck. "It'll be quicker."

They climb up the stairs, their breathing heavy and uneven. As they round the corner, Brian realizes how tired he is. It's been a long day, he sighs to himself. He looks up and sees that there's someone sitting in front of his door, his knees tucked under his chin and his arms wrapped around his legs. It's Justin, who's smile falters when he sees that Brian isn't alone. And it's just gotten longer.

Chapter Ten

It didn't go as Brian expects. Instead of a huge fallout, Justin merely flashes Brian and his guest a shy smile, apologizes for interrupting, and leaves. Brian stands there, confused, while the man he's brought home with him asks annoyingly personal questions.

"Do you want me to fuck you or what?" Brian asks the man grumpily as he holds the loft door open for him.

The man can't decide. He keeps jetting glances between Brian and the direction Justin left moments before. The man's been around the block many times, he understands the forlorn look Justin gave Brian right before he exited. And he understands, even more, the lost confusion etched in Brian's features.

"Yeah," The guy says slowly, stuffing his hands awkwardly in his pocket. "Yeah, I want you to fuck me. But, uh... don't you think you should be going after the kid?"

"What?" Brian's voice bounces off the hall walls, repeating the word over and over. Emphasizing Brian's fear.

"I mean... uh... it's not really my place to say anything, but--"

"You're right, it's not," Brian snarls. They stare each other down and then Brian gives up with a long sigh. He shakes his head and shuts the loft door again, locking it before saying, "Come on. I'll give you a ride back to Liberty."

The man smiles softly. "Atta boy."

Justin doesn't go home. How can he, when everyone expects him to be with Brian doing... God knows what. What does he expect from Brian? Anything? Everything?

Nothing?

No. Justin shakes his head, his hands rhythmlessly strum against the steering wheel. He doesn't expect nothing. Not after a kiss like that.

He licks his lips and imagines them still red, still bruised. Still crushed against Brian's.

"Fuck," he says out loud, turning a sharp right. He stops in front of a nice apartment complex.

It's only one-forty, Justin thinks, getting out of his car and quietly slamming his door. Maybe she's still awake. The gravel under his feet crunch loudly and makes him slow his speed. This neighborhood is so...

Perfect.

All the apartments have names on the doors. Smith. Hines. Armstrong. The flower beds are creative and the lawns, impeccable. He wonders how anyone can live such boring lives.

His finger pauses over the door bell, then he presses it. Waiting. Waiting. He presses again and the porch light flips on, followed, quickly, by a half-asleep Daphne.

“Justin?” She squints. “What the... it’s two in the morning,” she says, stepping aside to let her friend in.

“Nah. Only one-forty four,” he grins.

“Is everyone okay? Is it Lindsay? Your mom?”

“No. Nothing like... that.” They stand together in Daphne’s living room. He feels weighted under her open gaze. “Aren’t you gonna offer me tea or something?”

She grins, “You want tea?”

“No. Not really.” They settle on the couch, wrapping a blanket around each other. Daphne picks up the remote and turns the television on out of habit. When they were younger and needed to talk, they’d keep the television on as a distraction.

“So...” She trails off, waiting for him to start. When he doesn’t respond, she asks, “It’s about Brian, right?”

Justin nods his head slowly. “Yeah.”

“You love him, right?”

“I...” He trails off, staring blankly at the commercial for some waxing product. “I don’t know if it’s love. I just... I like him... lots. God, Daph. I really fucking like him.”

“Does he like you?” Her mind is flowing with the possibility of real romance for her best friend.

“Yeah,” he all but whispers. “Probably. At least, I thought so.”

“Thought? As in... used to?”

“Well, he came to the house tonight. We kissed.” He looks up and grins, flashing her one of his exquisite smiles. “It was hot. But then Linds... God, she made such a big deal out of it. He left. And I became impatient, so I went to his place and...” He doesn’t continue, the edges of his mouth dipping into a small frown.

“He was there with someone else?” Daphne asks, finishing his story for him.

“Yeah. He wasn’t at the loft, so I waited. He came home with this guy. You know, tall and handsome. So... different than me. I felt bad. For putting him on the spot. For... I don’t know, expecting something, I guess.”

“Expecting what?”

“Anything.”

Daphne studies Justin and then sighs. “Expecting romance?”

“A little,” he admits, flattening the blanket nervously. “But I shouldn’t,” he explains quickly. “I mean, everyone told me not to.”

Daphne smiles and scoots a little closer to Justin. "Ah, Just. That's the way it works."

"It?"

"Love. Romance. It's what you want, you know, deep down. You want to be loved the way you're supposed to be loved."

"That kind of love, Daphne, the kind of love we read about, that's not the kind of love I can have."

"What not?" Daphne asks, frowning.

"I'm... well, I'm a fag, Daphne."

"So?" She pulls away to look at him more closely. "We used to talk about our Prince Charming all the time in high school."

A shadow passes over Justin's face. "Yeah, that was before... Stuff like that, they sort of ruin life for you. I guess."

"They ruin life for you or are supposed to?" Daphne asks, scooting closer to Justin and raking her fingers in his hair. "You need to get a haircut."

Justin leans back into her touch. "I kinda wanted to grow it out," he purrs. She makes a disgusted face and he laughs. "Not like... long, idiot. Just... longer."

"That'd look nice." She strokes Justin's hair for a couple minutes and when she sees Justin relax completely, she says, "I think you need to just lay out everything on the table for Brian. Tell him what it is you want, what it is you need, what it is you'd like... What it is you don't want, need, like... And let him decide if he's up for the challenge."

Justin snorts. "I know he isn't up for it. No one is. I'm going to be a bachelor for the rest of my life. Hey, Daph? Marry me."

Daphne erupts in a fit of giggles. "Sure, lemme just wake up Richard and tell him we're getting a divorce." They sit in silence, smiling at their joke until Daphne continues. "I don't really think it's fair that everyone's making Brian's decisions for him. Lindsay, his friends... even you. Just let him choose. Where's the harm in that?"

Shrugging his shoulders, Justin yawns. "I guess I'm afraid."

"Of?"

"I'm afraid that if I give him the choice, he won't choose me."

"But at least you know. And at least you tried. I hate how passive you've become, Justin. I don't mean... wimpy or anything... I mean... apathetic. Yeah. Apathetic. You've become so apathetic. Especially when it comes to guys. I want to see the Justin who goes after what he wants. Who won't take no for an answer. Who'll try, fail, and try again. That's the Justin I love. And that's the Justin Brian will love, too. I don't know him well at all, but from what I've gathered, Brian likes people who take charge of their lives. I think that's why he respects you. 'Cause, even after all the shit you've been through, you're still up and surviving each day. He's a survivor, too. I know it."

"God, Daph. This is beginning to sound like a Lifetime original."

"It's two in the morning and my best friend's over, whining 'cause he's too scared to go for what he wants; what he knows he can get."

Justin looks at her out of the corner of his eyes. "You really think I can get him?"

"Hell yeah."

“Even though he doesn’t do boyfriends or... love?”

“Yep.”

“But--”

“Look, Justin. Is he worth it?”

“Worth what?”

“Everything.”

Justin sighs and leans back against the couch, kicking his feet to rest on her coffee table. “Yeah. I think so. I mean, I hope so. ‘Cause I so don’t want to repeat any of my past relationships. I’m ready for a change. Something different. Something better.”

“Then get out of my fucking apartment and go back to his place. Just... do it.”

Snorting, Justin stands up. “You’ve been watching too much TV.”

“Are you leaving?”

Justin walks over to her door. “Yeah. I have... some thinking to do.” He kisses her cheek affectionately. “Thanks.”

“I love you, Justin.” She stands in the doorway of her apartment until he’s turned the corner, a slight smile playing on her lips.

“Is Michael home?” Brian asks sheepishly, sticking his head into the small apartment and looking around. The kitchen light is the only one on, illuminating a pile of papers and books on the table.

“You do realize it’s two in the morning?” Ben asks.

“So... he’s sleeping?” The sound of defeat in Brian’s voice makes Ben sigh. He opens the door in invitation to Brian, who nervously enters the apartment.

Ben locks the door behind them. “I can use a break. C'm'n. I'll make some coffee. Decaf, though. It's too late for regular.”

“Yeah,” Brian follows him into the kitchen. “Thanks.” He sits down on a chair and begins to leaf through the papers on the table. “This for your class?”

Ben starts the coffee and joins Brian at the table. “Yes. I think they’ve stopped teaching grammar to students. I’m getting a headache from trying to figure out where one sentence ends and another begins. I’m glad you stopped by.” Brian looks away, staring into space and Ben can’t help but ask, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” He picks up one of the papers and begins to read it. Soon, the coffee is done brewing and they’re laughing together at one student’s poor attempt at a self-reflective essay.

Ben places two mugs on the table and they both stir milk and sugar absentmindedly into their coffee. “So...” Ben trails off, cautious to start anything.

Brian brings the mug to his lips, gently blowing off the steam. "I just needed to... talk to Mikey," Brian tells Ben, taking a sip.

"Want me to wake him up?" Ben asks, setting down his cup and getting ready to stand up. Brian reaches out a hand to stop him. "Well... I'm here... If you need to talk to someone..."

Brian rolls his eyes dramatically and picks up one of the papers again. Ben watches him momentarily and then begins to read a different essay.

Half an hour later, the coffee is gone and Brian's standing, stretching out the kinks in his body. "God. I'm so glad I'm not a teacher," he tells Ben, picking up their mugs and placing them in the sink. The warm water runs off his hands soothingly and he wants to make it hotter.

"Brian..." Brian turns around to look at Ben, who's gathering all the papers and piling them neatly into a folder. He purposely doesn't look at Brian as he continues. "What's going on? You seem so... subdued, I guess."

Heaving a sigh, Brian turns around, resting against the back of the sink. "There's no fooling you, Professor." He smirks and then looks down at his wet hands, wiping them softly against his pants.

"Well?" Ben asks abruptly, folding his arms across the chest in a very Michael-esque manner. Brian can't help but smile. "What?" Ben's suddenly self-conscious.

"When did you know? Was it like... boom?" Brian shifts uncomfortably on his feet.

"When did I know wha--" But Ben cuts himself up. He tries not to react openly. Instead, he sits back down and gestures to the other chair. Reluctantly, Brian joins him at the table, determined to keep his distance and remain stoic. "I knew I wanted him, right from the beginning," Ben starts slowly. "It was like 'boom,' but it wasn't sure if it was love. Not until later. Not until he gave his little speech in my class and blew me out of the water with his integrity and honesty. That's when I knew I loved him. But, physically, yeah, I wanted him. Right away. I felt... I was struck."

Brian's eyebrows crinkle together. "I could never think of Michael that way."

"I know," Ben reaches out to pat Brian's hand. "And I thank you for that. Because if you did, even remotely, there would never be a chance for he and I. It'd be all you."

Brian nods curtly.

"Was it like... 'boom' for you?" Ben asks him timidly, staring openly at Brian, who looks like he's ready to run. "It's okay. You don't have to say it. He's... sweet. And even I can't deny that he's good looking." Brian glares at him and Ben laughs. "But he'd have to be, to get your attention. I think that you should do what you need to do. Aren't you always saying 'no regrets'? I think if you don't do this, you'll regret it."

"Do what, exactly?"

Ben pulls his lips into his mouth nervously. "I... I don't really know. That's up to you."

Brian stares hungrily at Ben, as if Ben can give him all the answers.

"I can't tell you what to do. Just... be yourself..."

Brian smirks. "Sounds like some bullshit you'd find in Teen People."

"Well, the best advice is usually the simplest. You should go home and think about what you want."

Brian nods slowly and then gets up. "Thanks," he tells Ben softly before heading to the door.

“Brian,” Ben stops him. “Just one more thing. If you don’t... feel... anything for him, don’t bother. It’d cause too much of a mess within our little family.”

Brian doesn’t react, just nods quickly and heads down the hall, Ben trailing him with his eyes until he’s out of sight. “Good luck!” He calls out, but closes the door before a neighbor can stick out her head to complain about the noise.

Justin circles Brian’s block for a couple minutes, stalling in front of the building, then peeling out, pressing the gas so quickly it grinds him into his seat. He stares up at Brian’s blackened windows, squinting to find movement. Nothing.

He suddenly gets a tingling at the base of his neck. Staaaallllkkkkkeerrrrrr, a voice in the back of his head whispers. He blushes. God, is this what it’s come to? Driving around some guys building in the middle of the night, in hopes of getting just a glimpse, a mere glimpse, of him.

No.

Justin shakes his head and presses a hand to his eyes. God, no. Hell no is he going to do this. Resolved, Justin doesn’t even pause as he once again passes the front of the building. Instead, he heads down to Liberty. Glancing at the clock on his dashboard, he notices that it’s well past three-thirty. It should still be thumping. He won’t have to wallow in his pathetic misery alone.

He decides on Woody’s. He needs a drink. And to think. Think about what Daphne said. Think about Brian.

Think about what he wants.

He orders a whisky on the rocks, lights up a cigarette, and thinks.

But of course, this hurts his brain. He doesn’t want to have to think. He’s thought all his life. He just wants someone to tell him what to do. To tell him what he wants and show him how to get it. He wants easy. All he’s ever had is hard.

Not that hard isn’t good, he grins, looking at the sexy bartender. But that’s not what he really wants.

So, okay, yeah. He knows what he wants.

Huffing to himself, Justin brings his glass to his lips. The ice clinks loudly as he empties the contents. He holds his hand out, signaling to the bartender. Just one more. Then he’ll lick his wounds and go back to Linds’. If he does it right, they won’t even know he came home in the middle of the night.

Shaking his head, Justin mentally kicks himself. He’s acting like he’s been dumped. Thanking the bartender, Justin places his drink on the small cocktail napkin in front of him. It’s wet and already ripping. Cheap.

Justin dips his index finger and runs it along the edge of his glass, hoping to make that eery wailing that comes from only really fine crystal. Instead, it just sounds like something skidding ; like wet rubber. Nowhere near the music he wants to hear.

“You think they’d use anything other than cheap glass here, Justin?” A now familiar voice asks him. Justin doesn’t even have to look to know that Brian has occupied the stool next to him, their bodies dangerously close.

“I’ve never made that noise before,” Justin explains, once again wetting his finger in preparation for his musical genius.

Brian covers Justin's hand with his own. "Spare us, please. It's late." Justin can hear the teasing in his voice and doesn't take offense. He watches curiously as Brian leans over the bar, using his long arms to reach for something unseen. Sitting back on his stool, looking immensely proud of himself, Brian grins at Justin and holds out something metallic. Justin stares at the spoon in wonder.

"It's for you," Brian tells him, sighing when Justin's eyes cloud over in confusion. "It's for to make music with," Brian's voice takes on a childlike sarcasm. Finally frustrated, Brian places the spoon next to Justin's glass and taps gently. A beautifully hallow sound whispers across the bar, almost muffled by the noises around them.

Brian watches, fascinated, as Justin's eyes fill with awe. He beams at Brian, grabbing the spoon and tapping earnestly.

"How many of those have you had?" Brian asks, nodding to the drink.

"This is my second." Justin taps a beat Brian thinks he recognizes. "Do you play an instrument?" Justin asks, looking up finally.

"Uh... I was taught the harmonica when I was really young. And can pluck out some shit on the piano. My mom used to make me take lessons at church. I've never really tried to be good at any of it."

"Sounds better than anything I can do."

Brian pulls out a cigarette, occupying himself.

"I went to Daphne's tonight," Justin explains, stilling his movements.

"Oh?"

"Yeah. After I left your place."

"Bet she wasn't too happy about that."

Shrugging, Justin resumes his tapping. "She's used to it. Besides, I really needed to talk to her."

Brian's hand pauses before he places his cigarette to his lips. "Oh? About..."

"You, actually," Justin smiles up at him unashamedly.

"I see." Brian tries to remain calm, but Justin notices the way his throat moves as he swallows hard.

"I just needed some friendly advice, is all. Don't worry about it." Justin pats his shoulder delicately, the spoon rutting against his neck. Justin doesn't remove his hand when he says, "It's too early for all this, huh?" He sighs.

Brian turns to Justin, his mind on overload from Justin's hand on his shoulder. "For what?" He asks, hoping his voice doesn't sound as desperate as he feels.

"All this drama, I guess. I'm making a big deal out of what will probably turn out to be nothing. Daph said I should tell you what I expect. But how can I do that when I'm not even sure what it is I want from you. God, I don't even know how I feel about you. I mean, I think I know, but..." He takes the spoon and hits himself hard on the forehead. "Stupid. It's too soon!"

Brian yanks the spoon out of Justin's hand, gently turning Justin's head to face him, and starts to caress the spot Justin attacked. "I talked to Ben tonight. He said... He said for him, with Michael, it was boom."

"Boom?" Justin's voice cracks, staring wildly into Brian's eyes, trying to find... something.

“Yeah.”

“Yeah?” Justin leans forward, his lips so close to Brian’s. “Boom?” He closes the distance and kisses Brian lightly. Pulling away, Justin smiles softly. “Boom,” he repeats, then grabs Brian’s shoulders and starts an open mouthed kiss. It doesn’t take long for Brian to return the kiss.

Brian wraps his arms around Justin’s torso and tugs until Justin’s off the stool, standing in between his legs. Brian lifts his feet slightly and, using his ankles, locks Justin into place.

It’s only when they start moaning frantically does Justin pull away. He studies Brian’s flushed cheeks, dark eyes, glistening mouth, and heaving chest and decides, right there, what he wants.

He wants it all.

And he wants it with Brian.

But he already knew this, really, from the moment he saw Brian dancing at Babylon. He just needed the courage to admit it. And having Brian here, in his arms, gives him that. He thinks that with Brian, he can accomplish anything. No one’s ever made Justin feel that way before.

Justin can get used to feeling this way.

Happy.

And... in love?

Chapter Eleven

The first thing Brian thinks when he wakes up is that his arm has fallen completely off. He tries to move it, but only succeeds in flailing his wrist around, wiggling his fingers uselessly. His eyes open as he registers this difference and glances at the offending limb only to find a sleeping blond weighing it down.

He’s momentarily confused. And frightened. He wracks his brain and then... smiles.

A wide, unashamed smile.

He tries, once again, to move his arm. Justin lets out a small groan as he feels the muscles of the arm under his body flex and shift. Instead of moving away, Justin rolls over and covers half of Brian’s body with his warmth. He smiles sleepily, never opening his eyes and wraps his arms around Brian’s naked torso.

The feel of skin alerts his senses and suddenly, his eyes are wide open, looking around the room in a uncomfortable daze. His eyes land on Brian, who watches his pupils adjust as Justin becomes more aware of his surroundings.

Justin’s hair is standing every which way, puffing out horridly in the back and pressed flat near his ears. Brian brings a hand up to his head and tries, hopelessly, to flatten it. “You need a haircut,” Brian repeats Daphne’s words from last night.

Justin shakes his head. “I’m growing it out.”

Brian doesn’t seem to mind this idea. He continues playing with Justin’s hair, giving up on flattening it and instead, running his hands through the small, loose knots, feathering it more. Justin moans and opens his lips slightly. “God, I love it when people play with my hair,” he says huskily, smiling up at Brian.

Giving Justin’s hair one final tug, Brian lifts his body, forcing Justin to sit up quickly. “Oh God!” Justin moans, clutching the sides of his head. “The room!” He gasps. “It’s... spinning. Oh. Make it stop, please!”

Brian barks out a laugh. "That's what you get for insisting that you can drink me under the table, Sunshine."

Justin puts a finger to his lips. "Shhhh. Morning time is quiet time."

Brian snorts. "You're such a baby," he teases, lightly slapping Justin's back before sliding off the bed.

"Where are you going?" Justin asks, forgetting his dizziness.

"To take a shower. The munchers are having that brunch today, remember? We've got to be there looking shiny and new."

"Can I..." Justin starts to ask, but shakes his head and gropes for the covers, pulling them over himself as his cheeks flush red.

"What is it?" Brian asks. He looks at Justin closely and can't help but smile. From Justin's reaction alone, Brian knows what Justin wants. "Want to join me?" Justin's off the bed and next to him before Brian even blinks. Laughing, Brian pushes Justin towards the bathroom, saying, "I guess that's a yes."

In the shower, Brian watches greedily as Justin turns away from him, letting the water cascade down his pale, naked body. His eyes focus on Justin's slim waist, surprisingly muscular legs, and... He feels his body react.

Last night they were too inebriated to have sex, but this morning... He reaches out for Justin, enveloping him in his long arms, pressing his body tightly against Justin's. Justin turns his head to look at Brian, his eyes full of questions. Brian licks his lips and smirks, causing Justin to blush. He reaches down and slowly ascends his hand when Justin steps away. They stand on opposite sides of the stall, Brian confused and Justin...

Scared.

Brian recognizes that look. It resembles something he's seen on his own face many times before. Something hidden, dark, and private.

"Justin..." Brian begins, taking a small step toward him.

Justin shakes his head and offers a smile. "It's just that... I wasn't lying when I said that I haven't bottomed in a long time. I haven't."

Brian tilts his head. "Well, I... uh... I don't bottom." He sighs, "Well... this is gonna... be problematic."

"I'm not ready," Justin whispers, squinting his eyes and scrunching his nose. He turns away from Brian and slumps his shoulders in defeat. "It's okay," he tells the man, stepping toward the shower door. "I'll leave."

"What?" Brian's lost. "No. We don't have to... fuck..." This isn't what he wants. Not at all and it makes him frown deeply.

"It's okay, Brian. I guess, fundamentally, we're just too different."

"You think that I'd insist on fucking you even though you've said no? Is that what you would do if I said no? Fuck me anyway?"

"No," Justin's voice raises. "No. Of course not."

The sound of the water hitting the tile floor almost muffles Brian's whispered, "Then we're not that different from one another."

Justin's eyes narrow as he regards Brian with interest. "Brian?" He asks, pausing until Brian's looking at him. "What is it you want?"

"From what?" Brian responds hoarsely, clearing his throat and nervously clenching-unclenching his fists.

"From this, I guess. From... from me."

Brian finally meets Justin's eyes. He opens his mouth and then shuts it, shaking his head from side to side. Justin can see the wheels turning. "No one's..." Brian pauses, trying to find the right words. "No one's ever asked me that before. Usually it's... what they want; what they need. I've never... never really thought about what I want." He swallows hard. "I've never really thought about it before."

Justin lets him stand there in silence for a minute before he asks, "Well, why'd you take me here last night and not home?"

Grinning, Brian says, "'Cause the munchers would've flipped if I dropped you on their doorstep drunk and singing show tunes."

"I was not singing show tunes."

Brian lifts an eyebrow and throws Justin a half-smile. "You're right. I wouldn't exactly call what you were doing last night singing either."

The stare at each other and then start giggling. The water becomes cold and they both are suddenly aware of their surroundings. Laughing, they jump out of the shower and into warm towels.

"That's one of the most serious conversations I've ever had in a shower before," Brian tells Justin, his voice muffled as he leans over to dry his hair.

Justin watches the muscles on Brian's back move as he towels his hair. Smiling wryly, Justin walks up to Brian, placing a hand on his bent back and starts caressing the skin. Brian's movements still and slowly, he stands up, turning around to face Justin. "What?" He asks cautiously.

Shaking his head, Justin smiles. "You're... amazing."

"I know," Brian leans down and kisses Justin's cheek, turning away quickly. He's not about to admit it, but he's embarrassed.

Justin follows him into the bedroom. He stares openly at Brian's naked body. "You know..." Justin says, his voice low. Brian's curious eyes meet his own. "Just 'cause I'm not ready to let you fuck me doesn't mean I can't blow you." Justin has to stifle a giggle as Brian's eyes widen and he licks his lips expectantly. "How does that sound?" He asks, breathing warm air onto Brian's face.

Looking down at his growing cock, Brian grins and raises his arms in offering. "That sounds fabulous."

But right as Justin slides down to his knees, a loud bang resounds through the loft. "Brian?" A voice calls out. The two look at each other and, sighing, Justin gathers his clothing and shuts the bathroom door behind him.

To his credit, Michael does ring. He waits, impatiently, for a couple seconds and when he doesn't get a response, huffs indignantly and presses the code. The door buzzes open and he avoids the elevator, taking the stairs two at a time. He has his key out before he even reaches the top step, deciding not to knock and instead, unlocks the loft door and walks right in.

He's been doing it for years.

Brian hurries out of the bedroom, hair still wet from his shower, towel secure around his waist. "Michael," he sputters. "What the fuck?"

Michael rushes over to him, carefully inspecting him. "Ben said you needed to talk to me last night. God, I was so pissed that he didn't wake me."

Brian shrugs and glances toward his bedroom. "That's okay. Ben helped out. Look, Mikey," he begins, placing an arm around Michael's shoulder. "Now isn't such a good time."

"But Brian," Michael argues, moving away from Brian's grasp. "You're the one who came to me, remember? Since I'm here, we might as well go to the munchers together."

Brian shakes his head slowly. "No. I'll leave later."

Curious, Michael folds his hands on his hips and stares intently. "What the fuck's going on?" A noise comes from the bedroom and Michael smiles. "Oh. I get it. Well, I'll wait 'til you dispose of your trick. Don't worry about that. I don't mind."

Brian looks trapped. He brings his hands up to his hair and weaves them through a few times before he shakes his head. "No. That's not gonna happen this time, Mikey. Just go. I'll come over later."

Michael's face falls, a deep frown immediately replaces his smile. "What do you mean?"

"I'll talk to you about it late--" But Michael's already heading over to the bedroom, looking in.

"Is he hot?"

Brian lets out a small chuckle. "Yeah. You could say that."

Lifting a brow, Michael walks back to Brian. "Have fun last night?" He asks, noticing the carefree smile playing on Brian's lips. "He musta been something special."

"Yeah. He is."

Michael frowns at Brian's word choice. He notices the bathroom door and a shadow underneath it. "Are you sure you don't want me to wait?" Michael asks, squinting, as if he can make out the shadow's form.

"Yeah." Brian watches the door with Michael for a moment, seeming both eager and uncertain. "Thanks for dropping by, Mikey," Brian tells Michael, ushering him, finally, to the front door. "Tell the girls I'll be there as soon as possible."

"But--"

Brian leans in and kisses Michael's cheek, grinning. "You're a great friend, you know that?" He sounds, well, sincere and that causes Michael to smile broadly and blush happily. "The best, actually. You're... my best friend."

Michael's smile falters. He glances again at the bathroom door then back to Brian. "You're my... best friend, too."

They leave it at that. Michael leans against the loft door for a moment, listening to the muffled silence from inside before pushing off and pressing the button for the lift. Perhaps he's hoping that Brian will change his mind. Or perhaps he's just waiting to see this trick that Brian seems so... enamored with.

Snorting to himself, Michael walks into the lift and shakes his head. He can't wait to tell the gang about this.

Brian, letting a trick spend the night and looking so happy about it? Impossible. Yet, he saw it with his own two eyes. Hell, he felt it. It radiated off of Brian, pulsating. It rubs off on him, because Michael's now humming a mindless tune.

He stops and thinks briefly of Justin.

"Poor kid," he mutters, climbing into his car. He wonders how Justin will handle this and is, for a moment, sad. For Justin. Because he's had first hand experience with Brian's never-gonna-happen flirtation. He knows that feeling of hope--desperate and useless.

Ever since Justin's become so chummy with Brian, he's felt extreme dislike for the man. Not that he hates him. No, Michael's not the type of person that can ever truly hate another human being. But, he dislikes the potential of Justin. He still remembers Brian talking so... lovingly about Justin. Justin being smart and funny and... hot. Well, Brian's never actually said that, but Michael's not blind. Justin's very good-looking. He can't imagine how many gym hours it'd take him to get an ass even close to Justin's pert bubble butt.

It's that they're friends. Michael would rather them lovers than friends. But...

He shakes his head. Justin will obviously be put on the back burner now that Brian's found someone.

God, that sounds so weird.

He wonders how long it will last.

Michael's hand pauses above his ignition. He feels his heart tug, but then he thinks of Ben and smiles. He unrolls his window and stares up at Brian's loft before finally starting his car and driving away.

"Where's Sunshine?" Is the first thing out of Debbie's mouth as they all sit around the living room, cocktails in hand.

Lindsay growls something undetectable, but calms down when Melanie places a hand around her waist.

"He went out last night. Never came home," she tells them. Emmett opens his mouth to say something, but is shot down by the look Melanie gives him. "We're not worried, though. We know where he is."

Debbie, surprisingly, leaves it at that.

Brian saunters in only moments after they all find seats at the dining room table, followed shortly by Justin.

"Don't you two know how to arrive anywhere on time?" Mel asks, shaking her head as she straps Gus into his high chair.

"We're here," Brian explains, plopping down on a seat next to his son. "Isn't that what matters?"

Melanie rolls her eyes as she pushes Gus in. "I sure hope that Gus doesn't take after you."

"Be lucky if he does," Brian smiles, making a ridiculous face at Gus, who giggles relentlessly. "I'm perfect."

Debbie snorts along with Melanie.

"Hey, Boy Wonder," Michael says. "Where'd you go last night? Your mothers were worried about you."

Justin's face pales for all of two seconds. Long enough to catch Debbie's attention, who, turning away from her conversation with Ted, asks, "Yeah. The girls said you didn't come home."

The table quiets as they watch Justin's face go from abnormally pale to obnoxiously pink. "I was... at a friend's," he mutters, twisting his napkin in his lap, refusing to look up.

The gang tease him a bit. "Oooh, a boyfriend" and "Did you get some?" and "What's his name?" But they soon tire of Justin's refusal to get riled up.

Eventually, Michael turns to Brian and gives him the fourth degree about the trick that wasn't kicked out. Brian thwarts their high-pitched squeals and shakes his head ruefully, never divulging a thing.

Chapter Twelve

Brian remembers Justin telling him once that he comes with baggage. And Brian's okay with this. Hell, everyone comes with baggage; his own life hasn't been a walk in the park. It's just that he never realizes how much baggage Justin comes with until he tries to fuck him.

It happens once. A couple weeks after the brunch. He's tired of waiting and confused by the signals Justin keeps giving him. So, he throws caution to the wind and is shot down.

Yes, he, Brian Kinney, is rejected.

And it pisses him off, still! Three days later. He's heard neither hide nor hair from Justin and at first, he's glad. Damn right the kid better be laying low. But as the hours tick by, as his loft becomes unbearably lonely, he starts regretting his actions.

This whole relationship thing... it's a bad idea. He knows this now. He knew it from their first kiss. No, not the soft, hesitant one on the muncher's porch. The heated, crazy, hash-filled one they shared a couple weeks later. Brian can still recall Justin's eagerness to share. His heat, his mouth, his tongue, his saliva, his... body.

Throwing his pen across his office, Brian mutters a string of explicatives.

No! Not his body. Anything but that!

Brian's pants tighten just thinking about Justin's lithe body, that's how bad he's got it for him. And he knows what a fucking sex-kitten Justin is. The way he talks about sex! The way... the way he sucks Brian's cock. Fuck. That... haste to taste and touch and lick and be. In all his experiences, Brian has never been affected by a blow job as much as he has by one of Justin's.

He bends over to pick up his pen.

...Bending over...

He can easily do it. He can. Brian knows that they can correct the whole intercourse issue by a simple "fuck me, Justin." But he won't. Not after all those years; all those years as the predatory top. As the Stud of Liberty Avenue. As Brian fucking Kinney. He's worked hard to be the top he is today. He could... God, he could fucking rock Justin's fucking world if the kid would only let him!

"Fucking shit!" He bellows, standing up straight and once again tossing his pen across the room.

He needs to get laid so bad that it hurts. Literally. The strain in his crotch is driving him insane. But, he's already had two tricks today and he still feels unsatisfied. The first trick's body was disappointment enough. It was so unlike Justin's. He could hardly keep his erection. He didn't even bother undressing the second trick.

Brian walks over to his desk and tentatively pick up his phone to dial a newly memorized number. It rings, over and over, until the voicemail picks up. Justin's surprisingly deep voice whispers in his ear to leave a message, but he doesn't. He can't. Brian Kinney doesn't beg.

Grabbing his wallet, Brian marches out of his office. "I'm going for lunch!" He yells over his shoulder before stomping into the elevator and angrily presses a button, mashing it multiple times. The two women in the elevator huddle in the corner together, glancing, half in terror, half in wonder, at Brian.

He doesn't know why he chooses the diner--

Okay, yes, he does know. It's because he has a small glimmer of hope that he'll see Justin there. And that Justin will see the error of his ways and cry out for Brian to take him and fuck him backwards to next thursday and then flip him over and do it again.

That's why he chooses the diner. He can feel his face melt when he looks around to find the diner decently crowded, but void of said blond.

"Brian?" He looks up to find Daphne, a frown stenciling worry lines around her mouth.

He offers her a sideways grin and motions for her to join him. She slides in wearily and he knows, at that moment, that Justin has talked to her.

"So, I made a mistake," Brian mumbles after ordering. He can't take anymore of Daphne staring at him. "So sue me."

"A big mistake," she agrees.

He wishes he ordered some coffee, at least it would give him something to fiddle with as he remains under Daphne's angry scrutiny.

"But, goddamnit, I've waited a long time. I've been patient."

Huffing, Daphne leans back into the booth. "A few weeks isn't being patient--"

"It is for me!" He nearly yells. Half the diner hushes as they regard Brian and Daphne with excited curiousness.

Their sandwiches arrive and they both are grateful for the distractions. Brian's mood has gone from angry to ashamed in less than five minutes. It's a new record for him, he thinks. The being ashamed part, not the mood shift. He's always been a bit... bipolar. Lindsay accused him of this once in college, after he made fun of her shamelessly when they first met. "You're nothing but a bipolar faggot!" were her exact words. Brian knew that they'd be great friends.

"Besides," Daphne begins. He watches as she delicately cuts her sandwich into quarters. "It's not like you guys are monogamous. Why not just fuck someone else?"

Brian's eyebrows fly off his forehead when she says this. "What makes you think I haven't already?"

"Oh, I know you have."

He frowns.

"Look, Brian," Daphne says. She waits until he does, literally, look at her. "How much of his past has Justin told you?"

Shrugging, Brian replies, "A lot. I mean, enough. I don't know. I know about his childhood and his dad disowning him. I know about the bashing..."

Daphne nods and then corrects herself, "I meant about his past relationships."

Brian drops his sandwich back on his plate, picking up a napkin to wipe his hands. "I know that the few he's had were bad. I know that his last boyfriend hit him." This still angers him, because he knows what it's like to be in that sort of situation and feel helpless against the attacks. It's moments like those that aided in defining who he is today.

"Then you should know why it's so hard for Justin to bottom," Daphne says matter-of-factly.

"I just... I don't see why it's such a big deal."

Tilting her head and biting back a grin, Daphne asks, "Then why don't you bottom?"

How do you explain to a straight woman the dynamics of the top/bottom mentality? Instead, Brian grimaces and pretends that his sandwich is the most interesting specimen of food he's ever seen. Daphne shakes her head sadly and continues eating her own meal, only occasionally stopping to study Brian.

She watches a myriad of emotions cross his face. Justin's right: on the outside, Brian seems so reserved and stoic. It's all in the eyes.

"If you were just patient--"

"I've been patient enough," Brian bites out, immediately regretting his words.

Daphne sits up and glares at Brian. Dropping the last of her sandwich on her plate, she takes out a twenty and throws it on the table. Sliding out of the booth, Daphne stops only to turn to Brian and say, "I'm glad he didn't put out," she grinds the words bitterly. "You're not worth it." Shaking her head one last time, she walks away, waving casually at Debbie before leaving the diner.

Brian sinks into his seat. Justin was right, it's too early for all this drama. But, now--now it's too late to stop it. Shit! He's in shit creek.

"What is up with you guys lately?" Debbie demands, placing her hands on her hips, snapping her gum anxiously.

"What?" Brian isn't really in the mood to banter.

"First Sunshine comes in looking like someone walked all over his grave. And now you look 'bout ready to scream. Even that sweet girl, Daphne, seemed so--"

"Forget about it, Deb." Brian gets up, adding to Daphne's twenty. "Must be the weather. Keep the change."

"Hey!" Debbie calls out. She jogs up to him, a huge grin plasters her face. "How's your man?"

"What?"

"The trick that you didn't kick out? The one Michael was telling us about..."

Brian sucks in a breath, letting it out, he slowly says, "There's no one, Deb."

Justin's helping Melanie and Lindsay redecorate Gus' room. They were going to ask Brian, but seeing how down Justin's been the past few days, they changed their minds. Justin hasn't told them anything, but they know, when he's ready, he'll explain. At least, that's what they're hoping for. Sometimes, it's hard to tell with Justin. He'll open up about the oddest things. Yet, sometimes it's the simplest explanation that will have him pensive and resistant.

They're hoping that this whole Brian thing won't be one of those moments.

Lindsay stands back to watch Justin rip off the wallpaper boarder hastily. She watches how sloppy he's being, how imprecise and inartistic his hands are. "Jesus, Justin. Take the whole wall with you," she practically screeches as a piece of paint the size of her head drifts lazily to the floor.

Justin stops and sighs. He looks down at his angry cousin and says, "I'm sorry. I don't think I'm in the mood for this." He climbs down the ladder and wipes his hands on the tarp covering Gus' dresser. "My brain's all over the place today. Sorry."

"What's the matter, Justin?" Melanie asks softly before he can reach the door. He turns around, ready for a death match, but only confronts a look of genuine concern on her face.

Justin opens his mouth, seems to think the better of it, but then blurts out before he even has time to register what he's saying, "It's Brian."

Lindsay, who's halfway up the ladder, practically jumps off, throwing the tool she has in her hand to the floor. "I knew it! Mother fucker! I'm going to kill him." She makes her way to the door, when Justin stops her.

"It's not really him, it's me, Linds. I swear. I'm the one not cut out for this. He's been trying."

"Why do I find that hard to believe?" She demands.

"Cause you know Brian. But, trust me on this one, this is all me."

"So, you're saying Brian had nothing to do with you behaving like a bumbling idiot the past couple days? That whatever problems you two are having is all your fault?"

"Well, no... Not entirely."

"I knew it and I'm gonna kill him!"

Justin rolls his eyes. "If you're going to behave like some deranged lunatic, then fine. But, shouldn't you hear all the facts first?"

Melanie snickers. "You think she's bad now, you should've seen her when she was pregnant."

"Oh, and you're one to talk!" Lindsay laughs.

Justin breaks the mood completely by saying, "I won't let him fuck me."

The two women turn their heads to stare openly at Justin. "What?" Melanie practically whispers.

"He wants to, but I just can't seem to let go."

"Wait..." Lindsay's having a hard time understanding. "You mean... you've guys... It's been almost a month!"

"You know, Lindsay," Melanie starts. "Most people like to wait. To get to know each other before jumping into bed."

"Yeah, but this isn't 'most people.' This is Brian Kinney we're talking about. I can't believe he would agree to no sex."

Justin shrugs his shoulder and slumps down on Gus' bed. "I never told him no sex. I just... I asked him to wait to fuck me and he agreed is all."

“What?” Lindsay asks again. Her mind can’t seem to fit around the concept of Brian Kinney waiting for sex.

“But I blew it all when I sort of... pushed him away the other night.”

Lindsay watches the torment on Justin’s face and takes a deep breath before saying, “Justin...” Justin looks up. “If this is the only problem in your... relationship with... Brian... Then, I don’t know what the fuck you’re doing here. You should be there, working this out with him, before you lose him. I’ve known Brian a lot longer than I care to admit and he’s never, I repeat, never gone without sex.”

Shaking his head, Justin explains, “No. We’re not... monogamous or anything. I mean, he’s had sex since we’ve gotten together. Just... not with me.”

Lindsay laughs despite herself. “Duh. I mean, no offense, but I can’t imagine Brian ever being monogamous. Ever. Though, I can’t imagine Brian wasting his time with you if there’s no sex--”

“Lindsay!” Melanie admonishes. Turning to Justin, she tries to explain, “What Lindsay means is that it’s obvious Brian wants to be with you, otherwise he wouldn’t have even bothered. He’s a fuck and go kind of guy. So, the fact that you guys haven’t fucked and he’s still with you... Well, that’s really too much to grasp right now.”

Justin shakes his head. “But... what if it’s the fact that I won’t put out that’s keeping him here. What if, once I do let him fuck me, he moves on to bigger and better things.”

“I’ve never liked Brian, Justin,” Melanie explains. “But, I do know him. And I know he doesn’t play hard to get and he never goes after someone. He’s not the type of person who will wait around. If someone won’t fuck him, Brian will just move on to the next best thing, no questions asked. I think you’re placing too many of your past insecurities on Brian. Just... trust your intuition.”

Standing up, Justin asks, “Do you mind if I bail on you guys? I need to get out.” He doesn’t wait for an answer and walks out the room. They hear his bedroom door shut somewhere out in the hall.

Lindsay turns to Melanie, a huge grin plastered on her face. “God, do you know how much I love you?”

Justin watches Brian from the second floor of Babylon. It’s so much like that first night he saw Brian.

Justin can’t help but notice that Brian has yet to make a trip to the back room. He’s watched as potential tricks lean in, lick Brian’s neck, bite Brian’s lips, whisper naughty words into Brian’s ear, only to receive a curt shake of Brian’s head as an answer.

This time, though, his beer isn’t cold. It’s empty. He shakes the bottle, hoping the movement will cause some hidden liquor to appear, but the bottle remains empty. He sighs and places it on the floor next to his feet. The crouched position he’s in gives him a better view of Brian’s face.

Bored. He looks... bored. And for some secret, selfish reason this makes Justin really happy.

A pair of black tennis shoes knock his bottle. Startled, Justin falls on his ass. Looking up, Justin sees Michael, who holds out his hand to help Justin up. “Don’t you have anything better to do than watch Brian pick up guys?” He asks, reaching around to straighten Justin’s clothing.

“Don’t you,” Justin asks bitterly.

“Touché.” Justin moves away from him, but Michael stops him, holding out two beers. “Wait. I got you one. Thought we could have a drink together.”

Justin's suspicious and he lifts the bottle in the light, inspecting it.

"I'm not gonna poison you or anything, Boy Wonder. Here," he takes the bottle out of Justin's hands and opens it. "There ya go. See? It wasn't even opened."

Justin reluctantly accepts the beer, never once offering a word of thanks. They both stare down at Brian, watching as he dances and declines.

"What's up with him tonight?" Michael asks, gazing at his best friend in wonder. Justin merely shrugs and takes a huge sip of his beer. "Don't drink it too quickly. You don't want to be drunk before you've even danced with the man," Michael says softly, taking the half empty bottle out of Justin's hands.

Justin starts to nod, but then realizes what it is Michael said. "What?" He asks.

"It's you, isn't it? I get it."

"What?" The liquor is making Justin's brain fuzzy.

"You were the one at Brian's loft that day. You're the trick that didn't leave. I'm not stupid. I've seen the way you guys act with each other. I get it."

Justin swallows hard. "We... we weren't trying to hide it or anything..."

"No? Then what were you trying to do? Wait for the opportune moment?" Michael's voice is borderline mean. Taking a deep breath, Michael apologizes, saying, "No. I'm... sorry. It's just going to take a while for me to get used to you guys... being together or whatever. I thought you were an usurper."

Justin can't help but giggle at this. "What?" He asks, astonished.

Michael has the decency to blush. "Well, yeah. I mean, from the moment you guys met it was like... I don't know... an explosion..."

"Like... boom?" Justin helps.

"Yeah! Boom! That's a good word for it. It's like, I knew you guys were gonna be friends... if not something more. And that really pissed me off. 'Cause I'm Brian's best friend. Not some blond twink he met a few months ago."

"I could never take your place, Michael."

"I know that! God. I know. But, still... It's hard to watch your best friend, the man who's insisted ever since you've known him, that love is bullshit... that relationships don't work out... and here he is, falling for his friend's cousin with the cute bubble butt and troubled past."

"You think I have a cute bubble butt?" Justin teases Michael.

"Fuck off. You know what I mean. So, I've accepted it. I mean, first I had to figure it out. And then after that, I had to get used to it. So, don't fuck it up. I don't know what's going on between the two of you, but you'd better get that cute bubble butt down there and fuck him like there's no tomorrow."

"I would fuck him, if he'd let me."

Michael turns to Justin. "You know... Sometimes sacrifices have to be made. You should... you should..."

"What? Ask him to fuck me in the back room?"

"If that'll make both of you happy, then yes. Hell yeah." Michael pauses and follows Justin's longing gaze to Brian. "Can I ask you something?"

"You've already interfered this much."

"Have you guys fucked?"

Justin slams down his beer bottle so hard, Michael's surprised it doesn't break. "Why's it always about sex with you guys?"

"It's not. It's not. I was just wondering."

"Well, there's your answer."

They stand in uncomfortable silence, watching as Brian is tempted by a short brunette with a nipple ring. "I've never been fucked by Brian. I used to think that that's the one thing I wanted in life. So, now that I meet you, and you don't want Brian to fuck you... I can't help but think you're insane."

"I do."

"What?"

"I do want Brian to fuck me. God, Michael. I want it so bad. Sometimes, when I'm lying in my bed at night, alone and I'll think about him, you know? About his cock and my ass and... God, I get so fucking hard. Once won't just satisfy me. On nights like that, I just keep going. You can't even begin to imagine how much laundry I do." He pauses and they share similar grins. No, actually, Michael probably can imagine how much laundry he does. "But then... when we're together and he's touching me... At first I get so excited and then I start to think... God, what if history repeats itself? What if I give myself to this amazing man and... he hurts me?" The last few words are forced whispers and it takes a moment for Michael to register what Justin says.

Michael's eyes widen. "Look, Justin. I can't promise that Brian won't hurt you emotionally. He's... well, he hasn't had a lot of practice being in a relationship. None, actually. But, physically? Brian will never, never ever, hurt you. I can promise you that. He won't ever hurt you in a way that makes you bleed or bruise or break...physically."

"How do you know?"

"I would never be friends with someone like that!" Michael's breathing heavily and resists the urge to grab Justin and shake him as hard as he can.

Justin nods, taking in the sincerity of Michael's voice, the cracking of his words. He once again looks down at Brian, takes a deep breath, and pushes away from the railing.

Chapter Thirteen

Brian doesn't know how to dance, but at least he has rhythm. And sex appeal. What Brian lacks in talent he more than makes up for in attraction. At the bottom of the stairs, Justin has a clear view of Brian's backside. He sways more than dances, swiveling and pivoting his hips intoxicatingly. Justin is mesmerized by the way Brian's pants slide, ever so slowly, down Brian's waist. When Brian raises his arms, Justin can see a hint of flesh. And it's enough to drive him wild.

Justin licks his upper lip, tasting the salt of his sweat. He can't decide if it's the heat emanating off the grinding bodies that's making him sweat, or Brian's sexy swagger.

See? This is what he was talking about with Michael! He wants Brian so bad. So bad. What the fuck is his problem?

Well, his problems are too numerous to count. Too deep to erase. Too painful to forget.

Fuck. He's fucked up.

If only he can find a way to tell Brian just how fucked up he is without scaring the man off completely...

Brian turns profile to dance with the man next to him. Or, to grind with the man next to him. Justin can see the man's mouth drop open as Brian's constant pressure against his groin starts to affect him. Justin's own body begins to react and he's not even the one being teased.

Brian glances quickly in his direction before turning back to his dance partner.

Okay, so... maybe he is the one being teased.

After a while, Brian tires of his dance partner and moves away from him, closer to Justin, but he doesn't take the initiative to join him. Instead, he nods at him slightly, leaving the decision up to Justin.

And after the shit they went through a couple nights ago, it's no wonder.

Justin's face twists in embarrassment.

Taking a deep breath, Justin slides in front of Brian, taking in his rhythm and pace before joining him.

"I'm sorry," he blurts.

Brian looks down at Justin through his long eyelashes. "Sorry's bullshit."

Justin shrugs. "You're probably right. But I feel regret all the same."

Brian stops moving and opens his eyes wide enough for Justin to see that he's totally free of drugs. "No apologies." He lifts a hand and cups Justin's face. "No regrets."

Leaning into the touch, Justin can hardly whisper, "Ever?"

Shrugging, Brian removes his hand and sways his hips again. "I saw you talking to Mikey."

Justin steps closer and starts to dance, noticing how much of Brian's attention is focusing on the way his body is moving. "He's... on to us."

Brian glances up at the scaffolding. Michael's no longer there, but that doesn't mean he's not watching. "Hey," Brian says suddenly, placing his arms gingerly around Justin's shoulders. "This is the first time we've danced together. You're..." Brian eyes him up and down. "You're good."

Blushing, Justin gives the appropriate response. "S'are you."

"Yeah," Brian snorts. "Right." He pulls Justin a little bit closer to him. "I shouldn't have... pushed you so hard the other night."

Justin looks away.

"I mean, I know that when you're ready... I don't know what happened... I lost control..."

"It happens, Brian," Justin cuts him off, a bit uncomfortable with where this conversation's heading.

"Not to me. I never lose control. But around you, I can't even... Never mind."

Curious, Justin asks, "Around me you can't what?"

"Nothing," Brian looks... embarrassed. He tries to distract Justin by running his hands through his soft, blond hair.

Justin won't let it go. "You can't what?"

Brian looks around, to check if someone's listening is Justin's guess, before he leans forward. "Around you... I can't even see straight." Justin slows his dancing, trying to focus on Brian's words. "I saw you at Babylon that night and I was like... whoa. And then I met you at Linds' and you came outside with me and I was like... whoa. And then I went with you to the hospital and I was like... whoa. I didn't even know what that meant. Hell, I still don't. I just know that every time I'm around you... I'm like... whoa. I can't even really function properly. It's hard for me to focus sometimes on your words 'cause my mind is working a mile a minute... thinking about you and all the things I could do to you if you'd only let me. And then I feel really bad about that. But, fuck... never mind... I don't know what the fuck I'm talking about. This is all too new for me. I don't think I'm ever going to be good at this."

By now, Justin's stilled all his movement completely, instead, he's just staring up at Brian in wonder.

"See? Now you're thinking I'm insane. Fuck. I probably am. It's just that... I've never... I've never wanted someone as much as you." He sees Justin back away slightly. "I don't mean sexually," he insists, pulling Justin back to him. "I mean, well, yeah, hell yeah I want you sexually. Who wouldn't? But I mean... Do I really have to say this?" Brian sucks his lips into his mouth.

"It'll probably help," Justin whispers.

"I don't know what this means or anything, but it's like... I'm making accommodations for you. Not in a bad way, I guess. Just shit I've never imagined myself doing before you came around. Like... I went to the grocery store to get some fruit and I picked up a package of those fucking cracker things you like just 'cause you like them. And then I had to buy new sheets and I picked a color I thought you'd look good against. I don't know why I'm doing shit like that. Fuck." Brian looks away from Justin, lifting his arms off his shoulder and taking a step back. "I just thought you should know that it isn't only about wanting to fuck you. That isn't the only reason why I... like you."

Justin swallows once and then once more, licking his lips nervously. "You like me?" He asks shyly.

Nodding, Brian says, "Well, yeah."

"I see..." Justin trails off.

"Is there a problem?" Brian bites out. This is more than he's ever done for any man before and Justin isn't reacting the way he expects.

Justin's eyes are huge, staring at Brian, waiting for... waiting for what, neither one of them know. Brian tries to ignore the way Justin's body is shaking. It's not too noticeable, actually. It's so slight, that at first glance, Brian believes he imagines it.

"I fucked up again, huh?" Brian asks nervously.

"No." Brian has to lean forward to hear this. "I just... can't do this." Justin lifts his hand to his face and nervously tucks his hair behind his ears. He looks up at Brian with those huge blue eyes and smiles.

"Justin..." Brian begins, but is stopped by Justin's hand.

"This..." Justin starts to explain and Brian waits as patiently as he can for Justin to continue. "This... this is very hard for me. You don't understand."

"No. You're right. I don't. 'Cause I've seen you trick before. I've seen you fuck, Justin. It's not like you can't do it. And you've run after me multiple times, demanding that I give you my attention and my respect and... my time.

You've teased me on the dance floor, dancing seductively with other men until I want to rip my eyes out. You've licked my lips, pinched my nipples, and sucked my cock. You've... asked me to make decisions about us. Us. There's never been an Us, ever, where I'm concerned. And here you come, out of nowhere, and demand that there be an Us. So, I try. God, I fucking try. So hard. I woo you and kiss you and... play nice with you. I act like a fucking pussy for you. Like, some love-sick lesbo. I give you everything you ask and then you... you suddenly... don't want it? You're fucking right I don't understand."

Justin is drowning in Brian's words. "You're right," he says quickly. He opens his mouth to say something else, but someone pushes into him and he falls into Brian's arms. He can feel Brian's warm breath on his face, his strong hands around his body, and God, he's never wanted anything else as much as he wants this--this man.

"Come on," Brian tells him, standing him up before leading him off the dance floor. Brian takes Justin's slightly smaller hand in his own and walks them out of Babylon. They walk across the street and stop in front a lamp post. Justin's face is half shrouded in darkness, so Brian pushes him up against the post. "I need you to explain to me what it is I don't understand. 'Cause I thought I had you all figured out, but the longer we seem to spend time together, the..." He pauses and his mouth drops open, as if he's just figured something out. Something important. And he has. "The more... scared... you seem to get."

Under the harsh glare of the streetlight, Brian can see Justin flush. "God," Brian says, nodding his head almost excitedly. "That's it. You're scared." He smacks his forehead lightly and then starts to laugh.

Justin grows from embarrassed to angry. "Why're you laughing at me?" He demands.

"And everyone thought it would be me. That I would be the one to run away from getting to close to someone. No one would ever suspect poor, little Justin."

"Shut up." Justin demands.

"No. It's true. Here I am, getting yelled at left and right when all the time it's been you who's scared shitless."

"Shut up," Justin repeats, a little louder. People passing by stop to listen for a moment.

"What? You think just 'cause you've had some bad experiences in the past... you think that just 'cause some weak little faggot used to hit you... that I'm going to do the same?"

"Shut. Up." Justin raises his voice. It cracks.

Brian shakes his head at Justin. "Oh. I get it perfectly now. It was all fun and games until it became serious and then you have to pussy out, afraid to start your life again. Afraid of something you have no control over--your past."

"What about you, Brian, huh?" Justin screams. He doesn't mean to, but the shit Brian's saying is hitting home. And it hurts. No one's ever gotten on his case like this before. Everyone's... well, offered him pity and understanding.

Brian stops dead. "What about me?" He grinds his teeth. "What the fuck do you think you know about me?"

"You... you've lived your life by these stupid rules about love and relationships when we all know it's 'cause you had a fucked up childhood. Let's see you move past your demons like I've moved past mine. Huh? Lindsay told me that you didn't want to be her sperm donor 'cause you were too afraid you'd end up like your old man. I don't see how we're much different in that respect. So, say all you want about me hiding from my past, 'cause you're doing it too!"

Brian gets in Justin's face. "You don't know shit."

Justin returns the fury. "And you don't know shit either."

They're glaring at each other, burning holes into their skulls. Justin's eyes narrow as Brian's face become a mask of indifference. Both men are breathing hard, practically spitting with anger.

Neither one knows who starts it, but suddenly, they're in each other's arms, biting at each other's lips, clawing at each other's backs. Brian pushes against Justin, who's head hits the post, hard. He lets one of his hands wander to the back of Justin's head, checking for a bump, but ends up winding his fingers around Justin's hair, pulling his head back. Justin's gasping for breath, his lips are swollen and his tongue is hanging out like a dog's. Brian pulls Justin's hair a bit harder, yanking Justin's head back again before swooping down and swallowing Justin's tongue in his mouth.

There's a small alley near the post and Justin grabs Brian's shirt and drags him into the darkness. The light from the street lamp casts odd shaped shadows on the dumpster and crates, but neither men notice this. Justin practically rips Brian's shirt off his shoulders, leaning up on his toes to lick, suck, and bite the naked skin. His hands tremble at the buttons of Brian's pants.

Brian's groaning, letting Justin tear away at his clothes. Justin's hands rest on his own, tugging at them, so Brian places them on his hips.

"No," Justin moans, pulling at his hands some more.

Confused, Brian looks down into Justin's eyes and watches as he pulls down his own pants and places Brian's hands on his ass cheeks. "There," he sighs.

Brian doesn't move. Justin lets his back touch the disgusting wall behind him. He pushes against Brian's hands and then, panting, grips the back of Brian's neck and licks from the base of his neck to the bottom of his lips. Brian feels the warmth in his hands, the perfect skin melting into his fingers and he squeezes. Justin breathes an unbelievable sigh, nipping at Brian's lips playfully.

"More," he whispers.

Brian acquiesces to Justin's demands.

"More."

"Not yet."

"Yes, there."

"Oh, God."

And finally, "Fuck me, Brian."

Brian thinks he can come from just hearing the words. He brings his hand up to Justin's mouth. "Suck," he tells him, his breath catching as Justin's tongue pulls his fingers into his mouth.

Brian probes and pushes and delves until his fingers are dry. He pulls out and Justin groans his disappointment. "Lube," he says, searching clumsily in his pockets.

Justin's arching, his cock brushing against Brian's. "Fuck me," he repeats. "Brian. Now." His hands tighten on Brian's shoulders. "Like this. The only way."

Brian leads him to a pile of crates. He spreads his shirt on top of one before laying Justin down, his back and head resting on the box. Brian pulls Justin's legs around his waist. "Stay," he tells him, pulling out a condom.

It's better than Brian could ever have imagined it to be. It starts out slow--oh so fucking slow. With Justin gasping and crying and his cock growing limp. When Brian's all the way in--all the fucking way in!--they simply stare at

each other. Brian doesn't think he's ever seen anything as sexy as Justin, spread out on the crate. So slutty, yet so... beautiful. Finally, Justin starts squeezing and pushing his readiness.

Justin comes before Brian, calling his name and covering his eyes with his hands. His back lifts off the crate and he practically throws Brian off his body. Brian waits through his orgasm before gently moving his hips again. Justin gasps and cries out. It's too much. Too soon after. But, suddenly, Brian stops and comes wordlessly.

Brian falls on Justin, panting. They lay there, momentarily stunned as the edge of the crate digs into Justin's thighs. But he doesn't complain, even as Brian's added weight almost makes him cry out from the shooting pain.

Instead, Justin brings a shaking hand up to Brian's head and pats it. The touch seems to bring Brian back from... wherever his mind has wandered to. He glances up at Justin, enthralled by the way his flushed skin begins to cool off. First his face and then his chest, his body once again returning to its normally pale state.

"Well?" Brian asks, cupping Justin's face. Well, what? But Justin can hear the hidden questions.

Now what?

Are you okay?

Did that feel good?

Am I forgiven?

Are you hurt?

Want to try again?

And Justin smiles lazily. "Whoa," he whispers, lifting his head to kiss Brian's parted lips.

Brian hovers over Justin and wonders how someone like Justin so easily invaded his life. Justin has major issues and Brian knows that fucking him hasn't made them disappear, but he doesn't mind. Because if this type of connection and heat and... absolutely splendid fucking is what he gets in consolation for all the drama, then Brian'll stick to it.

No. Not consolation. That's not the right word.

They dress slowly, Justin's hands tremble as he buttons his pants. Worried, Brian asks, "Are you... okay?"

Justin nods quickly, but doesn't meet Brian's gaze.

"Are you gonna disappear again for a couple days?" Brian presses. He stops dressing and sits on the crate nearest to Justin.

"What?" Justin's voice is sharp. "No, of course not."

"Then what's the problem?"

Justin pulls on his shirt and walks over to Brian, nodding for him to scoot over. They sit side by side, their knees resting comfortably against each other. "I wasn't trying to tease you," Justin says quietly, taking a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. He lights one and hands it to Brian.

"I didn't think you were. Teasing me, that is. You're just seriously fucked up." He sticks his tongue in his cheek and grins wryly at Justin. "But then, so am I. So, I guess in a way we're perfect for each other."

Justin nudges Brian's shoulder with his own. "Don't let anyone hear you say that. They might... assume things."

Shrugging, Brian nervously places his hand on top of Justin's. "Let them. We've gotta keep things interesting in this fucked up town."

Justin laughs and Brian can feel his body relax a little. "So... you wanna fuck again?" Brian asks, leaning back on the crate, smoking contentedly.

"Sure." Justin curls up awkwardly beside him. "Maybe I can top this time." He lazily paints a figure eight with his finger on Brian's chest.

"Not in some dirty alley, you're not."

Justin stops drawing and smiles. "But that wasn't a 'no,' right?"

"Yeah."

Justin sits up slightly, grimacing as the crate bites into his elbow. "You'd... trust me enough to let me top you?"

Brian shrugs and takes a long hit of his cigarette. "Well, you trust me. It's only fair."

Leaning forward, Justin catches Brian's lips in a messy kiss. "God, if you keep saying shit like that you'll never get rid of me."

"Good" is Brian's simple reply.

They lay together on the dirty crates in a filthy alley, breathing in the stale air, but really fucking happy. And neither one of them can remember being as content or... comfortable. For now, that's all that matters.

END.