That Happy Feeling
By Rizabeau

As he walked, his steps caused hollow sounds --- to match the emptiness of the house. Brian looked around the rooms for what was probably the last time. He had bought it seven months ago with every intention of living in it. Living in it with Justin. But in the end, he had never lived here. Not with Justin, nor by himself. There was no artist's studio in the sunroom, no parties by the pool, no teaching Gus to ride a pony in the field and no fucking Justin, the stable boy, in the hayloft. The house had remained uninhabited since he bought it, bought it for Justin. 'Britin,' Justin's eventual attempt at the spelling of the estate's name, had remained as empty as Brian's soul had been the last few months.

Brian sat down on one of the three pieces of furniture they had purchased for the house. Two leather chairs and a matching oversized ottoman. The chairs were right where the deliveryman had left them, placed in front of the stone fireplace centered on the exterior wall of the large living room. A fireplace he had only lit the day he showed the house to Justin, the day they made love in front of the fire. Now in the autumn of the year he considered turning it on again. Standing, Brian walked to the controls of the gas-fed fireplace. He familiarized himself with the controls and then turned it on, watching as the flame ignited and the heat began to build. He gazed at it silently for a few minutes, finally turning away from the fireplace when the ceramic logs began to glow a dull red. Brian sat back down in the chair, put his feet up on the oversized hassock and took a swig of the bottle of beer he had been carrying around the house while touring it. He had decisions to make, the smallest of which was what to do about the house.

Brian looked around the room. Maybe it was too big. The large multi-paned window drew his attention and he looked down towards the gatehouse. 'Gatehouse' was really a joke; the building was really a guest house. It had three rooms downstairs and one on the second floor. It was spacious and bright, with its own little drive off the main road. It was supposed to be another surprise -- a surprise even bigger than the house itself -- for Justin. Brian thought it could be turned into a gallery and studio, giving Justin a space to create and show his work in a perfect environment. They had never had time to really look over the building nor for Brian to explain what he wanted to do with it. Maybe if they had moved in here, gotten married, it could have been a surprise. He might have convinced Lindsay to stay in Pittsburgh and help with the work necessary to turn the structure into a studio and gallery; maybe she could have had a small studio there as well.
Brian tapped the arm of the chair with his hand as he thought about what it would have been like to live here after the bombing. The house was well away from the ugliness that had become Pittsburgh during the fight over the proposition. Both Justin and Lindsay could have thrived in the gatehouse studio; maybe Gus and JR could even have been around the gallery. He sighed in defeat. His idea for Justin's studio was over. Justin was in New York and Gus in Toronto. Innocent people had been killed, lives damaged, children orphaned and parents left childless. And after all that pain, heartache, grief, and all the final life-changing decisions made by so many, it hadn't even mattered. The proposition was dead.

Proposition 14 would not be voted on in November. It was withdrawn from the ballot after a review by several committees, including state legislative and electoral legal experts. The reports all found that the language used in the proposition to be unconstitutional under both current state and federal law. There was no doubt the new proposition, if passed, would be immediately litigated. The multiple reports cited the poorly worded proposition would most certainly be overturned based on its invasive language regarding civil rights. The cost to taxpayers would be in the millions for litigation. It was recommended that the proposition be withdrawn and a more correctly worded proposal be submitted the next year, or wait for federal legislation to be put in place. Brian knew bullshit when he heard it. The bottom line for people was a mom, Dusty, was violently killed, and pictures of her crying children on every front page in the nation was bad for business. Even if your business was hate.

So eyes were turning back to the national scene, the playing field changing as the presidential campaign started to heat up. Neither party wanted the images from the bombing to become a visual focal point of their platforms.

Some thought it was a victory but Brian knew it was more likely a lull between storms. The peace might last a year or five or ten but the issues would be there until they had federal laws protecting the rights of gays.

Brian thought that the peace would be longer this time for the simple fact that it had been a bombing. There had been gay bashings in the news. There had been murders of bisexuals, gays, lesbians and transgender people in the news – high profile cases with pictures. But these were individual incidents. They didn't always make the national news. But a bomb, now that made the nightly national news ... right at the dinner hour. It brought back all the fear of Oklahoma City, Atlanta and 9/11. A bomb was terrorism at its most visual; it couldn't be ignored or lessened. The weeks after the bombing at Babylon proved that. The weeks after many who were involved on both sides had left town or tried to put it
behind them. The weeks after, when the incident had remained a national news item, had kept the story alive. After all, a national manhunt was on, which was always good viewing for the American audience.

Brian was sure that the bombing had soured a lot of borderline supporters of the proposition. And speed with which the committees and legislators acted in looking for an out on the vote was sign of that. In just six weeks they found their way out, a nice 'all-American' legal technicality. Bad language meant bad law, and no one wanted bad law on the books. It was a perfect solution for a nation of laws and lawyers.

The local protesters stopped protesting in front of businesses along Liberty Avenue and went back to just being the average garden variety hate-filled homophobes who discussed their points-of-view over coffee with like minded individuals. Brian was sure they were just regrouping and waiting for another cause to protest--a cause that they perceived threatened their safe and narrow view of the world. He was also sure the special on one of the national networks that interviewed them and then showed them, with their names on the screen, screaming at the parents of one of the victims during his funeral had made most of them scurry under their rocks again.

Brian shook his head, set his empty beer bottle back in the case and pulled out another. He opened it and took two longs gulps. No. He decided they were just lying low because their main support had deserted them and left town.

As the investigation into the bombing heated up, with federal agents becoming involved, the megaphones and cars driving through the streets with taped rants they called messages stopped. The out-of-towners who had stirred up the hate and violence left in a caravan for greener pastures, disappearing back into the southern and mid-western states from whence most had come. Brian thought someone should have focused more attention on their leaving within a day of the arrest, on federal charges of conspiracy, of an assistant to one of the leaders of their national movement. At the very least the media should have hopped on that, but they didn't. They were too interested in the man being arrested to notice his league of accomplices was high tailing it out of the greater Pittsburgh area. The bastard who was arrested had given money to the radical homophobe who was behind the bombing, and he later helped the man, a cousin, escape.

The media had played detective, finding out before the police could report that it wasn't the bomber's first violent attack on gays, just his biggest. The FBI later confirmed that prints found somewhere in Babylon were in the national databank in connection with a brutal attack on a young gay man in some
state that's name alluded Brian. Brian made a face as he shifted in the chair, slinking down a bit before getting more comfortable.

He looked at his beer bottle, wondering if he should have brought a bottle of Beam instead of a six pack. He probably shouldn't be drinking with the long ride home, but he could always spend the night, after all he owned the place and the chair was comfortable and he was warm so... maybe he should spend the night... be lord of the manor for just one night.

Brian looked into the fire, the flickering red of the ceramic logs taking him back to the images outside of Babylon the night of the bombing. Red lights flickered everywhere, sporadic bursts of disorienting strobes flashed, while large search and rescue spotlights moved across the exterior of the building. The scene was organized pandemonium. Brian thought it was just the result of a worse type of anarchy. The explosion was the chaotic result of anger and fear being allowed to grow unchecked, emotions fed by the hate of a group of people and exploited by the media. A volatile situation that was left to run out of control until it ignited a fuse.

This explosion, however, did one thing. It caught the federal government's attention. Bombs seemed to do that, even if they went off in a gay dance club. He knew if there hadn't been a bombing the proposition would have been forced through. But all eyes turned to Pittsburgh that night and to the state in general. Yet for Brian, the world shouldn't have waited for that night. No, to him, all eyes should have been on Pittsburgh on that spring evening five years before when a beautiful young man lay unconscious on the greasy, filthy floor of a garage with his face covered in blood. That's when all eyes should have been on Pittsburgh. That's when all the hate mongers should have been shut down, that's when all the politicians and news reporters should have been pointing fingers. Pointing them at Chris Hobbs, Judge Russo, the bastards at St. James and at anyone who preached hate.

Justin's bashing should have had this kind of political and television coverage. All that blood running down his lover's face, over his own hands as he tried to stop the bleeding with his scarf. That was the night the world stopped, that was the night the heavens should have howled in horror. Just the memory of Justin's blood-covered face made his gut clench. Brian took a gulp of beer and tried to draw a breath, only to find his chest shake as he tried to inhale. The strong recollections of that night suddenly overwhelmed his emotions, letting his customary rigid command slip. "Yeah, I need something stronger." He stood up, deciding to visit the small group of stores about a mile down the road. The stores where a convenience for the locals, and he was sure he could pick up some Beam, as well as a thousand dollar bottle of wine and some very expensive gourmet foods if he wanted it. Small, convenient and expensive, just like the neighborhood.
Brian looked at the fire. Although he hadn't decided whether he would stay the night or not, he decided to leave it on since the room was just really warming up. And if the place burned while he was getting something to drink --- it burned.

Brian walked to the car, thinking about how nothing was done for Justin after the bashing. No one held a candlelight vigil, no one reprimanded Craig for being a bastard as a father, no one sent money to help and no one objected to Hobbs' slap on the wrist by Judge Russo. As he got in the car he noticed a hay pile which reminded him of the story on the news of members of the U.S. Marshall's office literally tearing haystacks apart in Kansas looking for the fugitive suspected of caring out the Babylon bombing, and he had a sudden image of Hobbs cowering behind a haystack and someone closing on him with a pitchfork. Brian snorted. Considering the way things worked in the real world he figured they'd find the bastard in a few years, wandering around a farm looking to steal a chicken or dumpster-diving to survive. At least he'd get more than a few hours of community service.

As he drove away from the house Brian wondered if he should call Lindsay and let her tell Mel that the latest reports on the manhunt claimed he was making his way to Canada. It wouldn't be safe there now – where would she drag his kid to then?

Mel and Lindsay made their decision to leave before the dust had really settled. They were gone before Proposition 14 was withdrawn. Many supporters took the time the proposition was being reviewed to quickly and quietly get off the bandwagon. They could see the way the wind was blowing and didn't want to be identified with killing the mother of three children, regardless of the woman's sexual orientation. It still made for very bad press. Many corporate sponsors cut their ties and closed their purses to the pro-proposition groups. Even Taylor Electronics stopped supporting the group. Although Brian suspected it was a temporary alienation, it was enough to stop Craig for now. Jennifer was still bitter about it and claimed he did it for business, not because he felt guilty about contributing to people who almost killed his son. Brian had to agree with Jennifer. Craig didn't have a problem with having Justin arrested, living in a dump or being bashed with a baseball bat. No, he was worried about his sales; after all, even fags bought televisions.

While it was all working itself out Brian had kept tight control over his emotions, focusing on rebuilding Babylon, but he did blow when Mikey and Ben informed him that the hotel that had refused to hold the rally against the proposition now offered to host a fundraiser for the victims and damaged businesses. No one could stop Brian from calling the manager of the hotel and telling him what he thought they do could do with the offer. He wanted nothing from anyone. He had insurance and he’d rebuild Babylon,
just like he had with Kinnetik, on his own terms and in his own way. And he did rebuild it because, after all, to quote Mikey, he "was Brian 'fucking' Kinney," and he could do anything.

Brian pulled into the parking lot and quickly parked. As he got out of the 'vette he started muttering to himself. "Right Mikey, if I could do anything, why is Justin in New York and Gus is in Toronto?" He slammed the door and looking around the parking lot, realized he needed to stop talking to himself, at least if he wanted them to sell him liquor. Brian walked into the liquor store and quickly sought out the whisky. After finding and grabbing a bottle of Beam he started towards the counter, only to stop and examine a wine display. He smirked when he picked up a bottle and checked the price. It was a sale item---only four hundred dollars. Brian put the bottle down and went to pay for the bottle of whiskey.

Instead of returning to the car Brian went into the green grocer next door. He selected two green apples, a cluster of large purple grapes and an orange, and then he backtracked to the front of the store and grabbed a small hand basket. He dropped the wrapped bottle of Beam and fruit into it then proceeded to the deli counter where he looked over the menu and the 'Tuesday's Special' entrees, which looked amazingly like the Liberty Diner's specials. Passing on the specials, he instead ordered soup and a sandwich. While the sandwich was being made he checked the bakery display and decided if he spent the night he'd stop by in the morning and get coffee and a muffin.

Brian picked up his sandwich at the counter and headed to the register. He stopped just before the counter, shaking his head. He picked up a bag of chips --- Justin had so much to answer for, including giving Brian the bad habit of occasionally needing the taste of salty and oily potato chips with his sandwich.

Brian was faintly surprised to see the house still standing. There was just a little plume of white smoke drifting away from the large chimney. Apparently it was well built after all. Brian parked in the front of the house, climbed out of the 'vette and then reached back in to grab the plastic grocery bag off the passenger seat. He shut the door and locked it. As he walked around the back of the car he stopped and thought a moment. He shook his head and opened the trunk. He couldn't believe he was really considering staying. He lifted a plastic-enclosed suit out from where he had carefully laid it when he had picked it up that morning at the cleaners. He set down the grocery bag in the trunk and opened up the overnight bag he had started leaving in the car for last minute trips to New York. Opening his gym bag, he grabbed a clean towel and sweats out of it and shoved them into the open tote. He lifted the tote and grocery bags and slammed the hood down.
Once in the house he dropped the tote by the door, hung the suit off a light fixture mounted on the wall and then walked into the living room where he set his grocery bag. He pulled the Jim Beam out and set it on the floor next to the beer. Before settling down Brian went to the small washroom off the foyer and was relieved to see some paper towels on the counter and toilet paper in the dispenser. He used the toilet, glad that he had arranged to have the place kept clean by a service. There were at least some basic things hanging around as a result.

Brian wandered out to the kitchen and checked the cabinets. There were a couple of coffee cups, plates and silverware --- as well as a can of coffee, a canister of sugar and jar of non dairy creamer. The only thing on the counter was a coffee maker. He knew it must belong to the cleaning crew. He walked to the back door, set the alarm for the house and prepared a pot of coffee. He didn't turn it on but if he needed it later it would be ready.

Brian returned to the living room and opened his soup container. Not ready to sit and stare at the fireplace yet he explored the house again as he drank the warm Portobello mushroom bisque from its container. He wandered upstairs, going into the master bedroom, standing by the windows, taking in the room. He puzzled over where he and Justin would have placed the bed. It would have had to have been a very large bed, given the size of the room. They had never gotten that far in talking about the house. He checked out the view from the windows. It had been late winter before, but now the surrounding countryside was a patchwork of dark evergreens and brilliant red, gold and orange foliage. It was a nice view. Not exactly Tremont Street or Liberty Avenue but just as colorful.

Brian walked into the master bath, admiring the glass-enclosed shower with its multiple heads and controls. He remained thoughtful as he left the master suite and visited the other three bedrooms, all smaller in size and with less luxurious shared baths. He returned down stairs and settled into a chair.

It was an hour before he picked up the sandwich, opened the chips and washed it all down with another beer. The Beam was for later.

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Brian didn't realize he had fallen asleep until his cell phone rang. He pulled the phone out of his pocket and squinted, trying to pick out who it was. He frowned when he recognized the number. Mikey could wait. Brian tossed the phone on to the hassock and stood up and stretched. He hadn't realized he was
tired enough to fall asleep. The room was cast in shadows as the day had turned into evening. The light from the fireplace was quickly becoming the only source in the house. Brian went out to the foyer and turned on the wall sconces, then dimmed the lights a bit. He circled back to the living room and then to the kitchen so he could put the remains of his sandwich in the otherwise empty refrigerator. He left the kitchen, leaving only the indirect lights under the cabinets lit.

Brian settled back into his chair and to the sound of the ringing of his cell phone. He picked it up and looked at the display. He turned it on.

"What Ted?"

"Brian?"

"Who else would it be?"

"Where are you?"

"Somewhere."


"What ... do...you ...want?" Brian wasn't in the mood.

"Everyone is worried sick about you."

"Why?" Brian rolled his eyes. He looked at his watch. He had been gone a whole six hours.
"No one knew where you were."

"No one who? Who the hell cares where I am?"

"Michael has been trying to get you on the phone."

"Is there something wrong?"

"Um... no, I don't think so."

"Then why are you calling me?"

"Because you weren't answering for Michael."

Brian dropped his head back on to the chair. "Now if I picked up the phone for you and not him what does that mean?"

"Your phone was off or you weren't answering Michael's call."

"And since my phone isn't off that means..."

"Oh! You weren't answering Michael's call?"

"Good boy Theodore."
"Brian..."

Brian interrupted. "And why in hell would I answer a call from you when I wouldn't from Mikey?"

"Because...ummm... I'm calling from a line at work?"

"Give the man a broken cigar and no raise. Bye Ted."

Brian broke the connection, dropping the phone on to the hassock. Justin hadn't been gone long when Michael had started to revert to the man he knew five years ago. Having Ted call him was just more proof of the fact. Michael, despite being Ben's partner, JR and Hunter's dad, and a business man, still found time to constantly check up on his old friend. Michael took time out of his busy schedule to call him, wanting to know all the times he scored a trick, or did something else Mikey could brag about and complain about at the same time. The controlling Mikey that used guilt and pathos to manipulate his best friend was back. His concern over Brian's relationship with Justin extended only to the point that he was glad Justin was in New York, and that he kept sending the artwork for Rage home. Not wanting to think about it for a moment Brian picked the cell phone back up and looked at the voice mail messages. He had had the phone turned off earlier in the day. He hit the buttons and began to listen to the messages. The first three were from Michael. Brian listened to his friend complain about why he hadn't called him when he got back from his weekend with Justin. The next call was from Lindsay, telling him Gus was fine, they were all fine, but she needed to talk to him right away. He wondered how much that would cost him. There was a call from Cynthia asking him to call Michael. Then a call from Cynthia telling him to call her.

Brian realized he should have checked his messages earlier, but then again he hadn't planned on taking a three hour nap either. He called Cynthia's cell.

"Boss?"

"Hello to you too."
"Where ARE you?"

"You aren't calling for Michael are you?"

"Like hell. Marks from Liberty called. They are announcing they are relocating their corporate office to New York City."

Brian sat up straight in the chair. "You're fucking with me Cynthia."

"No. Here's the even juicier bit, why they are moving. They are going to merge with Northern Air."

Brian stood up and started to pace. "Cyn, I haven't heard that. There has been no mention of it anywhere, nothing ... no merger rumors at all. The stockholders don't have a clue --- and I'm a fucking stockholder."

"That's because it is happening as we speak. Marks wanted to give you the heads up. He wants us available if they need help packaging the deal to the stockholders. Government waivers are already in the works. This is happening and the new marketing campaigns for Liberty Air will be huge, and Liberty is keeping control. They are absorbing Northern so the contract we have with Liberty is good. The whole shitting thing is ours!" Cynthia was squealing on the other end.

"Why do I feel like Martha Stewart being given insider information?" Brian laughed. "Fuck Cyn, a major New York based company. We have national companies, but this is different. Now we have a piece of the New York market. Northern is big on the East Coast. It flies into the major airports. We have arrived."

"Yes!!" Cynthia was still squealing.

"Where are you?" Brian threw himself back into the leather chair.
"In my car."

"You haven't told anyone?"

"God no. And don't you even look like you are buying more stock. The SEC will be watching all business associates and stockholders. Marks was adamant about that. He said bonuses will make it all up."

"I'm not an idiot. Besides this isn't about stock --- this is about business. A successful campaign in the New York market will bring in business from all over the East Coast."

"Yeah."

"What's Mark want us to do?"

"He asked for us to meet with him on Thursday at the Pittsburgh headquarters. The news will break tonight, well --- it probably already has. They are trying to fast track it through the government red tape and then the stockholders. He doesn't foresee any problems but he wants everything ready for the changeover. A media storm."

"Make the appointment, we'll be there. We'll give him a storm, we'll give him a fucking blizzard!"

"You got it Boss." Cynthia paused. "Are you going to be in tomorrow?"

"Of course."

"Where are you?"
Brian looked around at the house he was about to put up for sale. "I'm not sure." He hung up the phone and let it drop into his lap. "New York." He dropped his head back and yelled. "FUCKING YES!!" His voice echoed through the empty rooms of his house.

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His footsteps echoed on the hardwood floor. He pulled the other half of his sandwich out of the refrigerator and grabbed a coffee mug. Brian returned to the warm light of the fireplace in the living room. He sat down and set the cup and sandwich on the hassock. He opened the chips and then the whiskey. He poured several shots into the coffee mug and sat back to again think about what to do with the house and the rest of what had been on his mind.

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Brian needed to decide what he wanted. Did he want what everyone told him he should have, act the way they needed him to act, be the man they always thought he was or was there more to him and what he needed? Was he happy before Justin moved? Was he happy now? It appeared everyone was happy but him. Brian snickered. "Well, that answers one of the big questions. I'm not happy!" He picked up the coffee mug and swallowed. "That's not true, I am happy." Brian stopped and looked into the fire. "Then I guess it depends on how you define happy. What a stupid fucking word."

Maybe happy wasn't the right word --- content --- maybe that was the word. He had everything he needed to be comfortable. He had lots of money, he had his businesses, he was healthy again, he still had all the tricks he wanted, he had his friends, he had Mikey, he had his son and he had his lover every other weekend. Yeah, maybe he was content. Brian shook his head. But he knew he wasn't happy. He wondered if he had ever been what other people define as 'happy.' Lindsay said she was happy. Michael carried on about how happy he was. Emmett claimed to be bursting with happiness. Debbie actually agreed to marry Carl --- for the sake of happiness. Fuck, even Ted carried on about how happy Blake made him.

Brian sat up and put the mug down on the hassock. He leaned forward and stared into the flames. Wasn't it interesting that following the bombing everyone was living happily ever after. Everyone was
with the person they loved, paired off, ready for a trip on the ark. Everyone but him and Justin. Brian frowned as the flames flickered. Just why was that? Especially when he knew that he and Justin had a deeper, more binding understanding and --- love --- than any he had seen between any of his friends and their partners. Brian leaned back and put his feet up. It was going to be a long night.

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"Mikey?"

"Brian!! Where the hell have you been? Do you know what time it is?"

"Shut up Michael. You called how many times? You left messages that it was important I call you back. I'm calling you back!"

"It's mid-night Brian."

"Well, it's noon somewhere."

"What? What are you on? Where are you? I'll come and get you."

"I'm not on anything and I don't need rescuing. Where I am and whom I'm with aren't any of your concern."

"Of course it's my concern. You are my best friend. Always. Like I said before, even though I'm with Ben, that hasn't changed."

"You mean I haven't changed, don't you?"
Michael laughed. "Of course you haven't. You are still Brian 'fucking' Kinney."

"I'm just the way you want me, aren't I Michael?"

"What?" Michael lowered his voice. "Brian, where are you? I'll come get you."

"Michael, I told you, I don't need rescuing. In fact, I am very safe, and very sober." Brian looked at the whiskey in the mug in front of him and shrugged, thinking he was a lot more sober than he wanted to be.

"Are you at Babylon? I don't here any music."

"I'm supposed to be at Babylon, aren't I? Everyone counts on me being there. Counts on me to be the one thing in their lives they can depend on not to change. The one thing they can measure their own success and growth by. Isn't that it Mikey?"

"Brian?" Michael voice deepened. "What's wrong? You went to New York this weekend, did Justin finally dump you? Is that was this is about?"

"Why would Justin dump me Michael?"

"Huh?" Michael made a grunt into the phone. "Hold on Brian." There was a moment of silence before he spoke again. "Okay, I had to go downstairs."

"Why? I'm about to hang up."

"No! Wait Brian!"
"Wait for what Mikey?"

"Are you okay? You never checked in while you were away and you never called any of us when you got home."

"Never called who Mikey?"

"Us --- me, Ted, Em, you didn't even call Mom."

"Why would I check in with any of you?"

"Because, we are your friends, we worry about you."

"Mikey, when was the last time I saw you, not just talked on the phone? Better yet, when was the last time I saw all of you together --- other than a quick lunch or breakfast at the diner?"

"All of us? At Babylon...umm...last week ...no it was two weeks ago. Maybe the gym."

"No Mikey, no gym, and nothing since Babylon last month when Emmett conned my manager into a...what did he call it...Cozy Couples Night?"

"Oh. Right. Couples night. That went over well."

"No it fucking didn't, and Ted the accountant can verify that."

"You still should have called. I was worried."
"You're not my keeper." Brian paused, "I have a question for you."

"Sure."

"When was the last time you and Emmett and Ted got together?"

"What?"

"You heard me."

"Ben and I had them and their partners over for dinner on Saturday."

"And before that?"

"We went to that new coffee shop with them, during the week, after the movie."

"How cozy for you couples."

"Brian, why did you call up at midnight to ask stupid questions?"

"You called me Michael, remember? I'm just returning your many messages."

"Brian, what's wrong?"

"Why do you think something's wrong?"
"That little shit left you, didn't he? I just don't know why you kept going to see him. I knew when he left for New York this was going to happen."

"And if he did give me the 'heave ho' last weekend?"

"You'll get through it. I'll get you through it again. Just like when he left you for Ethan. Brian, I'm here for you. I'm your best..."

"Yeah," Brian interrupted quickly, "I know you are my best friend. Since you are my best friend maybe you can answer something else for me."

"Sure. Let me come get you and we can talk."

"I don't need you to come get me Mikey."

"Brian, you aren't using anything, are you?"

"No."

"You aren't um..."

"Fucking someone? No, I'm alone."

"You haven't sounded like this since your thirtieth birthday... shit Brian, are you at the loft? You aren't trying ..."
"Christ Mikey, I’m not holding my dick or a scarf. I TOLD YOU I’M FINE. But you can't seem to get that, can you? Brian Kinney is fine."

"Brian, something is obviously wrong."

"Mikey are you --- happy?"

"What?"

"Are you happy?"

"Of course I am."

"Would you say Ted and Emmett are?"

"Yes."

"Mel and Lindsay?"

"Yes."

"Debbie and Carl?"

"Yes."

"Me and Justin?"
"No."

"How do you know that?"

"Because." Michael's voice had a smug self-righteous tone.

"Because?" Brian asked quietly, his own tone an indication of his feelings.

"Because."

The quality of Michael's voice again confirmed his opinion. Brian grimaced at his friend's attitude. "You have to do better than that Michael."

"Shit Brian. You two --- you just aren't...I don't know, it's hard to explain."

"But you don't think we should be together." Brian took a sip of whiskey.

"It's not that. It's just you aren't, umm, you aren't yourself when you are with Justin, you are different."

"And different is bad."

"Well no, not really."

"Inconvenient?"
"No. It’s just --- you aren’t you."

"I’m not... Brian Kinney?" Brian’s frown deepened and his eyes narrowed, all clues to his feelings that went unseen by Michael.

"Well, yeah."

"And what if I was happy with Justin?"

Michael laughed at the thought. "But you weren't, you never were."

"I wasn't? How could you tell?"

Brian’s voice was low, Michael missing the warning in the measured words. "You two were always breaking up. You never wanted the same things. Your backgrounds are too different. He is too young and it showed, and as a result you were always disappointing each other. You can't remain faithful anymore than Justin can give up wanting you monogamous. You know that's impossible for you. He refused to believe the truth."

"And the truth is?"

"You will never change."

"I won't?"

"No, and you shouldn't have to. That's what was so bad about you being with Justin. You disappeared. My friend Brian Kinney, the man I knew for years kept acting differently. You were different when Justin was here, we all noticed it. You are calmer without him, more stable."
"More stable?" Brian asked again, not believing what he heard.

"Yeah. You weren't you and it's not like you were in a real relationship. It was more destructive than steady. It was nothing like the rest of us have."

"How's that?"

"I never saw you go out on a date with him, to a concert or the movies. Your relationship was really based on fucking. It was always all about sex with you two. That's how it started and how it ended. With Justin it was always about fucking not love. I used to think that was the way it was too until I met Ben. Now I know it's all about love too. Like I have with Ben. It just wasn't that way with you and Justin. You never told him you love him but you tell me you love me all the time. You never moved away from sex as the center of your relationship. Every time we turned around you two were fucking --- anywhere, hell, everywhere. You'd fight, you'd have sex. He'd leave and come back, and you'd have sex. You never were a normal couple."

Brian shook his head, a wry smile on his face. "It didn't matter that we were 'happy' in our unconventional way?"

"Brian, you weren't happy."

"I wasn't?"

"No!"

"And you knew that? How?" Brian picked up the whiskey and poured another shot. "How did you decide that?"
"Well, you and Justin --- the way you are together --- it's not a relationship you can build on. You are too independent and you don't want to change, nor should you. We all accepted you the way you were. It's who you are – no regrets. You tried to change, I think it was the shock of the bombing, but luckily that didn't last. You stopped going out as much. But you didn't do things we couples do. You two stayed on your own little island. At least you came to your senses and called off the marriage; that was the best thing to do. Justin leaving was another good thing for you. You are --- you again. Just like you were before Justin."

"And you like that Brian, don't you? He was the man of your dreams. Your idol?"

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" The frustration Michael was having with the conversation was evident in his voice. "That's not what I mean."

"Oh, you prefer the emotionally unavailable, drug using, alcoholic sexual predator who doesn't care about anyone but himself."

"That's not you!"

"That doesn't describe me five years ago?"

"No you were a ... "

"What? A mild-mannered professor who is rock steady when not on steroids?"

"No! You were my best friend. I loved you then and I love you now,"

"But you didn't love the guy in between. Why is that?"

"Brian!" Michael's exasperation caused him to whine loudly.
"Hey, all those years with Justin I was still the same guy. I outed you, messed up your relationship with the good doctor. I almost fucked my way out of a job, I tricked whenever I could, I had parties and orgies. Hell, I even hit you. I never gave an inch. Why didn't you like that guy? What changed in those years?"

"You were mostly the same but you... you..."

"What Mikey? Had Justin?"

"Shit Brian! Why does this conversation always come back to him?" Michael sighed deeply into the phone. "Brian, your life was great before him and it'll be great now without him."

"Why do you think I'm without him? You have continually assumed that since we started talking."

"Because you are talking crazy! And he's fucking left town Brian. Get a clue! How long are you going to keep up the fuck fest weekends? Eventually he's going to get tired of it, or bored, and then find another person his age to cheat with and you'll be back where you were after he left with Ethan. And we'll have to pick up the pieces again until you get back to normal."

"Thanks Mikey, sorry to have been such a burden. I hope all the money and favors I have provided over the years has been enough compensation for all of you. I'll be sure not to bother you all again."

"Brian. Wait. That sounded all wrong."

"You mean because of the fact that I continually told you all to stay out of my life."

"Brian. I..."
"Never mind Mikey. I think I understand."

"What's going on with you?" Michael's tone became more insistent, his confusion causing him to begin to panic.

"What do you think is going on with me?"

"Uh...I'm not sure. I don't know why you're talking like this."

"You don't?"

"No."

"That's too bad Michael. I can see that doing a little soul searching at midnight has not brought you any enlightenment."

"What? Brian? I can't help you if you don't tell me what's wrong."

"I've told you, you haven't listened."

"BRIAN!"

"Gotta go Mikey. Calls to make, people to wake."

"Brian, it's after mid..."
Brian turned off the phone. He wasn't going to listen to it ring until he was ready to use it again. Michael would just have to deal with his silence. Right now Brian needed the quiet to prepare for his next call.

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"Mmmhello?" A sleepy voice could barely be heard.

"I need to speak to Lindsay."

"Go away asshole. Do you know what fucking time it is? I'm hanging up..." Mel's sleepy voice had lost its confused quality quickly when she recognized his voice.

"Let me talk to Lindsay or I'll just keep calling. You can take it off the hook but you have to put it on sooner or later. Better yet, I'll report it as off the hook and the manly Mounties will show up banging on your door."

"Bastard."

Brian waited, listening to Mel swearing as she spoke to a sleepy Lindsay.

"Brian." Lindsay cleared her throat as she woke up. "What's wrong?"

"Are you happy Lindsay?"

"What? Brian? What's going on?"

"I asked you a question. Answer it."
"Brian, can't this wait for morning?"

"No."

"Okay. Give me a minute."

Brian listened to a brief argument as Lindsay got out of bed and went down the hall of the apartment to the living room.

"Okay. What's this about?" Lindsay made a grunting sound as she settled on to the couch.

Brian rolled his eyes as he listened. "Comfy?"

"Yes. Now what did you ask?"

"I asked you if you were happy."

"Of course I am."

"Are you sure?"

"Brian!" Lindsay huffed at his comment.

Annoyed at the tone Brian decided to go about the conversation differently. "Why did you need to talk to me?"
"Oh, that."

He knew immediately it was about money from her change in voice. "How much?"

"Whatever you can spare."

Brian sneered at the phone; she knew he could spare quite a bit. "How much Linz?"

"A couple thousand or maybe a little more would be great."

Brian's eyebrows rose at hearing the amount. "Why?"

Lindsay sighed. "It's been more expensive here than we thought. The exchange rate wasn't so good for getting a house so we had to settle on the apartment. We probably made the move economically at the worst time. Mel's not quite sorted out her working schedule yet. She's not a lawyer here and it'll take time to get it all arranged, she has to take some classes and then some exams."

"Thought her idea was to handle cases where people needed US legal experience?"

"She still needs to get credentials and..." Lindsay's voice trailed off.

"What?"

"Did I tell you I've started working at a gallery? It's been hard to get established here."
Brian was still missing a piece of their financial puzzle. "Where is the money from selling the house? There had to be a profit."

"Well, Mel's insisting we hold on to that for a new place. And I have to agree. But Brian it wasn't all that much anyway. We still had a mortgage on the old house. And we hadn't paid down that much of the principal yet."

"Savings?"

"Well, we really destroyed that when we were separated, keeping the two households going."

Brian didn't want to hear anymore so he redirected the conversation again. "So, you still feeling safer there?"

"Of course. It's a great place for raising Gus and JR."

"It's a happier place?" Brian asked with sarcasm, "Like McDonald's?"

"Brian!" Lindsay laughed, handicapped by not seeing the expression on Brian's face that might have warned of a coming storm. "Well, it's a lot like home."

"No problems? All rainbows and lollipops?"

Lindsay was silent, trying to decide the best way to answer her friend without revealing too much.

"Linz?"
"Well, it's like any other city Brian, it has its problems too."

"Are you happier there than you were here?"

"Well, it's different, not really comparable."

"And you and Mel? Happy ever after?"

Lindsay sighed. "We are always going to argue Brian."

"Are you going to become Canadian citizens?"

"I don't know."

"Why not?"

Lindsay was quiet again.

"Well?" Brian sensed there was a lot she wasn't telling and the length of silence between her replies confirmed it.

"We've heard some Americans have had trouble getting permanent resident status. There are a lot of immigration issues going on in Canada right now."

"Oh!" Brian was quiet. "Not quite the land of OZ, is it?"
"NO, it's..."

"It's a great country, just not home?"

Lindsay sighed. She didn't want to answer the question. "How is everyone?"

"Fine. You get the papers online."

"How did you..." Lindsay was silent. "It's home Brian but it doesn't want us."

"I don't remember there being a headline telling Lindsay and Melanie to leave Pittsburgh, much less the country, for that matter."

"You know why I did it."

"Hmmm. Did you see the Supreme Court in California upheld the rights of gay and lesbian parents?"

"Yes."

"Too bad Mel wasn't here to litigate that, right up her alley."

"Brian, did you call for a reason?"

"You called me."

"Did you call NOW for a reason?"
"I believe I did. I asked if you were happy."

"I answered you."

"Hmmm."

"Brian, about the money..."

"I'll send a money order."

"Thanks." There was silence. "I am happy."

"Can you answer another question for me?"

"If I can."

"Why did you encourage Justin to go to New York?"

"What?"

"I said, why did you encourage Justin to go to New York?"

"How is it? Has he said? He must be in seventh heaven over being in New York."
"How is it? I thought you would have been talking to him regularly, soaking up all the art stuff through the line."

"No, I... it's expensive to make calls...too many long distance calls."

"So, why did you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Insist he go to New York."

"Umm, because he is talented. Because so many artists never get the chance. He had a rave review from an important critic. Brian, do you know what that's like? What it means?"

"Yeah, I got a good idea. I've been there almost every weekend."

"You have?" Lindsay's squeaking out the words did little to hide her shock.

"More or less. That surprises you, doesn't it?"

"Well...I..." Lindsay snapped her mouth shut, knowing Brian had probably heard the sound she had made.

"He's been there for months and not much has happened. He's getting a few pieces shown but no more ravings like before from that one critic. But he's definitely being seen. Christ, I think I've been in every gallery in New York."
"It takes time Brian. Years if it happens at all, but he is so talented that..."

"Linz, I've been doing a little research." Brian interrupted before she could go on any further with a pep talk about Justin. "How many artists who have a good review from one critic actually make it big?"

Lindsay sighed, hating to discuss this part of Justin's career. "It's a small number Brian but Justin is very talented."

"So are a lot of other artists. Wouldn't he be better off painting here, all the time, than working as a waiter in New York City trying to paint in his free time?"

"Sure, but you have to be there to get discovered. I'm sure he's handling the job and painting just fine. He managed in Pittsburgh with all the distractions."

"Distractions?" Brian's voice dropped in tenor at the last comment. Was he the distraction or was Justin's bashing, recovery and all the other shit over the last five years the disruption?

"Brian, you aren't bothering him when you are there, are you?"

"Bothering him?" Brian's voice raised an octave by the end of the question.

Lindsay caught the change. "Uh...no. I mean are you there too much? Are you affecting his concentration, taking away from his experience?"

Brian kept clenching his free hand to stop from saying more, a lot more. "You know while I've been in New York I've noticed that an artist just has to be there for the opening or getting his work in the galleries. Justin had more notice here in Pittsburgh." Brian thought a moment, "And just for the record, I'm not fucking bothering him. My visits are good for the boy."
"Well, it's a smaller colony of artists in Pittsburgh. And when you are there, are the two of you—just fucking?"

"Ah, I see, the big fish small pond theory. And my fucking him isn't any of your business."

"Well yes, there is a pond theory. And as to fucking Justin..."

Brian stopped her before she could say something she would regret, that he would regret. "I was in New York this weekend."

"Again?" She sighed, feeling she had not made her point about his interference in Justin's New York experience.

"Again?" Brian asked, echoing her question.

"Brian, if you keep distracting him, pulling him back, he'll never make it."

"I make the rounds of the galleries with him."

"Oh."

"Did you know there are artists from all over the country, shit, from all over the world? There was one huge show with artists from Alaska to Tibet. And none of them, not one, lived in New York City."

"Oh well, some do make it out."
"Of their small pond?"

"Yes."

"So they never had to be a guppy in a large pond, never had to swim with the sharks?"

"Brian, what is this all about?" Lindsay countered. "Don't take him away from New York."

"Why not?"

"Because!"

"Because why Linz?"

"Brian, it's really late. The kids will be up early and I have to get them to daycare before I can go to work."

"A few more minutes won't kill you." Brian used a tone that Lindsay recognized. "So what is Mel doing that she can't do it?"

"Okay, a few more minutes." Avoiding all discussion of Mel, Lindsay continued, "What were you asking?"

"Why shouldn't Justin come home?"

"Does he want to?" Lindsay asked, not sure if something had transpired recently that she didn't know about.
"What's wrong if he did want to come home?"

"You know what's wrong with it. He's young and he has a chance to be successful and famous. He's better off there, whether he realizes it of not. If he comes home on his own, or if you ask him to come home, it'll be over for him. You've done all the big career building, even if it was in Pittsburgh. This is his chance."

"Yes, I did it in the frigging Pitts, but it's not like I've retired. I have plenty left to do in my career."

"You know what I mean. If he doesn't do it now, he'll never do it. He'll settle down and you two will ..."

"Will what?"

"You will change each other, maybe destroy each other."

"WHAT?" Brian asked, amazed at what he was hearing. "I'd never hurt him that way."

"Exactly. That's why you let him go."

"No, that's not it. And it's not like we aren't together."

"You aren't together. You are living apart. You aren't a couple in the real sense."

"You know I've already been told that once tonight and it's really starting to piss me off. No, we aren't a couple by your standard but we see ourselves as a couple by ours. We are NOT split up!"
"Oh come on Brian! That's bullshit. You two are just conveniently fucking. Either of you can walk away at any time. You didn't marry Brian. I admit you were weird for a while there and you seemed like you were sincere about a marriage with Justin, but it wasn't long and you were back to normal. We were all out of sorts after the bombing, it was understandable."

"Understandable?" Brian sat back in his chair and closed his eyes, knowing what was about to come. "So Linz, how was I different?"

"You were going to get married Brian! You told Justin you loved him. You weren't even interested in rebuilding Babylon. I have to give credit to Justin, he knew something was off and didn't take advantage of you, rushing you into something you didn't really want. You were missing that 'I don't give a fuck' attitude. You weren't living like you had no apologies or regrets. You were playing it safe, even conventional. Ted told us about that woman you almost let dictate what you were going to put in the ad for Remson. That's not you Brian. I've known you a long time; I have a child with you. THAT isn't you! But you finally adjusted to all the upset and you were you again. I think Justin's chance of a career in New York and his leaving helped get you back to normal..." Lindsay wound down a bit, realizing Brian hadn't interrupted her once.

"And?" Brian's voice was edgy as he encouraged her to continue.

Lindsay couldn't judge Brian's reaction by the subtleness of his prompt. "We ummm... I... we..."

"Spit it out Linz."

Lindsay noted the voice on the other end of the phone was suddenly more forceful. "You and Justin --- you aren't --- well I don't --- I don't think you are good for each other."

"Really? And what if we love each other?"

"Oh, come on Brian!" Lindsay couldn't help herself. "Love? Lust maybe, but real love?"
"I can’t love Justin?"

Brian's question was barely spoken loud enough for Lindsay to hear. She realized what she had said and how it must have sounded, and she hoped Brian didn't. "Maybe."

"Maybe?" Brian picked up the coffee cup and took a large gulp of Beam. "So you're saying it’s impossible for me to love people."

"No! No! I don't mean that. You love Michael. I know you love Deb." Lindsay was quiet. "You love Gus. And me."

"But not Justin?"

"Well, what you feel for Justin, it's different and..."

"Different, as in not like I love Michael, or Gus." Brian paused for effect. "Or you?"

Lindsay didn't reply, but Brian could hear her breathing.

"Linz, weren't you always telling me I needed to tell him how much I cared? I would lose him if I didn't tell him I loved him?"

"Well yes."

"So you did think I could love him?"
"Well, in the beginning, those first few months I could see it and maybe encouraged it but realistically I don't think any of us believed you two would make it past the first year, much less five. And after all these years Brian, you two aren't any further along."

"Let's back up here a minute. You said you were supportive of Justin and me but by your wedding you told me to just be myself. You wouldn't take the tickets to Miami, instead you told me to go fuck everyone, go be me."

"Well, yes."

"As much as you seemed to support Justin and me, you didn't really want me changing did you, especially for him?"

"That's not true..."

"What about when you left? And again gave me all the crap about me being myself. Why didn't you encourage me to go to New York too? You took my son away after years of trying to get me to be a quote unquote real dad! But you didn't want me following my lover, did you? No, I had to stay here and rebuild everything so it was just the way it was before."

"Brian..." Lindsay tried to interrupt but Brian wasn't having it.

"Are you happy now Linz? Tucked safely away from the fight? You ran. But you made sure I was still here, the same old Brian Kinney, a loner once again with no son, no partner. I was back where I was before they both came into my life. Did that make you feel anything Lindsay? Regret? Sadness? Sorrow? Or did it feel right to you?"

"Brian, no, I didn't mean for you to be alone. Michael is there and so are Ted and Emmett. I'm a phone call away and you talk to Gus on the phone all the time. You let him call your cell whenever he wants. Everything is almost the same. You could have come and seen Gus anytime you wanted in the last seven
months! But you haven't been to see him or me at all. Ben and Michael come at least once a month. You're always going to New York."

"Ah, I see. Instead of seeing Justin every other week I should come and see you."

"Once a month wouldn't hurt and you can afford it. If you can afford the Plaza for Justin I think you can come here too."

Brian doubted that Lindsay realized she sounded like a jealous ex-wife. "Well, you have been having a lot of company from here but I don't see any of you in New York visiting Justin. In fact I've been the only person to actually go there to see him. I'm the only one who calls for the most part too. Seems it's been a little 'out of sight, out of mind' for some when it comes to Justin."

"Well, maybe if you didn't call him everyday we all might feel like we could reach out to him."

"Oh, so my talking to him everyday has stopped you all from keeping in touch with him more than once a month? That's fucked thinking Linz, even for you and Mel."

"You know I didn't purposely push Justin to New York. I didn't ignore him once he left. Keeping a distance was for his own good. Keeping your distance from him was for your own good too."

"My own good?" Brian's voice was incredulous and Lindsay didn't miss it.

"Yes. He needed time to adapt to being alone in the city. By letting him acclimate we were making the separation easier for him. If you had stopped going constantly to fuck you'd both be more independent of each other now."

"Linz, we aren't addicted to each other like Ted and Blake are to crystal meth. We love each other, we want to be together, and if we spend time – a lot of time – fucking, that's not yours or anyone else's business."
"Brian you know what I mean. If you two are going to live separately it's time to start letting go. You both need to find the equilibrium you lost during the time you were together. So much happened between you, you both tried to change for the other person. He tricked and did all sorts of stuff to try and keep you. It didn't work. And then you tried to be the man Justin wanted. Luckily you realized the mistake before you made it worse and got married. Now, you are both finding yourselves again."

"And who am I finding Lindsay?"

"You are finding Brian Kinney again. You are finding Peter Pan, and as your Wendy, I'm glad."

"You may be Wendy, Linz, but I'm not Peter anymore."

Lindsay listened to the sadness in Brian's voice, realizing for the first time since they started talking that something was definitely wrong with Brian. "Brian, what's going on? What is this all about? Are you all right? Did something happen with Justin? Did you two decide to stop seeing each other all together?"

"I'm just thinking things over Linz. And you know what I have decided so far?"

"What?"

"If you want anymore money, bring my son home."

"Brian!" Lindsay was in shock at the turn of conversation and the change in Brian's demeanor and decision. "What?! What about the money? What do you mean bring him home?"

"Gotta go Linz."
"BRIAN! Wait!"

"What?"

"What do you mean bring him home?"

"Should be pretty obvious. I'm not supporting you and Mel in your Canadian adventure. And I want my son back home. Gotta go Lindsay."

"Brian! You can't..."

Brian turned off the phone again. He was so disgusted with the conversation that he had to get off the phone before he made things worse with Lindsay. He had a feeling it was going to get a lot worse. Throughout the conversations he had tonight he had gained more insight into how his friends saw him, and it was worse than he had thought as he had dealt with his thoughts and problems all evening. He made the calls to see if his thoughts were right and boy, had they been. He sat staring into the blaze and wondered what fires he had started tonight.

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"What are you doing?"

"Huh...iimmm...sleepin'."

Justin's voice was rough and deep causing Brian a warm feeling in his stomach at the sound of it. "Alone?"

"Yeah.... ahhh."
Brian smirked. Justin was always slow to wake up. "Ass still sore?"

"Asshole." Justin yawned and closed his eyes, holding the phone to his ear as he started to fall asleep again but then a well-loved voice stopped him.

"Do you miss me?" Brian smiled as he heard a gentle sigh.

"Ah huh. All the time."

"Do you miss living here?"

There was another yawn. "Yezzz."

"You must be the only person in the world that misses the Pitts."

"Briiaaannnn." There was a small snuffling sound as Justin settled back down into the pillows, running his nose over the soft cotton as he got comfortable.

Brian heard the sounds and closed his eyes. He could tell every movement his lover made by each sound, intimate noises he had heard so often as he lay in the dark in their bed each night. He knew he could pick Justin out of a crowd, even if he was blind, just from knowing the sounds and scents associated with his lover. Brian could almost feel Justin in his arms, smell the scent of his warm body as it lay close in his arms. "I love you Sunshine."

"I know. I love you too." Justin rolled over and opened his eyes, now suddenly wide awake, with a small frown on his face. He wished he could see Brian's face, the tone of voice wasn't giving anything away but the declaration of love came too quickly, too easily for something not to be wrong. "Brian?"
Not hearing the alarm in his lover’s voice or able to see the alarm on his face Brian continued on. "That's what I thought. Do you want to move home or should I move there?"

"WHAT?" Justin shouted as he sat up, Brian's previous comment and the latest one really convincing him that something was wrong. Brian saying he loved him without being coerced into saying it was one thing, but then asking him to move home or suggesting he move to New York only tripled his concern.

Brian laughed. "You awake now?"

"Yes, I'm awake."

"You wake the cockroaches and rats up too when you screamed?"

"Stop that, you know this place is okay." Justin's eyes scanned the room anyway; you could never be too careful in New York apartments.

"Right." Brian nodded absently, knowing Justin was probably armed with a can of bug killer even as he denied the need for it.

"Well, it is okay! And it's not like you ever stay here to really know anyway."

"You like weekends at the Plaza... hot running water, breakfast in bed, sheets changed as needed, room service. Should I go on?"

Justin snorted at his lover's description of their weekends. "I'm not stupid."

"No, you're not."
There was a long silence. Justin waited for Brian to say something more but he didn't. "What's wrong Bri? Insomnia again?"

"No, why would you think that?"

"It's after one a.m. You don't usually call like this, not even for phone sex. What's the matter?"

Brian nodded to himself, accepting what Justin had said. "I need you to come home for a few days."

"Are you all right?" Feeling a sudden tightness in his chest Justin turned on the light and sat up. He moved to sit on the edge of the bed, eyes half closed against the light.

"Yes, of course." Brian dropped his head back on the chair, suddenly feeling very tired. Maybe he should have waited to call Justin but he needed to hear his voice.

"When?" Justin started to sit on the edge of the bed.

Brian stifled a yawn. "First thing tomorrow. Get the earliest flight. Call me before you board. Use the credit card."

"Uh. Okay." Justin glanced over at the clock. He had better get up now; he had a lot to do. He knew something big had to be wrong and in the thirty seconds since Brian had asked him to come he had imagined the worst possible scenarios.

Brian sat up and tried to focus on the conversation. He thought Justin sounded a bit preoccupied. He could tell something was wrong. "Is there a problem? You can't make it?"

"No, I'll call into work from the airport."
"You sure you can come?" Brian yawned, unable to stifle it this time.

"Yes. I'll call you from the airport." Justin got off the bed and started for his closet.

Brian knew it was pointless to interrogate Justin now. He'd do it tomorrow when he could better judge what was going on with his lover. He was tired and he knew he had woken Justin up so the younger man had to be tired too. Maybe that was why he suddenly seemed distant. "Okay. Call my cell not the loft."

"Not the loft?" Justin stopped as he reached for his suitcase. "Aren't you home?"

"No."

Justin's concern rose even higher. In his mind he could see Brian, pale and hollow cheeked, sitting up in a white-sheeted hospital bed calling him while the nurses were out of the room. "Bri?"

"Yes?"

"You are okay?"

"Ahuh." Brian yawned again. "I will be. I'm just a little tired."

Justin worried his bottom lip with his teeth. "Okay, you get some rest. I'll call in the morning to let you know when I arrive and then I'll take a taxi to you."

"Just call. I'll get you."
"You sure? You sound very tired."

"I am all of a sudden."

"Get some sleep---please."

"I will. You get some too."

"Later." Justin closed his eyes as he waited for Brian's response. Something was wrong and Justin was afraid his constant fear was realized, that the cancer was back. Brian's replies did nothing to ease his anxiety, but at least he wasn't in the hospital if he wanted to pick him up at the airport.

Not really aware of the worry he had caused Justin, Brian gave his lover a quiet, "Later," and turned off the phone. He leaned back and closed his eyes, "No more later Sunshine. Not for us." He put his feet up on the hassock and quickly fell asleep.

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~~ Wednesday, October 3, 2005 ~~

Brian had turned on the coffee before hitting the shower. Now, a half hour later he was leaning against the counter, looking at the view of the yard through the breakfast room windows. Even as jaded as he sometimes felt he had to admit it was beautiful. He had just taken another sip of coffee from the same
cup he had used for whiskey the night before when his cell phone started to ring. He set the cup down and picked up his phone. He didn't answer until he made sure the caller ID was Justin's cell. This call hadn't been the first of the morning --- but it was the first he was willing to answer. It was just after six in the morning.

"Brian?"

"Who else?"

Justin gave a small laugh and then yawned. "I'm on a Liberty Air flight. It's direct and leaves at six thirty. It's flight 529. We should land at seven fifty."

"I know, I know. It's the flight I usually get on Monday mornings. It's usually on time."

"Right...right. You'll still be outside to pick me up?" Justin was trying to gauge Brian's energy levels.

"Of course. And make sure you have the stewardess wake you, that flight continues on to Dallas within thirty minutes."

"I won't fall asleep. I got a double espresso just before I called, and I have a soda with something extra in it in my bag, in case I need it." Justin suppressed a yawn. "Plus they serve lattes on this flight."

Brian frowned as he heard the muffled sound. "Did you sleep at all after I called?"

"I had to pack and get to the airport and..."

"Justin."
"Okay. I'll be sure someone wakes me up. I don't think I'll sleep anyway, not once the caffeine hits."

"Ahuh," Brian muttered in disbelief. "I'll see you soon."

"Bri?"

"What?"

"You are okay right?"

"Yes." Brian rolled his eyes. "Of course."

Justin wasn't convinced. He needed to look Brian in the eyes, and then he could tell if Brian was lying. "Okay. I have to finish this drink before I board, and they said they are calling my row in five minutes."

Brian glanced at the clock on the coffee maker. "Five minutes?" Brian muttered, and then he remembered Justin's comment about a latte. Brian's eyes widened. "Are you flying business class?"

"It's the only thing left." Justin laughed, amused by the accusing tone in Brian's voice, regardless of his own fears. "Besides, it is your card. See you soon."

Brian listened to the phone until Justin turned it off. He had heard the flight being called and then nothing. Justin definitely enjoyed the good life.

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Brian knew he was going to be late. He hadn't counted on the extra time negotiating the early traffic jams out of the suburban area where the house was located. Apparently the wealthy who worked there got up early too. The cars around him were mostly expensive foreign models being driven by men and women in pricey suits. He realized a lot of these people probably worked in the same financial area as he did while at Vanguard. Brian had never considered the commute they must all have had.

It wouldn't have been a bad commute into the city but he had to go beyond that to the airport. He drove into the arrival lanes of the airport and was quickly pulling up to the curb where Justin was waiting in the passenger pick up area. Brian watched as the early morning sun gleamed off the bowed golden head. Justin looked up and saw him, giving a small wave of recognition.

Brian leaned over and opened the door. Justin had his backpack and ever present portfolio. "Get in."

Justin slid his portfolio behind their seats. "Open the trunk."

"What?" Brian looked at the backpack. "Just shove the backpack between your feet."

"Brian, please open the trunk!"

Brian put the car in park and turned off the engine. Being able to pop the hood and trunk of later model cars was one of the few conveniences he missed having with the Corvette. Brian got out of the car and went to open the trunk. "I don't see why you can't put the damn thing in the front seat..." He turned to look at Justin who was lifting one of two soft pieces of luggage into the trunk.

"Help me get them in. They will fit."

"Justin, what's with all this shit?" Brian pushed the large tote to the side and watched as Justin lifted the matching piece.

The blond just shrugged. "I didn't know what I'd need."
"Fuck, you didn't leave with this much!"

Justin shut the lid of the narrow trunk. "I knew it would fit. It took me a while to get the specs on the Internet for the trunk, and then I had to check the airline's requirements to see what was allowed. Do you know a one way ticket is over four hundred dollars!" He pulled the keys out of the trunk and gave them to Brian. "Here, let's go, security is already giving us the look."

Justin turned to walk around the car to the passenger side. Brian stared at him with a dumbfounded look on his face. He suddenly reached out and grabbed Justin by the collar of his heavy sweater. He drew him into a tight hug, pinning Justin's back against his chest. "Justin, how much coffee have you had this morning?"

"I'm fine."

"How much?"

"Just the cup or two I mentioned."

Brian felt the slight shudder go through Justin's body. "Let me rephrase that. How much caffeine have you had since I called last night?"

"I had a lot to do to get to the airport this morning."

"You didn't go back to sleep at all did you?"

Justin shook his head.
Brian leaned the side of his head against Justin's and spoke quietly in his ear. "Tell me what's wrong."

"HEY BUD, GET OUT OF HERE!"

Brian and Justin were startled by the angry shout. They looked over to see the security guard walking towards them.

"COME ON. YOU KNOW THE RULES. PULL IN THEN OUT. NOW MOVE IT OUT OF HERE. IT'S PICK UP AND MOVE ON HERE."

Brian let Justin pull away. Justin gave him a small smile. "Wonder if he has ever met you at Babylon."

"Get in the car Justin," Brian groused as he moved to the driver seat.

Brian started the car and then picked the backpack off the seat so Justin could get in. He almost dropped the sack. "What the fuck have you got in here?"

Justin settled in the seat and then took the bag from Brian and set it down between his feet. "CDs"

"You brought your entire music collection?"

"No, computer files and programs."

"Oh." Brian gave him an annoyed look and pulled away from the curb. He drove out of the airport and merged onto the highway without saying anything but every time he glanced over at Justin the blond was staring at him. He finally put on his blinker and pulled over to the side of the road.
"What's wrong?" Justin asked as they rolled to a stop. "Are you feeling sick? Do you need me to drive? Should we go right to the hospital?"

"Justin I'm fine. It's you I'm worried about. Are you okay?"

Justin turned in his seat to look at Brian more closely. "Are you in pain?"

"Justin I feel fine! You've had too much caffeine. I'm worried that you are going to have a problem."

"I'm fine." Justin reached out his right hand and gently caressed Brian's cheek.

Brian felt the gentle touch and could tell that there were small tremors in Justin's hand. He reached up and clasped the slightly smaller hand in his own. "I'm okay Justin. I'm worried about you right now. You're not looking too good."

Justin didn't say anything but continued to look closely at Brian. He finally nodded. "You are okay?"

"Yes. I'm not going to tell you again. I was with you just three days ago and nothing has changed, not an ache or a pain, a sniffle or a cough."

"When you left on Sunday you said you had a doctor's appointment on Monday."

"So?"

"And then you said you needed me to come home."
Brian shook his head, confused. "I had an eye doctor's appointment Justin."

Justin looked at him more closely and let out a deep exhale of breath. "So you really are okay?"

Brian nodded.

"YOU FUCKING ASSHOLE!" Justin pulled his hand out of Brian's and hit him in the arm. "I've been going nuts."

"Owww!" Brian rubbed his arm. "What's wrong with you? Why were you worried?"

"WHY? Why do you think? Ughh..." Justin threw himself back in his seat. "You are such a fucking queen."

"Me?"

"Yes. You!"

Brian gave him a nasty look. "Look princess, I'm not the one that arrived with more luggage than Streisand and wired with caffeine to the point of shaking."

"What did you fucking expect me to do? I had no idea what was going on, or how long I had to be here, or if you were..." Justin just shut his eyes. "Fuck."

Brian's eyes grew wide as he realized what Justin must have been thinking. "Jesus Justin, I'm sorry. I'm fine. It isn't back." Brian waited for a reaction but Justin's eyes remained tightly shut. "Justin, I'm sorry."
The younger man nodded but remained still. His face had initially been pale but now it was slightly flushed and Brian could tell he barely had hold of his emotions. He knew Justin was holding back tears. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

The blond just nodded again but stayed quiet as if he didn't trust himself to speak yet.

Brian sighed and prepared to pull out into traffic. "You hungry?"

He received another nod in reply.

"Okay. Breakfast it is."

They drove in silence for ten minutes.

Justin finally opened his eyes and looked around. Brian glanced over at him. "You okay?"

Justin nodded his head. "I thought it was back."

"No, it's not."

"Then what else is wrong?"

Brian sighed. "A lot. But not my health."

"Okay."
Brian took an exit off the interstate. Justin looked at the where they were. "Aren't we going to the diner?"

Brian shook his head. "I thought we'd go to that place you like over by the Institute."

"Oh, okay."

Brian's cell rang. Justin picked it up off the console between their seats.

"Don't answer it until you know who it is."

"It's Michael." Justin squinted a bit as he tried to make out the numbers. "I'm more tired than I thought."

"You're crashing from the caffeine. And don't answer it, let it roll to voice mail."

"Why aren't you taking a call from Michael?"

"I have my reasons."

"Shit, what's going on?"

"Don't worry about it. Just don't answer the phone unless it's Cynthia."

Justin began to scroll down and saw there were 8 missed messages. He checked the voice mail; there were nineteen messages waiting to be heard. "There are a few from Lindsay and a bunch from Michael."
Starting from last night before you called me." Justin set the phone down in his lap. "What the hell is going on?"

"Can we eat first?" Brian asked with an annoyed tone. He pulled into the parking lot of the café.

"Okay," Justin agreed as he started to get out of the car.

The two men entered the café and were quickly seated, ordering before speaking again to each other again.

While looking over the menu Brian ordered himself a non-fat decaf latte and a decaf herbal tea for Justin. He ignored Justin’s glare. He didn’t feel like ending up in the ER with Justin suffering from caffeine poisoning or a rapid heart rate. When the waiter left with their order the two lovers took the first few moments to look each other over more closely.

Justin nodded almost too himself. "You look okay."

"Just okay?"

Justin smiled. "You look fabulous."

Brian shook his head in annoyance. "Well you look like shit."

"Thanks!" Justin scowled at him.

Brian nodded. "You’re welcome."
A small wrinkle appeared in his forehead as he frowned, looking more closely at Brian's suit. "Isn't that the suit you wore on Friday?"

"Yes. I have had it dry cleaned since then."

"But you never wear the same suit within two weeks..."

Brian gave him a warning glare.

"Sorry!" Justin surreptitiously gave the other man the finger. "I had a rough night."

Brian snorted and took a sip of his coffee. He watched as Justin reached for the sugar. He intercepted his hand. "Use the artificial stuff for now. At least until you've eaten something."

"What!?" Justin glared at him. They stared at each other for several moments, before Justin gave a slight nod. Brian released his hand and quickly handed his lover a couple of yellow packets.

Justin opened the packets and emptied them into his tea. "Are you in trouble?"

Brian gave him a look.

Justin rubbed one of his eyes and thought a moment. "Okay, it's not you."

"Exactly."

"It's not me, I haven' been here. So --- what did they do?"
"Long story."

"Isn't that why I'm here?"

Brian shrugged. "We have a lot to do, a lot to decide."

"We?" Justin paled. "Decide?"

Hearing a strange tone in Justin's voice Brian looked up from his coffee. He rubbed the back of his neck. Was he ever going to get this right and stop scaring Justin? He shook his head slightly. "No, not that decision. That is not an option."

"Okay." Justin took a deep breath, realizing Brian was not breaking off their relationship; in fact, Brian had just made it clear he wouldn't even consider separating. Justin closed his eyes and took a calming breath. He and Brian were okay. Brian was okay.

Brian watched as Justin physically relaxed; in just a moment of time, his eyes were closed and there was the shadow of a smile on his face. He watched the younger man sink, almost as though boneless, into his chair. He waited for him to open his eyes. When he didn't he began to wonder if the blond had fallen asleep.

"Sunshine?"

"Hmmm?" Justin opened his eyes and looked at Brian.

Brian watched as the blue in Justin's eyes grew as his eyes acclimated to the increase in light. He waited until Justin was more alert and focused on him. He eventually nodded to Brian, giving him a little motion with his hand for him to continue.
"Liberty Air is buying Northern, corporate is moving to New York City."

Justin's jaw dropped. "Wow."

"We've been guaranteed the account after the merger and are being asked to help with the marketing of the whole project as it happens." Brian nodded. "So we, you and me, have a lot to decide."

"About where to live?" Justin moved his tea to the side as he saw the waiter approach with a tray. "Is that why you asked me about you moving to New York on the phone? Is that why I'm back?"

"Not just that. It is a big change coming, and we have things like that to think about. And just because corporate is moving doesn't mean the business group is moving, if I remember right, and I always do, they got some tax break that might mean they have to keep some of the business functions here in the Pitts." Brian moved away from the table a bit as the waiter placed his breakfast in front of him. "I ... we ..." Brian waited until Justin was served and the waiter was walking away before continuing. "... need to talk about some things that happened before you left."

Justin looked up from cutting into his French toast with a confused look. "Like?"

"Why you are in New York. Why you went. Why I didn't go. Why I let you leave." Brian started to move the food around his plate, deciding what he would eat and what he would shove off to the side for Justin. He stopped and motioned to the waiter, pointing to his almost empty coffee cup.

"Wow." Justin waited for the server to leave after he arrived to refill Brian's coffee before saying more. "Does this discussion include what is going on with Lindsay's and Michael's calls?"

Brian nodded. "It's part of it."

"And we aren't at the diner because...?" Justin made a questioning motion with his knife.
"Because the food is better here?"

"Brian!"

Brian nodded. "You have to admit Sunshine, this place is nicer, faster, has quieter service and the food is better."

Justin laughed. "I thought I was very good and fast at the diner."

"Yes, but you weren't quiet and you weren't on the menu." Justin laughed again and Brian was glad to hear a relaxed tone

"Only your menu."

Brian smiled. "True." Brian set down his knife and fork, quickly getting Justin's attention.

"What else?"

"I don't want anyone to know you are here."

Justin looked surprised. "Why?"

Brian shrugged. "I have my reasons. Can you deal with that?"

Justin nodded. "I trust you." He frowned suddenly. "It'll be tough not seeing Mom and Daphne. Will it be for long?"
Brian shrugged. "Don't know but initially I just want us to work a few things out. We can't do it in two different cities and I'd prefer to do it without advice from the cheap seats."

"Okay." And with that decided Justin quickly began to inhale the food on his plate. Brian didn't bother to pick up his utensils; instead he pulled out his phone and called Cynthia. Justin listened as Brian talked with his assistant about tomorrow's meeting and the work they would need to get done prior to it.

Brian asked if Ted was in and grimaced when he was told he had been to Cynthia's desk twice to see if Brian had called. She also mentioned she had messages from Lindsay and Michael.

Brian turned off the phone and finished his eggs. When he put his fork down, Justin pointed at his toast and bacon. Brian nodded and watched as Justin quickly moved the food to his own plate.

He sipped his coffee and watched his lover eat for a few moments. "I wanted you to come into the office with me but that may not be feasible. At Vanguard I could at least keep people out, but Kinnetik's design makes it practically impossible for you to remain out of sight."

"I probably could use some sleep Brian. Drop me at the loft till you work it all out. Then come and get me. I won't answer the phone or door."

Brian nodded. "I really wanted you at the office today, I wanted your input on stuff."

"We'll think of something."

The two finished breakfast, paid the bill and slowly walked to the car. Brian felt Justin's hand reach out for his. Brian clasped it and held it until they reached the car.
"Fucking Asshole!" Brian yelled as he suddenly hit the brakes.

Justin made a face as Brian took a sharp u-turn and headed back down the way they came.

"Where are we going to go?"

"I can't believe the little shit doesn't understand I don't want to talk to him."

"Does he have a key again?"

"Yes. He's probably camped out up there."

"Probably going through your mail."

Brian looked over at Justin. "He goes through my mail?"

Justin shrugged. "Who knows?"

Brian swore and turned down a side street. He pulled over and parked.

"What's the matter?"
"You can't stay at home. Or the office. You show up at your mom's and you know everyone will find out you are there."

Justin looked down the street and recognized the neighborhood that had been his neighborhood for the last few years. It felt good to be 'home'. Everything was familiar and he liked the feeling. The diner was just a couple streets over and not far from that Woody's. He closed his eyes thinking of what else was close. "Umm... you ... you could leave me at Babylon I guess. I can stay in the office there. The cleaning crew will be done and the staff won't be there until seven tonight."

Brian turned and gave him a long stare and then shook his head. "You haven't been back. I wouldn't leave you there alone for the first time. Not an option."

"You're right." Justin nodded, trying not to look relived.

"Mark the calendar. You admitted I was right."

"Brian." Justin lightly hit his arm. He thought a moment, a smile brightening his face. "How about a hotel?"

"Nice try Sunshine, but I've seen your hotel bills."

"Well, just drop me off at the bus station and I'll hang out there! I can beg for money, eat out of the garbage can and sleep in the alley. I'm sure the bathrooms will be great places for a quick piss and wash. I'll keep my cell off, just turn it on at certain times and you can call me then, that way my battery won't run out of power the first day. Of course, that might be a problem because if I don't have to hock my watch to eat it'll probably be stolen the first night I have to sleep in the alley or a shelter!"

Brian shook his head as he put on his blinker, pulled away from the curb and roared down the street. "Drama princess. You never change."
"Hmmph."

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"Brian?"

"Yeah?"

Justin looked around puzzled. Brian had gotten on the first entrance to the expressway. "Where are we going? You missed all the turns for downtown and the big hotels. I am not staying at some dive."

"Does your mother know of your expensive tastes?"

Justin gave him a look.

"How foolish of me, of course she does. I remember the day she came into my office. She warned me about you. How expensive you were to keep."

"That's bullshit. I've lived in --- live in --- pretty economical places."

"Save it. Your mom and I know the real Justin Taylor."

"Fuck off," Justin grumbled but didn't actually argue the point. Both Brian and his mother were very familiar with his tastes. He was silent for a few more minutes, watching the miles burn away. "Where the hell are we going?"
Brian didn't answer him but kept driving, finally taking the exit he had taken the day before. He glanced at Justin and saw the moment he realized where they were going.

"Brian?"

"Yes."

"I thought you had sold it."

"Hadn't quite got around to it yet."

"Shit."

"Hmmm."

Justin sat still, not saying another word for the rest of the ten minute journey. Brian realized the ride was a lot faster now than in rush hour traffic. Not really bad at all, but now he understood why the realtor had insisted on showing him the house during the day.

Justin slowly got out of the car while Brian was already at the trunk, turning the key in the lock. While Brian raised the trunk lid, pulling out the two pieces of luggage Justin just stood staring at the house. This had been a dream he was sure he wanted, and when he finally had it, he gave it back. He wanted Brian but not on terms that changed the essence of the man he loved. Justin had never thought he would really see this house again, much less walk over the threshold with Brian again.

"Hey! Princess? Get over here. What the hell have you got in these?"
Justin turned to Brian. His first instinct was to say, 'My life asshole!' but he controlled himself. "Just the usual. Clothes, shoes, underwear, the kitchen sink." He turned and reached into the car and pulled out his portfolio and backpack.

"Real funny Sunshine. Now get that bubble butt over here and roll this shit to the door yourself!" Brian shut the trunk and walked around the car to stand next to the blond. He grabbed Justin's backpack and portfolio from the blond's hands. "Follow me!"

"Fuck." Justin watched him walk away. "Are you really going to make me stay here?"

Brian looked back at Justin and nodded; he unlocked the door and disappeared into the house.

Justin shook his head and went to get his luggage. "Why does this shit happen to me? I can't believe he's ...

"WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU?"

"I'm coming already, shit." Justin almost tilted the heavier of the two suitcases as he tried to maneuver them over the brick walkway.

"You are always coming Justin," came a disembodied voice from inside the house.

Justin made a sneering face and moved his head from side to side to show Brian what he thought of his humor.

Brian appeared at the door. "I saw that."

"Dick."
Brian smirked and disappeared back into the house leaving Justin to continue his struggle with the two pieces of luggage.

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Justin rolled his luggage into the foyer and left it by the door, resisting the urge to kick the luggage and making a mental note to research luggage styles and find the ones that rolled well on cobblestone and brick. He closed the door and then walked from the foyer into the dining room on the left. Justin made a face and shivered. He turned and walked back to the foyer and then directly across and through the wide entrance to the living room. He noticed Brian was over by the fireplace, lighting it, and then took in the two chairs and hassock. Justin grimaced, turned and left the room, making a quick circuit of the entire downstairs. While in the kitchen, he made a fast check of the cabinets and fridge. He picked up the wall phone and then hastily hung it up. He practically ran back to the living room, stopping only to pick up his pack and portfolio.

Brian stood by the fire watching him.

Justin glanced at Brian and started towards the doorway to the foyer.

"Where are you going?" Brian leaned back against the fireplace, casually crossing one leg over the other, and slid his hands into his trouser pockets.

Justin had stopped when Brian had started to speak and turned towards him. He looked over at the relaxed man leaning against the fireplace, so comfortable and calm, seeming very much at home in these surroundings. Justin became annoyed, very annoyed. "I am NOT staying here."

"Yes you are," Brian replied calmly.

"No I’m not!"
"Yes you are."

"I AM NOT."

"Why not?"

"Why not you ask? WHY NOT?"

Brian nodded, looking rather amused.

Justin took a step backwards, towards the doorway, more aggravated than before. "It's cold for starters."

Brian rolled his eyes, stood up straight, and walked over to the wall by the door, passing his lover. Once by the door he opened a decorative panel, checked out the controls that were on the wall and pushed several buttons. There was an audible click and the gentle hum of fans starting. Brian smiled smugly. "Heat's on."

Justin rolled his eyes but remained silent.

Brian raised his eyebrows in question. "What else?"

"There's no furniture!" To emphasize his point Justin waved an arm around the room.

Brian nodded towards the leather seats. "Those chairs are very comfortable."
Justin looked at the chairs and saw a beer bottle on the floor. "Did you stay here last night?"

"Like I said, the chairs are VERY comfortable."

"BRIAN! There is NO FURNITURE in this HOUSE. I am not sleeping in the same chair I have to sit and eat in all the time."

"Fine. I'll get some rental stuff delivered in a couple hours. A camping stove, some fold up chairs...sleeping bags."

Justin's lips twisted, demonstrating just what he thought of the comment. "There is no phone service."

"You have a cell and the power is on so you can recharge it. See, it's better than the bus station already. There is a very expensive alarm system so you don't have to worry about being rolled for your phone. And as an added bonus, in case you are still worried --- all the bathroom doors in the house lock and all the baths have running hot water!"

"Brian!" Justin practically growled his name.

Brian just raised his eyebrows higher and waited.

"There is NO FOOD!"

"Ahh, I knew there had to be something really scaring you."

"You shithead!"
Brian moved to look out at the back yard. "Well, I know we have no cows or chickens, no garden or root cellar. Do you think the gourmet store down the road will be okay? I know it might be roughing it for you – brioche, butter and imported jam for breakfast, panini and soup for lunch, and then for dinner and dessert there would only be stuffed butterfly shrimp, prime rib and chocolate mousse. I know what a hardship I'm asking of you. I mean instead of bread and water for an evening snack it would be all that cheese and crackers, expensive red wine. Nothing but bottled water and imported beer to drink." Brian took an expressive sounding deep breath and then let it out in an exaggerated sigh of sorrow. "I don't know if you can survive it. I mean I know how you love to forage in the fields for roots and then hunt, kill and prepare your own meat. I know I'm asking a lot but can you put up with it for me?"

"You shithead!"

Brian smirked. "You are repeating yourself Sunshine, surely you can do better than that."

Justin dropped the backpack on the chair. "How am I supposed to get all that?" He thought about it again, picked up his backpack and took a step forward. "I bet there isn't even toilet paper!"

"Actually Sunshine there is! I know that for a fact!"

"Brian, you can't leave me here."

"Why?"

"Because."

"That's not a reason."

"It's kidnapping."
Brian barked out a laugh. "I don't think so."

"You bring me out here, in the middle of nowhere, and leave me. There are no bus routes out here."

"You'll be fine."

Justin shook his head. "Let me keep the car. I'll drop you off and get what I need."

"Oh no. You'll be spotted all over Pittsburgh, charging me into debt for the next decade.\" Brian didn't really care what Justin put on the card, but it was a source of amusement for him to tease the younger man about it ever since Justin's escape to New York years ago.

Justin made a noise that was obviously an objection to the annoying comment and then took another step forward. "No I won't."

Brian held up his hand for Justin to stop. "Don't start on how frugal and self-sufficient you are. I've heard it all before."

"Well, I am frugal and I can take care of myself! I won't be kidnapped and forced to live like some...some... housewife in the suburbs or kept like some cheating husband's mistress."

Brian made a scoffing sound and shook his head in disbelief. "First, you weren't kidnapped. Second, your frugality is questionable except when you decide you are trying to prove a point. Third, you are not being kept here like some desperate housewife, dependent on me. That's an insult to both of us. Fourth, I'm not cheating on you or with you or whatever the fuck and you have got to stop reading that shit Emmett gives you."

Justin frowned. "What about my self-sufficiency?"
Brian shook his head, arguing with Justin was never a linear event, they ended up all over the place. "Well, I have to say you are the most self-sufficient person I know, in that you are the most persistent person I know at getting what you want."

"I want out of here. I don't want to be trapped here." Justin shook his head. "Just let me keep the car. Like I suggested before, I'll drop you off and get what I need."

"And like I answered before: No. You will be seen in Pittsburgh. And I know you, after you're done, I'll have to take out a new line of credit at the bank."

Justin wrinkled his noise and thought for a moment. He tipped his head as he formulated his next argument since his others had failed. "Well, like you won't be spotted? Everyone will know where you are, that gas guzzler is pretty obvious! Michael WILL find you."

Brian glared at Justin. First because of the insult to his car and then because this lover was right about the car being a dead giveaway to where he was. Brian opened his cell and hit a number. He and Justin stood silently in a standoff as he waited for the other person to pick up the phone.

Justin let his backpack drop to the floor, it was very heavy, and he knew he was losing his latest burst of energy. He suddenly covered his mouth to stifle a yawn. He glanced at Brian to see if he noticed. From the look on the other man's face he knew he had.

"Cynthia?"

"Yes Boss? Where are you?"

"I'm running later than I thought. I'll be in --- just keep moving things forward." He glanced at his watch; it was almost 10:00 a.m. "Get your pen. I need some things done --- and fast."

"Okay, shoot."
"I need a rental, preferably a luxury car, but nothing that will get stolen in our neighborhood."

"Did you crash the Corvette or did it just die?"

Brian rolled his eyes. "No, the 'vette is fine." He heard a snicker from Justin, and glared at him. He then pointed at the blond and mouthed, 'Later.' Justin just gave him the finger.

"Boss?"

"Yes."

"You want to pick it up?"

"No, have it delivered to 7569 Middlesex Lane. By noon."

"Okay. That'll be extra."

"Cynthia," Brian's tone obviously voicing his complaint about her comment.

"Okay, forget I said it. What else?"

"I need the number for a rental place --- expensive, short term furniture. I know there are a couple that handle business needs like this." He looked over at Justin who was looking through his backpack. "Make sure they have camping equipment." He looked away as Justin's head snapped up.

"Huh?" Cynthia reacted in surprise to the request. "Are you serious?"
"No." Brian sighed and raised his hand to press on the bridge of his nose. He felt a headache coming. "Can you do this?"

"Of course, I just..."

"Cynthia."

"Okay. Okay. What else?"

"I'll need linens too. I'll need a contact where I can order and know that it'll be delivered today." Brian noticed that Justin was now standing and staring at him, mouth slightly open as if he were about to interrupt. "Make sure whoever it is has the latest in sleeping bags and shit like that."

Cynthia was quiet a moment. "You are joking again. Right?"

"What do you think?"

"Okkkayyy."

"Your tone is making your bonus smaller."

"Yeah, like I'm worried at this point."

"I should never have let you think I needed you."
"Next command General."

He smirked. He glanced at Justin who had given up his defiant cross-armed stance for leaning against the chair. Brian knew a light shove would probably send him over the back of the chair.

"Hold on a minute. I need to get a paper and pen." Brian walked over and grabbed the backpack from Justin's feet. He then walked over and sat in one chair, pointing to the other. Justin nodded and sat down, immediately snuggling down in the chair and putting his feet up. Brian reached into the side of Justin's pack where he knew the other man always kept a pencil and small drawing pad.

"Okay. Here's what I need you to do." Brian looked over at Justin and saw him staring, entranced, into the flames. He smiled and started to get down to business. "You ready?"

"Shoot Boss."

"I want Ted out of the office."

"Out of the office?"

"A huh, in fact, I want him out of the state."

"Why?"

"Are you questioning my authority?"

"No, maybe your sanity."
"Cynthia!"

"You do realize he is our chief financial officer and considering what's about to go down I would think..."

"Don't think. When you do it the fire alarms go off. Let me do the thinking for Kinnetik, okay?"

"You can be such a prick."

"I know, and that's what you love about me. Now---Ted. Out of the state."

"How am I supposed to do that short of firing him and having the state police escort him to the border?"

"You haven't slept with any state police that owe you big time?"

"Not anyone who would think they owe me that big. Maybe I should tell him you want him gone. That should do it."

"See that's your problem, you need to learn subtlety."

"Ahuh."

"Tell him he has to be ready to leave for New York by 2:00 p.m. I want him to begin scouting for office space, but do not tell him any more than that."

"You expect Ted to just get on a plane, sometime in the next five hours and what? Just get out of town. I know he's your friend and you've known him a long time, but as short as the time has been since I met and started working with him I am pretty sure he won't do that."
"Tell him I said to get his frigging ass out of there by two or I'll kick it out of there. Tell him his blond twink can go too and that we will pick up Blake's airline and hotel bill but nothing else."

"We will? So Ted isn't in trouble?"

"Yes we will pick up the tickets, you may want to say something about you wish you were being sent – all that shopping, the theaters, and the opera."

"Opera?"

"Just do it. And as for your other question, no he isn't in any more trouble than usual. I just want him out for a while. Trust me, mention opera and the free ride and he'll run to the exit and be in New York before he figures out I'm being too nice and therefore up to something."

"Too true." Cynthia gave a low laugh. "Okay, got it."

"Be sure to send them economy on Liberty and make sure we get the discount. Put them in a safe but cheap place in New York. If nothing else is available you can go to three stars tops."

"Gotcha, no business class tickets or Plaza suite. For how long?"

"Tell him a few days. Then I'll just keep him there as long as I need."

"Don't you want him here for the Liberty meetings?"

"No."
"All righty. Next?"

"I am not in to anyone."

"Not even Justin?"

"Don't worry about that."

"Okay."

"I need another cell, mine is being inundated with calls. When it rings I only want it to be you or Justin on the other end."

"Oohh, I feel so special. And that answers my Justin question."

"Bitch! Do you want to have a job tomorrow?"

"Yes, your greatness, I'll have it sent over by courier. It'll be here when you arrive. Will you at least say hi to Justin for me?"

Brian glanced over to check on Justin. The younger man's eyes were slowly closing; he would open them a moment and then they would start to droop again. "Cynthia says hello."

Justin nodded. "A huh." His eyes started to close again as he seemed to be struggling to watch the fire.

"Justin says hello back. Can I continue now?"
"Next."

"How do we keep people from getting from the lobby to our offices?"

"We don't?"

"We need to."

"Ummm, security?"

"Arrange a temp."

"Oookkaayyy. Is there something I should know? Has there been a threat?" Cynthia cleared her throat. "Boss, we aren't ... you know..."

Brian shook his head. "No Cynthia, no threats – no bombs."

"Oh good. You know I think once in a lifetime is all a girl should have to deal with."

"I know. I just don't want people bothering me over the next few weeks. We have a lot to do and we will be handling some very sensitive stuff. I'd like to be able to tell Liberty that we are solid on security. Have the security agency do badges so people don't get past reception and the guard."

There was a long pause. "Aren't you going to extremes to keep Michael out of here?"

Brian barked out a laugh. Cynthia could usually see through the bullshit. "What do you think?"
"I think the guard should be armed and be shown a picture."

"He's been there this morning?"

"Yes, just a little while ago. Marched right past all of us as if he owned the place. In fact, he used your name quite liberally, saying you were the man who would fire us all if we stopped him. Ted hid."

"Maybe we need a dog as well?"

Cynthia laughed. "No, he'd get a load of Michael's puppy dog eyes and let him by."

"Hmm, just arm the guard then."

"Okay. Anything else?"

"Not until I get there. I just need to know when the car will arrive and those phone numbers. How long do you need?"

"Give me a couple minutes."

"Okay."

"Want to hold or do you want me to call you back?"

"I'll hold, that way I know you won't waste time."
"You are a harsh man."

There was a click and Brian listened as the canned music of their phone system cut in.

Brian heard a slight snore to his left and turned toward Justin. He couldn’t help but smile. The younger man had fallen asleep, and his head was tipped back slightly causing him to snore. Brian decided to let him sleep until he was off the phone. Then he would have to wake him up to take him to the grocery and liquor stores. A trip he knew would be expensive and annoying since Justin had a habit of getting a little out of control in a regular grocery store. This trip was going to be a nightmare. He shook his head. He realized that Justin would want to cook and the only pots and pans at the store were very, very high end. Vic had aptly called Justin a princess; he certainly had the tastes of the rich and noble. This little temporary housekeeping venture was going to cost him a bundle, but it was better for their privacy. At least he could stop and get things from the loft without being cornered. The rental would give him some anonymity for the next few days. He really didn’t want to see Michael or anyone else for that matter, including Debbie, Jennifer, Daphne and Emmett. He had all he needed now. Justin.

"Boss?"

"Yeah?"

"The car will be there at 1:15."

"I said noon."

"You want luxury, you have to wait until 1:15."

"I'll be at the office by 1:45 then."
"Here are the contacts and numbers for the other stuff. First, Premium Executive Solutions, the rental business, is 555...."

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Brian ran down the list of what he had ordered from the rental company. King size bed with new top quality mattress, an armoire and lounge chair for the bedroom. He ordered a small dining table for the kitchen with two chairs. He was glad to hear they had a small package of kitchen essentials. He didn't have to worry about Justin demanding pans at the gourmet shop. The company specialized in providing services for executives that had long but temporary stays for business and needed apartments or efficiencies furnished but with finer quality furnishings. As an afterthought he had added a couch for the living room. What hadn't been an afterthought were the worktable, easel, chair and computer for the sunroom. If he was going to keep Justin at the house he needed to keep him occupied. Brian looked over the list and shook his head. He called back and asked for a large screen television, DVD player and stereo setup as well.

Brian glanced at his watch and then at the still sleeping Justin. He called the number Cynthia gave him for the professional shopper. He quickly made arrangement to have linen, towels and any items needed for the bath, bedroom and kitchen purchased and delivered. The hardest part had been trying to get the woman to understand he didn't have a pattern or theme in mind. He simply wanted dark blue in the bedroom, red in the bath and he didn't care about the kitchen. He also wanted hypo-allergenic pillows and the same for the duvet --- no feathers. He called information and then the cable company. He arranged for both the cable and internet service to be installed. He paid extra but they would be out in the late afternoon with the cable box and computer modem --- but today. Justin should wake up to luxury living in the morning. Money talked. A lot of money did more than talk; it got things done more quickly.

He regretted having to do it but he stood up and walked over to stand by Justin. He watched the blond for a moment and then squatted down beside him. "Justin?" He spoke quietly, but when there was no reaction, he reached out and began to gently shake him. "Come on Sunshine. Time to wake up."

Justin moaned but began to open his eyes. He gradually focused on Brian's face. "Hi."

"Hi."
"What time is it?"

"Time to go shopping for food. You ready?"

Justin nodded and slowly sat up and stretched. "The chair is so comfortable Bri."

"I know."

Justin rubbed his face for a moment. "You really did spend last night here."

Brian nodded. He stood up and reached out a hand to Justin. The younger man grabbed hold and allowed Brian to pull him up. Justin immediately wrapped his arms around Brian's waist, pulling the taller man closer.

"I love you."

"Of course you do."

"Can we talk about what's wrong now?"

Brian kissed the top of Justin's head. "No!"

"But isn't that why I'm here?"

"You are here for a lot of reasons." Brian pushed him away but grabbed his left hand and began to pull the smaller man after him as he headed for the foyer.
"Where are we going? I doubt you have a bed upstairs."

"Shopping."

"Why does this not surprise me Brian?"

Brian pulled him out the front door and gave him Justin a shove towards the car. "For food."

Justin turned and smiled widely. "You know how to show a guy a good time!"

Brian locked the door and walked past the blond and towards the car. "I can skip the food and leave you here you know."

"Fuck." Justin ran towards the car.

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Brian looked at the cart and shook his head in shock. They hadn't even reached the deli or the butcher's area. "Do we really need all this shit?"

"You may not, but I do; you know better than to take me grocery shopping on an empty stomach. Where's the soda aisle?"

"There is no aisle, this is just a gourmet shop and you are emptying the shelves!"
"Then I'm sure they have Pellegrino." Justin ignored Brian's moan. "Why don't you just go to the liquor store? I'll meet you at the car and we can stop at the shop on the corner that advertised baked goods and candy."

"Fuck this." Brian turned and walked away.

Justin smirked as he watched his lover's retreat. "Don't worry, I'll just use the card to pay for it."

Brian gave him the finger as he walked away. Justin laughed and continued toward the meat counter. He didn't know what was wrong but he was enjoying the freedom to go crazy in the store. Brian rarely allowed him to buy whatever he wanted. The older man hated it when Justin had tried to economize but hated it just as much when he spent money. Justin smirked as he saw the fillet mignon...oh yes, he was going to have fun here. The seafood section was next. And Pellegrino. Brian could complain all he wanted but he was the biggest label snob Justin had ever known. He knew for a fact that the loft's refrigerator was full of Fuji and Pellegrino waters.

Justin checked out and had the sense to blush when he saw the tally. Brian was going to kill him. He didn't even know how long he was going to be in Pittsburgh, nor did he know where he was supposed to keep all the food he had just bought. Justin shook his head as he pushed the basket with over six hundred dollars of the finest quality meat, produce and other goods to the car. Maybe he could claim his spending was a reaction to all the stress he had been under and the empty kitchen? He knew it was mostly the truth. Justin debated the possibilities of Brian believing him as he continued to walk to the car. Maybe if he told the truth in just the right way Brian wouldn't believe him and just blow it off to his lover's excesses. That way there would be no covert glances or gentle handling that Brian was prone to when he was worried about Justin's emotional stability. Justin knew from experience Brian never confronted his reactions; he had let Justin reveal his fears both after the bashing and again after the Posse meltdown. Brian watched, waited and tried to handle things indirectly. If Justin said he overspent, Brian would think something more was going on. If he claimed to be stressed Brian would think he was being a drama princess. Brian had a way of telling what was going on inside his head, so Justin figured if he told the truth Brian might not be sure what was really happening and let it go. Justin hadn't figured out what to say when he noticed Brian leaning against the car with the trunk open. The brunette was slowly shaking his head.

Justin raised his hands in self defense. "You should have stayed with me. You know I get carried away. And---the kitchen is empty. That's just too frightening for someone with my sensibilities."
"You mean your appetite."

"Stress...hunger..." Justin didn't finish but shrugged his shoulders.

Brian gave him a long stare; Justin could see him trying to gauge what was going on in his head.

Brian looked down at the bags, his expression giving nothing away. "There better be something in there I can eat."

Justin nodded, deciding to just go with the direction Brian was setting for the conversation. "I got you some homemade granola that is made with bran."

"Granola." Brian looked up at him. "You?"

"Okay --- I also got eggs loaded with omega 3 that were from chickens that were treated humanely and fed only...."

Brian's head jerked up from the bag he was looking in as he lifted it from the cart. "You bought the eggs that were five dollars a dozen!"

"They are good for your heart!"

"Jesus Christ Justin! Not having to work three jobs to keep you in this style would be better for my heart."
"You are so full of it Brian. You only work two. Tricking is not a job. And I’m not sure running Babylon could be considered a job, it's more like playing with a toy than working." Justin set a bag into the trunk and saw the case of wine and six bottles of assorted liquor, two of which were Jim Beam. "Well the red wine might be good for your heart but I doubt the whiskey is!"

"I'll take care of my heart my way." Brian lifted another bag and peeked into it. "And all this cheese and meat isn't going to kill me?"

"The cheese is mine and that is grass fed beef that was not medicated with antibiotics or growth hormones. It's good for you. Healthy fat, and low cholesterol meat."

"Right."

"Everything in these bags is natural and healthy. Guaranteed to save your life through healthy eating."

"Uh huh." Brian closed the lid of the trunk and turned to Justin. "And all those bags of potato chips, nachos and cheese thingies?"

"Shut up."

The two men climbed in the car and headed towards the road.

"Brian, don't forget to turn into that bakery."

"Like that is going to be healthy!"

"Shut up."
Brian smirked and pulled into the bakery. Justin started to get out of the car but Brian reached out and tapped his arm. "Can you at least look for a low fat muffin for me?"

Justin nodded. "Yeah, but my primary goal is creamy and chocolate." He closed the door to the 'vette.

Brian smiled as he watched Justin disappear inside the bakery. He realized he felt relaxed, even with everything that was going on at work and with the anger he felt towards his friends. He was feeling --- what was he feeling? Brian tried to define it but he rarely felt this way. He only felt this way with Justin. He felt at peace? So was this what everyone said was --- happy?

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"Brian there is someone here."

Brian pulled into the drive and pulled up to the white van. "I'll check it out. I have deliveries coming but they shouldn't have started arriving yet. And they don't have a key."

"Deliveries?" Justin decided to prod for more information. He could kick himself for falling asleep and missing what Brian had ordered for them to sleep on. He wasn't convinced Brian would not really order sleeping bags or a big futon size mattress like he had gotten for the loft for his orgy during the Stockwell campaign.

Brian ignored Justin's question and slightly beseeching look by getting out of the car without saying a word. He walked into the house without hesitation as to what or who might be waiting for him inside.

Justin took out his own cell phone and turned it on, ready to call 911 if necessary. He frowned when he saw a list of missed calls. Brian must have turned his phone off when he fell asleep. His eyebrows lifted when he saw three of the IDs. If Brian had heard his phone in his backpack, answered and saw the numbers he knew why he had turned his phone off. Apparently if Brian wouldn't answer their calls they
assumed Justin would. He would need to know what was going on before he returned Lindsay, Michael and Emmett's calls. He waited nervously until Brian came out after a few minutes.

"Come on and get the groceries unloaded."

"Who is it?"

"It's the cleaning crew. I didn't realize this was their day to come."

"Oh. Are they leaving?"

Brian shook his head. "No, they are cleaning, and they are cleaning faster and more thoroughly than usual. I told them I wanted everything dusted and vacuumed. The bathrooms in the master bath and downstairs are all to be cleaned and ready for use."

Brian picked up the bags and started to head for the house but stopped when Justin's hand reached out and took his arm.

"Brian?"

Brian turned with a questioning look on his face.

Justin let his worry show on his face. "Am I really staying here?"

"Yes, but not just you, me too"

Justin let out an audible sigh of relief.
Brian observed Justin's body language and then the look on his face. "We need to be alone and we will have our privacy here. We won't get it in Pittsburgh right now. We have things to talk about and work on, and fuck knows we don't need other people telling us what we should do, how we should feel or what they think of our relationship. Okay?"

The blond nodded. "Okay," he replied absently.

Brian could tell the wheels were turning in Justin's brain. He waited.

"Brian, this is big, isn't it?"

Brian nodded. "For you and me it is."

"What happened?"

"Why do you think something happened?"

"Did you turn my cell off?"

Brian nodded. "I was on my cell and you were sleeping. You needed the sleep and I didn't need the interruptions. How many calls?" Brian made a face. "I saw one ID and turned it off."

"Michael and Lindsay, they are the unusual ones, Em calls at least once a week."

Brian shook his head in disgust. "Don't talk to any of them until we have decided on stuff okay?"
"How do they affect what we have to decide?"

"They don't." Brian smiled sardonically. "That's what happened Justin."

Justin nodded, getting a glimmer of what might have happened. "You'll explain what this is about later, all of it?"

"Yes, Sunshine. Now let's get that seven dollar a pint chocolate hazelnut gelato into the freezer before it melts."

"How did you know I bought that?"

Brian just laughed as he turned away. "The same way I know you bought the lemon sorbet that costs just as much."

Justin rolled his eyes and followed Brian into the house with his first load of grocery bags.

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Justin watched the commotion of the three person cleaning crew for a few moments before he opened the freezer and began to put the frozen food away. When finished, he then joined Brian at the counter where the taller man was looking at several of the cans he was unpacking. "Brian?"

The older man looked at him and raised his eyebrows in puzzlement at Justin's tone. "Why are you whispering?"

Justin gave him a look of exasperation but continued to whisper. "What did you say to them? They look frightened of you."
"They should, they were sitting on their asses in the living room doing nothing when I walked in. I'm here now and I told them I'll be moving things in. We'll need them once a week and they better look like they have this place free of every molecule of dust, dirt and mold by four this afternoon."

"Oh." Justin wrinkled his nose. "Mold?"

Brian laughed. "There isn't any, and if there was there won't be when they are done."

"Brian, how are we supposed to stay here? There's nothing here."

"That's why you are staying here this afternoon. Deliveries."

"I am? But I thought I was going with you. Hasn't Ted left?"

"You heard that?"

"Sort of, some of it, and then..." Justin shrugged, indicating he fell asleep at that point.

"Cynthia checked in and Ted, he will be on his way to New York shortly, but I need you here this afternoon. I told you --- deliveries." Brian reached into the bag and pulled out a can. "Decaf?"

Justin shrugged. "What deliveries?"

"Stuff. If we are going to be camping out here then we need the equipment -- a tent, king size sleeping bags. Who knows? Maybe I splurged and arranged to have one of those inflatable beds delivered. Your job will be setting up the camp!"
"Brian I don't --- we don't camp."

"I do Sunshine --- remember my trip back from Toronto? I slept in a tent. Haven't you ever camped out?"

"Well, no --- I have allergies. I thought we were staying in the house? You didn't really send for a tent did you?"

"NO!"

"Thank God!"

"Just sleeping bags." Brian watched the relief on Justin's face turn to outrage, but before the blond could say anything Brian held up a hand to stop him. "Hey, it's your own fault, after the money you dropped in the market we may have to use a campfire for cooking. I won't be able to pay for the gas and electricity."

"You shit."

Brian laughed. "Help me get the rest of the stuff out of the car." He glanced at his watch, "The first delivery should be here in a few minutes and I need to leave for the office."

Justin followed Brian out the door. They made one more trip together and then Brian brought the liquor in by himself in the next trip while Justin put the canned and boxed food into a cabinet by the stove. Justin looked in the cabinet and made a face.

"What?" Brian asked as he put the case of wine down.
"All that stuff...it didn’t make a dent in the cabinet, and look at all these cabinets." Justin pointed at all the doors along the wall.

"Somehow Justin, given the time, I think you could fill them to capacity --- with junk food alone."

Justin was about to answer him when they heard a horn beep.

Brian pointed to the front of the house. "Time for me to go." He started out of the kitchen.

"Wait a minute Brian, what am I going to do here?"

"Like I said – set up camp. Just arrange what's delivered or put it away. It's your job. I think you will find a lot to amuse yourself with."

"What time will you be back? I'll be stranded out here – alone."

Brian snorted. "Yeah, there are a lot of lions and tigers and bears out here."

They reached the foyer and Justin grabbed his arm. "I'm serious Brian!"

Brian turned and took Justin's hand. "Hey, it's okay. I'm only a phone call and twenty minutes away. The power is on, I had the phone reconnected, and your cell phone can be recharged. You know how to set this alarm system. It's the same as the loft. In fact, I used the same code."

Brian took his hand and pulled the younger man out the door and to the drive. There was a red Mercedes coupe in the driveway.
"Who's that?"

"My rental."

"Rental?"

"You were right. Michael and the others would hunt me down with the 'vette. This car I can move around in." Brian kissed him on the lips. "Gotta go."

Justin dogged his steps around the car. "What about the cleaning crew?"

"They are paid and will do whatever you want."

"What about the deliveries?"

"Their tips are already arranged, just tell them where to put everything. They will set it all up."

"I feel like some whining housewife being left behind. I DON'T like it Brian."

"Okay Lucy!" Brian mimicked in a very bad accent.

"You are such a fucking asshole."

"Well, look at it this way, two of the cleaning crew did sort of look like Fred and Ethel."

"BRIAN!"
Brian shook his head. "Not today Justin, not until we've talked. You stay here and get things organized. We may be here for a while."

"Get what organized? Fucking sleeping bags?"

Brian smirked as he shrugged and then opened the door. "Call me if there is a problem but I think you'll know what to do when the stuff arrives." He climbed in the passenger seat and nodded to the rental car delivery person. He shut the door and put down the window. "You going to be okay?"

"Yeah, like you said, it's not like I'm trapped." Justin looked up and saw a truck pulling in. "I guess that is the sleeping bags and shit."

Justin narrowed his eyes as he looked at Brian. "It better not be an inflatable mattress."

Brian laughed.

"Well, if it doesn't take long to set up camp – unroll the sleeping bags, draw the wagons into a circle," Justin shrugged and smiled wickedly, "I have the 'vette to keep me occupied."

"Of course you do." Brian laughed and motioned to the driver to go.

Justin wondered at the devious look on Brian's face as he watched the Mercedes grow distant down the driveway. His eyes widened when he realized why Brian was laughing. He pulled out his phone and hit a button and waited for a certain bastard to answer.

"Yes Sunshine?"

"You shit! Turn around and bring the keys to the 'vette back!"
"Have a nice afternoon Princess!"

Justin cursed into the phone but knew Brian had hung up. He stood there and watched Brian disappear down the main road. He waited for the truck to pull up so he could take the sleeping bags from the delivery man. He just hoped Brian had ordered air mattresses with a pump. Justin scowled as the truck kicked up some dust causing him to sneeze, and he began to think about revenge.

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Brian looked at the clock on his desk. It was almost 6 p.m. and he hadn't heard from Justin at all since he left him in the driveway with the delivery people descending on him. He wasn't really worried; Justin was resourceful. He had Cynthia check to be sure everything had been delivered and that the professional shopper had bought all the things for the house, although she had seemed a bit disconcerted after she had checked. Brian had gotten caught up in planning tomorrow's meeting and had ignored her when she tried to talk more about it. Brian wasn't concerned --- but then again Justin still hadn't called to comment on the quality of the 'sleeping bag.' Just then Brian's computer beeped, letting him know he had new email.

The brunet saw who it was from and opened it up. There were only two lines in the message that were followed by 'Love Justin.' It was so typical of Justin, never a thank you, just orders and criticism. "Dinner at 8. You are so cheap. I called the cable company and added ALL the premium channels."

Brian growled as he quickly typed a reply. "Be there at 9. And you're welcome!"

He waited and received a reply a couple minutes later. "8:30. The bed is VERY VERY comfortable!"

Brian laughed this time and replied again. "Leaving now. Just have to pick up some clothes. Dinner at 9. Bed at 7:30."

He started to close down his files when he was beeped for a message. It was from Justin. "You are the lord of the manor. I'll be awaiting your commands at 7."
Brian raised an eyebrow, hit a programmed button and opened the intercom. "Cynthia, I'm on my way out. We have it covered for tomorrow?"

"Yes Boss. We have the plan laid out. We should be ready to respond quickly to whatever they need. Like you said we can't do much until we know more. I'm going to leave too. The coast was clear last I checked. Last call came in fifteen minutes ago and Michael asked you to call him at home."

Brian rubbed his hands over his face. Cynthia had fielded calls from Lindsay and Michael all day. Michael had stopped in once more before Brian arrived in the afternoon and been told Brian was not in. "Okay, see you at 8 a.m. tomorrow morning. You have the new number for the house?"

"Yep. See you tomorrow."

Brian turned off the intercom, shut down his pc and headed out the door with his briefcase and laptop. It was time to go home to the manor and exercise his rights as lord. Since Michael was apparently at home he would pick up a few things at the loft before heading out to Justin.

~~~

Justin turned off the computer and smirked. He hadn't had this much fun in a very long time. If Brian was pissed at the extras Justin had made the rental agency and shopper deliver he would have to just get over it. Justin didn't camp and Brian knew it, and if Brian was going to keep him trapped at the mansion for a few days he might as well be comfortable --- very comfortable. Justin had forgotten what a platinum card could accomplish if you had a few hours and a telephone.

Justin set up the espresso machine and gave an evil laugh. Oh yeah, Brian was going to be furious. Once the machine was plugged in he turned on the oven, setting it to a very low temperature. The blond then pulled the aluminum trays out of the refrigerator and placed them in the oven. According to the
instructions the chef had provided at the grocery the food would come up to temperature within an hour but could be left in the oven at the same temperature for an additional hour without loosing its quality. He checked the place settings at the table and then headed upstairs for a shower.

Justin didn't like how empty the house sounded so he had shut and locked all the bedroom doors except for the master bedroom. It made everything less hollow, fewer echoes. One slight after effect of the bombing had been his hearing. He could stay in Babylon for hours and his hearing would adjust to the quiet of the outside after a few minutes, but the explosion had left him with a strange echoing reverberation in his hearing for a day or so. The emptiness of the house reminded him of that sound effect, so he shut the doors and the house seemed to grow smaller and less filled with echoes.

Justin adjusted the lighting in the hallways so it was light enough to walk by without being too bright. He didn't want it too dark or he'd feel like he was in a horror movie. He knew if he was more familiar with the house and there were more furnishings he would probably have felt very safe and at home here. The thought made him grimace. This would have been their home now for seven months if things had been different. He tried to shrug off the sadness as he entered the rather large bedroom, a room that was a lot cozier now with the gas fireplace burning and additional furniture. The room now had more than just the armoire and bed Brian had ordered. There were bedside tables, lamps, curtains and a dresser. The additional furniture matched the two pieces Brian had ordered. When Justin saw what was in the truck he was relieved to see something other than an air mattress and sleeping bag but it made him think about what the rental signified. He questioned the head delivery man as he and a team of two other men set up the bed and brought in the armoire. While they brought in the couch and computer Justin called the account representative about the lack of lamps and tables. In five minutes Justin had the rental agent helping with a list of more items. Justin figured Brian might be mad about the cost but it was temporary, plus Brian liked his creature comforts as well. In two hours the bedroom was soon fully furnished, including an entertainment center with a TV and stereo.

Justin had also added a few items for downstairs. The couch was nice but again there were no tables and lamps. Justin had those delivered as well. He was thrilled to see the computer setup that Brian had arranged. He had it set up in the study with its large windows that faced the backyard. Brian had been so thoughtful about the computer that Justin decided to return the favor and have something delivered for Brian --- a treadmill.

When the delivery truck pulled away to go get the additional items Justin had requested, a black van pulled up. Naomi James got out of the van and introduced herself. Brian had apparently thought of everything, and Justin would have to thank Cynthia for that.
Naomi, a professional shopper, had delivered bedding and linen. Justin helped her carry in the bags of bedding and pillows. The two toured the house and discussed a few things they might still need, even with a temporary stay. Naomi left Justin to make the bed and ran to the store for several more items, including the espresso machine. Justin was surprised to learn Naomi knew his mom. She had dressed several houses for Jennifer’s agency to help sell the properties. Naomi explained that having a totally empty house didn’t always help to sell it. Sometimes having a couple rooms decorated gave prospective home buyers something to spark their interest, especially if it was luxurious. It also gave the home buyer some perspective of the house’s depth and size. Considering her advice Justin realized that setting the stage in one or two rooms of the otherwise empty house might help sell the house when Brian did put it on the market. He had let her quickly measure for some pre-made curtains in the bedroom, as well as a tablecloth and valances for the kitchen. He also figured he could convince Brian the extra furniture was for a good reason and could probably be written off. At least he hoped that Brian would believe it.

Justin put the stereo on low and then quickly stripped, heading for the shower. The bedroom and bath no longer felt hollow. He turned on the towel warmer that Naomi had pointed out to him as she placed the plush, deep scarlet terry cloth towels she had picked up for the bath on the rack. Justin had found the controls to the mechanism and Naomi had explained how to use it. Yep, he could rough it out here in the boondocks. The blond figured he could definitely camp out sleeping on the 600 count sateen sheets that were covering the king size bed. He gave a low laugh as he stepped between the massaging jets of the shower. Yes, this was definitely a rustic camp.

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Brian slowed as he approached the house. He had never seen it at night. There were sensor lights and timers that came on automatically at dusk. He had known that since it was part of the security system and he had been paying the electric bill. He had just never seen the house lit; last night he had not wandered outside. The house was lovely. It looked stately but inviting. There were lights on within the house as well, and he wondered if those were Justin’s doing or part of the timer system too. Brian could see thin plumes of smoke curling up into the clear, cold fall air from the house’s three chimneys.

Brian pulled up next to the ’vette in the large circular drive and quickly walked to the front door. He unlocked the door and reset the alarm after closing and locking the door.

The lights on the stairwell were lit so he knew Justin was probably upstairs. He turned off the entry hall lights and hung his coat on one of the wall sconces he had turned off. He took his brief case and laptop
into the living room. He was going to toss them on a chair and head upstairs but stopped in his tracks when he saw the room. The chairs and hassock had been rearranged in a small intimate square around the fireplace. The couch was on one side and the over size hassock was in the middle. There were now tables with lamps between the chairs and behind the couch. The lights were set low and the fireplace was softly glowing. The large screen TV was angled off the side and best viewed from the couch. Justin had done more than upgraded the cable.

Brian took the time to make a circuit of the downstairs. Justin had closed the pocket doors to the dining room. Brian opened the doors, relieved to see the space empty. He was afraid he'd find a ten foot table and twelve chairs in the room. He felt the chill in the room and quickly closed the doors and moved down the hall to the kitchen. Brian noticed the swinging door to the dining room was closed but that was all that was closed off. Brian rubbed his forehead as he checked out the breakfast area of the kitchen. The table and chairs he ordered were there but the table was set for dinner with things he hadn't ordered. Brian absently noted the curtains as he turned around in the kitchen. Something smelled good. He peeked in the oven and saw the aluminum pans. After checking the temperature he nodded to himself. As he was about to leave the kitchen he stopped and his eyes grew wide. There sitting all by itself on the counter was an expensive-looking espresso maker. "You little shit!" he muttered as he headed out of the kitchen, ready to have a few words with a certain spoiled little brat.

Brian had gotten far from the kitchen door when a green glow caught his eye as he passed the darkened study door. The glow must be from a surge protector. Brian switched on the wall light and saw the desk with the pc set up on it. He thought its location along the wall was strange. There should have been more room even with Justin's easel and worktable placed nearer the windows. He glanced over to the other side of the room and understood why the furniture seemed crowded to one side. Everything was as he had ordered with the exception of one large additional piece of equipment. Brian walked in and took a closer look. He smiled and shook his head. At least the twat had thought of him too.

Brian turned off the light and walked down the hallway to the stairwell. Once at the top of the stairs he noticed Justin had once again shut the doors to all the empty rooms. The double doors leading into the master suite were open and light spilled out of the room and into the hall, as did the sound of music and water running.

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Brian knew he shouldn’t have been surprised by the interior of the bedroom. It was fully furnished, including curtains and a media center, and from the clothes on the floor – appeared to be very lived in. Time to teach the little twat a thing or two.

Brian quickly stripped and went to join Justin in the shower

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Justin turned at a noise and saw Brian stepping naked into the shower. "Hey."

Brian took the soap out of his lover’s hand and pushed him a bit so they could share the spray.

Justin made a face. "Aren't you going to say anything?"

Brian pulled his head out of the spray and whipped his head from side to side, tossing his wet hair out of his eyes. "You've been busy little boy."

"It's an investment."

"How is that?" Brian reached out and started to soap Justin's chest in slow circular movements.

"Well Naomi explained it all to me."

"Naomi?"

"The shopper you hired?" Justin rolled his eyes.
"Oh, right, right. And just how was your extravagance with my money, for your own comfort, actually an investment?"

"Well..." Justin stopped and moaned as Brian played lightly with his nipples as he soaped his chest.

Brian smirked, letting his hands trail down the younger man's chest to his waist. "You were saying."

"Umm... oh yeah... there."

Brian's hands had dropped to Justin's pubic hair and were lathering it. "Justin, try to answer my question."

"Hmm. Right." The blond's eyes were closed and his cock was starting to notice Brian's attentive fingers.

Brian moved his hands from Justin's groin and placed them on his shoulders. "Turn around." He pushed his lover around and slowly started soaping his back. "Can you talk now?"

There was a dramatic sigh from Justin. "Yes!"

"So explain your rather unscrupulous use of my money."

"Hey, the card has my name on it!"

"It's for emergency use."

"This was an emergency."
"I thought it was an investment?"

"That too."

"Justin." There was a warning note in the older man's voice.

"Well, Naomi and I were talking and she said she knows my mom."

"What has that got to do with the espresso machine?"

"Oh, you saw that, huh?"

"Yes, as well as the extra furniture, the two – count them two – entertainment centers."

"Did you see your surprise?"

"Yes. I saw the treadmill. Thank you for at least thinking of me as you spent my hard earned money."

"You're welcome."

Justin turned and took the soap from Brian's hand. He started soaping the older man's chest.

Brian smiled down at him. "Don't think for a minute that will side track me like it does you."

"I know." Justin's hands moved to Brian's shoulders and then down his arms. "It's just that Naomi said that houses sell better sometimes when at least one or two rooms are decorated. Gives the home
buyers some ideas on how the rooms would look, sort of gets them invested in thinking about the house and what they would do or change."

"So you took the opportunity to add a few things."

Justin nodded. "Now it's more comfortable, less like camping out or being somewhere unfinished or temporary."

"But it is unfinished and temporary."

Justin sighed. "I know but.... it almost wasn't."

Brian nodded, understanding maybe better than Justin did why the younger man had made the house livable for the short time they would be there.

"I'm sorry Justin."

Justin shook his head but didn't say anything. He decided he was clean enough and handed Brian the soap and reached for the shower door.

Brian turned to him. "Do you want to keep it?"

"What's the point Brian?" Justin opened the door and stepped out on to the mat. "I know we still have to talk but I've been running around all day trying to keep busy to stop thinking. In the end, aren't we really here to decide whether we are going to be apart – for good?" Justin let the door shut and turned away. Brian finished showering, watching Justin through the glass door as he dried himself and then left the bath. He quickly finished and grabbed a towel and followed his lover into the bedroom.
Justin was sitting cross-legged on the bed, rubbing his hair with a towel. Brian walked over to him. "I told you earlier, that wasn't an option. I was thinking more that we needed to decide if we are going to be together --- for good."

Justin slowed his movements and took the towel away from his hair. He looked at Brian with surprise. "For good? Really?"

Brian nodded. "Really."

He dropped his towel and then took Justin's out of his hand. He dropped it on top of his. Brian crawled on to the bed and pushed Justin back. The two quickly moved to accommodate each other's bodies, Brian laying on the top of Justin, arm to arm, leg to leg.

Brian kissed the other man's lips lightly. "Really," he repeated.

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The two kissed for several minutes before Brian sat up and smiled. Justin returned the smile and then turned, reaching for the bedside table. He turned off the light and then opened the drawer. Brian knew what Justin was reaching for in the drawer. He rolled off the bed and went to the bathroom, turned off the lights and then returned, turning off his own bedside light as he knelt on the bed. The room was now dark except for the fireplace light that gave a soft yellow radiance to the room. Brian remained kneeling as his eyes slowly moved over his lover's body. The pale whiteness of Justin's body now had taken on a golden hue, almost aglow in the firelight. His blond hair now had rich honey tones but the occasional platinum highlights sparkled as his head turned to his lover.

Justin set the lube and condom down at Brian's knee and then rolled on to his stomach, pulling his pillow under his head and giving a small sigh of contentment. Brian let out a slow breath and then moved so he was lying on his side next to Justin. He raised his hand and slowly ran it over and down the center of Justin's back; he stopped when he reached the small of Justin's back, just before the swell of his buttocks. Brian massaged the area, drawing slow circles with his index finger. He dropped a couple of slow kisses on Justin's shoulders and back. His kisses slowly moved down the same path as his fingers had. While blazing a trail with his lips Brian let his finger follow the path between Justin's cheeks and
down the crevice to his hole. Brian exhaled warm air onto Justin's back as his finger began to gently tap the little pucker of Justin's anus, teasing it gently with his fingertip. Justin let out a small moan and raised his buttocks, spreading his legs a bit to give Brian even more access.

"You like that, don't you?"

"Mmmm." Justin gave a long sigh.

Brian gently pulled the cheeks apart and gave a soft kiss to the small bud.

Justin moaned again.

"Yeah, you really like that," Brian snickered. He kissed Justin's right cheek, his finger tip pressing again the tight hole. He moved his finger to his mouth, sucking it for a moment to wet it and then pressed it against the pucker, this time just barely breaches it. He felt the pucker grab and spasm a bit against his finger. Justin let out a small sound of pleasure.

"You want more?"

"Yeah." Justin wiggled a bit, trying to push his bottom up, hoping to force Brian's finger a little deeper.

Brian used his other hand to press Justin back down. "No, I'll decide how much you get, what you get and when you get it."

"Please?"

"Please what?" Brian reached for the lube, flipped the top but then set it down by his side. He bent back down and spread Justin's cheeks, and his tongue joined his finger tip at Justin's opening. He gently
tugged a bit to the left with his finger; the small whole seemed to open and then contract. Brian tugged again and when the hole opened he quickly removed his finger and pushed his tongue into the opening.

Justin stifled a moan and tried to stay still but Brian could feel his body shiver from the sensations he was creating. He fucked the quivering hole with his tongue while his fingers dropped and played with Justin's sac. Brian continued to play with Justin's hole, wetting and stretching it with his own saliva and tongue while Justin gripped the sheet as he tried to remain still.

Brian withdrew his tongue as he heard Justin's breathing begin to increase; he waited a moment and then blew a breath across the trembling hole.

Justin groaned. "More!"

"Hmmm, maybe." Brian laid his head on one of Justin's mounds and languidly reached for the lube.

"Justin?"

"Yeah?" The younger man's answer was more of a gasp than anything.

"How come you weren't knocking me down in the shower to give me a blow job?"

"Because I know you'd rather have something hotter and tighter, something you like more than a blow job."

"Doesn't hurt that you really like this too does it?" Brian squirted some lube on his finger, and then set the tube down.

"No. I'll just lay here and let you have your way with me."
Brian kissed the cheek beneath his lips as he lightly tapped Justin's anus. "So you'll just lay there and what? I do all the work?"

"I'll help out when I can."

"No, I think I can manage." Brian sharply nipped the buttock beneath his lips as he pushed his finger deep into Justin.

"Shit!" Justin yelped, his movement forcing his ass up and forcing Brian's finger even deeper.

Brian licked the little bite and wiggled his finger, stretching Justin's opening. "See, I have it – and you – under control. Seems I can make you to do some of the work after all."

Justin started to say something but hissed and grabbed the pillow under his head as Brian unerringly found his prostate and began a direct massage.

Brian grabbed the lube and as he pulled out his finger he squeezed more lube on to a second finger. He eased the two fingers into the opening, watching as the hole dilated and took both fingers in. He began to stretch Justin more thoroughly, letting Justin push back onto his fingers. From experience Brian knew Justin would be demanding more soon and would no longer need as much stretching, or three fingers, to be loose enough to take in his large cock. What Justin liked when he was like this, stretched out on his stomach after a shower was extended anal play and then a long, leisurely hard fuck.

"Is this what you wanted Sunshine?"

Justin nodded. "Been... long ...time," he gasped as Brian twisted his fingers, just grazing the little bump deep in Justin's rectum.
"I know." Brian planted kisses along Justin's back, moving his body forward a bit. He let his fingers stay in Justin's ass, as he nuzzled the younger man's neck. Justin turned his head to face Brian and they shared a long hot kiss. Brian pushed his tongue into Justin's mouth and fucked it with the same movements as his fingers pressed into his lover's rectum. Justin moaned, almost choking on the sound.

"I wish we had a long thin dildo with us," Brian muttered as they took a moment to breathe. Justin's rectal muscles pressed on Brian's fingers in reaction.

"Oh God, fuck yeah. Then maybe I could suck you off and you could fuck me with it."

"No, you're right I want that hot tight hole of yours. I've missed it. I'm better than any fucking dildo."

"Yeah, your cock is hard and hot, you go deeper than anything. Ughh." Justin reacted to Brian shoving his fingers in deeper and pressing on his gland. "Jesus, we haven't...long...ughh."

Brian smiled and kissed Justin's mouth, swallowing another groan of pleasure.

"I know, not in a long time." Brian pulled his fingers out. "Roll over a minute."

Justin groaned but rolled onto his back.

"You know."

Justin nodded and bent his knees up, and Brian quickly moved between his spread legs. Brian pressed his fingers back into Justin and bent to take the blond's hard leaking cock into his mouth. Justin let out a shout at the timing of the dual sensation, his body jerking off the mattress, forcing his cock further into Brian's mouth and Brian's fingers deeper into his passage.
Brian purposely toyed with Justin. Never stimulating his prostate for more then a quick pass, and backing off Justin's cock, squeezing the base to stall his lover from coming. Brian kept Justin on the edge for as long as he could, the blond groaning and keening for release.

"Okay, now it's my turn." Brian quickly pulled on a condom and pushed Justin's legs wider apart. He lifted them up on to his shoulders and pressed the younger man down into the mattress, his cock pressing against the younger man's pucker and pushing in, in one quick deep movement. Justin let out a loud whimper, his body shuddering at the weight of the body on top his own and the swift, deep entry. Brian groaned at the sensations he was experiencing, the tight heat of Justin's passage, the smaller man's hole tensing around the root of his penis and the pressure and release of the rectal muscles as they reacted to him pushing his way in, and knowing all the those feelings would be repeated each time he would be thrusting into the body beneath him. With his first plunge into his lover he hit Justin's gland and the body folded beneath him shook as if convulsing. His own cry of ecstasy matching that of Justin's.

Brian took a moment and dropped his forehead on to Justin's. "Okay?"

Justin looked into Brian's eyes, his own wild and dilated. "Hmmm." He gave a shake of his head, and then hungrily kissed Brian's mouth. Brian returned the kiss, pulled himself out a little and plunged back into his lover. Justin broke the kiss, his head dropping back and a loud moan escaping. Brian's dropped his head and sucked on Justin's exposed neck, slowly twisting his hips as he pulled out of Justin and then pressing in, even more slowly. Next he used a series of sudden short hard thrusts.

Justin's reaction was instantaneous. He took a sharp breath and demanded more. "Again. Again."

"When I'm ready." Brian then made a series of very controlled short and then long thrusts, again adding a twisting motion.

Justin gasped with each thrust.

Judging how close Justin was to coming by his breathing Brian then moved to slower, longer thrusts, fighting Justin's tendency to rock up and meet his forward motion. The next few minutes were a battle between the two men over the pace of their lovemaking. Justin finally surrendered to Brian's control, and with the surrender Brian began to build from a leisurely rhythm to one that was faster, his thrusts
moving from the slow and long to short and rapid. Justin had lost all control and was moaning and whimpering, muttering Brian's name through the quivering breaths.

Brian kept his eyes focused on the changing expressions of Justin's face, his sweat pouring on to his lover as their bodies glided against each other. When Brian could see that Justin was becoming frantic for release he reached between then and grasped Justin's cock. He gave a few short pulls and felt Justin's body convulse in orgasm, the blond's face flushing red, the blue dilated eyes suddenly focused on his own as his body convulsed over and over and the semen spurted between them. Brian groaned as the hard muscles in Justin's ass compressed on his cock. Brian let Justin's legs slide to bed and he used his arms to support himself as he pushed deeply over and over into the tight heat of Justin, his own orgasm pulled out of him, his cock erupting into the condom as it was milked by Justin's contractions. He dropped down on to Justin, the younger man's legs now resting around his hips. They remained that way, for a long time, Justin never complaining about his weight but instead, his arms coming around his lover, and slowly rubbing up and down his back, quieting him as he lay there.

After his breathing had calmed Brian rolled on to his back, pulling Justin with him. "Welcome home."

Justin smiled. "There's no place like it."

Brian smiled and gave Justin a kiss on his sweaty forehead. He took a breath and closed his eyes for a moment. He felt like this was the first time he and Justin had made love in months. It had been different in New York. Each time had seemed like an urgent mating, as if it was their last and they had to get it in as soon as he arrived. This had been different. It had been intense and more intimate than anything they had done in a long time. It was like coming home, and Brian knew that Justin had sensed the difference too.

"Brian?"

"Yeah?"

"It's good to be home." He kissed Brian's chest and let out a breath. "It's been a long seven months. I missed you."
Brian smiled; his Sunshine didn't miss much, not much at all. They lay quietly, arms and legs intertwined, their hot bodies cooling as they rested.

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They hadn't said anything for almost a half hour. Brian lay looking at the ceiling, one arm around Justin's waist. The younger man was partially lying on his tall lover, his left hand resting over Brian's heart, his face buried in Brian's neck. Brian heard the sigh but Justin didn't move. "What?"

"Why do you need me here? I don't seem to be doing anything but hiding out. Granted I am spending money, staying in 5 star surroundings and having incredible sex. But I feel sort of useless."

"You've only been here twelve hours. I don't think that's enough time to feel useless. Besides, vacation is over tomorrow."

"Brian, tell me. I know about Liberty but something else started the other stuff. What happened? Why did you need me to come home?"

"Something had to happen?"

"Yes, otherwise I'd be waiting on tables right now in New York City. And I'm not talking to anyone, seeing anyone and I have a lot of strange messages on my phone about calling Lindsay or Michael."

Brian took a breath, "This can't wait until later?"

"No." Justin's hand tapped Brian's chest lightly. "It'll be easier. Here. Now. Like this. You don't even have to look at me. We seem to communicate best when we are like this."
Brian briefly touched the top of Justin's forehead with his lips. "Okay."

Brian was silent for a long time.

Justin waited.

"Are you happy?"

Of all the things Justin expected this wasn't the one. "Happy?"

"Yeah. Happy."

"Right now?"

"I know you're happy right now idiot." Brian swatted the back of Justin's head lightly.

"You mean as in..."

"Generally, overall. Happy with the ways things are. Your life now versus a time when you were unhappy or more happy."

"Happier."

"Shut up and answer the question."

Justin absently moved his hand in a circular motion. "You're right. I'm happy --- now."
"Two days ago."

Justin moved a bit, snuggling closer, Brian allowing him to move closer and in fact tightening his arm around his younger lover. "Happy. That's what? A feeling? A mindset?"

"Been trying to figure it out myself. Content isn't happy is it?"

"No. I don't think so. I mean they are synonyms of each other but being content could mean like you settled for something, but to me happy means --- well, you didn't settle."

"So, are you happy Sunshine?"

Justin shook his head, rubbing Brian's chin with his hair. "No Brian, I don't think I am, not really. I know I should be. I mean. It's a struggle, but I'm in New York right? Supposedly every artist's dream? I guess you could say I'm content. Things are okay but they aren't great. So no – not happy."

"Have you ever been? You know the difference?"

"Oh yeah. I definitely have been happy. What I've been feeling lately – living lately-- isn't it."


"Have you ever been happy Brian?"

"I never thought about it before. I was pretty sure I thought I was happy. I could tell when things went the way I wanted but was it happy?" Brian shrugged, feeling the weight of Justin's body slowing the
movement. "Thinking about it now. I was mostly content. But happy --- there has been a time or two I guess."

"Brian what started this introspection?"

"What? You never thought I could be reflective or pensive?"

"Show off." Justin's body shook gently as Brian laughed. "Hey! What did you get on your SATs?" The laughter was followed by a swat to his ass.

"None of your business. Remember, words are my business to some degree."

"We have to play Scrabble."

"I don't think so."

Justin was silent a moment. "Bri?"

"Hmmm?"

"What happened that started this?"

"I need a cigarette."

"No. Besides, there are no ashtrays here."
"What? Fuck this shit, you spent all this money and you didn't get an ashtray?"

"We aren't smoking as much now."

"We aren't?"

"No. Have you seen the cost of a pack in New York City? They have more taxes on cigarettes than you can imagine."

"Of all the fu... right. Budgetary cuts."

"A huh." Justin reached for Brian's left hand and drew it into his own, resting their entwined hands on Brian's chest. "Spill."

Brian remained quiet for a bit, having a silent debate with himself over how to explain what was happening and if he should even bother. He gave an internal sigh realizing that Justin wasn't going to let it go and decided to just start the best he could. "I'm not sure really --- how it happened. Maybe it was on the flight home Monday morning, not really sure what triggered it. I just started thinking about whether there had been any changes in you that I might have seen. Hair, body fat, wrinkles."

"Brian," Justin warned in a deep voice.

Brian ignored the warning although he enjoyed the deepness of Justin's voice. "Told you I'm not sure how it started. But I was deciding whether we had changed, had the sex changed, had the ...relationship shit changed. I just began to think about how long I would be doing the every other weekend in New York City. And then I was looking at a recent issue of "Newsweek on the plane."

"About?"
"Hmm?"

"About what?"

"Artists and money."

"And?"

Brian shrugged, moving both his and his lover's body with the movement. "I was reading what it was saying about charging for struggling artists' work, getting a fair price, how many artists will become animators or... it got me thinking about you and success, and just made me think a lot about some things I always knew."

Justin let out a breath. "I read it too. I've had more professional experience and success then most new artists my age. It made me mull over what I was doing too."

Brian nodded. "I had those same thoughts all along, it was just strange to see them in an article and then the approach the article took. The whole thing made me think again about all the concerns I had."

"And they were?"

"How would you measure your progress? How long would you need to stay in New York? How long should I keep visiting?"

"Are you getting tired of it?" Justin's voice was barely a whisper.

Brian squeezed his hand. "No."
"You sure?"

"I knew what we were getting into when you left, what the separation could mean, but we had admitted how much we loved each other, and that made the ties to each other stronger, regardless of being in different cities. I knew all this shit before you left. I guess – maybe the article really didn't get me thinking about it because it was always in the back of my mind. You there, me here and all the time in between visits. And because ..." Brian frowned. He should have kept his mouth shut, the article would have been the perfect out but it didn't explain everything else. Maybe Justin would let it go...

Justin lifted their clasped hands and kissed Brian's fingers. "And because?"

Or not. He should have known better. Brian sighed. He might as well just get it over with now. "Our fucking friends."

"What?"

"No one ever mentioned you much. Just Emmett. I think they just figured we were done. I guess on the surface it might have looked that way to them."

Justin made a low noise that sounded like a short cough. "But you came to New York."

"No one takes my weekends with you very seriously. Kind of 'Brian's going to New York to shop and party' or 'Getting his fucks in while he can'. It seems they think you are an excuse for me to spend time in the city. I'm just fucking you because it's convenient and fun. Some are just waiting for you to drop me for someone else, and then they will have to pick up the pieces. Others think I'm holding on and need to let you go because I'm holding you back."

"That's crazy Brian. We spend every moment together. We want to be together. You aren't holding me back, you encouraged me to go. And what's this shit about me dropping you for someone else? And whose business is it if we like to fuck?"
"How about a drink?"

"No, keep going. I need to understand this."

"Bossy little shit."

"Hmmm."

"Justin, have any of our friends ever believed I wasn't any thing but a selfish, narcissistic bastard?"

Justin groaned. "Christ Brian...they just..." He stopped talking and just tightened his grip on his lover's hand.

"Justin?" Brian gave the smaller man a slight shake, trying to get him to respond. "You okay?"

"Yes. It's just they really piss me off and ....disappoint me. I know I'll never break Michael's belief I'm some stupid kid who doesn't belong. And I know everyone else believes I'm too naive or young. That's just a perception they have because I 'm the youngest -- well except for Hunter...and Gus...and JR...and...fuck, I mean of the guys. I'll always be that kid to them in some way but I can deal with that, it's my place in our group. Everyone has a place and that's mine. And it's time they let me change or accept my getting older. What I can't believe, after all these years, is that they can't get beyond this stupid, inaccurate image they have of you --- to see you, the real Brian, if they wanted to but..."

"Some of what they see is accurate Sunshine, you know that. I have been known to be a pleasure-seeking son of a bitch. They just see what they want."

"You know I hate it...hate that I can't fucking get them to see you...see the real you. Even Michael and Lindsay, who both claim to know you better than I do, don't see you. I ... I just thought it never bothered you ... that you liked the distance it gave you, that it gave you a way to blow them off and keep them from getting too close."
"Yeah... well... maybe it has started to bother me."

"Brian, there is more to it than that, more than you just deciding you don't like it, I've seen the sheer volume of your messages and listened to a couple of my own."

"What are they asking you?"

"Michael has called a couple times. Left messages asking if I have seen you and to call him as soon as possible. He wanted to know if you were in New York and if you were there now. Even Debbie called and said she needed to know something and to call her as soon as my ass was in one place long enough. And then there were a couple from Lindsay. She suddenly was interested in knowing how I was doing, if I was enjoying my experiences. She asked me to give her a call and said she had a few questions about my future plans. In her last call she wondered if I had heard from you and if I did could I mention that you should call her, but that Gus was fine."

"Hmmm. I listened to all mine on the drive home. They are a little more to the point."

"What happened with Lindsay and Michael?"

"Nothing in one way, everything in another."

"Brian, what happened?"

"Well, as I was trying to puzzle out what was keeping me in Pittsburgh..."

"Wait --- keeping you in Pittsburgh?" Justin pushed up and looked Brian in the eyes.
Brian wiggled his eyebrows and then used his right hand and arm to push Justin's head back down and against his neck. "As I was saying, I was trying to figure out why I was still here. Gus was in Toronto, you were in New York. Michael is doing his happily ever after scenario, and even Ted and Emmett are pretending they are living their fairy tale endings. Seemed everyone was doing just what they wanted, were with who they wanted and everyone assumed I was living this happy ever after life as 'Brian fucking Kinney.' Just the way I was supposed to, everything was going according to their script. They all had perfect lives and I was just the same person I always was. Everything was just as it should be in Liberty Land, and I was doing and being who Lindsay and Michael needed me to be."

"Wow."

"You know they are continually harassing me to change my evil ways. Fuck knows we've fought about it enough, or alluded to it in more than one argument."

Justin let out a grunt in agreement but refrained from saying anything.

"And if I did appear to change, they immediately claimed I was going about it wrong or not being true to myself. I couldn't give Michael what he wanted, but I couldn't give it to anyone else either. He could move on, become this honest married man but it was all wrong for me. Lindsay constantly wanted me to change, be a better father to Gus, a better partner to you. Still, every time I tried she pulled the rug out from under me. Her wedding --- she tells me you want one, I should think about it. I give her the fucking tickets to Miami. Do I get a thank you -- no I'm told to go be myself, fuck everything that moves. I try to be a better dad --- she takes my kid to fucking Canada. I keep fixing her life, she encourages me to commit to you and what does she do--- tells me I HAVE to let you go to New York, I can't stand in your way. We say we are getting married -- first they don't believe it. But then I was all healed because I saw the light and let you go. But I still wasn't me -- no, I had to rebuild Babylon. Michael hauls me down there, he has to snap me out of the person I was becoming, tells me everything about how I'm not happy, I have to be who I was to be happy." Brian fell silent. He noticed that Justin hadn't moved since he had started talking. "Justin? I didn't put you to sleep did I?"

Justin gave his hand a squeeze but ignored the question. He had been listening closely, processing quickly everything Brian had confided, amazed at the level of depth and honesty of his thoughts that Brian was sharing. He turned his head and lightly kissed whatever part of Brian he could reach. Brian didn't respond but simply waited. With his head snuggled against the taller man's neck, Justin finally was able to speak. "But you did rebuild it Brian. For you --- and Michael."
"Fuck Justin, it gave me something to do while you were in New York. And yes, a part of me wanted it back. A part of me will always be that man."

"I know that. Were you happy --- being the king of Babylon again?"

"You knew I wasn't ..." Brian suddenly seemed at a loss for words. "You knew."

"I knew something still wasn't right. In your voice, on the phone, but when we were together in New York you seemed fine. Everything seemed fine."

"Yeah, but before you left, I was acting atypical for me. Right?"

Justin nodded in reply.

"I mean you were the one who pointed it out. You didn't want to marry me because it would change me. Even you wanted the old Brian."

Justin lifted off Brian a bit, using their clasped hands as leverage. "Not the old Brian. Just Brian. I didn't mean for you to stop loving me or to go back to being the Brian I met five years ago. I was just afraid that our love would be destroyed if you tried to become like Michael or Ben. I was also worried that..."

"What?"

"You said you loved me only because you thought I had died or been hurt. Stress causes people to say and do things they normally wouldn't do. I know what trauma does to people. I’m becoming an expert at the repercussions on what it does to you."
"And you thought at some point I'd come to my senses and kick you to the curb?" There was sarcasm that did not hide the hurt in Brian's voice.

"God no Brian. I knew you loved me and would never go back on a vow. No, I was more afraid of you killing yourself to keep a vow that you gave when emotionally you were temporarily unbalanced because of the bombing and Michael's injury. I know you were reacting to things, I was too, but I guess it was everyone else’s reactions that made me second guess why we were doing things. You tend to ignore people's reactions, or get a laugh out of them. When I started seeing the differences in your reactions I tried to talk to you about it but you weren't willing to listen. Like always you do it in your own time. That night --- the night we decided and then made love – you had already brought everything back into focus. You were thinking clearly and we decided together --- decided that we didn't need words or rings to know we were forever."

Brian gave Justin a slow smile. "And we decided in bed as usual."

"We communicate best like this. Alone. Naked." Justin didn't add the other word he was thinking --- vulnerable.

"So every time we disagree we have to what? Fuck?"

Justin suddenly giggled, partially because it was funny but also from relief that he and Brian had gotten through part of a very difficult conversation. "We fuck constantly."

"The secret of our success apparently."

"Whatever works for us Brian."

"Yeah, but we have bigger issues." Brian kissed the top of Justin's head.
Justin squirmed a bit in Brian's embrace, suddenly worried about the treading into more difficult area. "Like?"

"What am I doing in Pittsburgh?" Brian stretched a bit. "I'm not sure we got it totally right about New York that night either. There were still some things we weren't seeing clearly."

"Pittsburgh, it's our home Brian." Justin leaned up again to look Brian in the face. "And you might be right about the New York decisions, but what about you and Pittsburgh?"

"You aren't here. Gus isn't here. Why am I here? The guys are all into their coupledoms. I rarely see them. And when I do, I'm just the Brian they expect. I'm not supposed to be anything else. I'm this icon they have that's frozen in time. As long as I live up to my end of the bargain everyone is happy."

Justin dropped his head back to Brian's shoulder. "Everyone but you."

"Yeah."

"You said this to Michael, didn't you?"

"I thought about it all day on Monday. I came out here yesterday to figure out what to do with this place – actually take one last look before I sold it."

"Brian that's...that's...so sentimental!"

"Don't fucking insult me Sunshine."

"Just checking that you were still you."
"Twat."

"So what happened during your conversation?"

Brian then repeated the phone conversation to Justin in fine detail.

Justin shook his head in wonder. "You really said all that?"

Brian nodded. "More or less."

"He really said you weren't yourself when you were with me?"

"Yes."

"Did he ever really know you Brian?"

Brian mouth twisted. "Maybe – I don't know."

"So you hung up and he's been trying to reach you ever since?"

"Yep."

"That's because you stepped outside the lines again."

"Oh definitely. Peter Pan isn't supposed to change."
"I take it the call with Lindsay went along the same lines."

"Oh that one was even better."

"How?"

"She had called and left a message earlier in the day, apparently not all is idyllic in lesbo land."

"Brian!" Justin's voice was full of censure about Brian's snide comment.

"Don't ask me to be nice Justin, they take my kid, she practically packs you up and pushes you out the door and then sticks her hand out and expects me to send them money."

"Okay, let's hear it."

"Let me start by saying Wendy's a bitch and Peter should have made Tinkerbelle drop her from 200 feet."

Justin leaned up to look Brian in the face. "Ouch. Went that badly?"

"Humpff...I left it like this – return my kid or you get nothing."

Justin dropped his forehead onto Brian's chest and let out a small groan. "That's pretty direct. I'm not seeing anyone but the Brian Kinney I know."
"Well apparently you are the only one that sees the fine balance I have between narcissistic bastard and caring human being."

"There is no fine line Brian, it's all there, all the time." Justin laughed lowly. "Maybe we do need a few drinks and a cigarette."

"No, we are almost done here, besides we need to eat soon. I not only heard your stomach growl, I felt it."

"Okay. So tell me everything that Lindsay said – or rather you said to Lindsay."

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Five minutes later Justin laid quietly in Brian's arms trying to decide how best to express all the emotions he was feeling. "Lindsay is the worst kind of brat and Mel is going to come looking for your balls."

Brian snorted. "All that and that's the best you can do?"

"It's been a lot for me to process Brian. And you had to be on overload, first confronting your own feelings and then you confronted them." He gave Brian a quick kiss. "You are amazing."

"Amazing as I am Justin, it still does not answer the only question I had before all the fucking soul searching and after. What and where are we going?"

"Oh."

"The bottom line is --- do you want to end this – us?" Brian voice had dropped into a low tone. "I would understand if you needed to. I don't want to consider it an option but you can. You know I'll always be there if you need me, but if you want more, I'll understand."
Justin looked at Brian, his eyes wide in the glow of the firelight. "You'd just walk away."

"If that's what you want. If it's what it takes for you to succeed as an artist. If you need the marriage and house. Yes. I'll walk away."

"And what about you? What about what you need?"

Brian shrugged and then started to sit up against the pillows, releasing Justin from his arms.

"No you don't." Justin grabbed him and snuggled into his arms, pushing himself up to the same position as Brian.

Brian gave him a look but put his arms around him again.

"You need to tell me what you want. Do YOU want out? Is that why I'm here?"

"No, that's not why you are here. You're here because --- because I need you to be here."

"Then that answers all the questions. No other options needed or wanted."

"What?"

"I needed to be here too."

Brian looked down at Justin's upturned face. "That means?"
"US. Nothing else."

"Are you sure Justin?"

"It's not like I haven't had the same questions about being in New York as you have, or the same reservations about it. Lindsay was so fucking gung ho. If I wanted to be Warhol, I had to follow the great plan. I had to be the starving artist. I had to be Ethan."

"Don't mention that prick."

Justin laughed. "Will you listen, I'm just explaining. You were right about not having to live on cat food and in roach infested rooms. You taught Ethan that lesson. I shouldn't have had to learn it. I've been in New York for months now, I'm going every where I should go, talking to the people in the galleries. One review doesn't seem to make that big of a ripple in the art world there. Brian, I had more notice here in Pittsburgh. It's easier to be the next Warhol, the next find, if you don't have to compete with every art student in the city of New York. Everyone is making the gallery scene. Everyone is trying to get noticed. You do have a better chance of attracting attention by coming out of a small market and getting into an exhibition, than trying to get things into a gallery by lugging in your portfolio with twenty other people each day. I had more national notice for 'Rage' and I created and worked on it here. You had a lot of valid points with what you talked to Lindsay about. Lindsay believed so strongly that I couldn't pass up the chance that she swayed my decision."

"She could be right."

"Maybe, but I'm not willing to run this game for years to come. Maybe it was Lindsay's dream but I don't think it will work for me. I have more..."

"Talent."

Justin blushed a little. "Maybe."
"No, trust me, you do."

"Hmmm. I think a part of her really wanted me to go and be a success."

"And the other part?"

"Subconsciously --- I think she might believe I came between the two of you."

"So you noticed that huh?"

"Might have been the fact she would only have your child, or that she expected you to solve all her problems, or that she expected you to support her. She believes she has the right to say anything to you she wants and you are supposed to take it, that she is some living alter ego of Wendy to your Peter and..." Justin was really warming to the topic but was forced to stop when Brian's hand covered his mouth.

"Okay. Okay. I see that you have grasped the problem."

Justin nodded and Brian dropped his hand away.

"So where does that leave us Brian?"

"Well, I guess we have to decide. We can move to New York City. With the Liberty Air merger I'll need an office there. And the business will certainly keep me in the city at times."

"Or we could live here."
Brian made a circular motion with his hand, "Here?"

Justin looked around. "I don't know about that. It's kind of big and I don't have a car."

Brian nodded, "I'm not sure it's the right place either."

"But Pittsburgh might be?"

"I guess. You have more family here than me right now."

"You'd be willing to go to New York. Permanently?"

Brian nodded.

"What if Lindsay and Mel move back? Gus would be here then."

"Kinnetik would still have an office here, I'd be in town a couple days a week and New York isn't that far by plane. We'll have the loft."

"You told her to bring him back --- I can hear Mel now."

"Fuck Mel."

"She'll claim you are being a controlling bastard. That you have a double standard. You can move away and they can't."
"Then I'm still the same Brian Kinney they all know and hate." Brian rolled a bit, releasing Justin so they could now lie side by side and look at each other's faces. "The Brian you know and love."

"You are incorrigible."

"So I'm told."

Justin reached out and gently ran a hand down Brian's face. "What if we do the opposite?"

"Move to Toronto while Lindsay moves here?" Brian sucked in his lips trying to hide his smile.

"Asshole." Justin swatted Brian's face lightly. "No, live here and visit New York a couple days a week."

Brian nodded. "It's possible. I do have to see what parts of Liberty's corporate structure are actually going to move to New York."

"I could still make the art scene in New York, but work on 'Rage' and my animation here."

"Maybe pick up a few classes?" Brian asked quietly.

Justin nodded. "Yeah. Maybe."

"But it's not just that is it?"

"No."
"What is it?"

Justin leaned forward and kissed Brian's lips.

"You miss sex?" Brian looked into the blue eyes hovering a few inches from his own.

"No. Well. Yeah. But I think we sort of already agreed we won't be missing anymore right?"

"Right. So there are other reasons for spending more time here? Besides sex and the big fish small pond syndrome?"

Justin sighed dramatically and dropped his head onto the pillow, rolling on to his back at the same time. "Yes."

"And they are?" Brian turned on his side and rested his head on his folded arm so he could see Justin.

Justin pulled the pillow out from under his head and covered his face. He muttered something.

"What was that?"

Justin muttered again.

Brian's eyes widened and pulled the pillow off the blond's face. He tried unsuccessfully to keep an incredulous tone out of his voice. "Did you say you miss your MOMMY?"

Justin grimaced and reached for his pillow. "No, you asshole."
Brian held the pillow away, starting to laugh. "Yes you did."

"No I didn't." Justin lunged for the pillow and grabbed it. He took a firm hold of the pillow and hit Brian in the chest with it, knocking the laughing man on his back. "I said I miss my family --- and friends."

"And me?"

"I'm not so sure about you." Justin started to get out of bed.

Brian reached for his naked lover. "Wait a minute; we aren't finished talking."

"I'm hungry."

"So we have to stop talking?"

"Yes. Besides we aren't talking. You're laughing. AT ME!"

"So you're going to eat?"

"That's my plan." Justin went over to the dresser and pulled out a thick terrycloth robe in the same color of the towels in the bath.

Brian made a face when he saw the robe Justin was putting on. "Where did you get that? I have never seen it before."

Justin turned and smiled. "You have a matching one. It's hanging on the back of the bathroom door."
"You little shit!" He threw the pillow at the retreating backside of his lover. "I want that card back."

"Not a chance in hell while I'm stuck out here." Justin picked up the pillow and tossed it back at Brian and the bed, "Dinner. Five minutes."

"Fuck you."

"I think the kitchen's too cold for that but definitely after we eat --- and in the leather chair."

Brian closed his eyes and shook his head. Keeping Justin was going to be expensive. He suddenly smiled, opened his eyes and headed for his new robe. "Yeah Kinney, expensive but fun. And the payback... let's see how he likes his bare ass pushed up against a cold refrigerator door." Brian went into the bathroom, washed up, and he grabbed his robe on the way out of the bath. But he did make it downstairs in five minutes.

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Brian's plans were put on hold as he entered the kitchen. Justin looked up from pouring wine into two glasses. He gave Brian a smile and then laughed as he saw the expression on the taller man's face.

Brian's mouth was twisted in a slight sneer. He rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Dinner candles?"

"Yes."

"No."

"If you can light candles at an orgy for atmosphere, you can eat dinner with me by candlelight."
Brian grunted but didn't attempt to blow out the candles when he walked by the table and over to the oven. He turned off the oven and opened the door. Brian turned to ask a question, "In all that paraphernalia you bought, did you happen to ..." He stopped speaking as two oven mitts were tossed at him, hitting him in the face and neck. He caught the mitts against his chest as they fell. "Of course you did."

Justin went to the refrigerator and opened the door. He pulled out a couple small jars.

"Sorry, the cheese is pre-grated."

Brian lifted the eggplant parmesan out of the oven and walked it over to the table, setting it down carefully on the trivet. "Yeah, this is roughing it. No grater for the cheese, but you have a fucking trivet on the table."

"Hey, I found that shoved in a drawer. You don't want to damage the RENTED table do you?"

"God forbid." Brian tossed the mitts on the table.

Justin quickly picked them up and retrieved the other pan from the oven. He balanced the pan by holding it from the bottom, and then dropped the extra mitt onto the table, letting the pan slide off the mitt on his hand and onto the one on the table. Justin stopped what he was doing and looked at the candles, suddenly smiling. "Brian, this remind you of anything?"

Brian looked up from picking up a fork by his plate, glanced at the table, taking in the candles and then pointed at the still covered pan Justin had set down. "This had better not be jambalaya." He glanced over at Justin. "Because we both know..."

"It's better the second day." Justin finished his lover's sentence and then gave Brian a huge smile and sat down.
Brian shook his head, sucking in his lips to hide his own smile. He proceeded to take a fork and began to work the lid off the pan. He pulled enough of the lid away from the hot tray to lift it off and see that it wasn't Jambalaya. "Looks good, but there is enough fat here to kill several people."

"I love cannelloni, especially in béchamel sauce. This stuffing is a blend of low fat cheeses, it's really delicious. That place does a great job."

"And you would know that because?"

Justin shrugged and smiled.

Brian looked the pan over more closely, and saw where one pasta roll was missing. "Ah, lunch or snack?"

Justin laughed as he removed the cover from the eggplant. "Snack. I did leave the eggplant alone...for the most part."

Brian looked at the tray of parmesan and saw a corner that looked a little thinner than the others. "Is there anything you haven't nibbled yet?"

Justin went over to the counter and brought a bowl to the table. There was a dressed green salad in it. "Ahuh." He nodded to the bowl he set down next to a glass filled with fresh breadsticks.

"Right, the healthy things."

Justin sat down and handed Brian a flat serving spatula. "I want a large piece of eggplant please."

Brian carefully inserted the spatula and lifted a precut serving of the eggplant. Justin raised his plate so Brian could slide the parmesan on to the surface. Justin set his plate down and picked up a server and placed a cannelloni on his plate, spooning a little of the sauce over the stuffed tube of fresh rolled pasta.
Brian held out his plate for a serving of cannelloni. He skipped the eggplant and instead spooned salad on to his plate. Justin finished shaking grated cheese over his plate and offered it to Brian. Brian shook his head. "Not freshly grated."

"Cheese snob."

"Whatever." Brian took a small mouthful of the cannelloni. "Very good."

Justin nodded. "Want a bite of the eggplant? It's terrific. They use less mozzarella and added a thick layer of ricotta, asiago and parsley."

Brian reached over with his fork and broke off a small bit of eggplant. He lifted it carefully so as not to drop any and ate it. "Hmm, not bad, no bitterness in the eggplant at all. And not salty."

Justin nodded as he swallowed a sip of red wine. "Almost sweet but the asiago gives it a fuller flavor. Vic would have liked this."

Brian nodded as he attacked his green salad. The two men continued to eat, commenting on the food, reminiscing about dinners with Vic and Debbie and other day-to-day things, neither mentioning or trying to continue the conversation they had been having upstairs.

Brian loaded the dishwasher as Justin put the leftovers back in the refrigerator. Justin closed the door and turned around to find Brian blocking his path. Brian smiled and put his arms around the blond. Justin stretched his neck to kiss Brian on the lips. Brian deftly lifted the back of Justin's robe and fondled his buttocks.

"You know what Sunshine?"
"What?"

Brian began to push him back gently. "You forgot soap for dishes." Brian looked down and gave Justin a smirk just as he pushed the younger man into the cold refrigerator door, moving his hands so Justin's bare bottom made contact with the cold stainless steel of the refrigerator surface.

Justin let out a screech and shoved Brian off him so he could move away from the cold surface. "That was not funny!" He quickly moved over to the fireplace in the eating area and stood with his backside to the warmth being given off by the blaze.

Brian laughed as he watched the younger man raise his robe in the back and warm his naked backside. Brian went over to the espresso machine and picked up the instruction book. Brian looked through the instructions, "These instructions are in French and Italian."

"I guess it's a good thing I know how this thing works then. We have two in the café in New York."

"Oh barista, can you operate this overpriced coffee maker? Or do I have to use the cleaners' Mr. Coffee machine?"

Justin frowned but walked towards him warily. "You better be nicer to me or you are going to be sorry, especially in the morning."

Brian snorted. "As you know we don't go without sex that long even if we are mad at each other so don't use that as a threat. You are way too easy."

"That may be true, but that's not what will drive you over the edge. No coffee from now until tomorrow at work will."

"See Princess, that's where you are wrong." Brian flipped the book on to the counter. "Another empty threat. Like I said, I'll use the coffee maker."
"Don't think so. Be kind or be decaffeinated."

Brian saw the smirk appear on Justin's face. He looked over at the counter where the coffee machine had been. "What did you do with it?"

"I didn't do a thing."

"They took it home?"

"Yeah, apparently the owner of this place reamed them out for sitting around and drinking coffee when they were working. I guess they took the criticism to heart."

"I really should fire them."

"Maybe, but you better start kissing the ass you tried to freeze or you aren't getting any ---- coffee that is."

Brian grimaced but then suddenly smiled. He grabbed Justin and pulled him in for a hard kiss. This was what he missed. Just an evening at home with Justin. The feeling he had now. That was what had been gone for the last few months. They ended the kiss and Justin buried his face in Brian's neck, delivering small kisses along his jaw. "So." Brian asked in a deep tone, whispering into Justin's ear. "Can I interest you in pressing my grounds and steaming my milk?"

Justin moaned and then gave a little giggle. "How can you make a latte sound sinful?"

"Because I am very good at my job." Brian sucked on Justin's earlobe, while his hands moved up and down his lover's body. Justin was groaning again. "Now how about that latte?"
Justin sighed and dropped his head onto Brian's shoulder. "Now?"

"Uh huh. After that meal a little caffeine will go a long way toward extending my exercising."

"You aren't talking about the treadmill, are you?"

"No, I was thinking of warming those cold cheeks of yours." Brian dropped his hands and squeezed Justin's ass.

"Okay. Lattes coming up. Sweet and nonfat for you."

"Good. I'm going to check my email. Did you set up my account as well?"

"Of course."

Brian smiled and began to walk out of the kitchen. "And he's trained too," he muttered as he went through the doorway.

"I heard that!"

Brian didn't answer. He went into the den and turned on the wall sconces. As he sat down he moved the mouse and the screen came to life, turning the power saver off. After opening the mail utility he logged on. He watched as his messages appeared. He read through Michael's and Lindsay's just to see if either had anything new to ask other than demanding he call them. He laughed when Michael threatened to report him as a missing person. Michael went on to rant how Carl had told him he couldn't do that since Cynthia had told him that Brian was in fact in meetings all day. Brian snickered loudly at Emmett's request that he call Michael so Michael would leave them all alone and stop the rumors that he had been kidnapped. There was a message from Ted asking what he should do now that he was in New York
and when could he come home. Brian raised an eyebrow but decided against emailing him a one
worded response such as 'NEVER.'

Brian sighed as he waded through Lindsay's prose-filled, somewhat whiney messages, quickly saving the
jpegs she had sent of Gus and then marking messages for the trash file. He knew the pictures were sent
in the hope of manipulating him into seeing things her way and sending the money, but it just wasn't
going to happen. He and Justin still had a few things to sort out and then he --- they --- would deal with
Lindsay and Michael

"Here."

Brian looked down and saw two tall latte cups being set down. He shook his head. "Did you get
demitasse cups too?"

"You only hire the best. Naomi was very thorough." Justin pushed Brian back with his hip. Brian rolled
away from the desk and promptly had his lap filled with Justin. Justin put his arms around Brian's neck,
leaning down and kissing him gently on the lips. He then leaned his forehead against Brian's. "So how
goes the email? I heard you laughing."

"How could you hear anything over that steamer gizmo?"

"I can always hear you." Justin smiled and kissed Brian's forehead. "Always."

"Hmmm, seems there is occasional static in the reception."

"New York?"

Brian nodded. "And L.A."
Justin sighed and looked at the screen. "What did they want?"

"For me to surface, apologize for being an asshole and go back to being their Brian."

Justin leaned forward, grabbed the mouse and quickly clicked to close the program and clicked again to shut down the pc. He let go of the mouse and leaned back against Brian. They both watched as the windows program went through its shutdown. "Fuck them."

"Exactly." He rubbed Justin's stomach where his arm was wrapped around the younger man's waist. "Coffee in the living room?"

"Ahuh. Couch or chair?"

Brian shrugged as he dropped his arm so Justin could stand. "Wherever you are."

Justin picked up his and Brian's mugs. "Chair. We need to finish our talk, and I need to be close."

Brian followed Justin out of the room, turning off the light as he left. The two men went into the living room, and Justin set the coffees down. "Music?"

"Yeah, but nothing --- loud."

"Okay, I got it, no Babylon thumping."

Brian knew he could say something terribly sick and romantic about just needing the thumping of Justin's heart but that just wasn't him. Well okay, maybe he could think it but he'd never say it. "Right, something decent but not overly ... sentimental."
"No Barbra."

"I'm going to have to spank you at some point if you keep that up."

Justin shook his ass at Brian letting him know what he thought of that particular threat. Digging through a pile of CDs he had taken out of his luggage and stacked by the Bose CD player in the media cabin earlier, Justin located the new CD Daphne just HAD to share. It was all in Italian and the singer, Eros, had a really nice voice. In the note she attached to the CD she burned for him, she told him he should use it to prod Brian into thinking, "Vacation, Italy, Florence, Milan and you." Justin had listened to it and added it to his collection of music he listened to as he painted. The collection was eclectic and had lots of extremes in it. But this was what Brian ordered, easy background music and since Brian didn't speak Italian he'd never know half of the songs were sentimental love songs.

Brian turned the gas up on the fireplace, the flames growing larger with more heat being directed out into the room. It was early October and the nights were chilly. He settled into the chair, his longs legs stretched out in front of him. Brian watched as Justin pushed the ottoman closer, with his knees, to one side of the chair. He tried to hide his grin as the blond quickly settled in next to him in the chair, positioning himself so his back was partially leaning against Brian and the chair for support, and his much shorter legs were resting stretched out on the ottoman.

"Comfy?"

"Yes. Can I have my cup?"

Brian reached out and handed Justin his cup, and then reached for his own. The two sat for a long time just watching the flames and listening to the music as they sipped their coffee. There didn't seem to be a need for words. Brian's hand wandered over Justin's neck, sometimes playing with or tugging the hair at his nape. Justin unconsciously kept contact with Brian by resting his hand on his thigh, occasionally patting or rubbing the skin beneath his hand.

"Who's singing?"
Justin took a breath before answering, almost as if he was awakening from a nap. He cleared this throat. 
"Eros Ramazzotti."

"Sure." Brian gave a tug on the hair his fingers were twirled in.

"Keep that up and I'll get it cut."

"So?"

"You don't care? Maybe I'll buzz it off again."

"As much fun as the novelty of the haircut was, don't even think about it."

"So you do have a preference."

"Yes. But it's your decision."

"And if I got it cut?"

"It's your choice."

"Brian this is that static. DO YOU like my hair this long?"

"Yes."
"WOULD YOU mind if I got it cut?"

"It doesn't matter if I mind."

"It matters to me whether you like it or not."

"I like it, prefer it this way. Okay?"

"Yes, thank you! Was that so hard?"

"Justin, it isn't that it was hard, it's just ..."

"You wouldn't care if I liked your hair one way or another, nor would you change it for me."

"I won't ask more of you than I'm willing to give."

"Brian, most of the time you don't ask enough of me and other times it's too much. If you want me to stay you have to tell me, I can't make a decision for ME, regarding US, if you don't tell me what YOU want."

"What I want shouldn't matter."

"But it does!" Justin handed Brian his empty latte cup and Brian placed it on the table. The blond then turned a bit more so he could look his lover directly in the eye. "Brian, you know exactly what you want all the time. You are direct, motivated, even ruthless, when you are after an account, a trick, an enemy or something else you want. You are never that way with me. You don't hold on because you think it's not what I should want or need, or it's not the decision I should be making—whatever. It's because you wouldn't tell me what you wanted for us that I made a lot of decisions without any idea of what you needed or wanted. We could have avoided so much if you had just let me know how you felt after
Hobbs almost killed me; when I went off to Vermont alone; when I got involved with Ethan; the Posse; when I went to Los Angeles; when I left over the issue of monogamy and even when I left for New York after the bombing. It seems I’m always leaving only to come back! You have to tell me you want me before I leave! You have to tell me what you want. Please be SELFISH when it comes to ME!

Brian was silent for a few minutes. He took a deep breath and let it out. "Justin, I can't do that."

"Be selfish?"

"Be selfish when it comes to you."

"Why not?"

"Because ... I don't want to change you."

"You changed me the night we met."

"A lot of good that did you."

"You have no idea what that night gave me. It gave me hope, peace, a future, a family. It gave me the world. It gave me you."

Brian shook his head. "I can't be your world."

"I'm not asking you to be my world, but you are my life."
"Fuck." He dropped his head back on to the top of the chair. "It's the same. I don't want you to be dependent on me."

"No, there is a difference. I can live without you Brian, I can survive. I've had to do it. I can work, I can travel, I can have fun, I can have friends and family, I can party and have sex. That's having the world Brian, but it's just existing --- a sort of day in and day out. It's living but it's just existing. I can do it BUT something feels like it's missing all the time. There's a sadness or emptiness. I know the difference. When I'm with you, I don't feel it. There is no feeling of loss. None of it is the same without you. You make it better, fuller, lighter, stronger, bigger, bolder... you are what brings color, breath, life into the picture. I can be alone Brian, I can. But it's just living, living without the emotions and love that make it feel real and wonderful. When we are together those everyday things just seem better. How can I explain this better..." Justin paused and looked off to the side, and after a moment he gave a gentle shake of his head, "there's these moments that only happen when we are together when I feel like I could burst, I just get this feeling that's... it's...it's indescribable but I want to smile and shout and laugh... I'm full... I feel..."

"Happy?"

Justin looked at Brian and smiled gently. "Yeah, I feel happy."

Brian was quiet. Justin waited. Finally the older man spoke, "I'll hurt you. And then what? Won't that make it less vibrant, less alive? That's what sucks about relationships."

"Even when there is pain Brian I can cope with it better because we are together, and the joy outlasts any ache."

"I can't do that, be that for you. I can't make you stay or choose for you to stay. I want you to be free. I won't make decisions for you."

"You idiot. You already have made decisions, every time you have determined we should be apart. And believe it or not we have always managed to get back together. Probably because you beat yourself at your own game."
"And how’s that?"

"Here's a clue. You already made the decision you wanted me back before we talked about it yesterday."

"I must have missed that." A touch of sarcasm leaked into Brian's voice.

"You outmaneuvered yourself when you picked up that phone and called me. For the first time you needed me, and you were selfish. You asked me to come, no explanations, no questions. And did you ever doubt I’d come?"

Brian closed his eyes, unable to look at Justin. He had to swallow a lump in his throat before he could finally whisper, "No."

"See. Stop fighting yourself and me. We can make anything work Brian."

"Even with all the things I don’t want to change and you want to change?"

"Yeah. But we have to commit to being in it together, no walking away."

Brian nodded. "You walked away again. I wasn't pushing you to New York as much as I pushed you away other times. You had refused to go before getting married. If we still loved each other so much after we decided not to get married why did you go?"

Justin dropped his head on to Brian's shoulder. "I've been trying to figure it out. I'd be in New York walking from one place to the other trying to figure out how I got there. I think..." Justin became very quiet, and a frown formed on his face as he looked into the flames.
Brian gave him a little shake. "Justin, you okay?"

Justin nodded. "I think... I think it was a delayed reaction to the bombing."

Brian pulled him in closer, both arms enfolding the younger man, pulling him against his body and warmth. He gently kissed the top of Justin's head. "Have you been having nightmares again?"

Justin nodded.

"I'm sorry, I should have..." Brian shook his head in disgust with himself. "After the bashing... I should have known that you were going to react to it at some point. It was years before you really dealt with the bashing."

Justin held on to Brian. "Everyone was encouraging me to go, my one chance. Brian, I've almost died from violence twice because I'm gay. Suddenly it seemed like I should go because I might never have a chance. Lindsay and Mel ran away, Ben and Michael seemed connected in a way I thought we should be. It just seemed going was a way of..."

"Getting away from it all?"

Justin nodded. "Brian, I had lots of time to think in New York. Trying to figure out just what the hell I was doing. The last couple months I have been really depressed...I've hardly painted or drawn anything. 'Rage' wasn't even fun. I was getting ready to tell Michael that I don't think we should do it anymore."

"I didn't know."

"Well, it's not like I was going to tell you I hated it there. When you came to New York, I just wanted to enjoy being with you, and New York was better with you there."
"I can see how the Plaza improved your mood."

"Shithead." Justin bumped his head lightly against Brian's chin. "It wasn't that. You were there to share it all. You understood things --- without me having to say a word. You just knew what I was thinking or feeling."

"You were making friends."

"Yeah, but it's different." Justin sat up, pulling himself out of Brian's embrace and putting his feet on the floor. "Brian, I am very intelligent. After Los Angeles I knew what the odds of succeeding in New York were. I did the reading, the research, the math. I let myself be convinced it was the thing to do. I let go of everything. You, my family, my education and my friends, to go to New York when I had less than a few million to one shot at success. The stupid thing was I was already having success. I'm the co-creator and artist for a popular cult comic, I've worked in pre-production on a movie about my own character, and I had a review in a major art magazine. And I did it all here, with you. I still can't figure out how I ended up in New York living with a very straight, very strange, cousin of Daphne's. I can't totally blame Lindsay but she is someone I have always counted on for advice and encouragement when it comes to my artwork, and she kept telling me I had to go, I couldn't miss the chance. I was sort of confused and screwed up after the bombing and I didn't realize it." Justin waved Brian off as he tried to interrupt. "No, you didn't see it either, you were still strung out too."

"You noticed it in me," Brian claimed quietly.

Justin smiled. "Yeah, but I've always been on to you."

Brian smacked his arm. He leaned forward suddenly. "I should have seen it. Shit Justin, your father had you arrested and you just went on as if it didn't bother you, as if you could take anything he dished out. And you could, you are strong, but you were too controlled, too calm. I should have noticed, especially how you acted as if you hadn't almost been killed the day after the bombing."

"Not at all like after the bashing." Justin gave a slight nod as he thought about it.
"No, maybe that was it. I thought you were just dealing with it all better."

"I thought I was too."

"I should have noticed the nightmares."

Justin looked away from Brian and at the fire. "They didn't start until after I left."

"You should have told me."

"After you telling me I had become the best homosexual I could be?" Justin shook his head, "No, nobody wants to admit that part of himself is really a crybaby."

"Justin, you were never that. In fact, you are one of the strongest people I know. You'd have to be to want to stay and be my partner."

Justin smiled suddenly. "Your partner?"

"In a vague, undefined, unconventional way."

"That is better than your first proposal."

"That wasn't a proposal."

"Sure it was."
"No Justin. 'Will you stay with me regardless of where we live,' would be a proposal. The other statement was a..."

"Yes." Justin interrupted him and then started laughing.

Brian snapped his mouth shut and opened his eyes wide. "You little conniving bastard."

"My mom was married. And it's too late, that was a proposal and I said yes. Can we just move on now and figure out where we are going to live?"

"Don't I at least get to fuck you now?"

Justin shook his head.

Brian raised an eyebrow. "How about a blowjob?"

Justin tipped his head and seemed to ponder the question. "I suppose that the exchange of bodily fluids would seal the deal. It's not a ring but it's all I need."

"What about all the other stuff?"

"It's just who we are. I know what and whom I'm getting. But you bring home another communicable disease and I'll cut it off if it hasn't rotted off already."

"Okay." Brian tapped his fingers on the arm of the chair. "What about you?"

"What about me?"
"Communicable disease?"

"As if."

Brian shrugged, his expressive motion showing that he was conceding the fact to his lover. He reached out and tugged on Justin's hair. "Okay, you got me there. We still have a few big issues."

"Monogamy?"

Brian nodded.

"Well, now that you mention it. I had a lot of time to think about it in New York, actually, worry about performance issues."

"What?!" Brian asked in a surprised tone. He pulled sharply on Justin's hair. "You better be speaking about your own."

"Uh uh." Justin gave him an innocent look, "I figure sooner or later you won't be able to get it up as much, so it's a matter of me waiting out your declining abilities. Eventually, you'll just be happy to get it up for me.... and viagra"

Brian shoved Justin off the chair. "You little bitch."

Justin saved himself from hitting the cold hard floor, but he was laughing so hard he did end up sitting on the floor between Brian's legs. Justin finally controlled himself long enough to roll to his knees between Brian's legs. He looked up to find his lover watching him with a slight frown. "Is there a problem?"
Brian gave a slight shake of his head and continued his silent perusal of the younger man.

Justin leaned into Brian, resting against the chair in the space between Brian's legs. He began to move his hands up Brian's legs, in slow, sliding caresses. He began below the knees and gradually moved up and over the bend of the knees, continuing under the robe until Justin's hands glided to a stop on the top of Brian's thighs just before his groin. Justin's eyes had been following the leisurely progress of his hands under the robe, but glancing up he became mesmerized by the hazel eyes that met his own. Brian remained silent as he stared at his lover. Justin moved just his thumbs, in a small circular pattern against the sensitive inner skin of Brian's thighs. Justin watched as Brian raised an eyebrow in an unspoken question.

Justin returned the question with a slight smile, then glanced down and saw that Brian's robe had begun to tent a bit as his cock became partially erect. Justin leaned forward and gently kissed the skin of Brian's chest that was exposed by the opening of his robe. Leaning back he moved his hands gently to push the thick terrycloth up and off of Brian's thigh, revealing his genitals. Justin smiled widely and gave a soft laugh as he watched Brian's cock give a slight twitch as the cloth moved and it was exposed to cooler air. The exposure did nothing to slow the growing erection.

Brian reached out and gently caressed the side of Justin's face. "That's right Sunshine, there's nothing slow or old about the equipment yet." He suddenly moved his hand to the back of Justin's head and watched Justin's eyes open wide as he watched his cock. "And there's no waiting." Justin smirked as Brian pulled his head forward and down.

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Brian dragged Justin by the hand as he led him into the hallway and up the stairs. "Come on Justin!"

"Hmmm...comfortable...warm...."

Justin's mumble was all the proof Brian needed that Justin was still asleep. Brian grabbed Justin more tightly as he seemed to teeter backwards. "Shit, will you watch what you're doing?"
"Huh?" Justin squinted and looked around as Brian's tight grip seemed to rouse him. "Oh. Bed."

"Yes." Brian moved down a step and began prodding Justin to continue up the stairs. "Fuck, but it's a long way to the damn bed."

"Like my old house." Justin sighed, "It always seemed so far away when I was little and tired. My dad use to carry us up to bed sometimes."

"Well, you aren't little anymore. And I am not carrying this huge bubble butt." Brian nudged Justin's ass. "Now move it."

"Well, I can tell the romance is gone." Justin moved away from Brian's constant prodding, now fully awake. "Okay, I'm going. I don't know why we had to come up here. I was comfortable where we were."

"I wasn't, you were making my legs go numb." "Bullshit."

The two men continued to spar verbally with each other until they had both gone to the bathroom and were finally getting into bed.

Brian eased down into the bed. Being here was very unlike being with Justin in bed at the loft. And yet, he felt strangely comfortable and at ease. He moved to accommodate Justin as the younger man rolled into his arms. The two lay quietly for a time and then Brian reached to his right and turned off the bedside light. The only light in the room was from the soft glow that radiated off the ceramic logs of the gas fireplace.

"This is different, isn't it?" Justin asked, immediately yawning as he finished speaking.
Brian shrugged, not really wanting to discuss it.

Justin took the silence as permission to continue. "It's not like being in a hotel for some reason, but it's not like being in the loft either. It's not exactly familiar but it's not impersonal. It's oddly familiar. Kind of weird."

Brian closed his eyes and tried to fall asleep, or at least look like he was falling asleep.

"You listening?"

Brian remained silent.

"I know you are wake."

"Go. To. Sleep."

"You think it's weird too. I can tell by the way you aren't answering me."

Brian pretended to snore.

Justin snorted. "If you were really asleep, that snore would be a lot louder."

"Will you fucking shut up!?"

"We never really finished our conversation about what to do."
Brian let out a deep breath. "Here's what we decided. We are together. Location unknown. Michael and Lindsay can wait until all the really important other shit is finished. End of discussion. Now go to sleep." To prove his point Brian pulled his arm out from underneath Justin and turned to roll towards him. The move forced Justin to roll to his left and on to his side. Both men knew this was the position Justin always favored when falling asleep. The blond pulled his pillow down into a more comfortable position as Brian spooned behind him and draped his right arm over him.

Justin had a small smile on his lips as he closed his eyes. "Good night Brian."

"Shut up Justin."

~~ Thursday October 4, 2005 ~~

Justin woke slowly. He listened to the sounds around him. Trying to identify them. It was quiet other than the noise of the shower. So different from the morning noise he had been waking up to in New York. He sat up and looked at the windows. Brian had opened the curtains and the window. Justin made a face as he saw the open window. He grabbed his robe and put it on, giving off a shiver as he walked over to the window. He was about to close the window but paused as he looked out on the backyard. The air coming in the window had a crisp feel and fresh scent, and although it was cooler than the air in the room, it wasn't that cold. Justin continued to silently enjoy the view from the window, caught up in studying the variations in tone the morning light made on the green lawn and the field beyond the fence that ran along the property line, until the shower was turned off. "Brian?"

"What?"

Justin turned away from the window and the peace of the scene he had been enjoying. He started towards the bathroom and Brian. "Do you want to eat here or should we get something in town?"
Brian walked into the bedroom naked while toweling his hair. He pulled the towel from his head and glanced over at his partner. "What?"

Justin rolled his eyes and walked up to his lover, taking the towel from his hands and giving him a light kiss in the lips. "I'll just be a couple minutes. I need a quick shower, you should have woken me up" He started for the bathroom. "I said, do you want to eat here or should we get something in town?"

Brian followed Justin a few steps and then veered to the door that housed the walk-in closet. "Take your time, I'll get something when I get into the office."

Justin immediately turned and walked out of the bathroom. He turned to stand in the doorway of the closet. "What do you mean, 'I'll get something when I get to the office'? Don't you mean 'when we get to the office'?"

Brian looked at the three shirts hanging on the rack. "I need more clothes here, this is no selection, what the fuck was I thinking when I grabbed these last night?" He finally selected one shirt and then held it up against one of the three suits. "This SUCKS." He frowned and pulled the suit off the rack as well. "I bet none of the ties will go either."

Justin rolled his eyes and looked at the selections Brian had made. "They look great together and I'm positive you've worn them together before too."

"That's not the point Sunshine!" Brian forced Justin to move out of the doorway so he could leave the closet. "The point is I have to wear them. It's like --- being confined, no choices. I don't like it."

Justin leaned against the doorframe. "And they think I'm the cause of all the drama in our relationship."

Brian gave him a look and walked to the dresser and unerringly pulled open the drawer with his underwear in it. He looked in the drawer and how it was arranged, and hid his smile from Justin. The younger man had unpacked his clothes last night while he had hung up his suits and shirts. Brian knew if
he pulled opened the drawer next to his own, Justin's socks would be in it. Justin always kept his underwear in the second drawer. He knew what Justin had been talking about last night. It was all so routine and familiar but at the same time it wasn't. He didn't remember the other moves over the years feeling this way. And this wasn't even a move, it was just a temporary place to stay and be out of the way of all their friends. Brian's head turned around when he realized Justin was talking to him. "What?"

Justin made a sound of disbelief and blew out his cheeks as he let out a breath. "I said I'm going to take a shower..."

"I know," Brian interrupted as he returned to the bed to finish getting dressed.

"And I'll be ready in a few minutes to go with you."

Brian turned around and looked at his lover. "You aren't going with me."

Justin shrugged. "Fine, leave the keys for the 'vette and I'll drive myself in."

Brian shook his head as he lifted his right leg and bent over to put his underwear on. "You are not driving the 'vette."

Justin turned to go into the bathroom. "Fine, leave me the Mercedes."

Brian reached for his pants. "No. I said you weren't coming." He sat down on the bed

Justin walked to the bed and came to a stop three feet from Brian. He crossed his arms across his chest in a defiant stance. "I am not staying here all day."

"Yes you are." Brian stepped into his pants and then stood, pulling his pants up. "Shit, I bet I don't have socks or a belt that will match this fucking suit."
Brian brushed past Justin, ignoring the younger man. He went to the armoire and pulled out the drawer where he knew his socks would be, quickly pulled a pair out and turned to Justin. "What do you think?" He glanced at Justin and shook his head. "Why am I asking you? You wear white athletic socks most of the time." He turned back to the armoire and examined the two belts that were hanging on a tack, next to the tie rack.

"Stop avoiding my question. Why can't I come to work today? I don't want to stay here alone. I thought..."

Brian held up his hand to stop him. "Listen. It's just for today. I have to go to Liberty for a big meeting."

"I could go to that you know. I am a professional. I've interned at Vanguard and I worked for a studio. I do know how to conduct myself during business meetings."

Brian said nothing but gave him a long look. He contemplated how to respond to Justin. The boy he knew five years ago was the perfect advertisement for a polite, country club mannered, successful, intelligent, up-and-coming businessman. The man that stood before him now, although no less intelligent and successful, was less likely to keep his opinion to himself.

Justin narrowed his eyes. "What?"

"Eyeconics? Stockwell? The Dean? Pink Posse? Rage's producer?"

Justin frowned. "I was asked in the case of Eyeconics for a professional opinion, which I gave. They liked it, you didn't. In those other instances I was expressing a private opinion, but not in the workplace."
Brian sneered, "The new blue is orange."

"Admit I was right!"

Brian set his socks on the bed and started to run the belt through the loops his pants. "You were inappropriate, you should have deferred to me."

"I was right."

"Hmmpf! The other times?"

"I never was anything but professional concerning Stockwell."

Brian's head snapped up and he gave Justin a warning look.

"In the office." Justin qualified his statement at the look he was receiving from Brian.

"You don't think using Vanguard's supplies and equipment wasn't unprofessional?"

"It was resourceful, and I knew you wouldn't..."

"Don't go there little boy." Brian grabbed his socks and began to put them on. "You just remember the sight of all the furniture being hauled out of our happy little home."

Justin shrugged. "It all worked out and you went way over the line yourself."
"You complaining?" Brian stood up straight and then reached for his shirt.

"Never. You did what no one else could or would do."

"One weak moment."

Justin shook his head. "I'm not falling for it. You aren't going to distract me. Why can't I go?"

Brian sat on the bed and rubbed his forehead. "You can come when I am sure you can come to work and not be hassled by anyone wandering in the door."

"You mean Michael."

Brian shrugged. "Can we just settle in, get Liberty Air sorted out, decide what you will be doing and where we will be living?"

"In other words, please stay where I can find you and fuck you but don't bother me otherwise."

"Justin." There was hint of impatience and warning in Brian's tone.

Justin closed his eyes and tried to regroup, knowing Brian getting dressed and slamming out the door wasn't going to help. He opened his eyes and looked directly into Brian's. "At least leave me the car keys."

Brian looked off to the side, sticking his tongue in his cheek as he thought about it. He finally gave a shake of his head and turned back to Justin. "Only if you promise not to come into town or visit any of our known associates."
"Deal." Justin sighed. "Will you come back for lunch?"

Brian shook his head as he stood to put his shirt on. "I probably won't have time."

"I can help you know, I'm not just your partner in sex. I have done this kind of work before."

Brian finished tucking his shirt in. "I know. You've interned and you have done 'Rage' -- graphic novel and almost movie." He zipped and buttoned his pants and started to fasten his belt. "You are very good and..."

"No, I've done more." Justin fiddled with the tie on his robe, looking down as if he suddenly found the carpeting very interesting.

Brian paused as he reached for his tie. "What?"

Justin looked up but his eyes continued to travel around the room, never settling in one place and always avoiding Brian. "It ...uhhh... well you know...that article in 'Newsweek' wasn't that far off."

"You did work for an advertiser?"

Justin shrugged. "Web more than anything. Graphics, animation."

"When? How?"

"I decided I needed a studio, the shared living space at Garin's wasn't big enough and my bedroom didn't have enough light. I couldn't earn enough as a waiter to get it so I figured I'd try some freelancing. Turns out my resume is pretty decent and I'm not too expensive. The internship at Vanguard, the studio work, owning 'Rage', and then having that good review made it relatively easy to get a couple respectable small jobs." Justin checked Brian's reaction and then looked away again. "I was close to
getting what I needed for the security and first month's rent. I would have gotten a studio eventually but..." Justin played with the long end of the belt on his robe, gave a slight shrug, but didn't continue.

"But?" Brian continued to dress, shoving his feet in his boots, annoyed by Justin's reluctance to tell him the rest of the story.

"But I would have had to keep up the small jobs and the waiting to keep both places." Justin sighed. "I'd have had a studio but no time to use it. That is the big problem with New York. Plus I was having a problem ..." Justin waved his right hand as if painting, "You know, getting into a creative mood for other stuff, but I was actually able to concentrate on the jobs."

Brian put his tie around his neck, a thoughtful expression on his face. "You liked the work?"

Justin pressed his lips together and wrinkled his nose, making a face that showed he thought it was a stupid question. "I wouldn't have interned at Vanguard if I didn't."

Brian's eyebrows lifted at the comment. "You interned at Vanguard to get me back!"

Justin shrugged, "Says you."

Brian made a derisive sound of disbelief and walked over to the dresser to adjust his tie. "So what did you work on?"

"Loos and Dunn's website advertisements."

Brian looked into the mirror and caught Justin's eyes in the reflection. "You did those fucking animos? The ones with the morphing animals that turned into designer wear?"

Justin didn't answer.
Brian turned to look at Justin incredulously. "You DID do them, didn't you?"

Justin's expression turned from one of insecurity to discomfort, and he simply nodded in reply.

Brian picked his watch up off the dresser. "How much did they pay you?"

"A couple grand."

"SON OF A BITCH!" Brian shook his head. He grabbed his wallet, sliding it into his back pocket, and then stalked over and grabbed his suit coat. "You stupid LITTLE SHIT!"

Justin's jaw dropped. "Hey! I..."

"Don't." Brian held up his hand.

Brian walked back over to the dresser and picked up his keys.

"What? What did I do?"

"Did you sign a contract?" Brian snapped out sharply.

"I'm not stupid."

Brian stopped in his tracks and closed his eyes. "What did you give them – full rights?"
"No! I did learn something from 'Rage', between Michael and Brett, I made sure I only gave permission to use the artwork on the webpage and I kept all copyrights."

"Where's the paperwork?"

"It's in my backpack with all the other important stuff I grabbed. Why?"

"I'm going to have Peter go over it."

"Your lawyer? Why?"

"Do you have any idea what you did?"

"What!? I did some artwork."

"No, you probably gave that fucking advertising company the front page of Advertising Age and AdWeek. And fuck knows what awards!"

"How?"

"I saw the website and promos Justin. It was one of the hotpick links on the national advertising association website. I don't work in a vacuum Justin; beyond competition there are the associations, and they keep us in contact and up to date. Advertising as an industry is somewhat cohesive as a group as well as competitive individually. How do you think I set fees? Pull them out of the air? No, there are industry guidelines and an internal communication system among companies. We may compete but we sit down and make nice with each other too."
"So?"

"JUSTIN!" Brian's patience exploded. "I will not have my partner---MY PARTNER---working for the competition and giving them award-winning graphics and designs. IT'S NOT GOING TO HAPPEN!"

"Oh." Justin took a step back since Brian had shifted forward as he shouted at him, closing the distance between the two of them. Justin swallowed but found it difficult with a suddenly dry mouth. "I didn't think it would be that ...er..."

"Good?"

Justin nodded.

Brian threw his hands in the air in exasperation. "Justin, you are a very talented 'artist'," Brian had said the last word using his hands to indicate quotes around it, "but you are also an exceptional commercial and graphic artist. 'Rage' is a part of it. Yes, you see it as art, but it has a mass market, commercial appeal that goes beyond selling a few canvases each year in some snobby gallery. You could work in any agency. You are beyond what most commercial artists do. You are inventive, and you have an incredible gift with visual art that is full of feeling and passion. You transcend certain boundaries and your art appeals on a mass market level as well as on the more exclusive collector level where your finer individual canvases and drawings attract a more exclusive clientele. You can make a living -- a very successful living -- in my business with no problem. Luckily for you, you also enjoy it, which you have been loathe to admit because of a certain asshole demanding you go get a business degree at Dartmouth."

Justin blinked, trying to hide his reddening eyes; it was a moment before he could speak. "Thank you Brian."

Brian waved him off.
The blond took a step back towards his lover. "No, that kind of validation is something every artist needs, and it means so much more coming from you because you will never be anything but honest about what I do. You know me."

"I know you alright." Brian stepped past him towards the door. "I’m going to get that contract and make sure you didn’t fuck it up."

"I DIDN’T!" Justin’s voice betrayed his slight irritation at Brian's pragmatic approach to what they were discussing over his own emotional way of thinking.

"Well, if the asshole that signed you wants more he’ll have to deal with Kinnetik."

Justin tried to switch gears but failed to see the connection between the job he did in New York and Kinnetik. "Huh?"

"As of five minutes ago you belong to Kinnetik, lock, stock and colored pencils."

Justin gave a laugh, realizing Brian was asserting control over a situation he didn't like or approve of. "Brian, you can't do that."

"Watch me."

"Okay." Justin gave a slight shrug of acceptance, knowing that Brian taking the initiative and controlling the business component would only end in a very satisfying partnership. He would be working with Brian, helping Brian's business but still be able to have the time to do what he loved... create. And more than anything else they would be together.

Brian stopped in his tracks and turned to look at Justin, surprised at the easy acquiescence over a business issue. "Okay? Just okay?"
Justin smiled and nodded. "I assume I'll have plenty of time for my other art --- beyond the commercial aspect."

"Of course. But I thought you were having problems with the creative side of drawing right now."

Justin shrugged. "That block sort of disappeared yesterday afternoon. I actually got some sketching done."

"In between spending my money?" Brian shook his head, and tossed his keys from one hand to the other. "Figures, I put you on the payroll and you already want time off for creative playtime."

"Jerk." Justin nodded towards the shower. "Can you wait for me?"

Brian caught his keys after a high toss and then looked at him. "Why?"

"Well, since I'm on the payroll, I have to think of the business. I can come to work with you now."

Brian shook his head. "Not yet. Why don't you take all that creative energy you suddenly have unblocked and do something with it today? The meetings today are strictly management and contract. I'll make sure you are there for the brainstorming and artistic ones."

"I understand the business Brian. And like you said I sort of like it. I don't want to just be a paycheck and a no show employee"

"You won't be." Brian gave him a slow smile. "I intend to get my money's worth out of you."

Justin thought he saw a little leer in the smile. "ON THE JOB!"
"Haven't you heard?" Brian's smile turned into a smirk at the comment. "I don't fuck the employees any more."

Justin made a face. "Then we have a problem."

Brian looked sideways as he thought about it. "You don't count. You won't just be another hired hand."

"Oh." Justin crossed his arms and gave him a look. "Thanks."

Brian rolled his eyes at the performance.

Justin dropped his hands, and he looked down a moment, his right hand picking up the long belt tie again. "Brian." He looked up from his examination of the belt length to his lover. "Kinnetik's success means as much to me as it does to you. It's your dream and I have always known how much your work means to you. I know how much of yourself goes into to the creative process. It's a part of you."

"And I know how much 'Rage' means to you, I know how you really felt about it not being made into a film, what it did to you, not just as the business man but as the artist who gave life and depth to the images that told a story more beautifully and completely than the few words in the captions."

Justin nodded. "People don't realize how much we really have in common, do they? They think it's all about the sex."

Brian laughed. "It isn't?"

"I should tell them just how much time you spend reading, or that you pretend to mimic accents but are essentially fluent in French and Spanish. Maybe I will tell them how much you actually know about art and that if truth be told you like going to the galleries and museums with me."
Brian raised one eyebrow and lowered his head, trying for a threatening look. "If you spread vile gossip or cast aspersions in an attempt to assassinate my character with mindless and sentimental drivel like that, you will be punished."

Justin just smiled at him and began to twirl the long belt loop in front of him. "Hmm, sounds interesting."

Brian turned to walk away. "Don't count on it Sunshine. Count on a red bottom."

Justin let out a laugh at the threat and Brian turned to glance over his shoulder to see what was so funny.

Justin was walking, somewhat oblivious to his partner, towards the bathroom, still twirling the belt. "Yeah! SPANK ME DADDY," he mimicked in a low, sultry voice.

Brian turned and quickly walked out the door, trying not to react to Justin's lusty toned comment, or the images it brought to mind. The brunet's shoulders shook silently as he laughed at the memory of Justin's 'spank me' walk. He paused for a moment and looked at his watch. "If only I had the time." He shook his head and walked down the stairs.

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Brian did a rapid search of Justin's backpack. He found a number of files that looked like they might have the contracts he was looking for, and when he saw a logo he recognized he knew it must be the right folders. Brian pulled them out, set his brief case on the table, opened it and dropped the files in. Just before he closed it he spied the keys to the 'vette. He sucked his lips into his mouth and thought for a millisecond about leaving them for Justin, but he closed the case back up without taking them out. Brian listened for Justin but only heard the faint sound of water running. He was about to leave the living room for work when he looked past the backpack lying on the table and noticed the sketch pad laying open on the couch. He walked over and glanced at the open pad.
Justin had been drawing at some point yesterday because there on the page was the image of the workmen carrying a couch. He saw the detail Justin had captured, catching the men in a moment of time. Brian picked up the sketch pad and browsed though the previous sheets. There were a number of unfinished drawings, and a large number of doodles. The blond hadn't been lying about not drawing in recent weeks, if not months. Brian set the pad down and went back to get his briefcase. He picked it up to leave and then stopped. He set the briefcase down, reopened it and pulled out the keys to the Corvette. Shaking his head as he walked over and dropped them on the sketchpad, he muttered to the empty room. "There better not be a scratch on it when I get home Justin." He gave the keys a last look, grabbed his briefcase and went to work.

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Justin had just finished reading his email messages when the doorbell rang. The musical sound of the bells surprised him as it echoed through the house. He had a brief memory of standing outside his own home and Debbie commenting on their door chimes. He shook his head at the memory and quickly walked out to the front door. He wasn't sure who would be at the door; no one knew he was here and it was unlikely that it was the 'welcome to the neighborhood' committee. Justin approached the door slowly and jumped when the banging started on the front door.

"Justin! Open this door. Now!"

Justin collapsed against the wall and covered his face with his hands. He wondered if she would just go away if he pretended she wasn't there.

"I know you are in there Justin." The voice was even louder. He had never noticed before how nasal his mother's voice sounded. The door bell rang again. "The jig is up, I ran into Naomi this morning and learned how very handsome and polite my son is. And how does she know this? Because she met you here --- not in New York! --- yesterday. Now open the damn door!"

Justin quickly moved to the door and opened it before his mother could huff and puff and blow the door down. "Hi Mom."
Jennifer quickly covered the look of surprise on her face when the door opened and actually revealed her son. "Don't 'hi mom' me." The two stared at each other for a moment as if judging the other's mood. Jennifer won the staring contest by folding her arms across her chest and taking the role of annoyed mother. "Going to invite me into the mansion?"

"MOM!" Justin stepped aside and opened the door wider so his mother could walk past him.

Jennifer stopped in the foyer and looked around. Justin shut the door and moved to stand beside her. Jennifer glanced over at her son. "Naomi’s right, this will never show well. The foyer is too empty and that makes the whole house feel unwelcoming."

Justin's jaw dropped. "Is that what you are here for? Selling the house?"

Jennifer turned and frowned at him. "Why else would I come all the way out here? It couldn't possibly be to see a child who I haven't laid eyes on in 6 months and who didn't even have the decency to call his mother and let her know he was home."

Justin grimaced, causing his nose to wrinkle and his eyes to squint. "Sorry?"

"Is that a question or an apology?" Jennifer’s tone was even more annoyed as she walked through the foyer and stood looking into the living room.

Justin followed quickly; if it had been seven years earlier he would have been grounded for months if she had used that same tone on him. "I just... I can explain."

"Where's Brian? His car is in the driveway." Jennifer turned to face Justin. "He hiding somewhere?"

"He's not here." Justin paused a moment. "And why would he be hiding from you?"
"For disrupting your life and dragging you back home?"

"I want to be here. And you, of all people, should know Brian would never hide."

Jennifer shrugged. "True, he'd parade naked in front of anyone."

Justin frowned and spoke as Jennifer did.

"You don't seem very happy to see me." "Brian let you have his car?"

Jennifer wore a matching frown as she processed her son's comment.

Justin sucked in his lips and narrowed his eyes as his mother's question sunk in.

Jennifer saw the look and realized what Justin had said. "Of course I'm happy to see you Honey. I just want to know what the big secret is about why you are here."

"There is no secret and it's nice to see you too." Justin walked into the living room and threw himself on the couch, flicked on the TV and then crossed his arms and stared at the screen. "I guess we are past the welcome home hug stage."

Jennifer rolled her eyes at her son's dramatic walk and followed him to the couch. She set her purse on the coffee table and sat down next to Justin. She pulled the remote from his hand and turned off the TV. Justin grabbed it back and turned it back on. Jennifer took it again, turned off the set and then sat on the remote before Justin could take it back.

Justin turned and started to reach over his mother.
"Don't even think about it."

"That's not fair."

"Mother’s need every advantage."

Justin sat back on the couch, again folding his arms and looking straight ahead, this time at an empty screen.

Jennifer sighed and looked at the blank screen as well. "Okay, so maybe that wasn't the best welcome home you've ever had."

"Thanks." Justin's voice was full of sarcasm.

"And maybe I deserved that tone – a bit."

"I'm sorry I didn't call."

"Do you know what it's like to have someone casually mention that your son, who you think is in New York City, spent the day with her, shopping and chatting?"

"It wasn't like that." Justin let his arms drop, relaxing his body, his tone more apologetic than defensive.

Jennifer let out a little sigh. "I acted like I knew you were here."
"I didn't tell Naomi not to say I was here. I figured I'd see you well before you saw her. She said she only saw you once a month, if that."

"Well, this is the first Thursday of the month, all sales and consultants meet to go over listings and evaluate why some properties haven't sold."

"Oh."

"The bigger question is why you are here and how long have you been here?"

"How did you know where I was?"

"I'm a realtor Justin. I had a vague idea where the house might be but I couldn't very well ask Naomi." Jennifer smiled suddenly. "I checked the property transactions for the last year under Brian's name."

"Ah." Justin nodded, following how his mother had found him.

"When?" Jennifer shifted a bit to her right so she could watch Justin more comfortably as they talked.

"Yesterday."

"Why?"

Justin rubbed his hands over his eyes and then dropped his head on the back of the couch. "I was needed."

"You were needed?" Jennifer made a face. "I think you should explain that more. Is Brian all right?"
Justin scratched his head. "Brian is fine. HE...WE... needed to figure out some stuff. And it's figured out now."

"Meaning?" Jennifer was not about to let it drop.

Justin rolled his eyes. "I am an adult now Mom, I shouldn't have to explain this stuff."

Jennifer didn't say a word, but kept watching Justin intently. Justin shifted under the gaze.

"Mom!"

Jennifer remained silent.

"Shit." Justin turned to face his mother, pulling one leg up on to the couch as he settled into a comfortable position. He looked off at the fireplace, trying to order his thought. "I guess the bottom line is that Brian and I are together, permanently."

Jennifer rubbed her forehead almost as if she had a headache. "What does that mean Justin? Marriage again?"

Justin shook his head, "No. We just are together. Period. That's all. We made the decision and that's it."

"But Honey..."

"No Mom. You don't understand." Justin looked around the room as he searched for a way to explain it. "Brian and I – we just are. We talked about it and decided we are going to be together."
"What about you---living in New York? What about his --- his other men?"

Justin's cheeks puffed up and he slowly blew out the air trapped in them. "We haven't decided where we are going to live yet. And Brian's tricking --- well, that's not up for discussion, that's between Brian and me."

"And how many men?" Jennifer reached out to grab Justin's arm. "You have never been able to deal with it, it has always been an issue for you."

"It's not anymore."

"Oh, right." Jennifer rolled her eyes and dropped her hand.

"Mom, you have to understand. Relationships are compromises, right?"

Jennifer nodded. "But Justin, monogamy shouldn't be a compromise."

"It doesn't matter now. I understand what's going on with him." Justin shrugged. "I have all of Brian."

"What?" Jennifer shook her head. "That makes no sense."

Jennifer watched as Justin smiled; it was a slow smile and seemed, irrationally for someone that young, to be full of wisdom.

Justin looked directly at his mother. "Whatever makes someone love someone, whatever soul someone has to share, whatever makes you give your heart to another ---- I have that part of Brian." Justin patted his mother's arm reassuringly. "I don't care how many men he fucks, they mean nothing. It's just a
physical satisfaction for him. Emotionally, the part that really counts— that's all mine. Brian and I are bound more closely than most married people, he only loves me. And that's enough – more than enough."

"Oh Justin." Jennifer clutched at the hand resting on her arm. "Sweetheart, are you sure? Are you sure you aren't trying to convince yourself, so that you can have Brian?"

"No Mom, I have had a lot of time to think about it. Brian and I knew we either had to let go and be apart, or move on together, somehow. Being apart wasn't the answer. So we are moving on together. Trust me, he is compromising – in ways no one can see. But I know and I appreciate what he is doing."

"How is he compromising?" Jennifer shook her head in disbelief.

Justin smiled. "He lets me love him."

"What?"

Justin laughed gently. "He lets me love him Mom. You have no idea how hard that is for Brian to accept, what a compromise it is for him to let someone inside those walls. I can hurt him more with a single word than anyone else in the world could do with a thousand, but he lets me in and he loves me, he takes the risk of being hurt. That is a huge concession for him Mom. I am in places in his life, his heart, his mind where he won't let anyone else enter, not Lindsay, not Michael, not Gus. Just me."

Jennifer didn't know what to say. She sat back against the couch and just watched the gentle flames in the fireplace.

"Stay here Mom. I'll get you some tea."

Jennifer nodded absently as she thought about her son and his partner.
"Justin?" Jennifer set her empty teacup down on the table.

"Yeah Mom?" Justin stifled a yawn. He stood and stretched, as the two had been sitting on the couch sipping tea and munching very expensive shortbread cookies for the last half hour.

"Where are you going to live, here or the loft?"

"I guess the bigger question is Pittsburgh or New York?"

"New York?" Jennifer surprise was evident in her tone. "NEW YORK?"

Justin nodded.

"Brian is going to sell the agency and move?"

"No, open another office in New York. Oh, that's not public news yet. Don't tell anyone."

"Do you like it there that much?"

Justin grimaced. "No not really. It's a nice place to spend time, to vacation or take sabbaticals, but live there--- no, I don't think so."

"You're kidding!" Jennifer stood up and walked over to the fireplace. She warmed her hands by the grate. "My son not wanting to live in New York City?"
"I'm living there now Mom, did I sound particularly happy on the phone?"

Jennifer turned to look at him in surprise. "You didn't like it?"

Justin shrugged. "I was there Mom --- alone --- having the experience everyone thought I should have, maybe because it's something they wanted, not necessarily what I really wanted."

"Were you lonely Justin?"

"You aren't supposed to be lonely in a city of a few million."

"Oh Honey, you were lonely, weren't you?"

"Garin isn't the most sociable of roommates – and he's not gay— so it's not like we went to the same bars and clubs."

"I didn't know. I would have tried to visit but I thought you wanted to be independent and..." Jennifer made a motion with her hands to try to finish her thoughts.

"The best times in New York were the weekends with Brian. The rest was work and trying to stay occupied. I did meet some people, but it's hard to in a place where everyone is from somewhere else or too busy trying to make ends meet. The galleries are full of wealthy people looking, and young ...and old...artists trying to get attention."

Jennifer walked over to Justin. "How about your welcome home hug now?"

Justin nodded and embraced his mother.
"Are you sure you know where you are going?"

"Yes."

Justin looked around at the passing scenery. "Admit it, we're lost."

"We are not."

"There is nothing around here Mom. Just cows and fields."

"That's what is supposed to be around here; we are going to lunch at a country inn."

"And you are sure you have been here before?"

"Ah huh. And on a motorcycle too."

"HE brought you here?"

"Justin." Jennifer's tone sounded more weary than warning as she thought of Justin's continued resistance to her lover.

Justin made a face at the tone in his mother's voice. "Just asking."
"There's the turn." Jennifer slowed the car. "You'll love the food here Justin."

"Maybe." Justin's uncharacteristic lack of enthusiasm indicated his continued dislike of his mother's boyfriend.

Jennifer smirked, deciding to rattle Justin out of his sulk. "You will. I've been feeding you since you were born. I know what you like, I breast fed you and made ..."

"GROSS!"

".. all natural baby food..." Jennifer laughed as she negotiated the drive, "and I know what you like now."

"MOM!" Justin shrunk down into the seat of the car and tried to ignore his mother.

Jennifer continued laughing at her son's blushing face as she pulled into a parking space.

Justin looked around with a pout at the several barns he saw off to the right, and quickly put up his window. "Barns --- hay --- animals --- allergies."

"Oh stop it." Jennifer opened her door to get out of the car. "You took your medication, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Then get out. After lunch we can check out the antique shop in the bigger barn, and there is a bakery and a couple smaller stores in the other barn."
Justin got out of the car and saw the fruit and vegetable stand under a large oak tree. "They have pumpkins!"

Jennifer smiled. "Wait until you try the apple cobbler."

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Brian phoned the house for the fourth time. Justin wasn't picking up his cell, and the recording actually reported that Justin was out of the calling area. For the last two hours Brian had had images of the Corvette racing down country roads with high cornfields on either side of the lane. The image had then changed to the 'vette going air born when it hit a slight incline and then coming down hard on the undercarriage, smoke streaming from where the treads skidded on the pavement, and then accelerating again as the driver floored the pedal. He was ready to leave the office and hunt his lover down.

"Hello?"

Brian jerked at the voice that answered the phone. "Jennifer?"

"Oh, hi Brian."

Brian's hand clenched around the receiver. "Is your son there by any chance?"

"Yes, he is just getting something from my car. Do you want to wait and I'll go get him?"

"No, that's okay. Just tell him I'll be later than I thought. I probably won't get there until seven."

"All right."
"Oh, and would you give him another message."

"Of course."

"Tell him the bottom will be red. Very, very, red."

"The bottom?"

"He'll know what I mean."

Jennifer paused a moment. "Okay."

Brian nodded to himself. "Good bye Jennifer."

"Bye Brian."

Brian put the phone down. The brat was in so much trouble. And he claimed he didn't miss his mommy. Brian snorted as he opened the file on his pc's desktop that contained the business plan he was working on for Liberty.

~~~

Justin was still struggling with the backseat of his mother's car, trying to get the rear part of the seat locked back into place.

"Did you get it Honey?"
Justin nodded as he heard the lock click into place. He pulled himself out of the backseat, his face flushed pink from the exertion.

"It's great the seat folds down like that but I can never get it back up."

Justin nodded as he closed the door to the back seat. "Design flaw." He eyed his mother's Volvo. He knew she had bought a new one a couple months ago but never thought about it. "Business good?"

Jennifer nodded. "That and the revised divorce settlement your father and I finally agreed to."

"Good." Justin smirked. "The new lawyer worked out."

"Oh yeah!" Jennifer nodded. "And Honey. I have your tuition money now. I had it put into an account in both our names; your father's name is off it."

Justin shook his head. "I don't know Mom."

"Well, it's there and you had better look like you are going to use it."

Justin looked off down the driveway. "Umm, how is he?"

"I love you so much Honey." Jennifer reached out and gently touched Justin's face. "It amazes me that I created a child that can still care about his father after everything that has happened. If your father only knew what he threw away." Jennifer dropped her hand and looked down at the ground. "I'm not sure I care anymore how he is."
Justin closed his eyes to slits and he bit on his lower lip for a moment, trying to harness the emotions he was feeling. No matter how often he was told his parent’s break up wasn't his fault he would always feel guilty about it. "Have you seen him at all? Has Molly?"

"Molly has. We have tried to compartmentalize it all. You know the Taylor and the Sommer families."

Justin gave a slight shake of his head acknowledging the way his family, including the extended family on his mother's and father's sides, had the ability to draw boundaries around issues and people and then just continue to act as if nothing was wrong. Ignore it and it wasn't happening.

Jennifer raised her eyebrows as she thought about Craig. "I think, everything that happened," she paused trying to put it into words, "it hit him weeks after it was all over. Not long after you left he called to check on when he was supposed to pick up Molly and asked about you. I told him you had moved to New York and about the review." Jennifer chuckled for a moment. "He was concerned about your safety with living in New York. I'm afraid I might have told him that so far it seemed safer than Pittsburgh and..." Jennifer stopped and looked at Justin a bit sheepishly. "I might have mentioned something about his idea of locking you up in a cell with criminals may not have been the best way to protect you either."

"Mom!" Justin laughed. "You didn't."

Jennifer nodded. "There were some other words too but I'm not going to bore you with it." Jennifer laughed. "He is very polite now when he calls."

"Do you think Dad is feeling guilty?"

"He feels something Justin, I'm not sure he knows what it is, and I'm not sure either. But I do have control over your education trust now so that says something."

"But you are not sure what's going on with him?"
Jennifer shook her head. "No, let's just give it time okay? Maybe he will surprise us both."

Justin gave her a long stare.

"Then again..."

"Maybe he won't," Justin finished for her.

"Well Honey, I need to be going, Molly gets out early today."

Justin nodded.

"You will call me tomorrow?"

"Yes Mother."

"You will let me know where to find you?"

"Yes Mother."

Jennifer gave him a kiss and got into the car. "Lunch was fun Dear, and so was shopping." Justin nodded and leaned down to the open window and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "I'm glad you are home Honey. I liked spending time with you today."

"I did too Mom."
Jennifer started the car. "Oh, before I forget, Brian called."

Justin froze. "What?" He dropped his head in a sign of defeat. "You answered the phone?"

"You were out here."

"What did he say?" Justin pulled his cell phone out and started looking through the calls.

"He's going to be late. Won't be home until around seven. Oh, and something about the color for the bottom."

"What?" Justin leaned down to look at his mother in the car.

"He said to tell you the bottom was going to be red—very red."

"Oh God." Justin stood up and took a step back from the car just as his cell phone rang. Justin turned it on expecting to hear Brian screaming at him. "Hello?" He held the phone away from his ear as his greeting was met with screeching.

Jennifer smiled as she heard and recognized the voice. "Everything okay Justin?"

Justin listened to the tirade with the phone held a few inches away from his ear. He tipped his head and shrugged his shoulders. "Probably."

"Okay, I'll see you later. Say hi to Daphne for me." Jennifer gave him a small laugh as she put the car into gear and drove off with a wave.
Justin turned to go back into the house. "Daph... Daph...will you calm down..." He held the phone away from his ear again. Justin cursed Brian for putting him in deep shit with the women in his life and he really hoped Cynthia and any other woman Brian ran into at the office was making him miserable too.

~~~

Brian glared at the buzzing phone. Cynthia had been told not to interrupt him unless Justin called and claimed to be bleeding to death. He grabbed the receiver and picked it up. "What is it?"

"Lindsay is on the phone."

"So what? She's called all week."

"This time she said it is an emergency."

"Put her on." Brian listened as the phone beeped and the transfer was made.

"Brian?"

"What's wrong with Gus?" Brian frowned as he set his pen down.

"Gus. Gus is.... he's okay."

"Are you okay?"

"Yes."
"Mel and JR?"

"Umm...fine."

Brian felt the red flush of anger rise in his face. "Then what the hell is the emergency?"

"I have been trying to reach you for days but you won't answer your phone! What's wrong with you!?"

"Nothing. Did you ever consider the fact that maybe I didn't have anything to say to you?"

"Brian! Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Now good-bye."

"Wait! Wait! Don't hang up!"

"What do you want Lindsay? I'm very busy."

"Where are you?"

"Well since you lied to get past Cynthia I would assume you know where I am."

"I mean, where have you been? You haven't answered at the loft at all."

"I'm not at the loft."
"Why not?"

"Maybe because the phone's constant ringing was driving me crazy."

"That's not fair."

"I wouldn't go there if I were you."

"We need to talk."

"Not now. I'll talk to you when I'm ready. I'll talk to Michael when I'm ready." Brian listened to the silence at the other end of the phone. "I can tell that you already know I haven't been returning Mikey's calls either."

"Well, he did mention it when he called to check on JR."

"And did you ask him for money?"

"Michael? He doesn't have any...Brian that's not why I'm calling. I'm worried about you."

"Really? Why?"

"Why? Because."

"I'm fine Lindsay. Never better in fact."
"Are you, ummm, seeing someone new?"

"New?"

"Well, I called Justin and..."

"Justin?" Brian scratched his head with his free hand as he thought about it for a second. He knew the little twat had talked to his mother but he never mentioned Lindsay. "What did he have to say?"

"Well. Actually his roommate said he was out."

"So you haven't talked to Justin?"

"No."

"And why were you calling Justin?"

"I just wanted to check on how he is doing. I guess it must be going well because he hasn't been in for days."

"Days? Just what did his roommate say?"

"What. Oh... nothing like that it's just that when Mel and Mich... I mean I guess he just hasn't been in when other people have tried him either."
Brian shook his head. "Well, I guess he's just a really busy guy. And so am I Lindsay. I have to go. I have an important meeting with a client that I need to be at."

"Brian, wait."

"What?"

"I need to talk to you."

"About?"

"Gus."

"I thought you said he was okay?"

"He is, it's just that things here are so tight and ..."

"So you did call about money."

"No. Yes. Brian! It's just that... I need to talk to you."

"You bring my son for a visit and maybe I'll talk to you."

"I can't do that."

"Then I won't be talking to you again until I have finished sorting out a few things I need to work out."
"Sort what out?"

"That isn't any of your business."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Just what I said. Bye Linz." Brian hung up the phone. He suddenly picked it up again and pressed the button for Cynthia.

"Yes?"

"You let her through again you are fired."

"If she calls and says Gus is hurt?"

"You put her through only after you make sure it is a real emergency."

"For how long?"

"Until I tell you differently."

"So only Justin?"

"And make sure he just isn't calling to find out what I want for dinner!" He heard Cynthia laugh as he slammed the receiver down.
Brian watched a car speed by him. He caught just a glimpse of the driver and shook his head. She was young and very familiar. "Justin, what are you doing?" He turned up the driveway and eventually rolled to a stop next to the Corvette. After getting out of the Mercedes Brian walked around the Corvette in the fading daylight trying to see if there was any damage to the car. The outdoor lights were on but it was that part of the day, between daylight and dusk, when artificial lights didn't really help in the waning sun. Shaking his head in defeat, Brian started for the front door.

"Justin?" Brian opened the front door and walked in, yelling loudly. "Why isn't this locked?" He set his briefcase down on the chair and dropped his keys on a small table that set next to it. He turned when he heard footsteps, the unmistakable sound of sneakers squeaking across a wooden floor.

"Hi."

Brian hung his coat up on an old fashioned coat rack absently as he looked at Justin. "You want to explain your mother AND Daphne now, or later?"

Justin smiled sweetly. "Do I get spanked now or later?"

Brian took a step towards him.

Justin held up his hand to stop him. "After dinner my liege."

Brian shook his head at the comment.

"How about you go shower and change? I put the rub on the steaks and I just started the grill on the stove. By the time I get them on and cooked you'll be back. I'll even have a nice cold beer waiting."
"What else are we having?"

"Salad and roasted sweet potatoes."

Brian nodded and Justin turned and quickly made his way back to the kitchen. Brian watched as his lover hastily disappeared. He wondered about the rapid retreat --- not even a kiss. Brian thought it over as he felt his pockets for his cell phone. He scoffed when he couldn't find the phone and reached back to where his coat was hanging and checked its pockets. Brian flicked open the phone and began to run down the calls he had ignored as he walked towards the stairs. Although he was watching the numbers and frowning at the calls from Michael and Lindsay he couldn't believe that Justin was so nervous about Brian's reaction to his mother and Daphne being at the house that he avoided coming into the hallway to give him a kiss.

Brian snapped the phone closed and decided he'd deal with the calls tomorrow. He turned and walked a few steps back to lock the door and set the alarm. Finished with the alarm he set his phone on the table and headed for the stairs. Brian stopped mid-way to the stairwell and looked back at the foyer, really noticing it for the first time. An oak coat rack stood by the door, its wood stain matching the small table and chair. The woods complimented but did not match the woodwork and wall paper.

Brian turned and headed for the kitchen, now knowing why Justin never came near him in the foyer. "Justin! Give me back that fucking credit card right now!"

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Friday, October 5, 2005

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Justin settled into the passenger seat. "This is nice, comfortable." He watched as the landscape changed quickly, sipping the latte they had picked up at the bakery near the house. "Did you stop at Haskins yesterday too?"

Brian nodded but didn't say anything.

Justin put his tall cup in the holder by the shift and stretched a bit. "This is really nice, a lot more comfortable than the 'vette."

Brian gave him a long stare before turning his attention back to the road.

"Are you going to talk to me at all?" Brian had spoken to him last night and they even attempted a little discipline that turned into laughter and very hot sex, but this morning Brian became increasing silent as they got ready to leave for the office. Justin could only think that seeing the furniture again as they were leaving had annoyed Brian again.

Brian's only answer was to reach for his own coffee cup and take a sip.

"Jesus Brian. We can sell them for what we paid for them. Mom was right, you have to admit it, the entrance does look better and when the house is being shown people have a place to pick up the brochures or to sit and take off their shoes and put those blue things on their feet while they tour the place."

"I'm not upset about that Justin."

"Then what?"

"Your mother AND Daphne?"
Justin looked bewildered as to how they had become the focus of Brian's silence. "I told you how my mother just showed up. It wasn't my fault. Why is it bothering you?"

"And you spent the entire morning with her? I thought you were supposed to be painting." Brian's thoughts were on the blank drawing pads he had seen as he walked through the den this morning. He was beginning to wonder whether bringing Justin into the business was the right thing for the younger man.

"Brian, I hadn't seen my mother since I left."

"You talked to her all the time. If I recall correctly I actually had to stop fucking you one Saturday last month because she called and YOU picked up the phone. You weren't drawing then and you weren't yesterday."

"I hadn't SEEN her Brian. It's different. She's changed. And I did draw some. I'm just happy to be home, it's not interfering with spending time on my art. I want to feel like I'm home. Seeing Mom and Daphne helped. And my mom--- she's still with that 'Easy Rider' teacher jerk and she's ... she's ... I don't know... different."

"How?"

Justin shrugged. "Her hair was lighter, she had lost a little weight and I know she has a lot of pressure on her between Dad, Molly and work but she actually seemed less stressed. And there was a wrinkle right here." Justin pointed to the side of his mouth, "that was never there before --- she looked older."

"In six months?"

Justin nodded and looked out the window. "She's my mom."
Brian gave him a sideways glance and rolled his eyes as he concentrated on making a turn on to the entrance ramp for the interstate. He shook his head and muttered as he merged into the first lane. "I hope you had enough sense not to point out the wrinkle."

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They had been traveling for about five minutes when Brian decided to break into Justin's obvious sulk over his mother. "What about Daphne?"

"Please not that too." Justin dropped his head into his hands and then suddenly looked up, his expression now defiant. He pointed at Brian with one finger. "That's your fault."

Brian gave him a quick glance and gave a shake of his head. "Want to explain that one?"

"I answered the phone because you had just talked to my mother and I knew you couldn't resist yelling at me after hearing her voice. She delivered your message by the way!"

"Oh right." Brian's soft tone did not hide the mocking sarcasm in his voice. "It's my fault." Brian put on his blinker and changed lanes. "That is such bullshit."

"Daphne wouldn't have stopped you know. You were lucky I answered; she was getting ready to come to the office and hunt you down."

"Me? Why?" Brian exclaimed incredulously. "How the hell did I become involved in this?"

"Garin."
"Garin?!” Brian practically shouted the name in incredulity.

"He knew I got a call from you and then left."

Brian made a snorting sound of disbelief. "You told him?"

"I had to tell him something Brian. I pay half the rent and I was packing like I was leaving for good."

"What did you tell him?"

"That I had to go home and not to tell anyone. He was to tell them nothing but to leave a message on my cell phone and that I would get back to whoever called. But then Daphne called Garin." Justin then ended the conversation as if that explained everything.

Brian reached for the radio when he became annoyed with Justin and his lack of explanation. He glanced at Justin and waited before turning it on.

Justin made a face, knowing if he let Brian turn on the radio the conversation would be over and Brian would probably ignore him the rest of the day. "OKAY."

Brian let his hand drop back to the steering wheel of the car.

Justin sighed and began. "Garin told Daphne I was gone. He wasn't supposed to tell anyone anything if they called the apartment's phone number. He didn't let my mom know, just told her I was out and like I said before he was to tell anyone calling to use my cell number and leave a message there if I didn't pick up."

"And he told this to everyone?"
"Yes."

"Then why was Daphne at the house?"

"Because GARIN TOLD DAPHNE."

Brian shook is head. "I don't get it."

"Garin is afraid of Daphne."

Brian smirked. "You are too."

"I am not."

"I've heard your end of many conversations. You are afraid of her."

"She hits!"

Brian started laughing as he switched lanes and sped up, his exit just two ramps away.

Justin made a face. "It's not funny. She has hit since we were seven. She used to pinch before that but that left a mark, especially on me. She got caught doing that and had to quit. Garin, he caved instantly when she called. Shit, he didn't even want her visiting us because she was going to stay with me. He like freaked and said he'd stay with a friend when she was going to come."
Brian was still laughing, "Who would have thought our sweet little Daphne is a familial terrorist."

Justin pulled up his sleeve and pointed to a spot on his arm. "See that?"

Brian looked over quickly and then back at the road. "What?"

"That little pink patch."

Brian looked at Justin, then his arm, and then back at the road. "No, not really."

"Well, it's there. That's where she hit me yesterday."

"Why did she hit you?"

Justin let his sleeve drop but rubbed his arm in memory of the punch he received yesterday. "When Daphne got to the house to visit I get this big hug, followed by a kiss. She is telling me how happy she is to see me. And we are talking and then I get this punch in the arm and a rant for not telling her I was back."

"I can't believe you are scared of little petite Daphne, or that her 6 foot 2, 200 pound cousin is too."

"You know how Daphne can be. I've seen you take off when she is in a mood. You give a little kiss, tell her how sweet she is and glide out the door. You are just lucky she thinks you are the sexiest man she has ever known."

"I know how to handle men AND women."
Justin snorted. "You just know how to retreat without looking like you lost or are scared."

"Bullshit!"

Justin looked at Brian and lowered his voice a bit. "I heard from Emmett how Daph hit you in Woody's and made you come after me in New York!"

Brian stopped laughing. "It was just a tap. It didn't hurt." He sat up straighter in the driver's seat.

"I bet it did. She has these strong, bony hands. When she gives you her little punch, her knuckle is like a stick poking at you!"

"And that's NOT why I went looking for you; you had my fucking credit card." Brian suddenly started laughing again as watched Justin frown at the comment and start rubbing the spot on his arm again.

Justin noticed what Brian was looking at and dropped his hand from where it was rubbing his arm. With an annoyed look thrown at Brian, the blond picked up his coffee and proceeded to look out the passenger side window, avoiding all contact and comment with his snickering partner, who put his blinker on and smoothly exited the interstate, still laughing.

~~~

Kinnetik was quiet early in the morning. Justin realized it was just eight o'clock, and his first day of work.

Brian stopped at the reception desk and then turned, looking around the reception area with a frown. He quickly took off towards the partial wall that hid the entrance to the rest of the office space. Justin followed closely, wondering what was wrong.
"Cynthia?"

The blonde looked up from her desk. "Hey Boss, just got in myself."

Brian jerked his head back towards the reception area. "Where's the guard?"

Cynthia smiled at him. "Maybe the bathroom?"

Brian frowned at her.

"Okay, okay. He comes on duty at 8:15 since our doors aren't unlocked until 8:30 a.m. Until then access is limited to those with keys. He will unlock the office after doing a check of the building. It's all in the contract I left on your desk yesterday."

"Hmmph. HE should be early on his first day on the job."

"I'll tell him you said so."

Brian ignored her comment and gave Justin a wave, letting him know he was to follow him.

Justin smiled at Cynthia. "Good morning."

Cynthia gave him a wide smile that she didn’t give Brian. "Morning to you too. I hope you find the arrangements..."
"Justin! Stop bothering the staff! She has work to do and we pay her a lot." Brian’s shout was heard from the area behind the glass wall. "Too much in fact."

Justin laughed. "I’d better go."

Cynthia gave a giggle. "I guess so."

~~~

Justin walked into the large area that comprised Brian’s office. He noted the changes. Against the wall was a small glass desk, with a large flat panel monitor, wireless keyboard and mouse on the desktop; there was also a lamp and phone. Next to the desk, at an angle, were a draftsman table and a complete supply of art materials in a small cart.

"I’m going to work here?" Justin asked in surprise.

Brian was already sitting at his desk and going through papers. He nodded without looking up. "We need to carve you out a more permanent, private space --- with a door. This will do for now."

Brian continued to go through the papers while Justin investigated his temporary work space.

"Brian?" Justin had been sitting at his desk and watching the other man for over fifteen minutes.

"Hmm?"

"I need something to do."
Brian didn't look up from the papers he was reviewing on his desk. "Login to the system. You user name is 'justint' and your password is 'babylon.' You can change the password if you want. You have the same privileges as me – it means you can look at anything. Go to the Liberty files; Cynthia put the notes up from the meeting yesterday. All minutes appear in the team rooms for each client. Also look at Northeast's files. Their advertising information is all in there. I want you to compare the two campaigns, ours for Liberty and Three Point Shot's campaign for Northeast. We technically will own the campaign after the final merger. Compare, contrast, whatever. We just need to look for something better than either campaign we have now for the new company."

Justin nodded and logged in.

~~~

Brian had finally finished the third file he had been trying to get through when his desk phone rang.

"Kinney."

"Can we please get lunch? I'm starving."

Brian put the phone back on the receiver and turned to look at Justin. "Don't do that."

"I had to! You haven't responded to me beyond a grunt for three and a half hours. But you do answer the phone!"

"That's because I know Cynthia will only let important calls through."

"I'm important. And I know your direct line."
Brian sat back and stretched. He hadn't realized how stiff he had gotten sitting here working. He glanced at the time on his pc. He was surprised to find that it was almost noon. "Okay, lunch it is." He stood up and stretched again. "How's it going?"

Justin shrugged. "Kinnetik's ad was better in concept and content, but Three Point Shot executed a mediocre ad very sharply. I like their artwork better than ours."

Brian nodded, taking the criticism constructively. "They had a lot more money to spend on the final process. I was just looking over Northeast's and Three Point Shot's contract. Very lucrative for the agency."

The two men started out of the office. "Where we going for lunch?"

Brian paused. "I usually run to the diner for something quick on a day like today."

"But we aren't doing that are we?" Justin really did want a cheeseburger from the diner. He wanted to visit someplace familiar, to make it seem more like he was really home. Other than the loft, the diner and Debbie's, nothing else was really the same to him. He had no home with his mother—that had gone with the divorce—and he had never really stayed in the town house long enough to make it feel like home. He had moved so many times in the last few years that the loft, the diner, Mel and Lindsay's and Debbie's home became what was most familiar to him, what he identified as part of being 'home'. But they weren't staying at the loft, and the girls had sold the house and moved, and he couldn't go to Debbie's. Even Michael's apartment would have been familiar but Ben and Mikey's new place wasn't the same, and he couldn't go there anyway. Nope, the diner was a place to reconnect but he couldn't go there.

Brian put his arm around Justin's shoulder and pulled him close as if sensing Justin's inner turmoil. "I know you want a greasy, fat dripping, cheeseburger with French fries, all dripping in ketchup, from the diner, but not yet. How about I take you to Papagano's and let you order anything you want?"

"Anything?"
Brian nodded. "Anything."

"But can we please go to breakfast at the diner ---soon?"

"Soon." Brian nodded. "So tell me how you think we can improve our concept and artwork."

"First of all, I need to show you the artwork for both campaigns and the quality. Three Point Shot accomplished the look using materials and techniques your people have available to them if they kept current. So second, you need to kick some ass in the art department."

"I can do that."

~~~

The long kisses in the car after lunch lead to an uncomfortable afternoon in the office for both men. Justin kept looking over at Brian and licking his lips. The older man would look up, catch his lover’s gaze and then quickly look down. By two o’clock Justin had given Brian a blowjob in the men’s room and received a fast jerking off in the darkened supply room.

Holding Justin against the wall while the younger man recovered, Brian whispered into his ear. "This isn't going to work."

"Huh. Why?"

"Because."
"Of the sex?"

"Yes."

"Brian we have sex all the time --- all the time."

"Not at work."

"Why?"

"It's distracting."

Justin let out a huff. "You are what's distracting."

Brian gave him a gentle kiss on the forehead. "We need to get out of here." Brian reached for a pile of paper towels he saw on a shelf. "I'll leave and then you come out a few minutes later."

"Brian. That's crazy! We just walk out of here carrying something and nobody will think twice about it." Justin began to zip up his pants. "Besides, why do you care? I've given you blowjobs in bathrooms and closets before, and you've done more in the backroom than jerk me off."

"It's different here Justin. It's the workplace and we run it." Brian scowled. "Maybe..."

Justin shook his head and pushed Brian away from him. "Just forget what you are thinking right now. I am not staying at the house all the time, so just deal with me sitting across from you." Justin moved around Brian, grabbed a ream of paper and opened the door. "See you back at your desk." He walked out into the empty hallway.
Brian turned and leaned back against the wall with a sigh of exasperation. He never had temptation quite so close nor so constant in the office. What Justin didn't know was he had been trying to avoid sex with him since he sat down at his desk this morning and tried to concentrate on the files in front of him. Brian had kept stealing glances at the blond, watching his lover's expressive face as he looked over the artwork, watching the scowls and smiles, the look of discovery; the truth was, the brunet could have spent the entire day watching his lover work.

Brian had fucked someone occasionally in his office or the restroom, but that practice stopped with Kip Thomas. He and Justin could go a whole day without sex. They had lived together and actually managed to go a day without sex, although he doubted his friends would have believed him. The problem now was that they had been living apart, in different cities for seven months, and now having the blond in close proximity --- fucking distance --- after such a dry period was proving more distracting that he thought it would be. He had spent the morning trying to ignore his lover while his lover was trying to be noticed. Brian was sure of that because he would catch Justin staring at him every once in a while when he took a surreptitious look over his papers at the blond. Brian moaned as he pushed off the wall. Working in the same space as Justin was not going to be very productive; he could not remember his concentration ever being broken so easily or quickly.

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Brian picked up the phone.

"Is it time to go home now? Everyone has left."

Brian leaned back in his chair and turned to look at Justin across the room. "What did I tell you about the phone?"

Justin set the phone down. "I don't know, want to refresh my memory?" Standing up as he spoke, the man walked over to where his lover sat. He pushed himself between Brian's legs and leaned in, reaching for the phone. He kissed the older man lightly on the lips and then straightened up; he let his free hand caress Brian's crotch as he bent over the desk, reaching to put the receiver back in its cradle. "So, what was that about not using the phone?"

"Justin!"
"We’re all alone now. And I believe your desk is a virgin." Justin leaned down and kissed Brian again, and this time the seated man returned the kiss. "We never did get around to actually doing it on your desk."

Brian ran a finger down the slight bulge in Justin's pants. "Didn't we? It seems we did it on a desk here."

Justin took Brian's hand in his own and pressed it more deeply into his crotch. "No," Justin's voice was low and deep. "That was the receptionist's desk; remember, you liked the circular shape and wondered if ---"

"SIR?"

Justin jumped at the sudden interruption, dropping Brian's hand and taking a jerking step back.

Brian, who had been leaning back in the chair, let the chair slam down, his body coming forward, almost coming up and out of the chair into Justin. "WHAT?"

The guard tried unsuccessfully to hide a smirk. "Just wanted to let you know the building is empty and the doors are locked. The lady was quite insistent earlier that I check in with you before I leave."

"Bitch." Brian muttered to Justin as he stood and nodded to the new security guard. "Thank you. From now on you can just give me a call if I'm still in the building."

"Fine sir. Do you want me to do the same in the mornings? I'll notify my partners."

"No. I just wasn't sure of the schedule this morning. Just open up as usual. What time do you arrive?"
"I will be coming on at 8 a.m. One of my partners may relieve me for a part of the day or all of it. Depends on our scheduling."

"Just let Cynthia know your schedules and make sure you give her the names and pictures of all the guards so the staff will know who you are."

"Of course. Good night Mr. Kinney."

Brian waved him off and the two stood and listened for the guard's footfalls. Justin turned to Brian with a confused look at the lack of sound. Brian shrugged, going to the open space beyond his walls and looking around. He turned and looked at Justin. "Gone."

"Shit, he's quiet. Kind of creepy," Justin claimed as he watched Brian approach him and then veer away.

Brian reached for his briefcase and started to open it. "Get ready."

"We're leaving?"

"Yes!"

"But."

"No! No more in the office."

"Brian!"

"Justin, let's go."
"Can we at least go to the loft?"

Brian looked over at his partner; he had heard the pleading tone in his voice. "Can't wait until we get to the house?"

Justin shrugged. "You need more clothes and... I don't know... can we stop there?"

Brian dropped some files in his case along with two flash cards for his pc at home. "Okay, it might be fun to see if we can slink in there."

"We can turn the lights on and not answer the door. The 'vette won't be there, if Michael goes by it will drive him nuts."

Brian laughed. "Okay, for a while, but then back to the fortress. We can't risk being seen in the Mercedes during the day."

"Okay."

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Justin rolled on to his side and let out a deep breath. It felt good to be back in the loft with Brian and all the familiar furniture and décor.

"You okay?"

"Ahuh."
"Don't fall asleep."

"No, I'm ready for dinner. I was just absorbing...the ambiance."

Brian laughed. "You've been living in New York too long." He rolled over and then sat up on the edge of the bed. "Good thing the cleaning woman has been coming."

"Mmmm." Justin rolled behind Brian and snuggled around his body. "What's for dinner?"

"Whatever we have at the house."

Justin groaned at the thought of cooking. "Isn't there anything here?"

Brian looked down at him and raised an eyebrow.

"Stupid question."

"Come on, before the fag squad catches us."

"There is no one but Michael or Emmett to catch us."

"True." Brian stood up and began to pull on his clothes.

"How about we go to Bangkok Express, have some Thai noodles and shrimp, and then go to Babylon." Justin rolled into the place next to Brian on the edge of the bed and sat up.
"Justin, we are going home." Brian threw some of his clothes at him, missing the surprised look on the younger man's face at the comment.

Justin sucked his lips into his mouth before he could ask the obvious question; he was sure they were home now. He looked back at Brian after a couple moments. "Please?"

Brian walked over to a drawer and pulled out a clean black t-shirt.

Justin perked up at the sight; the man was dressing for a night out whether he realized it or not. He quickly got off the bed and went into the bottom drawer on the other side of the dresser. He pulled out a long sleeve, light blue pullover. He had left a few things behind regardless of claiming he had all his clothes when he left. He wasn't surprised to find the clothes just where he had left them. He pulled the shirt on and looked over at Brian who was now sitting on the bed, pulling on a pair of socks.

"It's Friday night, there is no way Michael will be at Babylon, not even to look for you."

Brian nodded. "But Emmett might be there."

Justin shrugged. "Give me a few minutes, please?"

Brian gave him a long stare and headed for the bathroom.

Justin found his pants and pulled his cell phone out of his pocket. He opened his call list and then quickly arrowed down and highlighted Emmett's number. He hit send and waited.

"Hi Em."
"Baby! Where have you been?"

"I've been busy Em, sorry I haven't called you back."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I was just covering shifts at the bistro, you know, trying to save money for my studio."

"Well, we are all worried here."

"Why?"

"Why? Auh... Have you spoken with Brian?"

"He's here with me. Spoken about what?"

"HE'S WITH YOU? IN NEW YORK?"

"It's the weekend Em, of course he's with me." Justin rolled his eyes; even Emmett didn't believe they could still be together. "Hey Em, what's going on there?"

"Nothing. Nothing." Emmett's voice was full of relief. "I'm glad you two are together for the weekend."

"Me too. Is that all you wanted? To make sure I was all right?"

"Ahuh." Emmett paused. "So is Brian spending the entire weekend with you?"
"Yeah. We are just getting dressed. We are going out to dinner and then clubbing."

"Ooh, sounds like fun. Sounds like you already had fun!"

Justin laughed. "Yes, I did." Justin looked over his shoulder and saw Brian frowning at him. He held up a hand to stop him from saying anything. "So, Em, what are your plans for the night? Woody's then Babylon?"

"I wish!" Emmett lowered his voice. "Debbie's having some family meeting and we all have to be here; she's pissed about something. Then Michael, Ben and Hunter are going to an October soiree at their neighbors. Ted's in New York so he won't be there. Have you seen him?"

"Really, Ted's in New York? No, I haven't seen him." Justin made a face at Brian who rolled his eyes and continued to dress. "What about you Em, were you invited?"

"No, but I'm catering the soiree. And my very close friend, Calvin Culpepper, from Hazelhurst, whom you didn't get to meet, is helping out."

"How is that working out Em, you and Calvin?"

Emmett gave him a dramatic sigh. "Apparently not quite the way I hoped. But he's good in the kitchen."

"Sorry Em."

"Don't be, I'll eventually find Mr. Right."
"Well I have to go. You sound like you'll have a busy night. Are you sure you won't get a chance to go out to party?"

"God no. I'm tired already, and the tedium from this party should send me right off to sleep."

"Maybe Michael and Ben will hit Babylon with you."

"I doubt it, after I tell Michael that Brian...ohh look at the time. I have to get going. I'm happy for you Baby; you take that man and have fun in all those hot clubs."

"Thanks Em, and we will have fun." Justin turned off the phone and smiled at Brian. "Em said to have fun at all the hot clubs!"

"Lying to our friends?"

Justin raised his shoulders and then raised his arms up, holding his hands out to Brian in 'Hey, wait a minute' motion. "I NEVER said we were in New York. Em assumed we were. I never lied."

Brian stuck his tongue in his cheek and shook his head. He spoke with a bad accent, "You goin' ta have a lotta splainin to do Lucy."

Justin's only reply was a huge smile.

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~~~ Saturday, October 8, 2005 ~~~
"Come on, get up Sunshine."

"No." Justin swatted the hand that was pulling at him. "Go away."

"I'm going to make the coffee, run on the treadmill and then shower. You had better be ready to leave in an hour and a half."

Justin rolled over to look at his lover, his eyes barely open. "It's Saturday. Go away."

"Be ready or I leave you here."

"Why?" Justin groaned. "Where?"

"To work."

Justin sat up in surprise. "Work? You didn't say anything about it last night."

Brian nodded. "I sent you the email."

Justin groaned. He had been either making notes on the artwork or watching Brian yesterday afternoon, well, when they weren't in the men's room or supply closet. It never occurred to him to check his email account at Kinnetik. "Oh, right, I forgot."

"Hmpff, you could have forgotten, if you had actually read it," Brian muttered.

"I hate you," Justin grumbled. "It's early."
"The staff is coming in at nine. We need to be there by eight." Brian walked around the bed to the windows, "We have to be ahead of the curve on this. This is going to be an important campaign. It will make us if we deliver."

"And you need me?"

"You are the artist in charge." Brian opened the curtains and looked out at the scenery below. "The other part of we---as in you and me."

Justin rolled over and watched Brian gazing out the window. He seemed preoccupied, unaware of the importance to Justin of his last few words.

"I won't let you down."

Brian just nodded and continued to look out the window.

Justin opened his eyes just a slit so he could observe Brian without it looking like he was studying the older man. Justin noticed his lover's body language; he wasn't as tense as he had been at other times during major work crises. In fact, Brian seemed to relax as he continued to stare out the window at the field and small forest of trees that stretched out beyond the tennis court and the property line. Brian's calm made him wonder if Brian's comment about going home last night was just a slip of the tongue or a subconscious decision that the house was now home. Justin's gaze moved around the room before focusing back on Brian. His partner had brought quite a bit of clothes and belongings with him the night before. Besides the box he had dropped off in the den Justin noticed that the wooden box with Brian's jewelry and Gus's pictures now sat on the dresser. Rubbing his eyes he realized he should start looking through magazines for permanent furniture just in case. He closed his eyes and waited for Brian to move.

Brian finally seemed to rouse himself from the window and turned to look at his lover. "You going to be ready?"
Justin nodded and then opened his eyes. "Anything interesting out there?"

"Just a lot of leaves." Brian shook his head. "I wonder why they didn't put a pool in? The space next to the patio seems perfect. The tennis court was placed way to the back; it could have been closer if they weren't putting in a pool. They got every other fucking convenience here, why not that?"

Justin shook his head. "I don't know." He rolled off the bed and went to stand next to Brian, looking out over the back yard. "Hmm. You're right, seems like it should have gone right there." He pointed to the space to the left of a small summerhouse and a brick patio. "Wasn't there a bathroom out there? I know the grill and mini fridge are there."

Brian nodded. "There's a bar there too. It just seems that the whole thing was designed to be around a pool that isn't there." Brian turned away, seemingly dismissing the lack of a pool. "Gotta get moving." He glanced back at the window with a frown. "I'll have to check out the house plans; there is a copy in the built-in cabinets in the den. See if a pool was on the plot plan. Maybe call the realtor I bought it from and find out why there isn't one."

Justin watched him walk towards the bedroom door, more than a little surprised at Brian's fixation with the house and lack of pool, "At least there is a sauna."

Brian stopped and turned to look at him. He suddenly smirked. "Well, there's something for a Sunday afternoon other than football."

"Yeah, like we watch that." Justin scratched his head as Brian left the room. He went back to the bed and threw himself down. He grabbed a pillow and closed his eyes. "I better find the directions to the sauna before he melts us both." He snuggled into the blankets and tried to fall back to sleep.

"JUSTIN!"

The blond groaned and started to get out of bed.
Brian had stood leaning against the wall watching the creative arts team move from the conference table to the computer graphics area. They were now huddled around a networked set of optical mice and drawing pens. Brian had checked in on the group several times since they had gotten down to work after the staff meeting at nine thirty that morning. He was amazed at how Justin had smoothly taken the lead earlier and now had the individuals working as a team.

The overhead projection system had the artwork from Liberty up on the wall screen, and he watched as the group marked it up, changed the attributes and basically transformed it into something much better, something Justin had said it should have been from the beginning. Looking at the changes Brian wondered how he had ever kept the Liberty account with the original artwork. He sighed and watched as another edit began to bring the Northeastern logo into the mix. It was amazing to watch the creativity of the five artists and how they complimented and then built on each other. Justin listened to each suggestion and challenge. He was a natural born leader. Brian knew Craig had been right about Justin's business instincts, he just hadn't known that that genius needed to be channeled into a process that allowed Justin to shine as an artist as well as a businessman.

He felt a tap on his shoulder. "Boss!"

"Hmmm?"

"Peter Williams is here."

Brian nodded. "I'll be right there, get the man something to drink."
"Ahuh." Cynthia was staring at the artwork on the large screen. "Shit that's good. A hundred percent better than what we had. Liberty's going to go wild for it and it's just the working concept."

Brian shook his head in agreement. "And to think the little asshole was around all the time."

Cynthia laughed and turned to leave. "I'll get Mr. Williams something to drink."

Brian watched a couple more minutes and then as he moved off the wall to leave he watched Justin's head turn to look at him. The blond gave him a huge smile as their eyes met. Brian gave him a slight salute. Justin's smile grew. Brian noticed the younger man's attention was back on the project on the screen before he had turned to leave.

~~~

"Hey Pete."

"Brian." The tall man greeted Brian with a strong handshake.

"Thanks for coming in today."

Peter sat down at the chair Brian indicated, putting his briefcase onto the table and opening it. "You should be. I don't usually work weekends and I never make house calls."

"But for me."
Peter snorted. "You are a pain in my ass."

"I was not. I believe you enjoyed every moment."

"I was young and foolish."

"You mean you weren't grey yet."

Peter ran a hand through his hair, the black strands now mixed with fine silver. "Fucking genes."

"Looks good on you."

"So Andrew says."

"Still together after all these years?"

"Ten and counting."

"I guess I was the young one then."

"Yes you were. Still are by my reckoning. Although the young man in these documents was just about your age when we met." Peter dropped a pile of papers in front of Brian. "Your copy. Let's go through this."

Brian took up the documents. "They say what we discussed?"
"Yes. Are you sure? He's damn young Brian."

"Yes he is, at least in the way people count years but not in the way I count."

"Okay. The first two documents deal with the business and partnership. The last four are personal. Assets, health proxy, retirement and will."

Brian nodded. "Okay, let's get through it."

~~~

Brian looked over the team Justin had been working with; they were breaking up to go home. The staff had agreed to break at three, and people were drifting out the doors, not due back until eight thirty Monday morning. Brian knew they all needed at least one day off.

"Justin?"

The blond looked up at Brian as he shut down the computer. "Yeah?"

"My office please?"

Justin nodded. "Just let me grab the flash cards. I'm going to check this stuff at home later."

Brian turned and almost ran into Cynthia.

"I'm outta here Boss."
"Okay."

"We need Ted back here."

"Why?"

"We need to crunch the numbers, plus he may be a little tightly wound, but he knows these financial records inside out."

"Okay, I'll let him come back mid-week."

"What?"

"I want things settled down before he gets back."

"What settled down?"

Brian gave her a long stare.

"Okay, say no more. If you think things are unsettled fine, it's your company."

"Thank you for noticing that."

Cynthia gave him an evil laugh. "Don't forget to lock up. I have a life to get back to."

"Really?" Brian asked with false surprise.
"We can't all have our cake and eat it too – at work and home."

Brian raised his eyebrows. "Why Cynthia that was loaded with filthy innuendo. I'm proud of you. Add that to our sexual harassment program."

"As a 'can do' or 'don't do'?

Brian gave her a careless wave with one hand. "Don't get lost on your way home."

"See ya Boss."

~~~

Justin arrived in Brian's office shortly after Brian. He stopped short when he saw a distinguished older man, probably in his mid-forties, sitting with Brian at the small conference table in their office.

"I'm sorry, am I interrupting?"

"Justin, I'd like you to meet Peter Williams, my attorney."

"It's a pleasure Mr. Williams." Justin held out his hand.

"My pleasure really, I've wanted to meet you for a while. Call me Pete."

"Wanted to meet me?"
Pete nodded. "I've heard a lot about you, from Brian and others."

"Brian has mentioned you as well." Justin gave Brian a small rap on the shoulder as he sat down at the table.

"Really? Well, I've been Brian's attorney for some time." He smiled at Brian suddenly.

Brian scowled at Pete. "Right, then how come you are never around when I need you?" Brian turned to Justin. "Pete should have been my attorney for the Kip fiasco but he had to go to Maui for a two month vacation."

"I'm not going to apologize for that. You should have known better and Ms. Marcus did a fine job representing you."

Justin thought back. "Those papers you gave Mel when you gave up Gus. You had torn up the originals, those were new ones." He turned to the other man. "You did them?"

Peter frowned but nodded, and Justin could hear him mutter, "Asshole never listens to me," under his breath. He hid a smile at the comment; apparently Peter Williams did know Brian well.

Brian gave Peter a quick smirk having overheard it as well. "He's been my attorney for years. Mostly useless."

"Hey, you get yourself into the shit and then expect me to get you out. And you usually call after all the said shit has hit the fan." He turned to look at Justin, "At least with Kinnetik he finally let me do my job and did what I told him to do."

"Stay in Pittsburgh more often and maybe I wouldn't have SO MANY fires."
"Hmpff," Pete snorted as he pulled out another set of documents. "Justin, these are some documents we need to go over."

"Why? Is the contract going to be a problem? I was pretty sure I kept my intellectual and visual property rights."

Peter nodded. "No, those were fine. You did a good job with the clauses." Pete glanced over at Brian. "Better than some people I know."

"Fuck you." Brian picked up a water bottle and began to fiddle with it.

"Then what are these?" Justin poked at the paper stack in front of him without looking at them. He was looking at Brian.

"Oh for God’s sake Brian, you didn't tell him?"

Brian shrugged, looking down at the water bottle in his hand; he started to pick the label off it. "I've told him it was our company."

Justin's eyes widened and he looked down at the papers. He scanned the top page of the first document and then looked at the second. "NO!"

"Yes Justin." Brian stated it simply and strongly.

"Brian, you can't do this."

Brian looked at Peter. "I can do it without his signature, right?"
"What? Make somebody a partner without their agreement?"

Brian nodded.

"I guess, but it makes it hard to get business done that needs both signatures. I guess we could add clauses that if Justin doesn't agree to decisions in a certain amount of time his inactivity means agreement. We would also have to add something that prevented agents representing him and from making decisions for him. We would need to protect your control."

"But he could own half of Kinnetik and be entitled to his share of the profits?"

"I guess we could do something." Peter nodded, watching the reactions on both men's faces.

Brian looked at Justin. "Well..."

Justin sat back and thought it over, recognizing the offer Brian was making and what it meant. This was Brian's undefined and non conventional version of marriage. In the last few days they had committed to being partners in an intangible way. They were a couple emotionally, but it was an intrinsic, almost sacrosanct commitment that they would never --- or could never --- explain to anyone. Now, in a way the world could see, a no romance, no sentiment, no emotion deal, Brian was making them partners in another sense. Legally he was committing to Justin, giving him half of everything that mattered to him personally and financially – his business, his health, his independence.

It was obvious to the other two men that the blond was having an internal conversation with himself. His eyes were looking off to the right but they weren't focused. He suddenly gave a little nod as if answering himself.
He looked at Peter. "I need something drawn up that gives him half of all my business and finances --- 'Rage' and equal ownership of all artwork I produce."

"NO!" Brian shook his head.

Justin gave a shake of his head, his voice strong and determined. "If you do this, than I do it. It's the only way I accept it."

Brian thought about it. He acknowledged Justin's need to be an equal in all things. "Fine, but you keep creative control of 'Rage.' I am not going to become a referee between you and Mikey. And you better look like you are going to support me in my old age with your painting." He looked at Peter. "I want it clear I only get involved in the business end."

"And I'm only involved in the creative end here." Justin waved his hand around the room.

"Deal," Brian agreed.

"Deal," Justin repeated, looking at Peter. "Can we do this?"

Peter smiled at him. "Yes." The man looked at Brian. "You were right, he is older than he seems." He drew out a pad. "Let's talk it over and I'll take some notes about the finer points." He laughed, "I feel like this is more than a partnership, I think it's a merger. Then again this has a different feel altogether." He looked at Brian. "You know I've always wanted to be a judge and somehow I feel like I just presided over a marr--"

"SHUT UP Peter!" Brian interrupted him and gave him a warning glance, the open bottle in his hand looking dangerously close to being poured on someone's head.

Peter held up his hands. "Partnership, merger, whatever." He was still smiling, knowing it was annoying Brian.
Justin had ignored the conversation as he looked over the other documents, realizing what they were. He tapped them and looked at Peter. "I also need the same made up for me, with Brian as my proxy and heir."

Brian looked up at him sharply. "You don't need a will yet."

"Right. You're talking to the guy who has already cheated death twice." At Justin's words Peter winced and looked away. Brian just looked at Justin, unable to deny it.

Justin gave him a slight smile, recognizing instantly the pain in Brian's eyes. "Partners, right?" he asked softly.

Brian nodded slowly in agreement. "Partners." He looked at Pete. "Tie us up and strangle me legally."

Justin rolled his eyes. "How romantic. Just drop kick me across the threshold when we get home."

Peter let out a laugh and quickly tried to muffle it when Brian glared at him.

Justin leaned back in his chair, raising his arms behind his head and kicking his legs out and crossing them. He smiled at Brian. "You know what this means?"

Brian's eyes narrowed as he leaned back and stretched out his own legs mirroring Justin's relaxed position. The difference was he crossed his arms across his chest, almost in a defiant stance. "What?" There was no mistaking the tone in his voice, making it clear there were to be no sentimental declarations.

Justin wiggled his eyebrows and smiled even wider. "The credit card is MINE!"
"FUCK!"

~~~

~~~ Sunday, October 11, 2005, "Britin" ~~~

Brian lay sprawled out on top of Justin. "If we don't move soon we are going to be stuck together."

"Hmm, I like the idea of being glued to you." The sharp laughter that shook Brian's body shock waved itself through Justin's. Justin shivered with the feeling of Brian's body pulsing against his. "The champagne was good."

"For what it cost it better have been damn good."

Justin sighed and held Brian closer. "It was damn good... in the glass, in the dip of your back..."

Brian gave Justin a small kiss on the cheek. "In you navel, on your skin. The last time I brought champagne home I made partner at Vanguard."

"And I wasn't there because I was stupid, childish and off in Vermont." Justin waited for Brian to say something, when he didn't, "You could disagree with me."

"When you're right you're right.'
Justin closed his eyes and sighed but then quickly reopened them to look at Brian, "I'm glad I didn't miss this partnership."

"Me too."

"Do we have plans today?"

"I don't."

Justin moved his head up a bit and kissed Brian's lips. "I need clothes for the office."

"We could shop. It's Sunday but some of the downtown stores will be open for a few hours."

Justin nodded. "How about the diner for breakfast?"

"How about Caffe Amante's for lunch?"

"Brian." Justin's complaint was imbedded in his tone.

"Tomorrow. Tomorrow morning we will go to the diner for breakfast. All the troops can know we are here, but we aren't talking to them beyond a hello and 'pass the sugar.' Got it?"

"Yes sir. Now where are we going to shop?"

"Sak's first, and definitely Lydell's since the Caffe is also at Fifth Avenue Place."
"Did you know, Fifth Avenue Place is on the corners of Fifth and Liberty?"

"We already settled it; we are not going to the diner! Besides it's further downtown and you know it."

"Isn't there a Caswell-Massey at Fifth Avenue Place?"

"Why?"

"I want to try out the tub."

"Shit." Brian dropped his head onto the pillow and thought about going back to sleep.

~~~

"That sucked Brian." Justin dropped his Sak's bags on the couch. "You know there is a reason malls are successful, like the fact they are open on Sundays."

"I can't believe Fifth Avenue Place is closed on Sundays." Brian dropped down on the couch. "Under 'pros' on the list of where to live, put shopping under the column for New York. After shopping there the past few months, I can now confirm my long standing belief that Pittsburgh is nothing but a wasteland for fashion."

Justin pouted as he went through his bag. "Nothing for the tub either."

"Fuck, I'll go and buy you some Mr. Bubble if you are going to sulk over not having anything to take a bath with."
Justin crossed his arms and actually put a pout on his face. "We didn't get lunch either."

"Oh for fuck's sake." Brian got up and headed for the hallway. "Get you ass in the car Sunshine. You can have that fucking heart attack burger and fries at the diner. But we aren't going to breakfast there too."

Justin bounced off the couch. "You know I bet Station Square is open and they have a bath shop there."

"Fuck you, you little twat!"

Justin heard the front door slam and ran to follow Brian out to the car before the older man left without him.

~~~

Justin was surprised to find Brian in the Corvette. "How come we are taking the 'vette'?"

Brian gunned the motor and headed down the drive. "If we are going public there is no point in hiding it. After today we will need the Mercedes to move around without being noticed."

"Like that red thing won't stand out on Liberty?"

"It's not as well known as this baby."

Justin snickered. "You have a point there." He sat and watched as the miles melted away. "Sure doesn't take long when there isn't any traffic."

Brian nodded. "Less than fifteen minutes, not bad at all. I think it's less to your mom's."
Justin nodded. In a few minutes they were pulling up outside the diner and parking in the first open space. Justin got out of the car and looked up and down the street; he noticed a shop across the street. "Brian, I want to go in there first."

Brian looked over at the store and saw it was a personal enhancement business, and knew it was loaded with spa and body products. Emmett had been carrying on about it at breakfast a couple weeks ago. Brian hadn't gone in just on the principle it was painted chartreuse and hot pink. He was sure there could be nothing of interest to him in a place so terribly decorated and marketed, but he nodded to Justin as he locked the car door. "Go ahead but it better not smell like flowers or perfume. You'll be sleeping on the floor."

Justin laughed and crossed the street.

Brian shook his head and went into the diner.

~~~

Brian looked at the menu that the weekend waitress had given him. Debbie had cut back on her hours to please Carl after she returned to work. Brian had known when he agreed to the diner for dinner that Debbie was off and at home cooking Sunday dinner for her pseudo-husband and whatever family members she could corral over to the house. With Ted and Blake in New York and Mel and Lindsay in Toronto he figured the herd must be pretty small. From past weekends he guessed Michael, Ben, Hunter and Emmett had joined Carl at the dinner table. Debbie had also adopted Drew, so there might be a decent crowd, enough that he didn't have to worry about anyone showing up at the diner.

The waitress returned with coffee and Brian ordered a bowl of soup and half a turkey sandwich for himself while ordering the cheeseburger platter and a milkshake for Justin.

The waitress wasn't gone long before the seat across from him was filled by a smiling blue-eyed blond.
"I got something really nice. In fact, there was a whole line of bath oils, salts and moisturizers I saw at that salon in Chelsea, remember the ones you were talking about? From Scandinavian I think?"

Brian nodded. "Expensive and very very good."

"Tell me about it."

Brian put his coffee cup down and raised an eyebrow at Justin.

The younger man smiled back. "Well, it was the only thing that wasn't flowery."

"You weren't in there long enough to smell everything!"

Justin gave a little shrug of his shoulders, "I saw it, recognized it, and knew you wouldn't object to it."

Brian looked out the window and across the street at the shop with its garish colored paint and sign. "They have it in that trashy hole in the wall?"

Justin nodded.

"It's fucking Liberty Avenue not Michigan Avenue, you sure it's the same?"

"It's not trashy inside at all." Justin claimed as he handed Brian the bag. "It's actually pretty upscale. It's got whitened pine everywhere with navy and yellow accents. The building goes deep into the back and they are still redoing it." Justin pulled a paper out of the bag as Brian examined the containers Justin had purchased. "They are also going to offer day spas -- massages of all types, stylists and ..."
"Shit. On Liberty Avenue?" Brian rubbed his cheek as he looked at the sheet Justin was showing him. Brian uncapped the bath oil and gave a small sniff. He recapped it and shook his head in disbelief, "Nice." He opened the bath salts and then the moisturizer; both bottles had the same light ocean scent as the oil.

"So I won't be sleeping on the floor?"

"I don't know; we will have to wait and see."

"Is this a pro or a con for Pittsburgh?" Justin smiled at Brian's little pout at the comment; his lover's slightly petulant mood was interesting.

"I'm not sure yet."

"Did you order for me?"

"I ordered the required grease."

"Good, I'm starving." He took the bag from Brian after the man had returned everything to it. "Can we go to Lydell's tomorrow?"

Brian looked over as the door opened; he unconsciously relaxed when it was no one he knew. "We can try; if not, Tuesday. When we break for lunch tomorrow I want to go over and check the loft. We'll go after that if there is time on the schedule. Otherwise it's Tuesday; we should have a little more time. I'll make reservations at Caffe Amante for both days, just in case."

"Cool." Justin looked around the diner for the first time. He recognized faces of people he knew but no close friends. "Where do you think everyone is?"
"Debbie's, probably."

"When was the last time you saw her --- or anyone?"

"I saw Debbie here that last Friday for breakfast before I left for New York. No one else since before that except for Ted at work."

"Have they been calling you?"

Brian watched as the waitress approached with their meals. "A few messages, I think they finally took the hint that I'll talk to them when I am damn good and ready." Brian smiled as he watched Justin's eyes light up at the sight of the burger.

"Sunshine!"

Justin looked up from his plate to the waitress. "Hi Sheila, how are you?"

"I'm fine Justin. Aren't you a sight for tired eyes!"

"You aren't on the late shift anymore?"

"Only a couple nights, I'm taking weekend shifts for Deb now. It's been great. But I miss your smiling face. You here for a visit or are you moving back?"

"I...umm..." Justin looked at Brian, not sure how to answer the question. Brian reached for the salt, ignoring his look. "I'm not sure yet Sheila, but I'll definitely be around a lot more."
"Well, if you ever need your old job back you can work my shifts. I miss talking to you."

"Thanks. I'll remember that." He smiled to himself; he was now a partner in Kinnetik and didn't think he'd be back here to work again.

"Wipe that smirk off your face; when the credit card bill comes you'll be back here busing tables again to pay me back."

Justin made a face at his lover but then gave a sigh of contentment as he took the salt from Brian and prepared his cheeseburger.

~~~

Brian sat with his head resting on the palm of his right hand, his eyes covered by his fingers as he tried not to watch Justin demolish the hot fudge sundae that sat in front of him. Brian split his fingers over his left eye and took another peek. "You done yet?"

"You can't gain weight from looking asshole." Justin laughed as he enjoyed his ice cream. "I have missed this."

"What, the fat and calories? Or watching me cringe at your table manners?"

"My table manners are impeccable. And I hold silverware correctly."

"Besmirching Michael again?"

"You know I have actually wasted time on trying to figure out why he handles his spoon like a shovel? I mean Debbie doesn't and Vic was never so ill mannered. I don't get it."
Brian rubbed his forehead, sat back against the booth and looked intently at Justin. "You did waste your time."

"Didn't you ever wonder?" Justin asked, his spoon slowing for a moment.

Brian stuck his tongue in his cheek and looked away. He was not going to admit he had often speculated about it too.

Justin pointed at him with a spoon dripping ice cream and hot fudge; he was starting to laugh as he spoke. "Oh my God! You have wondered about it."

"Shut up and vacuum up the rest of the sugar and fat so we can get home."

Brian looked over to Sheila and pointed at the register. The waitress waved her order pad at him, letting him know she would be over to give him the check when she was done at the counter. A blur moved past his eye but it didn't register until he felt the commotion on the bench seat across from him. He looked at Justin and saw the man being pushed into the booth, red nails waving him in as a hip shoved him over.

Brian focused on the red wigged, red nailed woman dressed in a brown sweater that covered an apron that looked like it might be a pumpkin. Brian leaned a bit and looked more closely trying to figure out what the hell Debbie was actually wearing. The look on his face must have made it clear he was worried about what he'd find.

"Stop it asshole, it's a pumpkin patch."

"With sequins?" Brian's voice was a half octave higher than usual as he sat up, an appalled look still on his face.
"The vines are the straps."

"Jeezus Deb!"

"It was a gift from Carl."

"Fuck, I didn't think anybody could have worst taste than..." Brian stopped himself when he saw the narrowing of Debbie's eyes. "Excellent taste from the detective."

Debbie pointed a red tipped finger at him. "Shut up asshole, I'll get back to you in a minute." She turned to the blond who was holding his spoon in a tight grip as he tried to sit back up straight after having been rocked and pushed further into the booth.

"Baby! Sunshine, what are you doing here?"

"Hi Deb." Justin gave her a big smile and set his spoon down on the table.

"Come here and give me a hug. I can't believe you are here." Debbie turned and pulled the blond into a tight hug. "I've missed you Baby."

Brian hid a laughing smile behind his hand as he watched Justin disappear into Debbie's hug.

"I didn't think you'd ever come back for a visit. I've missed you as much as your poor mother did."

"I missed you too!" Justin tried to gently pull himself from Debbie's embrace.

Brian smirked. "Yeah, I missed you almost as much as your mother too."
Debbie glared at him and let go of Justin and turned to face Brian. "What the fuck is going on?"

"Why what do mean Deb?"

"Don't you give me that bullshit."

Brian put a hand on his chest in a shocked and innocent motion. "Me? What? I haven't done anything. My partner came home this weekend instead of me going to see him in New York City."

Debbie made a face at him. "Then why does Emmett think you are in New York?" She turned to Justin. "Both of you?"

Justin raised his eyebrows, giving Debbie an innocent look and a slight shake of the head. "I never told Emmett we were in New York."

Debbie turned to Brian but pointed at Justin. "This is more of your influence, isn't it?"

Brian raised his hand to stop Debbie, "Trust me, he's taught me a thing or two about being devious and using misdirection."

Debbie looked at Justin. "My Sunshine was not like this until he started living with you."

Brian snorted, "Obviously you weren't paying attention."

Debbie pointed a finger at Brian and was about to say something when Justin interrupted her.
"Uh Debbie?"

"What Baby?" Debbie's attention was diverted back to Justin, proving Brian's point, a point Debbie totally missed.

"Why are you here?"

"To see you."

Brian crossed his arms and sat back, "Aren't you cooking dinner for everyone?"

"Yeah. So?"

Brian held out his arms and turned his palms up, asking a soundless question as to why she was in the diner.

Debbie grimaced at him. "Sheila called to let me know --- she could cover Larry's shift on Tuesday, and she just happened to mention Sunshine was here."

Brian gave her a look of disbelief. "More like Sheila hotfooted it into the back first chance she got and called you."

Debbie ignored him. "How long are you here Justin?"

"I'm not sure yet."

"Well, what about work and your place in New York?"
"It's taken care of Deb. Nothing to worry about."

"Are you okay? Did something happen?" She turned and gave Brian a disapproving look.

"No, nothing has changed. Nothing is wrong. I just came home to spend some time with Brian and everyone here. I have been away a while."

She turned to Brian. "Okay, fess up, what's going on. And I want the truth."

"Why do you think anything is going on?"

"Don't give me that, you think I'm stupid? I have heard it all for days, from Michael, Ben, Lindsay, Emmett, even Ted called."

"And what are they saying?"

"Oh, have I seen Brian, has Justin called lately? A lot of conversation until they got around to actually asking if I have heard from either of you."

Brian made a face. "Deb?"

"What?"

"Where is everyone?"

Debbie gave a shrug, "Probably being forced to watch the football game with Carl and Drew."
Brian gave a chuckle. "Do they even know you aren't in the kitchen?"

"Oh shit. My sauce." Debbie got out of the booth and ran over to the phone.

Brian looked at the door. "Think we can make a break for it?"

Justin looked at Debbie at the phone and the door and shook his head. "She's fast, chased my ass up the stairs once or twice."

"Yeah, but your ass is a bigger target. I could slip out of here and be down at the car before you get clear of the door."

"I hate you."

Debbie came back to the booth and sat down. "Carl's checking it."

"Did he ask where you were?"

"I told him I had to run to the diner because of a problem with the new waiter."

"He believed you?"

Debbie smiled. "Carl reads between the lines but he'll cover for me." She lost the smile. "Now you tell me the truth, all of it. If I have to listen to Michael's whining, Mel's swearing, Lindsay's double speak and Ben's silence, I would like to know what's going on, so I can at least lie about not knowing anything."
"Well," Brian looked at Justin, "That makes sense --- in a Debbie sort of way."

Justin nodded.

"You want to?"

Justin was silent a moment. "My mom knows, so yours should too." He paused a moment. "It's all up to you, you know why."

Brian nodded. He looked at Debbie who was watching him expectantly.

"As you know Justin and I were living in different cities."

"Yeah. And?"

"We weren't broken up."

"I know."

Brian's face showed his surprise. "Well you were the only one."

Debbie gave a laugh and reached out and tapped Brian's face gently. "When are you going to learn I know you?" She turned to Justin. "So does your being here mean you are breaking up or," she looked back at Brian "is something else going on."

"What makes you think that?"
"Michael and Lindsay." She gave Brian a less gentle tap on the face and dropped her hand. "What the hell did you say to get them acting like two rockets fired at the ground? They are fully ignited, spinning around in a circle, and have nowhere to go to explode.

Justin mouthed a silent, "whoa," picked up his spoon and started to play in his ice cream bowl to hide his nervousness.

Brian closed his eyes for a moment and then looked directly into Debbie's eyes, hazel meeting deep brown. "I told them the truth; they either didn't like it or didn't understand it."

Debbie glanced at Justin and then back at Brian. "About time." She sat back and tapped the table gently as she thought silently for a few minutes. "So how formal is your partnership?"

"It's a partnership. It suits us and we are in agreement."

Debbie gave him an evil look.

Brian dipped his eyes and absently ran a finger along the back of his seat as he thought about his answer. "We've made --- officially authorized --- arrangements concerning each other." He looked back at Debbie. "All above board and legally permissible."

"Hallelujah, my rolling stone is finally settling down and getting hitched."

Brian shook his head. "No fucking way Debbie. We aren't getting married. We don't need..."

"Blah...Blah...blah, well fuck, I figured that out. I know you; like I said before the only way that you will ever marry him is if you get Sunshine knocked up. And even then you'd find a way around it."
Justin choked on the melted ice cream he had absentmindedly been eating as he listened to Debbie and Brian.

Debbie laughed. "You didn't tell him? I can't believe Em didn't."

Brian laughed. "No, I guess we didn't share your reaction to that wedding announcement with him."

"So you are together --- for good. Married by my definition but not yours."

Brian nodded. "Why do people insist on defining a couple's decision to be together as marriage? Justin and I don't need..."

Debbie held up her hand. "Please just let me enjoy the moment --- at last." Brian closed his mouth but rolled his eyes. Debbie slapped his hand and he stilled all motion. She took Justin's hand and put it over Brian's, holding their hands together. She sighed, and repeated, "At last."

Justin moved his hand from Brian's as the older man snatched back his as if he had been burned. The younger man clasped Debbie's more firmly. "You don't doubt it?"

"Not with you two. Other people I would think it was a crock of shit, but you two are different, I've always known that. That asshole," she pointed at Brian, "has loved you from the beginning; he's just been too stubborn to accept it."

"Will you stop!?" Brian folded his arms over his chest in a defensive stance.

Debbie smiled at him as if knowing a secret about Brian no one else knew. "And you've never hidden how much you love Brian. I've just been waiting for him to grow up and catch up with you."
"Damn it Debbie!" Brian slapped his hands down on the table.

Debbie ignored him and continued speaking to Justin. "Although some of his bad habits and ideas have rubbed off on you Sunshine. You better watch that."

Justin made a slight face but just nodded.

"As I was saying, now that you two have gotten to this point, where you BOTH had to face how you felt, I knew you would do the right thing and stay together."

Brian watched her, suddenly wary. "You are showing an awful lot of confidence in me."

Debbie gave him a sweet smile. "I know you Brian. You'll stay together. Now that you've admitted it's what you want and need you'll make sure you make it. There is nothing else for you to do but succeed and I know as much as you two love each other that you'll respect the commitment you made. I know it'll be hard, but now that you've stopped listening to everything and everyone but your own hearts you'll be okay. Just remember to trust each other first and everyone else second."

Brian gave her a slow smile that built into one that rivaled Justin's. Brian leaned forward and kissed Debbie on the cheek. "Thank you."

"And I'll be here to make sure you don't fuck it up." Debbie gave him a smile and a snorting laugh.

Brian shook his head at her comment, although he appreciated her attempt to bring some levity to keep him from revolting against the obvious sentimentality of her comments. "What about all that confidence you had in me Deb?"
Debbie grabbed his face between her hands and looked at him. "I love you kid, and this is the best thing in the world for you. I want you to be happy; it's all I ever wanted. This is your best chance, like I said, don't fuck it up." She gave him a kiss on the check and then slapped it lightly as she let go of him.

"Aw gee, shucks Mom, thanks for all the support." Brian stuck his tongue in his cheek and rolled his eyes, but the pleasure from Debbie's declaration of love could not be kept from showing on his face.

Debbie laughed. "Asshole." She sniffled a bit and gave her eyes a quick dab with a napkin from the table. "I have to get back to my dinner." She looked from one to the other. "Where are you staying and for how long?"

Brian scratched his head. "We don't know Deb. I'm not sure if we will be here or in New York."

"Pittsburgh."

Debbie and Brian looked at Justin, surprise on both their faces. The younger man looked at Brian as he spoke, "Pittsburgh is home but we will be in New York a lot. I want to keep up going to the galleries and trying to get a show, but we will also be doing some work there."

"We?" Debbie asked dubiously. She looked over at Brian and he shook his head.

"Partners Deb."

She looked from Brian to Justin and back. She gave them a smile. "Every way that counts Brian?"

Brian smiled back. "Can't let that genius work for anyone but me."

Debbie grabbed Justin's hand. "I expect you for dinner on family nights, when you are in town, and you better be in here for breakfast and lunch on a regular basis."
Brian separated Debbie's and Justin's hands, "Only as long as he can still fit through the door."

"Asshole." Debbie slapped at his hand. "I have to get home."

"Deb?"

"What?" Debbie saw Brian looking at her, and could see the slight plea in his eyes. "You two take care of yourself, I better get back to the house, I think I fixed Sheila's problem, don't you?"

Brian and Justin nodded but Brian mouthed a silent, 'Thank you.'

Deb nodded and then raised her eyebrows as if remembering something. "Brian?"

"Yeah Deb?"

"You fix your other problems too --- soon, before they get out of control."

"How close are my problems from getting to that point?"

"I'd say Wednesday for the problem here in town, for the one in Toronto --- there's a lot of other pressure there, I'm not sure how long before that one blows and I'd prefer my grandchildren weren't in the middle of it."

"We'll get it sorted Deb," Justin claimed as he reached for Brian's hand but then bypassed it to get to his spoon to finish his sundae. Brian reached out and grabbed his hand before he could scoop anything out of the bowl.
Debbie smiled at Justin, "I know you will Sunshine. Oh, and don’t forget to take care of your own problem."

"Huh?" Justin glanced up and Brian used his preoccupation to get a better grip on the spoon.

"There are widely varying rumors that a certain former king returned to Babylon and was seen dancing --- among other things --- with the Stud of Liberty. You should sort that out with Em; he's claiming it can't be true, but I can tell he's a little upset."

Justin wrinkled his nose. "Okay. I'll call him."

Debbie watched the battle at the table and shook her head as she smiled. "Why don't you to stop the foreplay and get that bubble butt back to wherever you two are hiding and continue with your honeymoon?"

"Fuck Debbie, will you stop saying shit like that?" Brian asked with a grimace. He then tightened his grip on Justin's hand with his left hand and successfully wrestled the spoon out of Justin's hold with his right hand.

The red head laughed and headed for the door. "Never Brian, never."

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Justin watched as his legs gently floated among the bubbles on the surface of the warm water. The tub was large, deep and very comfortable. He took a deep breath and made a contented sound. There was a slight movement and his legs felt the buoyancy of the water underneath him. He knew he wouldn't be floating like this if his back wasn't anchored to Brian's chest by the arms wrapped around his chest. He turned his head a bit and felt the tickle of Brian's breath on his ear. "You have to admit this is nice. Very nice."
Brian reached for his bottle of beer. "I've had worse experiences."

"Can't you just admit you are enjoying it?"

"Fine, I love getting all wrinkled with you."

Justin gave a low laugh. "No avoiding that over the next few decades."

Brian splashed water over his chest, signaling playtime was beginning.

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~~~ Monday, October 12, 2005, Kinnetik Agency ~~~

"We aren't getting to Lydell's today, are we?" Justin asked from his chair as he patiently watched Brian go over the budget proposals from the art department.

Brian shook his head and continued to mark up the page in front of him.

"The loft?"

Brian shook his head no again.
Justin decided he would just sit there and admire Brian's forearms; he really liked the way Brian had rolled up the shirt sleeves, his tanned skin contrasting sharply with the arctic white material.

Brian continued to look at the numbers on the page. "Stop it."

"Stop what?"

"You know what."

"I can't help it. You are distracting me."

"How? I haven't said a word."

"Maybe I should go pick up lunch then, it's almost noon."

"Maybe you should."

"Any chance you'll have something different?"

"No." Brian put the pen down. "Damn, Cynthia is right, I'll need Ted here to go over these projections."

"Those numbers are the best I could do. You know that part of it is new to me."

"No, your numbers are good, there's just a lot more figures too. I want to run all this against prior campaigns. I don't want to put out high numbers that look like we are taking advantage of the deal." Brian frowned. "Or too low."
"You think it's too low? I didn't cut any corners. You have the capability of doing most of it in house already."

"I know Justin." Brian finally looked up and smiled at him. "You are a natural at this."

Justin smiled back at him and Brian's stomach clenched. He wanted to pull the blond down on his lap and neck for a while. "Maybe you should go and get that lunch now."

Justin nodded and headed for the door. "We going to eat in here at the table?"

Brian nodded and gave him a wave as a dismissal. When Justin had disappeared Brian picked up the phone. "Cynthia?"

"Yes Boss?"

"When will Justin's office be ready?"

Cynthia swore briefly. "Same as when you asked this morning. Not until the twentieth at the earliest."

"Why so long?"

"Electricians, carpenters, furniture, building inspector. Need I say more?"

"I need some screens delivered ASAP."

"Screens?"
"Yes, something opaque but that will allow all the light through --- wait, make it frosted or warped glass."

"And where are we putting them?"

"Around Justin's desk."

A loud explosion of laughter erupted from the phone ear piece.

"Just fucking do it!" Brian slammed the phone down.

~~~

Justin was looking at Brian for the fifth time in ten minutes.

Brian looked over and glared at him. It was only one thirty and already Justin seemed distracted again.

Justin smiled back but didn't avert his eyes.

Brian knew that Justin had figured out that he had been slightly aroused most of the day. He had pulled down his sleeves and re-buttoned the cuffs of his shirt after lunch. Justin had explained his admiration of the view during lunch while pulling Brian's arm into his lap and massaging the muscles and tendons of Brian's right arm. The older man had pulled his hand back when his erection began to grow as Justin began to give his palm a deeper and more erotic finger massage. Brian had watched the tip of Justin's tongue wet his lips and then slowly move back and forth along his lower lip as he concentrated on providing Brian with the same reflexology kneading that his physical therapist had trained Brian to give him after the bashing and motor damage to his right hand. The massage was considerably slower and more erotic than anything Brian had been taught, and that, combined with watching Justin, had caused
him to become clearly aroused. He saw the smile on Justin's face and the blond started to reach for his erection with one hand. "Looks like there is something else I need to massage."

Brian pulled his hand from Justin's grasp and then intercepted his lover's other hand. "NO!"

"But Brian!"

"I SAID NO!" And that was how it had ended, almost an hour ago.

Now Brian sat at his desk, sensitive to Justin's furtive glances and his own imagination, which involved his desktop. "Can't you find something to do, maybe down in Graphics?"

"No. They are at work and I don't want them thinking I'm looking over their shoulder or trying to micro manage. I'm new in the mix and sort of forced on them. I need to lead the team not control it."

"Fine. I'm going to check on what's going on with accounts receivable. You go draw somewhere."

Justin sighed. "I do need to run a few errands."

"Like what?"

"Return my library books?" Justin gave him an insincere smile.

"Justin." Brian's tone made it clear that he wasn't up for snotty comments.

Justin held up his hands in surrender. "Actually I promised Em I'd meet him."
"Where?"

"The Starbucks over by the Carnegie library."

"Why way over there?"

Justin just looked at him and made a face, not feeling he needed to remind Brian that he wasn't allowed to go around Liberty Avenue yet.

"Right. Okay. Go."

"Can I take the car?"

"Do I look that much in a hurry to get you out of here?"

Justin rolled his eyes. "I was hoping you'd be a little easier about the rental than the 'vette."

"The rental is a Mercedes."

Justin shrugged. "You trust me with your classic but not an over insured rental?"

Brian snorted but reached into his pocket and pulled out his keys. "Try to keep Em from getting cum all over the seats when he gets in it and orgasms."

Justin laughed and headed for the door, giving Cynthia a quick hello as she came into the office as he left.
"I got the screens Boss. Found them at the Pottery Barn. They should do the trick."

"They are here already?"

"I sent Joel over to get them; he has a truck."

Brian's eyebrows rose a bit, thinking of the small man who worked in sales. "Joel has a truck?"

Cynthia laughed. "I guess he has hidden interests."

Brian gave a laugh. "I'll say, he's all of 110 ponds and is sneezing all the time."

"And it's a big truck too."

"Must be overcompensating for something," Brian gave a knowing smirk to Cynthia, who then started to giggle.

"Want me to catch Justin before he leaves and ask him how he wants them set up?"

Brian shook his head. "Set them up while he's out. He doesn't know they are coming"

"He doesn't? This won't be much fun for him."

"What?"
Cynthia gave him a knowing look and laughed, "I guess your face will stop looking so flushed all the time now."

"Bitch!"

~~~

"I don't like this." The disembodied voice came from behind the wood and glass enclosure.

"It's only until your office space is ready." Brian smiled as he sat back and enjoyed his semi private office.

"Does it have a window?"

Brian shrugged. "Yeah."

"It faces the alley, doesn't it?"

Brian rolled his eyes but didn't respond.

"There was something to be said for the offices at Vanguard."

"Go home if it bothers you so much."

"Can't. You need me here."
Brian grimaced, thankful Justin couldn't see him. "Part time. Remember?"

"I have to watch what they are doing with the artwork."

"That's not what you said earlier."

"I can't let them think I'm not willing to put in the same effort as them either."

"Shit, there's no winning with you." Brian tapped a pencil on his desk. "Just set up a schedule, give a deadline, tell them to use email and then go home and draw."

Brian's only answer was a stubborn silence.

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After thirty minutes of silence Justin emerged from his glass enclosed exile. "I'm going to the diner."

Brian looked at his watch. "No you're not. Deb's not even there anymore, her shift's over."

"So, no one else will be either."

"For what?"

"I need a milkshake. Can I get you anything?"

Brian narrowed his eyes and looked at Justin more closely. "What's going on? Did you scratch the car?"
"No!"

"How was your coffee with Em? You weren't gone long."

"How long does it take to drink coffee?" Justin edged away from the desk.

"What happened?"

"Nothing. You know Emmett."

"Yes I do." Brian put his pen down and considered what Justin hadn't said.

"Something happened."

Justin gave a little shrug. "Not really. I apologized if I mislead him into thinking we were in New York."

"And..."

The blond frowned. "There really wasn't anything else I could say. I mean until we resolve the Michael and Lindsay things what could I tell him? Besides, we don't even know where we are going to be living for certain."

"Pittsburgh, so you said."

Justin gave a smile and nodded. "But where?"
"What?"

"Where are we going to live here?"

Brian paused before answering and thought about it seriously for the first time. "I don't really know."

"Staying at the house makes the loft seem," Justin tried to put words to the feelings he had about it, "too...busy...public. But..."

"But?"

"I'm not sure the house is the right place --- but it doesn't feel like the wrong place either." Justin had his suspicions about Brian having an unexpected attachment to the house, so he had to draw Brian out into a conversation about it. "What do you think about the house?"

Brian shuffled some papers around his desk, the motion failing to disguise how uncomfortable he was talking about the house. "We have time to figure it out Justin."

"How, if we have to be in New York a lot?"

Brian gathered up the papers and stood them up on the desktop, tapping the bottoms to get them all even. "We have time."

"We should really talk about it Brian. We'll end up having clothes and belongings in three different zip codes. We'll own some things in triplicate. I've lived like this since I left home. I don't really want to do it anymore."

Brian set the papers down. "Okay."
"Okay what?"

"We'll talk about it later."

Justin scratched an ear as he pondered Brian's reaction and body language. There was definitely something going on with Brian's feelings about the house. "We don't have to sell it. I just want to call one place with you home. It doesn't matter where in Pittsburgh it is, that's really up to you. It's just if it's not on the bus line I need a car. And I'm really liking the Mercedes."

"I bet you do," Brian snorted. "Like I said, we have time." Brian thought about something that had escaped him for a minute. "Speaking of the car," Brian pulled his thoughts back to how they started the conversation and what was bothering him. "Emmett."

"What about him?" Justin asked suspiciously.

"Did he enjoy the car?"

"He didn't really get to see it."

Brian raised an eyebrow and picked up the pen and began tapping it again. "You said he was annoyed you wouldn't tell him what was going on, right?"

Justin frowned and nodded.

"The gossip queen will get over it. Don't worry. He always does."

"Brian, he's the only one of the group that actually likes me."
Brian shook his head. "Not true. Ben admires you. Lindsay and Mel love you despite the fact that you love me. Debbie's smothering is an obvious clue to how she feels. Ted wants you --- we won't go there. Blake wishes he was more like you. The ass from Hazelhurst that is hanging out with Em wants to meet you. I think Drew wanted to fuck you on first sight --- another 'we aren't going there' moment. These people love you Justin, they aren't suffering in your presence. My own kid loves you more than me, and I'm sure Michael is concerned JR will too."

"But Michael doesn't like me or really want me around."

Brian looked down at his desk and then back up at Justin. "That's Mikey's problem. And if he doesn't get over it, it won't matter."

The phone rang and Brian reached for it and picked it up when he saw the caller ID. "Theodore, how's gay New York?"

Justin pointed to the door and made a drinking motion. Brian nodded and listened to Ted as Justin left the room. He suddenly covered the phone. "Justin?"

The blond trotted back into the room. "You want something?"

Brian shook his head. "If you run into anyone tell them you need to get home."

"In other words, no talking to strangers --- or friends, or even Michael. Fuck it." Justin threw up his hands in defeat. "I'll go to the place over by the park just to make you happy. I'll get you the non-fat yogurt shake, made with nonfat milk. I'm having mine with real ice cream and real milk." Justin stomped out of the office.

Brian watched Justin go, a little worried about any confrontation that Michael might cause and unreasonably glad Justin was going in the opposite direction of the diner and comic book store. Then he had another thought, "Ted." Brian interrupted the monotonous complaint coming over the phone.
"Yes, oh fearless leader."

"Who would you pick as the winner in an argument between Emmett and Michael?"

"Emmett."

"Emmett and Justin?"

"Em, Justin would let him win."

"Really?"

"Yeah, then Emmett would realize Justin was right and that would be the end of it."

"Huh." Brian thought it over for a second. "What about Justin and Michael?"

"Justin."

"You and Justin."

There was a sigh, "Justin."

"Justin and me?"
"Do you seriously want me to answer that? Will I still have a job?"

"Stop the histrionics Ted. Answer me."

"Justin."

"Michael and me?"

Ted paused. "Tie."

"Overall, who would win every argument?"

"I'd like to say me, but since I didn't even figure into this, the winner would be Justin."

"Why?"

"Why?" Ted asked in surprise

"Yes! Why?"

"Because he's fucking smarter than the rest of us. And..."

"And?"

"There's just something about him Brian. Something beyond the average shit we deal with, maybe it was the bashing – whatever, he's strong Brian. He'd have to be to put up with you but he can hold his own, I
think he always could, that blond hair and doe-eyed look he has misleads you. He’s a kid who walked on
to the floor of Babylon and walked off with what everyone wanted. He survived a bashing and used it to
make all of us stronger."

"Tell me about it." Brian suddenly had a revelation. "Thought about him a lot, have you Ted?"

Ted was silent for a moment and then changed the subject. "Can I come home now?"

"Answer my question."

"Christ you are a pain in the ass! Rehab Brian, okay? Rehab. I had a lot of time to think and one of the
exercises of self discovery was identifying people I love or hate, disapprove of or admire. Looking for
positive role models rather than idols with clay feet."

"Bite me." Brian had had enough of his conversation with Ted, knowing which list he was on.

"You asked, no, make that insisted."

Brian's tone of voice did nothing to hide the derision he was feeling for his friend. "Did you do what I
asked?"

"No, but Brian I'm not equipped to do this. Let me come home and send someone else. I can do deals
Brian but I can't pick out a space you'll be happy with."

"Check in tomorrow and I'll let you know. Is Blake enjoying the trip?"

"Ah, er, yes."
"Check your email. There's a shit load of answers I need and you should be able to manage that if nothing else."

"Brian..."

"Tomorrow Ted, maybe your exile will be over tomorrow."


Brian hung up the phone on Ted's diatribe, knowing the other man would never dare to call back. He stared at his monitor but he wasn't seeing the spreadsheet displayed on it. Instead he was considering Ted's comments about Justin. Brian realized he could stop worrying about his lover. He was a man and could take care of himself, and if he did run into anyone he would be the winner.

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~~~ Tuesday, October 13, 2005, Liberty Diner, 7:30 a.m.~~~

"SUNSHINE!" Debbie hurried across the diner floor to give Justin a big hug. She let him out of the embrace after a moment but didn't let go of him. "Come on, sit down and tell me what you want." She dragged Justin after her. "Hey you two, not there." Debbie waved off two men who were about to sit in the second booth from the back. "Go take one up front; you know this is always the family booth."

The two men gave each other a smirk as they eyed Justin as he was hustled into the booth. They each nodded to Brian, moving quickly away as they saw the warning glower on his face as he followed in Debbie's wake.
"What's it going to be Baby? The usual?"

"Please."

Debbie nodded and wrote something on the pad; she gave Brian a quick look as he settled in the booth across from the blond.

"And you?"

"The usual."

"And that is?"

Brian gave Debbie a sharp look in reply. She snickered and walked away. He leaned out of the booth, watching the retreating woman. "Coffee Deb!"

"Hold your balls, it's coming."

Brian grimaced. "Can't she say anything without using innuendo?"

Justin laughed but then stopped as his cell phone vibrated in his pocket. He pulled it out to look at the number. "It's my mom."

"Better answer it before she hunts us down again." He opened his paper and proceeded to ignore Justin and his conversation with his mother until his concentration was interrupted when his paper was pulled down. "WHAT?" he snapped irritably.
"Mom wants to go shopping with us."

Brian made a face of distaste and shook his head.

"Mom, I just checked with Brian and he’s not sure when.... maybe lunch?" Justin looked at Brian with a question on his face.

Brian shook his head and raised the paper.

"No Mom, he won't have the time I..." Justin shook the paper again to get Brian's attention and then gripped his wrist when he dropped the paper again with a scowl on his face. "Yeah, maybe I could meet you after one?"

Brian made a slight sneer but nodded.

"Where?" Justin gave his trapped hand a squeeze.

Brian shook his head again; he had no intention of shopping with his partner's mother or being held captive by her.

"I can call you and you can pick me up. How's that? You office isn't far away."

Brian smiled and nodded, then grappled with his lover to free his wrist from Justin's iron grip. He raised his paper and again tuned out the diner and its chattering customers. He reached for the coffee as he heard it set on the table. Brian put the paper down briefly to fix his coffee. Justin took the opportunity to pull the 'Life and Arts' sections from the paper. Brian rolled his eyes and folded the paper so he could read its business section one handed while he sipped his coffee. The two sat in companionable silence until their breakfast arrived.
Brian set the paper down after turning the page so he could read the property transactions. He glanced up to see Justin buttering his pancakes. He gave the plate a quick once over. Justin had eggs, pancakes, bacon, sausage and home fries. There was a small fruit garnish. He looked down at his egg white omelet, turkey sausage and dry wheat toast, then back at the blond's plate. "Tell me again what that obscenity on your plate is."

Justin finished stacking his pancakes and then picked up the syrup; he lifted two pancakes with his fork and poured the syrup over the bottom cake, then dropped the second into place and repeated the procedure. He let the top pancake fall into place and then added more syrup. After setting the bottle of syrup down he licked the tip of his finger where some sticky syrup had remained. "It's the lumberjack special, or as Debbie calls it in the kitchen, the happy homo."

"How could I forget you eat all that?"

Justin smiled. "And you like to sneak bites of it."

Brian sniffed impolitely. "I do not."

Justin laughed and began to eat, leaning his section of the paper against the napkin holder. He read the comics then the movie reviews as he ate. Brian went back to his own breakfast determined not to steal his usual bite of pancake by shifting his pages of the paper to block his view of the Justin's plate. He heard a snicker but ignored it.

When Brian had finished his breakfast he unfolded his paper to change the page, and he paused to look over at Justin, who was still eating. He watched quietly for a minute. "I'm going to my regular doctor next month for a check up. You are coming with me."

Justin looked up as he bit into a sausage link. "Why?"

"I want your blood work done – cholesterol, triglycerides and sugar levels."
Justin laughed. "I'm fine."

"How can you be with all that shit?"

"I am but if it'll make you happy I'll go."

Debbie stopped by the table to refill the coffee cups. She looked at Brian's plate. "You done?"

"Unlike the human trash compacter, yes."

Debbie snorted, "Leave Sunshine alone, it's nice to see someone not afraid to eat." She picked up Brian's empty plate. "Want more milk Sunshine?"

"Please."

Brian made a choking sound from behind his paper. "Could you at least make it nonfat?"

Debbie laughed. "One large glass of WHOLE milk coming up." She walked away, yelling for another table's order.

Brian read in peace until his paper was ripped from his hands and slammed down on the table in front of him. He started to complain by yelling at Justin until he focused on the perpetrator. He gave a frown and reached for his paper. "What?"

"Oh, so you can speak!"
Brian let a slight sigh. "What do you want Mikey?" He glanced at his watch and then at Justin. Justin was turned and waving to Debbie. Brian gazed back at Michael, noticing Ben, Emmett and Hunter hanging back, slightly behind the irate man in front of him, at the entrance to the last booth.

Michael's mouth settled into an angry pout. "What do I want? I'm not even sure why I'm bothering to talk to you. You call up in the middle of the night, spouting some incoherent shit and then just ignore all my calls to check on you. You sit here like nothing's wrong after almost a week of ignoring me. What the fuck are you playing at?" Michael turned to Justin and waved a hand at him, "And what the hell is he doing here?"

Debbie came bustling up. "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong?" Michael shouted angrily.

"Deb, can we have our check?" Justin asked quickly.

Debbie stepped boldly in front of her son. "Sure can, I got it right here." She turned to Michael, "So, what are you having this morning?" She looked past Michael at the other three men and made a motion with her hand for them to get into the booth. The three quickly slid into the booth while Justin slid out of his seat, picked up the check and motioned to Brian that he was going to go to the register, leaving Michael, Debbie and Brian at the booth.

Debbie looked from Michael to Brian, noting the expressions on both men's faces. "Boys?"

"What?" Michael asked, his eyes not leaving Brian.

"I don't know what's up either of your asses but my breakfast rush isn't the place."

Brian continued to challenge Michael's look with a stare of his own. "There's no problem Deb. I'm on my way out and I'm sure Michael's FAMILY is waiting for him to order breakfast."
Brian casually picked up the sections of newspaper and stood. Michael took a reluctant step back to allow Brian out of the booth. Brian folded the paper and roughly tapped it against Michael's chest. "Here." Michael moved to clutch the paper before it could fall to the floor. "All the news you need to read today." Brian bent and kissed Debbie on the cheek. "Have a nice day."

Debbie tapped his face, "You too, you shit."

Brian gave her a sideways smile and started to walk away.

"Brian!"

Brian stopped and closed his eyes, taking a breath before turning around. "What?"

"We need to talk, although I don't know why I should bother with the way you are treating me."

"We talked already Michael."

"No we didn't."

"Yes we did. Apparently you didn't hear what I was saying." He took a step away from Michael towards the door.

"I'm not finished talking." Michael reached out and grabbed Brian's elbow trying to stop the taller man from walking away.

"I am." Brian turned to face Michael, shrugging his arm out of the other man's grip. "I have to get to work." He turned and joined Justin by the door, the two quickly walking out the door.
Michael stood staring at the empty doorway. Emmett turned to Ben, "Well, I think that went well, don't you?"

Ben opened his mouth to say something and then gave a slight shake of his head and looked at the menu without uttering a word.

Michael sat down on the bench next to Ben, his arms crossed, an angry look still on his face.

Debbie looked at the four men. "So what are you having this morning?"

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~~~ Tuesday, October 13, 2005, Loft on Tremont, 11:30 a.m.~~~

"We aren't going to get to Lydell's today either are we?"

Brian slid his hands up under Justin's shirt. "Is that a problem?"

"No, I just need to get something for the meeting with Liberty on Friday." Justin allowed his shirt to be tossed aside; he decided to return the favor and started unbuttoning Brian's shirt. "What about my mom?"

Brian unzipped Justin's pants. "Trying to ruin the mood?"
"No."

"Call her and have her pick you up here, she can take you to Lydell's." Brian buried his nose in Justin's neck, nuzzling the sensitive skin behind his ear.

"Ahhh," Justin sighed, enjoying the attention, "What time?"

"One."

"Nice long lunch for the boss."

"Perks, Justin, perks."

"I like this job more every day."

"I bet you do."

~~~

~~~ Tuesday, October 13, 2005, Loft on Tremont, 12:50 p.m.~~~

Brian pushed Justin up against the wall by the loft door for another kiss. Justin obliged, barely paying attention as he unlocked the downstairs door when it buzzed, expecting his mother. She was due to pick him up in twenty minutes but she was notoriously early. Brian insisted her tendency to show up early
was some strange mother syndrome that Debbie had too. They were always trying to catch their child doing something they shouldn't be doing, and then were actually surprised when they did catch them.

Brian had grabbed Justin as he stood by the door waiting for him after they dressed. The two men had danced a bit as they kissed and then struggled for dominance over their lovemaking with Brian winning when he had pushed the slighter man up against the wall a few feet from the door and proceeded to plunder his mouth. It didn't seem to bother either man that they had been trying to get ready to leave for a half hour but kept being distracted by each other. The door beginning to slide open finally broke them apart as Brian stepped away from Justin hurriedly, not wanting to give Jennifer the satisfaction of catching them in the act. Brian moved even more rapidly to the center of the doorway when he saw who was opening the door.

"Mikey, we aren't going to do this." Brian raised his arm to block Michael from entering the loft. "I told you that earlier --- there isn't anything else to talk about."

Michael ducked under Brian's arm and kept walking into the center area of the loft, either not seeing or ignoring Justin. "We need to talk."

"No we don't." Brian dropped his arm and walked past Michael into the loft.

"Brian, you need to think about what you are doing."

"I beg your pardon?" Brian stopped and turned to stare at Michael.

"What the fuck do you think you are doing? You were getting your life back to normal and suddenly I get this strange call and then nothing. No calls, you are avoiding me and then after a week I find out he's back." Michael tipped his head backwards in Justin's direction.

"He's back?" Brian asked in a deadly tone, angered that Michael had seen Justin and had chosen to ignore him.
"YES! What are you two playing at now? Are you two back together? Again? Don't tell me he's talked you into marrying him for a second time."

"YOU need to change Michael, or this is never going to work."

"What's not going to work?"

"You and me."

"What?" Michael looked amazed at the comment. "You and me? What the hell does that mean? We are best friends, we have been together for almost twenty years. How are we not going to work?"

"Michael, in case it had escaped your attention, I am with Justin. I have been with Justin for five years."

"You have not. You may have been fucking him for five years but you haven't been partners with him, you're lucky if you two have actually been talking to each other for five consecutive months!"

Brian gave a shake to his head, "I don't have anything to say to you right now. I told you I'd talk to you when I was ready, I'm not ready. But could you wait? No."

"That's bullshit! You can talk to me now. You could have talked to me anytime in the last week. What have you got to wait for? I've been calling you constantly, worried that something was wrong, really wrong. And was there? No! You were just shacked up and too busy fucking Justin to call me."

Brian slammed the lid of his small suitcase closed. "First of all Mikey, Justin and I weren't shacked up together. WE LIVE TOGETHER! Got that?"

Michael crossed his arms and then rolled his eyes. "Yeah right."
"You can choose to believe it or not, but that's the way it is."


Brian lifted his suitcase and walked over to the chair where he had draped his coat over the back. "Second, what Justin and I do when we are in our home, or anywhere else, is none of your fucking business!"

"Brian!" Michael took a step towards the other man. "Can't you see this isn't getting you anywhere? You two --- you just aren't..." Michael paused trying to find the word.

"You and Ben?" Brian, his voice deceptively calm, asked. "Mel and Lindsay?"

"Yeah. Yeah!" Michael nodded empathically. "You aren't uh ...uh..."


"Yes. Yes," Michael said, again nodding.

Brian glanced at Justin who was still standing by the loft door. He gave Brian a wide smile and a little nod. Brian smiled back and then looked back at his friend. "Let me tell you something Mikey. Justin and I are not married; we will never be married, at least not in the eyes of the law, or in the eyes of religious fanatics, or in the eyes of homophobic conservatives, or even in the eyes of our gay and lesbian friends."

Michael shut his mouth and took a step backward at the force of Brian's explosion.
"But we are together, we are together in all the ways that count, you can call it a relationship, a union, call it whatever the fuck you need to in order to verbalize it. Justin and I don't need to verbalize it because we know. We just know. We don't need some piece of paper to legalize what we have, we don't need some priest or president telling us it's okay to love each other, that we can be together. We love each other, we are together and that's it." Brian started to head for the door. He was just about to pass Michael when the other man spoke up.

"That's really nice for you Brian." Michael turned to face Brian so angry that he didn't even notice the suitcase. "That's nothing but words, and words haven't kept you two together before! And there is nothing wrong with marriage, or for the legal and moral recognition of what Ben and I have!"

"That's fine for you Mikey. But like I said, Justin and I don't need anyone's permission or recognition to love each other or to be together. And it may be 'just words' to you, but it is more to us. Justin and I are together and we plan on staying that way!"

"Nice sentiment but what about our rights --- as spouses and parents?"

"Mel seems to have worked out the whole parental thing hasn't she? She's got my son and your daughter in Canada, so I think her rights as a gay parent are pretty well protected. You've done that shit – the courts protected you too."

Michael lowered his voice a bit, some of the wind out of his sails. "Yeah, but look at Ben and me, in this state I'm still not entitled to his benefits."

"Do you really need his social security that badly Michael? Maybe some do, but do you? You have been paying in too. More important than the social security is Ben's pension, and I know he can manipulate his pension so that you receive it as a survivor."

"It's not just about Ben and me." Michael shook his head, "That's not the point."
"It seems to be the one you are making. Let me tell you something Mikey. Right now you have your little out-of-the-country marriage certificate, but I can guarantee you Justin has more control over my assets, my health, and my life, and vice versa, than you have with Ben. It's all legal, it's all contractual and it never needed the permission of laws other than the ones we have now. I didn't have to plead with some homophobic prick to have the right to marry Justin. Justin and I are together, that's it. Our choice, our understanding, our decision. The rest of the world can gofuck itself because it doesn't apply to us."

"BUT I NEED IT."

"Fine Mikey, you need it. Everyone who supports it needs it. Who knows maybe someday Justin will decide he needs it." Brian glanced back at Justin who smirked and shook his head. "And I'll consider it." He looked back at the blond who shook his head again. Brian hid a smile and trained his gaze back on Michael. "But should we need it? Justin and I have decided we don't. What I am saying to you, and have been saying to you for years, is don't even begin to judge or measure Justin and my relationship by yours or anyone else's. YOU need a fucking marriage certificate. WE don't."

"But you should! It's what defines a relationship."

"In conventional terms, in socio-religious terms. Not in mine or Justin's terms. No Michael, I don't have to want it. I don't have to need it to have a relationship that will last beyond the first major argument."

"But we need to work as a united group to get our rights."

Brian's eyes went wide at the comment, his arm stretched out towards Michael as he pointed at him, his arm moving back and forth as he made each point. "Don't you dare Michael, don't you dare use the guilt shit on me. Don't tell me how I have to help the community out of some obligation for being born gay. I've done it plenty and been shit on by the people I helped. They can keep their begrudged thanks and insincere awards. I never asked for anything from them and I never will." He dropped his arm. "After Stockwell's defeat I didn't ask them for any help, did I? I didn't go crying to them. No, I sat there with nothing while OUR community knew the truth but chose to ignore me. It took Lindsay and Debbie as the 'Concerned Citizens for the Truth' to guilt people into taking up a collection for me. I did take the money but I didn't use it. Not a fucking cent. I gave it back to Lindsay. I got loans and I worked the telephone and I made Kinnetik work! You didn't know that did you? Lindsay didn't know what to do with the money either and put it to an account in my name, probably thinking I'd need it if Kinnetik went bust.
But Kinnetik didn't fail. And guess what, after I got the money from Remson for sponsoring me on that fucking bike ride I took the money out of the bank, added it to the rest and gave it back for Vic's house. I think I'm more than even now, don't you? I did have a bombed out building that proved I gave you and your community what you needed in support of the cause! And as for my real friends? I had the broken collar bone as a souvenir from your little marriage 'tour de farce' and I gave Lindsay ten thousand fucking dollars for her marriage initiative a few years ago. So I don't care or give to the community? Tell it to somebody else Michael. I'm not listening. I have no regrets and no apologies concerning any of it. See Michael there you go --- absolute fucking proof I'm the same old Brian Kinney you've always known." Brian took a step away from Michael and towards Justin and the door. "And I'm still with Justin!"

"Brian ... I didn't know....I "

"Because you never wanted to know Mikey." Brian glanced over at Justin, receiving a sad smile in return. "But you always knew didn't you?"

Brian started to walk to Justin when Michael quickly reached out and grabbed Brian by the arm trying to stop his exit. "I'm sorry. I should have known. But Brian we still need..."

"You always need Mickey." Brian stopped moving but pulled his arm free of the other man's grip for the second time that day. "Enough! I don't need what you do Michael. And I never will. I'm not taking away from what you want, I'm just telling you to stop saying I have to have what you do. Because I don't! I have what I want and I think it's a million times better than what the rest of you have. So fuck off and leave us alone! And if you can't, then I meant what I said. You and me --- it's not going to work." Brian walked to the door to stand next to Justin. They both stood and looked at Michael who seemed stunned by Brian's last comment.

Michael turned slowly, his face obviously pale, "What...what...what do you mean it won't work?"

Brian lifted his arm and gave Justin a quick hug. "Got to go or I'll be late." He and Justin shared a quick kiss. Brian looked down at the suitcase, then back up, smiled at Justin and then laughed. "You won't need that much for the first meeting; we'll shop in New York. Try to be back by three, say hi to Mommy for me."
"Dick." Justin snickered and gave him a light shove away from him.

"BRIAN!" Michael's voice interrupted the two men by the door.

Brian gave a small sigh and turned to his friend. "What?"

"What did you mean?"

"What I said. If you can't accept our life the way it is then I have nothing more to say to you." He turned and walked out the door, quickly bounding down the stairs.

Michael stared after his friend; it was several moments before he seemed to be aware of where he was. He started for the door, his only intention to follow Brian and argue some more. He was a few feet from the door when the metal door was suddenly rolled closed in front of him.

"No you don't." Justin closed the door and turned to Michael; he folded his arms and gave the other man a huge smile. "He may not have anymore to say to you, but I've got plenty."

Michael gave Justin a dirty look. "I need to leave."

"No, you need to listen."

"I don't think so." Michael made to push Justin out of the way. He was surprised when Justin uncrossed his arms and gave him a strong push backwards.
"Oh. I think so. This conversation is long overdue and there is no one here that is going to listen and believe your sympathetic, 'oh poor me' whining." Justin leaned back against the door. "And trust me, just because I let you shove me around before does not mean I'm going to allow it again."

Michael raised his eyebrows in shock and then closed his mouth in a tight frown, his eyes narrowing. "I have no idea what you are talking about."

"Cut the crap Michael. It's just you and me now. No holds barred."

"Look you little spoiled..."

"Oh come on Michael you can do better than that. We both know you are a bigger brat than me and spoiled in a lot worse ways!"

"WHAT?"

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Brian knew it was cowardly as he headed down the stairs from the loft. He just hadn't felt like talking to Michael any longer. It was bad enough he had let himself be drawn into a conversation he hadn't planned on having until he and Justin returned from New York next week. He heard the loft door shut but didn't hear footsteps following him or the elevator starting. He stopped mid-step and listened. He overrode the instinct to go back up the stairs and see what was happening. Justin had obviously stopped Michael from chasing after him. He reached the next landing and stopped to listen again. Not a sound. In his mind's eye he saw the two men in the loft facing each other down. He started back down the stairs. Justin had a lot to sort out with Michael and now was as good a time as any.

Brian remembered his conversation with Ted the day before. It really only confirmed what he already knew; his blond would mince Michael with words and intelligence. It would have been pretty cool to watch but maybe Justin was right to do it in private. He only hoped Michael understood what Justin would be trying to say, and he didn't mean on an intellectual level. Brian laughed to himself; okay so
maybe there would be some words Michael might not understand, but he knew what was more important was that Michael finally grasp the concept that he and Justin were together and that things would be different in the future. Justin and Gus came first. He just hoped Justin could make Michael understand something he had not been able to get the man to understand. Justin might try the compassionate angle but he knew his little blond princess could be a viper. It wasn't a side he showed often. Brian had seen it first hand, Justin's mother had certainly had to deal with it, but he doubted the rest of Liberty Avenue would believe his angelic looking lover could be lethal when he was dealing with situations that threatened someone he loved.

Brian existed the building and considered whether he should go back and save Michael a few venomous bites. He was about to turn around when his phone rang. He pulled it out and glanced at the number. Ted.

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Justin smiled at Michael after his little outburst. "Do you think I am too naive not to know what an emotional manipulator you are?"

Michael raised an eyebrow. "I think you are describing someone else in this room." He pointed to himself. "I have never manipulated anyone."

"Yeah, right and I've never fucked Brian."

"What?" Michael's head turned to him so quickly his neck made a cracking sound. "Oww." Michael raised his hand to rub his neck.

Justin smirked. "You are such a selfish asshole. Everything has to fit in your little view of what the world should be like."
"Look Justin. I know you think you have it all and that Brian will eventually change his mind, or something will happen and unbalance him again, just long enough for you to get married, but it won't happen. I'll make sure it doesn't happen."

"Oh, you can get married but he can't? He can fight for your rights, but he better damn well not use them for himself. Interesting double standard you have going for you and your 'best friend'." Justin gave a low laugh. "Doesn't matter anyway. You're too late."

"What!?"

"Brian and I --- we are together. Didn't you hear him? We have made a decision. We are together, regardless of arguments, promiscuity, health or interfering friends. You don't accept it, you lose. It's really quite simple. You can have Brian and me, or you can have nothing."

"That's bullshit. Brian will..."

Justin gave a shake of his head. "No he won't. If you know Brian as well as you claim to know him, then you know that when Brian and I made the decision to commit to this relationship, and stick it out through all the assorted shit that goes with it, that Brian will never walk away, he'll never back out."

Michael sneered at him. "But you will."

Justin shook his head. "You still don't get it, do you? After five years, after everything that happened, after all the opportunities, drama, and sacrifice. You still don't get it."

"Get what?"
Brian tried to block out Ted's incessant drone as he tried to figure out how to solve the problem of space in New York. He absently watched a silver Volvo coming down the street. The car turned on a blinker and glided up to the curb in front of his building. He smiled. Problem solved.

Jennifer pulled up to the curb and got out of the car. She came around the car and saw Brian standing by the front door, speaking into the phone, a small suitcase by his feet. She smiled and gave him a wave, and then stopped suddenly.

Brian had waited at the entrance to the building as Jennifer approached, and just as she was about to pass him he held out his arm and touched her. The blonde stopped mid stride and looked at Brian, giving him an alarmed look at being stopped. His only reply was to hold up one finger in a motion asking her to wait. "I have to go Ted. Come home. Now. Problem solved... What? No, YOU didn't solve it." Brian turned off the phone and put it in his pocket. He turned to look at Jennifer. "Hello." Brian leaned in and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek.

"Hello," Jennifer smiled and looked up at him, noticing a certain glint in the eye and set of his jaw. "And what?"

"I have to want something?" Brian asked in false dismay.

Jennifer tapped her cheek where he kissed her and nodded. "Yes."

"Jennifer." Brian gave her a wide smile.

"Hmmm?"

"You know what I like."

"My son?"
"Other than him," Brian gave her a look of forced patience but then stuck his tongue in his cheek and raised his eyebrows a bit. "Although I do like him the best of all my things."

"I'm going to ignore that last comment." Jennifer crossed her arms and gave him an irked mother's look. "What's this about?"

"Theodore, the useless, is in New York City looking for space for the agency."

"Justin mentioned it, but swore me to secrecy."

"Of course he did." Brian nodded, "Well the assho...Ted. Ted is looking in mid Manhattan near the other agencies."

"Well that's sensible."

Brian shook his head. "No, it's overly expensive and it's too conformist. People are willing to come to Pittsburgh for my agency. Clients come because they know we have a unique approach and a phenomenal business product. And when they arrive they don't expect a conventional company, they expect the unusual, the avant-garde. And they get it from the office space right down to the campaign. They leave the glass towers of the business district and come to a renovated bath house because that is Kinnetik --- eccentric, unusual, eclectic. If they are willing to come to Pittsburgh and do that, then they will be willing to leave Fifth Avenue to come to Kinnetik in New York."

Jennifer nodded. "I see what you are saying."

"You know what I'm looking for, you found it here. I need you to find it there too. Something as offbeat and unique as the Kinnetik building here. Something that will show we are more than the usual over-polished advertising agency."
"You want me to take a look at the listings?" Jennifer smiled, pleased that Brian trusted her to do this for him.

Brian shook his head. "No, I want you to go and find what I need."

Jennifer's expression turned to amazement. "Damn! That's putting a lot of trust in me."

Brian shrugged. "I trust you with your son's future. Whatever you find, it'll be half his."

"OH!" Jennifer knew things had changed between the two men, Justin coming home was a big clue, and she knew Justin was different the last few days. He seemed peaceful as if some battle had ended but at the same time he seemed filled with a passion and energy she hadn't seen in him since he began to really draw and paint in his early teens. She was sure it had to do with his new arrangements with Brian, but hadn't realized the changes were this deep. She took a moment to consider what Brian was asking, her business sense coming back to the forefront. She'd get all the details out of Justin while they were shopping. "Mmmmm, what do you need in it?"

Brian looked off in the distance and Jennifer could tell he was forming a list of requirements at a rapid pace. The man's abilities amazed her at times.

"I want a street front with room for several offices on the first two floors. The other parts of the building are to be residential. We will have a small but permanent staff in New York but a lot of personnel will be going to the city just for a couple of days at a time, from here, depending on the accounts they are working on. I'll need some rooms or efficiencies in another part of the building. I'm not paying to put them up at some hotel and pay to feed them every time they are in town. They'll have plenty of downtime to treat it as a vacation. Ted can find a way to write it all off. The building will need a floor for Justin and me, we'll need privacy and he'll need workspace, so we will need some accommodation for natural lighting somewhere in the building, maybe even a small gallery space." Brian nodded to himself, "Yeah, that may solve a couple of issues."

"You want a BUILDING?" Jennifer asked in a shocked tone.
Brian nodded. "Economical lease with an option to buy. Be firm on the price and the options. I'm not renovating a building so some asshole can kick me out of it and make money on what I put into it. And I want to be able to exit the lease without losing my shirt in case the New York office is a bust."

"Oookayy." Jennifer took a deep breath. "What's your timeframe?"

"It's short. I can work out of the Liberty offices for a while but I don't want to be seen as an extension of them. We need a separate space and identity. We will need time for some initial renovations too. It'll be great if we can find a multi-purpose building almost ready to go. Look in lower Manhattan -- West Village, Chelsea, Tribeca or SoHo but not as far down as the Financial District. Part of what we want is atmosphere. They will come to us since it's all trendy there now. Our people can work and get around easily when they have to be there."

"So what --- 4 months?"

Brian shook his head, "Two at the most."

"Two?" Jennifer shook her head, "Okay. I'll have to use some realtors in New York but I know the group I work for has some very good contacts. We'll have to look for something just being renovated or maybe a business that is in trouble and needs to exit quickly."

"Whatever. If you need anything you let Cynthia know."

Jennifer nodded. "I'll look into making arrangements and ..."

Brian immediately shook his head. "Call Cynthia, she'll arrange all the travel and hotel reservations. Take Molly if you want. Justin and I will be there by the weekend. Tell her to put you up at the same place as us. It'll make it easier for us to see the places you find."

"Okay."
Brian looked at his watch. "I better get going. Thanks Jennifer."

"Brian?"

"Yes?"

"Where is Justin?"

"Oh." Brian looked at the doorway; he had totally forgotten about Michael being upstairs. "He should be right down. He was taking care of a little housekeeping problem we were having. In fact, maybe you should just wait for him in the car. He won't be long."

Jennifer nodded and pulled her phone out of her purse. "You're right, there are some calls I need to make now!" She walked back to the car and was quickly settled in the driver's seat and calling someone.

Brian looked at the front door, and still saw no sign of Michael. He hoped Justin remembered to hide the body. Brian gave a casual shrug, picked up his bag, turned and walked around the corner to where he had parked the Mercedes.

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"Get what?" Michael repeated as he became more agitated and angry by the second.

"Get that I'm still here. I've been here since that first night. I've got a piece of Brian in my heart and he has a piece of me in his. No bashings, no bombs and no interfering from you has changed that." Justin moved to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. "Oh, sorry. All I can offer you is some water. We haven't been staying here so I haven't shopped for anything." Justin tossed Michael a bottle of water.
"Not staying here?" Michael put his hand up and caught the bottle before it hit him in the face.

"Whoops. Sorry about that."

"You tried to hit me."

"Of course I didn't. But you saw it coming, didn't you?"

"Yes."

Justin nodded, "I never did, not when Hobbs lifted the bat, or when you tried to get Brian to dump me all those times, when you had your little drama and guilt parties to get Brian to do what you wanted, or when you told Brian about Ethan."

"You are so full of shit. You were no victim."

"Did you see it coming?"

"See what?"

"When Brian hit you at Gus's birthday party. Did you see it coming?"

Michael frowned but shook his head.

"Then remember that, because if you try to interfere in my relationship with Brian again you won't see it coming then either."
"Are you threatening me?"

Justin smiled and gave a little nod. "Yes, who would have thought? Normally it's you threatening me."

"I'm going to tell everybody what an asshole you are and what you've said. I'll tell Brian."

Justin shrugged. "Go ahead. He'll probably laugh at you."

"He'll believe me."

Justin nodded, "Yes, he will, but his reaction might surprise you. After all, he's already hit you himself."
Justin's slight smile faded. "What was it again? Oh yeah --- you told him he should have left me on the garage floor."

Michael's jaw dropped. "He told you.... he never told anyone."

"I'm not anyone. I'm his lover, his partner. You're just his best friend."

"Just?" Michael rolled his eyes. "I've been here for him, where have you been?"

Justin ignored the dig. "What kind of best friend are you? He always took the heat for you, he let everybody think of you as the poor pitiful victim. He took their contempt and their censure without ever blaming you. But I blame you. What would they all think of poor sainted Michael if they really knew how nasty he could get? Then again – Mel has some idea doesn't she? So does your mom. But does Ben know? He passed off your muckraking and manipulations to a loving father trying desperately to hold on to his visitation with his infant daughter. Does he know you can snub your friends because they aren't good enough for your party? Get down and dirty with the victim of a bashing? Or worse than anything, humiliate your mom in front of a United States Senator? Wouldn't that just shake his image of you a bit?"
Michael's eyes narrowed at the references to his past mistakes. "What happened between MY mom and MY friends isn't any of YOUR business. You're just pissed because I always tell Brian the truth about you. Brian will always defend me. I don't believe he told you what I said that day of the party, and if he did, then he must have been high or something. Do you think he'll let you blackmail me?"

Justin laughed at the threat. "The truth is never blackmail."

"It's your word against mine. Brian won't say anything and you'll just be left hanging, looking like the same silver-spooned spoiled brat you have always been."

"No, they are going to believe me because Brian won't deny it. He may not give them a word for word account, but he won't support you over me."

"Bullshit."

"Come on Michael, act your age for a change. Admit the truth. Brian will choose me over you. You know it. He already has."

Michael shook his head.

"God, you can be so pathetic." Justin rubbed his hand through his hair in frustration with the man. "Michael! He just chose me over you. Did you not understand anything he just said?"

Michael's eyes clouded as he thought about the conversation; eventually he gave a slow, reluctant nod as Justin's words sank in. As he started to understand the significance of what was happening he had the look of a lost child.
Justin felt his compassion for the other man's recognition of his loss almost overtake his own anger. "Michael, I'm not trying to come between you as friends. Brian needs friends, a best friend, just like I have Daphne or Ted has Emmett. Just don't presume to think you are going to come first in his life anymore."

Michael frowned, and Justin wondered if he was having difficulty understanding the shift of Brian's priorities.

"Would you put Brian before Ben?"

Michael suddenly crossed his arms in a tight, defensive stance. "No --- I haven't. Not really. I...I wouldn't." There was a troubled look on Michael's face. "Ben is my husband." Michael's voice was suddenly loud, almost as if he were trying to convince himself of the fact.

Justin shook his head, not convinced by Michael's answer either; in fact there was a look of doubt on Michael's face that was all too plain. He knew he had to make the point clear again or Michael was just never going to understand. "Don't even think you are going to come second."

Michael looked at him in surprise. "What...who..."

"Would you put Brian before JR?"

Michael sighed. "Of course not."

Justin snorted, not sure he actually believed him this time either. "Regardless, you need to understand, Brian and I – we're off limits to comments, meddling, whining and all other forms of irritating interference, especially FROM YOU!"

Michael suddenly seemed to regain his footing, Justin's demand annoying him. "I'll do and say what I want to Brian and about you."
Justin nodded. "You go ahead. And you will be the loser."

"No one will believe you over me."

"Do you think our friends are blind to you? They forgive you because you are so pitiful they let things go. But they have seen everything I have."

"Fuck you!"

"Good comeback." Justin opened his bottle of water and took a sip. "See you've lost the war before we've even had the first battle."

"How?" Michael gave him a look of disbelief.

"Don't even think you can beat me on a fair playing field." Justin's voice lowered, the seriousness of it sending a shiver up Michaels's back. "You have lost the advantage of people thinking you are naïve and innocent, and I can disassemble what remains of those beliefs very easily. You can be selfish and mean and people are now disillusioned enough to know it. We are both victims of violence; we both have had hard times with families and lovers. We are even in all the emotional categories that trigger sympathy from our friends --- victimization and relationships. You can't even use my supposed betrayal of Brian with Ethan, in your eyes, against me because others believe it was justified. When it's all said and done our strengths and weaknesses in all those areas cancel each other out. That leaves only one battlefield you have left open to you and if you try to engage me on it you will lose."

"And that battlefield is?" Michael couldn't hide his sneering tone.

"Words, intelligence, wits, common-sense."
Michael made a grimace and then a harsh sound of disbelief. "You are so full of yourself. You think you are so privileged that you can just roll over us poor ignorant people. You've never had to fight, and outwit people who are smarter, bigger, wealthier than you."

"Like you have?"

"Yes!"

"More like Brian did it for you, then David and then Ben."

"That's not true."

"You don't think I can get down and play dirty?"

Michael shrugged. "You can be conniving but you don't have what it takes. No street smarts from living in violence or poverty."

"You don't think I have what it takes?" Justin's jaw dropped down in disbelief. "Who do you think got Kip to back off Brian during the lawsuit? Who started the campaign against Stockwell? Who got Brian's nephew to admit he lied?" Justin waited for an answer.

Michael just scowled at him but gave a little shake of his head. "Little stuff, no big deal."

Justin tightened his fist as he tried to control the anger that suddenly surged through him. "What do you think I was doing with the Pink Posse, planting flowers and going to fashion shows? Who do you think made Chris Hobbs finally pay, to hold a gun on a piece of shit of a man and make him pee his pants? And if that's not enough to convince you," Justin took a step toward Michael. "Remember you are talking to the man who HAS Brian Kinney."
Justin took a step back and looked Michael over, his head tilted a bit to the side. "Don't you get it? I'm Brian's partner, his equal, the only man that can take all he has to give, good and bad, and handle it; not only handle it but give it back and know he can take it too."

Justin moved around Michael to the door. "Take the water with you. We're done."

Michael shook his head. "No, no we're not."

"I've said all I have to say. It comes down to this, leave us alone and be friends; or interfere and never be a part of our lives again."

"Brian and I go back too far..."

"Don't Michael. Accept what he is willing to give you and move on. You have a husband and children, everything you claimed you wanted. Maybe you don't have Brian the way you wanted but you let that dream go --- at least you have everyone believing you did. Don't ruin their trust in you. You have more to lose than you will ever know."

"Brian IS my best friend."

"Then be his best friend and accept what he has decided."

"But you'll hurt him."

"Oh, I suspect we will hurt each other a bit in the years ahead of us, but not the way you think. Not the way you will hurt him if you can't accept that he and I are together and will remain that way."

"You can't stop me from seeing him."
"I have no intention of doing that." Justin's eyes narrowed. "But don't count on the fact that I couldn't. You'll lose there too."

"If I call he'll answer."

"Like he's been taking your calls for the last week? Oh wait, there's that logic of yours again. You are assuming he would want to see you, hmmm, but didn't he just tell you what would happen if you couldn't get along with me?"

Michael threw his arms up in the air. "What the fuck is wrong with you? I thought we were friends."

"We are. But we aren't close friends, best friends. We have the same friends, love many of the same people, but that doesn't mean I have to automatically take your shit. We are business partners too. Was I concerned when you were hurt? Of course. Did I wish you were left on the floor of Babylon bleeding? Surprisingly, no. I do care about you, and I know what your death would have done to Ben, Debbie and Brian. God knows your mom couldn't handle losing you after Vic dying. But then again why should I care? Have you ever given me the same benefit I have given you? Not once! Every opportunity you have had you have tried to shove a wedge in between Brian and me. But I understood your need. So I let it go. But not anymore, and I certainly won't help fix any problems you have with Brian as a result of your own stupidity. For fuck's sake Michael, you probably still wouldn't be talking to Brian if I hadn't given you that damn 'Captain Astro' comic book years ago. Where would you be now if I hadn't done that?"

Michael made a strange noise and stamped his foot and threw his arms in the air obviously not believing what he was hearing. "Oh, so I owe my entire life as I know it now to you?"

Justin looked surprised for a moment and then laughed suddenly. "Yeah, maybe you do."

"You are so fucking full of yourself!"
Justin smirked, not being able to resist the opening the other man had given him. "No, I'm usually full of Brian."

Michael's face flushed red, "SEE! SEE! Everything is about sex for you two."

"Oh come on Michael, give it up." Justin laughed again as he shook his head. "You REALLY need a vacation."

"Justin, this isn't funny."

"No it's not, it's actually quite sad." Justin opened the door to the loft. "What happens from here on in is all your doing."

Michael stood still staring at the younger man. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"Deadly."

"Just like that," Michael snapped his fingers, "I'm supposed to accept everything you have said and let you and Brian just walk off into the sunset."

"Pretty much." Justin leaned back against the open door and crossed his arms. "And it's not like you have the power to stop us anymore."

"You really believe you and Brian are going to be together forever, just like a married couple."

Justin shook his head. "Not like a married couple, at least not by your definition, not in the conventional sense. But I guess if you need to use that word to define it, to understand it, then fine, call it that. But the 'marriage' Brian and I have --- it didn't come from standing up in front of our friends and saying some practiced words, it wasn't validated by some official, and it's not enforced by a slip of paper. No,
what we have --- it's a melding, a joining of our lives, our desires, our love, it's a compromise of spirit. It binds us more than any ceremony Michael. I feel his pain, his joy, and he feels mine. We understand each other, we know each other and we can still love each other regardless of our inadequacies."

Michael snorted. "You can't possibly talk this shit to Brian; you'd have him running for the exit in the blink of an eye."

Justin looked thoughtful. "True. But then again I don't have to say it to Brian. He just knows, with every touch, with every look. Besides if I do say it, I know he can handle my sporadic sentimental romanticism, and I can cope with his occasional emotional stoicism. We balance each other. Will I ever get Brian to take a walk down the aisle? No, but I might get him to take a ride in one of those horse drawn carriages in Central Park." Justin shrugged. "You never know!"

"Do you have any idea who Brian Kinney is?"

"I know exactly who he is, too bad after all these years you haven't met him." Justin pointed over his shoulder, signaling for Michael to leave the loft. "I've got things to do."

"Right, Brian said you shouldn't be late for work. Going back to work at the diner?"

Justin shook his head. "As Brian's partner in Kinnetik, I have to be ready for a meeting with Liberty later in the week. The work in L.A. gave me some ideas on how to handle the Liberty campaign artwork. Brian and I have a meeting later this afternoon with our staff to finalize what we might need in the way of materials and upgrades." Justin looked down at his watch. "I really need to get going, I have to meet with my mom first."

Michael shook his head as if to clear his hearing. "You are working at Kinnetik?"

"I'm his partner and that includes Kinnetik, didn't you listen to Brian at all?"
"You bamboozled him into giving you half of his company?" Michael's voice raised an octave as he spoke.

Justin sighed. "No, he just gave it to me. And I gave him half of 'Rage' and all my future earnings and art."

"What?" Michael seemed surprised. "Brian owns 'Rage' now?"

"Trust you to only hear what you want!" Justin shook his head. "Brian told you we were more tangled up legally than most married couples. Since there was no need for a pre-nup, we just agreed to split everything down the middle, including any future profits or losses." Justin looked at his watch. "We will sink or swim together. Just the way we wanted it. I really have to get moving." He started to move away from Michael. "And don't think because Brian owns a part of 'Rage' you can plead with him to overrule me. We agreed – I kept creative control, he gets financial control!"

Justin quickly turned off the lights and tried to wave Michael towards the exit but the other man seemed glued to the floor. "If you decide to do another one of those couple's nights Brian told me about, give us a call and if we are free we'll come. But be forewarned, Brian isn't going to be nice for the sake of being nice so I doubt it would end any better than the last one. You know how he is. But it would be nice if you included him again."

Since Michael wasn't moving Justin walked over to the counter and picked up the phone. "Where the hell is my mother?" Justin looked up at a still stunned Michael. "I can't believe how you ignored him while I was in New York. For that alone, I should crush your picturesque little world."

"Justin... you ..." Michael stuttered and was silent.

Justin ignored Michael and waited for his mother to answer. "Where are you? Oh, I'll be right down." Justin turned off the phone and set it down on its base. "Well, I have to go." He picked up his keys and started for the door. "Come on Michael I have to lock up." Justin gave the loft a once over visually, not sure when he would be back but wanting to make sure everything was okay.
Michael walked to the door in a daze. He slowed by the door, waiting for Justin's perusal of the loft to end. "Brian --- he's changed."

Justin closed the door behind them. "No, he's probably the only one of us that hasn't changed, at least not in the ways that count. He does look at things differently, maybe he's grown up a bit, but he still doesn't believe in bullshit, self pity will always make his dick soft, and I've yet to hear a real and sincere apology out of him, even when he knows he's wrong!"

"You two are really going to try this." Michael looked surprised and for the first time accepting of what he had been told.

"We don't need to try Michael. We are doing it, we've been doing it, what you all saw was just us working out the kinks."

"Just like that, you two are the world's greatest couple."

Justin started down the stairs. "No, but we are working on it."

"You are such an arrogant little shit."

"You know you sounded like Debbie just then."

"You little fuck wad!" Michael exclaimed, appalled by the comparison but suspecting it was true.

Justin laughed in reply. When they reached the bottom of the stairs, Justin looked out the glass door at the curb and saw his mother waiting for him. "Look Michael, I have to go. I know I was pretty blunt with you but sometimes you just don't understand anything else, but let me assure you I meant every word
of it. Brian comes first with me and any interference in our lives will be dealt with directly. I hope you can accept that and deal with it."

"You aren't leaving me much choice, if I am to believe what you have been threatening."

"Believe it Michael." Justin pushed the door open with his hip. "Believe it. We can be friends and partners on Rage. We can both have Brian in our lives. If you can't let go and respect Brian's and my relationship there will be no friendship, no partnership and Brian won't be in your life."

"So it's your way or no way?"

"No, it's Brian's and my way. I think once you accept that, everything will be okay. Once you can deal with your place in Brian's life, everything else will be fine. It's your decision." Justin walked over to the car and opened the door, "Hi Mom."

"Hi Honey." Jennifer leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek as he sat down; seeing Michael she gave him a smile. "Hi Michael"

Michael waved at Jennifer. "Jennifer."

Jennifer leaned over Justin to speak to Michael. "Michael, are you going to see your mom?"

Michael looked briefly at Justin and then nodded. "I'm going there now."

"Please tell her to call me tonight when she has a chance; I'll be home. She left a message but I wasn't able to get her on the phone."

"Okay."
Justin reached for the door. "Take care Michael." He closed the door and Jennifer pulled away, leaving Michael staring after the car.

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Brian heard Justin before he saw him. It was really the sound of shopping bags that alerted him to his lover's approach. He put his coffee cup down and leaned back in the chair, relaxing for the first time since he had left the bed in the loft. He watched as the younger man walked into the office, returning the smile he was given. "So, how much are we in the hole for now?"

Justin waved a bagged suit at him. "Not too much. I got a really nice Dolce suit."

Brian's eyebrows rose. "My, your mother's taste just keeps getting better and better."

"I picked it out."

"Ahuh."

"I have excellent taste." Justin laughed. "With your money."

Brian rubbed his cheek. "Our money."

Justin stopped and looked at him. "Well, I guess I'll have to begin economizing again, especially with your habits."

"You are not going to start clipping those fucking coupons again."
Justin laughed. "No, but I guess we'll need to replace the Mercedes with a nice hybrid, especially if you intend on keeping the old guzzler. What do you get, two miles to the gallon?"

Brian made a face. "You don't want to know."

"The Mercedes is getting better mileage, isn't it?"

Brian sighed in defeat. "Yeah, I'm probably the only person driving a Mercedes whose gas cards have lower charges since I'm not driving the 'vette as much --- and you aren't driving it at all."

"You know Brian, if we decided to live at the house or somewhere else, we really need to consider the 'vette isn't going to be really safe in the heavier snows."

"Leave my Corvette alone."

"Okay." Justin pulled the cover off his suit. "What do you think?"

"You going to model it?"

"Here?"

Brian thought about it, knowing Justin hadn't located his underwear when he was getting dressed and had gone shopping commando. "How did you manage?" Brian asked, pointing to his crotch.

Justin blushed suddenly. "Carefully!" He walked over to Brian holding the suit high. "My mother finally got the clue and stopped trying to check the fit at my waist."
Brian burst out laughing. "I bet the guy trying to measure was having fun too."

Justin gave him a smirk. "I believe he was."

Brian pulled Justin closer, regardless of wrinkling the suit in Justin's hand. "Were you a bad boy?"

"Not as bad as I could have been if my mother wasn't standing next to me."

Brian gave a low laugh and buried his face in the younger man's chest. Enjoying the warmth of the shirt and the scent of his lover, he put an arm around his waist, holding him against him. "I actually missed shopping with you." Brian rested his head against Justin as the younger man's free arm lightly wrapped itself around his neck.

Justin slowly carded his fingers through the silky soft hair at the nape of Brian's neck. "I missed you too."

Brian turned and looked at the suit, then ran his fingers over the material. "Nice, a silk blend. How does it fall over your ass?"

"I was assured by the clerk that you will enjoy the view, although it was nicely hidden by the length of the jacket for my mom."

"And anyone else who might covet it." Brian ran a finger down the narrow lapel. "I like the cut."

"And the color?"

Brian moved his head a bit and caught the slight shimmer of black under the deep blue as the material moved. "Very good choice. Did you get shoes and a shirt?"
"Yes, and a tie too. My mother was like Attila the Mom. She even picked out the fucking socks. And then when my back was turned she dropped a couple pair of boxer briefs on the pile and told me not to leave home again without them! It was so fucking embarrassing."

Brian was trying to hide his laughter by burying his head again in Justin's chest, seeking the warmth of his body.

"It was not funny Brian. I was red faced until we got out of there."

"Can I see the boxers?" Brian laughed harder as Justin pushed him away, disgusted at the lack of sympathy.

"It was your fault."

"My fault?"

"It wouldn't have happened if you hadn't needed some stuff from the loft."

"I wasn't the one running for the bed when we got there!"

As Justin set his suit down and pulled something from a bag, Brian gave a slight shake of his head and looked back down at the work on his desk. He was wondering how to bring up Justin's conversation with Michael when his world suddenly went shadowy for a moment as something dark and soft landed on his head and then skimmed silkily downward against his face. He caught the material as it fell on the desk top. "She bought you these?"

"Like I said, it was awful."
Brian fingered the material; it was a deep blue silk, slightly stretchy but very, very soft. He picked up the phone and hit a button.

"Cynthia? I don't want to be disturbed for a few minutes. No one is allowed in. What? Yes, I'm going to get a show and NO you can't join us." Brian hung up the phone and tossed the boxers back to Justin. "Put this on – slowly."

Justin caught the underwear. "But what about your rules?"

Brian gave him a sideways smile. "I'm not moving and you aren't coming any closer. Now let's see the new outfit...and don't forget to put those boxers on." Brian sat back and enjoyed the fashion show. Justin removed his jeans first and took a very long time in getting his boxers on; in fact, he started with his socks, and shirt, leaving the boxers until the last possible moment.

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The ride to the house that evening was quiet. Justin watched as the miles quickly disappeared; he gave a slight sniff. "Dinner smells so good!"

Brian gave a slight smile thinking about the bags of Thai takeout that were sitting on the floor of the seat behind them. "It'll be good with a cold beer."

"You start the fireplace and I'll get everything ready."

"It's a deal."

No more was said until they pulled up to the house five minutes later. It was after dusk and all the outdoor lights were already lit.
Brian stopped the car and got out, suddenly remembering the other belongings in the back seat. "Justin, you get the food and I'll take your suit and my carryall upstairs."

Justin nodded as he handed his suit to Brian. "I'll get the fireplace going in the kitchen then. Take your time."

"Yeah, I'm going to change too." Brian took the suit and headed for the door; he quickly unlocked it and disappeared inside leaving the door ajar for Justin. Justin locked the Mercedes and followed Brian into the house. He locked the front door and then went to the kitchen to prepare for dinner.

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By the time Brian came back downstairs the kitchen was warm and the fireplace was making the room seem intimate and homey. Justin had set the plates out but was waiting to take the beer out of the refrigerator; the takeout was sitting in the warming drawer that was built into the island. Justin had quickly investigated every nook and cranny of the house and was now well versed in running all the little 'extras' the house had. Brian was pleased with himself as well after mastering the sauna controls and not sweating them to death on their first adventure in the sauna.

Justin turned around to greet Brian and received his sweats in his face. "Uh, thanks!"

"You're welcome – but you know it's warm enough in here that..." Brian shrugged.

The blond smiled and boldly stripped down to just his boxers in front of the fireplace. He tossed the sweat bottoms on his piles of clothing on the floor and just put the tee shirt on that Brian had also brought him.

Brian smiled. "Nice look on you." He patted Justin's bottom on the way to the refrigerator.

Justin laughed and retrieved their dinner from the warmer.
After they finished eating both men cleaned up, but then Brian headed to check his email and Justin grabbed his head phones, his charcoals and a pad. As he walked past Brian, the other man grabbed the headphones.

"You don't need these here, we have walls and doors. Just play something that won't give me a headache with the bass."

Justin laughed. "No club music."

"Make sure it's something I can run to."

Justin nodded and went into the living room. Brian watched as the lights were turned on. He also heard the click he now associated with the gas fireplaces being turned on. He headed for his computer and eventually his treadmill.

Brian was just getting off the treadmill when he heard the music go off. He glanced at the clock and rolled his eyes. It was almost 9:00 p.m. --- on Tuesday. He glanced back at his computer and considered going online or maybe even back to the treadmill, ignoring the inevitable.

"Brian! Come on, it's going to start. I made popcorn. The good stuff for me and the taste free for you."

Brian looked longingly back at the treadmill and then his pc, but he sighed quietly in resignation and walked to the door, turning out the lights as he left.
He walked into the living room and thought of the perfect excuse. "I'm sweaty and I stink. I'm going to go up and shower, then I'll be back."

"No! I have a towel here for you. Besides I like you smelling strong!" Justin smiled and waved at him to hurry. "Come on. I have a couple of bottles of water for you too."

"This race sucks Justin." Brian grabbed the towel in defeat, drying himself the best he could.

"I know but these teams are so bad that it's funny." Justin patted the seat next to him. "Sit."

Brian threw himself down on the couch and was immediately made into a pillow by Justin and his popcorn bowls. "Hmm, you smell good."

Brian rolled his eyes and watched as Justin flipped the channel from MTV to CBS, while his own hand found its way into the wrong popcorn bowl as it always did. He ate a few kernels of butter soaked popcorn before finding his 'taste free' popcorn with no butter or salt or flavor moved into the same space. "No, it's not funny. It's sad. There is no Team Guido, no Cha Chas, no Alex and Lynn or Reichen and Chip. Not even a brother or son. Nobody gay at all. And there are kids in this thing. This is not the 'The Amazing Race,' it's the "Race of the Amazingly Annoying.""

Justin nodded in agreement but then gave Brian a sidelong look. "Interesting you can remember all the gay racers and none of the others. In fact, you make a point of not remembering names, so that makes it even more interesting that you remember the names of these players. Which verifies my belief you always remember the names; you just claim you don't. So there goes your excuse that you aren't really paying attention."

Brian ignored most of his lover's accurate observations. "Some of the breeders stand out... in a bad way... like that creep John and his whining wife, or those two that cheated their way through. They should never have let those two on the show, they had already been on some other shit show. Basically not much to like among the groups, although there were a couple nice teams---but not many. I liked lady lawyer and her cousin who was a little person. They didn't take any crap from some of those jerks. And Gerald and Ken."
"The little person and her cousin? Yes, I liked them too." Justin tapped his lips with a piece of popcorn. "Gerald and Ken? Gerald and Ken?" he muttered. "Oh, the gay guy and his brother. They were great. I liked Joyce and Uchenna too." Justin smirked. "I didn't really dislike anybody else that much. Not as much as you didn't like Team Guido."

"They reminded me of Mikey's new and oh so pretentious friends. They were the first team to arrive last after taking the 'Fast Forward.' The whole point of the 'Fast Forward' is to get there first! They should not be considered poster boys for what the gay community is like. They were stereotypical, a 'Gay as Blazes' type couple, who were rude in their superiority and condescending attitudes. And they wonder why we have an ugly reputation."

"Wow. That's a little harsh. Vic might have been a bit like that."

"Vic would never have! He'd have been too irreverent to be prissy."

"Hmm, who do I know that's prissy?" Justin threw a couple kernels in his mouth to hide his smile.

Brian raised an eyebrow. "If you don't want to end up on the floor with the popcorn bowl on your head you may want to rethink that question."

Justin laughed. "And you claim you never pay attention!" Justin's eyebrows rose. "I never realized you felt so strongly about them."

"They used the term 'guido' and you know that connotation, but then said it was their dog's name."

Justin nodded. "True. They are racing around the world, supposedly these smart world travelers, but they rarely had a nice thing to say about anyone. They were kind of childish when they tried to block people from getting on the train because they didn't have a ticket."
Brian made a noise of disgust. "They looked stupid; if you are going to slow people down, do it with a little flair, don't try to block an entrance and don't be obvious about it. And then to be so over-confident, so full of themselves that they blow the fast forward. They claimed they were smarter than anybody else but the fact they named themselves after their fucking dog, whose name Guido is synonymous with a reference to dumb looking hunks says so much about them. Give me a fucking break. This is the best the producers could come up with?"

"We could do better."

Brian gave his lover a little pinch on the butt. "Careful or I will start drawing comparisons between Susan and Patrick and Justin and Jennifer."

"My mom and I are nothing like those two!" Justin turned up the TV a bit and made sure he ground his shoulder a bit into Brian's chest as payback.

Brian grabbed the remote when Justin set it down to get a handful of popcorn and turned the TV back down a bit. "Too much hyena screeching with the race."

"We should do this." Justin watched as a team read their latest clue.

"Watch the damn show."

As the episode was almost over and they waited for one team to be eliminated Justin shook his head. "We should do this. We would win."

Brian rolled his eyes. "No way. You would balk at the first weird food and the bungee jumping."

"No, I'd do it."
"Right." Brian's tone of voice made his disbelief clear.

"You liked the way Oswald and Danny handled the race. We would be a bit like them. Maybe a bit like Chip and Reichen."

"Oswald? Who?"

"The Cha Chas."

"Oh right. Anyone who can be racing for a million dollars and take the time to shop in Hong Kong, relax, have a nice dinner and then get a hotel to send you on your way in a Mercedes knows how to play the game."

"I liked Lynn and Alex."

"It was like watching Ted and Emmett."

"No, Ted and Emmett aren't butch enough." Justin burst out laughing. "But Chip and Reichen were and they won the million."

Brian remained silent, his hands absently patting Justin as he watched the television screen. The younger man knew the signs. "What?"

Brian gave him a thoughtful look. "We would win. And we'd be a hell of lot smarter about it than those two. They won in spite of themselves, they were a little too... I don't know...too perfect!"

"They were models, or something like that, weren't they? Their announcement that they were gay at the pit stop half way through the race wasn't really a surprise to anyone, but did you see the look on the faces of the bible couple when they announced they were married?"
"Hmmm. That was my reaction too." Brian snuck some of Justin's popcorn.

"Mine." Justin slapped his hand lightly. "So we get to the real reason you didn't like them."

Brian smirked as he swallowed, then nodded toward the TV. "They aren't going to do another race like this one are they?"

Justin frowned, "I hope not. I hate to admit it but it's just not as much fun as the previous races."

Brian squirmed a bit. "Not like I watch them or anything."

Justin snickered, but he sat up and looked at Brian. "You have been patient about it."

"Hmpf. You are just lucky I'm somewhat indulgent of your stranger habits."

Justin laughed. "Good thing the 'Game Show Network' was running them all this summer. It made the summer go faster, and it gave me a reason to talk to you every night."

Brian nodded. "We watched a few spectacular episodes in New York together."

Justin barked out a laugh. "It wasn't the episodes that were spectacular, it was our discussion afterward."

Brian smirked. "That's right; we ran a whole different kind of race."

"Yes, and we had much better pit stops."
Brian rolled his eyes and he pointed at the screen as the last team became apparent. "The breeder is losing the race in his own home town!" Brian reached for the remote. "Turn it off. I'm not going to watch this until they go back to the way it was before."

Justin sighed and turned off the TV. "Bed?"

Brian shrugged, "In a while." But he reached over and turned off the lights. "Got the remote for the CD player?"

Justin handed it to him and Brian squinted to see the writing on the buttons. The only light now was the glow from the fireplace. Brian pressed a couple of buttons and waited until a soft melody started. Justin and he had shifted positions during one of the commercial breaks. They were both lying down, with Brian behind Justin, the smaller man wrapped in his arms.

The two lay watching the flames, talking quietly about whatever happened to wander through their minds. After a half hour Brian decided it was the best time to bring up Michael. "So how was your talk?"

"What talk?" Justin's response was met with silence. He snuggled a little closer to Brian. "Oh." Justin paused for a bit. "Okay. It was okay."

"And?"

"We just cleared the air. There were a few things I needed to straighten out with him, regarding his and my relationship and yours and my relationship --- things that he needed to be more aware of. Michael knows where he stands. I think he'll come around Brian. You mean a lot to him, I just explained how much Gus and I mean to you. You know, he's an only child Brian and he never learned to share."

Brian snorted. "He's not a child anymore."
Justin gave an almost silent chuckle.

"What?"

"What you said --- about him not being a child."

"Oh." Brian blew out a deep breath, ruffling the hair on Justin's head. "He needs to grow up."

"I think he will."

"What did you say?"

"What needed to be said. It'll be fine. Let's just wait and see how he reacts. He should apologize to you but that's probably asking too much. I'm not sure he has had enough time to process everything. Maybe when he does --- maybe if he talks to Ben about it --- he will finally understand what you were telling him."

"Okay." Brian nodded; he did prefer to just leave it and see what Mikey would do next. He would just have to cut his friend off if things didn't change. It would be hard, for both of them, but it was the only solution. He sat and thought about it for a few more minutes, letting the tension drain away, resolving to let Michael make his own choices. And if they weren't the right ones, Brian would have no regrets because he and Justin had both tried to reason with him.

Justin listened as Brian's breathing started to even out. "Bed?"

"Yeah. I'm a little tired."
"You taking your vitamins and extracts?" Justin had added to Brian's already healthy routine supplements with more anti-oxidants and extracts. And Brian had forced a few into Justin's daily regimen as well.

"Yes sir."

Justin stood up and reached down to pull Brian up after him. Looking down at Brian, their hands clasped, Justin suddenly wished everyone could meet the man he was in love with and see that they were happy. He wished they could know the Brian who watched his lover's favorite TV show, or snuck the unhealthy popcorn, or would sit and just hold his lover and discuss anything from the shapes of clouds to the condition of the global economy. Justin wished they knew the real Brian.

Brian took the younger man's hand and let the blond haul him up to his feet. They held hands as Justin led him over to the fireplace. Brian turned off the gas and then double checked the switch. The ceramic logs still glowed enough that they could navigate out of the living room to the hall. Brian led the way up the stairs, now pulling Justin after him.

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~~ Wednesday, October 14, 2005, 4:00 p.m., Kinnetik Agency~~

Brian stood up and stretched. He heard the vertebrae in his back pop and grind and thought about using the sauna at home tonight and then maybe making an appointment with a massage therapist for tomorrow. The length of time he was sitting and working on this Liberty merger combined with the tension with his friends was taking a toll on him. Justin had been dropping hints about increasing his anti-oxidants and looking for methods of stress relief that didn't include sex. In fact, the little shit had disappeared an hour ago to go to the health store and wasn't back yet. He shuddered at what the blond would return with.

The phone rang and Brian reached down, a small moan slipping out as his neck twinged. "What?"
"Boss."

"WHAT?"

"Um, er, Mr. Michael Novotny is here and he would like to set up a meeting with you at your earliest convenience."

"Is he standing directly in front of you?"

"Yes."

"And did he phrase it that way or did you?"

"It was Mr. Novotny's request."

"Is he being polite?"

"Yes."

Brian quirked an eyebrow. "Okay, set up an appointment for next...never mind, send him back, I might as well get this over with now."

"Yes sir."

Brian stood and waited behind his desk for his best friend.
Michael walked in slowly, seeing Brian and then looking around the room. He pushed his hands into his pockets and gave Brian a nodding smile. "Hi."

"Michael."

Michael grimaced a bit at the use of his whole name. "I hope I'm not disturbing you too much, but I --- I need to talk to you."

Brian nodded. "Okay, about what?"

Michael rolled his eyes. "Like you can't figure that out?"

Brian gave him a small smirk, and Michael answered it with a sideways smile.

Michael turned to look at the glass room dividers. "You redecorating?"

Brian shook his head. "Justin's temporary office, his is still being finished."

"Oh...wow."

Brian made a small scowl. "You have a problem with that?"

Michael was silent as he looked at the temporary walls, imagining suddenly what it would be like to have them between him and Brian for the rest of his life. Always seeing what Brian was doing but never being a part of it. He shook his head suddenly, "No. No, Brian. Justin's your partner."
Brian gave a small nod and pointed to the couch that had been temporarily pushed back against the wall. "Have a seat Mikey." He walked around his desk and went over to the couch, missing Michael's sigh of relief.

The two sat on the couch at the same time and then turned to face one another. Brian remained silent and gave Michael a look showing his expectation that the other man would start the conversation.

Michael pointed to Justin's area. "Is he here?"

"No, he's out, buying poison"

"What?" Michael looked first confused and then alarmed by the comment.

"Justin seems to thinks I need MORE supplements to deal with stress."

Michael suddenly laughed.

"What?"

"I think he sought guidance from Ben on it."

"Really?"

Michael nodded. "When I was... well Ben was muttering last night and looking up things in his holistic healing books as he was writing an email. I sort of interrupted him because I needed to talk to him. When he asked about what, I told him I had had a discussion with Justin. Ben just gave me a shake of his head and said something about it explaining a lot. Then he finished his email and sent it."
Brian rubbed his chin absently. "Hmm, I think I better have a discussion with Zen Ben. I am willing to eat healthy, I take care of myself, but I'd rather he curbed Justin's tendency to go to the extreme rather than support it."

Michael had a doubtful look on his face. "I wouldn't count on it; you wouldn't believe what I have had to eat over the last year."

Brian gave a snort of laughter. Neither man said anything for a long time. Brian finally decided to break the growing, uncomfortable silence. "What brings you here Mikey?"

"You --- me."

Brian tilted his head, "And?"

Michael sat back in the couch, no longer looking directly at Brian, and his discomfort was evident in the way he absently pulled on invisible threads on his jeans.

"Mikey?" Brian prompted, after another long pause.

"Huh?" He looked at Brian. "Oh!" Michael had been so lost in thought on how to begin he had lost track of time. "Well...I...After you left the loft yesterday Justin and I had an argument ...well not actually an argument, more of a strong discussion."

"I know."

"You know?"

"He told me."
Michael looked down and gave a slight nod. "Yeah, I thought he might."

"And?" Brian repeated his earlier prompt.

"Um...it gave me a lot to think about."

"And did you --- think about it?"

"Yes, for hours. Then I talked to Ben about it." Michael gave a soft snort. "For hours."

"Did it help to talk to Ben?"

"Yeah. Ben...he's terrific, you know?"

"A huh." Brian glanced at his watch and then back at Michael. "So?"

Michael frowned and looked about to say something about Brian looking at his watch but then just took a deep breath and paused before saying anything. "I owe you an apology."

"You do?"

Michael nodded.

"For what?"
Michael shrugged. "Everything?"

Brian laughed. "I don't think so Mikey. I'm sure I'm to blame for a lot of shit that happened between us."

"You're telling me!" Michael agreed but then grimaced. "I didn't mean... I..."

"I know Mikey. I know." Brian tapped the back of the couch with his hand. "So what is the apology about?"

"You were right. On the phone that night. I wanted you to be who I wanted you to be. I didn't approve of you and Justin either. And instead of wanting the best for you, instead of wanting you to have what you wanted, I preferred to define you the way I wanted you to be and refused to accept it when you changed. I didn't see your commitment to Justin as real or important." Michael nodded as he finished. Almost as if he was pleased with having recited a soliloquy.

"Wow Mikey, that's a lot of introspection."

"Well, I had a lot of time, and not much sleep, last night."

"Hmm, all in one night. I'm impressed." He gave Michael a sly smile but his eyes were relaxed and laughing.

Michael looked at him and saw his friend, the man he could say anything too. A man he hadn't seen in a long time. "Asshole."

Brian's smile disappeared and he looked quickly at his friend. "Michael. Maybe ...maybe this is too soon to really talk this over."

Michael gave a frown and a nod, but then shook his head. "No, I have to at least get this started."
Brian sighed, "Okay."

Michael screwed up his lips and twisted them to the side. Brian's eyes narrowed at the look, making him wonder if Michael was really ready to make peace.

Michael seemed to take a moment and then his features relaxed. "Ben and I, like I said, we talked a long time. I had no idea --- well, I knew he loved me, but I never realized how much pain I had caused him when it came to you."

"Me?" Brian asked in disbelief. "Wait a minute Mikey, I have never come between you two, if anything I have supported both of you, I seem to remember actually being at your wedding."

Michael shook his head. "No. No. That came out wrong Brian. It's not you, it's me!"

"You? You love him. What's the problem?"

Michael rubbed the back of his neck. "Because...even though I chose Ben, and did put him first, or thought I did, I was still trying to be more to you than a best friend."

Brian shook his head. "No, not in a long time Mikey."

"But I didn't really let go. And Justin, yeah we appeared to make peace, but I never really supported your choice and I did --- unconsciously --- try to undermine you two."

Brian looked at Michael. "So?"
"So?" Michael asked bewildered.

"Michael I knew that for a long time, to some degree, but it had come to a point where I couldn't ignore it."

"That's what the phone call was about, wasn't it? You telling me, finally, that it had to change."

Brian tipped his head and looked thoughtful for a moment. "I was unhappy Michael, for lots of reasons, but when I tried to work it out it seemed I didn't have what I wanted for no reason other than my friends thought I should be living my life the way I always had. I felt I had lost Justin, or wasn't strong enough to hold on to him."

"You? Not strong enough?"

"I should have seen through all the bullshit and didn't. Letting him go --- or letting him go without me --- was stupid. He is who I want, being with him is what I want. Nothing has ever stopped me before from going where I want or doing what I want. I let everyone else tell me who I should be. I let myself be who I used to be." Brian smiled a bit. "I'm not exactly the same person I was five years ago. None of us are. I think I had to accept I have grown a bit and everyone else had to as well."

"You're wrong you know."

"About what?"

"About nothing ever stopping you from going where you want or doing what you want."

Brian smiled suddenly. "Justin?"

Michael laughed suddenly. "I realized it as I talked to Ben. I think I could finally see what I was fighting."
"What?"

"The way he could move you. Get more emotionally from you in two weeks than I could in fourteen years. I guess a part of me wasn't willing to believe you could choose anyone over me. Even when Gus was coming I was sure you would put me first."

"The man I was then probably would have."

"But then Justin came to Liberty Avenue, and he's had you dancing since that first night. You know?" Michael took a hurried breath, needing to say everything he had come to say as quickly a possible, hoping it would hurt less that way. "He made you break all your rules: no repeats, never going after someone, no caring, no regrets, minimum input, maximum return. He even had you make rules just for him – no kissing tricks! He had you all the way from the beginning and I couldn't accept that." He shook his head at the memories. "All the way to New York to get a credit card you could just have cancelled over the phone. You went to his prom. You let him move in – three times. The therapy...the support. It wasn't guilt Brian. That's what I thought it was but it was love all the time. I didn't see it. Not even when you hit me could I admit Justin meant more to you than me. It was unthinkable. And then when he went to New York, you got into the same funk you always did when you two were separated, but this time the distance made it seem more permanent, there was no return ticket provided by a studio. To me he left you, and he left a man who didn't know who he was anymore. I thought if you became the Brian I knew again you'd be happy, and I would still have you. Before Justin you were so solid; even in your arrogance there was strength. Having you get back to being that man would bring back both the arrogance and the strength."

"Why does that word sound a little like Ben?" Brian interrupted him, a small smile on his face. Michael gave him a slight smile in return, the subject changing a bit as his thoughts wandered. "Do you know that Ben loves me, even when I'm at my worst?"

Brian nodded. "Must be true love."
Michael nodded. "I know, and what I learned last night was that sometimes he doesn't like me."

"What?" Brian was surprised by Michael's revelation.

"Like when I was so nasty to Ma, or wouldn't speak to you, or when I protected you without thinking about how it affected him. When I was less than... a... less than kind about Justin. Ben said I claimed it was always about you, what I could or needed to do for you, but it was really about me. What I needed, what I wanted, and that sometimes I hurt people because I was childish."

"Ouch."

Michael nodded. "It took us all night, talking it out, but I think I understand it better. I owe him Brian, more than just my love. I owe him my loyalty. He has put up with a lot of shit and with the exception of the steroids has never made me worry or doubt him --- well accept for that groupie creep. And even then — I was so caught up in myself I didn't notice Ben was struggling with so much. I am selfish. I needed you to be who I wanted you to be. I'm sorry. I love you and I hope we can get past this."

"What about Justin?"

Michael rolled his eyes. "I think he can take care of himself. To tell you the truth, I'd rather get on your bad side than his." Michael leaned forward and spoke softly, as if he was afraid Justin would hear. "I think Rage's next storyline is going to reveal a little more of JT's rather wicked personality."

Brian sat back and laughed. "Well, I guess Zephyr will learn when to duck. Rage's partner and his sidekick are very important to him but as long as Zephyr knows where the lines are there won't be a problem."

Michael nodded. "Justin had always respected my relationship with Ben."

Brian wrinkled his brow, "Of course, why wouldn't he?"
Michael shrugged. "Ben admires Justin a great deal, respects him, not just his talent or intelligence. If Justin wasn't so obsessed with you I'd feel threatened in a whole other way."

Brian raised an eyebrow, "Something we should worry about?"

Michael laughed. "No. Trust me, I made Ben explain his feelings to me --- I was a bit agitated when he talked about Justin."

"I bet."

"Ben said that Justin stands out as someone who is strong enough to lead the battle until victory, but fragile enough to be destroyed by the pain of the aftermath at the end."

Brian frowned at the comment. "He won't ever be fighting alone Michael, I won't let that happen."

"Ben said he was worried that if Justin and you didn't work out that Justin would never really love again. That it seems to have been all about you for the last five years, your growth and that we -- I -- was hindering it more than helping."

Brian nodded, a serious look on his face, but then shook his head. "Ben is right about some things but not that. Everyone can believe it's been all about me but it's really been all about Justin for five years Michael."

Michael shook his head. "How do you figure that? You are the one who has changed, has grown."

"Everyone has Michael. All of us. But would we have without the introduction of Justin into our little group? He may have just seemed like a teen, growing into manhood amongst us, but he's been very involved in our lives, touched them, influenced them. We would have all gone on the same way without
him – maybe for years, too many years. How many changes or events wouldn't have happened if Justin hadn't been under the street light on Liberty that night? He changed some of our actions, tempered opinions, interfered in fights, he made us think. He made us do. Made me do. He made us change Mikey."

Michael nodded. "Maybe that's what Ben meant."

"About what?"

"Last night, when he was trying to get me to understand that Justin was a ...what did he call him? Oh yeah, a catalyst. Justin's path intersected with ours; actually Ben thinks we were all thrust in his path." Michael shrugged and made a face that made it clear he didn't understand what Ben had been talking about. "He said something about how even we met indirectly because of 'Rage' and that whether I admitted it or not, Justin had to be present in my life for that to happen, that Justin had provided us the course to what he hoped was a love that would last a lifetime. No Justin and I wouldn't have been on the path to him. Ben believes Justin brought us all to a point where self-realization could not be ignored."

"Ben was going deep again." Brian looked at the ceiling. "Really deep!"

Michael laughed. "Please, at least I understood some of what he was trying to get me to accept this time." Michael turned to Brian, "And you want it to be all about Justin even now, don't you?"

"No, I want it to be all about the both of us. Shit, Justin knew how much I had changed but neither he nor I knew what to do next. We knew what we should do, or what everyone else would do. I think our decisions were based on everyone else's views. That's why he ended up in New York and me in Pittsburgh. But we aren't like anyone else; I just had to remember that, and then remind him of it."

Michael let out a chortle of amusement. "No, you two definitely aren't like anything I've ever seen."
Brian sucked his lips in and raised his eyebrows. "I gathered from Justin's edited version of yesterday's conversation that you finally met my little bulldog up close and personal."

Michael nodded. "He made it clear to me exactly where I stood, or wouldn't stand, in your life, if I couldn't accept you and him."

"And?"

"I'd like to say I agreed and said I would be a wonderful friend to you both. Instead I was pissed and disappointed. I felt lost." Michael sat back and let his head drop on to the back of the couch, as he stared at the ceiling. "I went home, depressed, then totally pissed off, then depressed again. Ben knew something was wrong. I hadn't even talked to Hunter, just ignored them both through dinner and then the rest of the evening. Hunter went to bed early and Ben was just silent; he let me suffer until it was late in the evening. His silence actually drove me to ask for his help."

"That's when you asked to talk and learned all this?"

Michael shook his head. "No. Ben closed his email, sat down beside me and then asked if I was finally going to ask to discuss whatever was bothering me. Apparently that's what my silence was --- a request for help."

"Oh, must be fun to live in your house." Brian gave him a look of distaste.

Michael gave a snort of sarcastic agreement. "Tell me about it." Michael shook his head at the memory. "So I let it all out." Michael rubbed a hand over his eyes and then looked at Brian. "And you know what my loving husband said?"

Brian shook his head.

"He said it was about time Justin stopped pulling punches."
Brian smirked, "Well, who would have thought Ben – and the Zen master of peace -- would pat Justin on the back for throwing a punch, even a literal one."

"Yeah." Michael frowned. "Then he let me have a one two punch of his own. He, in his quiet way, explained how he felt about my obsession with keeping you just the way you were and what he thought it meant. He also said he understood we loved each other and had a lot of history that bound us together but where you had let me go, I hadn't let you go."

Brian shrugged. "I wanted you to be happy."

"I want the same for you. Ben sort of helped me start to work through it. I told him everything Justin had said – and about what I said at the party. He said you let me off lightly. I sort of grumbled about you hitting me and he turned the comment around, using him and his HIV positive status as a parallel. What if you had said something similar to me about when he was in the hospital? You didn't, you supported me." Michael sighed and looked off at Justin's screened, office area. "I never apologized to you for that comment, nor did I let everyone know how justified that punch was."

"I shouldn't have hit you."

"If Ma had heard I would have been hurting a lot more." Michael flushed. "I can't believe Justin even talks to me knowing what I said. I think his mother will mow me down the first chance she gets if she finds out."

"It was an ugly remark Michael. No matter how you felt, you have never been as purposely cruel to anyone – not even me – as you have been to Justin."

"Jealousy does that."

"So, no more jealousy?"
Michael shook his head. "I can't be jealous of you and Justin. I have Ben, and what we have is just as solid and good. You are my friend, my best friend. But Ben and Justin are our partners. I'll listen to you rant and you'll listen to me rant and then we'll send each other back to who we are meant to be with."

Brian reached out, grabbed Michael behind his neck, and pulled the slighter man towards him. He rested his forehead against Michael’s. "So Mikey, best friends again?"

Michael smiled and knocked their heads together lightly. "Yeah, best friends forever."

Brian smiled and gave Michael a brief kiss on the lips. Michael returned the light kiss. After a moment they pulled apart and sat back on the couch.

Brian looked sideways at Michael and saw a slight frown. "What?"

"Something Ben said."

"About?"

"Old habits."

Brian nodded suddenly, understanding. "I know this has been tough on you Michael. I don't expect things to go back to the way they were, well actually they can't, can they?"

"No, I guess they can't," Michael agreed glumly.

"So best friends will have to be redefined."
Michael nodded.

Brian watched the dark-eyed man closely. "You aren't sure you can do this, are you Mikey?"

Michael looked up wide-eyed and shook his head in a negative manner but didn't dispute the words.

Brian gave him a pat on the back but had a sad look on his face. "We'll try Mikey. We can do it at your pace. You call when you think you are ready to try."

"But..." Michael held out his hands in front of him, in an open, almost pleading way.

Brian got up and started to walk away but then turned to look down at his childhood friend. "It's okay Mikey. Talk to Ben some more. You can't change every feeling you have in twenty four hours." Brian laughed, suddenly thinking of the night he met Justin --- the same night Gus was born, "Well, some of us can't and others...well." Brian gave a shrug. "We can."

Michael stood up, suddenly overwhelmed by emotion from all they had talked about. "Brian?"

"Yeah Mikey?"

"I'll get there."

"I know you will."

Michael turned and quickly left the office.
Brian looked at the empty doorway his best friend had disappeared through. "Some day Mikey." He sat back down at his desk and went back to work, not stopping until Justin returned with a bag of large bottles which contained pills even larger than the horse pills he was already taking. Brian made a mental note to get even with Ben.

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~~ Thursday, October 15, 2005, 10:00 a.m., Kinnetik Agency~~

Justin scowled at the glass wall separating him and Brian. His role in the art work was done for a while, at least until the agency's artists had reworked everything. Brian had asked for the preliminary work for review by next Thursday since he and Justin would be in New York over the weekend and possibly through Tuesday depending on the discussions at Friday's meeting with the Liberty executives. The storyboard work was all being done by the staff so Justin had very little to do until they came up with the copy for him to consult with them on. Plus it was just the initial ideas, so they wouldn't be detailed until after they had more interaction with Liberty. As Brian pointed out, this was just the starting point for the campaign; it could be weeks before they had a single concept to build the campaign around. He was bored. Very bored. And Brian knew it too. Justin was accustomed to working on projects independently, at his own pace, with little or no consultation from others. They both knew he would adjust to working with a team, especially since he did so well leading the agency's artists, but Justin was someone who was used to being the only artist on a project, like 'Rage', or the sole boss, like with the anti-Stockwell campaign. Justin had never realized he might be more of a control freak than Brian. When he pointed it out to Brian, the other man had just laughed, claiming he knew it all along, and then added he could be impatient with others and also a bit hyper active intellectually. Justin tried to deny it but Brian said he knew Jennifer would back him up on it, and she would know better than anyone.

So, now he was bored and feeling confined. Not a feeling Justin liked; he felt an anxiousness growing, the walls seeming to imprison him. If he could find something to do he knew he would be alright but Brian didn't have the time to bring him in on other campaigns right now; in fact, they hadn't decided how involved he would be on a daily basis, especially with the work on the next issue of 'Rage' set to start in two weeks and his creative block gone for drawing and painting. Justin stopped himself from letting out a strong sigh. Brian had already commented on the sighs and told him to go home several times yesterday afternoon and this morning.
Justin thought he could go through all the files that were for his and Brian's eyes only again but he had already done it twice. Ted was due in later so maybe he could go over some of the financial data but then again Brian was waiting for Ted to go over the growing paperwork involved in the Liberty merger. Justin picked up his pencil and tried sketching; he had been drawing a while when he stopped and looked off abstractly as he thought about his project. He suddenly scowled; all he could see was rippled glass and distorted images beyond. He really couldn't draw in this space, at least not now. When it had been opened and better lit he didn't have a problem. He had never had a problem drawing in small rooms before. He was beginning to wonder if it was a claustrophobic reaction; he felt boxed in. He had mentioned it to Brian on the way home the night before and Brian told him he should stay home for a couple days. His new office would be much larger, with an open plan and natural light, but it wouldn't be ready for a while. Justin knew his constant activity was starting to annoy Brian. He was having a difficult time staying in his enclosure for more than a half hour without needing to call someone or come out from behind it. In fact he knew he was annoying the shit out of Brian. He looked down at the paper and tried to get lost in his drawing again.

Justin set down the artwork on the drafting desk Brian had moved to the screened area he had created in his office for Justin. "Out of sight, out of mind," Brian had proclaimed. At first Justin had thought it would be an unwelcome distraction for him since he could hear everything going on in Brian's office but now those distractions were a good thing. Plus he wasn't the only one bothering Brian. He remembered yesterday's phone call from Ted. He was actually glad to be behind the screen or he might have been scorched by Brian's temper. Ted had been nagging Brian to be allowed to come home. Brian had told him to come home on Tuesday. Wednesday afternoon Ted still hadn't shown up for work. He finally called and said he was taking the day off. He was still in New York. Brian berated him but Ted claimed he had dropped everything to do Brian's bidding last week and over the weekend and now he was taking Blake to dinner and a play. He didn't have an answer when Brian asked how many other dinners and plays they had seen in the last week. Ted hung up after a very serious warning from Brian. It was almost ten and Ted was still not in. Justin wanted to be out of the building when the man finally showed up.

He picked up the pad again; the image wasn't what he wanted. It showed the anxiety and gloom he felt behind the screen. He closed the pad and sat his pencil down on the cover. That was it, he was giving up. He was going to ask to be taken back to the house in the middle of nowhere. But at least there was sunshine and quiet there. He could eat all he wanted, when he wanted. He could play his music as loud as he wanted, drink coffee, burp and talk all he wanted --- even if it was to himself. The only plus for staying here would be being able to watch Brian as he worked and fucking, and since Brian had the screens put up he couldn't watch Brian work, and Brian had already said no fucking unless the agency was empty and locked.
Justin dropped onto the stool in front of the worktable and rested his head on his hands. No, he was going to tell Brian he wanted to go home. Enough of the glass prison he had been relegated to. He was sure Brian had done it on purpose just so he would ask to go back to the house. Brian hadn’t wanted him in the office all day but Justin had insisted. Sometimes he really was annoyed when Brian was right. There was cable and space at home. He picked up the phone on his desk and pressed a button. He listened to the phone on the desk fifteen feet away from him ring.

"WHAT?"

"I surrender."

"I’ll drive you back to the house as soon as I finish this report. AND DON’T CALL ME AGAIN!" Brian put the phone back in the cradle trying to hide his look of triumph. It was the fifth time the little twat had called him since they came in, and he was only across the room behind a screen. He knew there wasn’t enough to keep Justin busy yet but the younger man wouldn’t stay home.

Brian heard a tap on the wall and looked up to see Ted walk quickly into the room. "You here to grovel for your job?"

"Don’t start. I’m sorry. I just saw my desk."

"When I pay for your time I expect you to be here. Did they do a nip and tuck on your brain as well?"

Ted frowned even deeper.

"Watch it, you’ll get wrinkles," Brian taunted him with a smirk and a lift of his eyebrow. "You don’t really believe all those insipid platitudes about your makeover do you?"

"What do you mean by that?"
Brian shook his head. "You'll never figure it out Ted and I'm not buying you the clue."

Ted drew himself up taller. "I don't have to make excuses. I had the right to comp time for being in New York for a week and I took it!"

"That is bullshit Ted and you know it. You aren't more important than any other employee here. I don't see your name on the door or signature on the checks; in fact they say Brian A. Kinney. You know the rules. I SAY when you take comp time."

Ted's lips tightened into a disfigured line but he nodded in capitulation. "I'm...I'm sorry."

"Sorry is bullshit too Theodore."

Ted sighed. "It's just that...we got these tickets," Ted paused, realizing he had just made it worse. "I mean...oh I don't know what I mean."

Brian shook his head in disbelief. "You thought two tickets to some Broadway show were more important than your job? What the fuck is wrong with you? Do you have any idea how important this job is to this agency and every worker here? If it works out, you two, you and your fellow co-dependent, recovering meth partner, will be in the city all the time. But do you think about that, of the future? No, you are still thinking of only the next fix whether it be drugs or whatever else you need. You risked it all for what? Back row seats to some ripped off Oz tale?"

Ted cringed. "How did you know?"

Brian leaned forward. "I know everything Ted, now get your ass back to your desk, and don't even think about being out from behind it until I tell you to. Don't be more than a call away from me until this job gets done or your ass is on the street, and your health benefits for your and Blake's therapy a long distant memory. You forget Ted, I can replace you."
"Brian --- I'm sorry. I just got caught up in..."

"OUT!"

Justin grimaced as he listened to the whole exchange. Brian had been right about Ted being irresponsible. He was needed yesterday and he didn't call until hours after he was due. Justin was surprised Brian didn't do worse, like firing him.

Brian called to him from his desk. "You hear all that?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"Thank you for not firing him."

"Did you think I would?"

Justin smiled suddenly. "No, not really."

"That was a minor screw up for him." Brian suddenly slammed his hand down on his desk. "He can't do this stuff. I can't treat him differently than the rest of the staff, it wouldn't be fair. He needs to realize that. I do need him here, because I know he'll get it done, I can trust him but then he does something so stupid and irresponsible. I've been able to leave things in his hands before, he's very good at it but he's too fatalistic and has no confidence. He thinks confidence comes from the stupid cosmetic surgery. He doesn't even realize he doesn't look any different. How fucked up is that? I can't keep babysitting him, he either has to realize his value or he'll continue to fail. If I continue to let him off the hook the rest of the staff will balk. They know he's a friend and he doesn't understand that that makes it even more
important that he is seen as equal to everyone else. He has to be above reproach and be willing to do more and be here longer than anyone else."

Justin tried to focus on Brian's figure through the warped glass. "That's what you expect of yourself --- to be here longer, to do more, to sacrifice to get it done."

"Of course, it's my agency – our agency."

Justin stood up and walked over to the edge of the screen so he could visually connect with Brian. "And me? If it's ours, shouldn't I be willing to do that too?"

Brian smiled at his partner. "You would never do that, you understand the demands of leadership and responsibility, of commitment, more than anyone else I know."

"Then maybe I should stay."

"Not a chance in hell Sunshine." Brian smiled over at his partner and made a motion for him to go back behind his screen. "Let me finish this and then check on Ted. We'll have lunch and I'll take you home."

"Do you think he knew I was here?"

Brian shook his head, the movement accompanied by a snorting laugh.

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Justin sat back down. He thought about their conversation and Brian's and Ted's conversation. He took out a pad and started to make a few notes. As partner in the agency he needed to have a chat with Ted.
Brian's method of trying to get Ted to recognize his own talents and gain self worth and confidence wasn't working, so Justin thought he might try a different approach, like talking to Ted in a more direct manner. Ted didn't seem to understand that Brian did have faith in him and as a result demanded more of him than others and remind him why Brian could not show favoritism. Maybe they should look into some employee development programs.

Justin made a few more notations and then began to search the web for a few sites on human resources and employee assistance programs. His head jerked up when he heard an angry Brian ask a question, realizing very quickly it wasn't aimed at him.

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"What are you doing here? How did you get in?" Brian looked at the person standing in front of him.

Lindsay recognized the annoyed look on Brian's face immediately. "Well, what choice did I have Brian, you won't take my calls."

"I took your call the other day. I thought I made myself pretty clear."

Lindsay placed her coat on the back of her chair. She had dressed in her best outfit for this meeting. She had her dark brown suede miniskirt on with the marching boots that almost made her as tall as Brian. She wore a cream colored cashmere turtleneck, accented by a topaz necklace and earrings. She felt confident as she settled in the chair and gave Brian a bright smile. "I'm here to talk about our son."

Brian set down his pen and leaned back in the chair. "Is he here?"

"No."
Brian sat back up, grabbed his pen, and went back to reading the report, ignoring his visitor totally.

"Why was I refused entry when I tried to get in this morning?" Lindsay waited for an explanation but only received silence. After two minutes she frowned as she realized she had been totally dismissed. "Brian, we need to talk about this."

Brian kept reading, ignoring Lindsay. He suddenly dropped the pen, picked up the phone and punched a number. "I have an uninvited guest; please find out how she got around security."

Lindsay's frowned deepened. "There is no need to do that. I called Ted and he met me outside and walked me in by the back door, I avoided the front desk that way."

"Never mind. It was Ted. Go tell him about the new security measures and the person he brought in was on the 'not allowed in' list. Then tell him I'll be hunting him down shortly," Brian said into the phone, replacing it on the hook. "Congratulations, you may have just gotten Ted fired."

Lindsay's jaw dropped in surprise. Before she could say anything Brian's phone rang. He looked at the ID and rolled his eyes.

"What?"

Justin whispered into the speaker. "Don't blame Ted; he wouldn't have known you aren't talking to Lindsay. He might have known about Michael but probably not Lindsay."

Brian ran his hand over his face and then sent a glare towards the screened off area of his office. "Fine. Anything else?"

"Can I leave? This is going to get personal."
"NO!" Brian hung up the phone. He looked at Lindsay. "Well you're here, what do you want?"

"Please don't blame Ted. I told him I wanted to surprise you. I never mentioned to him that you were angry at me."

"I'm not angry so much as disappointed Lindsay."

"No, you are angry."

"See, there you go, telling me how I feel. It's the same old, 'Brian has to be angry because that's what I think.' Guess what Lindsay, I got over being angry days ago. I'm disappointed. Disappointed that you could care so little for my feelings."

"Your feelings? What about me? What about your son?"

"Oh, so he is my son? I was beginning to wonder. Are you sure? I know Mikey is JR's father but I wasn't too sure about me."

"You agreed to my taking Gus to Toronto."

"And would it have stopped you if I didn't?"

"You are his father."

"Don't pull the lip service shit with me, I know better. I don't have rights to my son do I? Mel could care less if I objected. You needed Michael's permission, not mine. It seems Michael has rights to his daughter, that would have stopped you two, but it never occurred to you that I would have objected and when I did--- I got the old soft talk, batting of the eyes, smile, and the old, 'Brian you know this is the right thing' speech. Interesting how that works too. Tell me, does Michael support JR? Is he expected to?
Does he get visitation? I told you I'm not angry, I'm disappointed. Disappointed that you, of all of them, think less of me than you do Michael, but at the same time, expect more from me than you do Michael."

"Brian, that's not true. Mel was just concerned about her rights because of how you feel about each..."

"Save it Linz, it's old news." Brian stretched his shoulders and rubbed the back of his neck. "Why are you here?"

"I needed to talk to you."

"How much Lindsay?"

"I'm not here for that." Lindsay saw the look of disgust on Brian's face and looked down at her hands that were clasped in her lap, knowing he didn't believe her. "It's not going well Brian."

He let out a long deep breath of regret, disgusted with himself for not being able to stop himself from asking. "What's wrong?"

Lindsay shrugged, trying to hold back the hot tears she was fighting. "Everything."

"I take it the streets weren't lined with gold."

Lindsay shook her head. "I'm working in a private gallery but I don't make anywhere near what I earned here in Pittsburgh. A large number of the cultural centers are run by the government in Canada. They have invested in their arts, unlike here where it is funded more by private or philanthropic donations."

"So?"
"It's hard getting a job in many of the galleries. I told you we were having some difficulty with work visas too."

"How much are you earning?"

"Enough to keep a roof over our heads. I manage the rent for the apartment and groceries."

"And Mel?"

Lindsay frowned and looked over Brian's shoulder, intentionally not meeting his eyes. "It isn't a good situation for her."

Brian raised his eyebrows in question. "Not good?"

Lindsay nodded, squirming a bit in her seat. "She can't practice law in Canada; her degrees are not accepted there. There is no reciprocity with American law degrees. She can do a little clerking but in order to practice law in Canada she will need to take a number of courses and then pass their bar. It may take a couple years before she can practice and in the mean time she will need to go to class full time, study, maybe get a part time job."

"And you didn't know this before you left? I mean, Melanie didn't check all this out?"

Lindsay looked at him, throwing her hands up as a sign of not knowing the answer.

"Linz, you are intelligent women, I thought you had this all worked out."

"We did, but there were factors we didn't take into account, rules and regulations we didn't know about until we got there."
"In other words you two jumped off without looking."

"Brian, we were desperate to feel safe, to start over. I agreed that leaving and going somewhere our children would be safe and our marriage recognized was the right move."

"Damn me, damn Michael."

"Brian, this wasn't about you."

"Feels that way now." Brian tapped his pen into the silence in the room. "So it's no utopia?"

Lindsay smoothed her skirt before answering. "If Mel could practice we would have no problems."

"Bullshit."

Lindsay made a face at him. "We are dealing with lots of things Brian, but we know we want to be together."

"So other than being broke, Mel having no real job, and having problems getting the visas it's been everything you wanted. You have your family, new friends, a new community where you are accepted, and you feel safer there?"

"More or less. It's hard. We miss everyone. It's still so new. We joined a couple groups and are trying to become part of the neighborhood." She gave a small sad smile. "But it's not home."

"I thought a lot of people from here were going to move there, you'd have your own little enclave of expatriates."
Lindsay shook her head. "We haven't run into anyone. I drove... never mind."

Brian looked at her closely. "Mel's not working?"

Lindsay's mouth twisted in consternation. "Well, like I said, she is doing a little clerking and starting the application process for classes. She has to wait for the next term to start. It will take her two years."

Brian thought about what Lindsay had said. "Lindsay, who's going to be watching my son during these two years?"

"We are looking into a couple of good daycare programs."

"But they cost money?"

Lindsay nodded.

"And Mel's courses will be expensive?"

Lindsay sucked her lips into her mouth, nodding again rather than answering Brian, again avoiding making direct eye contact.

Brian set down his pencil and picked up a rubber ball he kept on his desk to play with as he thought things over. He sat back and manipulated the ball through his fingers for a few moments before starting to verbalize the questions that he was formulating. "What did you do with the profits from the house?"

Lindsay took a deep breath, preparing herself for what she was worried would be the end of their conversation, if not their friendship. "There wasn't all that much Brian. We had only paid five years on
our thirty year mortgage. Although the house had gone up in value and we did have more equity, we did price it low to sell quickly."

"In other words, there wasn't as much profit as there should have been and now there isn't a lot left."

Lindsay shook her head. "We had to pay our security and first month's rent. The utilities needed deposits. There were a lot of expenses in getting the apartment, replacing some furniture; what we do have left we are banking to help with JR's care."

Brian bit his tongue at that comment knowing he was expected to pay for Gus's. He went ahead with his next question. "Savings?"

"I think I mentioned before that it was sort of depleted during our separation."

"Mel sold her share of the practice?"

Lindsay shook her head no.

"Why not?"

"It's a small practice. They have replaced her, and I guess the new lawyer has the option of buying her out, but it will take about a year. He needs to prove himself to the firm and then will get the option. Right now we do get a very small check from them when profit sharing is done on the quarter but since Mel isn't contributing it's very small."

"What about her retirement or trust or whatever it is? She was going to break into it before."

Lindsay shook her head again. "The money from her dad? When we decided not to use it..."
"Because you broke up," Brian interjected. "Which time was that? Oh, that's right, it was the time I gave you a few thousand to tide you over."

Lindsay made a face at him. "Ted invested the funds into a different type of investment account; if we were to withdraw from it now we would take a penalty. Since it's our only retirement at this point, we can't touch it, especially because Mel wants part of it for JR's college..." Lindsay stopped talking mid word, a look of pain on her face.

"So you'll starve your kids instead? Or at least threaten to starve my kid? I know what you were going to say, Mel wants that money for JR's college." Brian had a disgusted look on his face. "What about your parents? Gus's grandparents?"

Lindsay shook her head vehemently. "No way."

"So if your old 'Bank of Brian' doesn't come through that leaves?" Brian asked with a questioning look on his face, and both hands held out and turned palms up.

Lindsay pulled out some papers from her purse. "I need you to sign these." She set them on his desk and then leaned back into her chair.

Brian looked at the papers with a growing suspicion. He opened the papers and quickly looked them over. "The answer is no. Now go back and tell that bitch you are married to to go fuck herself."

"Brian, this is not Mel's idea. It's mine. If you won't help then this is the only solution to make sure JR and Gus have heat and food."

"I'm mistaken." Brian tossed the papers back at Lindsay. "You are the bitch. And this isn't about food and heat; it's about your comfort and sending Mel to college for remedial law."
"I need your help. It's either borrow money from you or take it from Gus's college account."

"An account you put absolutely nothing in. So I pay one way or the other, is that it? I support a woman who hates me, a child I have no rights to and a kid no one else supports, is that it?" Brian stood up and started to pace. "And exactly what do I get out of this Lindsay?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do I get rights to my son? Do you bring him home?"

Lindsay shook her head. "I can't do that Brian."

"Do you know Lindsay that never once have I ever touched this money? When I was fired from Vanguard and they were hauling my furniture out of the house I never once considered touching this money. Mel would have scorched my ass if I tried. I could be starving and homeless, but as long as I kept putting money away for Gus’s education and kept my life insurance policy for Gus Mel didn't give me a thought. I had nothing and no hopes and I wouldn't touch Gus's future. When I had cancer, and was worried about medical bills for the future, I made sure that trust and insurance policy were solid, couldn't be touched by bill collectors. But what about you two, huh? Melanie and Lindsay run away from home and at the first sign of trouble the only solution is to cash in Gus's trust, like it was your money, your entitlement. Well, it's not. No fucking way Lindsay. No fucking way. Tell Mel to get off her ass and get a job. That money is money I set aside for Gus and the rest of you aren't getting it!

"It's not like that Brian! It's not!" Lindsay looked at him and knew he wasn't listening, grasping that the disappointment Brian had felt had grown exponentially in the last few minutes, and where before there had been no anger there was now fury. She looked back down and watched as tears started to fall on her clenched hands; she hadn't even realized she had started to cry.

"Get out of here Lindsay." Brian's own fists were clenched as he stared at the woman sitting in the chair. He felt a sudden warmth at his back, and a calming hand began to move in circles at the small of his back. He looked to his right, angry hazel eyes meeting worried blue. His partner was here to help him; his lover took one of his hands in his and gave it a squeeze.
"Lindsay."

Lindsay had snapped up at the voice calling her name. "Justin?"

"Why don't you go? Where are you staying?"

"At Deb's."

"Debbie's?" Brian whispered, as if he had been betrayed.

Lindsay nodded. "No one knew I was coming. I took a bus last night and got here this morning. You didn't answer at the loft and I couldn't get in here earlier. I stopped in the diner for breakfast. Deb was there, and when she saw my overnight bag I explained I was just here overnight. She insisted I stay there instead of a hotel. I'm glad because I really don't have the money for one. Deb even loaned me her car so I wouldn't have to keep taking a taxi."

"Where's Gus?"

"At home with Mel. She doesn't know I'm here either. She thinks I'm on a trip to Quebec with one of the gallery's staff people to look at a few new native artists we are considering for the gallery." She looked at Justin. "What are you doing here? Where did you come from?" She looked beyond the two men and noticed the screen enclosed area, understanding what it was for the first time. "Oh. You heard..." her voice tailing off into silence. "When did you..." She stopped speaking again as she watched Justin.

Justin was shaking his head at her. "Please leave for now. We'll call you later at Deb's. The agency isn't the place for these discussions and we are under a lot of time constraints with a new campaign."
Lindsay looked perplexed as he spoke. Justin was sending her away and Brian was glaring at her, holding tightly to the blond's hand as if he was the only thing stopping him from exploding into a million pieces. "You'll call?"

Brian took a deep breath as if suddenly regaining his voice and control. "I'll call but in the meantime you need to think over what the hell you are doing. I'm telling you right now, you are not getting into Gus's trust. I'm just glad I kept control even though Mel hated the idea. You would have used it without even contacting me if you could have, wouldn't you?"

Lindsay shook her head.

Brian held up his hand. "Don't Linz, just don't." He looked at Justin and gave him a small smile. "If you two decide to stay in Toronto, Mel will just have to work in a diner for her tuition, the same way Justin had to for a while. Just so you know, it's unlikely, short of making sure my kid has food that I'll give you anything."

"So what? I uproot my family and come back here? And you'll do what?"

Brian shook his head. "Later Lindsay. You need to think about it. Go take a ride, walk the streets, visit your friends."

"When will we talk? I have to go home tomorrow." Lindsay looked at the papers on the desk; she started to reach for them.

"Leave them."

"But."

"You claim Mel doesn't know. Right?"
"Yes! Definitely!"

"Then who drew up those papers Lindsay?"

Lindsay bit her lip and frowned but didn't answer.

"Linz?"

"Mel did. But, she did it a while ago, just in case. She really doesn't know I'm here!"

Brian sighed and turned away from her. "I'll call you and tell you when and where. Leave your cell phone number with Cynthia."

"I don't have a cell anymore."

"I'll call you at Deb's."

"I'm going there now. I don't want to ride around anymore. I already have. I went by my house. Do you know they took the fence, wooden gate and arbor down? It just looks like every other house on the street. They shouldn't have done that. Mel and I put that up to give the house an identity, to grow flowers and welcome people. They painted it a horrible grey too."

Brian looked at her with a sad smile. "Why shouldn't they Linz?"

"They ruined our house Brian. It looks so cold now."
"It's not your house anymore."

"What?" Lindsay looked at him mystified, and then the two men watched as the realization of the loss hit Lindsay. Her eyes started to water again and she turned abruptly, grasping her coat. "I'll be at Deb's," she choked out and then walked quickly out of the office.

"You all right?"

Brian nodded. "I won't let him want for anything. But those fucking..."

Brian shook his head. "I can't believe them."

"I know Brian, but they will eventually realize you aren't going to support all of them, nor should you solve all their problems."

Brian nodded and snorted. "Ted must have exaggerated my wealth to them. I can't really support them. If we decide to expand into New York, our expenses will be high so there will be a lot less profit to take."

Justin nodded. "I know, I read Ted's memos on possible risks and how to manage them. Can we afford to attempt to make the New York office as big as you want?"

Brian nodded. "Yeah, but we will only be able to afford one residence in Pittsburgh. Ours and only ours. Even if Mel and Linz move back here there will only be just so much we can help them with."

"Seems like they've pretty much destroyed themselves financially with the move."
Brian nodded. "At least if they come back here Mel can start to practice again and Lindsay can find another job, or go back to teaching. It'll take a while but they will eventually get back on their feet financially."

"Do you think they have healthcare?"

"Fuck." Brian shook his head, "I don't know. I would think they are probably able to continue paying for it through Mel's partnership, at least for a year or so. I can carry Gus if I have to. I don't think we have any legal way of picking up JR short of putting one of them on the payroll. And Mel will never be on my legal team."

Justin wrapped his arms around Brian. "So I guess if we have to tighten our belts, that means the Mercedes has to go. And the loft or the house."

Brian shrugged, but returned Justin's hug. "Well, we don't have to tighten quite that much, I do have my limits. But we do need to decide on where we are going to live and buy a car for you instead of renting one."

"I like those little hybrids."

"No fucking way, I'd feel like a clown getting out of one of those wind-up cars."

"Well there are hybrid SUVs."

"That's a little better." Brian still grimaced at the thought.

"I love a man with style," Justin claimed, the sound of his voice matching the smirk on his face. He suddenly hugged Brian and in a more serious tone asked if his lover was all right.
"I'm fine. Letting go of the anger already. Go somewhere. I have to finish this up before we can get out of here."

"You sure?" When Brian nodded Justin made a face and turned for the door. "In that case I'm going to go and check to see if Cynthia delivered your message and to see if it caused Ted to start hyperventilating."

Brian rolled his eyes. He took a deep breath and sat down. He tried to get his thoughts together and get back to work. He picked up his pen and gathered his papers back into a readable pile. He suddenly spied the papers Lindsay had left. He felt a flare of hot anger; picking up the phone, Brian made a call.

"It's Brian Kinney, I need to speak to Peter immediately if possible."

Brian waited while an inquiry was made and he was informed Peter would take his call.

"Brian? What did you do now? Justin already change his mind?"

"No." Brian made a face, wondering why everyone assumed Justin was so saintly. "I need to have some other changes made."

"Like what?"

"I have some papers I want you to go over."

"What kind?"

"Melanie Marcus drew up some papers for signing Gus's college trust over to her and Lindsay Peterson."
"You want me to look them over for you to sign?"

"No, I want to make sure they can never touch the money. I want Justin made guardian of the trust if I die while Gus is a minor. I want him to have sole control until Gus is twenty five."

"Okay. That is doable. Anything else?"

"Yes, you know that life insurance policy I took out for Gus?"

"I remember the Marcus woman sending all sorts of demands about it, but we kept it to Gus as the beneficiary and Lindsay as trustee if Gus was a minor."

"Can we change that, do they have to be notified?"

"No Brian. It is your policy; you can do anything you want with it. We'd only notify them if Gus was no longer named because Marcus required it of you as part of a support of Gus."

"I want Justin named as the trustee for a minor Gus on that as well."

"Okay, we can do that. Any changes to the one you have with Justin as beneficiary?"

"No, that one is fine --- and private Peter."

""I know Brian. Justin isn't supposed to know about it. You shouldn't keep secrets. How many times do I have to tell..."
Brian tuned Peter's sermon out as he mulled over Mel's demands Peter had referred to; there was something about it bothering him, something Peter had said. He had a sudden thought, and his brows knitted as he became perplexed; he interrupted his friend, "Peter?"

"Ah...Yes?"

"How can the policy be part of a support requirement for Gus demanded by Melanie and Lindsay when I don't have any legal rights as Gus's father?"

After a long pause. "That's an interesting question Brian." There was another silence. "I'll need to check into that. You had the policy in effect before the other papers were signed, right?"

"A huh."

"Hmmm, that indicates support was expected. You've given them other money for Gus, money they asked for?"

"Yes."

"In the capacity of being Gus's father, not as their friend?"

"I gave Lindsay money to help with an apartment and daycare for Gus once when they were separated a few years ago. They've also allowed him to stay with me. They were separated again a few months ago and Lindsay kept custody of Gus. Melanie didn't pay support."

"Did you?"

"I helped Linz out."
"Did you pay by check? So there's a trail?"

"Yes."

"Send me all the cancelled checks. And make sure you send that document over. I want to see how you are referred to in it. There seems to be an expectation that you will provide support when necessary and within specific guidelines but you have no rights. I'll have to pull the parental waiver papers from your files.... Yeah, I remember, you tore up the first copy Mel gave you, lucky I have the copy she sent to me for you to sign... if I remember right they were clear in that they expected no support from you, that was part of the giving up of parental rights.... hmm... but they have asked and you have provided..."

Brian could hear Peter scribbling on a pad, knowing half of what he was saying was really to himself. "Peter, it's always been that way – the life insurance policy, the college fund, daycare...whatever. He IS my son. Of course I was going to give it to him."

"I know but it sort of voids the agreement, they expected you to give it, they requested it, before and after the agreement was signed, and they expected you to provide it as Gus's biological parent, not as their friend doing a favor. His biological mother, especially, recognized you as Gus's parent by requesting aid as the child's father. Sort of makes the waiver moot or at least brings into question its integrity. It could also be argued that they did not sign it in good faith since they claimed to want nothing from you in return for the waiver but did ask and take assistance after signing it. At least it could be argued that way if you decided to challenge it at a later date. Melanie should have seen that."

Brian hadn't considered that. "I didn't realize one affected the other."

"Huh. It may or may not but it does raise a couple legal questions. It'll take a while to really give it a hard look. I may need to consult someone who specializes in custody issues. Is that okay? It'll be expensive."

"Yeah, go ahead."
"Is that now your priority?"

"No, just fix the trust and insurance policy, but if you can research the other thing over the next few weeks I'd appreciate it. Don't worry about the cost."

"Okay Brian, as for the other things, I'll send the documents over for your signature when I get them processed. Are you telling Justin any of this?"

"Eventually." Brian heard a sigh from his attorney.

"Brian, you can't keep surpr..."

"Got to go Peter."

"Okay. I'll get this done and then we are having a talk."

"I can't wait. Bye." Brian's sarcasm couldn't be missed as he hung up the phone.

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Brian negotiated the Mercedes out into traffic. "So how was Ted?"

"He had a paper lunch bag up to his mouth and he was breathing into it." Justin tried to look serious but smiled in spite of himself. "It was awful." He started to giggle.
Brian laughed quietly as he drove. "It'll teach him to pay more attention. If we suddenly have new security measures, he should find out why."

"He calmed down after I told him he wasn't fired," Justin started to giggle again, "but he started to hiccup when I left."

Brian shook his head and changed lanes. "Do you want to get something to eat first or do we have something at the house?"

"Depends. What do you want?"

"I don't want a greasy hamburger and fries."

"How about a panini? With chicken breast, artichoke spinach spread, melted asiago and roasted red pepper? Oh, and fresh basil."

"Where do I have to stop?"

"I have it all at home."

Brian gave Justin a sideways look. "I can believe you have all the ingredients. I know there is chicken left over and a lot of bottled crap on the shelves. And you picked up bread at the bakery yesterday. The big question is, when did you get the panini grill?"

Justin just smiled at him and wiggled his eyebrows.

Brian just sighed and sped up the entrance ramp to the interstate.
Brian sat at his computer quickly reading his email while Justin prepared lunch. His cue to get up and go to the kitchen was Justin’s shout that it was almost ready. Brian put the pc to sleep and got up. He glanced around the room and developed a slight frown. He walked into the kitchen and looked around. His frown didn't deepen but rather merged into a smirk. How could a house that was four-fifths empty look lived in? Justin had somehow accomplished it.

Brian walked over to the cabinet and pulled down two plates; he left them on the counter next to where Justin was standing in front of the sandwich grill. He then returned to the cabinet and got glasses and then silverware out of the drawer. He set the table while Justin plated the sandwiches.

"Could you get a bag of chips and the olives?"

Brian nodded and opened up the refrigerator, and looked at the contents and then choices. "Sicilian or kalamata?"

"Both."

"Green tea, Pellegrino or Pepsi?"

"What are you having?"

Brian rolled his eyes; Justin always asked but never got the same thing. "Pellegrino."

"Oh. Um green tea."
Brian shook his head in disgust, it never failed. He carried the bottles and containers of olives to the table and then went back for the chips out of the closet. When he opened it he sighed loudly. "You want the lightly salted, deli, sour cream or rippled?"

Justin set a plate down at one place setting and then at the other. He sat down and turned to Brian. "Are there barbecue flavor?"

Brian's jaw tensed. "YES."

Justin turned and reached for the olives. "I'll have the deli."

Brian gave him a look that should kill and reached in and grabbed the deli chips, practically crushing the bag as he carried it to the table. He tossed them down on the table.

"Thanks." Justin looked at them and frowned. "I think."

Brian sat heavily in the chair. "Why did you ask about the barbecue if you didn't want them?"

Justin looked up from pouring his tea. "Huh?"

"Why did you ask about the other chips? Was it a test of my patience or an inventory of your stash of artery clogging shit?"

Justin looked mystified. "I just wondered if we had any in case I want some later."

Brian closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. He was sure Justin's sole purpose on the planet was to drive him nuts. "Whatever."
"You okay?"

Brian felt a gentle touch on his hand. He opened his eyes and saw Justin's concern, the worry marring his features, casting a shadow over his smile and clouding the clear blue eyes. Brian suddenly smiled. "I'm fine." He picked up his sandwich while Justin opened his bottle of water for him and set the olives close to him.

"You've had a rotten morning."

"What gave you that idea?"

Justin ignored his lover's comment. "What do you think we should do about Lindsay?"

Brian shrugged. "Do you miss the loft?"

Justin's hands stopped halfway to his mouth at the segue in the conversation; he snapped his mouth shut and set his sandwich back on the plate. "What?"

Brian picked up his sandwich and asked the question again before taking a bite.

Justin looked at his sandwich, concentrating on it as he thought. "Yes, I miss it."

"What do you miss about it?"

Justin shrugged as he picked up his lunch again. "It was your home. We lived there. It was beautiful, a good location..."
"What don't you like about it?"

Justin took a bite and chewed as he thought it over. After swallowing, he set his sandwich down and picked up the olives and spooned a couple green Sicilians onto his plate. "I guess it isn't very private. And I never really had enough room for my stuff. We'll have to fix that. And while the location was good, it wasn't that good. You know what I mean?"

Brian nodded. "Sort of in the middle of Liberty but not near everything else in the city. And the neighborhood is not totally safe."

"Yeah, and the parking sucked."

"Like you had to worry about that?"

Justin shrugged. "Someday I will."

Brian stole a chip from Justin's plate. "Will you miss this place?"

Justin was taken unawares by the question. He thought Brian had a secret longing for the house but now he wondered if he might be wrong. Justin shrugged a silent reply that showed a noncommittal answer.

"Justin, honestly, will you miss this place?"

Justin set his sandwich down. "Yes, I guess I will."

Brian nodded but didn't really say if he agreed or not.
"So are we moving back into the loft?"

Brian frowned and played with his sandwich. "I don't know."

"Really?"

Brian nodded.

Both men were silent as they ate; Justin broke the silence after a few minutes. "Will you miss this house?"

Brian looked out the window and at the yard beyond. "Maybe."

"Maybe?"

Brian nodded. "We can't keep both places. So we have to get rid of one or the other --- or both."

"And find a new place?"

Brian nodded.

"Where?"

"I don't know."

"Near where Mikey is?"
"NO!"

"Another loft?"

Brian thought about it and shook his head. "No, a new one would never replace the one I have now. It's been perfect in design; a loft with rooms wouldn't feel right."

Justin nodded. "So a house?"

Brian made a face. "Yeah, I guess."

"But where? What you like about the loft was you didn't have to deal with neighbors or anything like that."

"How do you know that?"

"I know you Brian. You like your privacy. You like open space, not feeling confined and you don't want people and noise around except when you invite it."

Brian gave Justin a nasty look. "Twat."

"I'm right."

Brian gave a little nod; part of him hated that anyone knew him that well.

"Brian, why this house?"
"What?"

"I know you must have looked at a bunch before you bought it, you never take the first thing you look at. People think you just have to have the biggest, the best, but I know that's not true. You must have liked something about this house."

Brian shrugged. "I just liked it the best."

"Why?"

Brian picked up his water and took a gulp; he suddenly wished it was whiskey. "I don't know Justin; maybe it was just a childhood dream, getting out of that suffocating dark house, getting something that would impress my old man."

"You don't have to do that anymore, you haven't done anything like that lately." Justin shook his head, "That's not it." Justin crunched a chip. He looked at Brian thoughtfully. "Maybe you just liked the house, the yard?"

Brian grimaced. "Maybe."

"It's big. The loft was getting too small wasn't it? With me, and company. You couldn't cut it all off. No control. Here, there is plenty of room, lots of control too. Plus it's quiet."

"It's never quiet with you around." Brian snorted as he reached for an olive.

"Brian, tell me the truth. Do you like this house? I mean everyone thought you bought a big house as an emotional reaction to the bombing. Did you buy it simply because you liked it too?"
Brian took a deep breath and thought about it. "Like you said, I looked at other places, both in the city, around Liberty and out here. I picked this one."

"Because?"

"Obviously because there was something I liked about it," Brian sniped. He frowned and looked out the window at the yard. "Why the fuck isn't there a pool out there? You know I looked at the satellite maps on Google and every house out here has one but this one. And I checked the plot plan that they left, it was approved for a pool." Brian pointed to an area over by the small summer house. "Right there."

Justin sucked his lips into his mouth, trying not to laugh at Brian's obvious consternation that a pool was never built. "Maybe they couldn't swim or had kids and didn't want one."

Brian scowled. "You put fences around the damn things Justin, solves the problem."

Justin made a face. "We had a pool but Dad was nuts about Molly and me going near it."

"Did it have a fence all the way around?"

"Sort of."

"Sort of?"

Justin nodded. "More around the backyard than the pool."

"I knew Craig was an idiot. It goes all the way around the pool, so the kids can play safely in the back yard and not fall in."
Justin gave a 'whatever' shrug. He munched a few more chips and realized Brian had diverted the conversation again. "Hey, you still haven't answered the question."

"What question?"

"Why you like this house? What were you thinking about when you bought it?"

Brian sat back in his chair. "Nothing and everything."

Justin nodded in understanding. "It is big and sort of off the beaten path."

Brian nodded in agreement. "Don't you think the gate house could be made into a gallery and studio?"

Justin eyes went wide. "Is that what you thought?"

"Yeah, it was going to be a surprise. It does have a small separate drive. Customers could use that. We could gate the driveway then. You could use the upper floor for storage or we could create a guest suite for Kinnetik clients or visiting artsy people there." Brian smirked at the last couple words describing Justin's friends.

Justin nodded, ignoring the jibe in his excitement. "This area is sort of exclusive but full of activity. You can tell it's getting popular by the newer stores and renovated barns. Lots of galleries, specialty stores. There's great dining too. I talked to Mom about this area, the people settling out here aren't old money. They are the up and coming entrepreneurs, like you actually, who want to escape from being in the city all day. But Mom says they are pretty liberal and the voting pattern has shown that."

Brian raised an eyebrow in question.
"She has to know those things Brian if she is showing the area. People ask questions about schools, churches, shopping, hospitals and politics. There is even a new club just a few miles north that has strict rules against discrimination."

"A club?" Brian asked in a doubtful tone. "I can't see many fags dancing out here."

Justin smirked. "No, this club has eighteen holes."

"Oh, that kind of club. You got me all excited there for a moment with the 'eighteen holes' comment." Brian smiled briefly and then looked at his watch. "I should be heading back."

"Not yet. We haven't finished talking."

"If you are going to ask about joining this new country club, don't."

Justin gave an exasperated sigh. "I wasn't but just so you know Mom told me the name and I looked it up on the Net. Peter is a board member."

"Peter? My lawyer Peter?"

Justin nodded.

Brian sat back in his chair and smirked. "Well, I guess if you can't join them, you go out and get your own."

"Ahuh."
Brian started to get up again.

Justin reached out a hand to stop him. "Not yet. Are we moving back into the loft or doing something else?"

"Do you want to move back?"

"Only if you do."

Brian scowled at him. "You've already hinted that the loft isn't going to work over the long haul."

"We would need to renovate it Brian, and I know you don't want to do that."

"Do you like it here?"

Justin looked around. "Yeah, I guess."

"Sunshine it has to be more than a guess, this is an expensive decision."

"We could look for something closer...smaller."

"Smaller?" Brian grimaced as if the idea was too repugnant to consider. "Closer to what?"

Justin rubbed his forehead, he was getting a headache. "Brian it's okay to admit you like the place."
Brian stood up and walked unerringly to one of the kitchen cabinets and opened the door, pulling out Justin's medication for headaches. He walked back to the table and set it in front of Justin. "Do YOU want to live here?"

"With you?" Justin asked as he reached for the bottle.

"No, with fucking W."

Justin swallowed the pill with his green tea. "Shit, don't make me vomit. I don't need his image here."

"But you do want to live here."

"Yeah. I kind of like it. And if it doesn't work out we can downsize."

Brian rolled his eyes. "I haven't moved in years, unlike you, my little blond gypsy. It's this place for a while or we back off and sell both and move into a third place."

Justin frowned, looking around the kitchen. "Sort of already feels like home, doesn't it?"

Brian looked around the way Justin did, his eyes quickly darting back to the counter. "By the way, where the hell did that panini grill come from?"

Justin rubbed his head as he let out a small rumble of laughter. "My mom."

Brian looked around the back yard, his eyes focusing on where the pool should have been. "I guess we can try it for a while. If after a year it isn't working we look for an alternative. That will give us some breathing room with New York City. Although it makes more sense to stick with the loft because of time and financial issues but you're right that it won't be big enough. We will need the space and the privacy since we will be working together as well."
"Do you want to just lease the loft in case we need to fall back on it?"

"I don't know. I'll have to talk it over with Ted. See if we need the capital or not. It might also depend on how much the New York venture costs." Brian rubbed his thumb along his lips as he thought it over. "I think we should lease it with an option. It is still a personal asset; the mortgage on this place should balance it out."

"Brian, we are going to need furniture for here. I mean we still have to try to live here as if it was home."

Brian rubbed his neck. Justin's headache seemed to be transferring to him. "We'll figure it out, there are a couple of funds I have--there's the emergency one. I don't want to touch the other."

"Which one?"

Brian shook his head. "You are going back to school."

Justin connected the dots. "You still have my tuition set aside?"

Brian nodded. "All three years and you are going to use it."

"No, we are using it for other stuff."

"No, you are going to school. I won't touch Gus's and I won't touch yours."

"I don't need one."
"Yes, you do. You are going to get that fucking degree."

"Yes, I will get it, but no, I don't need the money."

Brian scowled. "You aren't going to be earning enough working part-time at Kinnetik to pay for your tuition, even if you pick up hours at the diner – which you aren't."

"No, no. I have my own money."

Brian sat down and looked at his lover. "Since when?"

"I forgot to tell you. Mom got control over our education trusts from my dad after the bombing. I can pay for my own tuition." Justin gave Brian a huge smile. "Do you know what this means?"

Brian nodded and looked outside. "I'm putting in the fucking pool."

Justin rolled his eyes. "I was thinking more in the line of new furniture that we pick out together."

Brian made a gagging noise and then pretended to choke, his head dropping on to the tabletop.

Justin ignored him, "Too bad, we are doing it."

Brian gave an explosive sigh and hung his head. "Okay."

Justin laughed at his antics.
Brian stood up. "Now I really have to go."

"What about Lindsay?"

Brian sat back down in the chair again. "Fuck, I was getting really good at ignoring it."

"Where should we meet her?"

Brian thought about it. "This evening at the loft, I have to pick up a few things. Meet me there at six. I'll leave you the Mercedes and take the 'vette."

"What time are you going to talk to her?"

"Seven. That'll give us time to talk and eat."

"Okay, I'll pick up a pizza."

"Salad for me."

"Of course. Think about what you are going to say to her."

"Yes, Justin," Brian mimicked as he kissed him and headed for the door.

Justin sat there a moment and then ran after Brian. "Hey, I need those keys!"
Justin was packing the video and music collection when he heard the elevator; glancing at his watch he saw that it was only 5:30 p.m. He looked at the box and wondered if he should hide it. He planned on having the boxes he had brought to pack safely stowed in the car before Brian or Lindsay arrived; there were already three in the trunk with kitchen items and boxed or canned food. The loft door slid open and Brian walked in, carrying two boxes. They looked at each other and smiled.

"In the car before Lindsay gets here," Brian said briskly as he moved past Justin and over to the credenza behind the computer desk.

Justin nodded and began putting more DVDs into the box. "Brian?"

"Hmm?"

"What furniture are we going to take from here?"

Brian paused and looked around. "Whatever will fit the new house; I'm not sure about renting it furnished."

"The bed?"

Brian looked over at the dark bedroom. "We can always put it in the gatehouse. I sort of like the king mattress we have now."

Justin had his head down, hiding his smile. The new bed was a lot more comfortable than the one in the loft. It was also brand new. "When will we have time for furniture shopping?"
"It's called catalog shopping Justin." Brian paused as he looked at some of the papers he was packing. "Do you think we should keep this desk and credenza or replace it?"

Justin glanced over. "It won't really fit the den, but we have a lot of space to fill. It might look good in one of the upstairs bedrooms. We can put ....hey, what about my stuff in New York? My pc there?"

Brian glanced over. "We move it to the office there. It will save us some money."

"Brian? What if we haul all this stuff to New York? We will probably have some loft type place there, right?"

Brian looked around and suddenly smiled. "Yeah it will fit in there. If we rent a moving truck and force the guys to help it'll save us a lot of money. Most of this furniture is expensive but paying to have it shipped wouldn't be smart either." Brian laughed. "It'll be cheaper to take the guys to New York for a weekend. We'll pay for their hotel."

Justin went and sat in the desk chair next to where Brian was packing. "I'm glad Brian. I... it was hard thinking about really leaving here."

Brian stopped what he was doing, setting the files down and turning to Justin. "You don't want to move to the house?"

"Yes I do." He looked down at his hands. "It's just this place has so many memories. This place has been the center of my life in a lot of ways for five years."

"Justin, as much as I love this place – it's just that. A place."

"I know, but it sort of helps that the furniture will be in New York with us. Like we aren't totally giving up on the place."
Brian stepped between Justin's legs and pulled him close in a tight embrace. "I know; it helps me too."

"So it's just not me being a cry baby?"

"No."

Justin smiled into Brian's chest. "It's the both of us."

"No!" Brian laughed, tapping Justin on the back of the head. "You twat!" He let go of Justin. "I am not that sentimental you shit. Like I said, it's a place, but the furniture is so perfect that I'm glad I don't have to give it up."

"Has nothing to do with being sentimental about your first home, or where we first made love or lived together?"

Brian glared at him. "No."

"Right." Justin's disbelief was evident.

"This is just four walls to me Justin; we are moving on. That's it.

"So we can let the tenants paint the walls or put down carpeting."

"Like hell."

"Or change the bedroom, maybe remove it."
"Never."

Justin nodded, "Just so I understand this, it's just four walls, but the tenants can't change a thing?"

Brian turned away. "Smart ass."

"Brian, is the naked guy going to New York or coming to 'Britin'."

"Stop calling it that." Brian walked over and looked at the painting. "Won't really fit out there will it?"

Justin walked up to Brian and stood next to him. "It'll fit anywhere; the outside of today's homes rarely reflect the interior design. We can do almost anything we want inside." He glanced around, "But it sort of seems to belong with this design grouping, doesn't it?"

Brian nodded. "Okay, it'll be carefully crated and brought to New York. It'll be better suited for life there anyway."

"How?"

Brian shrugged, "Just seems it should be in an urban setting rather then near a window that has a field outside it."

"True. The starkness of brick and glass and a cityscape seem the best."

The two men went back to their respective packing. "Brian, do you think we could take that long bedroom adjacent to the wall of our room and make it into an exercise room?"
Brian thought about it. "Should work, we could have a door put into the wall by the bathroom. There would then be enough room in the den for both of our desks and workstations."

"I can paint in the room off the kitchen for now."

"What about the gate house?"

"We'll need to get into more of a schedule before we tackle that."

"True."

Justin closed up his last box. "I got all the video and music packed. And a good share of the kitchen stuff."

Brian looked over at the kitchen. "How long have you been here?"

"Since about 3:30. I was too buzzed to concentrate so I came into town, got some reusable boxes at the shipping center and came here. I want to put the stuff away as I bring it home. A lot of smaller trips but it will be more manageable and less noticeable."

Brian scoffed. "Was that how you infiltrated the loft the first time?"

Justin laughed, "You never saw me carry anything more than my backpack."

"Okay, moving is up to you. All personal items except the furniture."
"Are we keeping the TV and stereo system you rented?"

"Why?"

"We can bring that stuff to New York too. We won't have to buy anything in the beginning and can concentrate on furnishing the house."

"Yep." Brian put the lid on the first box and started the second. When he reached his backing files he stopped and started to look through them.

"I'm going to take these down to the car."

Brian glanced up and saw Justin loading the boxes on to a hand cart. "Where did you get that?"

Justin smiled as he pushed it over to the loft door and slid it open.

Before Justin could reply Brian caustically answered his own question. "Don't tell me – your mother."

"Fine, I won't tell you," he said over his shoulder as he wheeled it out the door.

Brian continued to go through his cancelled checks, pulling out only those given to Lindsay for Gus. He noticed the number was more than he remembered. Justin was back before he was done.

"What are you doing?"
"Just gathering the files I needed." Before Brian could stop him Justin had picked up the checks and was looking at them.

"Shit, it's more than I thought."

Brian quirked an eyebrow at him. "I thought the same thing."

Justin looked at one check. "Look at your handwriting here. I remember this; you had the only real hangover I have ever seen you have. It was after you got drunk with Mikey over Kip." He tapped the check against his lip thoughtfully. "This was when they were separated and Lindsay needed help with childcare. You gave her a lot more than babysitting costs."

"She needed it for food and bills."

Justin fanned through the checks. "I think my dad has paid less for supporting Molly Brian."

Brian gently pulled the checks from Justin's hand. "Whatever." He put them in a separate file along with the papers Lindsay had given him earlier.

Justin frowned as he noticed Brian slide them all into a courier envelope. He pulled it out of Brian's hands and saw it was being sent to Peter. "You want to tell me?"

Brian grabbed it back. "Fuck, you are nosy --- and pushy."

"And?"

"I'm having Peter check it all over – make sure they can't try to force me to give them control of the trust."
"What are the checks for?"

"Peter just wants an idea of how much assistance I've given them."

"Brian, you give them everything they ask you for, and it's just not money. You gave them Gus, you got them back together, you gave them a wedding, you let them leave the country with your son. Need I go on?"

"I don't have any legal rights to Gus."

"Bullshit." Justin looked at Brian's face and then the envelope. "That's what Peter's going to find out, isn't it?"

"Maybe." Brian set the file courier envelope into the last box and put the lid on it. "Umm, what do you think about that?"

"I think it's the best thing you could do; they shouldn't have taken Gus from you."

Brian nodded. "Let's get this down before Lindsay gets here."

Justin nodded. "Oh wait." He disappeared into the bedroom and beyond. He returned with a box and a garbage bag stuffed with clothes.

"Those better not be my suits."

Justin shook his head. "Bathroom stuff and the dirty clothes from the hamper."
"What a happy little home maker you are."

"Eat shit. The clothes were starting to stink --- and they are yours, so you'll be doing them."

"Like hell." Brian took the box from Justin's hands and set it on the other two stacked on the hand cart. He wheeled it out with Justin dragging the bag along the floor behind him.

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The two men were having a beer at the counter, having just finished dinner and thrown the takeout containers away.

"You really need to decide what you are going to say to her." Justin played with his bottle, moving it back and forth along the counter.

Brian reached out and stopped the annoying action. "I haven't really decided."

Justin took back his bottle and his hand and made a face at Brian. "The bottom line is you want them to move home."

Brian agreed with a shake of his head. "But that probably isn't realistic, Mel is very stubborn. And unlike Lindsay, she has family there."

"True, but Lindsay's is here. Plus, I still don't think it's working out for them there, you can kind of tell. Lindsay's on the edge, isn't she?"

Brian swallowed a large gulp. "Oh yeah."
"So what are you going to say to her?"

"I can't support them Justin. And I will not give them Gus's money."

"But you won't let them starve either. Lindsay knows that. You won't let Gus suffer and you can't control how they use whatever you give them to make sure it is used just for Gus."

"Why not? Mel seems to be making sure JR is taken care of."

"That must make Lindsay feel even worse. Mel is holding her trust for JR. You are providing Gus's."

"Well she shouldn't feel bad, Mel hauls her up there but Linz is the one keeping them off the street."

"They both decided."

"Lindsay would have done anything for Mel to forgive her. The price was moving."

"They decided before then, didn't they?"

Brian shook his head, "The bombing made them realize they needed to 'forgive and forget' apparently," Brian made a look of disgust at the thought of lesbian reunion sex, "and they kissed and made up." Brian shifted a bit in his seat. "Still, Mel...her comparing it to the Holocaust probably pushed Lindsay into moving more than just starting over. Fuck knows they've done that enough here. No, it was the fear that Lindsay was caught up in. I understand how affected Mel is by her history and it's not something that should be forgotten, but I don't agree with the move."

"You don't think that what is happening over our rights is the beginning of a holocaust?"
"No Justin, I don't. At this point I don't find them comparable. God knows, Vic said to me once that AIDS was a type of holocaust in the gay community but again that's different too. I see how Mel was drawing the references and similarities, but I don't agree on the basics of her comparison. If I thought it was going to be like that I would have your ass in Toronto before morning."

"What do you think it is then?" Justin was surprised Brian was being so open, especially since he was so angry about it all. He knew Brian's tendency was to keep a lot of these thoughts tightly controlled and unspoken.

Brian looked at Justin, with an expression revealing not only his intelligence but his earnestness. "It's a civil rights movement, it has been since Stonewall. It's a movement against repression and discrimination, a movement for recognition and equality. I know there are hundreds of hate crimes, my partner is a victim of a hate crime. But I know that there a lot of people out there that are on our side. Granted, AIDS was a type of holocaust, but I don't think it was engineered by the right wing establishment — as much as I would love to blame them. This is about rights protecting jobs, benefits, freedom of expression. It's about being equal under the law. Yes, there is a religious component but again, it's only a portion of the people. It's about being equal in thought and action."

Justin looked at him with an amazed expression. "You think we will win this, don't you?"

"What's the matter Sunshine, you didn't think I had any idealism left?" Brian snorted. "Justin, we are already equal, we always have been, it's a matter of making others realize it. If you allow them to think you are less than equal you lose. You don't succeed by running away. I'm sorry but Mel overreacted. I understand it but I don't condone it. There is no perfect place, no utopia, and if she thinks there is no hate where she is living now then she's wrong. Fear creates a lot of things including hate. Most hate is taught, that's what we are fighting --- ignorance. Me, I say fuck them. If they don't know better it's not my problem. Other people think it's all a matter of education and that's what's stirring the pot right now. It might work but being the realist I am I think there will always be hate. Hate is a part of human nature."

Justin looked at Brian a long time before speaking. "When you first refused to fight for marriage rights, or help out the GLC, when you worked for Stockwell. That's what it was all about, wasn't it? It wasn't
greed or indifference. You know you are equal. So it's fuck those who don't understand because they aren't worth your time."

Brian shrugged but didn't disagree or reply.

"I wasn't sure if you disagreed with our rights to marriage because you thought being gay made you want to be inherently different and shouldn't want things that straight people wanted. You sort of inferred it. But then I discovered you quietly helped the marriage proposal and gave money to the GLC, so then I thought the idea of marriage offended you because of your own parents' experience. But then you arranged Lindsay and Mel's marriage, you helped celebrate Michael's, and then you even proposed to me. It's not either, is it?"

Brian shook his head. "Marriage is a pretentious institution that means nothing because it can be unmade as easily as it's made. Religious people believe it to be their territory because it is blessed by God. That's nonsense because not everyone marries in church; it's become a legal transaction by the government. Matrimony is a false moral decree that keeps people in bad situations and creates unnecessary problems. It's a social contract, and as a man---a man, not just a gay man---I don't need anything beyond my word to honor my commitments."

"Okay." Justin scratched his head and tried to hide his surprise. He took a small sip of beer. "So we aren't ever taking that step?"

"Why?" Brian looked sideways at Justin. "We don't need to. We have done everything we need to realize our partnership is for keeps. We didn't need the dinner, hearts and flowers, cake and caterers, the witnesses and photographs, the priests or presents, we needed no one's validation. I promised you, you promised me, and Peter drew up the necessary legal documents. That's all we needed."

Justin couldn't help himself. He understood the differences Brian meant by the definition of a legal marriage and the description of their commitment to one another. Marriage was based on a legal contract that could be broken and their commitment was based on personal integrity and not meant to be broken. The definitions were close and he just couldn't resist the chance to tease Brian. "Sounds like a marriage by legal standards just without the celebration." He gave Brian a serious look but his eyes were dancing in laughter. "So is it that you just hate family parties?"
Brian almost dropped his beer bottle. "Asshole."

Justin's smile started to break through his attempt at playing serious. "I know you like dancing with me so it's not that. Is it registering for gifts? We could use the free stuff."

"You are such a fucking little twat. I don't know why..." Brian stopped as he heard the loft door start to slide open. Both men turned toward the sound.

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Lindsay opened the door to the loft. She thought she heard a murmur of conversation but it stopped as the sound of the sliding door continued. She walked into the loft sliding the door closed behind her. "Hello? Brian?" Lindsay walked into the loft and saw Brian and Justin sitting by the counter. "Oh, there you are."

Lindsay walked over to the two men. She looked around the loft. "So you do still live here, I was beginning to wonder."

Brian swiveled the seat to face her. "Actually, no we don't live here."

Lindsay's eyebrows rose. "You are leaving the loft? But Brian – the loft – it's you."

Brian sighed, "It's a place Lindsay. It doesn't define me, I define it. It reflects my taste, my style, but it's not what makes me – me. I can live, survive, somewhere else."

Lindsay gave him a slight frown and then turned to Justin. "And are you living in this other place too? Have you given up your chance in New York?"
Justin shook his head. "I haven't given up anything Lindsay. New York is still there and I'll be in the city all the time. But I'm living with my partner in our home. The way it should be, the way you are living with your partner in your home."

Lindsay's frown deepened. "It's not that easy Justin."

"Yeah, it is. Brian and I know what we want. It's very clear to the two of us."

"And we don't fucking care what the rest of you think." Brian tapped his beer bottle lightly on the counter. "So, let's get down to it. What do you want?"

Lindsay looked around. Again. "I want this."

Brian looked dumbfounded. "You want the loft?"

"No!" Lindsay's voice had taken on a slight whine. "I want a nice place to live, security for my children, not having to worry about where the money is coming from. A job I like. Friends and family around me."

"Didn't you have that before you moved?" Brian asked, his tongue becoming lodged in his cheek.

Lindsay sighed. "No."

Brian gave a little tilt of his head. "Funny, seems to me you had a nice place to live, didn't have to worry about where the money was coming from. You had a job you liked. A partner with a pretty good future as a partner in her firm. There were plenty of friends and family around to annoy you. And for the most part, you felt secure about raising your kids here."

"The bombing..."
Brian interrupted her. "The bombing could have happened anywhere those assholes went, but it happened here. Those bastards are gone, the police are hunting the bomber, and the rest of us have gotten back to our lives. You are the ones who left. You left us, you made your decisions, you ran."

"That's not true. We did what was best for our children."

"Was it really the best? Look at what's happened! Did you know crime is actually down in our area? Last year we elected a mayor who promised to protect us. He's doing that."

"But the proposition!"

"The proposition is dead for now, and if it rears its head, it'll be fought again, but not like it was before."

"You can't promise me that."

"Nobody can you promise you that. There are no promises. You won't get them in Canada either. I know there are groups there, same as here, that are fighting the laws there. And just because you have laws doesn't mean you won't have hate."

Lindsay gave out a small moan and set her suede jacket down on the counter. "I know that Brian, it's just... she died."

Justin put a hand down on Brian's to stop him from saying anything. "Lindsay, her death wasn't your fault."

"Wasn't it?" she snapped at him. "We...I... convinced her to go. She would have been home, safe with her wife and kids."
Justin shook his head. "It wasn't your fault, anymore than it was my fault that Chris Hobbs hit me, or Darren got beat up by those bastards in the alley. It was not us, it was them. Their hate. They were individuals who simply acted on their hate, and they aren't just in Pittsburgh Lindsay. They are everywhere." Justine looked at Brian and gave him a slight smile. "You don't fight them by running, you beat them simply by claiming your rights and living your life. You win the battles where you can and eventually we will win the war. I have every confidence we will succeed in the end."

"How can you be sure Justin?"

Justin gave a shrug, "Someone I respect more than anyone believes it, so I do too." He looked at Brian and smiled, and the other man was caught looking back into the blue eyes focused on him.

Lindsay looked from one man to the other. "I know you believe that Justin but I have to think of my children."

Brian broke his gaze from Justin and turned to her. "Bullshit."

"What?" Lindsay stamped her foot as she yelled back.

"If you were thinking of your children you would still be living in the fun house and you would still be employed and contributing to the 'community' you were always bitching at me to be a part of."

"Brian, you know Mel's fears were justified."

"Sorry, Linz. I don't agree."

Lindsay sighed. "This isn't getting us anywhere. I came to you for help and you apparently aren't willing to give it." She picked up her coat. "I'm going to be at Deb's until morning. I'll have to let Mel handle the trust."
"Don't bother. My lawyer is overseeing it. You won't get any of it."

Lindsay set her coat down. "Then what do you expect me to do? Are you going to let your child starve?"

Brian rolled his eyes at her dramatic declaration. "Just my child? What, are the three of you going to sit at the table in front of him and eat, then tell him he can't because his daddy doesn't send money?"

"Brian! Don't." Lindsay looked appalled at the thought.

"And when Gus asks if JR gets to eat because her daddy sends money what are you going to tell him? That Mikey doesn't have to send money because Mommy Mel has money for JR but not him? That JR's daddy is too poor? But that daddy gets to visit his daughter and makes decisions about her because he didn't have to give up his rights? And does Mel add that I'm an asshole to the whole explanation just for the fun of it?"

Lindsay covered her eyes with her hands. "Brian...I..."

"You hurt me Linz. All the time. And you never care if you do or not."

"You were serious about what you said on the phone."

"You remember?"

"Yes, I've done nothing but think about it for days." Lindsay glanced over at Justin and sucked in her bottom lip.
Justin turned to Brian. "Why don't I go down to the corner and get something for dessert to bring home later?"

"No. You are my partner and you stay." Brian reached out and grabbed Justin's wrist, keeping him in place. He looked at Lindsay. "Go on."

Lindsay paused, her fingers nervously playing with her coat on the counter top. "You ...you were right. I didn't want you to change, I didn't want you to be anything other than what you were, what I saw...because I needed you to be that person. I needed to know you would always be there for me...that I didn't have to share that part of you that was mine." She looked at Justin. "But I ...I did want you to be together. In the beginning I did support you and Brian. You were good for him, but then Brian seemed to pull away, spend more time away from us. But still I was hoping you'd be happy, but you are so young, and after Ethan I was worried for Brian. And there is so much you could do --- as an artist... to be free to do that..."

"Justin has always been free to do that," Brian said quietly. "I never stopped him."

"I know, it's just, marriage and commitment...it brings changes."

Brian nodded. "For you it did. Not us. You can't interfere with us, or judge us based on your own expectations and experience Linz. It's totally different."

"I know...I was being..."

"Selfish."

"Brian!" Lindsay frowned at him and started to cry.

"It's true Linz."
Lindsay sniffed. "Maybe."

Brian seemed merciless to Justin as he continued.

"No maybe about it." Brian leaned forward so he was closer to Lindsay. "But I still love you anyway Wendy."

Lindsay gave a snort of laughter through her crying.

"What am I going to do?"

Brian sat back and pulled Justin's hand into his lap, below the counter and where Lindsay couldn't see. He changed the grip so they were holding hands. "You ask yourself the hard questions and answer then truthfully."

Lindsay wiped her eyes. "Like what?"

"For starters... do you want to come home?"

"Back to never-never land?"

Brian shook his head. "Never-never land is gone, just like Peter Pan, but I here the Pitts isn't as bad as its name would indicate."

"We have nothing left here Brian."
'Everything you had before you left is still here.'

"Our house is gone."

"You start over again."

"We are doing that now."

"Don't be dense Linz; it's about as attractive as the runny nose you are sporting."

Lindsay reached into her purse for a tissue. "You are a bastard."

"No, just honest."

"What if Mel doesn't want to come back?"

"Lindsay, do you really think she doesn't want to?"

"I don't know; we never really talk about it. It's like if we admit we miss Pittsburgh it will open up a tidal wave. Mostly we try to convince each other how much better off we are but I know we are just lying to each other."

"Do you want to come home?"

"YES! Okay? YES! I want to come home!" Lindsay started to walk around the counter, exploding with emotion. "Are you happy now? I've said it. I want to come home. I miss you and Justin, I miss the diner, I miss knowing where I'm going. I miss feeling like I belong somewhere. I miss feeling a part of a
community. I hate feeling like an outsider! I want to go to Smith's every Saturday to get the croissants I like or go to Goldsmiths for bagels. I hate not going to the diner and having time with you and the guys. I hate that I can't show Gus places I grew up or explain why he can't see his daddy or his friend Eric. I hate my job and not having money to spend on some little toy for Gus or JR. ... I'm afraid I'll start to hate Mel..." Lindsay covered her mouth with her hands. "Oh God, what were we thinking!?"

Lindsay walked over to Brian, forcing him to let go of Justin's hand and catch her as she rocked into him as she cried. He gave a small sigh but held her. "It's okay, it can all be fixed."

Lindsay shook her head, "No, no it can't. Mel's never going to forgive me if I tell her I want to come back."

"Yes she will. You said you don't think she's happy either. You know keeping her from practicing law has got to be tough on her. You can do this, you can talk to her."

Justin moved from his seat and went to get more tissue and a bottle of water.

Brian let go of Lindsay; she took a couple steps back and away from Brian's stool as she tried to get control of her emotions. Justin stepped between them when handing her a tissue and opened the water bottle, setting it down in front of her. "Thank you Justin." She gave him a shy smile. "I'm glad you're here." She started to tear up again. "I ... I almost ruined that too."

Brian looked at the ceiling and actually prayed for patience. His prayer was answered as Justin began to calm Lindsay.

"No you didn't ruin it. It worked out for the best really. Right Brian?" Justin turned to his lover, blocking Lindsay's view.

Brian made a face at him.
"Right Brian?"

"Yeah, yeah." Brian turned away, muttering so only Justin could hear him, "Yeah, I loved being alone for six months, having to travel every weekend for a good fuck." While smiling at Lindsay, Justin pushed his elbow backwards sharply, hitting Brian's side. "Oww."

Justin moved quickly to the other side of the counter. "Let me make some tea or coffee and we can talk about it."

Brian scowled at him.

Lindsay nodded, blowing her nose as she settled into the seat next to Brian. Justin started to look into the cabinets and frowned.

Brian noticed his expression. "What?"

Lindsay was rifling through her purse looking for something, missing the byplay between the two men. Justin looked at Brian and mouthed, 'I packed it all!' Brian rolled his eyes but said nothing.

Looking in the mirror Lindsay groaned. "I look awful when I cry." She snapped her compact closed and dropped it in her purse. She took a deep breath and smiled at Justin. "I could use a cup of coffee, better yet tea. Your mom always sent Mel and me specialty teas at the holidays. She mentioned you like the variety too."

Looking at Lindsay, Justin said apologetically, "I might need to run down to the corner after all." Justin bit his lip. "We seem to be out of tea."

"Oh. You've been in New York." Lindsay turned to Brian. "You didn't throw them all out, did you?"
Brian gave her an innocent look and shook his head.

Lindsay gave a shrug. "Coffee is great, decaf if you have it." She glanced at Brian. "I know he was trying to get you to drink more decaffeinated."

Brian turned and gave Justin a long stare.

The other man ignored him. "We seem to be out of coffee too Lindsay. I can go and get some."

"That's okay Justin. Water is fine for now."

Justin nodded, rubbing the back of his neck, staring at the cabinets with a frown, thinking he needed to leave a few basics at the loft until they rented it.

Brian leaned forward a bit and whispered. "Maybe you shouldn't have been quite so thorough in packing."

Justin gave Brian a glare, "Stop that."

Brian laughed. "Sometimes you are just too easy to read."

Lindsay watched the byplay. "You two are happy, aren't you? You've settled it, haven't you? So in sync. Are you getting married after all?"

"No way in hell Lindsay." Brian shifted in his seat to look at her.
"Why not?"

Brian looked at Justin and waved his hand, giving him the floor.

Justin thought about it. "Brian doesn't like family parties."

"You shit." Brian laughed and stood up to lean over the counter and grab him.

Justin stepped away, laughing as well.

Brian sat down again.

Lindsay gave a shaky smile. "You are obviously happy Brian but..." She gave a little lift to her shoulder, silently finishing her comment.

Brian gave a huff. "We don't need what everyone else needs. We made our decisions; we did what we needed to legally. That's it. Till whatever, we are together."

"Just like that."

Justin gave a half hearted snicker. "Not just like that. You watched the five years of pain and happiness it took us to get here. But we got here and we've agreed we want to be together. That's all we needed to do."

"What about the future? What if one of you ....if someone else..."
Brian shook his head. "No. I told Justin how I feel about him, what I want, I made my peace with it and I won't break my word, that's all Justin needed and that's all I needed." Brian twisted his lips and the disdain he felt toward others came out. "The rest of you, who seem to need more, can equate it with whatever you need to make it seem more substantial... pledge, vow, oath, promise, commitment... whatever." Brian smiled at Justin, "We don't need artificial chains to keep us together out of duty or law. We will keep ourselves together because that's what we want. At least that's how I see it."

Justin nodded. "Me too." He turned to Lindsay. "I understand Brian, probably better in the last hour than ever before. We are together."

"That's right." Brian nodded and gave a snarky laugh. "And as long as he owns half of everything that's mine, I'm keeping the little shit close."

"Hey, you own half of everything that's mine too --- even stuff I haven't done yet."

"There's a comfort. I'll own half of nothing in my old age."

"So little faith, so little faith," Justin murmured, pretending to be wounded as he rubbed a spot on his chest over his heart.

"WHAT?" Lindsay looked from Brian to Justin and back. "Half?"

"We're partners Lindsay --- all the way." Brian nodded. "And that means Justin gets it all, he has say in everything, if something should happen to me, he controls everything that happens, he decides." He looked at Lindsay directly. "He is now the guardian of Gus's trust and insurance policy."

"WHAT?" This time it was Justin who was surprised.

Brian turned to him, "Oh, Peter thought I should mention that to you."
"I like Peter, I'm not so sure about you."

"Hmm, already?" Brian sighed and shook his head, theatrically clutching his chest this time.

Justin laughed.

Lindsay grimaced. "I know you have no respect for our beliefs but do you need to denigrate them." She looked at Justin. "And I know you believe in the marriage initiative."

Justin nodded. "I do. I think we should have equal rights under the law. Brian and I know we don't agree on it, but I also know that the commitment we have to each other transcends those issues. Brian and I can disagree on the philosophy of issues. Brian doesn't believe in any need for us to be recognized or respected by anyone, because we are their equals and their acceptance is based on their giving us an entitlement we already own. We believe intrinsically in the same ideology, but not in whether we have to fight for it or if it is inherent." Justin gave a shrug. "Some of us are activists, some are pacifists and then there's Brian." Justin gave a little laugh and looked at his lover.

Brian gave him a rather regal nod of acknowledgement.

Justin tapped the counter absently as he spoke to Lindsay again. "You also have to remember Brian also doesn't believe in societal conventions. Me? I want those rights written into laws to protect those who, unlike Brian, don't just go out and grab them as if there was no question they were their rights." He gave Brian a shy smile, "I'm not adverse to societal conventions."

Brian snorted in reply to the comment.

Justin held up a hand to stop Brian, "But I agree with Brian --- they don't and won't keep us from being happy or together." Justin smiled at Brian. "And all I need in assurances from Brian I have received."
There aren't enough social or legal conventions to make us any more committed to each other than we are."

Brian sighed. "You just had to use the 'c' word, didn't you?"

Justin laughed as he gave him the finger.

Lindsay was biting the tip of her thumb, lost in thought at the revelations. She tried to understand everything that was revealed. "I sort of understand what you are saying. This... it's going to take a little getting used to."

Brian gave her a sideways look. "Why do you need to get use to it, it has nothing to do with you."

Lindsay bit her lip. "I just... I just meant... well you two... together... forever?"

Brian let out a disappointed sigh. "Can't you even say you are happy for us? That you are glad we are together and know what we want. Instead we get --- 'I have to get use to it'?"

Lindsay looked to Justin for support, but gone was the humor and gentleness she had seen in his eyes moments before; now there stood a young man with a solemn look watching her intently. Somehow Lindsay knew this was a moment of truth for any relationship she wanted to have with either man. Whatever had sparked Brian's actions the week before that had resulted in the phone calls to both her and Michael had resulted in Justin returning home and the two men declaring they were in a permanent relationship to the point that they had intertwined their business and personal finances, as well as personal responsibilities. She no longer had that special spot in Brian's heart, and Michael maybe even less than her. This was something totally new for Brian, yet very much in keeping with the Brian she had long known. It was his terms or be damned. In the past there had been a way around Brian's wall of attitude and emotions; she could get what she wanted, but no more. She knew now that between Brian and those defenses was Justin. Brian would always put Justin first, and Justin would do the same and he would never let anyone get close enough again to use Brian's psychological and emotional wounds to manipulate him.
Lindsay glanced at the two expectant faces, and she gave an internal sigh, admitting that it was over. After all these years, it was over. Brian truly belonged to someone else. Not her, nor Michael; they could have shared Brian, but that was never to be. He belonged to a man who would take no position but the one he felt was right for Brian. There would be no sharing Brian with Justin. Lindsay hoped both she and Michael would be able to adjust because they really had no other option if they wanted to stay in both Brian's and Justin's lives.

Over the last five years they had all seen Justin's loyalty and devotion; whereas he might have his own disagreements with Brian, no one else could dare speak against the man and not expect Justin to defend him. Lindsay realized that Justin's feelings for Brian went beyond loyalty, beyond devotion; it was love, love that was deep, abiding and apparently lasting. And as much as she didn't want to admit it she knew it was returned. She thought back to that blond teen who had introduced himself and offered to carry her packages. What had she overheard Justin tell Daphne? 'They are Brian's lesbians.' She felt a small smile slip out; little did she know that this young blond with his princely manners and sunshine smile was truly a king. King of Brian's heart. She knew she had to be happy for them, that she had to be their friend, that she had to be supportive of Justin's career but not interfere, that she had to allow Brian to be Gus's dad and not ask anything else of him. If she could do that, they would remain her friends and her family; if she couldn't do it, then she knew that the hole caused by the loss of the two men in her life might never be healed.

Lindsay turned to Brian. "I am happy for you," she turned to Justin, "for both of you."

She laid a hand on Brian's. "I'm sorry if it sounded like I didn't approve or that it was something I should have any effect on." She smiled. "It's just so sudden. There have been so many changes, and I thought things were one way and they weren't. I'm sorry if it bothers you that I need to process your being together, I shouldn't have to but..."

She looked at Brian, and saw him give a slight nod and then a shrug; he turned away from her to look at Justin. Lindsay could feel him slipping away; she turned to Justin as well, but his eyes were only on Brian. She took a deep breath. "Brian, Justin."

Both men turned to face her.

"You two...you are the best." Lindsay tried to find the words to explain. "I love you, love you both. It should never matter to you how any of us feel about you being together. WE...yes 'we,' did come to see
you in a certain way Brian and we... I...was wrong. We shouldn't expect you to be the same as you were while we go and find our partners. And Justin, yes, I think we thought you were too young, that Brian was that first love, the one you never forget, but not the one you will always be with. You were just luckier than the rest of us, your first lover turned out to be the right person." Lindsay paused and looked at Brian, "And so were you; the first person you fell in love with was the right person too. Maybe I was jealous. Jealous of someone taking my place in your life Brian. And Justin, your talent, I wanted you to do what I never could. I'm sorry if I somehow caused either of you pain. Mel and I have been struggling for almost 12 years for what you two have now. I know you have had major problems but it was exciting and at the same time demoralizing to watch how easily you two seemed to connect."

Brian stuck his tongue in his cheek and looked at Justin, watching his partner in the growing silence.

Justin looked backed, raising his eyebrows suggestively.

"Well, all I can say is that some of us are just luckier than others." Brian turned to Lindsay suddenly. "So now that you understand everything, what are you going to do about my son and moving home?"

Lindsay looked down at her hands before glancing up at Justin with a beseeching look. "Are you sure you don't have any coffee?"

"I believe I mentioned before that we aren't living here." Brian gave her a look. "Stop stalling."

Lindsay's eyebrows rose in a disingenuous look of interest. "Oh... where are you living?"

"Just a little place outside of town." Brian jerked when Justin shut the door of the empty cabinet with more force than necessary.

"Oh." Lindsay looked around the loft. "And you really are going to leave this behind, or are you just hiding out in some B&B for privacy and to avoid me --- and Michael?"
Brian sucked in his lips. And thought for a moment. "So you do know about my not speaking to Michael."

Lindsay nodded.

"Well, you can relax, that is sorted out." Brian glanced at Justin. "More or less."

Justin gave a minute shake of his head, then his eyes widened. "That reminds me. Michael called and asked if we could join him and Ben for dinner sometime soon. I explained we'd be in New York until Tuesday or Wednesday, so he asked about next Thursday."

"You forgot?"

"Well, I had other things on my mind."

"When did he call?"

"While I was," he twirled his finger, and looked out at the loft, "you know, doing stuff."

Brian rubbed his eyes. "And?"

"He asked if we would please come and that it would just be us, and maybe Ted and Em."

Brian sucked his lips in and thought about it. "Tell him yes."

Justin gave him a huge smile. "Why don't you?"
Brian's eyes narrowed a bit as he took in the smile. "Twat."

"That's 'interfering twat' to you."

Brian laughed and turned to Lindsay. "Okay, now let's get back to you and my son and the fact that you have no money, no real jobs and no real future."

"Brian!" Lindsay exclaimed indignantly, "That's not true."

Brian gave her a snide look of disbelief. "Yes it is and you know it, so let's just cut the crap and get down to it. You should come home and I want to see my son more."

"It's not as easy as that; you just can't wave a magic wand and make it so."

"I can't?" Brian asked, as if surprised by her comment.

"Brian, it's Mel's and my decision, not yours."

Brian gave her a long stare and then tipped his head a bit. "We don't really want to find that out, now do we?"

Lindsay had a confused look on her face. "What?"

Brian gave a shrug, "You can't seem to support my son. I have an issue with that."

Justin came around the counter and took Brian's hand, but turned to face Lindsay. He wanted to avoid any reference to custody and keep Brian in a positive mood.
"Lindsay, I think Brian is just worried. You want to move home, don't you?" He felt Brian squeeze his hand but ignored it. "You suspect Mel wants to too, why not just come home? It's not working out and it will take years before it does. You can come home and get your lives back on track, in months, not years."

"What about our rights? Our safety?"

"You and the kids are safe Lindsay." Brian pulled Justin into his arms.

"How can you say that?"

"How can you question it?" Brian dropped his chin on to Justin's head. "Justin came home, he's not afraid. He's ready to live in a city, not just where he knows the victims of hate, but was actually a victim -- twice --- of a hate crime."

Justin looked at Lindsay. "Hate is everywhere Lindsay, but here we have a strong community, we have family and friends, and I don't want to be away from them, I won't be driven away from them. Things have calmed down and I don't think they'll ever be like that again, at least here. Here we will be more vigilant with our children, cautious with our events, we know who to trust, and we need to fight to keep the city government we have now. Dinkins did do what he promised after the bombing; our streets are safer now, we have as many patrols as the rest of the neighborhoods in town, maybe more. And there are citizen watch groups too. Ask Michael if you don't believe us."

He took Brian's hand and lifted it to his mouth and gave it a slight kiss. "And I have to apologize to Brian."

Brian pulled his hand a way. "Why do you need to apologize to me?"

"We all do."
Brian shook his head and sat back in his chair dropping his arms from around his lover.

Justin took a step away so he could stand between Brian and Lindsay and see both their faces. "I left you, that's what I should apologize for. I never thought about you and how Babylon's destruction, losing Gus and almost Michael affected you. You claim you don't give a shit about our social issues and community Brian but you have always contributed, and when you saw something that you abhorred, you took care of it, alone and at great personal costs. You are 'Rage.' I thought of myself and not you, not us and that was wrong. I won't do it again."

Brian didn't say anything but Justin saw the deep swallow he took as if fighting some strong emotion.

Justin turned to Lindsay. "You did too. You ran after all the years of fighting and trying to make it better; you got scared. This time it wasn't happening to me – or another gay man. It happened to your friend, a mother, a woman, a lesbian. And it scared you and Mel. We should have regrouped, instead we ran. We shouldn't have left, I left – I let other people take up the fight I started and that was wrong. I left Brian to rebuild and to fight alone again." He looked over at Brian. "I'm so sorry."

Brian shook his head but didn't say anything.

Lindsay hands were clenched and she was looking down at her hands. She spoke quietly, causing both men to listen closely. "I...you're right. All those years we campaigned and claimed we had to fight, when it got too close ... the children... we were afraid for them."

"Do you think I would ever allow them to be hurt?" Brian asked just as quietly. "Do you think I would ask you to bring them back if I didn't think they would be as safe as any other child in this country can be? There will always be threats Lindsay and not from homophobes. You know that. But here, you had financial security, you had friends and backup. You had me."

Lindsay felt the tears roll down her face. "I know." She rubbed a hand across her eyes to catch the tears. "I want to come home, but Mel..." She took a trembling breath. "I'll talk to her but I'm not sure we can even afford the move at this point. Where would we stay? I need to find work."
"I'm sure you'll both find work easily. Hell, you know Sidney is crazy about you. He'll probably take you back in a heartbeat. Mel's firm will probably take her back too. They made her a partner, didn't they? And if not, at some other firm where Mel can begin practicing again. I don't think it will take you long to get that sorted out. Gus can start kindergarten. Michael and Ben will be here to help with JR. God knows Debbie will baby-sit at the drop of a hat."

"But it's gone Brian, it's all gone. Our home, our jobs, our savings."

"Everything that is important is still here. The people you love are still here, and we will all help. We will all protect the kids. Except for the people killed nothing has been lost that can't be replaced. You can rebuild it all. You can take back what you lost. Nothing here has changed. The summer went by without you, but the shops and restaurants stayed open, the street vendors were out, the GLC had a benefit and contributions created scholarships at the local high schools in the victims' names. The community, as you call it, went on without you, it didn't disappear, it didn't weaken; if anything it became stronger. People who don't hate stepped up and began to see what they could do to help. Maybe it's only here in the Pitts, but it's a start and it makes home just that much safer and stronger." Brian stopped talking as he saw the look of wonder on Justin's face. "What?"

Justin smiled with a shake of his head. "How do you know all that? Why didn't you ever tell me?"

"I read Sunshine." Brian gave a careless shrug, "And it never came up in conversation."

"You are so full of bullshit." Justin laughed and gave him a hug, whispering into his lover's ear. "And just how much did you give to the scholarships?"

Brian smacked Justin's ass. "Get off me you little drama princess. I have no idea what you are talking about."

"We missed so much --- what will people think?"

"Who gives a fuck what people think?" Brian shook his head in disgust. "Lesbians!"
His comment was so normal, so everyday Brian, both Justin and Lindsay laughed.

Lindsay picked up her water and took a sip. "I'll talk to Mel. I can't make any promises, but I do want to come home."

Brian shrugged. "Then tell her. She'll follow."

Justin coughed on the water he was drinking. "Mel?" he choked out. "Just like that?"

Brian looked at him and smirked. "She's human too; you aren't scared of her, are you?"

"No," Justin said but his voice wasn't convincing.

Lindsay giggled suddenly. "I am."

"Amateurs." Brian shook his head. "You have to just sell your campaign Lindsay. She'll come."

"Oh, now it's a marketing venture."

Brian smiled widely. "Isn't everything?"

Justin tapped his water bottle against the counter. "You know Lindsay, Brian is right. You have to make her see things are better here. The news from the community is a good start. The fact that Dusty's partner stayed here with their children. Maybe she needs to work for an organization that will make her feel like she is fighting the discrimination more directly."

"But coming back --- it'll take the last of our money. Mel won't dip into..."
"Don't give me that shit. Mel can start working the minute she gets back; if she doesn't want to break into the reserves you'll still be all right. It'll be tight but I think it will be a hell of a lot easier than where you are now. And you know JR will never go without and you fucking well know it. Between her grandmother and her fathers she will be just fine. Mel needs to stop thinking like she's the only person in the world who has to provide for the baby. She doesn't have to do it alone, for fuck's sake, you are there too."

"I know but..."

"Lindsay, stop finding excuses. Just do it."

Lindsay's mouth set into a grim straight line and she narrowed her eyes as she looked at Brian.

Justin saw the look and decided to head off any confrontation. "You know by having the solutions to any arguments Mel might have against returning is the best way to proceed. There is no question about finances recovering once you're here, so you don't need to borrow or tap investment accounts. The community is strong and safe here. There is family, friends, and no red tape. There's not much else to argue against."

Lindsay nodded. "But we will break our lease by moving. We'll have the cost of the move and no place to stay. We won't have money to stay anywhere."

"How long before you could get your own place?"

"Well, without help, and the resettling and job search --- probably up to seven or eight months. It wouldn't take some people that long, but we have to pay for health insurance, we have the expenses of the children and other things, so it'll take longer to save."

"Your big problem is staying somewhere, and a family of four is a lot to take in and no one really has that much room."
Brian snorted. "Or patience."

Justin gave him a dirty look, and then looked around the loft. "You could stay here but it really isn't practical for kids."

"Excuse me?" Brian cut him off. "I think you need to discuss that with me first."

"Half mine."

"They can stay in your half --- with you!"

Justin waved off his comment. "Plus, you need to acclimate to being back and stuff. You probably could use some space between you and Deb...."

Brian saw the look in his lover's eye. "Justin."

Justin ignored the warning in Brian's voice. "You can't stay with us --- Brian would ... let's just say it wouldn't be pretty." Justin smiled slowly. "But we have this gatehouse, it's going to be my studio..."

"JUSTIN!"

Justin ignored the explosive shout from Brian. "It's going to be MY studio and gallery eventually, but I don't really have the time to organize it now because there is so much going on with Kinnetik. It's small, well not too small." Justin saw Brian drop his head on to the counter and bury his face in his arms, and he stifled a small smile. "It has a decent size bedroom upstairs, with two smaller ones, and it has three -- no four rooms downstairs --- if you count the sunroom. Really, I wouldn't be surprised if it wasn't almost the same size as your house was here. It'll be a great place for the kids. There is a private drive off the road and we won't bother you at all. It's not too far from town, and you'll love the area. There's
even a country club, and our lawyer, who's gay, is on the board. You'll probably feel right at home there. I can't get Brian there but you and I can check it out."

Brian raised his head and glared at Justin. Lindsay hid a smile, "Brian seems to have the same attitude about country clubs that Mel does. You and I could check it out though."

"Fucking shit," Brian muttered. "One goddamn point Mel and I can agree upon and it's shit like that." He sat up and looked at the two blonds. "I don't think this is a viable alternative."

Lindsay frowned. "You don't want Gus and me there?"

Brian rolled his eyes. "I'll pay for a place to get you settled."

"No, you are right, Mel and I need to make this work --- and without help." She turned to Justin. "We could pay rent, something small in the beginning and then more. I don't think Mel would accept it any other way. She wouldn't put up with Brian paying for the roof over her head."

"But I can pay for her college courses in Canada?" Brian asked in amazement.

Lindsay gave a slight grimace. "Well, technically, it IS Gus's money and ..."

"Don't fucking open that can of worms again Linz, not if you are going to be living near us. And I'm not saying you are."

Justin looked at him. "They can stay in my half of the gatehouse OR my half of the main house."

Brian's eyes grew wide. "You little shit!"
Justin shrugged and turned to Lindsay. "See how strong our arrangement is? Even without being married, he won't leave me and I've really pissed him off."

Brian slapped his hand down on the counter. "You have no idea how pissed off I truly am."

Justin gave a careless shrug. "At least you have the final defense against any argument Mel will have."

"I'll need to think about it. Thank you for the offer Justin. It might just work."

"Justin! Why don't you go get that coffee down at the corner, I want to talk to Lindsay privately for a few minutes."

Justin shook his head. "No, I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"You'll try to change her mind and ..."

All three heads turned as the sound of the door sliding open stopped their discussion. Brian winced at the loud crashing sound of the metal door as it hit the steel stopping mechanism.

"SHIT!" Brian got up and started for the door to confront whoever was coming in but stopped mid-step as Melanie appeared before them, an angry look on her face.

"WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON?"

"Mel?" Lindsay asked meekly.
"What are you doing here Lindsay? I thought we had no secrets. I though you wanted our marriage. Are you back here to fuck Sam again?"

"What?" Lindsay stood up, her height not intimidating the smaller woman at all. "I am not here to see Sam. I am committed to our marriage. The question is --- what are you doing here and where are the children?"

"What am I doing here? WHAT AM I DOING HERE?" Melanie's eyes were wild. "The real question is WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?"

"Me?" Lindsay began to play with the neck of her turtleneck. "I...I came to see Brian about some business." She took a moment to regroup and stood a little taller. "How did you know I was here?"

"I didn't until I called Debbie's."

"Debbie?"

"Yeah, I was going over a few things, deciding on how to sort out a few --- problems --- when I noticed some legal papers were missing. I tried to call you to see if you knew where they were, and guess what? You took two days leave. Unpaid no less. And here I am, your partner, calling to get the number I can reach you at and you weren't off in Quebec checking out new talent, you are in Pittsburgh, checking out really 'old' talent."

"Fuck you," Brian snapped out.

"I called you last night; you never mentioned it."
"It was after we talked. I went looking for...I went looking for something... and I couldn't find it and then I realized you didn't leave me the number you promised to give me. So I called the gallery this morning and sounded like an idiot on the phone looking for you."

"So you called Deb?"

"Yeah, but it was Carl who answered. I bet he didn't know he wasn't supposed to mention you were here."

"How did you get here?"

"The kids and I have been on the road for seven hours to get here. It hasn't been pleasant. Now what the hell is going on?"

Justin looked between the two women. "I think I'll just run to the store and get that stuff for coffee." He started to walk past Brian.

Brian reached out and grabbed the back of his shirt. "Just stay where you are Sunshine."

Mel glanced at Brian. "You are behind this, aren't you?"

Brian held on to Justin's shirt but shook his head. "As much as a surprise to me as it was to you."

Mel turned to Lindsay. "What is going on?" She lowered her voice. "Those papers ... do you know the ones I mean? Do you have them?"

"We all know the ones you mean." Brian gave Mel a very measured look. "And no, Lindsay doesn't have them anymore. In fact, I don't have them anymore."
"What did you do? Where are they?"

"Peter has them now."

"Peter?"

"Peter Morgan."

Mel recognized the name and who he was to Brian. "Oh."

"Let's just leave it --- that is never going to happen --- and move on," Brian said strongly and quietly.

Melanie looked at Lindsay. "Uhmm, we need to talk."

"I know." Lindsay took a deep breath. "There's a lot to talk about and we might as well get started. Mel, I love you but I want to move back home."

"WHAT?"

"We'll be going now." Brian suddenly nudged Justin to the door.

Lindsay looked to Brian wide eyed. "But..."

Brian held up a hand. "It's all you now Linz." Brian looked around. "Where are the kids again?"
Mel looked at Brian with an annoyed frown. "At Deb's, Michael offered but ... it seemed better to stay at Deb's."

"They are staying the night there then?"

Mel nodded.

"We'll be by to see Gus in the morning." Brian looked around the loft again. "Why don't you two stay here? You can yell and scream and get it over with, no one will think twice about it if they hear you." He gave them a sly smirk and then frowned. "But --- no lezzie sex in my bed."

Mel gave him a dirty look. "Where will you be staying?" She suddenly stopped and seemed to realize Justin was standing there as well. "Baby? What are you doing here?" She turned to Brian. "You selfish asshole, now you have him back here too?"

Brian raised an eyebrow in warning. "I'd be very careful how you speak to your landlord right now." He gave Justin another push towards the door. He gave Mel another wide smile. "I think Lindsay can bring you up to date on everything. Have a nice evening. Before I forget and appear to be a rude host -- the phone works, but you'll have to call out for food; there isn't much to eat or drink here." Brian had reached the door as he finished speaking; he shoved Justin out the door and then turned and began to close the door. "Bye."

Brian listened to the clang of the metal door closing, looked at the closed door for a moment and then turned and quickly headed for the stairs.

"Brian?" Justin asked quietly.

Brian ignored him and started down the stairs at a quick rate.

"Brian?"
Brian continued down the stairs but he heard Justin following him.

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Brian reached the bottom of the stairs and almost reached the door when he felt his lover's hand on his arm. He stopped and waited, not saying anything or looking at the younger man.

"Oh, so it's going to be the silent treatment."

Brian gave him a cold stare in reply.

Justin wrinkled his nose at the look. "Okay. Fine."

Brian pulled his arm free and headed out the door. He headed straight for the Corvette. He unlocked his door and was surprised to see Justin unlocking his door. The two men stared at each other over the low roof of the car.

Brian pointed at the Mercedes without saying a word.

"No, I'm tired and my hand hurts."

Brian tilted his head and gave Justin a disbelieving look.

Justin shrugged and opened the door. "You wouldn't want me to wreck it would you? We can pick it up tomorrow afternoon on the way home. Unload everything into the house or garage. We will need to pack tomorrow night." Justin stopped speaking as he slipped into the car and shut the door, missing the scowl and pouting lips on Brian's face. Brian rubbed his hands over his face and got in the car.
Brian started the car and quickly pulled away from the curb. He gave Justin a sideways look and caught the younger man actually massaging his right hand, a small frown marring his features. Brian's lips compressed in concern but he refused to speak to the blond. His anger was still too close to the surface.

Justin ignored the silence and began a monologue that lasted most of the trip home.

He settled down into his seat and stretched his legs out. "Do you think they'll move home?"

Justin listened to the silence.

"Yeah, I think they will too." He glanced and saw Brian's jaw tighten; he turned to look out the window, smothering a small sigh. "I think Mel will go for it. She wants to come home; she just doesn't want to admit it. Certainly didn't take much for her to drive here. She doesn't budge out of Canada for months and bang, she's here. She could have waited and confronted Lindsay when she got home. That whole fucking Sam routine was not believable, but it gave her a reason, no matter how contrived. She knows Sam's out of the country. I bet she stalks him on the Internet to make sure she knows where he is at all times. If you fucked someone like that I'd make it my business to know where he was at all times."

Justin glanced over; Brian's only reaction was a slight raise of his eyebrow.

"I think them staying at the gatehouse is perfect."

Brian's hands tightened on the wheel and the 'vette accelerated a bit.

Justin rubbed his nose, hiding a hint of a smile. "Yeah, this is the best way. This way it won't cost US any money. Which we really don't have to spare right now. There are also a lot of pluses. First, Gus will be more accessible. Second, it won't cost us anything. Third, when we are in New York there will be someone to watch the house. Once we move in --- well, we will have some valuables and this way someone will be around. Next – is it the fourth?" He looked at Brian and saw him open his mouth and suddenly shut it. Justin almost had him answering but Brian caught himself. "Yeah, reason number four... the area is safer than in the city, it will give them time to ease their way back into their lives here,
get used to the city and feel more in control by not living in a really urban setting. Mel could even practice out of her home for a while, and there's a yard for the kids."

Brian put on a blinker and accelerated into the third lane of the expressway.

"You know since we don't have to help support them we should be able to gate the driveway to the house and the entrance to the gatehouse. Lots of extra security, especially for the kids. We have to make sure Gus knows how to get into the house. Can you imagine the decorations we can do for the holidays?"

Another glance and Justin saw a look of distaste wash over Brian's face. He tried not to laugh as he made his comment. "I think Lindsay and I should definitely check out the club, they are always great places for holiday parties, we'll get to meet some of our neighbors."

Brian made a choking noise that Justin was sure was the start of some comment. He took a peek at Brian and saw the brunet suck his lips into his mouth.

Justin continued to talk as they exited the expressway and headed down the main route to the house. "Can we stop at Haskins and get some ice cream?"

His answer was silence and Brian accelerating as they passed the shops.

"I guess that was a no."

Justin turned to Brian and watched him intently. Brian looked at him suspiciously once or twice.

Justin finally let out a deep breath. "Just so you know. You can keep silent all you want but sooner or later you'll have to talk to me. Now tomorrow at the meeting I guess you can just talk to me about business, or talk around me but this weekend you'll talk."
Brian pulled up in front of the house and turned off the car. He looked over at Justin and shook his head.

"Oh, you'll talk." Justin opened his door and partially turned to get out then stopped, his head turned to Brian. "You see, we will be in New York for at least four days. The only other company you'll have to talk to is my mother and Molly." Justin watched as Brian's eyes widened and then he got out of the car. He leaned down and looked at Brian. "So you'll talk to me, if only to complain."

"FUCK!"

Justin smiled. "See, we're talking already. I'm going to get the shower ready. I'll be waiting for you."

Brian sat in the car and watched as Justin unlocked the door and went into the house; then he got out of the car and shut the door. He stood watching the house as lights gradually lit up the inside; he could track his partner's progress as he made his way upstairs. Brian turned and looked down towards the road; he could see the dark shape of the gatehouse and a small smile broke into his taciturn expression. Next week there would be lights lit throughout the small brick house, he was sure of that. Gus would be living close, at least for a while. Their friends and family would be visiting regularly. Then there were the challenges; New York and taking Kinnetik to the next level, deciding what to do with the club, getting his friendship with Michael back to some sort of normalcy, dealing with two interfering mothers. Then there were the nosy friends like Daphne and Emmett, refereeing Mel and Lindsay, getting to know his son better, and keeping Joan and Claire from touching any of his happiness.

Brian gave his head a slight shake of disbelief. He suddenly had a very full schedule and a lot of people counting on him. He smiled widely; it was the best he felt in months. Of course he knew his biggest challenge was just beyond the front door of their new house. Living with and loving Justin would be the biggest adventure of all. He knew one thing. Justin had to learn who was in charge and it may take a while but he was sure the little drama queen would get with the program. Brian laughed suddenly, realizing it might take years for that to happen, but it was bound to be interesting.

Brian started for the door when he felt a growing warm ache in his chest. He stopped a moment, overwhelmed by it. The sensation wasn't a painful feeling, no not painful. Then Brian recognized the
feeling. He closed his eyes and took a deep calming breath, opening his eyes after a few moments to look up at the welcoming light of the house, Brian knew this feeling; it was something he had rarely felt, seldom as a child and almost never as an adult. He took a step and then lifted his hands to clear the moist cloudiness that had swept over his eyes. He recognized this—it was happiness.

"Fucking shit," he muttered as he went into the house, locked the door, turned out the first floor lights and headed up the stairs. There was a certain blond, standing under a shower, who had a lot to answer for.

-- End Season 5 --