QAF Stories

By Dayna

**Friend or Lover**

Justin was in the kitchen watching dishes when he heard the loft door open. Rolling his eyes, he turned as he saw Michael walk in unannounced. He looked around the loft before letting his gaze fall on Justin. "I figured I'd find you here. Does Brian know you come in here when he's not around?"

"Brian knows I'm here. Does he know you just let yourself in anytime you want?" Justin challenged, not about to let the older man that Brian was indeed home.

Michael's eyes narrowed before moving towards the kitchen. "We're best friends. Something you wouldn't understand. All you are is the twink that wouldn't leave."

Justin really didn't feel like getting into this again. Michael had made it very clear, repeatedly, that he thought Justin had no place in Brian's life. And he wasn't willing to accept that if Brian had really wanted him gone, he would be gone. "Why are you here, Michael? I already know how you feel about me and Brian."

"This isn't about Brian, it's about my mother. And the burden you're being to her."

"What?"

"She can barely afford to take care of herself and Uncle Vic, then you show up and it's that much more work. Have you ever stopped to consider that? Or are you too selfish to consider the people around you?"

Justin turned to Michael. "I help out around the house and you know it. And part of my checks goes to Deb."

Michael's eyes narrowed. "You're supposed to be paying Brian back for stealing his credit card."

"I am. He gets the other half. We worked that all out when we got back from New York."

Michael shook his head. "It doesn't matter. You don't belong here, Justin. You pushed yourself into our lives and no one wants you here. Mom feels sorry for you, that's the only reason she's letting you stay at the house. And you've done a damn good job of making Brian feel guilty so he'll let you stick around."

Justin's hands clenched on the dishtowel then turned back to the sink. "You don't know anything about how Brian feels about me."

"The hell I don't. I know him better than anyone. You were a trick, Justin. A one-night stand. No different than a thousand other nameless tricks. But you used this innocent little act of yours to attach yourself to Brian and you manipulated him. Now he feels guilty about the fact that he encouraged you to leave home and you're milking that for everything its worth."

Justin turned his head. "I'm not. I love Brian."

Michael snickered. "You don't know anything about love. You want him and you're willing to use every trick in the book to get him. But it won't last. Sooner or later he's going to see through you and you'll be out on the street......where you belong!"

Justin's eyes widened and he felt the tears in his eyes. Michael had never been so cruel before. But before he could think of anything to say, he saw Brian in the bedroom. And from the look on his face, he'd heard what Michael said. Looking down into the sink, Justin grabbed onto the sink.

"He doesn't give a damn about you, Justin. You're nothing but a fuck."

"What the fuck is going on out here?"

Michael turned in shock to see Brian standing in the doorway of the bedroom dressed only in jeans. He looked back at Justin who was still facing the sink then back to Brian. "I didn't know you were home."

"Obviously. You want to tell me what the hell this is all about?"

Michael shifted uncomfortably. "I was just talking to Justin. Nothing important."

Brian crossed over to the kitchen and leaned next to Justin. "Is that right?"

Justin looked up but didn't say anything. He went back to washing the dishes. Though he had looked away quickly, Brian had seen the tears in the teenager's eyes. And even if he hadn't heard the whole damn conversation, he would've known something was wrong. Turning back to his best friend, Brian crossed his arms over his chest. "I don't like being lied to, Mikey. You know that."

"Look, I never........"

Brian's eyes narrowed. "I heard every damn word you said, Mikey. You all but called Justin a whore. What I want to know is what the hell are you thinking?"

Michael's face went white. "I didn't know you were here. He never said........"

"And why does that make a difference? What else have you told him when you thought I wasn't around? I thought you'd gotten over this jealousy thing you have with Justin."

"Brian, I've only told him the truth. You know he doesn't belong here. He's taking advantage of the fact that you feel guilty and......."

"Guilty about what? I have nothing to feel guilty about, Mikey. And I never let anyone take advantage of me."

Michael looked from Brian to Justin's back. "Then why is he still here, Brian? He's taking advantage of you and my mom!"

Brian shook his head. "Deb is letting him live with her because she cares about him. As for me, I'm a big boy. I can take care of myself. And he's here because I want him here."

"He's nothing but a trick, Brian."

"Michael...." Brian said warningly.

"Is the little whore that good in bed, Brian? Is that why you're keeping him around?"

Brian's eyes narrowed and he could feel Justin tense next to him. "Shut the fuck up, Mikey. I don't have to explain myself to you or anyone else. All you need to know is that Justin is still around because people want him here. And he's in my bed because I want him there. I'd suggest you apologize for that bullshit and get out of here before I say something we'll both regret."

Michael shook his head. "I'm not going to apologize for telling the truth!"

"Get out, Mikey. Now!"

Brian saw Michael's hands clenched. "This has gone too far, Brian. He's trying to ruin our friendship! Are you going to let some little fuck come between us? ARE YOU!?!?"

"He's not trying to do anything. You're letting your jealousy.........."

"Choose, Brian."

Brian's eyes widened. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me. There's not enough room in your life for me and him. You have to choose."

"I don't do ultimatums, Mikey. Now, go home and calm the hell down. We'll talk tomorrow."

Michael shook his head. "One of us leaves right now and that person doesn't come back. Now which is it going to be?"

Justin turned then and saw the emotions playing on Brian's face then looked at Michael. The other man was completely serious. Justin closed his eyes as he thought about what was happening. As much as he loved Brian and wanted to be with him, he wouldn't be the cause of him losing the best friend he had. Justin knew how much Michael meant to Brian, he wouldn't make him choose. Taking a deep breath, Justin said the hardest words he'd ever said.

"I'll leave."

Justin dried his hands and turned to walk past Brian, but he was caught around the waist and pulled back against Brian's chest. "You're not going anywhere."

"Let him go, Brian. He knows he doesn't belong here."

Justin turned his head to look at Brian. "I never wanted to cause problems with Michael. I'll leave and everything will be like they were before you met me."

Brian just looked at him but when he tried to pull away he felt Brian's arms tighten around him. "Maybe I don't want things like that again."

"Brian......."

Brian turned back to his best friend but kept his hold on Justin. "If you're going to let jealousy come between us that's really fucked, Mikey. You know damn well that you and I will never be anything but friends. Justin's staying."

"I don't believe this. You're choosing him over me?!?"

Brian shook his head. "I'm not choosing anything. I'm telling you how it's going to be. Justin will be in my life and in my bed. Either you accept that or you don't. It's your choice. And I don't want a repeat of the bullshit that has been going on between the two of you."

Michael felt angry tears building in his eyes as he stared at Brian who was holding Justin in his arms. "You'll regret this, Brian."

And with that Michael turned, storming out of the loft. It was absolutely quiet for several long minutes until Brian turned Justin to face him. Tears were running down his face. "I'm sorry, Brian."

Brian wiped the tears away and kissed him softly. "You didn't do anything wrong, Justin. It was Mikey's choice."

Brian kissed him again then walked into the bathroom, closing the door behind him. Justin leaned back against the counter as the tears fell again. He knew how much Brian had to be hurting but he also knew that the older man needed to handle this on his own. Justin hoped that once Michael calmed down he would realize that he'd made a mistake.

A month later things had changed. The group had splintered apart. When they'd learned what had happened, Ted had supported Michael while Emmett had supported Brian and Justin. Deb and Vic were torn and tried to stay neutral. But it had become obvious early on that Justin's presence at Deb's was making it a volatile situation, and Lindsey had agreed to let him stay with her and Gus. She had been lonely since she and Melanie had split up.

But running into Michael at Babylon or Woody's always made for tense situations. Though Brian tried to ignore his presence, Justin knew he was hurting. Damn Michael for putting them all in this situation. An arm wrapping around his waist brought him out of his thoughts and he turned his head to meet Brian's kiss.

"Quit worrying about Mikey, Justin. He tried to force me to choose. I won't be forced into anything, not by him and not by anyone."

"But he's your best friend, Brian. And I'm......nobody. He didn't think there was really a choice to be made. Friend or trick."

Brian pushed Justin to his back and leaned over him. "He tried to make me force between my friend.........and my lover."

The tears pricked at Justin's eyes as Brian bent down to capture his lips in a passionate kiss. As they began making love, all thoughts of Michael were pushed out of their minds.

END

**Broken Pieces**

Justin sat with his head down staring at the floor. He wasn't aware of the people around him. The only thing that he was aware of was the fact that with one swing of a bat, Chris Hobbs had destroyed his entire life. He may not have killed him but sometimes Justin felt that would have been better then the way he was living now. A life that paled compared to what he'd had two months earlier.

What had started as being the best night of his life had turned into his worst nightmare. One minute he was deliriously happy knowing that things with Brian had taken a more intimate turn. Then, in a split second, the dream was shattered. And when he woke up in the hospital, it was obvious things had changed. Though he hadn't known it at the time, those few precious moments with Brian in the parking garage were to be the last time he was in Brian's arms.

During his recovery in the hospital, he'd had a steady stream of visitors, but never Brian. Wanting, no needing, Brian was what gave him the determination to work through painful rehab. But Brian had been distant when he'd finally seen him. And it didn't escape Justin's attention that Brian wouldn't even touch him. The emotions he'd seen in Brian's eyes on prom night were gone, replaced by the indifference that had been present at their first meeting.

Brian wasn't the only one who was treating him differently. They all were in one way or another. Debbie had been become so overprotective that he felt like he was smothering. Ted and Michael didn't seem to know how to act around him or what to say and the meetings usually ended up being uncomfortable for all of them. Emmett was overly optimistic trying to make Justin feel better. Melanie and Lindsay always looked at him with these sad sympathetic eyes. And his mother tried desperately to act as though nothing had changed. His father hadn't visited or called since he was hurt.

Justin's eyes closed against the burning in his eyes as he thought about his father. Though he hadn't spoken to him, he knew exactly what his father thought of the situation. Neither of his parents was aware of the fact that he was in the house when they got into an argument about the bashing. Hearing his father say that he deserved what happened had devastated him. And he'd desperately wanted to talk to someone about it but he hadn't. He couldn't handle any more sympathy. He just wanted things to be like they were before!

But it would never be that way again. He was damaged now. And all his dreams were dead. There would be no going to the Institute, no happily ever after with Brian, no loving family reunion. If he weren't able to get past the bashing, how could he expect anyone else to? And the nightmares told him that he couldn't forget what had happened or what he had lost because of it.

The next announcement broke through his thoughts and Justin shook the dark thoughts away. Standing, he grabbed his backpack with his left hand and headed for the bus terminal. And he boarded the bus out of Pittsburgh, tears falling down his cheeks as the familiar scenery disappeared.

Michael knocked more persistently until Brian finally opened the door. He pushed past him and looked around the loft. "Where is he? Tell me he's here."

"What the hell are you babbling about? No one's here."

"Shit. I was sure he would've come here."

"Who?" Brian asked.

Michael turned to him. "Justin. He's gone."

"What do you mean 'gone'?"

"I mean, he packed up his stuff and he's disappeared off the face of the earth! His mother hasn't seen him since yesterday afternoon. He's not with Daphne, he's not at mom's, and he's not here. Ted and Emmett haven't seen him, he's gone!"

Brian walked over to sit down on the couch. "Don't be so melodramatic, Mikey. Daphne's probably hiding him and not telling you guys."

"No, she's worried about him too. She knew he was depressed but never thought he'd take off."

"You're overreacting, Mikey. He's just hiding out somewhere and he'll show up in a couple days and pretend like nothing happened."

Michael shook his head. "Maybe before the bashing, but not now, Brian. You've seen how being around a lot of people freaks him out. If he's taken off, it means he's in trouble. And we've got to find him."

"He probably just wanted some time alone, Mikey. Christ, between Deb and his mother, the kid was practically suffocating."

"You're not getting this, Brian. This isn't like when he took off for New York. The bashing left him with more then an injured hand. The nightmares, anxiety attacks, the fears........he's not thinking clearly. And he's vulnerable."

"What nightmares? He told me they stopped."

"No, if anything they've gotten worse."

"Then why didn't he tell me."

Michael ran a hand through his hair. "Maybe because you've been pushing him away. Or because you never bothered to visit him in the hospital. Maybe he thinks you don't care."

"That's bullshit, Mikey. He knows differently."

"And how would he know that, Brian? You've barely spent any time with him and when you are together, you never even touch him. You haven't danced with him since the prom."

Brian stood with his back to Michael. "I didn't want to rush him or freak him out by trying to touch him before he was ready. You were there when Jennifer said he backed away from physical contact."

"But you were the exception, Brian. Remember, he reached out for you and you backed away. What do you think that said to him?"

"This is not my fault, Mikey."

"I didn't say it was. But Justin needs you, Brian. And we need to find him before something happens. He's too vulnerable right now to be out on his own."

Brian cursed under his breath. "I'll kick his ass for this stunt."

Michael smiled slightly. "Then let's find him."

Brian turned around. "Where do we start?"

Justin looked at the motel room and shook his head sadly. Turning, he shut the door and locked it. Then double and triple checked the lock before dropping down onto the bed. The tears rolled down his face as he curled around the pillow.

Michael leaned back against the couch with his eyes closed. Damnit, they'd looked all over the city for Justin and nothing. No one knew anything. The kid obviously didn't want to be found. Michael grabbed for his jacket as his cell phone rang. He pulled it out of the pocket and answered just as he heard Brian swear.

Michael told Emmett that they'd had no luck and he'd call him later. Then he hung up and turned to Brian. "What?"

"Fuck, I can't believe none of us thought about it."

"About what?"

Brian walked over and grabbed Michael's phone. "Justin's cell phone, Mikey. He probably took it with him."

"It's worth a try. Do you have the number?"

Brian gave him a look but nodded. He flipped open Michael's phone and dialed. Michael sat up and watched his friend, praying that Justin did have the phone and would answer.

Brian began pacing as the phone rang and rang with no answer. He was about to give up when he heard someone pick up but no one spoke. "Justin? Damnit, say something."

The phone line remained silent but the person on the other end hadn't hung up. "Justin, talk to me. Do you have any idea how worried everyone has been about you?"

Still nothing. Brian sat down in the chair. "Justin, answer me!"

"I'm fine."

Brian let out a sigh of relief at the sound of Justin's voice. "You little shit, don't fucking do that to me again. Where are you?"

"I'm fine, Brian." Justin repeated.

"You are not fine, Justin. I know about the nightmares. And I know you think that I've been pushing you away, but you're wrong. I was trying to give you the time you needed."

"I'm not your responsibility. I can take care of myself."

Brian's hand clenched on the phone. "Will you get it through your head that I fucking care about you! I wasn't pushing you away. Let me help you, Justin."

Brian heard what sounded suspiciously like crying. "Justin, please."

"Do you think I deserve this, Brian?" Brian asked shakily.

"What? Deserve what?"

"Getting hurt. Not being able to draw. Feeling isolated from everyone. Do I deserve it?"

Brian's eyes narrowed. "Who told you that?"

"I overheard my dad. He told my mom that I was asking for it. That I flaunted myself in front of Hobbs and provoked him."

"Son-of-a-bitch! No Justin, your dad is an asshole. Don't believe a fucking thing he says. He's no better than Hobbs or that homophobic prick of a judge. You did nothing wrong, Justin. We did nothing wrong."

The line was silent for several minutes before Justin spoke again. "Brian?"

"Yeah, Justin?"

"I'm scared."

"That makes two of us. Will you tell me where you are? I'll come and get you. We all want you home, Justin."

"I want to come home."

Brian wrote down the address. "I'm leaving now so it'll take me a few hours to get to you. Just stay in the motel until I get there. If you need to talk to someone, you can call Mikey. He's got his cell phone with him. I'll have him let the others know that you're alright."

"I'll be here."

"You better be. I'll see you soon."

Brian hung up and went into the bedroom to change clothes. As he was pulling on his jeans, he turned to Michael. "We'll probably stay there for tonight and drive back in the morning."

Michael nodded. "How did he sound?"

"Totally wiped out. Seems his old man managed to fuck things up without even trying."

Michael's eyes narrowed as he heard about the conversation. "Shit, he must really hate his son."

"No, but he hates what Justin is. And that's just as bad. The farther Justin is away from that asshole the better."

"Do I tell the others about that?"

Brian nodded. "I want Jennifer to know the truth. She needs to keep him away whenever Justin is around."

They walked out of the bedroom and headed for the door. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Take care of him, Brian. He's going to need you."

Brian nodded and walked out. Michael grabbed his own jacket and locked up before leaving. He knew there was a houseful of people waiting for word on the Boy Wonder. And he knew all of them were going to be as pissed as they were about what had happened.

Justin took a deep breath as he walked into his father's office. His mom and Brian had both tried to talk him out of doing this but it was something he needed to do. He had worked hard on healing physically, but this he needed in order to let go of the emotional baggage. And knowing that Brian was downstairs waiting for him gave him the added courage he needed.

Craig looked up as Justin walked in. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to tell you that you were wrong. There is only one person to blame for what happened to me. And that person is Chris Hobbs."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I heard you, dad. I was at the apartment when you were arguing with mom. The bashing was not my fault, it wasn't Brian's fault, and we did nothing wrong. We danced one dance together, that's it."

Craig stood up. "You flaunted your male lover in their faces, Justin. You went to that prom and shoved the fact that you're gay down their throats."

"They all knew I was gay, dad. And I didn't flaunt Brian. He came and we danced. It wasn't like we were fucking on the dance floor!"

"I don't want to hear this kind of talk from you, Justin."

"No, you never want to hear about it. But it won't make it go away! I'm gay, dad. Ignoring that fact, or ignoring me, isn't going to change that. And being gay doesn't give some homophobic jock the right to use my head for batting practice! He tried to kill me! Don't you give a damn about that?"

"Just drop this, Justin."

Justin moved closer to his father. "You never came to see me, never called. Where were you when I needed my father? Where were you when I was trying to get this," Justin brought his right hand up in front of him, "to work again? Where were you when I woke up screaming in the middle of the night? Or when I freaked out whenever too many people got into my space? You were nowhere around!"

"There was nothing I could've done for you, Justin. You wouldn't have welcomed my presence."

"How do you know? You never even tried to find out! I was falling apart and I needed to know that everything was going to be alright. But how could I believe that when my own father refused to be there for me? All of my dreams broke into a million pieces and I didn't know how to deal with it."

Craig moved to stare out the window. "Your lifestyle caused this, Justin. You can't deny that."

Justin shook his head as the tears started falling. "No, hatred and fear caused this. It's no one else's business if I sleep with men or women. That's my life. I don't try to tell others who they can or can't be with, and I deserve the same respect. My relationship with Brian doesn't concern anyone else."

Craig turned. "Relationship? Grow up, Justin. You're being used by that pervert and you are too naive to see it! He's using you and when he finds something better, he'll drop you in a second. Then where will you be?"

Justin wiped angrily at the tears. "You don't know anything about me or Brian. And even if we stopped seeing each other tomorrow, I wouldn't be alone. I have friends who will support me. Something that my own father isn't capable of!"

"It's disgusting, Justin. I will never approve or support it!"

"Then you can go to hell!"

Craig looked shocked at the words his son spoke. "Watch your mouth, Justin."

"If you can't accept that this is who and what I am, then I don't want or need you in my life! There's enough hate in the world to deal with, I don't need it from my own father. Goodbye."

Justin turned and walked to the door. "You'll regret this one day, Justin. Someday you'll see that what you're doing isn't right."

"Don't hold your breath." Justin said angrily then walked out, slamming the door behind him.

Brian stood leaning against the Jeep. He looked up as Justin made his way over to him. His hands clenched as he saw the tears running down Justin's face. Damn bastard!

"That good?"

Justin walked into his arms and leaned against his lover. "It's over. He's not a part of my life anymore."

Brian tightened his arms around the teenager. "Justin?"

"Let's go home, Brian. I won't give him the satisfaction of hurting me anymore."

Brian brought his hands to Justin's face and pulled him back to look him in the eyes. "He's not worth your tears, Justin. It's his loss and you're better off without him."

"I know."

Brian leaned in to kiss the younger man then they got into the Jeep. As they drove towards Deb's, Brian looked over at Justin who was staring out the window. Piece by piece Justin was rebuilding what Chris Hobbs had tried to destroy. He knew Justin would never be exactly the same, but he would heal and be stronger. And he would have the love and support of a lot of people who would be there to help him fix the broken pieces of his life.

END

**Christmas Spirit**

Justin wiped angrily at the tears that were burning his eyes. He wouldn't give them the satisfaction of crying. He wouldn't let it hurt him. As he walked up towards the door of Deb's, he smiled slightly as he saw Deb and Vic putting up the tree. Michael and David walked in and began to help trim the tree. God, he remembered last Christmas when he was doing the same thing with his family. They'd had so much fun. But there'd never be times like that again. Not when his family was torn apart. Something which, his father made perfectly clear, was his fault.

His father would be spending the holidays with his parents. Justin wondered what lies his father had been telling them about the divorce and about him. He hadn't heard from his grandparents since he walked out of his parent's home. And though she was more accepting of him then his father, Justin knew his mother hadn't told her parent's the truth either. She didn't say it in so many words but he knew. His mother didn't want her family knowing that her son was gay. So, while his mom and Molly would be there for Christmas, Justin hadn't been invited. He knew she expected that he'd spend the holiday with Deb but he couldn't.

The holiday was a bust already and he was in no mood to celebrate. But he'd be damned if he brought Deb and the others down with him. He'd politely decline her invitation and tell them that he would be spending the holidays with his mom and sister. Then he'd go stay at his mom's apartment for a few days while they were gone. No one would know the difference.

Justin looked up from wiping off a table when a brightly wrapped gift was set in front of him. He looked up as Brian slid into the booth. "What is this?"

"Your mom dropped it off at my office. She said she wanted you to have it for Christmas. I take it she's not going to be around."

Justin shook his head. "She and Molly are going to my grandparent's."

"Why aren't you?"

Justin shrugged but didn't look at Brian. "They don't know I'm gay. Mom didn't want to cause waves by having it come out now."

"So, I suppose that means I'll see you at Deb's."

Justin mentally swore. He'd never thought about that. "No. I.....I'm going to be spending it with Daphne."

Brian just nodded. Justin was saved from anymore questions by the arrival of the rest of the gang. And conversation quickly turned from Christmas to other topics. Justin grabbed the present and stuck it in back with his jacket. That had been close.

Brian leaned back against the couch. He wasn't a big fan of holidays and all this get-together-family time. He'd rather be at Babylon or picking up a trick at Woody's. But, Deb and Michael had been more of a family to him then his own ever had been and he figured he owed it to make an appearance. The whole thing would've been a lot more tolerable if Justin had been there.

"Damn, I forgot!"

Brian turned towards the kitchen where Deb stood with her hands on her hips. "What did you forget? To kill the turkey?"

"No, smartass. I was going to send some of my special dressing with Justin. I know Jennifer would have loved it."

"From the way Justin talked, they have so much food at his grandparent's house that there wouldn't be room for anymore. Just save some and give it to him later." Michael replied.

Brian sat up and looked between Deb and Michael. He motioned for Michael to come over. "What?"

"Why does she think Justin's with his mom?"

Michael looked confused. "Because he is. He left to meet up with his mom and sister last night and they'll be gone a couple days."

Brian shook his head. "He's not spending it with his mom, he's at Daphne's."

"No, he's not. Daphne and her folks went to visit relatives over the holidays. She won't be back till New Year's."

Brian's eyes narrowed. "What is that little fuck up to?"

"Brian, what's going on?"

"I don't know but I'm going to find out. If he's not here, not with his mom, and not at Daphne's, there's only one other place he'd be. His mom's apartment."

"But why would he......."

Michael began but Brian was already up and out the door. He exchanged confused glances with Emmett and Ted then shrugged. "Where'd Brian go?"

"Uh, he just remembered something he had to check on. He'll be back later, mom."

At least Michael thought he would be.

Brian drove towards Jennifer's apartment. The little shit was hiding something from all of them. Was he seeing someone that they didn't know about? Brian's hands unconsciously tightened on the steering wheel as his mind came up with any number of possibilities. And he didn't like any of them. Justin had one hell of a lot of explaining to do!

Brian stood outside Jennifer Taylor's apartment but all he could hear was soft music playing. His eyes narrowed as he thought about what Justin was doing and with who. Raising his hand, he knocked angrily on the door for several minutes until Justin finally opened the door. Pushing past him, Brian walked into the apartment and looked around. He saw nothing to indicate that someone else was there.

"Brian?"

Brian turned to Justin. "What are you up to?"

"I don't know what you mean. What are you doing here?"

Brian took off his jacket and walked over to sit down on the couch. "Well, it seems that there is some confusion about your whereabouts. I was over at Deb's and they are under the impression that you're with your mom and her family. You told me you were going to be at Daphne's and I'll bet your mom thinks you're at Deb's. You lied to all of us, Justin. I want to know why."

Justin just shrugged as he sat down in the chair across from Brian. "I just wanted to be alone that's all. And I knew if I told them that they'd all think something was wrong."

"And there isn't?"

"I'm fine."

"Really? You're sitting in a dark apartment, alone, on Christmas eve. That doesn't sound like you're fine. I heard your mom telling Deb last week how much you love the holidays."

Justin stood and went to look at the window. "Not anymore."

Brian watched Justin for a minute before he realized what was going on. "This is about your old man, isn't it?"

"Not really. It's about the fact that I no longer have a family to celebrate the holidays with. My dad hates me and blames me for our family being torn apart. My mom supports me as long as she doesn't have to share the truth with her parents. And my sister is scared to be around me because of the things my father has been saying. One set of grandparents want nothing to do with their gay grandson and the other set doesn't even know the truth."

Brian leaned forward. "Do not tell me that you are blaming yourself for the mess your family is in?"

"Things were fine before I......"

Brian got to his feet and went over to turn Justin to face him. "That's bullshit, Justin. Your parents lived in a fucking bubble and the first time things didn't go according to their well thought out plans that bubble burst and they had to face the real world."

"But if I hadn't......."

"If you'd stayed in the closet then you'd be miserable. You'd be denying who you really are. Sacrificing your dreams to keep their perfect little world safe. It wouldn't have been fair to them or to you."

Justin tried looking away but Brian caught his chin. "You are not responsible for anyone but yourself, Justin. Don't let their prejudices make you feel guilty. If they can't or won't accept you then fuck them."

Justin nodded but didn't say anything. Brian pulled away and grabbed his jacket. "Get your bag."

"What for?"

"Because I'm taking you back to Deb's."

Justin shook his head. "I can't. I won't ruin the holiday for them."

Brian looked at him. "You couldn't if you tried. Now, get your ass moving. If I have to suffer through the festivities at the Novotny home, so do you. Then you're coming back to the loft with me. And don't even try to argue. Move it."

Justin knew from Brian's expression that arguing would be pointless. He went to grab his bag from the bedroom then stopped to make sure everything was shut off. Justin followed Brian out, locking the door behind him. "What do I tell Deb?"

Brian pushed him out to the Jeep. "Try the truth."

Justin sank down into the seat and stared out the window as they drove to Deb's. Once they got there, Justin stared up at the house. "Justin."

"What?"

"Look at me."

Justin turned to Brian who reached out to cup his cheek. "You were wrong before. You do have a family and they love you, even if you are an annoying twink."

"I....."

Brian's hand covered Justin's mouth. "And they're all in that house."

Justin's eyes filled with tears and he nodded. Brian smiled as he leaned in to kiss Justin. "Thanks, Brian."

"I expect to be properly thanked once we get to the loft."

And for the first time in days, Justin smiled a real smile. "Count on it."

Brian and Justin walked up to the house with their arms around each other. That lasted until they got into the house and Deb spotted him. "Sunshine!"

Justin was pulled out of Brian's arms as Deb demanded to know what was going on. Brian just smirked as he hung up his jacket. "Everything okay?"

Brian nodded to Michael. "Yeah, he just needed to be reminded that family doesn't abandon each other during the holidays."

Michael eyed him curiously but Brian just smiled as he pushed Michael towards the living room.

Brian stared at the woman sitting in front of him. Who the hell did she think she was showing up at his home and telling him what to do. "You want to run that by me again."

Jennifer Taylor shifted as she faced off with Brian. "I want you to stop seeing Justin. It's time for him to come back and live with me. And it would be better for him if you were out of the picture."

"You must have had one too many eggnogs if you think I'm going to let someone dictate to me who I can and cannot see, lady. Especially someone who is so ashamed of her son that she abandoned him just two days ago."

"I did not abandon Justin."

Brain leaned back against the couch. "What would you call it? Because you're too scared to tell your parents the truth, you left your son to spend Christmas alone."

"It would have been a very uncomfortable situation for Justin. My parents would have a hard time........look, this is about Justin and what's best for him."

"I agree. So, I think it's time you put up or shut up."

Jennifer's eyes widened. "Excuse me?"

"Either admit the truth to your family or leave Justin alone. Don't come here and try to change him into what you want him to be. Moving back in with you, or whether I walk out of his life or not, will not make a damn bit of difference. Justin will still be gay. You need to either accept that completely or get out of his life."

"You have no right telling me to......."

Brian walked closer to her. "I have the right to interfere when I think Justin's being hurt. I'm the one who found him alone and depressed two days ago because his family had abandoned him. It was me who got him to go to Deb's and try to enjoy Christmas and it was me who held him later as he told me about how much it hurt losing his family! So don't tell me I don't have the right."

Jennifer shook her head. "I love my son, Mr. Kinney."

"Then prove it. Be there for him and say to hell with anyone that doesn't like it."

Jennifer leaned her head into her hands. "It's not that simple."

"If you love Justin then it is that simple."

Taking a deep breath, Jennifer stood and faced Brian. She knew that she had made a mistake thinking she could this man to back off. Shaking her head, she headed for the door. "Then let him go. He has people in his life now who love him no matter what."

"I'm his family, Mr. Kinney."

Brian followed her to the door and opened it. "Maybe you were straight Justin's family but you haven't earned the right to be gay Justin's family. And you never will if you don't stop trying to 'fix' him and lying to everyone about who he is."

Brian shut the door angrily as the woman left. "Thanks."

Brian turned to see Justin standing by the couch. "I take it you heard it all."

Justin nodded. "Nothing I didn't already know. She had talked to me before Christmas about going into therapy. Guess she thinks if I'm living with her that she could make me be not gay."

Brian walked over and kissed his lover. "Give her time, Justin. She does love you and at least she's trying."

"I'll see."

Justin turned and walked back into the bedroom. Brian went back to the door to set the alarm and turn off the lights then followed him. He stripped then crawled into bed and pulled Justin into his arms. "Merry Christmas, Justin. Don't let ignorance take away your love of the holiday."

"Merry Christmas, Brian."

Brian watched as Justin closed his eyes. He was bound to be hurt more because of what was going on with his family but at least Brian knew he'd made it clear that Justin wasn't alone. His real family may be pain in the asses but he knew that he had a family who loved him the way he was and weren't out to try to change him. And they'd be there to help him deal with anything his family threw at him. Though he wouldn't say it to anyone, Brian counted himself in that statement as well.

Brian looked at the framed sketch of him and Gus that Justin had given him for Christmas. It perfectly caught the playful mood they'd been in that day and Brian loved it. And he knew that Justin had loved the leather jacket he'd gotten him. Brian had to admit, at least to himself, that Justin was a part of his life. A very important part. And one he had no intention of losing. Turning onto his side, Brian closed his eyes and drifted to sleep. It had certainly been a Christmas to remember.

END

**Common Interests**

Michael had finished doing inventory at the store and decided to stop at the diner for a sandwich before meeting up with the guys at Babylon. Though even he had to admit that things hadn't been the same lately. Ever since Brian had thrown Justin out of the loft, he'd been a pain in the ass to be around. At first, Michael had liked the fact that Justin wasn't constantly around. Sure, he still ran into him at the house or diner but he had stopped showing up at Woody's and Babylon. But, even though he hated to admit it, he missed having the kid around.

Sitting down in a booth, he looked up when Justin walked towards him. "What can I get you, Michael?"

"Just a burger and soda."

Justin nodded and turned to leave. "Justin, you okay? You look....."

"I'm fine. I'll put the order in for you."

Michael watched as Justin walked back to the kitchen. There was something not right about the way the kid was acting. Was it just because Brian had pushed him away?

"He's not fine."

Michael turned to see his mother watching him. "Any idea what's wrong?"

"You mean besides that asshole Brian tossing him away like garbage?"

"Ma, come on."

Deb sat down and shrugged her shoulders. "He hurt him, Michael. And he did it on purpose."

Michael knew he couldn't argue that. But he suspected that Brian's reactions were done more out of fear then anything else. Justin was getting too close and it scared the shit out of Brian. So he reacted the way he knew best.....he pushed the kid away hard.

"Is that what's bothering Justin?"

"I don't know, Michael. I think it's something more but he won't talk to me."

Michael shook his head as he saw the way his mother was watching him. "Well, don't look at me. Justin and I aren't exactly friends. He wouldn't tell me anything either."

"You could try........"

They were interrupted when Justin brought Michael's order. "Here you go."

"Thanks, Justin."

"Justin, why don't you knock off early and go to Babylon with Michael. You haven't been there for a while, it would be fun."

Michael nearly choked on his sandwich as he looked at his mother. But before he could say anything, Justin beat him to it. "I don't think so. I've got a lot of homework to get done. Besides, I know where I'm not wanted."

Justin laid down the bill then headed back to the kictchen. Deb turned to her son. "You could've said something. Sunshine is hurting, Michael. You could try being sympathetic."

Michael just sat with his mouth open. How the hell had he become the bad guy here? All he had wanted was a sandwich.

Deb was sitting at the kitchen table when Michael walked in. "I came as soon as you called. Are you okay? Is Uncle Vic?"

"We're fine, honey. It's Justin."

Michael sat down across from his mother and saw how worried she was. "What about him?"

"He's become so withdrawn, Michael. He goes to school, to work, then up to his room. We hardly ever see him and when we do he barely says anything. I don't like it."

"What do you want me to do?"

Deb reached out for his hand. "I know you and Justin aren't close, but he needs to talk to someone. Something is bothering him, and I don't think it's just about Brian."

Michael looked at his mother for a second then nodded. "I'll try, but I don't know that he'll talk to me. But maybe if I can figure out what's bugging him, I can get Brian to talk to him."

Deb's eyes narrowed. "The last thing Sunshine needs is that little fuck around. Brian's made his feelings for Justin perfectly clear."

"Yeah, he has. He loves the kid, mom."

"Excuse me? Were you not there when he threw Justin out on the street and turned his back on him?"

Michael nodded. "And I've been there to watch Brian since then. I'm not denying what he did. But he did it because he was scared to death. You know Brian, mom. He hates anyone getting close. And that kid was getting pretty damn close. So, Brian reacted."

Deb sat quietly for several minutes as she thought about what her son said. It did make sense. She'd known Brian long enough to know how he reacted to things. And he did lash out at people when he was afraid. But knowing that Brian cared about Justin didn't help the situation. He had hurt that kid and hurt him badly.

"Just talk to him, Michael. Try to find out what's bothering him. Then we'll see."

Michael stood. "And if I think that what Justin needs is to talk to Brian?"

Deb shrugged. "Then you're the one who's going to have to confront Brian. And if that's what you decide, you make it damn clear to him that if he hurts Sunshine again, I'll hurt him."

"Alright. I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks, baby."

Michael kissed his mother on the cheek then headed up stairs. As he stood outside the door, he raised his hand to knock but then let it drop. Why should he knock? After all, it was still his room. Making the decision, Michael opened the door and walked in unannounced. His eyes widened as he caught sight of Justin standing there shirtless.

"What the fuck?"

Justin spun around and Michael's eyes went from Justin's chest to his face. "Michael, what are you doing here?"

Michael stood in silence as Justin pulled on a shirt. But when Justin tried to walk past him, Michael caught his arm. "No way, Boy Wonder. You and me, we're going to talk."

Michael closed the door behind him and watched Justin sit on the bed, his head hanging. Fuck, Michael thought. How in the hell was he supposed to handle this? He had enough trouble handling his own life without trying to fix Justin's. But remembering what he saw, he knew he didn't have a choice. The kid was in some kind of trouble and he needed help. And fast.

Michael stood looking at Justin. "Care to explain?"

"It's nothing."

"Bullshit. It doesn't look like nothing. You look like someone used you as a fucking punching bag, Justin."

Justin didn't say anything and Michael wondered again about what the hell he was doing. He wasn't equipped to deal with this. "If you won't talk to me then I'll call Brian."

Justin looked up then and shook his head. "Don't. Don't tell Brian. I just got banged up in gym."

"Justin, we both know you're lying. Either you tell me what the hell is going on or I'll let Brian handle this."

Justin looked down at his hands and shrugged. "It's no big deal. A couple guys at school jumped me."

Michael sat down on the bed. "Why?"

"Because I'm gay. They wanted me to know that they didn't like that."

"Shit, Justin."

Justin turned to Michael. "I'm fine, Michael. A little bruised but that's all. Just let it go."

"But you should tell someone."

"Like who? My parents? The school? No, I'll handle it on my own. Besides, they've made their point. It's not likely to happen again."

"And what if it does?"

Justin shrugged. "Then I'll handle it."

Michael ran a hand over his face. "Maybe we should call Brian. He could......"

Justin stood up. "No, there's nothing Brian can do about this. Look, he's made it clear that he wants me out of his life. You go to him with this he'll think it's some drama I've cooked up to get back in his life."

"I'll tell him......"

Justin shook his head. "Michael, please. I've never asked you for anything. But I'm asking you to not say anything to Brian or anyone else."

"Justin, I think......."

"Don't tell me you never had to deal with bullies when you were in school?"

Michael had been taunted by bullies but he'd always had Brian there to protect him. But Justin was right, bullies were a common problem in schools. Maybe he was overreacting.

"Alright, I won't tell. But if it happens again......."

"It won't. Thanks, Michael."

As Michael watched Justin walk out of the room, he couldn't help feeling like he was making a huge mistake. But he had given the kid his word.

Several weeks later Michael was at Woody's playing pool with the guys. He had checked on Justin a few times since their talk and the kid seemed to be doing better. The unease he'd been feeling since then had started fading......up until he got the phone call.

Brian made his way over to the pool table. "Where'd Mikey disappear to?"

Ted nodded towards the bar. "Phone call."

Brian moved to take his shot. When he was finished he looked up to see Mikey standing there. "What's wrong?"

Michael debated with himself. "Mikey?"

Michael looked between his friends then looked at Brian before making his decision. He couldn't handle this on his own. He'd tried it once and look what happened. "Can you give me a ride?"

"Now? Where do you need to be in such a hurry."

Michael took a deep breath. "The hospital. Justin's been hurt."

Michael watched as the blood drained from Brian's face. "How do you......?"

Michael threw Brian's jacket at him then turned to Ted and Emmett. "I'll call you guys later to let you know how he is."

Saying goodbye, he hurried outside to the Jeep. He sat quietly as Brian followed him out and they pulled into traffic. "Spill it, Mikey. What the fuck is going on?"

Michael turned and saw the angry expression on Brian's face. His friend was pissed and Michael knew that it would only get worse. Brian was going to be furious when he learned the truth.

Michael stood in the waiting room. "I'm still waiting, Mikey."

"I told you what I know, Brian. A couple weeks ago, Justin got beat up by some jerks at school. They must've come back for more."

"So they beat the hell out of him again. Badly enough that he ended up in the emergency room. That I get. What I don't get is why he called you? Since when have you two become friends?"

Michael shrugged. "We aren't, not really. Look, mom was worried about him and wanted me to talk to him. I saw the bruises and got him to tell me what happened. He thought that they'd gotten it out of their systems."

"But obviously they haven't. And how exactly did you see the bruises, Mikey? And why the fuck didn't you tell me what was going on?"

Michael turned to his friend, hearing the jealousy in his voice. "Jesus, Brian. I saw the bruises when I went to talk to him. He had his shirt off and they were kind of hard to miss. As for why I didn't tell you that should be obvious."

"Well it's not obvious. You should've told me, Mikey!"

Michael shook his head. "Why? You threw him out of your life, remember? Besides, he asked me not to tell you."

Brian got to his feet. "What? Why?"

"Geez Brian, I don't know. Maybe because you made it perfectly clear that you didn't want him in your life. Or maybe because he was afraid you'd think it was all some drama that he was using to get you back. He was scared, Brian. And he felt like he had to handle it alone."

The doctor came out then to get Michael. Brian watched as his friend was led back to see Justin. Brian's hands clenched into fists. It should be him going in there. He should've been the one that Justin talked to, the one to protect and comfort the kid. Not Mikey. But he couldn't forget what Michael had said. It had been his decision to throw Justin out of his life. It was his own fault that Justin didn't think he could talk to him.

Brian sat back in the chair and leaned his head into his hands. His feelings for Justin were something new for him and it scared him to death. That's why he pushed him away. Brian thought that once he got Justin out of his life, things would be like they were before. But he was wrong. He hadn't stopped thinking about Justin. Hadn't stopped wanting him. And now he was hurt. Justin was hurt and Brian was left on the outside looking in.

Michael looked down into Justin's battered face. The boy smiled at him slightly. "Hey."

"Hey yourself. So, what's the verdict?"

"Couple broken ribs, sprained wrist, nothing too serious. But I needed someone to be here or they wouldn't release me. And I didn't want to freak Debbie out by having her see me here."

"Was it the same guys, Justin?"

Justin didn't say anything for a minute but finally nodded. "Guess they thought I needed another lesson."

Michael ran his hands through his hair. "Damnit, Justin. I knew I should've told someone about this. If I had......."

"This isn't your fault, Michael."

"Justin, Brian's here."

Michael saw Justin's eyes widen. "Why?"

"He was with me when I got your call and gave me a ride over here. He's worried about you, Justin."

Justin shook his head. "Brian doesn't give a shit about me."

Michael reached out to touch the younger man's shoulder. "I think the problem is he cares too much. Talk to him, Justin. If for no other reason than to let him know you're alright. While you're doing that, I'll take care of the paperwork to get you out of here. Deal?"

Justin didn't look convinced but he nodded. Michael smiled at him then walked out to the waiting room. Brian looked up at him. "How is he?"

"He'll be fine. Go on, go see him. I'm going to go see about getting him released."

Brian nodded and headed the way Michael had come. "Don't screw this up again, Brian. You won't get a second chance."

Brian turned to Michael but his friend had already walked away. Taking a deep breath, he went back to see the young man he had fallen in love with.

Brian stopped at his first sight of Justin. He was sitting up on the exam table and Brian's breath caught at the bandages around his ribs. But what really fueled his anger were the bruises that covered the young man's body. A body that he knew as intimately as his own.

"Hi."

Justin looked up and Brian could feel the tension from across the room. Moving towards him, Brian forced himself to smile. "Mikey says you're going to be fine."

Justin nodded. "Just a little banged up."

Brian kept walking till he was only inches away from Justin. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Wasn't something you needed to know."

"I think it is."

Justin looked up at him. "You threw me out of your life, Brian. What happens in my life isn't any of your concern anymore. I'm not your responsibility."

Brian flinched as he heard the pain in the teenager's voice. The pain that he had inflicted. Reaching out, he cupped Justin's neck. "I was wrong."

As Justin looked at him, Brian could see the shock in his eyes. "What?"

"I made a mistake, Justin. An error in judgment."

"Are you saying......?"

Brian laid a hand over Justin's mouth. "I'm saying I want to see you again. Look, I can't give you any declarations or promises, but I don't want to lose you either. I want us to try to work something out. See where things go."

"I never asked for promises, Brian. I just wanted to be a part of your life."

"I know but I was still fucking terrified. So, what do you say?"

Justin looked from his hands to Brian. He was scared to death of trusting Brian again. Scared that he was just going to wind up hurt more. But looking into the face of the man he loved, he knew he had to risk it. Being a part of Brian's life was worth the risk.

"I say yes. I've missed you, Brian."

Brian gently cupped Justin's bruised face and kissed him softly. "I missed you too. Let's get you out of here."

When Michael returned, he stayed in the shadows as he watched Brian help Justin get his shirt on. And from the expression on both men's faces, Michael knew that they had at least come to some understanding. He walked in with a smile on his face.

"We're good to go. You have your prescription, right?"

Justin nodded as Brian helped him off the table. "Yeah, and the doctor's instructions. Can we just go, please?"

Once they got out to the Jeep, Brian turned to Justin. "What about the little bastards who did this?"

"What about them?" Justin asked trying to avoid the discussion.

"We aren't going to let them get away with this, Justin. They're not going to just leave you alone."

"I just want to forget about it."

Brian looked back at Michael who shook his head. And Brian understood. Now wasn't the time to talk about it. There'd be time enough to decide how to deal with the little shits after Justin had some time to rest.

By the time they got to the Novotny house, Justin had finally fallen asleep. Gently lifting his sleeping lover, Brian carried him up to his room while Michael handled explaining what happened to Deb and Vic. Laying him down, Brian stripped Justin down to his boxers and covered him with the sheet. Sitting down next to him, he reached out to caress the teenager's cheek.

"We'll figure this out together, Justin. You don't have to handle it alone."

And when Brian leaned down to kiss him, he knew he was talking about more then just the bullies. He was talking about everything. And even though the thought of a relationship scared the shit out of him, Brian Kinney didn't run.

END

**All the Credit**

Brian was sitting watching Gus play as his mind replayed the conversation he'd had with Mickey a few days earlier. And even after thinking about it, it still didn't add up to him. It didn't make any sense. But why would Michael lie? What could he hope to gain by making this up? He knew that there was never going to be anything but friendship between them. Didn't he?

"You want to talk about it?"

Brian turned to Lindsay. "Just trying to make sense out of something Mickey told me. And I can't do it."

"Maybe I can help. What did he say?"

Brian leaned his head back against the chair. "That he was the reason Kip withdrew the lawsuit. He gave me this very detailed account of how he confronted Kip and made him see that having this kind of thing in his file would make firms reluctant to hire him in the future, etc."

"And you don't think he did?"

Brian shook his head. "Mikey's not the type to do confrontations. Besides, he never even met Kip. And I don't see Kip just backing off like that."

"You're right. It doesn't sound like something Michael would do. It actually sounds like something Justin would do."

"What?"

Lindsay shrugged. "The kid loves you, Brian. I could see him getting involved somehow."

"No way. He never met Kip either."

"I didn't say he did anything, Brian. I was just pointing out that it sounded more like something Justin would do then Michael."

Brian ran a hand over his face. "So then Mikey's lying to me. He told me that in order to get something from me. But why? And what does he think it's going to accomplish?"

"I can't answer any of your questions, Brian. If you want to know why Kip dropped the suit, go talk to him. But for God's sake, be careful. As for Michael, you're going to have to talk to him. Confront him with your suspicions."

Brian pushed himself to his feet. "I hate it when you make sense."

Lindsay watched as he kissed Gus then headed for the door. "Where are you going?"

"To find the little bastard and get the truth out of him. Then, to talk

to Mikey. Fuck!"

Lindsay just shook her head as she watched him leave.

Brian sat outside the diner. He couldn't believe this shit. How fucked up was this? Kip had been reluctant to talk to him but being slammed up against the wall loosened his tongue pretty quickly. And he had no fucking clue who Michael was. But he had a hell of a lot to say about the blonde twink who had blackmailed him into dropping the lawsuit. Christ, what the hell was the kid thinking? He didn't know anything about Kip. He could've been hurt pulling a stunt like that. But he couldn't deny the fact that Justin had done something to help him when no one else had. And though he was reluctant to admit it, Brian knew that Justin had probably saved not only his job but his career as well. But damnit, it had been a stupid thing to do!

And he'd done it for no other reason than to help him. He never said anything about his part in it, not even after he'd told him about Mickey's declaration. Brian recalled that Justin had just gotten very quiet as he listened to someone else taking credit for his good deed. Yet, he hadn't said a word. He was going to sit back and not do a damn thing about it. Like hell!

Brian jumped out of the Jeep and headed in to the diner. He wanted answers and he wanted them now! From both Justin AND Michael.

Brian sat watching the other two people. He had pulled them to a corner booth as soon as he walked in and now they were watching him like he was crazy. Brian looked at Michael.

"How did you find Kip?"

"What?"

Brian saw that Michael was uncomfortable and he felt Justin's body tense. Well, served them both right. This would teach them not to keep secrets from him. "You said you talked Kip into dropping the suit. How did you find him?"

"Well, he came into Woody's one night. I went over to talk to him."

"Really? And how did you know it was him? You'd never met Kip before."

"I.....well, I just......"

Brian just shook his head. "Don't lie anymore, Mikey."

"Brian, I........."

"Shut up, Mikey." Brian said as he looked to Justin.

"Tell me how you knew Kip."

Justin turned to him with a denial on his lips but looked back down when he saw the expression on Brian's face. "How, Justin?"

"The night he came to the loft. You had me leave by the stairs. I waited and I saw him."

Brian nodded. "And then what did you do?"

Brian watched the expression on Michael's face as Justin explained how he had blackmailed Kip. "I know it was risky, but I had to help you, Brian. That was the only way I knew how."

"Come on, Brian. You don't believe this crap, do you?" Michael asked. "He's trying to get something from you."

"But I should believe your story, Mikey?"

Michael looked stunned. "Brian, we've been friends for almost longer then he's even been alive. Of course you can trust me. I wouldn't lie to you."

Brian leaned back in the booth. "I used to think that, Mikey. But you know what? I confronted Kip and he had no fucking idea who you were. He's never seen you or talked to you."

"He's lying, he just......."

"But he had a hell of a lot to say about the damn twink who blackmailed him."

Michael shook his head angrily. "Then they're plotting this together. Justin's trying to use this to get closer to you!"

"Then why didn't he tell me what he did? He never mentioned it, Mikey. Not even when you claimed credit for it. He couldn't hope to gain very much by doing something I wasn't even aware of."

"He was hoping........"

Brian's eyes narrowed. "What were you hoping, Mikey? Why did you claim to have done this? You know that you and I will never be anything more than friends."

"I know that! But I could get him out of our lives! You would owe me, Brian!"

Brian was shocked. "You did it in order to try to force me to get rid of Justin?"

"He's always around. He doesn't belong here."

"That's totally fucked, Mikey. Even if I had believed you about the Kip thing, I would not let you force me into anything. Whether Justin is in my life or not is no one's decision but mine. Do you get that, Mikey?"

Michael glared at Justin as he stood. "And what is he going to get out of this, Brian? He's the little hero, how much are you willing to give him?"

"That's none of your damn business. I think you better me more concerned with how our friendship is going to survive you deliberately lying to me."

Michael's eyes widened before he turned and hurried out of the diner. He hadn't considered what the consequences would be if Brian found out the truth.

Brian turned to Justin. "So, what is it you want?"

Justin watched Michael disappear out of the diner then looked back at Brian. "I didn't do it because I wanted anything, Brian. I did it because I love you. And because I wasn't willing to just sit back and watch you lose everything."

"Nice sentiment. Now just spill it. What's running through that head of yours?"

Justin just shook his head as he stood. "I don't want anything but what you're willing to give me, Brian. I've got to get back to work."

Brian sat in silence as he watched Justin walk away from him. What the hell? He was giving the kid a golden opportunity. Why wasn't he milking it for all he was worth? But Justin wasn't Michael. And he didn't want to think about Mikey just now. That situation would wait until he wasn't so mad at his best friend.

Justin had done something selfless and with no intention of it ever being brought out in the open. He hadn't done it hoping to get something out of it for himself. But Brian knew now and he owed Justin......a lot. And he didn't like being indebted to anyone. But how could he pay the kid back? Justin said he wanted only what Brian was willing to give. What the hell did that mean?

Brian looked across the diner to where Justin was waiting on a table. Shaking his head, he got up and headed for the door. But then he stopped and turned around. He knew what Justin wanted. But how much was Brian willing to give? He didn't have an answer for that. Not yet. And until he did, the debt would be hanging over his head. Whether Justin considered it a debt or not.......and Brian Kinney always repaid his debts. With a smirk on his face, Brian walked out of the diner.

END

**End of the World**

Justin stood with his arms wrapped around his waist as he watched Brian packing. He couldn't believe this was happening. Couldn't believe that the man he loved more than anything in the world was leaving him. He was going to walk away without a backward glance.

"Don't do this, Brian."

Brian didn't look up from the bag he was packing. "Grow up, Justin. Quit being such a drama queen."

"I'm so damn sorry, Brian. Sorry that I can't pretend that this isn't killing me."

Brian shook his head. "Oh for God's sake, Justin. You make it sound like we were a couple and I was walking out on you after twenty years together or something. The only thing between us was sex and you know that."

"That's not true, Brian. I love you!"

Brian looked up then. "Love? You're eighteen goddamn years old, Justin. You don't know what the hell love is. I was your first so you fixated on me, that's all there is to it. Now, it's time for you to move on. Find someone your own age."

"I don't want anyone else. I want you!"

"That's too bad because I don't want you. I'm going to New York and I won't have to give you a second thought. This is where it ends, Justin. The sooner you accept that the better off you're going to be."

Justin's arms clenched tighter around himself as he felt the tears falling down his cheeks. "I can't do this on my own, Brian. My dad........"

"I don't give a shit about your dad. He's your problem not mine."

"Brian, you don't understand. I........"

Brian shook his head. "No, it's you who don't understand. I don't care what juvenile end-of-the-world problems you have with your father. It's not my concern. The only person I'm responsible for is myself. We had some fun and the sex wasn't bad, but that's it. And now it's over. How many different ways do I have to say it? It's over!"

Justin stepped back as though he'd been hit. He swiped at the tears falling down his cheeks as he backed away from Brian's mocking face. Turning, he ran out of the loft without looking back. He ran until he couldn't breathe anymore, then slid down against the side of a building as he felt his world crumbling around him.

Brian waited till he was sure Justin was gone then sat down on the bed, his head in his hands. That had been harder then he'd thought it was going to be. It had taken every ounce of self-control he had not to reach out and pull Justin into his arms. The tear stained expression on the teenager's face had ripped at his heart and he knew he'd never forget that look. But he'd done what he had to do......for both of them.

New York was going to be his new start and he needed that. And Justin needed to accept that it was over. That they could never be together. And Brian had known that he had to push Justin away in order to make his point. He didn't want the kid waiting around for something that would never happen. Though he did care about Justin, Brian would never admit it to anyone.

Justin would be fine. He was strong and he would get over him. He'd go to the Institute and do what he loved and he'd have Deb and Emmett and the others around to help him. And he'd hate Brian Kinney and move on to find someone who could give him everything he deserved. Brian knew he had done the right thing.

Brian stood looking around the loft. Eight months. It had been eight months since he'd been there. And when he left, he believed that it would be the last time he ever stepped foot in it again. He had sublet it to a man he knew from the agency and had every intention of selling it to him down the line. But was it coincidence that the man let him know he was moving in with a lover the same week Brian learned he was being transferred back to Pittsburgh? Or just another cruel twist of fate in the life of Brian Kinney?

So, now he was back and he had no idea what the hell to do. When he'd left, he'd all but cut off all contact with everyone there. Except for the occasional call to Michael or Lindsay, he had shut the door on that part of his life. And now he'd have to deal with that.

And he'd have to deal with seeing Justin again. In the time he'd been away, he'd tried to not think about the teenager at all. But images of him always invaded and he saw again how hurt and scared Justin had seemed that last night. He'd made it clear to Michael and Lindsay that he wasn't interested in hearing about Justin and if they tried to talk about him, he'd end the conversation abruptly. Brian figured Justin had probably thrown himself into his drawing and had more than likely found someone new to spend time with. And Brian would handle it. He had no choice. It had been his decision to push Justin out of his life. Just because he was back on the scene wouldn't change anything.

"You're back."

Brian turned. "Hey Mikey. Just got in about an hour ago. I was just checking that everything made it back."

Michael nodded. "So, now that you're back for good, you've got some fences to mend. Emmett and Ted were pretty pissed that you disappeared without another word. And mom is really pissed with you for obvious reasons."

Brian shrugged. "Yeah, well they've all known me long enough to know how I am."

"And what about Justin?"

Brian's shoulders tensed. "I told him it was over. Me being back doesn't change that. He'll just have to accept that."

Michael didn't speak and Brian finally turned. "What?"

"As much as you'd like to believe that your actions don't affect anyone else, it isn't the truth. Things have changed in eight months, Brian. And it's not all good."

"Don't be so melodramatic, Mikey."

"I'm not. Lindsay and I both tried to tell you, Brian. For months we tried, you didn't want to hear it. Now........"

Brian's eyes narrowed. "Now what?"

Michael looked up at Brian and shook his head. "Now it may be too late."

Brian didn't like the look he saw in Michael's eyes. "Too late for who?"

"For Justin."

Brian's eyes widened and he knew he wasn't going to like whatever it was. Something had obviously happened to or with Justin. And from Michael's reaction, it wasn't good.

"Tell me."

"Why do you care now, Brian? You haven't wanted to hear about it for the last eight months."

"I didn't know there was anything wrong. I figured he was in school and making a new start for himself."

Michael shook his head. "You didn't know because you hung up on us whenever we tried to tell you. Justin's life has fallen apart and he won't let any of us help him. He can't accept that we're his friends too, not just yours."

Brian ran a hand over his face. "Tell me what's going on."

"Are you sure you want to hear it? It's not a pretty story."

"Jesus, Michael. Just tell me what the fuck is going on with Justin!"

Michael nodded. "You better sit down."

Brian moved over to the couch and sat down mentally bracing himself for what he was about to learn.

Brian sat watching Michael. "I'm waiting, Mikey."

Michael's eyes narrowed. "Don't start, Brian. You want to know what's going on? Justin is living with someone and has been for the last two months."

Brian forced himself to remain still. A part of him always knew that Justin would find someone new. Hell, that was what he wanted, right? Then why did he feel like someone had punched him in the gut? "Well, good for him. Looks like he took my advice."

"Your advice? And what advice was that, Brian? What the hell did you say to Justin that night?" Michael yelled.

"What the hell is your problem?"

Michael got to his feet. "My problem is that in a space of one night you managed to totally destroy Justin's self-confidence. Between you and his goddamn father it's no wonder he's in the hell he's in now."

"What hell? You just said he was involved with someone new."

Michael nodded. "Oh he is. And the guy is sexy as hell, rich, and Justin is the envy of a lot of guys at Babylon. But they only see what's on the surface. They don't see the truth."

"And what's the truth?"

"The guy beats Justin."

"WHAT!? How the hell do you know that? And why the hell haven't you done anything about it?" Brian yelled.

"Don't you dare get all holier-than-thou with me, Brian Kinney! Where the hell were you when Justin's old man disowned him, forcing his mother to choose between her children? Where were you when Justin found out there was no way he could go to the Institute without his father's backing? And where were you when he started pulling away from all of us because he thought that's what you wanted?"

"I......."

"Justin said that we were your friends, not his. And he wouldn't make things uncomfortable for you by sticking around. Since you had made it clear that you wanted him out of your life! So, he walked away from mom....from all of us. We didn't even know where he was until he showed up last month at Babylon with this guy. And a couple nights later, I went to try to talk to him and I saw the bastard hit him. I tried to get Justin to talk, but he wouldn't open up to me."

Brian sat down on the couch and ran his hands through his hair. "I had no idea......"

"Lindsay and I both tried to talk to you about this. We thought you might give a damn about Justin. Do you, Brian? Or was he just some trick you kept around because it was convenient?"

Brian's eyes narrowed as he looked at his best friend. "Where's Justin now?"

"With the bastard, I suppose. None of us know where they live. But they have been showing up at Babylon lately. It's the only time we get a chance to try to talk to Justin."

"Then we're going to Babylon. If they're there, I need you and the guys to keep the asshole distracted long enough so I can get Justin away. Once I do that, I'll talk to Justin."

Michael shook his head. "It isn't going to be that easy, Brian. For whatever reason, Justin thinks this is what he deserves. He's not going to just jump back into your arms and walk away from the life he has now. You hurt him, Brian."

Brian was beginning to see the truth in that statement. He'd done damage that he'd never considered. "Then I'll kidnap him if I have to. One way or another I'm getting him away from that situation. I'll figure out how to handle it once I get him back here. Now, are you guys going to help or not?"

Michael was quiet for a minute. "Yeah, we'll help. But just remember something, Brian. Justin is right on the edge. Don't do anything to push him. What he needs now is people who care about him."

Brian watched as Michael turned and walked out of the loft. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes against the burning in his eyes. "I care, Mikey. That was the problem. I cared too damn much."

That was why he had pushed Justin away and why he'd gone to New York. His feelings for the teenager scared the shit out of him. And now, because of him, Justin was in trouble. Getting to his feet, he went to take a shower and get changed.

Brian knew he would have to be calm when he confronted Justin. There'd be time later to beat hell out of the bastard who dared to touch Justin.

Brian leaned against the bar watching for any sign of Justin. He was aware of the looks he was getting from Ted and Emmett and finally turned to them. "What?"

Ted didn't say anything but Emmett shook his head. "You waltz back in here like nothing has changed and expect things to be like they were. They aren't. Our lives don't revolve around you anymore, Brian."

"I never thought they did. We all live our own lives, Emmett. It just so happens that goddamn fate has decided that my life had to be tossed back here."

Emmett took a drink of his beer. "So what's your big plan for Justin? Haven't you hurt him enough?"

Brian turned to glare at his friend. "I did what I thought was best for him."

"Really? I bet that's what his old man tells himself too. That he threw Justin out on the street for his own good."

"Shut up or so help me......" Brian threatened.

"They're here."

Brian and Emmett both turned to see Michael approach. "What?"

"Justin and the bastard just got here."

Brian turned to where Michael was looking and felt his stomach clench as he saw Justin for the first time in eight months. He watched as the man led Justin to the dance floor. But knowing what he did, he saw the grip the older man had on Justin's hips. Looking at Justin he saw that the teenager had not only lost weight but he'd lost the spark, the love of life he'd had. Brian's hands clenched into fists.

"Who is he?"

"No one really knows. And Justin hasn't been very forthcoming with the information. We don't even know where they met." Ted said.

Brian turned his attention back to the couple and he felt the anger and jealousy burn through him as he watched the man's hands roam over Justin's body. And saw the slightest flinches from the touch. It only made him more determined to get Justin away from the bastard.

It was almost half an hour later before they got their chance. They watched as the guy made his way to the back room with a conquest while Justin headed to the bar. Brian watched for a minute then turned to Michael. "Ok, you guys make sure the asshole stays in the back for a while. I'm going to get Justin."

"Remember what I told you, Brian." Michael said, then headed towards the back followed by Emmett and Ted.

Brian turned and moved to stand next to Justin at the bar. Justin didn't even turn. "Hello, Justin."

Justin's eyes widened as he looked at a man he thought he'd never see again. "What are you doing here?"

"Got transferred back. Looks like some things have changed since I've been gone."

"Yeah. Excuse me, I have to get back."

Brian reached out a hand and caught Justin's arm. "You aren't going back."

"What are you talking about?" Justin asked trying to free his arm.

Brian moved closer. "I know what's going on, Justin. I won't let you go back to that asshole."

Justin glared at Brian. "You have no say in my life, Brian. You wanted me out of your life, fine, I'm out. Now let go of my arm."

Brian shook his head. "Either you walk out of here with me or I'll carry you out. Either way, you are going with me and we are going to talk."

Justin looked back towards where his lover had gone, but Brian forced him to look at him. "I won't let him hurt you, Justin. You have friends, let us help you."

Justin shook his head. "I don't......."

"You do. Now which is it going to be?"

Brian could feel the trembling in Justin's body and it made him angrier. What had the bastard done to him? "Justin, walk out of here with me now and we avoid a scene. If we wait for the asshole to come back, I will beat the hell out of him."

Justin stopped struggling against Brian's hold and stared down at the floor. With a quick look back at Michael he wrapped an arm around Justin's shoulders and led him out of the club. Once outside, he got him into the jeep and headed to the loft.

On the drive Brian kept looking over at Justin who was staring off into the darkness not saying a word. Brian hated seeing Justin like this. This wasn't the Justin he knew. But he'd find a way to get that Justin back. And make him forget the hurt and hell of the last eight months.

Brian sat down across from Justin waiting for the younger man to say something. But Justin sat perfectly still not even looking at him. "You want to tell me what's been going on?"

Justin shook his head. "This has nothing to do with you, Brian."

"I think it does. When I left it was with the impression that you'd be living with Deb and going to the Institute. I come back and you're nowhere to be found and living with some bastard who hits you. That's pretty fucked, Justin."

"Story of my life. Can I go now?"

Brian shook his head angrily. "You aren't going back to him, Justin. We'll go get whatever stuff you have at his place and you can go back to Deb's."

Justin stood up. "Who put you in charge of my life? You're the one who walked away, remember? What I do with my life and how I choose to live it is none of your business."

Brian jumped to his feet as Justin turned for the door, pinning him against the wall. "I remember everything I said, Justin. And at the time I meant it. But if you think I'm going to sit back and watch you ruin your life, you're sadly mistaken."

"Let me go, Brian."

"No way. You're going to go stay with Deb and we'll figure out some way to get you into the Institute. Maybe some financial aid or......."

Justin pulled away from Brian. "I'm not going to live with Deb and I'm not going to the Institute."

"You have talent and ............"

"I don't draw anymore, Brian."

"What? What has that bastard done to you?"

Justin shook his head. "You don't know anything about him and you don't know me. So just stay out of it."

"Like that's going to happen. I seem to remember this annoying teenage brat who kept coming back even after all the times I told him to get lost. You didn't listen to me then, why do you think I'm going to listen to you now?"

"Because there was a big difference. You were worth the effort.....I'm not. Goodbye, Brian."

Brian grabbed Justin again before he could get the door open and he held tight against the struggling teenager. "Stop it, Justin."

"Just let me go!"

"I can't do that again. I won't." Brian admitted.

Justin continued struggling until he had exhausted himself and dropped to the floor still wrapped in Brian's embrace. Brian tightened his hold on the teenager as he felt Justin's body begin shaking. "Let me help you, Justin."

"No." Justin whispered.

"Why not? Damnit Justin....."

"Because I don't deserve it." Justin cried.

Brian leaned his head against Justin's shoulders as the younger man lost control and the tears fell down his cheeks. Brian was going to kill whoever had done this to Justin.

They sat like that for a long time until Brian felt Justin fall into an exhausted sleep. Moving carefully, he picked Justin up and carried him into the bedroom. Stripping off his clothes, Brian tucked him into the bed then crawled in behind him. He pulled Justin into his arms and laid there listening to his breathing.

Having Justin in his arms again made alot of things clearer. And Brian realized that leaving and pushing Justin away had been one of the biggest mistakes he'd ever made. Now he'd have to figure out how to fix it.

Brian groaned softly as he rubbed his hands over his face. He stretched and looked at the clock before he remembered the events of the night before. He sat up in bed as he looked to the other side and found it empty.

"Justin?"

No answer. Brian jumped out of bed and went to check the bathroom then the rest of the loft. No sign of the teenager. "Damnit, Justin!"

Brian hurried back to the bedroom and grabbed a pair of jeans. As he was pulling them on he noticed the envelope on the nightstand. He sat down as he pulled out the letter.

Brian~

The last thing I expected to see last night was you. I thought I'd never see you again. You made things clear that night and I've accepted it. I was a fool to ever think that someone like you would ever want me around. But, I am trying to stay out of your life. That's why I moved out of Deb's and why I've kept my distance. I tried to talk him out of going to Babylon, really I did. I'm sorry. I'll do my best to make sure we're never there again.

I don't understand why you dragged me out of there last night. But I think it's because for some reason you feel guilty. If that's the case, then stop. You are not responsible for what happens in my life, Brian. I made my own choices and I will live with the consequences. So, just forget me and whatever it is you think is going on in my life.

You don't owe me anything. I've learned to accept that this is where I belong. What I deserve. You were all right. You, my father, even Michael saw the truth before I did. But I know now.

You're free of me, Brian. I won't bother you again or interfere in your life. I'll never forget you, Brian Kinney.

Justin

Brian clutched the paper. "Shit!"

Still clutching the letter, Brian reached for the phone and called Michael. "He's gone."

"What?" Michael asked.

"I woke up and Justin was gone."

"I take it that means you didn't get through to him. I tried to tell you that, Brian."

Brian ran a hand through his hair. "Well, you're so smart, Mikey, how about telling me how the hell to find him?"

"I don't know, Brian. If he walked out on you, it's a safe bet that he'll make sure to avoid Babylon from now on. And no one knows where he and this guy live."

Brian thought it over for a minute. "What about Daphne? Where is she now?"

"I don't know."

"Then I'm going to find out. She might know where Justin is living."

Michael was silent for a minute. "Do you really think he'd tell her when he wouldn't tell anyone else?"

"Yeah, I do. Justin may see you guys as just my friends, but Daphne was his. His only true friend and she was there for him through a lot of shit. I have to believe that he hasn't let that go."

"Look, it's worth a shot. I think mom may have her parent's number. I'll get her to call and see if she can find out where Daphne is."

"Fine. But I need to be the one to talk to her."

"Ok. I'll let you know as soon as I find out anything."

Brian hung up the phone and finished getting dressed. Damnit, he should've been prepared for the fact that Justin may try to run. But, he hadn't seen it coming. He'd been so sure that all he'd have to do was bring Justin back and everything would just fall into place. Shit, this whole thing was totally fucked.

An hour later Brian was sitting on the couch staring at some paperwork without actually seeing anything when the phone rang. "Yeah?"

"It's me. Daphne's in New York. Her parents didn't think she'd seen Justin since they graduated but they believe she has kept in touch with him. They weren't too comfortable about discussing her or Justin with someone they barely knew, so they wouldn't give mom a number or anything. But, they were going to pass the message on to Daphne along with your phone number. Do you really think that she'll call you though?"

"Did Deb tell them that Justin was in trouble? That we needed Daphne in order to help him?"

"She told them."

Brian leaned back against the couch. "Then she'll call. I just have to hope that she knows how to find Justin. It may be the only shot we have."

"And if she doesn't? Or isn't willing to tell you?"

"I'll track her down in New York if I have to in order to convince her that I want to help Justin. If she doesn't know where he is, then I don't know."

"You care about him, don't you?" Michael asked.

Brian was silent for a minute. "Yeah, I do. And it scares the shit out of me, Mikey."

"We'll find him, Brian. And then we help him heal and you can figure out where you want to go from there."

"Thanks, Mikey."

"That's what best friends are for, Brian."

Brian smiled as he hung up the phone. He sat back as he waited for the phone to ring. Michael was right. Best friends looked out for each other, protected each other. And that's why he knew that Daphne was the key to finding Justin. She was his best friend.

All Brian had to do was convince her that trusting him was the best thing for Justin. And after what happened eight months ago, that may be easier said than done.

Brian jumped as the phone rang. "Hello?"

"It's Daphne."

"It's about time."

"Look, I almost didn't call at all. What do you want?"

Brian took a deep breath to calm himself. He couldn't take out his frustrations on the girl. That wouldn't get him anywhere. "Justin's in trouble and I need your help."

"Why are you suddenly so concerned about Justin? Eight months ago you couldn't get away from him fast enough."

"Eight months ago I thought I was leaving this life behind me for good. I wasn't going to leave Justin with some impossible fantasy that I was going to come back to him."

"But you did go back."

Brian snickered. "Yeah well, fate's a bitch. I came back and he's not the same Justin that I left. It's like he's.....I don't know what."

There was a moment's silence. "He's broken."

That description hit Brian with the force of a blow and he was glad he was sitting down. "You know what's happening to him, don't you?"

"I know. And I've tried to talk to him, but he's beyond listening to me. Other people's words have made him deaf to everything I've tried to tell him."

"Other people meaning me?"

"Not really. I mean, you leaving him the way you did hurt him. And he was already really vulnerable when he went to see you. He needed to talk to you about what had happened with his father, but it never got that far. Once you left, he just fell apart. He didn't think there was anyone there for him and the prick he's with took advantage of that."

Brian's eyes closed as he replayed that night and saw Justin's face as he mentioned his dad. But Brian had cut him off. God, Justin had been in pain and was reaching out and he had slammed the door in his face. "Michael said that Justin pulled away from Deb and them because he thought that's what I wanted. What about his mom? Why hasn't she helped him?"

"Because his father threatened to take their daughter away from her. He basically made her choose between Justin and his sister. And she chose the child she thought needed her more. I think she figured Justin had a pretty good support system in Deb and the guys. She doesn't know what's happening with him now."

Brian couldn't believe this. "She must know that her asshole husband isn't paying for Justin's schooling."

"She knows."

Brian shook his head. "Do you know where Justin is? Where he lives?"

"Why? What does it matter to you?"

"Because he matters to me. And the thought of that bastard touching him is killing me. Help me bring him back, Daphne."

"What does he have to come back to?"

Brian leaned forward as his hand clenched on the phone. "People who love him."

Silence. And in those moments, Brian hoped the young woman could hear what he couldn't say. "Don't make me regret this, Brian. If you hurt him again, I'll kill you myself."

"I won't. Where is he, Daphne?"

Brian wrote the address down as well as the name of the dive where Justin was working. There was just one more thing he needed to know. "Daphne, why isn't he drawing anymore?"

"His love for drawing was tied to his love of life."

"Christ." Brian muttered.

Brian finished up the call by promising to let Daphne know what happened. After hanging up the phone, Brian headed to the bedroom. He would get some sleep and go after Justin in the morning. He'd confront Justin once lover boy had left for work. And Brian was determined not to leave without Justin.

Brian stood in the doorway watching Justin sleep. It had been an exhausting day for both of them. There had been angry words and tears and accusations, but finally he had been able to get through to Justin. He had gotten him to leave with him and come back to stay at Deb's. Brian had insisted they take all of Justin's belongings with them because he had no intention of ever letting Justin anywhere near that bastard again.

But despite winning the battle, Brian knew the war was far from over. Justin's self-esteem had been shattered and they needed to rebuild it. And that was going to take love and a lot of patience.

Backing silently out of the room, Brian went down to sit with Deb. "How is he?"

"Sleeping. He was exhausted."

Deb nodded. "I would think the last few months haven't exactly been relaxing for him."

Brian leaned his head in his hands. "And it's because of me. I did this to him."

Deb reached over and laid a hand on his shoulder. "No, Brian. Sunshine had a lot of shit dumped on him at one time and it was drowning him. His father and that asshole did this to him."

"I didn't help anything. He tried to talk to me and I just turned my back on him. Made him think that his problems were juvenile and insignificant."

"Baby, you didn't know what was going on. I'm not saying you didn't hurt him, but this is not your fault, Brian."

Brian ran his hands over his face. "Doesn't matter because I'm damn sure going to fix it."

Deb watched sadly as Brian got to his feet. "I don't want to leave him alone. Is it okay if I sit with him?"

"Baby, you're exhausted. You need to sleep."

Brian shook his head. "Last time I did that he ran. I won't take that chance again."

Deb nodded and Brian made his way up the stairs. She had never seen Brian like this before. Any doubts she had about his feelings for Sunshine disappeared. Somehow, the two of them would work.

Brian sat in the booth with the guys and watched as Justin waited on a table and smiled. Deb was right, Sunshine was healed. It had taken a year, but bit by bit they had pulled Justin out of the hell he'd fallen into. They had shown him that he had people who loved him and would be there to support him. And slowly he began drawing again. Then Brian had gotten the idea to use one of Justin's drawings in an ad presentation and the client had loved it. So much so that the client had offered to sponser Justin and pay his tuition for the Institute in exchange for Justin doing some freelance drawing for the business.

So things had finally fallen back into place. Justin was back at Deb's and working at the the diner while attending the Institute during the day. He hadn't had much contact with his parents but when that threatened to get him down all he had to do was look around him. And he saw the new family he had. It didn't erase the pain of having his father turn his back on him or the loss of his mother and sister, but it helped him cope with those missing pieces.

As for their relationship, they were taking it slowly. Justin was still vulnerable in some ways and Brian was still unsure of what exactly he wanted. But they both admitted that they wanted to try being together and they were taking it slowly.

Now watching him, Brian knew that it was too late for him to walk away. He may be scared shitless, but he knew there was only one thing he could do. Brian stood and walked over to the table where one of the guys was flirting with Justin. Moving behind him, Brian wrapped his arms around the younger man.

"He's not interested."

"Yeah, says who?"

Justin looked at Brian who smiled and leaned his chin on the blonde's shoulder. "His boyfriend."

Justin's eyes widened. "Are you sure?"

"Very sure."

Justin smiled and leaned in to kiss his lover. Back at the table, the guys had big grins on their faces as they watched the two men embrace. And behind the counter, Deb wiped at the tears in her eyes. She knew everything was going to work out.

END

**Past Indiscretions**

Liberty Avenue was as crowded as every other night. Everyone busy with their own lives. No one noticed the man standing in the shadows outside the diner. And he didn't notice anyone else. His attention was focused on the group seated by a window inside the diner. Then his eyes narrowed as he stared at the man who was responsible for ruining his life.

Brian Kinney. The man had been a thorn in his side from the first moment they'd seen each other. And he had hated Brian from that moment. Hated the kind of man he was and hated the way he treated people. He was so goddamned full of himself that he didn't give a shit who he hurt. All that mattered to Brian was Brian. The bastard didn't deserve to have anyone in his life. But he did. He had a whole group who seemed to support him no matter what he did. Damnit, it wasn't right!

Ted and Emmett were always right there as were Deb and Vic. No matter how many times they complained about Brian or the things he did, they were still there whenever he called. Then there was Lindsay and Melanie and Gus. What the hell did Brian ever do to deserve to have a beautiful son like Gus? And Melanie could bitch all she wanted to about Brian but she was there to defend him just like everyone else.

And then there were the two he really couldn't understand. The two who loved and supported Brian, who took his shit but still came running when he called. It seemed as though Michael had finally realized that his relationship with Brian would never be more then friendship but he was still like the man's damn shadow. There whenever and wherever Brian needed him. That left Justin.

A teenager for God's sake. But a fiercely loyal teenager. He'd grabbed on to Brian that first night and he hadn't let go. And Brian ended up with a loyal little follower. Someone willing to do anything Brian wanted and all because he loved him. Why? What the hell had Brian ever done to deserve Justin's love? Nothing. He treated him like shit from the start, but Justin kept coming back for more.

It was because of Brian that Justin had been hurt. What the hell was he trying to prove by going to a high school prom? It's not like he gives a damn about Justin. Even now, all he's worried about is getting back out to the club. Jesus, the kid is pale as a ghost and is still weak and fragile, but Brian has dragged him out. Selfish prick!

His hands clenched as he thought about the people's lives that Brian had ruined. It wasn't right. And damnit, he was going to put an end to it. He had tried to save Michael from Brian's influence but it hadn't been enough. Brian already had too much of a hold on Michael. But, he could save Justin.

Justin wasn't that much older than his own son. And he prayed that if it was his son in Justin's position that someone would have the guts to do something about it. He would get Justin away from Brian and get him to see the truth about Brian Kinney.

"I couldn't help you, Michael. And I can't help the fools who fall for Brian's slick charms. But I will help Justin. He's too young to be destroyed by Brian Kinney. I'm going to make damn sure that doesn't happen. He's already been hurt enough by that bastard. I won't let him end up like you, Michael. I promise."

With that whispered oath, David turned and walked back to his car. He had plans to make.

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Brian looked over at Justin who looked about ready to fall asleep right there. He knew it was too soon for Justin to be out but he hadn't been able to say no to him. It was just for dinner then back to the loft. Brian knew Justin was feeling cooped up and depressed. Seeing Deb and the guys was something he needed.

"Finish up your drink, Justin. Time to get you home."

Justin turned but didn't argue. He wouldn't admit it but he was tired. Damnit, he hated feeling this weak. "Ok."

Brian cupped a hand behind Justin's neck and turned to the others. "You guys going to hit Babylon?"

Michael shook his head. "I'm not. I've got to get back to work. Inventory time again."

"Ted and I are going for a little while." Emmett said.

"I can take Justin back to the loft if you want to go, Brian." Michael offered.

Brian shook his head. "No thanks. I have some work I have to get finished before tomorrow."

Michael nodded. He'd known that Brian would turn down his offer when he made it. Brian had only been to Babylon a couple times since Justin had been hurt. And every time he'd made sure there was someone with the teenager. Michael looked at Justin and felt a slight shiver as he thought about how close Justin had come to dying. And even now it was hard seeing the physical effects the attack still had on him. It would take him a long time to be back to the annoying brat they all knew and loved.

"Ok, boys. I have to get going. Talk to you tomorrow." Michael said.

"Night, Mikey."

Michael grabbed his jacket and headed outside. He stopped as he caught sight of someone in the shadows. That had looked like David. Michael shook his head. He was imagining things. David was out in Portland. Turning, he started heading for the store.

Back in the diner, Justin was struggling with his jacket as he talked to Deb. "Should we help him?"

Brian looked at Emmett and shook his head. "No, he needs to do it on his own."

"Brian, he's still hurt. He needs......"

"I know he's hurt and I know what he needs. He needs to feel like he can take care of himself. You go over and try to help him and he'll get mad. You'll make him feel useless."

"You sound like you speak from experience." Ted said.

Brian nodded. "He needs to feel like he has control over his life. And he wants things to go back to normal. Physically he's still healing, emotionally he's working through everything, and mentally he wants to just put what happened behind him and go on with his life."

"But he's still so vulnerable......" Emmett began.

Brian was watching as Justin finally managed to get the jacket on and he saw how much that simple task had taken out of him. "I know. Which is why I make sure he's never alone. See you guys later."

Emmett and Ted watched as Brian walked over and wrapped an arm around Justin. They saw him gently lead Justin out of the diner. "Who would've thought that Brian Kinney could be that gentle or patient with anyone?"

"He's in love, my dear Ted. That in itself is a minor miracle if you ask me." Emmett said teasingly as he watched Brian help Justin and then grew serious. "I just wish it hadn't taken Justin getting hurt for him to realize it."

Ted laid a comforting hand on Emmett's shoulder. "Justin's going to be fine, Em. He's going to heal, Brian will see to that. And you know that Brian Kinney hates to fail. Justin will be back to his old self before we know it."

Emmett followed Ted out to his car and waved as Brian and Justin drove off. Ted was right. And he was looking forward to seeing how Brian handled being in a relationship. It would be most interesting. He couldn't wait. Smiling, Emmett got into the car.

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Jennifer watched as Justin made his way back to the bathroom. She felt the tears building as she watched him and jumped slightly when she felt a hand tap her shoulder. Looking up, she nodded as she saw Brian. He moved around and slid in across from her. "He's going to get stronger."

"I know. It's just so hard to see him like this. God, it took all my self-control not to run over there and help him. To make things easier for him any way I could."

"That's normal, you're his mother. But he has to be able to do these things on his own. We try to coddle him and it's going to push him away. You're not the only one, though. I've caught myself reaching out to help him pull on his jacket or open a box."

Jennifer looked closely at the man across from her. She'd been so sure that he was going to hurt her son. But her opinion of Brian Kinney had undergone alot of changes. Not just since the attack, even before that. Probably the first time he stood up to Craig at the house. God, that seemed so long ago. And she still felt her anger rising at the thought of her ex-husband. He hadn't been to see Justin since he got out of the hospital. Craig refused to accept that Justin was gay. And wouldn't even acknowledge the fact that Justin was living with Brian.

Shaking her head, she turned back to the man her son loved. "Is he drawing at all?"

"A little but not much. Only time lately has been when we were watching Gus. It's going to take time, Jennifer. Just because he's out of the hospital doesn't magically make everything like they were. He's got a long road in front of him. We all do."

Jennifer smiled. Would this man never cease to amaze her? "You're pretty perceptive, Mr. Kinney."

"I have my moments. How long has he been in there?"

Jennifer looked back towards the bathroom. "Since just before you came in. Do you think he's alright?"

Brian slid out of the booth. "I'll go check on him. But I'm sure he's fine."

Brian gave Deb a kiss as they passed and she headed over to Jennifer. "So, when does he get to start calling you mom?"

Jennifer rolled her eyes. "I'm not quite ready for that yet."

Deb and Jennifer were laughing about something or other when Brian came out. "Where is he?"

Jennifer looked up. "What do you mean? He went to the bathroom."

"He's not there. Deb, did you see him back there anywhere?"

Deb shook her head. "Let me ask in back."

Brian stood looking around the diner nervously as they waited for Deb to come back. "He wouldn't leave without telling us."

"Brian, they said he just went out back to get some air. I'll just....."

Brian was already moving to the back door. "No, I'll go."

Deb looked from Brian's retreating form to Jennifer. "Did I miss something?"

"Justin has anxiety attacks sometimes. Brian knows how to handle him when it happens."

"Oh, poor Sunshine."

Jennifer closed her eyes as she thought about everything her son had been through in such a short time. She looked up as she heard Brian swearing. And she didn't like the look on his face. "What is it?"

"He's not out there. No way would he have wandered off. I don't like this. Where's your ex?"

Jennifer's eyes widened. "You don't think Craig had anything to do with this, do you?"

"How the fuck am I supposed to know what he's capable of? This is a man who has assaulted me on more than one occasion, who threw his own son out on the street, why wouldn't I think he could take him?"

Deb laid a hand on Brian's shoulder. "Brian, we don't know that anything's wrong. Maybe he just went for a walk."

Brian shook his head. "He wouldn't just walk off without saying something to his mom. So that means someone made him leave. And I think that someone is his old man."

"Alright, let's calm down. Brian, call Michael and the guys. Make sure he didn't just need to get away. For all we know he's at Babylon or Woody's. Jennifer, call Craig. See what you can get out of him."

Half hour later, all pretense of calm was gone. Justin was not with Michael or the guys nor had he shown up at Lindsay and Mel's. They had checked out all his favorite haunts and even checked with Daphne. No sign of him anywhere. And their only suspect was not even in the city. Jennifer had confirmed that Craig was out of town on business to Florida. So that left the question.....where the hell was Justin? And who was he with?

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Justin moaned as he turned on the bed, his hands coming up to his face. What happened? Pushing himself up, he looked around the room then closed his eyes as a wave of dizziness hit him. Where was he? Justin leaned his head against his hands as he tried to remember what had happened. He'd been at the diner with his mom waiting for Brian to show up. Then he'd gotten up to go the bathroom. Justin rubbed at his eyes. Then what?

Justin remembered feeling like the bathroom walls were closing in on him. He'd gone out the back of the diner to the alley to get some fresh air. He'd been leaning back against the wall when he felt someone move in front of him. His eyes widened but he'd been relieved when he'd seen it was David. But that relief disappeared as he listened to David. The man was seriously deluded. Trying to talk him into leaving Brian. Telling him that Brian didn't give a damn about him and would only hurt him. Justin had shaken his head and told David that he could take care of himself. He had turned to go back into the diner when David had grabbed him by the arms. Justin had tried to fight with him but he was too weak. He had tried to scream but David had covered his mouth and started pulling him back towards a car. Justin struggled until his vision started blurring, then nothing. He must've passed out.

God, what the hell was David doing? Justin had no idea but he knew he had to get out of there. Pushing himself slowly to his feet he made his way to the door. It was locked. "Fuck me."

Leaning back against the door, Justin looked around the room. There was nothing he could use to force the door open. He walked over to the window, swearing as he saw it was nailed shut. Damnit.

Justin jumped as he heard the door opening and turned to see David leaning against it. "I thought I heard you up. Are you hungry?"

"No, I'm not hungry. I want to go home, David."

"This is your home, Justin. Or it is until you come to your senses."

"You can't keep me a prisoner here, David. My family and friends are going to worry about me."

David's eyes narrowed. "You're not thinking about them, you're thinking about Brian. He doesn't care about you, Justin. Hell, he'll probably be back at Babylon tonight and not give a damn that no one knows where you are."

"You're wrong, David. Brian loves me. And my mom and Debbie are going to be worried sick. Now let me go."

David shook his head. "I'm not going to let Brian Kinney destroy your life like he has Michael's. I couldn't help Michael, I'm going to help you."

"I don't need your help. What I do with my life and who I choose to spend it with are none of your business. It's not Brian's fault that your relationship with Michael didn't work."

"Yes it is. He controls everything Michael does. Brian calls and Michael goes running. He left me at the airport and ran back to Brian!"

Justin tried to shake his head but winced at the stab of pain and reached out for the wall to steady himself. "He left because I'd been hurt, David. Brian called to tell him about the attack. Michael called you as soon as he could. You're the one who overreacted and pushed Michael away."

"You're as blinded by Brian as Michael is. But I'm going to show you the truth."

David started pulling the door closed. "Why are you doing this? To get back at Brian because you think he stole Michael from you?"

David looked at the angry young man in front of him. "You're a child, Justin. Not that much older then my own son. Your father obviously isn't doing a damn thing to protect you but I will. I'll make sure Brian never hurts you again. Get some rest and I'll bring up some food later."

The door closed. "Don't do this, David! I'm not your responsibility!"

No answer. Justin sunk down on the bed and blinked back the tears. How the hell was he going to get out of this? No one would be able to find him. As far as anyone was concerned, David was in Portland. And no one would have any reason to suspect him of this. He and Michael hadn't spoken since just after the attack when David had made Michael choose between Brian and his life in Pittsburgh or David and a new life in Portland. Michael had chosen Pittsburgh, but not because of Brian. Whether David wanted to admit it or not, there was no romantic relationship between Michael and Brian. And Michael knew that now.

He needed to figure out a way to get away, but he was so tired. Why now? Knowing he wouldn't be able to do anything in his current condition, Justin lied back down on the bed and fell asleep.

Brian stood in his loft staring out into the night. It was late and he knew he needed to get some sleep. He wouldn't be any good to Justin if he exhausted himself. But every time he closed his eyes, he saw Justin. And saw how vulnerable his lover still was. In that state, he wouldn't be able to defend himself. Brian didn't want to think about that. And he didn't want to think about some stranger touching Justin.

They had been all over the city looking for any trace of Justin. Talking to people who may have seen him. But nothing. And no ideas about who would take him or why. Not for the first time, Brian found himself wishing that it had been Craig behind it. At least then they'd know that Justin wasn't in physical danger. His father was a prick and may have slapped Justin around a couple times, but he wouldn't have hurt him. They couldn't say that about whoever had him now. And there was no doubt that someone else was involved. They all knew Justin would never have voluntarily walked away. Especially not in his condition.

"Just hold on, Justin. I'm going to find you. Just be strong."

Brian blinked against the tears burning his eyes. He wouldn't cry. Justin needed him to be strong now too. Turning, he headed back to bed. He would try to get some sleep and start looking again in a few hours. And he would find Justin.....he had to.

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Brian sat at the diner waiting for Michael. It had been four days and they still had no clue as to what happened to Justin. They'd been out every night trying to track down anyone who may have seen or heard something. But it wasn't getting them anywhere. Brian felt like he was banging his head against a brick wall. And he felt so fucking helpless thinking about what Justin must be going through.

"You're the one looking for that kid, aren't you?"

Brian looked up to see a young man standing next to the booth. "What?"

"Word going around is you're looking for him. The kid that won King of Babylon."

"Yeah, I am. What's it to you?"

The man was silent for a minute then sat down. "Personally, nothing. But I think I might be able to help you. Maybe."

Brian leaned forward. "How so?"

"I saw him in the alley a few days ago. He wasn't alone."

Brian's eyes narrowed. "And why the hell did you wait four damn days to say anything?"

"I've been out of town. Just got back tonight and my boyfriend told me. It seems the kid's disappearance is the main topic of gossip around here."

"Tell me what you saw."

The man leaned back as he looked at Brian. "The kid was leaning back against the building, it looked like he was sick or something. Then another guy came up to him and they were talking. I left and don't know what happened after that. It may have nothing to do with what happened but I thought I should tell you just in case."

"Why didn't you step in and do something?"

"Why should I? From what I'd seen of them, they were friends."

Brian eyed him suspiciously. "Wait a minute. You mean it was someone Justin knew?"

The man nodded. "You do too. At least, I've seen all of you together at Babylon before."

Brian's hands clenched. "Who? Who the fuck was it?"

"I don't know his name. Dark haired, good looking for an older guy. He was in the contest too."

Brian was silent for a minute. "Son-of-a-bitch! I'll kill the bastard."

Standing up, the man started leaving. "Like I said, I don't know if this has anything to do with it."

Brian didn't even acknowledge the other guy as he walked away. David. Damnit, they'd never even thought about him. Why would they? What the hell was he doing?

"Hey Brian, you ready?"

Brian looked up as Michael sat down. "We don't have to go out. I know who has Justin."

"What? How?"

"Someone saw him out in the alley that night, and saw who he was with. Michael, it was David."

Michael's eyes widened. "No way, why would David go after Justin? That doesn't make sense."

"The guy recognized him from Babylon, Michael."

Michael leaned his head into his hands. He didn't want to believe this. But what if it was true? "So, what do we do now?"

Brian ran a hand over his face. "If David is the one who took Justin, that means he has to be close by. Any ideas?"

Michael was silent for a minute then looked at Brian. "The cabin. Remember when we went away for the weekend? He took me to his cabin, it's a couple hours from here. Out in the middle of nowhere."

Brian's hands clenched. "Could you find it again?"

Michael nodded. "Good, then first thing in the morning we're going there. And if he's hurt Justin, I'm going to kill him."

Michael watched as Brian stormed out of the diner. He hoped that Brian's information was wrong. He didn't want to believe that David would do something like this.

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Michael pulled up outside the cabin. It looked the same as it had that weekend. A weekend that had started out so perfectly. But it hadn't lasted. David's jealousy of Brian had destroyed anything they may have had. Michael was the first to admit that when he and David first got together, a part of him was still holding on to hope that he and Brian might get together. But the last of those hopes died that night in the hospital. The night he had sat and watched his best friend break down because Justin was hurt. It was that night that Michael realized how much Justin meant to Brian. And realized that he and Brian would never be more then best friends.

He had tried to tell that to David, but he wouldn't listen. All he saw was that Michael had chosen Brian over him....again. And that wasn't how it was. As much as the teenager could annoy him, Michael had come to care about Justin too. He was like a kid brother and he had to be there for him too. But, David had walked away and they hadn't talked since.

Is that why David was doing this? To get back at him or get back at Brian? Damnit, then why not come after them? Justin had already been through hell, he wasn't up to handling something that had nothing to do with him. Michael needed to find out.

Michael looked through the rearview mirror but saw no sign of Brian. Good. They had decided that if David was there, Michael would distract him while Brian snuck in the back. Michael just hoped that they were wrong about all of this. Getting out of the car, he headed up to the cabin.

David was in trying to talk to Justin when he heard the car door. Hurrying over to the window, he swore as he saw who it was. What the hell was Michael doing there? "Damnit!"

"What?"

David looked back at Justin. He couldn't take the chance that the kid would make noise and alert Michael to his presence. Going to a drawer, he pulled out several scarves. Straddling Justin, he got his arms tied then his legs before gagging him. Making sure he could breathe without difficulty, David headed for the door. He turned to Justin.

"I'm sorry about that, Justin. But I can't have you trying to alert Michael. I'm going to get rid of him then we'll continue our conversation."

Justin shook his head angrily but David walked out, locking the door behind him. The tears started falling down Justin's cheeks as he tried to work himself loose. This may be his only chance of getting home.

Brian stood at the back door, watching for David. Seeing him coming down the stairs, his hands clenched. He had already checked the door and knew it was unlocked. As soon as David stepped out the front, he'd go in. Hopefully, Mikey could keep him distracted long enough for him to find Justin. He watched as David opened the front door and stepped out, closing it behind him. Moving as quietly as he could, Brian entered and headed for the stairs.

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Michael stepped back as he watched David emerge from the house. God, he really had cared about him. Maybe.....Michael shook his head. He couldn't think about that now. He was there to cause a distraction. "Hi, David."

"Michael, what are you doing here?"

"I......I called your office and they said you were on vacation. I took the chance that you'd be here. I needed to talk to you."

"About what?"

"I need closure, David." Christ, Michael thought. He sounded like some damn talk show.

"What are you talking about, Michael?"

"I know that what we had we can never get back. But we never really got the chance to end it, face to face. I need that, David."

David was silent for a minute then nodded. They sat down on the steps and started talking.

Brian checked each room finally coming to the only one locked. Picking it proved easier then he thought and he opened the door. His eyes widened and his hands clenched as he moved towards the bed. "Justin?"

Justin's head turned and his eyes widened. "Shh, you're alright. I'm going to get you out of here. But you have to be quiet, ok? David is right outside."

Justin nodded his understanding and Brian leaned over him to undo the restraints. He sat down next to him and gently pulled the gag out of his lover's mouth then caressed his cheek. "You alright? Did he hurt you?"

Justin shook his head and whispered. "I just want to go home."

Brian leaned down and kissed him then helped him to stand. Justin was unsteady on his feet so Brian wrapped an arm around his waist to help him. Slowly they made their way down the steps then to the back door. Stopping, Brian pulled out his cellphone.

"Who are you calling?"

"Local cops. I want David arrested for what he did to you."

Justin leaned against him and Brian's arm tightened around him. As he talked to the cops, Brian knew what he really wanted to do was beat the hell out of David. But his concern for Justin's safety was more important. And seeing David behind bars would be almost as satisfying. The two of them leaned against the back of the house until they could hear another car approaching. Moving to the side of the house, Brian smirked as he saw the two cops pull up and approach Michael and David.

He listened as David denied knowing anything about what was going on. Yet when the police wanted to search the house, he had made it clear that was out of the question unless they had a warrant. Wrapping his arms firmly around Justin, Brian made their presence known. He smirked as he saw the look on David's face.

"It's over, David. Justin will tell everyone about you kidnapping him."

David glared at Brian then turned to Michael. "You set me up, didn't you? All that other stuff was bullshit."

"I meant the things I said, David. But yes, I came here to help Brian get Justin. You had no right to take him, David. Whatever problems you had with me and Brian weren't Justin's fault. Why hurt him?"

The one officer handcuffed David who was shaking his head. "I never wanted to hurt him. I was protecting him."

"From what, David?"

David turned to glare at Brian. "From him!"

"Brian loves him, David. He would never hurt Justin."

David spun around. "You're still so blind, Michael. Brian Kinney doesn't love anyone but himself. I tried to save you but his hold on you was too strong. But I knew I could save Justin. Make him see the truth about Brian before he was destroyed too."

The cops pushed David towards the car. As he was getting in, he turned to Justin. "You'll see that I was right, Justin. Everything I told you was the truth. Think about it."

Michael watched as the car drove away then turned to where Justin was leaning heavily against Brian. Moving to Justin's other side, the two of them got him to the car. Justin sat quietly as they drove to the police station. Brian stayed with his lover as he filled out his statement then they were free to leave.

On the drive home, Justin curled up against Brian in the backseat and immediately fell asleep "Brian, what do you think David said to him?"

"I don't know, Mikey. But I'm going to make damn sure Justin doesn't believe any of it. I won't let that idiot's words come between me and Justin. Are you okay?"

Michael looked through the rearview mirror. "Yeah, I'm fine. Why?"

Brian caressed Justin's hair. "You and David were talking for quite a while."

Michael nodded. "We got a lot out into the open. It was good for me, Brian. Now I can put what David and I had behind me."

"Good. Because if I never hear about David again, it'll be too soon."

"Brian, you know there's going to be a trial. Justin is going to have to testify."

Brian looked down at his sleeping lover. "I know, Mikey."

They drove the rest of the way home in silence. As soon as they got back to the loft, Brian helped Justin shower then put him into bed. After calling Deb and Jennifer to let them know Justin was safe, Brian crawled into bed and pulled Justin into his arms before falling asleep himself. Both enjoying the first peaceful sleep they'd had since Justin's disappearance. Justin was home and back where he belonged.

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Justin sat outside Deb's house and stared at the stars. He was finally healing and able to go back to the life he'd had before the attack and before David had kidnapped him. The trials were behind him and he was drawing again. And he wouldn't have to deal with either Chris Hobbes or David again.

And Justin knew in his heart that David had been wrong. He didn't know Brian. If all he'd been was Brian's whore, there's no way Brian would have stuck around all this time. There were times after he got out of the hospital when he and Brian couldn't have sex. Either because physically he wasn't ready or later because emotionally he couldn't deal with it. But Brian hadn't walked away. If it was just sex, Brian would've kicked him out a long time ago.

Brian loved him and sex was just a part of their relationship. A wonderful part but not the basis of what they shared. And it was Brian's love that gave him the added strength to get well. He wouldn't let David or anyone else cheapen what they had.

"So, this is where you disappeared to."

Justin turned as Brian sat down behind him and leaned back. "I just needed some air. Too many people I guess."

Brian's arms wrapped around him. "Are you okay?"

Justin nodded. "I'm fine. Really, I just needed some space."

The two lovers sat quietly content just to hold each other.

Michael looked out the window and smiled. Things had finally settled down for his friends and Justin was healing. They could put the hell of the last few months behind them and look forward to a future that would be an adventure for both of them. And they could do it without worrying about Hobbes or David. Both of them were out of their lives forever.

Michael turned as he was handed a soda. He smiled at the man he'd been seeing. A man very different then David in more ways than one. The two of them had more in common, including comic books, and he wasn't threatened by the friendship with Brian. His new lover saw what David never had. Brian was Michael's best friend, but he was Justin's lover. No one who looked at Brian and Justin together could not see the connection between them. And they were all seeing a side to Brian no one knew existed. A side that only Justin had seen.....a side the teenager had been able to bring out.

As he turned away from the window, Michael knew that it wasn't going to be smooth sailing for them. Their lives hadn't been perfect thus far and there was nothing saying it would be from then on. But Brian had finally found someone he wanted to keep in his life. And Michael knew his best friend would fight to hold onto that. Through good times and bad times, Justin and Brian were going to do their best to make it work.

END

**Runaway**

Brian sat back in the chair of Debbie's kitchen. He wasn't even sure why he was there. Michael had probably done a damn good job of laying a guilt trip on him. For all the bitching Michael did about Justin, he seemed awfully protective of him lately. Brian looked from where Michael sat across the table to where Debbie was pacing.

"I don't know what you think we can do."

"We find him and bring him home." Debbie said.

Brian shook his head. "We don't have to do that. As soon as he's done feeling sorry for himself, he'll come back on his own. You just have to give it a few days.

"It's been over a week already, Brian. No word from him at all."

"When he realizes that we're not all going to drop everything and go running after him........."

Brian stopped as he saw the looks that Michael and Debbie exchanged. "What?"

"There's more to this then you know, Brian. You think that Justin taking off is some ploy to get attention, but it's not. And it's not about your relationship with him." Michael said.

"There is no relationship, Mikey. We all know that."

Debbie turned to him. "Well, whatever you call it, this isn't about you. He loves you but he's a smart kid. Sunshine knows you're too selfish to love anyone."

"Gee, thanks Deb." Brian replied sarcastically.

"Brian, shut up."

Brian turned back to his friend. "Alright, what the hell is going on? If he isn't pouting, then why did he take off?"

Michael ran a hand over his face. "I don't know how much you know about what he was facing at school...."

"Some bad jokes and insults. So what?"

"It was more than that, Brian. We didn't even know about it until after Justin took off. Daphne came over and told us. The kid was living in hell, not only because of the insults but there were physical attacks too. It was destroying Justin from the inside and he kept it hidden from all of us because he didn't want anyone to worry. He didn't want you to think he was weak."

Brian didn't say anything as images from the past few months popped into his mind. Bruises that he'd seen but that Justin had explained away. Looking back at it, they were lame excuses. But at the time, Brian hadn't bothered to question it. "That doesn't explain......."

"There's more. A very ugly confrontation with his father which shattered what little self-confidence he had left. Which is why he took off. And why we're afraid that he's not planning to come back." Debbie added.

Brian leaned forward. "Oh come on. Everyone knows his old man is a bastard."

"But he is still Justin's father. Brian, his relationship with his father wasn't like yours. Having his dad turn on him has hurt Justin more then you realize. And the things he said, they were terrible." Debbie pointed out.

Brian was spared replying when the phone rang. He watched Debbie's face as she answered and wasn't surprised when she said Justin's name. Brian leaned back in the chair and gave Michael a rather smug 'I-told-youso' look. But he turned back towards Debbie as her tone became more frantic.

"Sunshine, don't do this. This is your home, you know that. Tell me where you are and we'll come get you."

Michael got up to stand next to his mother. "Justin, don't you let those bastards win. There are people here who love you and we want you to come back."

Debbie continued to plead with Justin as Michael turned to Brian. "Do something."

Brian rolled his eyes but stood and held his hand out for the phone. Debbie looked reluctant to hand it over but Michael nodded his head reassuringly. Brian took the phone as he leaned back against the counter. "Justin."

Silence. "Tell me where you are, Justin. I'll come get you myself."

"No."

Brian raised an eyebrow in surprise. "What did you say?"

"I said no, Brian. I'm not coming back."

"Then why bother calling?"

Silence.

"Answer me, Justin."

"I had to say goodbye, to thank Debbie for all that she's done for me. I didn't expect you to be there."

"So, you weren't planning to call me?"

"No. You're free of me, Brian. Everyone is."

Brian stood up straighter as he picked up the tone in Justin's voice. "What the hell does that mean?"

"Goodbye, Brian."

"Don't you dare hang up on me, you little shit!"

Silence.

"Justin, damnit. Say something!"

Brian didn't even acknowledge the looks he was getting from Michael and Debbie. His attention focused on the suddenly lifeless voice on the phone.

"Nothing left to say."

"So, you're just going to check out, is that it? To hell with everyone else?"

Brian heard the sharp intake of breath. "I can't do it anymore, Brian. I'm weak and I'm a coward."

"The hell you are! You would never have gotten through everything you have if you were either of those things. But you have let what narrow minded bigots think affect you too much. Say to hell with what they think and live your life the way that makes you happy. Forget them and forget your father. Concentrate on the people who support you and care about you."

"I'm tired, Brian. Tired of all the bullshit. I can't fight it on my own."

Brian's hand curled into a fist. "Then let us help you. We'll help you rebuild what those bastards have destroyed. But you have to come home. Now tell me where you are."

Silence again and it scared the hell out of Brian. He'd never heard anyone, particularily Justin, sound so despondent. "Justin?"

"I'm sorry, Brian." Justin whispered.

"Don't be sorry. Justin, just tell me where you are."

A humorless laugh came through the phone. "Where all worthless street whores belong. Bye, Brian."

The phone went dead. "JUSTIN! Damnit!"

Brian slammed the phone down. Debbie dropped into a chair, her head in her hands crying. "Who called him a street whore?"

"What?" Michael asked.

"He said he was where all street whores belong. Who called him that?"

Michael looked away for a second then faced his friend. "His father. It was one of the things he said anyway. Now do you see why we're so desperate to find Justin?"

Brian nodded as he grabbed his jacket. "Where are you going?"

"Back to my place. I know someone who may be able to backtrace the call. At least find out what city he's in."

Michael and Debbie watched as Brian stormed out of the house.

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They'd been driving around the city for hours with no sign of Justin. "This is like looking for a needle in a haystack."

Brian glared at him before turning back to the road. "No one asked you to come along, Michael. I can find Justin without you."

"Don't be an asshole, Brian. I'm just as concerned about Justin as you are."

"Are you?"

Michael turned to his best friend. "Don't give me that shit, Brian. Where the hell have you been the past few months while Justin has been self-destructing? You show up to screw him once or twice a week then want nothing to do with him the rest of the time. It's been mom and I who have had to watch his father and those pricks at school destroy him from the inside out. It was me who sat with him while he cried, finally breaking down and telling me about the things his father said......and did."

Brian turned. "What do you mean?"

Michael took a deep breath. "His old man beat him up during that confrontation. And Justin never said anything, but I think it probably wasn't the first time."

"Damnit, why didn't you tell me this?"

"Why should I? You've made it clear there's only one thing you want Justin around for, what do you care if he was falling apart inside?"

Brian glared at him. "You know me better than that, Mikey. If all I wanted was sex, I wouldn't need to keep him hanging around. I can find that anywhere."

"So, you're saying you care about Justin?"

"Of course I care about him. Jesus, you should know that."

Michael nodded. "But I'm not the one who needs to know it. Justin needs to know that not everyone in his life is disgusted by him. To know that what his father said were lies. He needs to know that you care."

Something in Michael's voice caught Brian's attention. "The bastard said something about me, didn't he?"

"He knew how much you meant to Justin and he used it against the kid. A surefire way to hurt him the most. By making Justin think that you didn't give a shit. That he was no more to you then a whore. And that you couldn't wait to be rid of him."

"Son-of-a-bitch, I'll kill him! Why the hell did Justin listen to him? He knows it isn't true."

"And how would he know that? The only time you're around is for sex."

Brian's hands clenched but he didn't say anything. He turned his attention back to searching the streets. Michael knew the subject was closed. "Couldn't your friend pinpoint it anymore?"

Brian shook his head. "All he was able to get was that Justin called from Pittsburgh. He has no money so he has to be living on the streets. That's what he said, he was where all worthless street whores belonged. Which means he's on the street somewhere."

"Do you think he's tricking? He'd need money for food if nothing else."

Brian tensed as he thought about it. He didn't want to picture Justin with some trick. "I don't know. From the way he sounded on the phone, I don't think he'd care that he wasn't eating. It would just be a way to die."

Michael turned. "You don't think he'd......"

"Kill himself? I don't know if he's fallen that far or not. But he's low enough that he wouldn't do anything to keep himself safe or healthy."

They drove in silence for hours until Michael reached out and grabbed Brian's arm. "Stop the car, Brian."

"What is it?" Brian asked as he pulled over.

Michael pointed and Brian looked to where Michael was pointing. A young man sat against the dirty building, his knees pulled up to his chest with his head buried in his arms. Only thing visible was his blond hair. "Is that him?"

"I'm not sure."

Brian got out of the jeep and headed across the street with Michael right behind him. "Justin?"

Michael thought he saw the shoulders tense but there was no other reaction. He watched as Brian croutched down next to the boy. Brian reached out to raise the boy's face and Michael's breath caught in his throat as he saw the pale face marred by bruises. "Jesus, Justin."

Justin pulled his face away. "Leave me alone."

"Not going to happen, brat. Get up, you're coming home." Brian said as he stood and held out a hand to Justin.

Justin shook his head. "I don't have a home."

Brian pulled Justin to his feet pushing him back against the wall. "Don't give me that shit, Justin. You have a home and a family. We may be a little weird, but we love you. And we won't sit back and let anyone hurt you anymore......and that includes yourself."

Justin looked from Brian to Michael then back again and started shaking. Brian pulled off his jacket and wrapped it around Justin's shoulder. "Let's go."

Michael took Justin's other side and they helped him into the jeep. Brian frowned as he watched Justin curl into a ball, moaning softly. "Is that from his old man?"

Michael shrugged. "Not entirely, I don't think. Looks like he ran into some trouble on the street. Maybe we should take him to the hospital."

"No hospital."

Michael turned. "Justin, you might...."

Justin shook his head. "No hospital."

Michael looked to Brian who just shrugged. "Don't push it, Mikey. We'll get him back to Deb's then go from there."

Michael nodded and leaned his head back. Brian kept checking the rearview mirror as he drove towards Deb's. Right now all he could concentrate on was the fact that Justin was alright. He'd deal with the rest later.

Brian sat on the edge of the bed caressing Justin's cheek. They'd gotten him cleaned up and some food into him, then pushed him into bed. He was asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow. Brian had come up later to check on him and found him tossing and turning, murmuring words he couldn't understand. He'd sat next to the younger man and whispered to him until Justin had quieted down. But seeing him so vulnerable had affected Brian more then he thought possible. Now he didn't want to leave him alone.

He wanted to be the first one Justin saw when he woke up. And he wanted to make Justin believe that the crap his father had told him was all lies. All of it. So, Brian kicked off his shoes and laid down on the bed, pulling Justin into his arms.

Closing his eyes, Brian ran a hand comfortingly up and down Justin's back. They would have to have a long talk when Justin woke up.

Debbie poked her head into the room and smiled slightly at the sight of the two men sleeping. Brian could deny it all he wanted, but she knew that he cared about Justin. And now he was going to have to face those feelings. It would be interesting to watch. Deb was still smiling as she closed the door.

END

**Russian Roulette**

Brian was leaning against the bar watching the guys dancing. His gaze was caught by a hot number in the middle of the dance floor. Brian took a slow drink of his beer as he watched the man try to seduce him from across the room.

"You should talk to him."

Brian turned his head annoyed to find Ted standing there. "What?"

"I said you should talk to Michael. He'll listen to you."

"What are you babbling about?"

"Ben. I'm talking about the fact that your best friend is involved with someone who's HIV positive."

Brian rolled his eyes. "I've already talked to Mikey. He knows the chances he's taking. And he knows how to be careful."

"Doesn't this bother you? Aren't you worried?"

"Look Teddy, Mikey's old enough to make his own decisions. Am I thrilled that he's seeing someone who's positive, no, I'm not. But what the fuck do you want me to do about it? If I try to tell him not to see him, he'll do the opposite of what I say anyway. Besides, I'm not his fucking keeper."

Brian turned back to the dance floor and caught the hunk's eye and nodded to the back room. The guy smiled and headed in that direction. "Then talk to Ben."

Brian looked back at Ted. "And why would I do that?"

"Get him to back off. If he cares about Michael........"

"You talk to Ben. I'm not getting in the middle of this. Now, don't you have someone else to annoy?"

Brian headed towards the back room. Ted's problem was that he was still hung up on Michael and he was jealous. Of course there was cause for concern, but it was Mikey's life. It was his choice and none of them could make it for him.

Brian walked into Woody's and looked around for the guys. He was surprised to see Ben there alone. Making a decision, he walked over and sat down next to him. Ben acknowledged him with a nod of his head.

"So, where's Mikey?"

"He'll be here in a few minutes. What about Justin?" Ben asked.

"Working for another hour."

Ben nodded. "We can skip the small talk, you know. Why not just get right to the point?"

"And what's the point?"

"I'm not going to play your games, Kinney. You've got something to say, then say it now."

Brian smirked. "Fine. I think you're a selfish prick who thinks only about himself. You're putting Mikey at risk and you don't even give a damn."

"You don't know shit about me. I care about Michael and I wouldn't do anything to hurt him. Look, I never hid my condition from him. We aren't going to take any chances."

"There's always a chance, you should know that."

Ben nodded. "What if the condom breaks? What if...? What if....? Well, what if Michael walked out the door and got hit by a truck? There's always risks in life."

"But this is a 'what if' that can be avoided. If you cared about Mickey you'd walk away instead of possibly exposing him."

Ben looked down at his drink. "And what about you?"

"What about me?"

Ben looked at him. "You think I'm selfish for wanting to be with Michael even knowing I'm positive. That I'm an asshole for endangering him. Maybe you should ask yourself this stuff."

"I'm not positive."

"No, which only means you've been damn lucky. I know about you, Brian Kinney. A different guy every night for years. Now, you've got Justin but you still screw around. Think about what you're exposing him to."

"You don't know what the fuck you're talking about."

"I'm talking about you playing Russian roulette with not only your life but with Justin's too. Can you say without a doubt that not one of those guys you've fucked has been positive? You screw nameless guys then you go home and screw Justin. To me, that's selfish."

Brian's eyes narrowed. "Shut the fuck up. This isn't about me and Justin. It's about you and what you're doing to Mikey."

Ben shook his head. "Michael and I both know what we're getting into. Does Justin? Your luck could run out, Brian. Then what? You get exposed and maybe you don't even realize it right away. And by the time you do, it'll be too late. You'll already have exposed Justin."

"Who I fuck is none of your goddamn business." Brian said angrily.

"But it is Justin's. Don't get all sanctimonious on me when you're screwing around with an eighteen year old's life."

Ben got up and walked out. Brian sat there glaring after him. What the fuck did he know? Brian knew he was always careful about safe sex. Shaking his head, he turned and headed for Babylon.

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Brian walked into the loft and headed to the bathroom to take a quick shower. He pulled on a pair of jeans then went to get some water from the kitchen. As he leaned against the counter, he saw Justin sitting on the couch. "Thought you had to work."

Justin shook his head but didn't say anything. "What's bugging you?"

Still no answer. Brian walked over and saw the look on Justin's face. "What?"

"This guy look familiar to you?"

Brian took the photo that Justin handed to him. It was one of the dancers from Babylon. "Yeah, seen him at Babylon. Why?"

"You ever fuck him?"

Brian ran a hand through his hair. "Jesus Justin, I thought we agreed......."

Justin turned to look at him. "Just answer the goddamn question. Have you ever fucked him?"

"Yeah once, so what?"

Justin closed his eyes then looked back at the ground. Brian got pissed and started walking towards the bedroom. He was in no mood to deal with Justin's dramatics. "I saw him today. At the hospice."

"And I care about that why?"

"Because he was being admitted. The guy is dying, Brian. He has AIDS."

Brian stopped dead in his tracks on the steps to the bedroom. "What did you say?"

"You heard me. I'm going to be tested tomorrow, I want you to go with me."

Brian turned. "What the fuck for? It was one time and I used protection."

Justin stood and walked over to him. "Because I need you to do this. Because I want you to be there. And protection is never 100%, remember?"

"You're overreacting, Justin."

"No, I'm not. You had sex with someone who was positive then you had sex with me. You used protection but there's always a chance that it wasn't enough. I won't be able to rest until I'm sure. I'm asking you to go with me."

"Fine. We'll go and you'll see that there was nothing to worry about. It was one time, Justin."

"One time with him. You didn't know he was positive, Brian. How many others were there?" Justin asked, then walked back to the couch.

Brian stormed into the bathroom and slammed the door. Justin was being a drama princess. There was no way. But as Brian looked in the mirror, the doubts began to sink in and he heard Ben's voice playing in his head. The comments the man made months earlier about playing Russian roulette with their lives. Had his luck finally run out?

"No, I protected myself and I protected Justin." Brian whispered to his reflection.

Brian finished dressing and then left for Babylon. Justin refused to go with him and that was fine. They needed to be apart right now. But as he was watching the crowd, he couldn't shake the doubts that were beginning to take hold in his head.

Had all his tricking finally come back to haunt him? Were there others that he didn't know about? Was it possible that he was infected? And oh Christ, had he infected Justin? No! They were always protected and safe when they had sex. Always! He was fine and Justin was fine. Brian didn't need any test to tell him that.

But despite his conviction, the doubts wouldn't go away. And he finally left without even trying to hook up with anyone. He needed to be at home with Justin. To reassure the both of them that there was nothing to worry about. Brian just hoped he could make himself believe it.

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Brian sat in Deb's living room and looked at Vic. He didn't know why he had come but he'd left work and found himself at the Novotny house telling Vic about what was going on. Vic sat quietly and listened while Brian expressed his own doubts.

"When do you get the results?"

"Not till Monday. Jesus, I'm going to drive myself nuts by then."

"Thought you said you thought Justin was overreacting." Vic said.

"I do. I did. Christ, I don't know what I think. I thought I'd never done anyone who was positive either. Now I know I have. And then I have to think of how many others there may have been."

Vic saw the play of emotions on Brian's face. The younger man had always been so sure of his own invulnerability. This had shaken him to his very foundation. "How's Justin handling this?"

"He's scared I guess. I don't know."

"Brian, you and Justin need each other right now. The next 48 hours are going to be the longest of your life."

Brian stood up and went to stare out the window. "He actually believes that I may have infected him, Vic."

"Can you blame him, Brian? The way you trick........"

"I'm always careful, Vic."

Vic shook his head. "And so far you've been lucky, Brian. I think, whichever way the test comes back, you're going to have to consider your future. Is having a different trick whenever you want him worth the risks? Is it fair to Justin?"

"The tests will be negative."

"I hope they are, Brian. But you're going to have to consider how this scare changes things. Justin may not be as willing to put himself at risk."

Brian's eyes narrowed but he didn't say anything. "You may have to decide what's more important to you, Brian. Screwing anyone and everyone with the risk that your luck is going to run out or being satisfied with having just one lover. Someone you can trust.......someone you love."

Brian looked at Vic then turned and walked out.

Justin was at the computer when Brian got back to the loft. He stood inside the door watching the teenager. Ben's words, Vic's advice, his own doubts and fears, everything was swirling around in his head. He didn't want to think about all of this. He just wanted it to be some bad dream.

But as he watched Justin drop his head into his hands, Brian knew it wasn't a dream. Walking over to the young man, he crouched down in front of him and pulled his lover into his arms. The two of them sat in silence just holding each other and waiting. Waiting for the news that would change their lives forever.......one way or another.

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Brian walked into his apartment and dropped onto the couch. The day had been a total waste. He hadn't been able to concentrate on anything. All he could think about was Justin and those damn test results. Every time the phone rang he had jumped. So finally, he'd decided to just leave early.

But Justin hadn't called. What was taking so long? They said the results would be in Monday and it was Monday. Was no news good news? He could feel his gut clench at the thought. During the course of the weekend, his conviction that the tests would be negative lost its strength. As he'd sat with Justin in his arms, his mind replayed night after night and faceless trick after faceless trick. Was the dancer really the only one who was positive? And by holding onto his desire to fuck whoever he wanted whenever he wanted had he put Justin in danger?

Brian hadn't been able to stop thinking about the things Vic had said. And as much as he wanted to ignore the truth, he knew he couldn't. Not anymore. Regardless of what the test results were, things were going to have to change. He couldn't go through this not knowing again. Or the fear of wondering what he could be exposing Justin to.

So, what was the answer? Stop tricking or let Justin go? "Fuck!"

Brian leaned his head back against the couch. "Brian?"

"Yeah?"

When Justin didn't answer right away, Brian turned his head. He sat up straighter when he saw Justin's pale face. "Justin, what is it?"

Justin walked closer. "The clinic called. Our results are in."

"Why didn't you call me?" Brian asked.

"I did but Cynthia said you'd already left."

Brian reached out and pulled Justin into his arms. "What did they say?"

"They want us to come in. Is that bad?"

Brian tightened his hold as he felt the trembling in Justin's body. "I don't know."

"I'm scared, Brian."

"Yeah, well, you're doing better than me. I'm fucking terrified."

Justin pulled back slightly. "You are? I thought you......."

"I wanted to believe that this was nothing. I wanted to think that there was no way those tests could be anything but negative. But, a part of me knows it is possible. It's possible that one time was enough and not only am I positive but that I've exposed you to it. And I fucking hate myself for that."

Justin caressed Brian's cheek. "Brian, I........."

"Don't, ok? Let me get changed and we'll head down there. Then one way or another, we'll know."

Brian leaned in and kissed Justin then headed to the bedroom. "Brian, what if we're positive?"

Brian turned to look at his lover. "Then we deal with it together. I'm not going to let you go through it alone."

Justin nodded and Brian went into the bedroom and started changing. As he pulled on his shirt, he stopped to look in the mirror. \*And if I'm the only one who's positive, I'm going to push you as far away from me as I can. I won't drag you down with me, Justin. I won't ruin your life.\*

Brian shook his head and went back out. "You ready?"

"As I'll ever be."

Brian took Justin's hand and led him out of the loft. He took a long look at his home before closing the door......knowing that it would never look the same to him again.

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Brian sat on the floor playing with Gus. His nerves had been on edge for days and even playing with his son wasn't helping him relax. "You want to talk about it?"

"Nothing to talk about. The tests were negative, just like I said they would be."

Lindsay sat down in the chair facing Brian. "Don't do this, Brian."

"Do what?"

"Fallback into the selfish bastard mode. You and Justin had a scare and trying to push him away isn't the way to deal with it."

Brian glared at her. "I'm not pushing him away. He still lives with me and we're still together."

"Then why haven't you had sex since you got the results?"

"Little shit has no business talking to you about that. It's none of your business."

"He thinks it's his fault, Brian. That he's done something wrong."

Brian looked back at Gus and tried to ignore Lindsay. "Fine. So, I hope you enjoy your choice."

"What choice?"

"The tricks over Justin."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

Lindsay waited till he looked up at her. "I know you, Brian. And I know you love that kid. But you just can't let go of the meaningless tricks, can you? You'd rather lose Justin completely then commit to him."

"Justin has known from the start how I live my life."

"But this scare has changed things, Brian. Justin can't handle playing games with his life anymore. Sooner or later, your luck is going to run out. Do you even give a damn?"

Brian stared at the teddy bear in his hands. Lindsay threw her hands up and was going to walk away when Brian answered. "That's why he has to leave. I can't handle the thought that I could pass something on to him. I won't put him through this again."

Lindsay smiled sadly then knelt down next to him. "Pushing him away isn't the answer, Brian. Give up the tricks."

"No."

Lindsay grabbed his face and turned him to face her. "Quit holding on to the past, Brian. If you were honest with yourself, you'd admit that these faceless tricks are more habit than anything else. What are you getting out of it but a quick release?"

Brian pulled away and stood up. "You've got someone who loves you, flaws and all. He'll be there for you no matter what. Someone that you can share your life with."

"Fucking is fucking, Lindsay."

"You're right it is. But when was the last time you and Justin fucked, Brian? When did it go from just fucking to making love?"

Brian turned to stare at her. "Think about that before you ruin this, Bri. Think about how much Justin has become a part of your life. And then think about how lonely your life will be without him around."

"Thank you , Dr. Ruth. I'm leaving."

Lindsay followed him to the door and watched him walk out. "And think about how you'd feel seeing someone else take your place!"

Brian's shoulders tensed but he didn't say anything. He got in the Jeep and headed for Babylon. But halfway there, he turned around.

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Brian was leaning against the bar when he saw Ben approach. Ever since his own scare with HIV, Brian had been a little less antagonistic to Michael's new boyfriend. "Heard congratulations are in order."

"What?" Brian asked.

"Michael told me about your scare and your negative results. Congratulations. It must be a huge weight off of you to know you're free and clear to go on servicing Pittsburgh."

It was on the tip of his tongue to come back with a smartass comment but he didn't say it. Because he knew Ben probably wasn't that far off. That had been his intention when he'd heard the results. He had every intention of resuming his life exactly where he'd left off. But not anymore.

After talking to Lindsay, Brian had taken a long look at himself and his life. He thought about the way his life had been before Justin walked into it and how it would be without him there. And once he admitted that he didn't want to think about his life without the blond teenager, he knew things had to change. He couldn't put his lover through another experience like they'd just shared. So, he'd made a choice.

"You're pretty quiet."

Brian turned to Ben. "I'm not a fool. I know I was fucking lucky this time."

"And luck runs out sooner or later." Ben added.

"That's why I'm getting out of the game. The odds aren't worth it anymore."

Ben looked out towards the dance floor where Justin was dancing with Michael and Emmett. "You tell Justin that?"

Brian nodded. "We had a long talk about it once I admitted the truth to myself. Neither of us want to go through that experience again."

"You think you can settle for being with just one man?"

Brian smirked. "I don't think I'm settling. Justin's a handful so I don't think I have to worry about being bored."

Ben smiled. "Glad to see you learned from your mistakes."

"I learn from my past, Ben."

"So do I. I won't do anything to put Michael in danger."

Brian looked at the other man and nodded. "I realize that now. Why don't we go grab them before someone decides to try to move in?"

Ben set down his beer and followed Brian out on the dance floor. He pulled Michael into his arms and they moved slightly away from Brian and Justin.

"They're going to be fine, Michael."

"Really?"

Ben nodded. They both smiled as they saw Brian pull Justin into his arms and kiss him hungrily. Ben looked around and saw the envious looks on several guys' faces.

Two of Babylon's finest were now off the market and out of their reach.

END

**Taken for Granted**

Justin stood at the bar staring after Brian and the trick. He had humiliated himself by getting up on that stage and Brian couldn't have cared less. Justin set his crown down on the bar and stared at it. "I take it that was the guy."

Justin turned to see Sheba, the drag queen who had given him the idea to enter the contest. "Yeah."

"He must be an idiot."

"Brian is anything but an idiot."

Sheba leaned against the bar. "Then he's a fool. There isn't a man in this room right now who wouldn't want the chance you just gave him."

"But he's the one I want."

"And he knows it. He knows you'll be there waiting for him when he's ready to make time for you. And he'll keep taking you for granted."

"So, what am I supposed to do? I can't walk away. I love him."

Sheba watched him sadly. "Then teach him a lesson. Show him that you won't be his doormat anymore. Make him do the chasing."

"Brian doesn't do chasing."

Sheba reached out and put a finger under his chin turning his head. "What have you got to lose? Make him see that if he's not going to appreciate you there are others who will."

Justin looked back to the direction Brian had taken off in and then back at the drag queen. He was quiet for several minutes as he thought about it. "How?"

Sheba smiled at Justin. "You just leave it to me, honey. We'll show him what happens when he takes you for granted once too often."

Justin smiled slightly but he still wasn't sure about the whole thing. Sheba wrapped an arm around his shoulder and pushed him out to the dance floor. "First lesson, don't moon over him. Get out there and make these guy's night. Forget about the jerk and revel in your victory."

Sheba left Justin and headed backstage to change. Stopping at the stage, Sheba turned and smirked. Justin was the center of attention on the dance floor and was starting to relax. Now, to find just the person to make Brian Kinney see red.

Sheba stood backstage with arms crossed staring at the bar. Brian had returned from the back room and was watching the newly crowned King of Babylon holding court on the dance floor. And from the expression on his face, he didn't like not being the center of the teenager's world. "This had better be good, buddy."

Sheba turned and grinned. "If you could teach a lesson to anyone at Babylon, who would it be?"

"That asshole Kinney, you know that. Why?"

Sheba grabbed his arm and pointed to Justin. "You like?"

"He's hot for a twink. But I don't think you dragged me down here to point out some twink."

"Now look at the bar."

The man leaned forward and saw Kinney leaning against the bar. His eyes locked on the blond kid. "You're shitting me, right?"

Sheba smirked. "The kid is Kinney's private stock. Treats the kid like shit though. I thought my little plan would be beneficial to both of us."

"What plan?"

"You show Mr. Kinney what happens when you take someone for granted. Make him see that if he keeps acting like a prick the kid isn't going to just sit around and take it forever. You get to knock Kinney off his pedestal and I feel like I've helped the kid. He loves the jerk."

The guy smiled as he slung an arm over Sheba's shoulder. "You old softie, who would've guessed?"

Sheba elbowed him in the gut. "I like the kid. Now, will you do it?"

He looked from Kinney to the blond and nodded. "For you, sure. I'll just wander over and say hi."

"Colt?"

The man turned. "Don't hurt him. He's a sweet kid."

Colt smiled and leaned over to kiss Sheba on the cheek. "You know me better than that. I'm just going to force Kinney into realizing exactly what he has to lose."

Sheba nodded and watched as Colt made his way towards Justin. Colt was whispering in Justin's ear and they both turned towards the stage. Sheba gave Justin the thumbs up and he nodded. Colt pulled Justin closer as they started dancing and Sheba looked towards the bar.

"Hope you're a fast learner, Brian Kinney."

Brian finished the rest of his drink and headed out of the club. If Justin wanted to pretend to ignore him then fine. If he wanted to pretend to be hitting on those other guys, fine. He was in no mood to deal with Justin's teenage tantrums. They'd see how quick Justin changed his tune after Brian kept him at arm's length for a few days.

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Michael had kept his mouth shut for three days. He hadn't mentioned the cold shoulder Brian was giving Justin nor had he mentioned the almost lost look on Justin's face. But this had been going on long enough. Brian was being a prick and was pissing all of them off. "How much longer are you going to punish Justin for having fun?"

"Excuse me?"

"You've been an asshole ever since Justin won King of Babylon."

Brian's eyes narrowed. "He was trying to manipulate me, Mikey. First by entering the damn contest to begin with, then by showing off on the dance floor."

"Jesus, Brian. He entered to get your attention. And from what I saw of him all he was doing was having fun. Actually, I'm not even sure he knew you had come back from the back room. Maybe that's why you're so pissed."

"What?"

"You're jealous, Brian. There were a bunch of guys there who made it clear they were interested in Justin. He could've had any one of them. But he didn't. You're the only one he wants......for now."

"Explain that, Mikey."

Michael looked towards the kitchen then back at Brian. "You made him your backup plan, Brian. How do you think that made him feel?"

"Jesus, Mikey, we aren't a couple."

"I didn't say you were but no one wants to feel like a consolation prize. And if that's all he is to you, or all he thinks he is, how long do you think he's going to hang around? How long till someone comes along who's willing to make him number one?"

Brian rolled his eyes. "Thank you, Dr. Ruth."

Brian stood and Michael shook his head as he followed his friend out. He knew Brian cared more for the kid then he was willing to admit. But if he didn't change something soon, he was going to push Justin away for good.

As soon as they hit Babylon, Brian disappeared to check out the possibilities while Michael made his way over to Ted and Emmett. "Hey, where's Boy Wonder? I thought he was coming with you guys."

Emmett nodded out to the dance floor with a smirk. "The stud picked him up as soon as we walked in."

Michael turned to see Justin dancing with a muscular young man, dark haired and gorgeous. "Why does he look familiar?"

"Because he was sizing Justin up after the King of Babylon. Justin said Sheba introduced them." Ted answered.

"Guy seems pretty interested." Michael said.

Emmett nodded. "He's got eyes for our baby only. Unlike some other people I could mention. Where is dear Brian anyway?"

"Right behind you."

Emmett jumped at the whisper in his ear and turned to see Brian standing behind him. "Damn you, don't sneak up on a person like that."

Brian smirked as he ordered a drink. "So, what were you three so deep in discussion about?"

"Justin......and the hottie."

"What hottie?"

Ted cheerfully pointed to the two men on the dance floor. "That one."

"He's alright. Now, if you'll excuse me."

The three of them watched as Brian moved in on a trick. "Stubborn jackass."

"He doesn't seem too concerned about Justin dancing with someone else." Ted said.

"Why should he be? He's got Justin right where he wants him." Michael said.

Emmett shook his head. "He may want to rethink that."

Ted and Michael followed his gaze to the stairs. Justin and the stud were leaving together. "Well, I'll be damned."

After the two men left, Michael looked towards the dance floor to find Brian. There was no sign of him which meant he had gone into the backroom. Which also meant he had no idea that Justin had left with someone.

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Michael sat in the diner waiting for Brian. His friend had been in a bad mood ever since a few nights earlier when he'd returned from the backroom at Babylon to find out that Justin had left with the hot guy he'd been dancing with. And he'd avoided the kid ever since.

"Can I get you something, Michael?"

Michael turned to Justin. "Coffee for now. I'm waiting for Brian."

Justin nodded and went to get the coffee but Michael hadn't missed the flinch when he mentioned Brian. He waited till Justin came back to try to talk to him. "Haven't seen you around the last couple days."

"One of the guys is sick so I've been filling in here."

"And have you see the stud lately?"

Justin looked confused. "Who?"

"The guy at Babylon. You know, the one you left with."

Justin shrugged. "That's Colt. He's just a friend."

"A friend? You left with him that night."

"So? We came here and talked. Then he dropped me off at Deb's and left."

"Have you talked to Brian?"

Justin shook his head. "He's made it clear he doesn't want to talk to me. I can't do it anymore, Michael. It hurts too much."

Michael looked shocked. "What do you mean?"

"I can't be Brian's backup fuck anymore. I love him but I can't do it."

Michael saw the defeated look on Justin's face as he turned and walked away. He had never expected to hear the kid admit defeat and walk away. At one time, that would've been music to his ears. But his opinion of Justin had changed and he had admitted to himself that he'd never have Brian. Besides, he knew Brian cared about the kid, even if he wouldn't admit it.

"Sorry, I got hung up."

Michael looked up as Brian joined him. Justin came over with coffee for Brian without talking to him. Brian didn't even acknowledge the teenager. Michael shook his head as Justin left.

"I hope this is what you want, Brian."

"What?"

"You've finally succeeded in pushing Justin away."

Brian smirked. "Yeah, right. He's playing the drama princess role to perfection now but he'll be back worming his way into my life in a few days."

Michael shook his head. He had seen the look in Justin's eyes. "You're wrong, Brian."

"We'll see, Mikey."

Brian became distracted with yet another nameless trick and Michael shook his head. He knew Brian was doing it intentionally to prove something to Justin....or maybe to himself. Turning, Michael saw the look on Justin's face before he disappeared into the kitchen.

Looking back at Brian, Michael knew that things were changing. Either Brian would just let Justin walk out of his life or for the first time in his life, Brian Kinney would have to do the pursuing. And even though Justin said Colt was just a friend, Michael had to wonder exactly how the man would fit into the equation.

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Sheba turned with a start. "Jesus Colt, don't scare a girl like that."

Colt smirked. "So sorry, my deepest apologies."

"Asshole. To what do I owe this pleasure? I haven't seen you for a while."

"I've been spending time with Justin."

"Justin? Still? Colt, I told you not to hurt him."

Colt held his hands up in front of him. "I'm not hurting him, I swear. I like him and I like being around him. He's walked away from Kinney."

Sheba's eyes widened. "You're shitting me, right? The kid loves him."

"Yeah, he still does. But he had enough of Kinney treating him like a door mat."

"So, you decided to move in when he was vulnerable, is that it?"

"Christ, come on. Justin and I are friends nothing more."

"Not for your lack of trying, I'm sure."

Colt smirked. "True. Look, I know Justin is vulnerable right now and I know he still loves the asshole. And from the glares I've been getting from Kinney lately, I think it's a safe bet that he does care about the kid. He's just not ready to admit it to himself or Justin yet."

"I'm still not clear why you're still hanging around."

"Because, I don't want to see the kid hurt either. If he's with me, then we don't have to worry about one of these vultures latching onto him. Sooner or later, Kinney is going to get off his ass and tell Justin how he feels."

"And what will you do then?" Sheba asked.

Colt shrugged. "Make it clear to Kinney that he better learn from his mistakes. And make sure Justin knows that he has options other than Brian Kinney."

Sheba smiled and kissed his cheek. "No matter what anyone else thinks, you're a good man, Colt."

"Thanks......I think. You want to go grab some supper?"

"Sure, just let me change. This getup is about to suffocate me."

Colt followed Sheba to the back.

Michael sat across the booth and watched the expression on Brian's face. His friend had finally realized that Justin was serious about staying away. They hadn't seen the kid at Babylon or Woody's in weeks. The only place Brian saw him was at the diner. And there, Justin didn't treat him any differently than any other customer.

Michael had to give the kid credit. His facade was almost as good as Brian's. If he hadn't seen the kid at his mom's, he may have even believed that Justin had put Brian behind him. But he knew better. The kid was miserable and Brian was miserable and it was making all of them miserable.

"So, looks like Justin is getting pretty close to that Colt guy. They seem to hang out quite a bit. Guess that's good for you, right? I mean it keeps Justin out of your hair."

Michael fought the smirk on his face as he saw Brian's hands clench. "Not for long."

"What?" Michael asked, even though he knew what Brian said.

But Brian wasn't listening to him. His eyes were locked on the teenager across the room. And Michael knew the look on his best friend's face. Brian was on the hunt. And God help anyone who got in his way. But Brian wouldn't find it as easy as he may think. Justin had been hurt and he would have to get past that.

Let the seduction begin.

END

**Granted**

Sequel to Taken for Granted

Brian leaned back on the couch staring off into space. The fight with Justin earlier in the night had left him drained, both physically and emotionally. Everything he'd thought he'd known had been tossed out the window the last few months. He thought, after King of Babylon, that Justin was pulling a drama princess moment. But, instead of coming back and acting like nothing had happened, Justin had allowed him to walk away. It hadn't escaped Brian's attention that Justin started spending time with Colt. But again, he thought it was just a ploy. Again, he'd been wrong.

And for the first time, he saw what Mikey had been trying to make him see. Justin had put up with a lot of shit with him but his actions the night of the King of Babylon contest and the weeks following it had been the last straw. Justin was making it clear that he wasn't going to be anyone's backup fuck. Not even Brian's. And Brian had seen the teenager pulling farther and farther away.

It was then that he made the decision that he wasn't ready to let Justin walk away. He still hadn't wanted to admit that he cared for the kid or that they were in a relationship. Brian just assumed that if he made it clear that he still wanted Justin, the teenager would throw himself in his arms. He'd been wrong yet again. And their roles were reversed. Justin became the focus of a 'stalker' and Brian took on the role of stalker.

A role very unfamiliar to Brian. Sure, he'd been the one to initiate his tricks but he'd never went to any lengths to get one person into his bed, he'd never had to. But, as with his entire history with the teenager, this time was different. Justin wasn't willing to just take the breadcrumbs anymore. And he wasn't ready to just jump back into Brian's bed.

Brian knew what Justin wanted, what he needed, but it took him several weeks to admit to himself that it was something he was willing to give. If he were honest with himself, he would admit that he and Justin had already been in a relationship. He'd broken one rule after the other with Justin and he was going to break his biggest one. So, he brought Justin back to the loft and they both let out everything they'd been dealing with. And when it looked like Justin was going to walk away, Brian caught him at the door. Offering what Justin hadn't wanted to hope for. A relationship.

Brian could still see the emotions in his lover's eyes. His lover. Fuck, he really was in a relationship. But though it scared him to death, he was surprised to realize that he wasn't panicked by the thought. They both knew there would be rules and Justin knew that he wasn't ready to give up his tricks altogether. It had taken some time but they had reached a compromise that they both could live with.

Standing, he walked into the bedroom and laid down on his side to watch Justin sleep. And that was all they had done. Both of them were too wiped out after their emotional argument to do anything but crawl into each other's arms and sleep. Brian figured that maybe Justin wasn't ready for more right then anyway. They'd come a long way but he could still see the doubts in Justin's eyes. Reaching out, Brian ran a finger gently across Justin's forehead and down his cheek.

He'd come too close this time. By refusing to admit what he was feeling, he'd almost let the teenager walk right out of his life. And that was something he couldn't let happen again. Lying down, his arms went around his lover and pulled him back into his arms.

Brian woke several hours later and sat straight up when he realized that he was alone. Yanking on a pair of jeans, he wandered out to the living room as he spotted Justin standing in a pair of sweatpants in front of the window. He walked towards him wrapping his arms around his waist and pulling him back against him. "What are you doing up?"

"Thinking."

"About?"

Justin was quiet for a minute. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

Brian felt the tension in the younger man's body. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about us. Is being with me really what you want or is it just convenient for you to have me around?"

Brian moved his hands to Justin's shoulders and turned him. "Convenient has never been what this is about. I don't know what it is about you or how you did it, but yes, I'm sure. I want you here and it has nothing to do with convenience."

Justin nodded but didn't say anything. Brian cupped his face as he bent to kiss him passionately. Justin's arms wrapped around his waist. When breathing became an issue, Brian pulled back slightly. "I'm willing to do things for you that I swore I would never do. And I'm offering the best I can right now. It has to be your decision whether that's enough."

"I love you, Brian. But I can't take being your backup plan anymore. I know you'll still do tricks just don't rub it in my face. I can't do that again."

"We can work it out, Justin."

Justin smiled slightly and allowed Brian to pull him back to the bedroom. They crawled under the covers and Brian pulled his younger lover against him. This connection, this touch, was enough for now. The rest could wait until they weren't running on emotion. They had the time now that they both knew where they stood.

Sheba stood backstage at Babylon and smiled at the couple dancing, oblivious to everyone around them. "Never thought I'd see the day."

The notorious Brian Kinney was in a relationship. And though he still picked up tricks occasionally, the number had severely dropped and almost all of them took place in the back room. Seeing the happiness on Justin's face, Sheba smiled. The King of Babylon had gotten his fondest wish. Sheba just hoped that Brian Kinney appreciated what he had. If he fucked it up again, there would be no second chances.

Turning, Sheba went to change for the next introduction. The sight of Brian leading his lover off the dance floor making Sheba grin. "Looks like Mr. Kinney can't wait to get the boy alone. Will wonders never cease."

Brian pulled Justin into his arms as they walked out to his Jeep. "It was worth it, Justin."

"What was?"

"Breaking my rules."

Justin smiled as Brian pressed him against the Jeep and kissed him. And Justin agreed with his lover. Looking back on it, the pain had been worth the result. They were together and they were willing to fight to stay together. It wouldn't be easy but neither of them was willing to let the other go. They would make it work......they had to.

THE END

**Fondest Dreams**

The bedroom was bathed in nothing but blue light as Brian emerged from the bathroom. He stopped and leaned on the doorway and smiled as he saw his lover. "What are you doing here?"

"I had to see you."

"It's risky."

"Aren't we worth the risk?"

Brian walked over to him and pushed him back on the bed. He bent down and kissed him as his hands crawled up under his shirt. "You know we are. But we have to be careful for a little while longer."

"I hate this, Brian. I want everyone to know that we're together."

Brian laid on his side as his hand stroked over his lover's stomach. "You knew it was going to be this way. No one can know that we're together yet. If they knew, then we'd be the ones they'd look at when he dies."

"You aren't having second thoughts, are you, Brian? This is the only way, you know that."

"Are you sure? Killing him seems a little extreme."

"He won't let you go, Brian. And he'll use every trick he knows to hold on to you. You've tried pushing him away before and it's never worked. If we're going to have any future together, we have to get rid of him."

"And you're okay with that? Even knowing how much his death would hurt Deb?"

His lover slid closer and wrapped his arms around him. "She'll get over it eventually. We have to do this, Brian."

Brian was silent but nodded. "And once he's out of the way, we'll be free. We can be together like we're meant to be."

"A dream come true, huh?"

"Most definately."

Brian smirked as his lover leaned over and kissed him. Finally, Brian pushed him back. "You better get going. I don't think we want to explain to Justin why you're here at this time of night when I'm wearing nothing but a towel."

"He's working a late shift at the diner. But I'll be so glad when he's gone. No more hiding. And we'll be together forever."

"Don't get ahead of yourself. We still have to be patient. If we rush this, we're going to fuck it up and end up in prison the rest of our lives. Seperate cells and we'll never see each other again."

"Never! I won't let anyone come between us again. I love you, Brian."

"Me too. Now you better get going."

After another heated kiss, Brian stood and pulled his lover to his feet. He pushed him gently out of the bedroom then dropped his towel and pulled on his jeans. Brian walked to the doorway of the bedroom and watched his lover walk to the door.

"Mikey?"

Michael turned. "Yeah?"

"Remember, no slipups."

"I won't screw things up, Brian. This is too important to both of us."

Brian watched with a smirk on his face as his lover walked out of the apartment. "Really fucking important, Mikey."

Brian was stretched out on the couch when Justin walked in. He could see the exhaustion and stress on his lover's face. Brian held out a hand for the younger man and pulled him into his arms. He set Justin in front of him as he massaged his shoulders. "You need to try to relax, Justin."

"I can't."

Brian leaned forward and kissed Justin's neck. "It'll be better soon, baby. Trust me."

Justin didn't resist as Brian pulled him back against his chest. "I trust you with everything I am, Brian."

"I know."

Brian nuzzled Justin's neck as he felt the younger man drift to sleep.

Soon.

Justin grabbed the coffee pot and walked over to the booth and refilled Michael's cup. The older man looked up at him and smirked. "What?"

"Nothing."

"Whatever."

Justin turned and went back behind the counter. He looked up and saw Michael still watching him. Michael had been acting stranger than usual lately and it was getting on his nerves. Every time he turned around, the older man was smirking at him. Acting like he knew something Justin didn't.

"Hey."

Justin jumped slightly and turned to see Brian settle on one of the stools. "Hey."

"What had you so distracted?"

Justin opened his mouth but shut it again as Michael walked over to stand next to Brian. "Hi, Brian."

"Mikey. Aren't you supposed to be at your store?"

"I'm on my way. See you later."

Michael leaned in and kissed Brian on the cheek, smirked at Justin, then walked out humming. Brian shook his head then turned to Justin. "What'd you put in his coffee this morning?"

Justin didn't say anything. He'd seen something in Michael's eyes that was unsettling. "Justin?"

Justin jumped when he felt a hand on his arm and looked at Brian. "What?"

Brian caught Justin's hand and pulled him closer. "What's the matter with you? You're acting like you're lost in some dream world or something."

"Nothing's wrong."

"You're a terrible liar, Justin. Out with it."

"You'll just think I'm being a drama princess."

"Try me."

Justin looked down at the counter. "I'm just a little freaked, I guess."

"About what?"

"Michael."

Justin looked up when Brian started laughing. He pulled his hand away. "I told you that you wouldn't....."

"Wait, you're serious, aren't you?"

"Yeah, Brian, I'm serious."

Brian looked over his shoulder to the door then back again. "Why? What did he say?"

"He hasn't 'said' anything. It's just something about the way he's been looking at me. I don't know, I just don't like it."

"Mikey is Mikey. He's just trying to ruffle your feathers. Forget about him."

Justin nodded and let Brian pull him into a kiss before turning to go back to work.

Michael was in the back room sorting through comics when he heard the door. "What the fuck are you trying to do, Mikey?"

Michael looked up to see an angry Brian standing in the doorway. "What do you mean?"

"I'm talking about that little scene in the diner. What the hell were you thinking?"

"There was no scene. All I did was kiss you on the cheek. Nothing I haven't done a million times before. It's not a problem."

"Oh, it's a problem, Mikey. You've got Justin freaked out. Seems the way you've been watching him has made him uncomfortable."

Michael stood up and faced his lover. "I don't act any differently towards him."

"Bullshit, Mikey. I've seen the little smirks. Do you want to blow this? Because if you can't keep your attitude in check, that's exactly what's going to happen. You're going to make him suspicious."

"What do you want me to do, pretend I'm not happy? I'm already hiding the fact that we're together, what more do you want, Brian?"

Brian pulled Michael into his arms. "Patience. I want you to keep your emotions in check. If you can't handle that, then maybe we shouldn't see each at all. At least not till it's time."

Michael clutched at Brian. "No, I can't not see you, Brian. I'll do better. Distract myself around Justin so I don't tip him off anymore. I can do it."

"I hope so, Mikey. Another display like this morning, and we seperate until everything's done."

To take away the sting of his words, Brian kissed his lover gently. "Alright, we'll see you at Babylon later tonight."

"See you there."

Michael smiled as he watched Brian walk out. It wouldn't be much longer and then there'd be no more hiding. He could pretend for a little while yet.

Brian was leaning against the bar at Babylon when Ted and Emmett joined him. He looked at them and they both looked like they'd rather be anywhere but next to him. "What?"

"Ah, well, you see......" Emmett stammered and looked at Ted.

"Brian, we just....it's just that......"

Brian rolled his eyes. "Just spit it out. What the fuck is wrong with you two?"

"We're worried about Michael."

"Why? He's not even here."

Emmett shook his head. "He's been acting strangely."

"Strange how?" Brian asked.

Ted and Emmett looked at each other. "He's been watching Justin and it's almost like he's laughing at him. And he mumbles things under his breath."

"What kinds of things?"

Emmett looked at him. "Things that make it sound like he thinks you two are going to be together."

"What?" Brian asked.

"He doesn't even realize he's doing it, I don't think. But he says things like you'll be together soon and something about once Justin is out of the way."

Brian's eyes narrowed. "And what is that supposed to mean?"

"We don't know. Has Michael said anything to you? Anything that has happened to give him the idea that you two would get together?" Ted asked.

Brian shook his head. "He knows that isn't going to happen. Maybe he's just trying to get some attention."

"Yeah maybe."

Brian watched as Ted and Emmett disappeared onto the dance floor. Turning, he headed outside and pulled out his cellphone. He looked around as he waited for Mikey to pick up.

"Yeah?"

"You've fucked things up, Mikey. We're going to have to push the plan ahead."

"What do you mean? I've kept my distance from Justin sine you talked to me last week."

Brian's eyes continued to scan the sidewalk. "But now you've got Ted and Emmett suspicious because of how you're acting. We either move it up or call it off completely. You can't keep this charade up and you're going to end up blowing the whole thing."

"We can't call it off! Then we're stuck with that twink in our lives."

"Then we move it up. Saturday night, Mikey. You know what to do."

"I'll be ready. I'm sorry, Brian."

"Just try not to fuck up between now and then."

Brian disconnected the call and leaned against the building. A smirk on his face. Everything was falling into place. And it would all be over soon.

Justin had finished his shift at the diner and was looking forward to getting back to the loft and taking a shower before he headed to Woody's to meet up with Brian and the guys. He really hoped that Michael would skip it though. The way the older man was acting had made him even more nervous. And he wasn't the only one who noticed. Ted and Emmett had picked up on it and he thought Deb probably had too.

Once in the loft he went to take a quick shower then threw on a pair of jeans before going into the kitchen to grab a bottle of water. As he turned from the refrigerator, he jumped when he saw Michael standing there. "Jesus, Michael, you scared me. What the hell are you doing sneaking up on me?"

Michael grinned. "I wasn't sneaking. I was waiting for you. But I was being considerate by letting you shower first."

"Why were you waiting for me?"

"We need to clear up a few things before this can really be over."

Justin didn't like the tone in Michael's voice. "What are you talking about?"

"You're so naive, Justin. You never saw the truth, did you? If you would have just accepted the truth and moved on then this wouldn't be necessary."

"Michael, I don't know what you're talking about but I think you should go."

Justin tried to move past Michael but was shoved back. And his breath caught in his throat when he saw Michael pull a gun out of his jacket. "I'm not going anywhere and neither are you. This is the end of the line for you, Boy Wonder."

"Michael, put the gun down. This isn't funny."

"It's not meant to be funny. You've been a pain in the ass since you walked into our lives. We've tried to get you to walk away but you're a stubborn little shit. \*You're\* the one responsible for this. If you would've just left Brian alone........"

"Michael, killing me isn't going to change anything. Brian doesn't think of you that way."

Michael smirked. "You would like to believe that, wouldn't you? FYI, Justin.......Brian and I have been lovers for over six months."

Justin couldn't believe what he was hearing. Michael had obviously lost his hold on reality. What the hell was he supposed to do now? "Michael, I know how much you love Brian, but.........."

"But nothing. Once you're out of the way, Brian and I can finally stop hiding the fact that we're together. We can show everyone how happy we are together and how much in love we are. And then you'll be nothing but a bad memory."

"And how are you going to be happy in prison, Michael?"

Michael shrugged. "No one will be able to tie me to your murder. As far as anyone knows, I'm working diligently at my store. Locked myself in and told everyone I wouldn't be answering the phone because I had new inventory I wanted to concentrate on. The loft will look like it got broken into and you were in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Justin backed up against the counter. "Don't do this, Michael. Let me help you."

Michael laughed. "I don't need help, Justin. You're the one who has no grip on reality. Brian and I were forced to hide our relationship because you wouldn't leave him alone. You pushed yourself into our lives and made everyone think of you as this innocent little victim. We couldn't admit that we were together because everyone would make us the bad asses."

"Michael, please......."

"Even my own mother has lectured me about leaving you alone. Poor Justin this and poor Justin that. I should let poor Justin and Brian be, they're happy together. Oh give me a break. It's me Brian loves not you."

"Of course he loves you, he's your best friend. But it's not more than that."

"If you believe that, you're stupider then I thought. I'm the one he's dreaming of when he's forced to take you to bed!"

Justin was shaking as he watched Michael and saw him pointing the gun at him. He was scared to death that he was going to die. When had Michael snapped? When had his feelings for Brian twisted into this obsession? Justin was about to try to get through to Michael again when he saw movement out of the corner of his eye. He felt a flash of relief as he saw Brian standing in the doorway.

Justin looked at Michael who was still rambling on about him and Brian being lovers and realized that he hadn't heard Brian arrive. Justin looked back at Brian who was looking between them almost in shock. Brian didn't move as he continued to watch them and Justin wondered what Brian thought about Michael's ramblings.

Justin held his breath as Brian started walking towards them.

"Hey, Mikey."

Michael turned his head but kept the gun on Justin. "Brian, what are you doing here? You're supposed to be at Woody's until I'm done. Go back so you have an alibi."

Justin watched in confusion as Michael looked back at him with a smirk on his face. "Finally getting a clue, Justin? Brian and I worked this out together. I'll finish you off and he'll be the one to come home and find you. It would be very tragic, don't you think? And as his best friend, of course, I'll be the shoulder he cries on, the person to get him through it."

"Michael, don't......" Justin pleaded then looked back at Brian who was standing behind Michael.

Michael was laughing and Justin's hands clenched in fear as he met Brian's eyes silently begging for his help.

Michael was smirking as he saw the fear in the kid's eyes. Even confronted with the truth, he could see that Justin didn't want to admit it. The fool was looking at Brian like some kind of saviour. {There's no one here who's going to do a damn thing for you, you little shit!}

"Put the gun down, Mikey."

"What? Why? We're so close, Brian." Michael said never taking his eyes off Justin.

"Mikey, put the gun down and we'll get you the help you need."

Michael turned to look at Brian in shock. "What the hell are you talking about? Don't tell me you're getting cold feet about this?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Mikey. And I don't know where you've come up with these ideas. But you need to step back and get a grip. You don't want to hurt Justin."

"What the fuck are you doing?"

"Trying to stop you from doing something you'll regret. Now give me the fucking gun." Brian said holding out his hand.

Michael shook his head. "I don't believe this shit. What? You want the kid to go to his grave believing that you actually give a damn about him? Fine, have it your way, Brian."

Michael spun around and cocked the gun as he pointed at Justin. "Bye, bye, Justin."

"No!!!"

Justin screamed as Brian jumped Michael from behind. "Justin, get down!"

Justin obeyed Brian's command without thought and ducked behind the counter. He peered around the corner and saw the two friends wrestling with the gun. "Brian, be careful! He's crazy!"

Michael swore as he fought with Brian. "What are you doing?"

"Following the plan, Mikey." Brian said as he got Michael onto his back and gripped his wrists.

"This wasn't part of the plan!" Michael whimpered.

"It was the plan all along, Mikey. You see, it wasn't Justin who needed to be taken out of the picture."

Michael's eyes widened as he realized the truth. "You set this all up."

"You aren't too bright, are you, Mikey? It was so easy to manipulate you."

Michael continued to try to fight his lover. "Why? You love me!"

Brian rolled his eyes. "You should've been happy to just be my best friend. But you started interfering in my life, Mikey. You tried to get Justin to leave me. I couldn't let you get away with that."

"Brian..." Michael pleaded.

"I love him, Mikey. And I won't let you ruin that."

Brian seemed to relax his hold a bit and Michael was able to knock them over so that he was straddling Brian. "I'll expose you, Brian. Then you'll lose him anyway! He won't stay with you knowing that you fucked me!"

"No one would believe you. Especially since you'll be dead."

"You wouldn't...."

"Bye, bye Mikey." Brian mimicked.

Justin was peering around the corner of the counter as he watched the two men continue to struggle. He watched as Brian tried to talk to Michael then saw Brian get shoved backwards. Then he saw Michael bend closer to Brian and he jumped when he heard the gunshot.

"Brian!!"

Justin stood outside Deb's house staring into the night. The funeral had been hard on all of them but they'd tried to be strong for Deb. She was devastated by her son's death but she couldn't help wondering what she could have done to prevent it. Justin figured they all felt that way. What could they have done to help Michael before it was too late?

"Come back inside, Justin."

Justin leaned back into the warm embrace of his lover. "How's Deb?"

"We finally got her to lay down. It's going to take her some time to bounce back."

Justin turned his head. "How are you doing?"

"I've been better. I have so many questions, Justin. What happened to my best friend? What pushed him over the edge?"

"Maybe I......"

Brian shook his head as he turned his lover around. "Do not blame yourself for this, Justin. Mikey was sick. He believed what he wanted to believe. You had nothing to do with that."

"But......."

Brian's hands cupped his cheeks. "No buts. Maybe now Mikey can find the peace that he couldn't find here. We need to remember the good things."

"I love you, Brian. Seeing you wrestling with that gun, I was so afraid I was going to lose you."

"That won't happen. You're stuck with me. Now go in before you get a cold."

"You coming?"

"I'll be there in a minute."

Justin nodded his head in understanding and kissed his lover before walking back into the house. Brian lit up a cigarette and stared up at the night sky. {It had to be this way, Mikey. I knew there was no way you were going to back off. And I knew you would always be a threat to what I have with Justin. That was made clear when you came up with the plan to kill Justin. I believe you really were ill, Mikey. You had to be to believe the lies I told you. To believe that out of nowhere I would decide you were the man I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. I'll miss my best friend, Mikey. But you left me with no choice. I can live without you......I couldn't live without Justin.}

Brian took a couple more puffs off the cigarette then put it out. He went back into the house and found Justin spread out on the couch. Brian kicked off his shoes then curled around his lover. They would mourn for Mikey then they would move on without him. Without his whining and without his interference in their lives. Mikey had been right about one thing........when everything was said and done, it was as it should be. Too bad Mikey's idea and Brian's had been nothing alike.

THE END

**Down Memory Lane**

Brian Kinney had just finished approving the newest layout for one of the company's biggest customers when his secretary announced his visitor. Brian smirked as he told her to send him in. Setting aside the work, he sat back and smiled as the young man walked in.

"Shouldn't you be in school?"

The young man rolled his eyes as he sat down. "It's 3:30pm, school's over."

"What, you didn't want to stay after and chase the girls?"

"I'm not on the prowl all the time, you know. Not like you."

Brian smirked. "I was never on the prowl for the young ladies. And as for the young boys......"

"Pop, please. I really don't need the details. Besides, anything you say I can and will pass on to dad."

Brian tried for a serious face but he couldn't hold onto it. "You always did like to tattle. So, Sonny boy, to what do I owe the honor of your presence?"

Gus sat forward and smiled at his father. Brian couldn't help but notice that his son had inherited his killer smile. A smile he had used to get his way more than once, and not just with his family. "I have a favor to ask."

"Shit, when you say it like that, it means it's something I'm not going to like."

"Pop, it's nothing that bad. I have a paper to do for my civics class and I want to ask you some questions for it. I've already talked to the moms so now it's your turn."

Brian eyed his son suspiciously. "And what is this paper about?"

Gus took a deep breath. "Being raised by gay parents. It needed to be about something socially important and it's unique to my situation. No one else in my class was raised by a lesbian couple and a gay couple. So, will you?"

Brian ran a hand over his face. "Why can't you ask Justin these questions?"

"I plan to, but I need your insight too. You're my father and there are questions only you can answer. Come on, pop. Please."

"Alright, alright. I suppose I'll have to fix whatever distorted details Mel filled your head with. Just let me clear my schedule and we can go to the loft for this little Q&A session. Then you'll be there to catch Justin when he gets home from work."

"Thanks pop. I kind of already told the moms that I'd be eating supper with you and dad anyway."

Brian saw his son's smirk and shook his head. "You think I'm going to bare my soul AND feed you, Sonny boy?"

"No, I think dad's going to feed me." Gus said with a similar smirk.

"One of these days you're going to appreciate my cooking, boy."

Brian turned for the phone and pretended to miss the gagging gesture Gus did behind his back. Hell, they'd all had their hands full with the kid. He was a good kid but he was a handful.

After clearing his schedule for the rest of the afternoon, Brian grabbed his jacket. "Now just because I agreed to this doesn't mean I'll answer everything. I reserve the right to tell you to mind your own business."

"Why? You got something to hide?"

Brian just shrugged as he led his son out of the office. Gus thought that he knew all about both sets of parents. Brian knew better. There were just certain things that none of them really wanted their son to know. Mistakes that may make him look at them differently. There were things that Brian never wanted his son to know. Things that he was not proud of but could never hope to change.

Gus sat down on the couch as he waited for his father to change clothes. He knew he should feel guilty for lying to his parents like this but he needed to understand them. And it wasn't all a lie. He fully intended to write a paper, it just wasn't an assignment for school. It was more of a way for him to understand the people he loved the most.

He'd learned at an early age that he was different then the other kids. Sure, he had a mother and father but he also had a mom and dad. Most of the time he lived with his moms, but the older he got the more time he got to spend with his dads. And they'd always been very open and honest with him about their relationships.

But none of them wanted to talk about what it was like during his early years. Or tell him what their relationships were like then. Especially his father. It seemed that anything before he and Justin moved in together was off limits. That was when Gus had been around six years old. Why wouldn't they talk about their life together before that?

Questioning his moms had gotten him some answers he wanted. He was still surprised to learn that Melanie had cheated on his mother and that he'd almost had a French stepfather. Gus shuddered at that. Thank God that hadn't happened. And he learned more about the antagonistic relationship that his father and Melanie had and he understood that now it was more habit than anything else.

But what was his father hiding? Neither of his moms would talk about it either. They'd told him that Brian had to be the one to tell him. It wasn't their place.

"Okay, Sonny boy. Let's get this started."

Gus pulled out his notebook and flipped to a clean sheet, making sure his father didn't see any of his notes from the discussion with his moms. "Geez, didn't you ever have to help dad with homework?"

Brian dropped down on the couch. "No. A kid who can score 1500 on his SATs doesn't need me doing his homework for him. Now, what exactly are we going to do here?"

Gus smiled. "I want my paper to show that having gay parents isn't something to be ashamed of. I want people to see that I grew up surrounded by love and had a more stable environment then a lot of kids I know. In order to do that, I need to have details about my growing up years and the relationship you and dad share. Then, I'll put all the information together chronologically and have one hell of a paper."

"Watch your mouth, Sonny boy."

Gus rolled his eyes. "Are you through stalling yet?"

Brian sat back though he looked extremely uncomfortable. "Alright, but remember what I said Gus. There are some things that are off limits."

"Even to your own son?"

"Even to you. Now, you still want to do this?"

Gus nodded. "Then ask away."

"Okay, but I have a warning. My questions will probably jump around a lot as I think of questions. I'll sort through the answers later when I get ready to write the paper."

"Fine."

Gus looked through the list of questions he had written down earlier. "Tell me about your first date with dad."

"I took him to a bed and breakfast in Connecticut for his 20th birthday."

Gus wrote that down then looked at his father. "That was your first date? But, you and dad met the night I was born. He would've been like 17 then."

"That's right. But when we first met, I didn't do dates, Gus."

"Pop, how did you and dad meet? You've never told me the details. All I know is that you met him the night I was born and he came with you to the hospital. He was the one to pick out my name."

Brian nodded and smiled at the memory. "That's all that's important, Gus."

"Come on, pop. There's got to be........"

"What did I tell you about stuff being off limits?"

"Why is asking how you met the man you've vowed to spend the rest of your life with off limits? God pop, it's not like I'm asking you about your sex life or something."

Brian got to his feet and stared out the window. "Why can't you just be honest with me?"

Brian spun around. "You want honest? Fine, he was a trick!"

Gus' eyes widened. "What?"

"That's how we met, Sonny boy. I was leaving Babylon with Mikey, Emmett, and Ted when I spotted Justin. I picked him up and we ended up fucking! Then I tried to get him out of my life."

"But why?"

"Because, I only did one-night stands, Sonny boy. I didn't do boyfriends and I sure as hell didn't want some twink following me around. I did more than twenty tricks a month, Gus. And I was happy with that life. The last thing I wanted was someone attaching themselves to me."

Gus had always known that his father had been quite the playboy when he was younger, but he had never suspected to what extent. Did he believe that it would make a difference to him? "And none of these tricks stayed around after the one night, did they?"

"Not a one. Not until Justin."

Gus smiled then. "You couldn't get rid of him, huh?"

Brian relaxed slightly when he realized that the revelation hadn't bothered his son. His sexual history wasn't something he was ashamed of but it wasn't something he wanted paraded around in front of his son either. Brian walked back to the couch and sat down. "I was doomed from that first night. And I fought against it hard. Hell, I knew there was something different about him from the time I brought him to the hospital after you were born. I would've never brought a trick there. Of course, I didn't consider that until later."

"When did you stop trying to push him away?"

Brian shrugged. "I'm not sure really. I think in some ways I was trying to push him away up to the moment I asked him to go to Connecticut with me. When I finally stopped being afraid of the fact that I'd fallen in love with him."

The phone interrupted them and Gus scribbled down the information he'd just received. There was still something that his father was hiding. And it had to do with dad. But what? What could be so bad that they didn't want him to know? Was it just something like he'd just learned? Just something they thought he wouldn't understand or approve of or was it something bad?

"Sorry about that."

"No problem. Pop, why didn't you tell me about how you and dad met? It doesn't bother me, really."

Brian nodded at his son. "Maybe we just didn't want the truth to make it seem trivial. He started out as no different then a hundred other men. I guess neither of us likes to remember that."

"But it's a part of your relationship, pop. A part of what the two of you have become. I love you both and that doesn't make me think any differently about either one of you."

"We love you too, Gus. Can we move on now?"

Gus nodded and looked back at his notebook. He would ask some easy background questions before he got to any more difficult ones.

Brian sat impatiently waiting while Gus wrote more notes. The rest of the questions so far had been fairly easy and centered around things Gus had already known. But Brian had a feeling that Gus was setting him up for something. Brian looked at the clock and wished that Justin would get home soon. He didn't like the way of all these questions were going. Reliving his past was not something he enjoyed doing. Hell, he wasn't the same man he was fifteen years ago. He wasn't the same man he was ten years ago even.

"You got more questions?"

Gus nodded. "I want to know about the time when dad was hurt. How the two of you got through it and what went on between you afterwards."

Brian tensed as he stood up. There was the bomb that he'd been waiting for. Damnit! "We've already told you about the attack, Gus. Chris Hobbs was a homophobic closet case who felt threatened by Justin being openly gay. He attacked him at the prom and got nothing more than a goddamn slap on the wrist! Justin, on the other hand, had to go through months of grueling physical therapy."

"I know about the attack, pop. But what I want to know about is how the two of you dealt with it. The whole thing must have brought you closer, right?"

Brian stood glaring out the window but said nothing. "Pop, tell me. I want to know everything about the people I love."

"Just let this go, Gus. That time is not something I want to talk about. And I don't want you questioning Justin about it either."

"You're hiding something from me, pop."

Brian turned to his son. "It was a time when we were all under a lot of stress. Things were said and done that hurt. And I don't want to relive it!"

"Did dad hurt you?"

Brian shook his head. "Your dad had a hell of a lot going on in his life at the time. He was trying to get through an emotional trauma that nearly destroyed him. And then I hurt him even more. It was something that took us a long time to get through and we almost didn't. I almost lost him, Gus."

"When he was in the hospital you mean?"

"No, I mean when I threw him out of my life."

Gus looked confused. "You're talking about before the bashing, right?"

Brian shook his head. He knew he had to tell his son the truth. Gus wouldn't let this go and he didn't want the kid questioning Justin to get answers. Maybe a part of him always knew that he wouldn't be able to hide this forever. Gus did deserve to know the truth about what happened.

"I'm talking about after Justin got out of the hospital. While he was trying to rebuild his life. I looked him straight in the eye and told him I didn't want to see him anymore. Told him that he needed to start a life without me in it. Basically, I told him to leave me the fuck alone."

"But he didn't go, right? I mean, you had tried pushing him away before and he never.........."

"But he'd never been that vulnerable before. He was an emotional wreck and when I told him to leave, he did."

"Why did you do it? What happened?"

Brian turned back to look out the window. "He tried to kill himself."

Gus gasped in shock as he looked at his father's tense stance. He didn't understand any of this. Why would his father hurt Justin on purpose? Why walk away when his lover needed him the most? "I don't understand."

"I told you, Sonny boy. There are some things that are better left unsaid. I've done things in my past that I'm not proud of but I can't change any of them. And I can't forget them either. I will never forget the pain I caused Justin or how it felt to realize how close I came to losing him."

"Why would you deliberately hurt him?"

Brian's hands clenched. "Because I'd already hurt him. It was my fault that bastard Hobbs went after him. I did what I thought was right."

Gus looked at his father. "You did it because you were scared. Justin had gotten too close and it scared you when he was hurt. So you thought it wouldn't hurt as much if you got him out of your life. It didn't work, did it?"

Brian turned to his son. And he saw the understanding in his eyes. "No, it didn't. I had to sit back and pretend that it wasn't killing me to see how much pain he was in, both physically and emotionally."

"Is that why he tried.....?"

Brian moved back to sit down. "He was having nightmares about the attack and panic attacks. Justin was always one of the strongest people I ever knew but everyone has their breaking point. Between Hobbs and I, we pushed Justin to his. He tried to OD on his medication."

Gus leaned his head into his hands as he thought about how hurt his dad had to have been to even consider suicide. "What happened?"

Brian stared straight ahead as the images took shape in his mind. "Deb found him and got him to the hospital. It was touch and go for awhile but he fought and he came back to us. And I stopped being a dick. As soon as he was awake, I went to him and told him everything. Then, we both decided we needed to see someone."

Gus turned at that. "You mean a shrink?"

"Yeah. Never in a million years would I have thought I'd be going to one. But it helped. I was able to deal with shit left over from my family and I learned how to face my feelings for Justin. It didn't happen overnight and for the first time in our relationship, I found myself in the role of pursuer."

"Really?"

Brian nodded. "I'd hurt him badly, Gus. I couldn't expect him to accept that I loved him when all I had done was push him away. So, I started slowly and wooed him. Another thing I never thought I'd ever do. But I had decided he was worth it, we were worth it."

"And have you ever regretted your choice?"

Brian turned to his son. "Not once. I wouldn't give up the life I have with Justin for a million hot one night stands. I guess I just needed to grow up."

"You were able to get through it." Gus stated.

"I'm a determined man, Gus. Once I admitted the truth to myself, I wasn't going to let anything stop me. I loved Justin and I was going to make sure he saw that."

Gus nodded. "You two were pretty strong to get through that."

"Justin was strong, I was determined." Brian said with a smirk.

"I'm glad."

Brian laid a hand on Gus' shoulder. "So am I. Gus, just do me a favor. Be careful if you bring this up around Justin. We don't talk much about what happened and I don't want a lot of rotten memories brought up."

"Okay. Thanks, pop."

"You're welcome, Sonny boy."

Gus watched as his father disappeared into his bedroom and felt guilty for dragging up those memories. But he was learning so much about his father and he couldn't regret what he had done. Though he would be careful when approaching the subject with his dad. He didn't want to see him hurt anymore either.

Brian stayed in the bedroom trying to get some paperwork done after supper, but his mind wasn't on his work. His mind was wondering what was going on in the other room. Gus and Justin had been talking for hours and Brian wasn't sure if it was such a good idea. He hated the thought that old wounds could be opened.

Finally, he heard the loft door open and close then looked up as the lights were turned off. Brian packed his papers and set them to the side just as Justin appeared in the doorway. Justin smiled slightly at him then disappeared into the bathroom. Brian leaned back against the headboard and waited. He watched as Justin emerged from the bathroom and moved to the bed, sitting with his back towards him.

"Justin?"

"Pretty insightful kid you have there, Brian."

Brian rolled to his side and reached a hand out to caress his lover's back. "We've got, Justin. I'm not taking complete blame for him."

Justin's laughed lightly but didn't turn. Brian got nervous at the silence. "It wasn't your fault, Brian."

"What?"

"What happened to me. None of it was your fault."

"The hell it wasn't. Hobbs hurt you because I set him off by being at the prom. And later......I hurt you so badly, Justin."

Justin did turn then. "Hobbs targeted me long before he even knew you existed. Maybe, if you hadn't been there, he wouldn't have attacked me at the prom, but he would have at some point. You being there saved my life, Brian. As for what I did, it was a lot of crap that just made me feel like I was drowning. You were not to blame."

Brian pulled Justin to him and leaned over him. "Don't. Don't let me off the hook, Justin. I hurt you so badly and I did it intentionally. Fuck, I still can't believe you forgave me for it. What the hell did I do to deserve you?"

Justin smiled and brought his hands up to cup Brian's face. "I forgave you because I loved you. Because I knew how hard it was for you to admit that you loved me. All of that is in the past but I'm glad Gus brought it up."

"Why?"

"Because he needed to know that our relationship wasn't all wine and roses. We've had more than our share of problems but we've gotten through them together. And we're stronger for it. Now, I want you to let go of the guilt. Hobbs was an asshole and you are not responsible for his actions. Or for mine."

Brian looked into his lover's eyes then bent to kiss him. He ran a hand over his cheek lovingly. "I'll try. That's all I can promise."

"That's all I ask. I love you, Brian."

"I love you too, Justin."

Justin pulled Brian down to him and they laid within the sanctuary of each other's arms. Nothing and no one could hurt them there.

Gus eyed the paper that he had just finished and saved it to a disk. He took the disk out and looked at it thoughtfully then put it away somewhere safe. Maybe someday he'd show it to his two sets of parents but not right away. The paper had served its purpose and he now understood more about the four people who had raised him.

Gus shut down the computer and crawled into his bed, then turned to look at the photo by the bed. He smiled as he looked at his family. A family that he had never loved or admired more.

END

**Denial and Pain**

Brian looked at his watch as he pulled up in front of the diner. Justin had better be ready to go. He smiled at Michael as he got out of the car and walked over to him. "What are you doing standing outside, Mikey?"

"Waiting for Emmett and Ted. Mom's in one of those moods and I really don't want to hear her jokes right now. What are you doing here so early?"

"Picking up Justin."

Michael's eyes widened. "You and the Boy Wonder have a date?"

Brian rolled his eyes. "Good God no. I'm dropping him off at his parents. His mom wants the family to sit down and talk so Justin can move back in. I told Deb I'd drop him off."

"So does that mean he'll be out of our hair?"

"It means that he'll be back where he belongs."

"And if it doesn't work out? Then I'm stuck having him live with my family and hanging around everytime I turn around." Michael pouted.

Brian reached out and ruffled his hair. "It damn well better work out. The little brat owes it to his mom to make it work. He's got people who love him and he better not throw that away."

"But if he's living with mom and working at the diner then he gets to hover around you all the time. Why would he give that up? He doesn't belong here, Brian. This is our lives not his."

"If he fucks this up then he's on his own. Now, I've got to get going. I have plans and I don't intend to miss them."

Michael smiled. "Hot trick, huh?"

Brian threw an arm over Michael's shoulder. "Very hot, Mikey."

Michael shook his head and Brian just smirked as he walked into the diner. "Where's the boy?"

Deb turned to him. "And hello to you too. He's taking the garbage out then he's ready."

"Time's wasting here, Deb."

Deb rolled her eyes. "He'll be right out. Thanks for doing this, Brian."

"Not a problem. But why didn't they just come get him themselves?"

Deb smiled sadly. "Jennifer is not comfortable around here and I don't think there's any way in hell his old man would show up here. And if they did, I think it would start everything out on the wrong foot. I just really want this to go well for him."

"You worry too much, Deb. Justin and his folks will yell and scream and cry then hug and make up. And then he'll be back home where he belongs."

Deb shook her head. "Brian, it's not going........."

"I'm ready."

"Good, let's get going."

Justin stopped next to Deb as she gave him a hug. "Thanks Debbie, for everything."

Deb cupped his cheek. "You know if this doesn't work out, you're welcome to stay we me and Vic."

Justin just nodded as he followed Brian outside. He tensed slightly when he saw Michael but no one noticed. "Make your parents proud, Boy Wonder. Brian, we going to see you later at Babylon?"

Justin got into the Jeep without saying anything. Brian watched him then looked back at Michael. "I don't know. If not I'll catch up with you guys tomorrow."

Brian got into the car and they headed for the suburbs. The only sound in the Jeep was the music coming from the radio and Justin sat staring out the window. Finally, Brian pulled up outside Justin's house. "This is it. Do not screw this up, Justin."

Justin nodded then turned to get out. Brian reached out for his arm. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing. Bye Brian."

Brian let go of Justin's arm and watched as the younger man walked up the sidewalk. He rang the doorbell, and Brian watched as Justin's father opened the door. Before closing the door behind them, Justin's father glared at Brian. Not intimidated, Brian glared back until the door slammed closed.

"What a prick."

Brain pulled the Jeep out onto the road and headed back to the city. He'd be interested to hear the details of the night's events from Justin later.

Emmett walked into the diner and slid into the booth across from Brian as he scanned the diner. "Where's Justin? I haven't seen him for a few days."

Brian shrugged. "Probably busy getting settled in at home. He and his parents are bound to have some rough patches they need to get over. Don't worry, he'll be back hanging around soon enough."

"I hope so. I miss him. So, I know Ted's running late, where's Michael?"

"He's not coming. Big plans with the good doctor."

Both men turned as Deb came over for their order. After ordering, Emmett leaned towards her and smiled. "So, when does Justin work next? You tell him he can't keep hiding from us."

Brian expected Deb to smile and say something sarcastic but she just shook her head sadly. "Sunshine won't be working here anymore."

"What? Since when?" Brian asked.

"Since he stopped by yesterday and told me. He'd already gotten the others to cover his shifts this week."

Brian leaned back. "I can't believe him. He's back with the rich folks and suddenly he's too good to work here."

"That's not it, Brian. It wasn't his decision to quit."

"What do you mean?"

Deb shrugged. "I'm not sure, but I know what I saw. He hated having to quit. There's something not right but he wouldn't tell me. Oh, here. He asked me to give this to you."

Brian took the envelope from Deb as she headed back to the kitchen. Opening it, he found cash and a note. His eyes narrowed as he read the note.

Brian~

This is the rest of the money I owe you. I'm sorry......for everything. Justin

"What the fuck?"

"What is it?"

Brian handed the note to Emmett who read it and looked back at him. "Why does it sound like he's not coming back?"

"I don't know, but I'm going to find out. What time is it?"

Emmett looked at his watch. "Almost 8pm. Why?"

Brian stood and put his jacket on. "I'm going to go talk to Justin."

"Oh, like his father would let you in the house."

Brian shook his head. "Like I would go to the 'burbs. Tonight's Justin's night to babysit Gus. I'll find out what's going on in that scattered brain of his then meet you and Ted at Babylon."

Emmett nodded as Brian left the diner.

"What do you mean he's not babysitting anymore?" Brian yelled.

"Brian, keep it down, will you? Justin called yesterday and said he wouldn't be able to babysit anymore. He sounded so sad, Brian. What's going on?"

Brian sat down on the couch. "I wish to hell I knew. He's quit at the diner too. And he left me an envelope with the rest of the money he owed me and a note."

"Did he explain any of this?"

Brian pulled the note out of his pocket and handed it to Lindsay. "Does that look like it explains anything?"

Lindsay looked at it then back at Brian. "That's it? When was the last time you talked to him?"

"The night I took him home. Come to think of it, he was acting strange then too."

"Have you tried calling him?" Lindsay asked.

Brian looked at her like she had two heads. "Do you really think his old man would put me through to him? Why don't you call him?"

Lindsay rolled her eyes. "Fine, I will."

Brian watched as Lindsay picked up the phone. His eyes narrowed as he listened to her conversation with Justin's mother. He saw the look on Lindsay's face as she hung up the phone moments later. "What?"

"She wouldn't let me talk to him. She said to leave him alone and let him start fresh. That he couldn't do that with reminders of the past. Brian, I don't like this. Justin loves Gus, he wouldn't just walk away. What the hell did you do to him?"

"Me? What the fuck are you talking about?"

Lindsay moved to stand in front of him. "This isn't like Justin and you know it."

"So that makes it my fault? Damnit Lindsay, I didn't do anything. Things were the same as always between us. No big fights or scenes. He was his pesky, pushy self right up to the night he went home."

Lindsay was silent for a minute. "Then there's something wrong at home. And we need to find out what."

"And how do you intend to do that? It's pretty obvious there's no getting through to him at home."

"I thought you could......."

Brian shook his head. "Leave me out of it."

"Brian, don't be such an ass."

Brian got to his feet shaking his head. "I'm not doing anything, Lindz. For all we know this is some ploy to get attention. Or maybe now that he's back with the rich folks he doesn't want to be reminded of his time slumming."

"That's bullshit and you know it. Justin's not like that. Fine, I'll catch him at school tomorrow."

"Do what you want."

Lindsay watched as Brian headed for the door. "Thanks for nothing, Bri."

Brian turned but didn't say anything. Lindsay knew he cared more than he was letting on. But she let him go with it this time. If she found out something was wrong, then she'd make damn sure he got involved. Because she knew Brian better than almost anyone. He was worried. Damn stubborn man.

Brian was in the middle of getting dressed when the phone rang. "What?"

"I went to talk to Justin."

Brian rolled his eyes as he heard Lindsay's voice. "Good. So, what did the little shit have to say?"

"Nothing. There's something really wrong, Brian."

"And how would you know that if he didn't say anything?"

"Because, unless it's normal for Justin to take off like a bat out of hell when he saw me, then something is wrong and he's trying to hide it."

Brian's eyes narrowed. "He ran away from you?"

"Yeah. I called out to him and he looked at me for a split second before he took off. I tried to talk to his friend but she wouldn't tell me anything."

"What the hell is going on?"

"I don't know. But I've tried, it's your turn, Brian. You have to find out."

Brian ran a hand over his face. "And how am I supposed to do that? His parents won't let me near him and if he ran from you, he'll run from me."

"Talk to Daphne. Get her to tell you."

"You said she wouldn't say anything."

"She wouldn't. At least not to me. But she knows you better then she knows me."

Brian sat back on the couch. And he knew he couldn't just sit back and do nothing anymore. There was something going on with Justin and he had to find out what it was. "Fine, I'll call her. But if this turns out to be some ploy for attention, I'm going to wring his neck."

"You don't really think that, do you?"

Brian took a deep breath. "No, I don't. I'll let you know as soon as I find out anything."

Brian hung up the phone. He would figure out a way to get a hold of Daphne and he'd make sure she told him what she knew. Then he'd figure out how to handle it.

Brian sat impatiently in the diner waiting. It had taken some work but he had gotten a hold of Daphne and gotten her to agree to meet him. Now he just had to convince her to tell him what the hell was going on with Justin. He looked up as the young lady in question sat down across from him.

"Hello, Daphne."

"Hi."

"I think you know why I wanted to talk to you. Tell me what's going on with Justin."

Daphne didn't look at him instead studying the table. "Justin's fine."

Brian reached over and lifted her face to his. "Justin's a lousy liar and you aren't any better. He's not fine. Why is he cutting off all connect with everyone here?"

Daphne was silent for a few minutes then looked him in the eyes. "Because, you told him not to screw this up."

Brian's hand dropped and he sat back. "What?"

"You wanted him back with his parents, away from you, at all costs. You told him not to mess up the chance to be back where he belonged. That's what he's doing. So you can relax, he won't be back here."

Brian sat stunned as he watched the young woman get up and walk out of the diner. What the fuck? Jumping to his feet he ran after her. He had even more questions than before and she wasn't going anywhere until she answered them.

Brian caught up with Daphne at her car. He grabbed her arm and turned her to face him. "Not so fast. You haven't answered my questions yet."

"You wanted to know why Justin wasn't around and I told you. He's doing what you wanted."

Brian shook his head. "I never told him not to come around here. Yes, I told him to make this thing work with his parents but that's it."

"You wanted him back where he belonged. Out of your lives."

Brian's eyes narrowed. "He heard Mikey and I talking that night. How?"

Daphne looked away for a second. "He was in the alley taking out the garbage. But then you told him not to fuck it up."

"Christ. Yes, I wanted him back at home. His parents love him and that's where he belongs. But I never told him to cut his ties to any of us."

"It can't be both ways."

"What? Tell me what's going on, Daphne."

Daphne looked down at the ground for a few minutes before replying. "He's miserable. Being down here made him so happy. He could be himself without being afraid of getting teased or beaten up. Yes, he's fallen for you, but you're not the only reason he kept coming back. Deb, Emmett, Lindsay, Gus.......he loves them, Brian. They were like family to him."

"Then why did he walk away? Even if he believed that I didn't want him around, he knows damn well that wouldn't matter to them. They love him too."

"He knows, but he didn't have a choice."

"Why not?"

Daphne took a deep breath and prayed she was doing the right thing. "Because of his father. He's made it clear to Justin that his living at home comes with conditions. If he doesn't follow those conditions, he'll be out on the street."

"What conditions?" Brian asked suspiciously.

"Justin had to cut off all contact with Liberty Avenue and everyone here. And basically he has to hide the fact that he's gay. His father doesn't want to hear about and doesn't want to see it."

"That's fucked. Why didn't Justin tell him where to go and walk out?"

"I told you. Because you told him not to screw it up. And if he did, he was on his own."

Brian swore as he ran a hand through his hair. "I didn't know his old man would pull some crap like that. I thought Justin was being a drama princess when he talked about his old man."

Daphne shook her head. "He wasn't. Justin's father can't accept that his son is gay, won't accept it. He's a violent man, Brian."

Brian's eyes narrowed. "Has he hit Justin? Daphne, tell me the truth."

Tears built up in Daphne's eyes as she nodded. "He has to pretend at home that he's not gay and still gets smacked around when he says or does the wrong thing. Then he goes to school and gets beaten up because they know he is gay. It seems he can't win no matter what. And he has no one to talk about what's going on."

"What about you?"

Daphne shrugged. "I'm his best friend and I try. But I'm not gay and I don't know what he's going through. I can sympathize with him and hold him when he cries, but I can't make it better."

Brian leaned back against Daphne's car. How had this gotten so fucked up? He couldn't believe Justin's father would do something like this. And why wasn't his mother stepping in? Well, it didn't matter. Justin wouldn't be staying there. Pulling Daphne behind him, he went back into the diner.

"Deb, you still willing to let Justin stay with you? Let him come back to the diner to work?"

Deb looked shocked. "Of course he can. But Brian, what's......?"

"We're bringing Justin back."

Brian turned back to Daphne. "Will you help us?"

Daphne looked from Deb to the man Justin loved. "What do you want me to do?"

Justin sat in the front seat of Daphne's car as they drove away from his house. She had called him and said that she needed to talk to him. Making it sound like a life or death matter. "What's wrong, Daphne?"

"Things can't go on the way they have been, Justin. You know that. It has to change."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about you and your dad. You can't stay with him and you know that."

Justin shook his head. "Daphne, I don't have a choice."

"Yes, you do."

"Daphne, where are we going?"

Daphne stopped at a red light and turned to Justin. "Do you trust me, Justin?"

"What kind of question is that? You're my best friend, of course I trust you."

"Then trust that I'm doing this for you."

Justin looked at her then back to the street. After a few minutes his eyes narrowed as he realized where they were headed. "Daphne, no. I can't go back there."

"You said you trusted me, Justin. It'll be alright."

Justin turned to look out of the window without saying a word. He didn't want to be going back to the diner but there wasn't much he could do about it unless he wanted to jump out of the car. But he couldn't figure out why Daphne thought he should go there in the first place. He had cut all ties with Deb and everyone else.

The car stopped outside of the diner and Justin turned to Daphne. "Are you going to tell me why we're here?"

"Because this is where you belong, Justin. This place and these people are your family."

Justin shook his head. "I belong at home."

Daphne and Justin both jumped as the passenger door was pulled open. Justin's eyes widened as he saw Brian. "Out, Justin."

Brian pulled Justin out of the car but made sure he had a firm hold on the teenager's arm. He looked in at Daphne. "Thanks, Daphne."

"Don't make me regret this, Brian. Justin, I'll talk to you later."

"Where are you going? And what the hell is going on?"

"Brian will explain. Bye."

Brian closed the door and they watched as Daphne drove away. Brian looked down at Justin. "You left without saying goodbye."

Justin tried pulling his arm away but Brian wouldn't let go. "I left you a note. Now let go of me."

Brian shook his head. "Not going to happen. We're going back to the loft and we're going to talk. Then I'm taking you to Deb's. We'll take care of getting your stuff tomorrow."

"I'm not going anywhere with you, Brian. I have to get back home."

Brian grabbed both of Justin's shoulders. "Like hell. You are not going back there. You're going to stay with Deb and go back to work at the diner."

"Why? You wanted me back at home and that's where I am."

Brian slid one of his hands up to cup Justin's cheek. "I didn't realize your father was such a homophobic little prick. Daphne told me what's been going on. Look, I don't intend to stand in the middle of the street and talk about this. Let's go."

Brian pulled Justin across the street to where the Jeep was parked and pushed Justin in. Moving around he got in and watched to make sure the teenager wouldn't try to make a run for it. He relaxed slightly as he watched Justin put on his seatbelt. Convinced that Justin wouldn't try anything stupid, Brian pulled out into traffic and headed towards the loft.

Brian stood watching as Justin sat down on the couch. The teenager hadn't said anything since they'd gotten into the Jeep. "Why didn't you tell me, Justin?"

"Tell you what?"

"About your old man. You knew about the conditions he was going to give you, didn't you? That was why you were acting so strange in the car."

"It doesn't matter, Brian. I'm at home where I belong and I'm making it work. Just like you told me to. That's why I have to get home. If my dad finds out I'm with you he'll........"

Brian walked over and sat next to Justin. "He'll what? Hit you?"

Justin looked down at the floor. "I don't know what you want, Brian. Just let me go home and it's over."

Brian reached a hand out and cupped Justin's neck. "Maybe I don't want it to be over. And I'm not letting you go back there."

Brian could feel the tension in Justin's shoulders. "Justin, relax. He won't hit you again."

Justin jumped to his feet. "I don't need your pity, Brian! Just leave me alone!"

Brian ran after Justin as he headed to the door. He grabbed Justin and turned him so they were facing each other. "You aren't going anywhere, you little shit. And you know me better then to think this is about pity."

"Then what is it about? I heard you and Michael talking, Brian. I've always been in your way. But you don't have to worry about that anymore. I won't be around."

"I don't know what you think you heard, but I never said anything about not wanting you around. Yes, you pushed your way into my life despite numerous attempts by me to get rid of you. But, think about it, Justin. If I really wanted you gone, you'd be gone."

"But Michael said......"

Brian laid a hand over Justin's mouth. "This isn't about Michael. When I said you belonged at home, I mistakenly believed that your parents loved you and wanted to make things work. I didn't know that they would try to force you to deny who you are. You tried to make it work, Justin, but it can't. If they don't love you enough to accept that you're gay, then fuck them."

"My dad will......."

"He won't do anything. We'll go over after he's gone to work in the morning and get your stuff."

Justin looked down at his hands jumping slightly as he heard the knock on the door. He looked up as Brian moved to open the door. "Don't even think about moving, Justin."

Justin went and sat quietly as Brian answered the door. And he felt himself tensing when he heard Michael's voice. "What is he doing here?"

Knowing his emotions were all messed up, Justin got to his feet. "I was just leaving."

He grabbed his jacket and headed to the door but Brian stepped in front of him. "No, you weren't. We've already been through this, Justin. You aren't going back."

"Brian, let him go. He's probably got a curfew or something." Michael said sarcastically.

Brian turned to his friend but made sure he was between Justin and the door. "Screw curfew. He's moving back in with Deb and Vic."

"What?"

"You heard me. Deb already said it was alright. And he'll go back to working at the diner."

Michael turned to glare at Justin. "How the hell did you manage this? Damnit Brian, I told you he'd find a way to screw this up. Anything to be around you. Now we're going to be stuck with......"

"Shut up, Mikey. You don't know what you're talking about."

"He's playing you, Brian. This sweet little act he has going on is as fake as he is. He manipulated this so that he could come back and attach himself to you again."

Justin felt the tears build in his eyes as he listened to the argument. He tried to move past Brian to the door, but was stopped when Brian wrapped an arm around his waist. "Enough, Mikey. I think you better just accept the fact that Justin is going to be around from now on."

Michael glared at Justin when Brian turned to grab his jacket. "Now, I'm going to give him a ride to Deb's. I'll talk to you later."

Michael watched as Brian and Justin walked past him. "This is a mistake, Brian."

"Let it go, Michael."

Michael swore under his breath as he closed the door behind him and followed the other two out. Why couldn't Brian see what Justin was doing?

Brian and Justin sat outside Deb's house. "I'll be over in the morning to pick you up. We'll swing by your house and pick up your stuff then I'll drop you off at school."

"You don't have to do this, Brian."

"Yeah, I do. Now go see Deb. She missed you."

Justin smiled slightly. "I missed her too."

Justin got out and started walking up to the house, but he stopped when Brian called out to him. "Don't even think about running, Justin. You wouldn't like the consequences."

Brian watched as Justin nodded and then went up to the house. He smirked as he saw the door fly open and Deb come running out to capture her Sunshine in a big hug. She looked at him and smiled. He nodded before driving away. As he drove home, he thought about Mikey.

Brian knew that Michael had always been jealous of Justin but it was something he'd either have to get over or deal with. Justin was a part of all of their lives now and nothing was going to change that. And whether he wanted to admit or not, Brian liked having the teenager around.

Brian leaned back in the chair as he watched Justin and Gus playing together in the other room. Seeing Justin this way was like having the old Justin back. Though he'd been back at Deb's for several weeks, Justin was still holding himself back from everyone. After-effects of the confrontation with his old man. Just thinking about that made Brian angry again.

"He missed Justin."

Brian turned to look at Lindsay. "What?"

"Gus. He missed not having Justin around."

Brian smirked as he watched his son and the teenager. "Yeah, well I don't think Gus was the only one."

Lindsay leaned against his chair. "How's he doing, really?"

"Well, other than the rather ugly confrontation with his father when we went to get his stuff, Justin hasn't seen or heard from him. He's talked to his mother a couple times, but nothing regular. He's still being harassed at school and then has to deal with Mikey running at the mouth whenever they see each other. Besides that, he's fine." Brian said sarcastically.

Lindsay rolled her eyes. "And what about you?"

"What about me?"

"How are you dealing with him?"

Brian watched Gus and Justin for a minute then looked at Lindsay. "I have no fucking idea. You know I don't do boyfriends but......"

"But what?" Lindsay asked softly.

"But I can't let him walk away either. He's wormed his way into my life, the little shit. Justin has a lot of crap he has to deal with right now and I don't want to add to that. But I want him to feel like he can trust me to help him handle all of it."

"Justin's strong, Brian. He'll get past all of this. Are you planning on sticking around?"

Brian was quiet for a minute then nodded. "I don't think I have a choice anymore."

Just then, Justin looked over at him and smiled. Brian smiled back. "No choice at all."

Brian walked out of the diner after dropping Justin off for his shift. "Brian."

He turned to see Michael walking towards him. "Hey, Mikey."

"We need to talk, Brian. About Justin."

Brian shook his head. "No we don't, Mikey. I know what you're going to say. And I know how you feel about him. But that isn't going to change the situation."

"And what the hell is the situation? He belongs at home, Brian. You know that."

"Yeah, I know that. And that's where he is. This is his home now, Mikey. Whether you like it or not."

Michael shook his head angrily. "He doesn't belong here. He has parents and a home, that's where he belongs. The only reason he wants to hang around here is to try to get closer to you."

Brian thought about something Daphne had said and for the first time he really understood it. "Mikey, listen to me. Justin has become a part of all of our lives and I think you know that. Your mom and Vic, Emmett and Ted, Melanie and Lindsay, and Gus....they all love him, Mikey. He's a part of our dysfunctional little family. And he's here to stay."

"And what is he to you?"

Brian shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not sure yet. But, I do know he's going to be in my life and in my bed. Look, I have to get going. We'll see you guys later at Babylon."

Brian started walking towards his car. "I don't like this, Brian. I don't want him hanging around all the time."

Brian stopped but didn't turn around. "Mikey, let go of whatever it is you have against Justin. You don't have to become best friends, but you're going to have to accept his presence around here."

"And if I don't?"

Brian turned but didn't say anything. The two friends locked glances until Brian turned and went to his car. Michael had known Brian long enough to know what the look meant. If he didn't accept Justin into the group, he'd be the one on the outside.

Michael stood watching as Brian drove away then turned back to the diner. He watched as his mother and Justin joked around inside. And he knew that nothing in his life was ever going to be the same again.

END

**Cost of Hate**

Craig Taylor sat in his office glaring at the computer screen. He looked up as his door opened and his ex-wife walked in unannounced. She closed the door behind her and walked over to sit down. "What are you doing here, Jennifer?"

"I wanted to drop these off. It's the paperwork for Molly's college expenses. You are still planning to finance her education, right?"

Craig reached for the papers. "Of course I am, Jennifer. She's my daughter."

"A daughter you haven't seen in over a year."

"That is her choice not mine. She refuses to even speak to me. And she's old enough that I can't force her into it."

"What do you expect, Craig? There wasn't one visit that she didn't come back almost in tears because you couldn't go the weekend without trying to turn her against Justin."

"That's not true."

"It is true, Craig. You may have thrown Justin out of your life but Molly and I never did. And they are closer now than they've ever been. That's why she doesn't want to see you."

"I can't help how I feel, Jennifer. I will never accept Justin's lifestyle. It's disgusting."

"Then that's your loss, Craig. Because of your hate, you've lost your family. You pushed all of us away because you couldn't let Justin live his own life. Do you have any idea how much it hurt your son when you never once showed any concern after he was hurt? You never even called him, Craig."

"That never would've happened if Kinney hadn't been there. If Justin didn't parade around........."

Jennifer shook her head angrily. "I am not getting into this with you, Craig. What happened wasn't Justin's fault and it wasn't Brian's."

"I won't talk about that pervert with you, Jennifer. He's the one who destroyed this family. He's the one who hurts Justin."

"It's so easy for you to blame everything on Brian, isn't it, Craig? When are you going to take responsibility for your own mistakes? And I'm not going to deny that Brian and Justin have had their share of problems, but they're still together, Craig. It's been over five years and they are making it work."

Craig's hands clenched but he said nothing. "And you know nothing about their life together. Nothing about the career Justin has or the friends who support them. You know nothing about this."

A photo was pushed across his desk. He picked it up looking at the photo of a fair haired baby. "What is this?"

"Her name is Sonya. She's your granddaughter, Craig."

His eyes flew to his ex-wife's. "What?"

Another photo was handed to him and he stared in disbelief at the picture of his son holding the baby with his lover sitting next to him, arms wrapped around them. "Brian and Justin wanted to have a child and Daphne agreed to be the surrogate. Sonya's almost eight months old now."

"It's not right. A child deserves a father and a mother!"

Jennifer reached for the photos pulling them away. "A child deserves two parents who love her. And Sonya has that. Brian and Justin love that little girl more then you could even imagine. That precious little girl will never want for love and affection, Craig. And she will be raised to love not to hate."

Craig stood. "Was telling me about her supposed to make me change my mind? To make me suddenly accept what my son has become?"

Jennifer shook her head. "It was to show you what you've lost, Craig. It's too late for anything else. You are neither expected nor wanted in their lives. Justin gave up the dream of having your support years ago."

"Justin made his decision when he walked out of my house."

"And you made yours when you tried to force him to deny who he really was. Justin has a family he loves, friends, a career he excels at, and he's happy, Craig. Can you say the same?"

Craig sat back down and turned his back to her, saying nothing. "You can't, can you? You lost your whole family, not just your son. Your daughter wants nothing to do with you and you'll never get a chance to know your granddaughter. All because you couldn't let go of your hate."

"Get out, Jennifer."

"I'm leaving. I hope your hate keeps you warm at night, Craig."

Craig didn't turn as Jennifer walked out slamming the door behind her. He got up and went to stare out the window. Tears pricked at his eyes and his hands clenched.

Jennifer sat out in her car with tears in her eyes as she looked down at the photos in her hands. What had happened to the man she'd loved? Even knowing he had a sweet, innocent granddaughter didn't do anything to lesson his hate. Well, it was his lost. Someday he'd realize exactly what his hate had cost him.

Craig had foolishly believed that because he didn't approve of Justin's lifestyle, that those around him would accept that. He had been surprised when she'd stood up to support her son and angered when he realized that Molly wouldn't let his hate come between her and her big brother. Now, they were all lost to him.

Justin had given up on trying to get through to his father and he wouldn't put his daughter at risk by trying to get Craig to acknowledge her. And she knew that Brian wouldn't allow Craig anywhere near Justin or their daughter. He'd seen the effects of Craig's hateful words on Justin too many times in the years they'd been together.

Now that Molly was old enough to make her own choices and decisions, Craig had lost her completely as well. She couldn't forgive her father for his treatment of Justin. Or for trying to turn her against him. Jennifer wondered if Craig realized that he'd never be welcomed around any grandchildren that may come along, Justin or Molly's. Did it even matter to him?

As for her, she had put Craig Taylor behind her years ago. She had met and fallen in love with a man who accepted and loved the woman she had become. A man without the prejudices of the husband she'd left behind.

Jennifer remembered back to the night Craig had come home from confronting Brian and Justin the first time at Babylon. He had issued Justin an ultimatum and it backfired on him. Craig had been angry, refusing to be made a fool of by a bunch of fags, refusing to see that he'd made a fool of himself. Maybe he thought Justin's life would be miserable without him, maybe he thought that about them too. Craig had never been more wrong.

They had people in their lives who loved and supported them. Who would be there no matter what. What did Craig have? A very lonely life. Jennifer looked up towards Craig's office. "Who's the fool now, Craig?"

Shaking her head sadly, she put the pictures in her purse and drove away. She had a date with her granddaughter and didn't want to be late. Jennifer drove away and didn't look back.

THE END

**No Son of Mine**

Sequel to Cost of Hate

Justin finished changing his daughter's diaper and was making funny faces at her when he heard Gus coming towards him. "Got it, daddy."

Justin turned and smiled as he saw the six year old dragging Sonya's diaper bag towards him. "You going to carry that all the way down to the car, Gus?"

Gus looked determined for a minute. "It's my job. I'm the big brother."

Justin picked up his daughter and stood. "And you are a great big brother, Gus. But that bag is pretty heavy. How about we put it in the stroller and you can be in charge of taking it down to the car?"

"I can do that." Gus exclaimed and drug the bag over to the stroller and pushed the bag into it. Justin couldn't help laughing. But he turned and decided to let Gus take care of it. The young boy would ask for help if he needed it. After he had Sonya's jacket on, he turned to find Gus smiling. "Did it."

"That you did, Gus. You ready to go? Your mommies are going to be waiting for us."

"And dada."

"If we hurry, we can beat dada to your mommies."

Gus hurried into the living room and grabbed his jacket. Then he ran back and started pushing the stroller. Justin smiled as he opened the loft door and let Gus go out first. He locked up and they got on the elevator. Gus kept a firm hold on the stroller while he made faces at the baby.

As they walked out of the building, Justin helped Gus with the stroller as they headed for the car. He opened the back door and leaned in to strap Sonya into her car seat then handed her the stuffed rabbit that Gus had given her. Then he folded up the stroller and put it in the trunk. As he closed it and turned, his breath caught in his throat as he glared at the man who was standing there.

"What are you doing here?"

Gus looked between his daddy and the other man and ducked behind Justin peering around his leg. He didn't know who the big man was but he didn't like him.

"Your mother paid me a visit, Justin. She said you had a daughter."

"That's right. Doesn't explain why you're here."

Craig looked from his son to the little boy who was hiding behind him to the window of the car. He could just barely make out the baby. "Where's her mother?"

"Daphne works in New York. She visits when she can but Brian and I are Sonya's parents."

"I can't believe you've done this, Justin."

"Done what, dad? Had a family?"

Craig shook his head. "I can't believe you've involved an innocent child in your lifestyle. Do you even care that she'll grow up taunted and shunned by her peers?"

"No, she won't. She'll grow up loved just like Gus has. Sure, there may be a jerk here or there, but Gus is like any other six year old. He has lots of friends and he's a great little boy. And he has the love of two mommies and two daddies. Sonya has the same."

"She doesn't have a mother!"

"Mel and Lindsay treat her like a daughter. And Daphne is great with her. Sonya will never want for anything, especially not love."

Craig stepped closer to the car but Justin moved in front of the window. "It's wrong, Justin."

"Then at least I'm consistent."

"What?" Craig asked.

"It seems everything I've done in my life for the past six years has been wrong. At least according to you. But you know what? I don't care anymore. I love my life and I love the people in my life. I'm happy, dad. Why is that so hard for you to accept?"

"Because you can't be happy living the way you do! It's disgusting."

"I'm not going to get into this with you again, dad. You've made your opinions perfectly clear. There's nothing that will make a difference. Now, if you'll excuse me, we're late."

Justin turned his back on his father and opened the door so Gus could crawl in. He hooked up his son's seatbelt and gave him a quick kiss and smile before closing the door. "This is the last straw, Justin. You are no longer my son!"

Justin took a deep breath but didn't turn to his father till he reached the driver side. "I haven't been your son for a long time. And you'll never be a part of my family. Goodbye........Craig."

Craig watched stunned as his son got in the car and drove away without a backwards glance.

Gus rushed out of the car to go find his mommies before Justin was even out of the car. Justin opened the car door and made a move to get out but instead he just sat there staring at the ground. He hated his father for doing this to him. Justin had sworn to himself that he'd never let his father hurt him again.

"Hey."

Justin looked up and smiled as Brian crouched down in front of him. "Hey. You beat us here."

Brian nodded. "You want to tell me what happened?"

Justin shrugged his shoulders. "Nothing."

"Gus told me about the bad man, Justin. I'm assuming it was Craig."

"Yeah, he stopped by to once again tell me how wrong my life is and to inform me that I'm no longer his son."

Brian cursed and reached out to cup Justin's neck. "Forget about him. He's not worth it."

Justin looked at the man he loved then back at their daughter. He thought about the people in that house and he thought about his mother and sister. And he knew Brian was right. Craig had done nothing but push him away and hurt him since he was seventeen years old. He wasn't that kid anymore. He was an adult with a family of his own. A family his father would never acknowledge or accept. That was his loss.

"You're right. He just got to me."

Brian leaned in to kiss his lover. "Hopefully, he's out of our lives forever this time. Just remember he's the loser here."

"I love you, Brian."

"Love you too, Justin. Now let's get inside before they send out a search party."

Justin nodded and smiled as Brian got their daughter out of the car. He and Brian may have had their problems but they loved each other. And they were there to support each other through the good and the bad. If his father couldn't be happy for him, then he could go to hell.

Justin took his lover's hand and they walked into the house. He looked around at the people gathered there and knew that they were more his family then his father ever could be.

END

**Bend or Break**

Michael sat on the swing set for a few minutes after his mother had walked away. She didn't understand. He had only been away from home for a couple months yet it felt like years. So many things were different. And so many things were changing. Everyone had gone on with their lives and he felt left behind.

Especially by Brian. He'd barely spent any time with his best friend since he came home. Brian was always with Justin. Michael was glad that Justin had survived the bashing and was going to be alright, but that didn't mean he wanted him around all the time. It was bad enough when the kid lived with his mother, but now he was living with Brian.

Damnit, he'd been secretly pleased when he found out that Jennifer Taylor had all but ordered Brian to stay away from Justin. Michael thought that, finally, things would get back to the way they'd always been. But that hope was shot down that night in Babylon. God, he still couldn't believe that Brian had walked away from him like that. What had he said that was so wrong? He'd been upset that Brian didn't want to dance with him and just pointed out that Brian would always dance with Justin. Michael wasn't sure what the look on Brian's face had been, the drugs and alcohol had fogged his memory. But he remembered clearly that Brian had stood and walked away from him without saying a single word.

Then, the next thing he knew, he found out that Justin had moved in with Brian. Damnit, things weren't supposed to happen like this. The kid was using what happened to him to manipulate his mother into approaching Brian. And he was manipulating Brian into giving in to him.

Michael got up as they called that Gus was opening his presents. He walked over but he wasn't watching Gus, he was watching Brian. Even at his son's birthday, Justin was the one occupying his time. Michael looked back at Gus when he heard Lindsay teasing Brian about Gus becoming a baseball player. He saw them swinging the bat around then turned as he saw Brian grab Justin into his arms. Michael's eyes narrowed as they disappeared into the house. What the hell was the kid trying to pull now?

Making sure no one was paying attention to him, he went up the stairs and into the house. He found Justin sitting on the couch with his head on his hands. "What the hell's wrong with you?"

"Just leave me alone."

"Poor baby has a headache so he has to drag Brian away from his son's birthday. How selfish can you be?"

Justin looked up at him and Michael saw the tears on Justin's face as he stood. "I didn't. Just leave me alone!"

"What the fuck? Mikey, what the hell are you doing?"

Michael turned as Brian hurried into the room with a glass of water and a pill bottle. He set them down on the coffee table and tried to pull Justin into his arms. But Justin shook his head and pulled away. "No....just don't."

Brian stepped back as Justin rushed past him and ran upstairs. He rubbed his hands over his face and turned to glare at Michael. "What did you say to him?"

"I didn't say anything to him. Why do you assume this is my fault?"

"Because, I had things under control when I brought Justin in here. I leave him for two minutes, come back and there you are, and he's freaked again. What did you say?"

Michael shrugged. "Look, you should be out with your son. Justin can handle a headache........"

"You asshole. You come in here and run at the mouth and you don't know what the fuck you're talking about. Justin didn't just have a headache, Mikey. He's remembering the bashing. Seeing Gus with that bat started bringing it back. And he can't handle it on his own. Now, go back to the party. I'll take care of Justin."

"Brian, I didn't know. I just thought he was........."

"I don't want to hear it, Mikey."

Brian turned for the stairs. "Don't walk away from me again, Brian. We're best friends, talk to me."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"You walked away from me at Babylon. You didn't even say goodbye."

Brian turned with an incredulous look on his face. "I don't fucking believe you. That night I thought I'd never see Justin again and you threw him in my face!"

"I didn't think it would bother you so much. He's just a trick, Brian."

Brian shook his head. "No, you didn't think."

Michael watched as Brian headed up the stairs without looking back. What the hell was that supposed to mean?

Michael was sitting out on the porch when Brian and Justin walked out half an hour later. Brian's arm was wrapped around Justin's waist and the kid looked even paler than usual. He watched as they stopped to talk to Mel and Lindsay and he saw the concern on the women's faces as they nodded. Brian kissed Gus then he and Justin headed for Brian's Jeep. Jumping to his feet, he followed them out.

"Brian?"

Brian had just helped Justin into the Jeep and closed the passenger door. "Leave it alone, Mikey."

"You're bailing on Gus' first birthday? You are coming back aren't you?"

"I'm taking Justin back to the loft and he's going to rest."

"So, have his mom watch him."

Brian looked at him. "I said drop it, Mikey. I've already said goodbye to Gus and his mommies. They understand, maybe you should have them explain it to you."

Michael stood shocked as Brian walked around to the driver's side. He looked at Justin who had his head back on the seat and his eyes closed tightly. The teenager didn't seem aware of anything going on around him. "He's playing you, Brian."

"Goodbye, Mikey."

Michael backed up as Brian started the Jeep and took off. And again, he was the one left behind. Brian had once again chosen the teenage twink over his best friend. Something like that was never supposed to happen!

"Don't cause trouble, Michael."

Michael turned, shocked to see Melanie watching him. "What?"

"Brian cares about Justin and the bashing was as hard on him as it was on Justin. I'll admit I thought he was an asshole the way he acted, but I know differently now. And I know it's been hell on him remembering everything about that night when Justin didn't. He needed to be there for Justin as badly as Justin needed him."

"But Gus' birthday........"

"Don't pull that on me, Michael. Look, Justin is getting flashes as his memory returns. His brain is reprocessing the attack and it's like he's reliving it. He needs to be somewhere he feels safe and he needs Brian. They're the only two who know exactly what happened that night. They need each other."

Michael looked down the street. "Brian can talk to me. I'm his best friend."

Melanie shook her head at him sadly. "Don't put him in the middle, Michael. You'll regret it if you try to make him choose between you and Justin. You're Brian's best friend, so start acting like it. Quit being so selfish and be there to help Brian AND Justin."

Melanie turned and went back to the party leaving a pouting Michael staring off down the empty street.

END